

CALVIN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

FROM HERE TO ETERNITY

A BIBLICAL, THEOLOGICAL, AND ANALOGICAL DEFENSE

OF DIVINE ETERNITY

IN LIGHT OF RECENT CHALLENGES WITHIN ANALYTIC PHILOSOPHY

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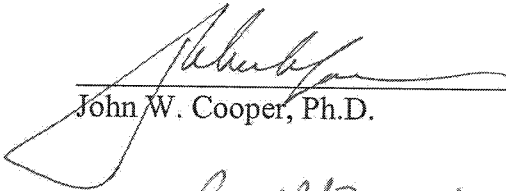
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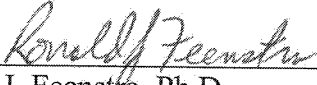
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Certainly if there were a mind endowed with such great knowledge and prescience that all things past and future could be known in the way I know a very familiar psalm, this mind would be utterly miraculous and amazing to the point of inducing awe. From such a mind nothing of the past would be hidden, nor anything of what remaining ages have in store, just as I have full knowledge of that psalm I sing. I know by heart what and how much of it has passed since the beginning and what and how much remains until the end. But far be it from you, Creator of the universe, creator of souls and bodies, far be it from you to know all future and past events in this kind of sense. You know them in a much more wonderful and much more mysterious way. A person singing or listening to a song he knows well suffers a distension or stretching in feeling and in sense-perception from the expectation of future sounds and the memory of past sound. With you it is otherwise. You are unchangeably eternal, that is the truly eternal Creator of minds. Just as you knew heaven and earth in the beginning without that bringing any variation into your knowing, so you made heaven and earth in the beginning without that meaning a tension between past and future in your activity. Let the person who understands this make confession to you. Let him who fails to understand it make confession to you.

Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions* 11.31.41; Chadwick translation, 245.

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PREFACE

Shortly after coming to faith, one of my first theological rites of passage was to read C. S. Lewis's *Mere Christianity*. It had been given to me by a woman who had been instrumental in my conversion and who remains, to this day, a spiritual mentor. It was a difficult read for a sixteen-year-old whose intellectual interests to that point had been almost entirely scientific, rather than theological or philosophical, but the effect was palpable.

I do not know if a study exists on the imprinting effects of early theological experiences, but there is no question that reading C. S. Lewis greatly enlarged my understanding of God, especially his eternity. Through a number of vivid analogies, Lewis illustrated that God was not subject to the limitations of time, that he transcended the temporal order, and that the mode of his existence involved no past or future, but a perpetual present. While all this sounded strange to my ears, I intuitively sensed it was correct, and as I grew in theological training and experience, I became confirmed in that opinion.

Those dogmatic slumbers were interrupted when I resumed graduate studies a decade ago and became aware of recent philosophical challenges to the traditional doctrine. Eventually, this led me to devote my dissertation to a defense of the doctrine of eternity. While this dissertation makes a modest contribution to a huge topic, its completion does reflect a certain milestone, and I would like to take a moment to express my thanks to those who have assisted me along the road thus traveled.

First, to Calvin Theological Seminary and those donors, who, by their generosity, provided a number of scholarships, fellowships, and assistantships and so invested in my further theological training and present ministry as a professor of theology.

Second, to my own institution, Reformed Bible College in Grand Rapids, its

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Third, I would like to express thanks to a number of people who contributed personally and intellectually to this project and who provided assistance and encouragement along the way: To Professor Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., now President of Calvin Seminary, who inaugurated this effort by a surprise phone call early one Saturday morning commending my Th.M. paper and encouraging me to consider Ph.D. studies.

To my Dissertation Committee: To Professor John Cooper, my thesis advisor, whose intellectual prowess, unassuming demeanor, and patient consultations have done much to shepherd this project through to its completion. To Professor Ronald Feenstra, who first introduced me to this topic in his stimulating seminar on Philosophical Issues in Christian Theology, and whose encouragement in my course paper on eternity was instrumental in my selecting this subject for my dissertation. To Professor Richard Muller, for his willingness to provide prepublication material from his currently available *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics* and his helpful consultation on early drafts of the history of the doctrine chapter. Finally, to Professor Paul Helm, for his willingness to be the outside reader, and for the significant contribution he made to this project through his numerous publications on eternity, divine providence, and the enterprise of faith seeking understanding.

To Professor John Frame, my former professor of theology at Westminster Theological Seminary (Philadelphia) and presently at Reformed Seminary in Orlando, FL, for sharing with me prepublication material from his presently available *Doctrine of God*.

To Paul Fields, Theological Librarian and Curator of the Meeter Center, John

Vander Lugt, Seminary Registrar, and Ina DeMoor, Administrative Assistant to the Director of the Doctoral Program. These individuals, by their steadfast cheerfulness and kind listening ears, helped me more than they realize through the dark days of composition, and I would seize this opportunity to make them aware of their contribution.

To my parents, Lucille E. Felch and the late Elroy L. Felch, for providing a stable Christian home, motivating me in the pursuit of excellence in my studies, and supporting my ministerial calling. I am especially grateful for a lunch conversation with my father, shortly before his accidental death fifteen years ago, in which he encouraged me to consider Ph.D studies. While he did not live to see this day, his counsel was a positive and important shaping moment in my life.

To my friend, Judy W. Griffin, the woman mentioned at the beginning of this preface, who unwittingly encouraged me down this path by making a present to me of her personal copy of *Mere Christianity*.

Finally, I would like to express special appreciation to my wife, Dr. Susan M. Felch, Professor of English at Calvin College. Susan's many encouragements, sharp mind, and equally sharp pencil, have done much to sustain and assist me in the development and production of this dissertation, and I am exceedingly grateful.

Douglas A. Felch
May 2005

ABSTRACT

Four decades ago, several analytical philosophers began to reconsider the traditional doctrine of divine eternity, which maintains that time is part of the created order, that God is not subject to its limitations, and that the mode of God's existence (following Boethius) is "the complete possession all at once of an unlimited life."

Critics objected that this doctrine was biblically underdetermined, that it was more Greek than Christian, and that it was incoherent since an eternal God could not redeem or be actively involved in the temporal world, could only minimally be considered a person, and could not possess knowledge of tensed truths such as what is happening "now." They argued God should be considered "everlasting" (infinitely extended in time) rather than eternal. This challenge generated an extensive published debate.

In this thesis, I maintain that the traditional view of eternity is defensible, is biblically grounded and theologically significant, and withstands the analytic critique. I argue that (a) the present conflict reflects two efforts of "Faith Seeking Understanding" with differing agendas; (b) much of the analytic debate misunderstands the tradition as absolute timelessness rather than duration without succession; (c) the tradition is motivated by biblical, not Greek concerns; (d) the eternity doctrine explicates rather than reduces the plenitude of divine life; (e) the traditional view is important to the ecumenical creedal tradition; (f) it is compatible with the Chalcedonian understanding of the Incarnation; (g) it is biblically and theologically supported; and (h) the eternity doctrine is *prima facie* coherent on the basis of numerous analogical models used to conceptualize it.

These arguments unfold in eight chapters. Chapter 1 (Introduction) states my thesis and characterizes attempts at formulating God's relationship to time as examples of Faith seeking Understanding. Chapters 2 through 4 provide an extensive survey of the

contemporary analytic debate. Chapter 5 clarifies the history of the doctrine relative to the contemporary debate. Chapter 6 develops a creedal, biblical, and theological defense of divine eternity understood as duration without succession. Chapter 7 presents an analogical defense of its coherence. Chapter 8 draws conclusions and makes suggestions for further research.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

According to most classical Christian theologians, God's existence is understood as being *eternal*. While there are some minor variations among its advocates, the traditional doctrine of divine eternity maintains that time is part of the created order, that God dwells independently of time in the mode of eternity, that he is unrestrained by temporal limitations, and that he possesses the fullness of his being as a whole in the eternal present in which there is no past or future. The constant refrain in most doctrinal formulations of divine eternity is that the mode of God's existence is one of "duration without succession." This doctrine of eternity involves more than God being *everlasting* (where his existence is seen as infinitely extended in time so that he is without beginning or end). Instead, it emphasizes the infinite plenitude or fullness of the divine life, rather than merely God's relationship to time. Indeed, divine eternity is classically defined by Boethius as "the complete possession all at once of illimitable *life*."¹ That God is eternal has been the consensus within the Christian doctrinal tradition over the last eighteen centuries and its adherents include some of the best minds in the history of Christian thought--Origen, Athanasius, Augustine, Boethius, Anselm, Aquinas, and Calvin, to name a few.

Around four decades ago, a number of analytic philosophers began to apply the tools of their trade to reconsider selected theological topics, including what they believed to be the traditional doctrine of divine eternity. Interpreting the traditional doctrine as absolute timelessness, several critics weighed it in the balances of analytic philosophy and found it

¹Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, 5.6; quoted in and translated by Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann, "Eternity," *Journal of Philosophy* 84 (1987): 429-458; reprinted in *The Concept of God*, ed. Thomas V. Morris (New York, Oxford University Press, 1985), 220-221 (page citations are to the reprint edition); emphasis mine.

wanting in two respects: First, they insisted that the traditional doctrine was biblically underdetermined, that it was more indebted to Greek than Christian sources, and that it needed to be dehellenized. Second, they maintained that the traditional doctrine was incoherent since an eternal God (a) could not redeem, be actively involved in the temporal world, or become incarnate; (b) could not be a person except in a very truncated sense; and (c) could not have knowledge of certain tensed truths such as what is happening “now.” These critics argued that God should be considered “everlasting” (infinitely extended in time) rather than “eternal” (transcendent of time and not subject to its limitations). This initial discussion developed into an extensive debate and produced a considerable body of literature. The end result has been the emergence of a new consensus highly critical of the supposed traditional doctrine and promoting the position that God is everlasting.

Statement of Thesis

In this essay, I argue that the traditional view is defensible, that it is biblically grounded and theologically significant, and that it withstands the critique of its analytic opponents. In support of this thesis, I also argue (a) that the present conflict reflects two efforts of “Faith Seeking Understanding” with differing agendas; (b) that much of the analytic debate misunderstands the tradition by interpreting it as advocating absolute timelessness rather than duration without succession; (c) that the traditional view does not reflect an uncritical acceptance of Greek models of divine timelessness, nor does Greek thought promote a view of absolute timelessness; (d) that the traditional doctrine does not reduce the fullness of the divine life (including God’s omnipotence and omniscience) since it is itself an attempt to preserve and explicate it; (e) that the traditional view is an important component of the Nicene and Chalcedonian creedal tradition of the church; (f) that it is compatible with the Chalcedonian understanding of the Incarnation; (g) that the biblical data, broadly considered, is better understood as supporting the traditional doctrine; (h) that biblically and theologically, the traditional doctrine is closely integrated with the other

revealed attributes of God, the Reformed doctrine of the divine decree, and the biblical-theological structure of redemptive history; and (i) that the doctrine of divine eternity ought to be considered as *prima facie* coherent on the basis of a number of analogical conceptual models that have been used to articulate it.

Faith Seeking Understanding

As we consider the debate regarding God's relationship to the temporal creation, it is important to recognize that both sides are engaged in a time-honored theological enterprise, that of "Faith Seeking Understanding" (hence FSU). This methodology, although certainly used by earlier Christian theologians, was first described in those terms by Augustine. It was later picked up and made famous by Anselm, and was also self-consciously embraced by Aquinas.² According to this tradition, the Christian begins with biblical revelation and uses the tools of reason and thought to better understand and articulate the truths or the divine logic found within scripture. FSU is designed not to go beyond scripture, but better to understand that which is spoken of in scripture. Gregory Ganssle puts it this way:

Faith seeking understanding is not an approach for turning mere beliefs into knowledge. Rather it is a mode for turning one kind of knowledge into another. It turns faith-knowledge into understanding-knowledge. We begin with God's revelation in the Scriptures, recognizing that we know certain things based on it. We then apply our reasoning to these things to see if we can also grasp the same things by our reason. Grasping some issues by our reason often involves a process of unfolding what is only suggested at or hinted at in the Scriptures. Thus philosophers may differ from each other in what they claim to have grasped.³

Part of what underlies these differences are the principles and priorities that arise out of a particular intellectual or philosophical method or the conceptual models or

²For citations from Augustine, Anselm, and Aquinas, see Paul Helm, *Faith & Understanding* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997), 26-28. For a more extensive discussion of the subject of the relationship of faith and reason within theology, see the first three chapters of *Faith & Understanding*, 3-76.

³Gregory Ganssle, "Introduction: Thinking About God and Time," in *God and Time: Four Views* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 12.

philosophical language that may be used to articulate or reflect upon the biblical material. Sometimes those differences can be so pronounced the conceptual tail can begin to wag the scriptural dog, so that faith no longer seeks understanding, but understanding determines or even undermines the content of faith.⁴ This means that the FSU enterprise ought to be engaged in with considerable care and certainly with a good measure of humility.

The theological discussions of the attributes of God, including whether God should be understood as eternal or everlasting certainly fall within the domain of the FSU enterprise and they have been pursued with great benefit in the history of Christian doctrine. This is evident, for example, in the fruitful efforts of Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas, Calvin, and Post-Reformation Reformed Orthodoxy all of whom were firmly committed to biblical revelation but were not reluctant to use the tools of reason or “secular learning” to enhance their understanding of the biblical text and Christian theology. Further, there is nothing wrong with these individuals seeking to draw upon the philosophical methods and conceptual models available to them in order to articulate the logic of the biblical data.

There is equally nothing wrong with Christian analytic philosophers seeking to use the tools of their discipline to better understand the attributes of God. This has been a productive enterprise, as evidenced by the large number of books and articles that have been generated. The attributes of God are knowable, because they are spoken of in scripture. They are incomprehensible in that they are beyond our ability as both finite and sinful beings to fully understand. Yet we should try to grasp as much as possible, and certainly both the analytic and traditional treatments of the divine attributes have been fruitful. Although in this thesis I will be critical of some aspects of the analytic approach to

⁴This is what those who want to dehellenize the doctrine of eternity accuse the theological tradition of doing. This is a real danger. However, as we shall see, in this instance the charge cannot be substantiated.

the attributes of God, I do not believe it is an illegitimate or a wasted effort. As we shall see in the main body of this thesis, many important points and arguments have been produced in these discussions.

Differing Principles and Priorities in the Debate

However, as in every area of intellectual endeavor, chosen governing assumptions and the manner in which the issue is set up play a crucial role in the pursuit of FSU. The principles and priorities with which a theologian begins an inquiry have a significant impact on the conclusions he or she draws. This point is clearly evident in contemporary discussions of the traditional attributes of God in general and the discussion of divine eternity in particular. *It is essential to see that in the analytic critique of the traditional doctrine of eternity, the contemporary discussions differ from the tradition, not only in the conclusions they draw, but also in the assumptions with which they are framed.* These differences are sufficiently pronounced so as to constitute differing agendas. The end result is that much (although certainly not all) of the modern critique does not actually engage the traditional view but addresses a form of the doctrine of eternity that the tradition has not advocated. Three differences in emphasis are of particular importance.

The emphasis on time vs. duration. A central concern of the analytic debate is the nature of *time*. At the heart of several discussions is whether time should be understood as dynamic or static (A-theory or B-theory), with the result that a dynamic (A-theory) understanding of time usually leads to a view of God as everlasting, while a static (B-theory) understanding of time usually leads to a view of God as eternal. It is understandable that the contemporary analytic discussion should focus on time, since that concept is of pressing importance to twentieth and twenty-first-century thinkers, who are influenced by contemporary scientific and philosophic investigations. In contrast, the traditional understanding of divine eternity does not focus on the nature of time (which is largely understood as implying the measure of change). The traditional concern is that of

duration. The Bible does not speak a great deal of God's relationship to time. But it does speak extensively about a God who endures. It asks, what does it mean that God is the One Who Endures or remains the same in the face of the unremitting temporal flux? The engine that drives the traditional formulation of eternity is the concern to explicate divine duration. Thus, the tradition does not construe the doctrine of eternity in terms of time but in terms of duration.

The emphasis on absolute timelessness vs. duration without succession. The second contrast between the analytic and traditional discussions of eternity arises out of the first. Because of its contemporary emphasis on time, the analytic discussions tend to interpret divine eternity as absolute divine timelessness which, by definition, forms an absolute contrast between time and eternity and makes interaction between the two modes of existence impossible. Such a concept of divine eternity naturally leads to the kinds of objections noted earlier, that a timeless God cannot be a person, interact with the world, or know what is happening "now." These discussions then tend to read that interpretation back into the tradition and criticize it as "the traditional view." However, the traditional view, concerned as it is with the immutable permanence or duration of God, understands eternity not as absolute timelessness but as "duration without succession." Because God is the One Who Is, he endures. But because his divine life is characterized by fullness and completeness, his duration is without temporal succession. His is the complete possession, all at once, of illimitable life. Such a view of divine eternity does not forbid knowledge of, or interaction with, the temporal world; rather, it demands it, for out of the fullness of the divine life flow the works of the divine decree, creation, providence and redemption. The point is that God's interaction with the temporal world does not change the fullness of the divine life; rather, the fullness of the divine life guarantees the meaningfulness of temporal life. This leads to the third contrast:

The emphasis on precision vs. plenitude. One of the hallmarks, strengths, and

primary motivations of analytic philosophy is its concern for philosophical precision. However, sometimes in its quest for precision, analytic philosophy does not simply make a topic more precise but also more narrow. When that occurs in theological discussion, the serious concern becomes the threat of reductionism. This has occurred with analytic treatments of simplicity and immutability, to name two, and I believe it has occurred in the discussion of eternity as well. Simplicity has been reduced to singularity and immutability to immobility.⁵ Similarly, if divine eternity is reduced to absolute timelessness, the life of God is reduced as well. However, the traditional approach to eternity is not motivated by a concern for precision but rather by a concern for plenitude and an attempt to explicate the fullness of the divine life, including its deep integration with the other divine attributes. Again, eternity is the complete possession, all at once, of illimitable life. The irony is that the analytic critique of eternity accuses the tradition of reducing the divine life, when, in fact, the tradition's primary motivation is to explicate its fullness. Furthermore, placing God on a timeline, which is the result of the analytic critique, also places God under temporal restraints and thus reduces his illimitable life. In this case, it is the quest for precision, not the traditional perspective, that leads to reductionism.

These three contrasts remind us that the pursuit of FSU can be a subtle and difficult business. They also make clear that while both the traditional and analytic approaches to divine eternity are legitimate examples of FSU, their agendas are sufficiently different as to distinguish them as separate quests. This is important because it suggests that the modern analytic critique does not directly address the legitimate issues with which the traditional view is wrestling and which give it value and credibility. This is my contention, and it is out of those legitimate issues that I seek to provide a biblical, theological, and analogical

⁵Thus, as we shall see, some interpret simplicity as meaning that all of God's attributes collapse into a single undifferentiated attribute or property. Others understand immutability to mean that God is frozen, static, or inanimate.

defense of the traditional doctrine of eternity.⁶ In the pursuit of this goal, I offer the following procedure.

Procedure and Summary of Chapters

First, *to state my thesis and to frame all attempts at formulating God's relationship to the temporal, including this thesis, as examples of Faith seeking Understanding (FSU)*, as I have sought to do in this chapter. This is of vital importance for defining both the value and the limitations of such endeavors. The task of FSU involves beginning with the scriptures and then utilizing the tools of thought to increase understanding and better articulate the mysteries of the Christian faith. This is what the Fathers were doing with the traditional doctrine of eternity, what the analytic philosophers are doing in their reexamination of it, and what I am seeking to do in this thesis. However, by its very nature, FSU involves the use of models that do not directly derive from scripture. As such, it is a creaturely activity, which is flawed and limited by both our finitude and our sin. Further, there is always the danger that such models can assume a greater importance than the biblical text they are seeking to illuminate. However, succumbing to it is not inevitable and the risk of compromise does not discredit the enterprise of FSU. The Fathers were not wrong to draw upon Greek models; neither are contemporary philosophers wrong to utilize the tools of analytical philosophy to clarify the debate. Likewise, it is equally appropriate to appeal to analogical models to extend the discussion. However, FSU carries with it an ever present hazard, namely that it may not be sufficiently chastened by the Bible. So the critical question remains whether any particular program of FSU actually does bring us closer to obeying and worshipping the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

⁶Of course, I am aware this sword cuts both ways. The two approaches may be talking past each other and missing the legitimate concerns that arise out of both. Thus, it might be possible to pursue more positively the legitimate concerns arising out of the analytic discussion as well. However, one thesis can only accomplish so much, and I am at this point more convinced of the importance of the traditional agenda than the analytic one.

Second, *to summarize and assess the contemporary analytical debate*. This is the burden of chapters 2 through 4. While I believe the current analytical debate has its limitations, it is impossible to move the discussion forward without an understanding of what analytic philosophy says about the subject of eternity. An important part of this thesis, therefore, will be to summarize and assess the recent analytical discussions. This assessment reveals how the friends of the eternity doctrine have clarified a number of points (such as that the traditional doctrine of eternity is not an abstract and absolute timelessness, but involves life and some form of atemporal duration). It also unveils its opponents' significant objections (such as how a God outside of time can be involved in the world) that must be faced in any defense of the traditional doctrine. The conversation has now gone through roughly three stages or "generations," each of which is discussed in a separate chapter. The "first generation" discussion in chapter 2 raises the challenge to what is understood to be the traditional view regarding its hellenistic roots and its alleged incoherence and draws the first analytic defense of the doctrine of divine eternity as well. The "second generation" discussion described in chapter 3 builds upon the first and provides a more fully developed response and several book-length treatments, some which reject, defend, or find a mediating position between divine temporalism and atemporalism. The "third generation" discussion in chapter 4 examines in some depth the mediating position of William Lane Craig. It also looks at a collection of recent essays, which raise some issues not previously considered and reflect the more nuanced positions of those who were involved in the earlier discussions. These three chapters taken together provide a comprehensive, although not exhaustive, survey of the analytic debate regarding divine timelessness.

Third, *to clarify the nature of the doctrine of eternity in the history of Christian thought and contrast the traditional view with the analytic understanding*. In chapter 5, I examine in some detail the actual roots and fruits of the traditional doctrine, including the

contemporary claim that it involves an absolute view of divine timelessness rooted in Greek philosophy. I establish that the tradition is not uncritical of Greek philosophy, that it is driven primarily by theological rather than philosophical concerns, and that neither the Greek nor Christian tradition asserts an absolute view of divine timelessness but rather understands eternity as duration without succession. I also examine the development of the concept of eternity in the history of Christian doctrine from the early Fathers to Post-Reformation Reformed Orthodoxy.

Fourth, *to provide a creedal, biblical, and theological defense of the traditional doctrine of divine eternity.* In chapter 6, I provide a positive and multipronged creedal, biblical, and theological defense of the traditional doctrine against charges that it is biblically underdetermined or insupportable by drawing upon some of the best argumentation found in the previous chapters and adding some of my own. Central to this defense is an emphasis on how the doctrine of eternity reflects the plenitude of the divine nature, so that it must be understood within the context of the other attributes of God. I also argue that much of the modern discussion regarding the doctrine of eternity does not do justice to the full range of biblical concerns which underlie the traditional doctrine.

Fifth, *to provide an analogical defense of the coherence of divine eternity understood as duration without succession.* In chapter 7, I discuss the defense of analogical language and conceptual models for theology provided by Thomas Aquinas and Janet Soskice as preparation for examining ancient and contemporary analogies of divine eternity. I argue that while such analogies cannot establish the truth of the eternity doctrine, they do provide a *prima facie* argument for its coherence.

Finally, in chapter 8, I draw my conclusions and provide suggestions arising out of this thesis for further research. By the end, I hope to have shown that the traditional view can be successfully defended against the analytic critique, and that, in a number of theological areas, it is preferable to the position that God is everlasting.

CHAPTER 2

Survey of the Analytic Literature (Part I) The “First Generation” Discussion

I. Introduction

There has been a general trend in twentieth-century theology to dehellenize the traditional doctrine of God and to emphasize God’s immanence over his transcendence.¹ It has been assumed that many of the traditional doctrines of the Christian faith, including that of God’s relationship to time, have been substantially the product of Greek influence. Oscar Cullmann, whose discussion of the subject laid considerable groundwork for the subsequent analytic discussion, drew a clear line in the sand on this issue:

There can be no real reconciliation when the two positions are so radically different. Peaceful companionship is possible only when either Hellenism is Christianized on the basis of the fundamental Biblical position or Christianity is Hellenized on the basis of the fundamental Greek position.²

The current debate regarding eternity in the Anglo-American theological and philosophical community partly reflects this trend. It was inaugurated when a number of analytic philosophers, many of them Christians, began to apply the tools of their discipline to traditional problems in theology, including God’s relationship to time. The amount of debate (and its level of sophistication) has increased dramatically in the last several decades. The result has been a rise in popularity of the view that God should be considered everlasting rather than eternal. This perspective insists that the traditional understanding of God as atemporally eternal is exceedingly problematic, if not incoherent, that its origins are more indebted to Greek philosophy than the Bible, and that it prevents God from

¹An excellent overview of this development is found in Stanley J. Grenz and Roger E. Olson, *20th Century Theology: God and the World in a Transitional Age* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992).

²Oscar Cullmann, *Christ and Time*, trans. F. V. Filson (London: SCM, 1951), 58.

being actively involved in the world either providentially or redemptively. A number of Christian analytic philosophers have sought to use the same tools to come to the defense of the doctrine of divine timelessness. Others have argued for more mediating positions. Thus, Alan Padgett argues that God is “relatively timeless”; that is, he is on an ontological divine timeline, but yet transcends our temporal dimension, even though he can interact with it. Another mediating view is that of William Lane Craig, who argues that God is atemporal apart from creation, but temporal with creation.

Six observations frame this survey of the analytic debate. First, most of the participants are of the opinion that the traditional doctrine of divine eternity (as found in Augustine and Boethius) is seriously underdetermined by the biblical data, and that the Bible is, at best, ambiguous as to whether or not God should be viewed as everlasting or eternal. Thus, most believe the resolution of the issue must be on the basis of philosophical rather than biblical considerations.

Second, although this issue has moderated to a certain extent over the last four decades, concern for the dehellenization of Christian theology has been a major motivating factor on the part of many who have challenged the traditional doctrine of divine eternity. Many insist that this is a Greek and not a Christian doctrine and that it ought, therefore, to be rejected. In this chapter I intend simply to document this assertion. In chapter 5, which deals with the history of the doctrine, I will challenge it.

Third, there seems to be some confusion in the analytic debate as to the exact nature of the traditional Christian doctrine of divine eternity. Most of the analytic discussion of God’s relationship to time understands it as an absolute timelessness involving a *defined incompatibility* between the temporal and the eternal. Since such an eternal (atemporal) God could not interact with the temporal realm without himself becoming contaminated with temporality, he could not be involved in the temporal world either providentially or redemptively, know what is happening “now” or appreciate music, and could barely be

considered a person in the normal sense of that term. As I will argue in chapter 5, the traditional doctrine does not posit an absolute timelessness, but maintains that God has duration without succession. Rather than having a truncated notion of the divine nature, the traditional view begins with the fullness of the divine life. God is a personal being who possesses all of his attributes without measure, and who, is, therefore, alive in the fullest possible sense. That is why Boethius describes eternity as “the complete possession, all at once, of unlimited life.” God endures in the sense that he is immutable, self-existent, and the ground of creational existence. However, he is not subject to temporal limitations, and, because his consciousness is full and complete, he does not experience the succession of moments. If the analytic discussion has misunderstood the traditional doctrine, then at least part of the analytic discussion, although certainly not all, is misdirected.

Fourth, the discussion has moderated to a certain degree. While the initial salvo was strongly critical of the notion of divine eternity (and there continue to be many who reject it), an increasing number of participants have either defended some form of divine eternity or have sought to develop a mediating position. I view both the attempt to defend the doctrine of eternity and the attempt to establish an essential compatibility between the temporal and the eternal as positive contributions of the analytic debate.

Fifth, although a number of participants in the debate have appealed to the analogy of the relativity of simultaneity found in Einstein’s special theory of relativity as a means of conceptualizing the relationship between time and eternity, such appeals have been chastened and rendered problematic through the efforts of William Lane Craig.

Sixth, the analytical method has raised a number of important issues and contributed significantly to the philosophical and theological exploration of God’s relationship to time. At the same time, its quest to be more precise carries with it the danger of making the discussion too narrow: First, the analytic discussion tends to abstract the doctrine of eternity into a kind of philosophical problem divorced from the constellation of

God's other attributes with which it is intimately connected and from which it cannot and ought not to be separated. Second, the analytic discussion has been reluctant to entertain (and indeed has been quite critical of) more analogical approaches to the doctrine and consequently has been in danger of speaking of God in univocal and reductionist ways.

My tripartite survey of the analytic discussion is roughly chronological.³ The current chapter, chapter 2, introduces the "first generation" of thinkers who inaugurated the reconsideration of the traditional doctrine of eternity. It includes the earliest challengers and defenders of the doctrine of divine eternity and sets the agenda for subsequent discussions. Chapter 3, the "second generation" discussion, summarizes the efforts of those who tried to build upon and interact with the intellectual foundation of the first generation to develop new lines of criticism and defense, including some of the first generation authors who clarify and expand their earlier treatments. Chapter 4, the "third generation" discussion, contains an overview of the extensive contribution of William Lane Craig, as well as a summary of more recent essays, largely taken from a single anthology published in 2002, which reveal the current issues connected with the analytic debate.

II. The "First Generation" Beginnings of the Analytic Discussion

A. William Kneale's Initial Inquiry (1967)

1. Timelessness as a "dubious partner" for theology

It is difficult to determine who fired the first shot in the analytic battle challenging the traditional doctrine of divine eternity. John Yates grants this distinction to William Kneale and cites the concluding challenge of Kneale's ground breaking paper:

³Precise chronology is difficult to establish because many of the books have their roots in essays written for journal articles or as contributions to anthologies that predate their subsequent book-length treatment. However, a precise chronology is not essential to my purpose. In this chapter, I am trying to capture the academic conversation as it has unfolded over time and to give the reader a sense of the recurring themes and issues without attempting either a taxonomy of the various positions or simply listing the arguments that favor or oppose the traditional doctrine. The dialogue is a complex one. However, my goal is to preserve both the sense of dialogue and its complexity among a substantial number of participants.

The doctrine of timeless eternity is a dubious partner for theology. . . . If anyone thinks he can nevertheless make use of the old phraseology, he must explain it afresh.⁴

2. Kneale on the Greek origin of divine timelessness

Kneale's treatment, which leads to this conclusion, involves an exploration of eternity that is metaphysical in nature and "is not conditioned by time."⁵ Kneale is curious how such an idea might have arisen and believes its source is a Greek concept of timelessness first articulated by Parmenides, and perhaps rooted in the Pythagorean school of philosophy of which Parmenides was once a part.⁶ Parmenides's description of a mode of existence that allows no distinction between past, present, or future reappears in Plato's theory of forms, particularly in the *Timaeus*, which describes the creator of the world as making the world "a moving image of eternity" and which includes the creation of time:

For there were no days and nights and months and years before the heaven was created, but when he constructed the heaven he devised them also. They are all parts of time, and "was" and "will be" are created species of time which we in our carelessness mistakenly apply to eternal being. For we say that it was, is, and will be; but in truth "is" applies to it, while "was" and "will be" are properly said of becoming in time.⁷

Such a concept of eternity appears to have a long pedigree in the history of Christian thought. It is picked up by Augustine, who reflects a Platonic understanding of time and eternity in his *Confessions* and who later cites this same passage from Parmenides in *The City of God*.⁸ It is refined by Boethius who defines eternity as the complete

⁴William Kneale, "Time and Eternity in Theology," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 61 (1960-61): 107; quoted in Yates, *The Timelessness of God*, 1. I have no reason to challenge Yates's choice of Kneale as initiating the discussion. Kneale certainly raises issues that are picked up by subsequent participants.

⁵Kneale, "Time and Eternity in Theology," 87. The phrase "not conditioned by time" is one that he picks up from the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

⁶Kneale, "Time and Eternity in Theology," 88-92.

⁷*Timaeus*, 37E6-38A6; quoted in Kneale, "Time and Eternity in Theology," 92-93.

⁸*City of God*, xi, 21; *Confessions*, x, 12-13; quoted in Kneale, "Time and Eternity in Theology," 94-95.

possession all at once of unlimited life, and who uses it to argue for the liberty of free creatures whose actions are “foreknown” by God.⁹ Boethius, in turn, is cited by Thomas Aquinas as the latter articulates his own view that the eternal has neither beginning nor end, nor succession of moments since it exists “all at once.”¹⁰ Kneale sees this incorporation of the Greek concept of timeless eternity into Christian theology as inevitable, natural, and unfortunate. Indeed, he compares it to “a fairy story” that we repeat out of habit, “though some of our utterances have no clear sense.”¹¹

3. Kneale’s judgment that divine timelessness is incoherent

As the previous quotation suggests, Kneale finds the concept of timeless divine eternity incoherent. He believes that timelessness and life are incompatible, for that which is alive presumably acts; but to act is to act in time, and this would be impossible for a being that was truly timeless.¹² The problem persists in the tradition, for although some theologians, such as Thomas Aquinas, seem to speak of eternity as if it were a refined version of time, others, like Augustine, strongly insist that eternity is really timelessness.¹³

The only way to account for the toleration of this strange speech by Christian theologians, according to Kneale, is the support Platonic thinking gives to the idea of God as a necessary being, who, in contrast to the world, possesses no contingency in his being.¹⁴ However, Kneale, appealing to Aristotle’s critique of Plato’s view of time and eternity, argues that this move is successful only if it can be proved that the world itself is

⁹Kneale, “Time and Eternity in Theology,” 95-96.

¹⁰*Summa Theologica*, I.Q x, Art. 1; quoted in Kneale, “Time and Eternity in Theology,” 96.

¹¹Kneale, “Time and Eternity in Theology,” 97.

¹²Kneale, “Time and Eternity in Theology,” 99. Note Kneale’s assumption here of an absolute incompatibility between the eternal and the temporal.

¹³Kneale, “Time and Eternity in Theology,” 100. Kneale alludes to passages in Aquinas and Augustine, but does not cite his sources, which may be subject to more than one interpretation.

¹⁴Kneale, “Time and Eternity in Theology,” 101.

not sempiternal (everlasting) and therefore without a necessary existence of its own.¹⁵

All of this leads Kneale to conclude that timeless eternity is a “dubious partner” for theology derived from “a very strange pronouncement by Parmenides, and the paradoxical attempt to connect eternity in this sense with a kind of life began in a poetical passage of Plato which no one could now accept as sound philosophy.”¹⁶

Although Kneale’s essay is brief, he anticipates a number of issues that will become important in the later discussions, namely, (a) that the doctrine is more Greek than Christian; (b) that it can be traced through the history of thought from Parmenides to Plato, to Augustine, to Boethius, to Aquinas; (c) that the concept is incoherent since an eternal God could neither act nor be considered alive in any normal sense of that term; and (d) that there is defined incompatibility between time and eternity considered as timelessness.

B. Nelson Pike’s *God and Timelessness* (1970)

Since Nelson Pike’s *God and Timelessness* sets the agenda for the subsequent debate over God’s eternity, it merits an extensive summary. Pike challenges what he considers to be the traditional doctrine of eternity on the grounds that a God who is truly atemporal could not produce or create anything. However, Pike is keenly aware of the implications of toying with the traditional understanding:

The position that a theologian takes on the topic of divine eternity has a kind of controlling effect on the general shape and texture of his broad theological view about the nature of God. . . . In short, the predicate ‘eternal’ occupies something of a pivotal position within the logical-geography of traditional Christian thinking about the nature of God.¹⁷

Nevertheless, he argues that we should think of God not as eternal but as everlasting.

Pike begins his own inquiry with twin unargued and fairly uncontroversial presuppositions (a) that God (if he exists) is a single individual being who possesses both

¹⁵Kneale, “Time and Eternity in Theology,” 106-108.

¹⁶Kneale, “Time and Eternity in Theology,” 106.

¹⁷Nelson Pike, *God and Timelessness* (New York: Schocken Books, 1970), ix-x.

positive and negative attributes; and (b) that language used to describe God is in some ways analogous to its normal usage in describing other personal beings.¹⁸

1. Two elements of predicating “timelessness”

Drawing on the thought of Schleiermacher, Pike identifies two essential elements to divine timelessness. First, if God is timeless, he has no duration; that is, he lacks temporal extension and is not “spread out in time” nor does he “occupy a number of consecutive temporal positions.” Second, divine timelessness means that God does not have temporal location. That is, it does not make sense to talk about God existing “before” or “after” some particular date. Consequently, “God is not to be qualified by temporal predicates of any kind—neither time-extension predicates (such as e.g. ‘six years old’) nor time-location predicates (such as ‘before Columbus’).”¹⁹ That God is timeless in this sense, says Pike, has been embraced by a number of important figures in the history of Christian thought including Augustine, Boethius, Anselm, and Aquinas.²⁰

2. The logical status of “God is timeless”

Pike proceeds to examine whether the statement “If x is God, then x is timeless” is a necessary truth. He notes that the doctrine of simplicity set forth by Anselm, Augustine, and others suggests that God does not simply possess his attributes, but he is his attributes, and that if God were to lose them, he would cease to be God.²¹ According to “the doctrine of essential predication,”²² to say that God is perfectly good is to say that perfect goodness would be an essential property of every individual who possesses it and must be assigned

¹⁸Pike, *God and Timelessness*, 1-5.

¹⁹Pike, *God and Timelessness*, 7-8.

²⁰Pike, *God and Timelessness*, 8-15. In these pages Pike cites particular passages from each of these authors in support of his notion that divine eternity is understood within the tradition as timelessness. His arguments will be considered later in chapter 5.

²¹Pike, *God and Timelessness*, 18-19.

²²Pike, *God and Timelessness*, 21.

the status of a necessary truth.²³ Likewise, in the theological systems of Augustine, Anselm, and the like, timelessness is also probably to be treated as an essential property of any individual who possesses it.²⁴

3. Timelessness and the negative predicates “immutable,” “incorruptible,” and “immortal”

Pike cites Augustine that when we say God is eternal, immutable, immortal, or incorruptible, we are saying the same thing:

Genuine eternity (is that) by which God is unchangeable, without beginning or end; consequently, He is also incorruptible. For one and the same thing is therefore said, whether God is called eternal, or immortal, or incorruptible, or unchangeable.²⁵

Pike evaluates this claim as follows: Beginning with immutability, if an object changes, it must exist in at least two moments of time. Since a timeless being would not exist at any moment of time, timelessness entails immutability, and essentially so, since such a being would not only be unchanging, but unchangeable.²⁶ Thomas Aquinas argues the opposite, that immutability entails timelessness on the grounds that a motionless or changeless being must be timeless. Pike himself is unconvinced by this argument, since he sees no reason why a motionless being might not have a duration.²⁷ However, Pike supplies an alternative argument that he believes preserves the entailment sought by Thomas Aquinas, namely, that if it is logically impossible for an individual to change, this would entail that individual also be timeless.²⁸ Thus, there is a kind of equivalence between immutability and timelessness.

²³Pike, *God and Timelessness*, 23-24.

²⁴Pike, *God and Timelessness*, 35.

²⁵Augustine, *On the Trinity*, 15.5.7; quoted in Pike, *God and Timelessness*, 39.

²⁶Pike, *God and Timelessness*, 39-40.

²⁷Pike, *God and Timelessness*, 42.

²⁸Pike, *God and Timelessness*, 43.

Something similar is true of “incorruptible.” To say that something is incorruptible is to say that it cannot be diminished in any way. In the case of God, this claim can be strengthened so that it is *logically* impossible for that individual to diminish, let alone to cease to exist. Such a being would lack both temporal extension and temporal position and would, therefore, be timeless.²⁹

However Pike does not believe the predicate “immortal” belongs with the first three (timeless, immutable, and incorruptible), for it does not produce equivalent entailments:

“*x* is timeless” does not seem to entail “*x* is immortal” because it does not seem to entail “*x* is alive.” Further, there would appear to be no plausible way of arguing that *x* is immortal entails “*x* is timeless.” An immortal being might have endless duration. “*x* is timeless” and “*x* is immortal” seem to be logically independent.³⁰

Thus, to say that God is eternal is also to say that he is incorruptible and immutable. The three terms constitute a cluster of ideas which involve mutual entailment.³¹ But they do not entail the predicate “immortal.”

4. Timelessness, foreknowledge, and free will

Pike next explores Boethius’s appeal to divine timelessness to explain how God can have infallible knowledge of human actions without diminishing or denying their free character. Pike views this solution as “one of the more important places in the history of Christian theology where the doctrine [of divine timelessness] worked to the advantage of the systematic theologian.”³² Boethius agrees that God cannot have *foreknowledge* of human actions since his knowledge is not located in time. Instead, God sees all things in the eternal present which does not affect the free agency of moral beings any more than our observation of such actions does so within the temporal present. Pike cites Calvin as

²⁹Pike, *God and Timelessness*, 45-46.

³⁰Pike, *God and Timelessness*, 49.

³¹Pike, *God and Timelessness*, 51.

³²Pike, *God and Timelessness*, 53.

agreeing with and precisely capturing Boethius's understanding of God's perception:

When we attribute foreknowledge to God, we mean that all things have been and perpetually remain before his eyes, so that to his knowledge nothing is future or past, but all things are present and present in such a manner, that he does not merely conceive them from ideas formed in his mind as things remembered by us appear to our minds, but he holds and sees them as if actually placed before him.³³

However, this raises a problem, and Pike illustrates it with a story: Jones mows his lawn last Saturday. Presumably eighty years ago, an infallibly omniscient God would have known that Jones would mow his lawn last Saturday. It would seem, then, that Jones was not free to refrain from mowing his lawn last Saturday, otherwise he would have the power to render one of the beliefs of an infallibly omniscient God false.³⁴ This suggests a second difficulty, namely, that "If God exists. . .no human action is voluntary."³⁵

After considering three inadequate solutions to this problem,³⁶ Pike reformulates Boethius's solution in accordance with the terms of his illustration. If God were to hold this belief, not eighty years before but *at the time* that Jones mowed the lawn, presumably this would not prevent Jones from acting freely in cutting his lawn. According to Boethius and Augustine, God is "seeing" Jones mowing the lawn in the eternal present, not by some contemporaneous method of seeing, but in accordance with his infallible and unchangeable omniscience, unaffected by past, present, or future. God knows, and that is enough.

Boethius does *not* say that God "sees" Jones's acting *at the time of action*. What he does say, however, is that the case in which God "beholds" Jones's actions timelessly (i.e. in his eternal-present) is *comparable* to the case in which one sees Jones acting at the time of action. We are thus invited to conclude that Jones has

³³*Institutes* 3.21.5; quoted in Pike as 3.21 in *God and Timelessness*, 55.

³⁴Pike, *God and Timelessness*, 56-57.

³⁵Pike, *God and Timelessness*, 61.

³⁶The three rival solutions are those proffered by Leibniz (*Theodicy* 1.27), Cicero (as reported by Augustine in *City of God* 5.9.2), and Arthur Prior ("Formalities of Omniscience," *Philosophy* 1962, 117-118). Leibniz solves the problem by distinguishing between absolute and hypothetical necessity, arguing that the necessity of a free agent acting in accordance with God's foreknowledge is of the latter, contingent kind, rather than the kind that results in determinism. Cicero and Prior both solve the problem by denying that God has certain knowledge of future events. Pike finds none of these solutions satisfactory.

the power at T_2 to refrain from doing A. . . . If we can assume that the notion of a timeless knower is intelligible. . . I think this reasoning is successful.³⁷

Pike closes his discussion by considering an alternative solution found in various forms in Augustine, Schleiermacher, and Molina who reconcile divine foreknowledge with human free agency on the grounds that God simply foreknows what the agent is going to freely choose.³⁸ Such a view is *prima facie* coherent, for if even humans can often anticipate the free actions of those they know well without in the least diminishing their free agency, how much more God, who has a far more intimate knowledge of his creatures, should be able infallibly to predict the actions of others. Pike admits that such a position softens the notion of infallibility so that it is no longer a logical necessity for God to be infallible (which would entail determinism).³⁹ Nonetheless, Pike believes that this solution, together with that of Boethius, is on the right track.⁴⁰

5. Timeless knowledge of what is happening “now”

Pike proceeds to consider the objection that the doctrine of divine timelessness and divine omniscience are incompatible on the grounds that there are certain truths that a timeless being could not know.⁴¹ Specifically, a timeless being could not know what is happening at this moment, or know that today’s date is today’s date, since such knowledge would force him to occupy time. Thus a timeless being could not know his temporal position or what is happening “now.” However, Pike remains unconvinced by this line of

³⁷Pike, *God and Timelessness*, 75.

³⁸Pike, *God and Timelessness*, 76-77. Pike quotes a section from Bk. 3 of Augustine’s *On the Freedom of the Will*, and refers to Bk. 5 of the *City of God* in the same connection. He quotes from para. 55 in Schleiermacher’s *The Christian Faith*, and also a passage from Luis De Molina’s *Concordia Libitrii*.

³⁹Pike, *God and Timelessness*, 81.

⁴⁰Pike, *God and Timelessness*, 83.

⁴¹Pike, *God and Timelessness*, 87. Pike addresses this objection in the form presented by Prior, “The Formalities of Omniscience,” 116; and Robert Coburn, “Professor Malcolm on God,” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 5 (1962-63):155-56.

argument since he believes that the same facts could be properly accounted for by different linguistic usage, since, “all that has been established is that there are certain *forms of words* that a timeless individual could not use when formulating or reporting his knowledge.”⁴²

6. Timelessness and power

According to traditional theology, God’s omnipotence means that he can bring about any “consistently desirable state of affairs.”⁴³ So understood, God’s inability to do things contrary to his nature or which are logically impossible would not count against his omnipotence. Schleiermacher goes further by arguing that God has no ability that he does not exercise and that his omnipotence should be understood in terms of his activity. If we consider the world as a matrix of events and causes, God is active in sustaining this matrix because everything is “absolutely dependent” upon him. Thus, according to Schleiermacher, to say that God is omnipotent is to understand him as “omni-preserver.”⁴⁴ This view, says Pike, is consistent with the position of Anselm who argues that since everything that exists depends upon God, where God does not exist nothing exists:

In no place or time, then, is this being properly said to exist, since it is contained by no other at all. And yet it may be said after a manner of its own, to be in every place and time, since whatever else exists is sustained by its presence lest it laps [sic] into nothingness.⁴⁵

Pike points out that Anselm’s qualification “after a manner of its own” is significant, because it suggests that God does and does not have temporal location:

The point may be that God exists in every place and at every time in the sense that His sustaining power is evident in every time and place. . . . God is not temporally qualified, but nothing that is temporally qualified would exist were it not for God’s sustaining power.⁴⁶

⁴²Pike, *God and Timelessness*, 95.

⁴³Pike, *God and Timelessness*, 98.

⁴⁴Pike, *God and Timelessness*, 99.

⁴⁵*Monologion* 22; quoted in Pike, *God and Timelessness*, 100.

⁴⁶Pike, *God and Timelessness*, 100.

This position, however, raises and intensifies the issue of divine timelessness. How can God create or sustain a temporal creation without himself being or becoming temporal? According to traditional Christian doctrine, God created the world of natural objects out of nothing, without tools or instruments and without bodily organs or appendages. According to Schleiermacher, all temporal circumstances and causes occur within the temporal matrix. This means that if God creates something at a specific time, then he could not have done so timelessly.⁴⁷ Indeed, a timeless being could not produce, create, or bring about an object or state of affairs. Therefore, a timeless being could not be omnipotent.⁴⁸ Schleiermacher deals with this problem by seeking to set aside the traditional Christian doctrine of creation and reduce it to the doctrine of divine preservation, which he believes solves the temporal difficulty and preserves his theological notion of absolute dependence.⁴⁹ Pike is critical of this move in two respects: First, most Christians would reject reducing the doctrine of creation to the doctrine of preservation.⁵⁰ Second, preservation is “no more compatible with the doctrine of timelessness” than is creation.⁵¹

In sum, Pike believes he has found reasons for denying that a timeless being could create or preserve a temporally extended universe, although this does not remove the possibility that the universe might depend for its existence upon a timeless being. Further, Pike observes, the heart of the tension between God’s timelessness and omnipotence as described here does not arise because such a being lacks temporal extension (duration), but because that being lacks temporal position. However, since the lack of temporal position is

⁴⁷Pike, *God and Timelessness*, 105.

⁴⁸Pike, *God and Timelessness*, 110.

⁴⁹Pike, *God and Timelessness*, 108-109.

⁵⁰Pike, *God and Timelessness*, 110.

⁵¹Pike, *God and Timelessness*, 117.

the key element to Boethius's solution to the problem of divine foreknowledge, "The claim that God lacks temporal position. . . works both to the advantage and to the disadvantage of the systematic theologian."⁵²

7. God as a timeless person

Pike next examines Robert Coburn's claim that a timeless being could not qualify as a person:

Surely it is a necessary condition of anything's being a person that it should be capable (logically) of, among other things, doing at least some of the following: remembering, anticipating, reflecting, deliberating, deciding, intending, and acting intentionally. . . . But now an eternal being would necessarily lack all of these capacities inasmuch as their exercise by a being clearly requires that the being exist in time. . . . Hence, an eternal being, it would seem, could not be a person.⁵³

Pike is sympathetic to Coburn's analysis and finds his argument to be "in good order," but views his conclusion that a timeless being could not be a person as "premature."⁵⁴ While a timeless being would not be able to deliberate or anticipate, Pike is at least open to the possibility that a timeless being could possess knowledge or even omniscience and that such a being might very well be considered a person.⁵⁵ Problems remain, however. Such a being would not be able to act in such a way as to make that knowledge relevant to us by any form of action or interaction. Such a being could not deliberate, anticipate, remember, write a letter or speak, smile, frown, or weep. Such a being would be immutable in such a strong sense as to prevent being affected by, or truly interactive with, another. Neither could a timeless being respond to the actions of another.⁵⁶ Such considerations lead Pike to adopt the position of Coburn that a being with all these incapacities could not be

⁵²Pike, *God and Timelessness*, 119.

⁵³Coburn, "Professor Malcolm on God," 155; quoted in Pike, *God and Timelessness*, 121.

⁵⁴Pike, *God and Timelessness*, 123.

⁵⁵Pike, *God and Timelessness*, 125.

⁵⁶Pike, *God and Timelessness*, 128.

counted a person, or at least not much of one.⁵⁷

8. Anselm's "Perfect Being" theology and divine timelessness

Pike then considers various attempts to justify divine timelessness offered by Anselm and Schleiermacher. Of particular interest is Pike's treatment of Anselm's use of "Perfect Being" theology as a justification for divine timelessness.

Anselm viewed God as "a being a greater than which cannot be conceived." He went on to argue that such a Perfect Being must be timeless. Pike, however, questions the logical connection between these two assertions.⁵⁸ He begins by trying to clarify Anselm's statement that God is a being a greater than which cannot be conceived. It cannot simply mean, as Norman Malcolm interprets it, that "God is the greatest of all beings" because Anselm views his definition as a logically necessary truth, and Malcolm's formulation neither possesses that status nor entails Anselm's definition as a necessary truth.⁵⁹ But if Malcolm is incorrect, the problem of how to identify the perfections manifested in God according to Anselm's "Perfect Being" criterion remains. For, as Pike takes pains to argue, what makes one thing greater than another is highly context and use-sensitive.⁶⁰ Pike sees this as an exquisitely difficult issue, because Anselm's definition must lead to very specific conclusions concerning a very particular Deity:

A fully adequate interpretation of "greater" would be one that renders Anselm's formula capable of entailing all of the divine attribution-statements usually endorsed within the Judeo-Christian religious tradition. It would also be such as not to entail statements that are blatantly and obviously not acceptable as characterizations of the Christian God, e.g., "God is sweet-smelling." An interpretation of "greater" is more or less adequate depending on how well it fares when measured in accordance

⁵⁷Pike, *God and Timelessness*, 128-129.

⁵⁸Pike, *God and Timelessness*, 130.

⁵⁹Pike, *God and Timelessness*, 131-132.

⁶⁰Pike spends considerable time and effort unpacking Anselm's concept of perfection as being better to be than not to be. He demonstrates by several language games the context-sensitivity of such comparisons in *God and Timelessness*, 135-149, but space considerations prevent further discussion here.

with these two principles of adequacy.⁶¹

How then are we to contextualize the concept of “greater” found in Anselm’s definition? Drawing on a suggestion from Charles Hartshorne that “God” in Anselm refers to the universal object of worship, Pike tests the concept as to whether “greater” means “more worthy of worship.” Applying this concept appears to lead to the conclusion that such a being would be “conscious,” “powerful,” knowledgeable,” “omnipotent,” and “omniscient.”⁶² However, other possible attributes are not so clear cut. For example, to add “benevolent” or other moral qualities to the list immediately raises the question as to whether devil worship is genuine worship (Pike believes it is). This suggests that while God’s being benevolent might constitute a reason for worshiping him--it might be listed among the “holy-making features of things”--being worthy of worship does not necessarily entail benevolence.⁶³

Pike then returns to the original question whether the statement, “God is a being a greater than which cannot be conceived” entails “God is timeless.” Pike argues that it does not. Applying the “worthy of worship” concept, it certainly does not provide the strong entailment found in other attributes such as “conscious,” or “powerful.” It is not even clear whether being timeless could be listed among the “holy-making” features that would provide a reason for worship. The only possible way of salvaging the connection between the perfect being theology of Anselm and timelessness would be to make the case that being worthy of worship entails a strong sense of immutability which, in turns, entails divine timelessness. Pike believes that such a case has not yet been made.⁶⁴

⁶¹Pike, *God and Timelessness*, 148-149.

⁶²Pike, *God and Timelessness*, 154. Please note that I am summarizing Pike’s conclusions, not the discussion that leads to them, which is quite detailed.

⁶³Pike, *God and Timelessness*, 158.

⁶⁴Pike, *God and Timelessness*, 165. It should be remembered, however, that Pike has reduced eternity to “timelessness.” If eternity is instead, “the complete possession, all at once, of unlimited life,”

9. Pike's conclusion

In his conclusion, Pike reminds his readers that his original intention was to investigate the doctrine of divine timelessness with the expectation of summarizing its strengths and weaknesses. However, at the end of his analysis, he admits that his evaluation is far more negative than he anticipated. Ultimately, he sees the roots of this doctrine to be Greek, not Christian, and asks, "What reason is there for thinking that the doctrine of God's timelessness should have a place in a system of Christian theology?"⁶⁵

10. Assessment

Pike's analysis sets the agenda for much of the "first generation" discussion and anticipates a number of its conclusions. He interprets "eternity" in the Christian tradition as equivalent to "timelessness," and he sees its origin as more Greek than Christian. He also identifies a number of key questions in the analytic discussion of divine timelessness. These include, but are not limited to, the following: (a) is the timelessness of God a necessary truth? (no); (b) is the timelessness of God necessarily entailed by or does it entail other predicates of God? (yes and no); (c) does Boethius's use of timelessness as an apologetic for preserving human free will have merit? (yes); (d) can a timeless God know what is happening *now*? (yes); (e) can a timeless God be actively involved in creating and governing the world? (no); (f) can a timeless God be a person in the same way we normally describe personhood? (no), and finally, (g) does Anselm's notion of God as a Perfect Being entail timelessness? (no). While it would be misleading to say that the subsequent analytic discussion of divine timelessness is nothing but a series of footnotes to Pike, his influence in staking out several areas of inquiry will become clearly evident.

such a being would certainly be one of which no greater can be conceived and so appropriately an object of worship.

⁶⁵Pike, *God and Timelessness*, 189-190.

C. Nicholas Wolterstorff's Criticism of Divine Timelessness (1975)

Nicholas Wolterstorff continued Pike's line of thought in his provocative and influential essay, "God Everlasting."⁶⁶ I examine his discussion in detail because it also introduces several themes and arguments important to the subsequent debate.

1. Wolterstorff's general concern about Hellenism

In this article, Wolterstorff admits to a self-conscious desire to dehellenize Christian theology and sets forth what has become both a classic and controversial defense of God as everlasting.⁶⁷ Wolterstorff argues for the (then) minority position that God is everlasting, a being who dwells in time and whose existence is temporal but infinite, without beginning or end. This view alone, argues Wolterstorff, is consistent with the portrayal of God found in the Bible. For God to be outside of time would prevent him from being an active agent in the world or bringing about redemption:

If we are to accept this picture of God as acting for the renewal of human life, we must conceive of him as everlasting rather than eternal. God the redeemer cannot be a God eternal. This is so because God the Redeemer is a God who *changes*. Any being which changes is a being among whose states there is temporal succession.⁶⁸

To substantiate his claims, Wolterstorff articulates two necessary aspects of temporality that pose problems for eternity.

2. The problem of temporal order relationships

The first involves the temporal order relationships of precedence, succession, and simultaneity, which are necessary for any "temporal reality."⁶⁹ The set of a given entity's aspects or events where each aspect or event bears a temporal order relation of precedence,

⁶⁶Nicholas Wolterstorff, "God Everlasting," in *God and the Good*, ed. Clifton J. Orlebeke and Lewis B. Smedes (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1975), 181-203.

⁶⁷Wolterstorff, "God Everlasting," 181.

⁶⁸Wolterstorff, "God Everlasting," 182.

⁶⁹Wolterstorff, "God Everlasting," 183.

succession or simultaneity, Wolterstorff labels the *time-strand* of that entity. For each entity there is only one time-strand. The set of events in temporal order relation between time-strands Wolterstorff names the *temporal array*. There is also only one temporal array since every member of every time-strand bears a temporal order-relation to every member of every other time-strand.⁷⁰

An entity would be eternal if all of its aspects and events are such that they are outside the temporal array (or if the entity has no time-strand).⁷¹ This being so, Wolterstorff insists that God is fundamentally non-eternal. That is, in regards to this first aspect of temporality (temporal order relations), God fails to satisfy the concept of being eternal by virtue of his change-relevant aspects.⁷²

3. The problem of the modality of temporal events

The second basic feature of temporality, says Wolterstorff, is that all the events in the temporal array are present, past, or future since any event must occur either before, after, or at the same time as another event.⁷³ This is a necessary aspect because every event on the temporal array must occur at some time and, when an event occurs, it is present. Since all events on the temporal array must stand in relationship to all other events by way of simultaneity, precedence, or succession, any event locatable on the temporal array must be either past, present, or future. According to Wolterstorff,

In contemporary Western philosophy the phenomenon of temporal modality has been pervasively neglected or ignored in favor of the phenomena of temporal order-relationships, temporal location, and temporal duration. Thus time has been “spatialized.” For though space provides us with close analogues to all three of these latter phenomena, it provides us with no analogue whatever to the

⁷⁰Wolterstorff, “God Everlasting,” 185.

⁷¹Wolterstorff, “God Everlasting,” 185-6.

⁷²Wolterstorff, “God Everlasting,” 187.

⁷³Wolterstorff, “God Everlasting,” 187-88.

past/present/future distinction.⁷⁴

For Wolterstorff this neglect has resulted in the widespread (and, in his mind, erroneous) assumption that all propositions expressed with tensed sentences are mode-indifferent and dated. Consider for a moment the example

(1) The kettle is boiling.⁷⁵

The common (and mistaken) assumption is that if we now (June 5, 1974) asserted this sentence, its normal sense would be “The kettle is or was or will be boiling on June 5, 1974.”⁷⁶

To show that this assumption is false, Wolterstorff demonstrates how when one replaces the present tense of a verb by a tense-indifferent use of the same verb together with a designator of time, they construct a whole new proposition. Take for example the following three sentences:

- (1) The kettle is boiling.
- (2) The kettle is boiling at present.
- (3) The kettle boils on June 5, 1974.

From statement (1) we can infer (2). But we cannot infer (2) from statement (3). This is because (1) gives information that (3) does not give, namely that the kettle is boiling in the present. There are two implications of this.

First, the interesting point regarding propositions like (1) is that they can only be known to be true when they are true. In other words, such statements are sometimes true and sometimes false. That is, they are variable in their truth value. “The kettle is boiling” may be true at a certain time, false at another. Second, without the ability to distinguish between the presentness, pastness, and futureness of events, we are not able to know

⁷⁴Wolterstorff, “God Everlasting,” 188

⁷⁵Wolterstorff’s preferred example is that of his golden chain tree flowering. This sample sentence is borrowed from Paul Helm and will make Helm’s later critique of Wolterstorff easier to follow.

⁷⁶Wolterstorff, “God Everlasting,” 189. The date, June 5, 1974 is given by Wolterstorff in his original article.

where we are in the temporal array.⁷⁷

4. An eternal God's inability to redeem

Armed with this perspective, Wolterstorff takes the offensive against the doctrine of divine eternity. If God is eternal, there are certain facts that God cannot know, or, if he does know them, he is necessarily contaminated with temporality. For example, God cannot know that the kettle is boiling until it begins to boil. That being the case, his knowledge is temporally coordinated with the time the kettle commenced boiling and is therefore "infected" with temporality. The alternative is to say that God cannot know that the kettle is (now) boiling, which would be worse. For then God could not be aware of where things are on the temporal array, or whether they are past, present, or future, and therefore could not make plans to bring about any particular event or events.⁷⁸ The bottom line for Wolterstorff is that an eternal God who cannot understand time can also not act in time and therefore could not bring about redemption:

So in conclusion, if God were eternal he could not be aware, concerning any temporal event, that it is occurring nor aware that it was occurring nor aware that it will be occurring; nor could he remember that it has occurred; nor could he plan to bring it about and do so. But all of such actions are presupposed by, and essential to, the biblical presentation of God as a redeeming God. Hence God as presented by the biblical writers is fundamentally noneternal. He is fundamentally in time.⁷⁹

Yet while God is fundamentally in time, Wolterstorff insists that this poses no limitation for him, neither should we permit it to diminish our worship of him:

Though God is within time, yet he is Lord of time. The whole array of contingent temporal events is within his power. He is Lord of what occurs. . . . It is not because he is outside of time--eternal, immutable, impassive--that we are to worship and obey God. It is because of what he can and does bring about within time that we mortals are to render him praise and obedience.⁸⁰

⁷⁷Wolterstorff, "God Everlasting," 192.

⁷⁸Wolterstorff, "God Everlasting," 198.

⁷⁹Wolterstorff, "God Everlasting," 199-200.

⁸⁰Wolterstorff, "God Everlasting," 203.

To summarize, Wolterstorff first defines the eternity of God as God existing outside of time and his being everlasting as existing within time. This sets up a defined incompatibility between temporality and eternity. There is no middle ground. God must be one or the other. If he is eternal, than he can have nothing to do with the temporal realm. If he does, he cannot be eternal but must be temporal. Since God does have involvement with the temporal realm, he must be temporal. These assumptions largely determine the outcome. Although Wolterstorff does not specifically define eternity as absolute timelessness, he works within those parameters, so that his approach to breaking down the barrier between the temporal and eternal is to insist that God is temporal.⁸¹ Second, like Kneale and Pike, Wolterstorff sees the origin of this doctrine as Greek rather than Christian, although he has more recently stepped away from that position.⁸² Third, he argues that the biblical testimony of God as the redeemer who is actively involved in human history requires that God be understood as everlasting rather than eternal. For Wolterstorff, the traditional view is not simply underdetermined by the biblical data, it is counterdetermined, and this conclusion remains central in his later work.⁸³

D. Richard Swinburne's Double *Reductio* against Eternity (1977)

A second line of attack on the traditional doctrine of eternality is found in Richard Swinburne's *The Coherence of Theism*.⁸⁴ His criticism of the doctrine is especially noteworthy, for in his earlier writings Swinburne originally defended the alternative view

⁸¹Wolterstorff, "God Everlasting," 202.

⁸²Wolterstorff, "Unqualified Divine Temporality," in *God & Time: Four Views*, ed. Gregory Ganssle (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 210-211, and n. 8 (210). Here he specifically dissociates himself from the claim that "in embracing the doctrine [of divine timelessness] the church fathers were succumbing to the power of Greek philosophical thought and that later theologians. . . then followed in the footsteps of their predecessors." In footnote 8 he admits that this position differs from one expressed in his essay, "God Everlasting."

⁸³Wolterstorff, "Unqualified Divine Temporality," 187-193. His argument will be considered in some detail in chapter 6.

⁸⁴Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1977).

but later came to reject it.⁸⁵ Swinburne credits Neoplatonism rather than the Bible with developing the notion of God's timelessness in order to defend the doctrine of immutability. "The timelessness of God would explain God's total immutability, if he was totally immutable. But we have seen no reason why the theist should advocate God's total immutability."⁸⁶ To this, Swinburne adds a second and equally impoverished motivation, namely that the Scholastics embraced the doctrine of God as being outside of time so they might maintain a strong sense of God's omniscience regarding future events without jeopardizing their free character.⁸⁷

These considerations do not, in Swinburne's mind, protect the notion of God's being outside time from the charge of incoherence, for which he offers two primary arguments. The first is a *reductio* involving the problem of God's being simultaneously present at all moments of human time:

The inner incoherence can be seen as follows. God's timelessness is said to consist in his existing at all moments of human time--simultaneously. Thus he is said to be simultaneously present at (and a witness of) what I did yesterday, what I am doing today, and what I will do tomorrow. But if t1 is simultaneous with t2 and t2 with t3 then t1 is simultaneous with t3. So if the instant at which God knows these things were simultaneous with both yesterday, today and tomorrow, then these days would be simultaneous with each other. So yesterday would be the same day as today and as tomorrow--which is clearly nonsense.⁸⁸

The second argument is an extension of the first. According to Christian theism,

⁸⁵His earlier position is set forth in Richard Swinburne, "The Timelessness of God (I & II)," *The Church Quarterly Review* 116 (1965): 323-37; 472-86.

⁸⁶Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism*, 217; 219. Swinburne's comment reflects a view of the traditional doctrine of immutability that is common in the analytic discussion of the divine attributes, but also misunderstands the theological tradition. Just as many participants in the analytic debate believe that divine eternity means absolute timelessness, so also they interpret immutability as absolute immobility. Neither are properly nuanced positions. For a more complete discussion of this kind of misapplication of the doctrine of immutability, see Richard Muller, "Incarnation, Immutability, and the Case for Classical Theism," *Westminster Theological Journal* 45 (1983): 22-40, and chapters 5 and 6 of this thesis.

⁸⁷Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism*, 219. Swinburne is alluding to Boethius's application of the doctrine of eternity which Pike so admired. Swinburne, however, does not share Pike's admiration.

⁸⁸Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism*, 220-21.

God performs many actions, such as forgive, punish, or warn, which are things that are true of a person at this or that or all times, i.e., which occur in time. But the notion that God could bring these things about without doing these things at times before or after other times (that is, temporally), seems incoherent.⁸⁹ Such problems can be avoided, argues Swinburne, by adopting the view that God is everlasting rather than timeless.

E. Paul Helm's Response to Wolterstorff and Swinburne (1980/82/88)

In contrast to Wolterstorff and Swinburne, Paul Helm defends the idea that God exists in a timeless eternity.⁹⁰ To the charge that such a notion is hellenic rather than biblical, Helm offers a twin response: (a) there is nothing unbiblical about the idea of a timeless God; and (b) there are good reasons for supposing that God is timeless.

1. Timelessness is not unbiblical

Both Wolterstorff and Swinburne allege that the biblical descriptions of God's activity suggest that he is in time. But what, counters Helm, keeps such descriptions from being anthropomorphic? We tend to interpret descriptions of God in space that way; why not the biblical descriptions of him in time?⁹¹ Further, there are other passages in the scripture (e.g., Ps. 90) that seem to suggest (and have been so interpreted in the history of the church) that God is outside of time.⁹²

Helm also believes that the argument from Greek influence lacks force. He willingly stipulates that the biblical writers are themselves not influenced by Greek notions of time and eternity. Indeed, it would appear that the biblical writers did not concern

⁸⁹Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism*, 221.

⁹⁰See Paul Helm, "God and Spacelessness," *Philosophy* 55 (1980): 211-221. This was later reprinted in Stephen M. Cahn and David Shatz, eds., *Contemporary Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982) and some of that material became incorporated into his, *Eternal God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988). For this discussion I will be drawing from both sources. References from "God and Spacelessness" will be taken from the text in *Contemporary Philosophy of Religion*.

⁹¹Helm, *Eternal God*, 2.

⁹²We will discuss several additional texts in chapters 5 and 6.

themselves with abstract notions of time at all. But this says nothing about what they might have thought about such notions if they had been exposed to them or whether they would have looked upon them favorably or unfavorably:

But if there is no evidence of either the acceptance or rejection of the abstract ideas of timelessness, then what this allows one to infer is not that the biblical writers *rejected* the idea of timeless eternity but that they neither rejected nor accepted it and that the idea of timeless eternity may be consistent with what they did accept.⁹³

The situation is parallel to whether the biblical writers accepted a geocentric view of the universe. It would appear that here, as well as with any other modern scientific topics, they neither accepted nor rejected it--it merely fell outside of their interests.⁹⁴ Another parallel example is that of the doctrine of the Incarnation. The New Testament does not teach as mature and developed a Christology as was later hammered out in the early church. But this does not mean that the Nicene and Chalcedonian Christology is unbiblical:

Perhaps the fairest thing to conclude about the developed doctrine of the Incarnation is not that the New Testament teaches it, or that the New Testament does not teach it, but that considered as a technical theological term of art, the New Testament provides only the raw data for such a doctrine, or at most the first rough formulations of it.⁹⁵

Helm thinks the same is true of doctrine of divine eternity. He believes there is “biblical data of a non-technical kind which can reasonably be understood as countenancing timelessness and that a satisfactory explanation can be provided of data which appear to go the other way.”⁹⁶ However, Helm does not merely think the doctrine of God’s eternity is biblically permissible. He also thinks there are good and biblical reasons for believing it.

2. Some good reasons for embracing timelessness

Helm begins his discussion of the arguments in favor of timelessness by reflecting

⁹³Helm, *Eternal God*, 4; emphasis his.

⁹⁴Helm, *Eternal God*, 32.

⁹⁵Helm, *Eternal God*, 10.

⁹⁶Helm, *Eternal God*, 11.

on Pike's discussion of Anselm's justification of the doctrine of timelessness. Anselm saw timelessness as adding to God's perfections and therefore as important to his ontological argument. Pike (and Helm) wrestle with how being timeless is a true value-adding concept. All other things being equal, how would a timeless being be an improvement over an everlasting being? This question is more complex than it appears on the surface and admits no easy or obvious answer.⁹⁷

Those who advocate the doctrine of timelessness have likely done so for two reasons: First, timelessness was thought to entail divine immutability. Second, it modifies other attributes of God, even those it might not entail.⁹⁸ This latter sense is an important aspect of understanding divine eternity. It is not only an attribute, but also a way of possessing them:

It is not that God is both omniscient and timeless but that he is timelessly omniscient. And it may be that to be timelessly omniscient modifies omniscience at least to the extent of saying that there are ways of representing all that a timeless being knows which are open to those who are in time which are not open to him and vice versa.⁹⁹

But as helpful as these notions are, they still do not provide a justification for timelessness. For Helm such justification is found in the need "to draw a proper distinction between the creator and the creature."¹⁰⁰ Both Anselm and Calvin insist that there are some attributes which God and his creatures do not share, or better, which are distinguished by their mode of possession. He expresses those concerns in a pair of arguments:

- (1) Whatever is created is finite.
- (2) Whatever is finite is mutable.
- (3) Whatever is mutable is in time. Therefore

⁹⁷Helm, *Eternal God*, 15.

⁹⁸Helm, *Eternal God*, 16.

⁹⁹Helm, *Eternal God*, 37.

¹⁰⁰Helm, *Eternal God*, 17.

- (4) Whatever is created is in time.

And

- (5) Whatever is the creator is infinite.
 (6) Whatever is infinite is immutable.
 (7) Whatever is immutable is outside time. Therefore
 (8) Whatever is the creator is outside time.¹⁰¹

For Helm, only the view that God is timeless will preserve the doctrine of immutability necessary to maintain the Creator/creature distinction so essential to Christian theology. In what amounts to an almost direct challenge to Wolterstorff's assertions, Helm insists that only the view that God is eternal does justice to the biblical material:

Only a God who is immutable in a particularly strong sense can (logically) perform all that Scripture claims that God performs, and a God can only be immutable in this strong sense if he exists timelessly. So if these scriptural claims are true God exists timelessly. It is the coherence of this metaphysical underpinning which is defended in what follows.¹⁰²

For Helm, his defense has the added advantage of moving the discussion away from whether or not these concepts derive from Greek philosophy. What is important is not the question of genetics but the question of adequacy.¹⁰³

In his second chapter in *Eternal God*, Helm addresses the usual charges leveled against the doctrine of eternity. He notes that the *prima facie* assertion that an eternal God has relations with temporal beings, and the view that God perceives the whole of the temporal world at a glance (timelessly) often results in the accusation of incoherence.¹⁰⁴

Swinburne, in his *reductio* quoted above, argued that the doctrine of God's eternity leads to the conclusion that yesterday is the same as today and as tomorrow--"which is

¹⁰¹Helm, *Eternal God*, 19.

¹⁰²Helm, *Eternal God*, 21-22.

¹⁰³Helm, *Eternal God*, 22.

¹⁰⁴Helm, *Eternal God*, 24.

clearly nonsense.” To this Helm cheerfully replies, “As indeed it is.”¹⁰⁵ For Helm, Swinburne is mistaken in thinking that timelessness consists of God existing at all moments of human time simultaneously. He does not. He exists *timelessly* without prohibiting the possibility of a relationship between himself and his creation.¹⁰⁶ We shall explore the nature of this possibility in chapter 6. For the moment we continue our discussion of Helm’s response to Wolterstorff and Swinburne by considering his third, and most creative criticism, of their position.

3. The parallel between “timelessness” and “spacelessness”

In “God and Spacelessness,” Paul Helm rejects Wolterstorff’s and Swinburne’s arguments against the eternity of God on the grounds that the same kind of argumentation used by them against the timelessness of God can be applied to the spacelessness of God.¹⁰⁷ Therefore, if God’s timelessness is incoherent, so also is God’s spacelessness. Recall the three propositions used above to illustrate Wolterstorff’s argumentation.

- (1) The kettle is boiling.
- (2) The kettle is boiling at present.
- (3) The kettle boils on June 5, 1974.

Helm proceeds to translate them into “spatial tenses”:

- (4) The kettle is boiling here.
- (5) The kettle is boiling at this place (i.e., where I am or we are).
- (6) The kettle is boiling in the Old Kent Road.¹⁰⁸

Just as you cannot infer (2) from (3), so also you cannot infer (5) from (6), for (5) provides the additional information that the kettle is boiling at the location of the speaker. Having translated (transported?) the problem into a spatial one, Helm presses his point and

¹⁰⁵Helm, *Eternal God*, 26.

¹⁰⁶Helm, *Eternal God*, 27.

¹⁰⁷Helm uses similar argumentation in the third chapter of *Eternal God*, 41-55.

¹⁰⁸Paul Helm, “God and Spacelessness,” in *Contemporary Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Steven M. Cahn and David Shatz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 101-102.

restructures Wolterstorff's argument as follows:

Now we might suppose that God knows that the kettle is boiling here. He cannot know this except where it is true. He cannot know this until he occupies a place in the Old Kent Road near to where the kettle is boiling if so be that the kettle is boiling in the Old Kent Road. So God cannot know that the kettle is boiling here until he arrives at or near the place where the kettle is boiling. That is, God's coming to know that the kettle is boiling here cannot occur until he arrives at the Old Kent Road, unless of course we suppose that he is already there. So if God is spacelessly present in his creation there are matters he cannot know. But just as the Bible, for example, portrays God as knowing when things take place, so he is portrayed as knowing where they take place. Accordingly we must conclude that if the earlier argument establishes the presence of God in time this argument establishes the presence of God in space.¹⁰⁹

Helm proceeds to apply the same kind of reasoning to Swinburne's *reductio*. Helm labels the argument "the argument from simultaneity," and states it in the following form:

- (7) God exists timelessly
- (8) God exists simultaneously at all moments of human time (from (7)).
- (9) God is simultaneously present at what I did yesterday, am doing today, and will do tomorrow.
- (10) If time t_1 is simultaneous with time t_2 , and t_2 is simultaneous with t_3 , then t_1 is simultaneous with t_3 .
- (11) If God is simultaneously present at what I did yesterday and am doing today then yesterday and today are simultaneous (from (9) and (10))
- (12) But the idea that yesterday and today are simultaneous is absurd.
- (13) Therefore (7) is incoherent.

Translating this argument from a temporal to spatial form by using the concept of being "wholly spatially present" as the spatial equivalent to "simultaneously" yields the following argument:

- (14) God is spaceless.
- (15) God is wholly spatially present at different places.
- (16) God is wholly spatially present at what I am doing here and you are doing there.
- (17) If an individual is wholly spatially present with another individual, and that individual is wholly spatially present with a third individual then the first individual is wholly spatially present with the third individual.
- (18) Thus if God is wholly spatially present at what I am doing here and you are doing there then where you are and where I am are the same place.
- (19) But that idea that this place and that place are the same place is absurd.
- (20) Therefore (14) is incoherent.

Helm concludes, therefore, that if the timeless existence of God is incoherent, so

¹⁰⁹Helm, "God and Spacelessness," 102.

also is the spaceless existence of God--something most proponents of the everlasting position would not want to grant.¹¹⁰

4. Assessment

Helm's discussion provides a useful defense of divine eternity in several ways. First, while Helm's argument from spacelessness may not provide a conclusive refutation of the position that God is everlasting, it is of sufficient weight to caution against too easily embracing the challenge to eternity posed by Wolterstorff and Swinburne.

Second, as Helm points out, the everlasting doctrine of Wolterstorff and Swinburne carries its own set of undesirable consequences. Their rejection of God's eternity requires them also to abandon the traditional doctrine of God's immutability. They do this with a clear conscience by arguing that both doctrines are throwbacks to Neoplatonism and therefore unbiblical. But, as Helm has indicated, this is too easy.¹¹¹ There is no reason to believe the traditional doctrine of eternity is inconsistent with the biblical descriptions of God as eternal and immutable. In addition, rejecting the traditional doctrines of immutability and eternity carries the risk of blurring the vital biblical distinction between the Creator and the creature. Finally, unless the advocates of the everlasting doctrine can articulate the way God is able to transcend time while at the same time dwelling within it, their view runs the risk of making God the prisoner of time. Simply declaring, as Wolterstorff does, that God is Lord of time may minister comfort to the pious, but does little to provide a real solution to this difficulty. Meanwhile, for the eternalist, the solution is right at hand.

Third, Helm's method of argumentation is useful for highlighting the parallel between time and space in comparisons between God's eternity and omnipresence. As we have already seen, Wolterstorff resists such parallels and dismisses them simply as an

¹¹⁰Helm, "God and Spacelessness,"103.

¹¹¹As I will argue in chapter 5, it is also debateable historically.

unacceptable way of spatializing time. Helm dissents from that opinion.¹¹² As we shall see, the parallel between the temporal and the spatial plays an important role in the development of divine eternity in the history of doctrine.

However, it should be noted that Helm also interprets eternity and divine timelessness in a way similar to his opponents and differing to a certain degree from the traditional understanding of God's eternity as duration without succession. Nonetheless, many of his arguments in support of divine timelessness are useful for defending the traditional view and have been used previously in the history of doctrine.

F. Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann's Defense of Eternity and ET-Simultaneity (1981)

We now turn to one of the most significant (and most frequently commented on) contributions in the "first generation" literature, Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann's essay, "Eternity."¹¹³ In their treatment, Stump and Kretzmann explicate and defend the concept of eternity as it is found in Boethius. In so doing, they tie themselves more closely to the actual theological tradition characterized by "duration without succession" than do many of the participants in the modern analytic discussion of divine eternity.

1. Their interpretation of Boethius's definition of eternity

According to Stump and Kretzmann, the traditional doctrine of eternity is not to be confused with either limitless duration in time or atemporality. Likewise, the picture of eternity as a frozen instant is a radical distortion. Eternity is, according to Boethius "the complete possession all at once of illimitable life."¹¹⁴

For Stump and Kretzmann this definition involves four elements: First, anything

¹¹²Helm, "God and Spacelessness," 104.

¹¹³Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann, "Eternity," *Journal of Philosophy* 84 (1987): 429-458; reprinted in *The Concept of God*, ed. Thomas V. Morris (New York, Oxford University Press, 1985), 219-52 (page citations are from the reprint edition).

¹¹⁴Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, 5.6 and *De Trinitate*, chap. 4; quoted and translated by Stump and Kretzmann in "Eternity," 220-21.

that is eternal has life. It is therefore not appropriate to apply the term to a number, a truth, or the world.¹¹⁵ Second, the life of an eternal being cannot be limited. It is characterized by “beginningless, endless, infinite duration.”¹¹⁶ Third, eternity involves duration of a special sort as suggested by the fact that it involves life which is possessed as a whole. Fourth, an eternal entity is characterized by “the complete possession *all at once* of an illimitable life.” The fact that it possesses its illimitable life “all at once” is what distinguishes a living eternal entity from a temporal one.¹¹⁷ So formulated, the concept of eternity sets forth *two* separate modes of real existence. However, “[e]ternity is a mode of existence that is, on Boethius’s view, neither reducible to time nor incompatible with it.”¹¹⁸

2. **The atemporality of an eternal entity: The distinction between presentness and simultaneity**

Stump and Kretzmann evaluate the coherence of eternity by considering the applicability of the concepts of presentness and simultaneity to an eternal entity. In the temporal mode, the present is a durationless instant immediately bordered by the past and the future. In contrast, the present in the eternal mode knows no such boundaries since there is no past or future. The eternal present is “by definition an infinitely extended, pastless, futureless duration.”¹¹⁹

The concept of simultaneity also differs in the two modes of existence. Temporal, or T-simultaneity, involves existence or occurrence at one and the same *time*. Eternal, or E-simultaneity, involves existence or occurrence at one and the same eternal *present*.¹²⁰

¹¹⁵Stump and Kretzmann, “Eternity,” 222.

¹¹⁶Stump and Kretzmann, “Eternity,” 223.

¹¹⁷Stump and Kretzmann, “Eternity,” 224.

¹¹⁸Stump and Kretzmann, “Eternity,” 224.

¹¹⁹Stump and Kretzmann, “Eternity,” 225.

¹²⁰Stump and Kretzmann, “Eternity,” 226.

But the critical question is whether there can be a common species of simultaneity between the eternal and temporal modes of existence (ET-simultaneity) without reducing what is temporal to what is eternal or vice versa. The answer is no:

Against this background, then, it is not conceptually possible to construct a definition for ET-simultaneity analogous to the definitions for the other two species of simultaneity, by spelling out ‘at once’ as ‘at one and the same _____’ and filling in the blank appropriately. What is temporal and what is eternal can coexist on the view we are adopting and defending, but not within the same mode of existence; and there is no single mode of existence that can be referred to in filling in the blank in such a definition of ET-simultaneity.¹²¹

But Stump and Kretzmann do not leave the matter there. Appealing to Einstein’s Special Theory of Relativity, they point out that the difficulties encountered by advocates of God’s eternity are not unique. Einstein’s theory suggests that, even within the temporal mode, there is no absolute state of being temporally simultaneous, for the notion of simultaneity is observer-dependent.¹²²

3. Their concept of ET-simultaneity

Stump and Kretzmann think that the difficulties encountered by the relativity of time provide a clue as to how we may conceptualize the issue of ET-simultaneity. The key is to focus on the two reference frames (eternity and time) from the point of view of two observers within those frames, and to speak in terms of one and the same *present* rather than one and the same *time*. This leads to the following formulation:

(ET) for every x and every y, x and y are ET-simultaneous if and only if

- (i) either x is eternal and y is temporal, or vice versa; and
- (ii) for some observer, A, in the unique eternal reference frame, x and y are both present--i.e., either x is eternally present and y is observed as temporally present, or vice versa; and
- (iii) for some observer, B, in one of the infinitely many temporal reference frame, x and y are both present--i.e., either x is observed

¹²¹Stump and Kretzmann, “Eternity,” 227.

¹²²Stump and Kretzmann, “Eternity,” 229.

as eternally present and y is temporally present, or vice versa.¹²³

To illustrate how this works, Stump and Kretzmann appeal to a hypothetical example of Richard Nixon, supposing that Nixon will die on August 9, 1990, sixteen years from the day of his resignation from office in 1974. From the perspective of a temporal being living at the present time (for them in 1981), Nixon's resignation is in the past, he is presently alive, and his death is in the future. His death (in the future) will be present to those who are at his death bed. From the perspective of an eternal being, Nixon's resignation, his life, and his death are present. This would appear to lead to a hopeless muddle. How can Nixon be alive in the temporal present but dead in the eternal present? Or worse, how can Nixon be both alive and dead in the eternal present? The answer to the first question is fairly simple. Since the eternal present and the temporal present are not the same thing, there is no contradiction. The second question is not that much more difficult to manage as long as we remember that we are dealing with two separate modes of existence and, therefore, two separate frames of reference. To say that both Nixon's life and death are present to an eternal entity is not to say that Nixon exists in eternity and is therefore simultaneously alive and dead. Nixon is a temporal being, and his life and death are temporal. But from the referential perspective of an eternal being, these are observed in the eternal present. Stump and Kretzmann put it this way:

One and the same eternal present is ET-simultaneous with Nixon's being alive and is also ET-simultaneous with Nixon's dying; so Nixon's life is ET-simultaneous with and hence present to an eternal entity, and Nixon's death is ET-simultaneous with and hence present to an eternal entity, *although Nixon's life and Nixon's death are themselves neither eternal nor simultaneous*.¹²⁴

It would appear to this writer that confusion over this formulation occurs when the notion of the eternal *present* is interpreted in, or contaminated with, its usual temporal sense. As Stump and Kretzmann will themselves point out in a subsequent article, part of

¹²³Stump and Kretzmann, "Eternity," 231.

¹²⁴Stump and Kretzmann, "Eternity," 235; emphasis mine.

the difficulty here involves the inherent limitations of language. Our understanding of “present” automatically carries with it certain temporal connotations. In the temporal realm, it describes the content of our consciousness, which is immediately bordered by the past and the future. For us our “present” is constantly changing.

The eternal “present” also describes some of the content of God's consciousness. But in his case, it is not bordered by the past or future, since these do not exist for God. It is, as Boethius put it, illimitably possessed. Also, unlike our own experience of the temporal “present,” God's eternal “present” does not change. Admittedly these notions are difficult to grasp because they are so unlike our experience, but they are not impossible to conceptualize, as will be addressed in chapter 7.

4. The relationship of atemporal duration and atemporal life

Stump and Kretzmann then argue for the coherence of the notion of atemporal duration. To them “it is the heart of the concept of eternity and, in our view, the original motivation for its development.”¹²⁵ The idea of atemporal duration arose from the desire to discern that which was abiding in a world of change. Our temporal experience of duration gives a sense of continuation which dissolves upon closer reflection of the nature of time. The present is a durationless instant, the past is lost forever, and the future remains beyond reach. Such temporally shifting sand provides no foundation upon which the house of existence might be built. For the Greeks, something more was required, and that something was *genuine* duration. Stump and Kretzmann explain:

Genuine duration is fully realized duration--not only extended existence (even *that* is theoretically impossible in time) but also existence *none* of which is already gone and *none* of which is yet to come--and such fully realized duration must be atemporal duration. . . . Eternity, not time, is the mode of existence that admits of fully realized duration.¹²⁶

The notion of atemporal duration becomes a stumblingblock and appears incoherent

¹²⁵Stump and Kretzmann, “Eternity,” 236.

¹²⁶Stump and Kretzmann, “Eternity,” 237; emphasis theirs.

only because we tend to think of duration as “persistence *through time*.”¹²⁷ The more we can distance ourselves from such prejudice, the better we are able to admit the possibility of atemporal life (which is a form of duration).¹²⁸ Indeed, upon reflection, it is clear that the notion of atemporal life is not incoherent. While an atemporal mind might not be able to deliberate, anticipate, remember, or plan ahead, other activities, such as knowing, willing, being aware, or even being angry do not require temporal sequence. They conclude:

The notion of an atemporal mind is not *prima facie* absurd, and so neither is the notion of an atemporal life absurd; for any entity that has or is a mind must be considered to be *ipso facto* alive, whatever characteristics of other living beings it may lack.¹²⁹

5. The possibility of an eternal entity acting in time

But even granted that atemporal life might be possible, how, as Pike argues, could an atemporal being bring about effects or create or preserve anything in a temporal world without himself being or becoming temporal?¹³⁰ Stump and Kretzmann think that such objections are confused and rest upon a failure to distinguish between:

- (a) acting in such a way that the action itself can be located in time; and
- (b) acting in such a way that the effect of the action can be located in time.

While (a) is impossible for an atemporal agent, there is no reason to believe that (b) is impermissible. And if (b) is permissible, there is no reason to think that God could also not create something, or sustain what he has created, or act in response to prayer.¹³¹

The doctrine of the Incarnation poses a more difficult kind of problem since in this case the eternal entity becomes a component of the temporal effect.¹³² Stump and

¹²⁷Stump and Kretzmann, “Eternity,” 238; emphasis theirs.

¹²⁸Stump and Kretzmann, “Eternity,” 238.

¹²⁹Stump and Kretzmann, “Eternity,” 239.

¹³⁰Pike, *God and Timelessness*, 104-105; quoted in Stump and Kretzmann, “Eternity,” 240.

¹³¹Stump and Kretzmann, “Eternity,” 241-44.

¹³²Stump and Kretzmann, “Eternity,” 244.

Kretzmann do not pretend to give this issue the kind of attention it deserves, but they do suggest that the complexity of the doctrine of the Incarnation, and particularly its essential emphasis on the two natures of Christ, may well rob the objection of its force while at the same time providing a potential path for resolving it:

We hope simply to have pointed out that the doctrine of the Incarnation cannot be reduced to the belief that God became temporal and that, if it is understood as including the doctrine of the dual nature, it can be seen to have been constructed in such a way as to avoid being reduced to that simple belief.¹³³

I believe that Stump and Kretzmann's observations here are essentially correct, and I will take up the relationship between eternity and the Incarnation in chapter 6.

6. Some final observations by Stump and Kretzmann

Stump and Kretzmann close their essay with a brief discussion of three issues related to God's knowledge and power in respect to the temporal past, present, and future. First, God cannot foreknow contingent events since an eternal entity cannot *foreknow* anything. But he is aware of all temporal events, for they are all present to him.¹³⁴

Second, God cannot change the past. This is not because the past is over and done with, but because there is no past for him. The "past" is only a part of the experience of temporal beings. For God, all events in the temporal realm are present events. This leads to some interesting distinctions:

As for a past event, the time at which it was actually occurring is the time at which it is present to such an entity; and so the battle of Waterloo is present to God, and God can affect the battle. Suppose that God does so. God can bring it about that Napoleon wins, though we know that he does not do so, because whatever God does at Waterloo is over and done with as we see it. So God cannot alter the past, but he can alter the course of the Battle of Waterloo.¹³⁵

Finally, the response to the question whether God can know what time it is, is yes, for God knows what is actually happening as it is happening:

¹³³Stump and Kretzmann, "Eternity," 246.

¹³⁴Stump and Kretzmann, "Eternity," 247.

¹³⁵Stump and Kretzmann, "Eternity," 248.

The whole of eternity is ET-simultaneous with each temporal event as it is actually happening; the *only* way in which an eternal entity can be aware of *any* temporal event is to be aware of it as it is actually happening.¹³⁶

The result is that God knows all there is to be known regarding the actual occurrence of temporal events. It therefore makes no sense to question him whether he knows what time it is *now*.

III. Chapter Summary and Conclusions

The positions surveyed in this chapter provide much foundational source material that will be drawn upon in the “second generation” debate. However, we already observe in this first round of discussion a number of the generalizations described at the beginning of this chapter, namely, that view that the doctrine of eternity is biblically underdetermined, hellenistic in origin, and incompatible with the temporal realm. We also see the use of Einsteinian relativity theory as a means of trying to conceptualize the relationship between the temporal and the eternal. All of these trends will continue in the second round of discussion.

Further, the first generation discussion yields no clear winner in the analytic debate whether God is eternal or everlasting. Ronald Nash, commenting in 1983, reported that many thinkers, including Swinburne and Helm, had changed their mind on the subject!¹³⁷ At that time, Nash also believed that the jury was still out and admitted to being personally undecided about the issue.¹³⁸ Indeed, the debate is just beginning.

¹³⁶Stump and Kretzmann, “Eternity,” 251; emphasis theirs.

¹³⁷Ronald H. Nash, *The Concept of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1983), 82. This is before they arrived at the positions described in this chapter.

¹³⁸Nash, *The Concept of God*, 83.

CHAPTER 3

Survey of the Analytic Literature (Part II) The “Second Generation” Discussion

I. Introduction

The “first generation” discussion described in the previous chapter gives an account of the development of the controversy and an overview of its initial participants. In this chapter, we observe a second round of discussion by most of the original participants and augmented by some new ones. In particular, Stump and Kretzmann’s “Eternity” article drew considerable response and criticism in the literature of religious philosophy, and much of what followed in the second generation revolved around their discussion. Respondents include, but are not limited to, William Alston, William Lane Craig, Stephen Davis, Paul Fitzgerald, Julie Gowen, William Hasker, Paul Helm, Brian Leftow, Delmas Lewis, Thomas Morris, Ronald Nash, Herbert Nelson, Alan Padgett, and Richard Swinburne. We will examine several select authors in detail and allude to the others.

Throughout this second generation discussion, the assumption that the traditional doctrine of eternity advocated a view of divine timelessness derived from Greek philosophy remained prominent. Only a few, like Stump and Kretzmann and Leftow, sought to defend the more nuanced position that the traditional doctrine of eternity centered on the fullness or plenitude of the divine nature and involved “duration without succession.” Helm’s position is more nuanced in the direction of the theological tradition in that he prefers to view God as “time-free” rather than “time-less,” and he also sees the fullness of divine nature as a central motivator for the doctrine. However, he is uncomfortable with the concept of atemporal duration defended by the others.

In addition, the decade of the 1990s witnessed a number of analytic philosophers

who sought to defend some form of divine eternity over against the view that God is everlasting. Included in this number were three book-length treatments by John Yates, Brian Leftow, and Alan Padgett.¹

II. The “Second Generation” Discussion

A. Paul Fitzgerald’s Criticism of Stump and Kretzmann (1985)

We begin with the response by Fitzgerald, “Stump and Kretzmann on Time and Eternity,” since it raises several key issues and was graced with a direct reply.²

1. The problem of duration without divisibility

Fitzgerald argues that Stump and Kretzmann do not “quite succeed” in making the idea of eternity intelligible and that the weak link in the chain of their argument is their concept of atemporal duration. For Stump and Kretzmann, eternal duration is infinitely extended yet without succession. But what would this mean? Fitzgerald outlines the elements he believes would be required for comparing *any* sense of duration, eternal or temporal. First, two particulars can both have the same kind of extension (e.g., length of two illnesses, two thoughts in God). Second, two particulars may both have the same or a different *amount* of the mode of extension in question (e.g., one item can be longer than another). Third, by having different positions along the extensive dimension, two qualitatively identical particulars can be numerically distinguished.³

Having laid out what he considers to be the elements necessary for a coherent notion of duration, Fitzgerald applies them to Stump and Kretzmann’s conception of atemporal duration. If these requirements do not hold for both temporal and eternal

¹The Yates book was a new contribution to the literature. The Leftow and Padgett books were anticipated in part by earlier journal articles.

²Paul Fitzgerald, “Stump and Kretzmann on Time and Eternity,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 82 (1985): 260-269; Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann, “Atemporal Duration: A Reply to Fitzgerald,” *Journal of Philosophy* 84 (1987): 214-219.

³Fitzgerald, “Stump and Kretzmann on Time and Eternity,” 262-63.

duration, one would have to wonder why not. But if they do, then what prevents eternal duration from becoming just another temporal dimension?⁴ The other problem for Fitzgerald is that Stump and Kretzmann insist on duration while at the same time denying that an infinite extended duration has finite parts. For Fitzgerald this is incoherent.

Instead, Fitzgerald defends what he believes to be the traditional view, namely that the timelessness of God is the “point” type, which simply denies there is in God any mode of extension or duration, temporal or otherwise.⁵ Talk of God’s enduring, and the like, is to be understood in his relationship to us rather than in himself. In this regard, God’s knowledge of future events is *foreknowledge* to us but not to him. He knows them as present. Likewise, from our perspective, God changes and learns things. However, in himself, he does not change. Something similar is true of his duration. From our perspective he endures, but not from his own, for there is no duration in eternity.⁶

2. The problem of ET-observation

Fitzgerald closes with an assessment of Stump and Kretzmann’s formulation of ET-simultaneity. Fitzgerald finds the concept of “observation” in their description of ET-simultaneity obscure. On the one hand, it seems to boil down to something trivial:

What does it mean for a temporal observer to *observe* something as eternally present, as distinct from simply *predicating* eternal presence of it? If there is any eternal particular, then any observer at any place-time can correctly predicate eternal presence of it. For this simply reduces to eternal existence.⁷

⁴Fitzgerald, “Stump and Kretzmann on Time and Eternity,” 263.

⁵It is not clear what theological “tradition” Fitzgerald is appealing to here, since he provides no references in his article beyond an informal allusion to the analogy of the geometrical point for eternity found in Boethius and Aquinas (264-265). As we shall see in chapter 5, the consensus position for understanding God’s eternity is duration without succession.

⁶Fitzgerald, “Stump and Kretzmann on Time and Eternity,” 263. While the former note suggests that Fitzgerald is incorrect when he speaks of the tradition as denying duration in God, he is quite correct that the tradition speaks about God as he is in himself and in relationship to us. This is an insight of great importance for conceptualizing the nature of God’s eternity and his relationship to the temporal world.

⁷Fitzgerald, “Stump and Kretzmann on Time and Eternity,” 267; emphasis his.

On the other hand, if Stump and Kretzmann mean more than that, it seems to reduce to mysticism, since the notion of “observation” suggests some kind of experience. For how does a temporal observer *experience* something eternal except in some mystical sense in which the eternal entity is experienced as being present to a temporal one? “If Stump and Kretzmann do not mean this when they speak of ‘observing x as eternally present,’ then I do not know what they mean.”⁸ A similar problem emerges with an entity in the eternal reference frame *observing* something as temporally present. If the notion is not trivial, then in what sense can the eternal experience the temporal?

B. Paul Helm’s Criticism of ET-Simultaneity (1988)

In the light of his defense of divine eternity, one would think that Helm would be enthused about the ET-simultaneity proffered by Stump and Kretzmann. He is not. While he believes their formulation enables them to avoid the *reductio* offered by Swinburne (since ET-simultaneity is not transitive), this victory comes at the prohibitive cost of obscuring the nature of the relationship between the eternal God and his temporal creatures:

For the problem is, how can something which is an event in time be wholly present ‘to an eternal entity’? The answer given is that it is ET-wholly present. But this answer is wholly obscure. It is not wholly present as two exactly simultaneous temporal events are wholly present to each other, but wholly present in the sense in which what is eternally existing is wholly present to what is temporally existing. But how can an eternal entity be aware of a temporal entity as present, as Stump and Kretzmann’s definition requires? What sort of presentness is the eternal presentness of a temporal entity? And what sort of presentness is it that can have wholly present to it the occurring of two temporally distinct events?⁹

1. His agreement with Fitzgerald

For Helm, part of the difficulty is found in the way that Stump and Kretzmann talk about eternal duration. At times their usage reflects aspects of temporal duration which would translate eternity into super-time.¹⁰ Helm echoes Fitzgerald’s concerns regarding

⁸Fitzgerald, “Stump and Kretzmann on Time and Eternity,” 268.

⁹Paul Helm, *Eternal God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 33-34.

¹⁰Helm, *Eternal God*, 34.

the coherence of a notion of duration that is infinitely extended and yet indivisible:

[I]f there is a duration which has no successiveness and no divisibility--and yet duration is still affirmed, does this not amount simply to saying that the mode of divine eternity is durational, and nothing more? What is the value of introducing a concept and then so paring it away that hardly anything is left? Indeed, what is left except the bare claim?¹¹

2. His preference for God's "time-freeness"

For himself, Helm prefers to explain timeless eternity in terms of "time-freeness," "where the only questions of simultaneity and non-simultaneity are *quoad nos*, and from which both the notions of duration and instantaneousness are banished."¹² This view does not prevent any relations between the God and his creatures, only temporal ones: "The creation is not temporally present to God in his knowing it, nor is it distinct. God knows, and that is all."¹³ This means, following Fitzgerald, that references to God's duration, or to his knowing or remembering, are pronouncements that describe a relationship to God from our perspective without at the same time requiring that God exist in time.¹⁴

3. His argument for God's timelessness

Helm goes further to provide a formal and positive argument for God's timelessness:

It might be argued that if God's existence in time requires the occurrence of time before the creation of the universe then this would, by a *reductio*, lead to an overturning of the idea that God is in time. For the idea that God exists in an infinitely backward extending time runs up against the idea of an actual infinite. For such a prospect requires that an infinite number of events must have elapsed before the present moment could arrive. And since it is impossible for an infinite number of events to have elapsed, and yet the present moment has arrived, the series of events cannot be infinite. Therefore, either there was a time when God began to exist, which is impossible, or God exists timelessly. Therefore God

¹¹Helm, *Eternal God*, 35.

¹²Helm, *Eternal God*, 36.

¹³Helm, *Eternal God*, 37.

¹⁴Helm, *Eternal God*, 37.

exists timelessly.¹⁵

In sum, Helm argues that God, as a timeless being, cannot have temporal relations with his creatures. But by being timeless he is also time-free. This enables Helm to avoid Swinburne's *reductio*, but it also causes him to reject Stump and Kretzmann's concept of ET-simultaneity. On his view, Boethius's description of the illimitable life of God does not mean, as Stump and Kretzmann suggest, eternal duration but rather a property modifying and reflecting the fullness of the other attributes of God (power, goodness, and so forth). Indeed, his position avoids the notion of E-duration altogether.

It should be remembered that Helm, like most of those involved in the analytic debate, maintains a defined incompatibility between the temporal and the eternal. On such a view, the temporal and eternal are, by definition, entirely separate modes of existence. This does not mean that there cannot be any relations between the two realms, but it does forbid there being any temporal ones. This affects the way Helm sets up the problem. Even though the theological tradition (which Stump and Kretzmann are, I believe, trying to represent) speaks of the eternal non-successive *duration* of God, Helm, like Fitzgerald (and others), is unable to embrace such a notion because duration is a temporal category which cannot be coherently applied to an eternal mode of existence. Shortly, we will examine Stump and Kretzmann's reply to their critics. To be fair however, it should be noted that even given his more absolute contrast between the temporal and the eternal, Helm has provided a viable and nuanced defense of divine eternity in his understanding of the "time-freeness" of God, as well as identified the importance of eternity in expressing the fullness of God's other attributes.

C. William Hasker's *God, Time and Knowledge* (1989)

In the eighth chapter of his book, *God, Time, and Knowledge*, William Hasker

¹⁵Helm, *Eternal God*, 37-38.

comments that the doctrine of divine timelessness has fallen on hard times.¹⁶ While Hasker seeks to give the doctrine a fair hearing and does pronounce it coherent, his discussion does little to relieve its plight.

1. His acceptance of the coherence of timelessness

Hasker proposes two criteria for an acceptable form of timelessness. First, it must be a doctrine of *divine* timelessness. In other words, it must be about God--the kind of God found in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Second, it must provide a solution to the problem of free will and foreknowledge.¹⁷ While not included among the formal criteria, such a doctrine must also be intelligible. This means that it can be expressed in well-formed sentences, is free from contradiction, and can be defended for reasons that can be articulated, but not necessarily understood or embraced by everyone else.¹⁸

As already suggested by the first of the criteria, the doctrine of divine timelessness must be applied to a living person, and cannot merely be a truth or a mathematical concept. Such a person must be outside of time and have neither temporal extension nor temporal location.¹⁹ How can we conceive of such a living *timeless* being? Some would say up front that we cannot, that such a notion is incoherent. However the defenders of the doctrine would argue that eternity is analogous to a moment of time rather than a temporal process. Therefore, activities that can occur momentarily might properly apply to God. Consistent with this, Hasker suggests that a timeless God should be describable as one who knows, acts, and responds to the actions of temporal beings.²⁰ Of these three, knowing is the least troublesome. We can *know* something directly, even without having

¹⁶William Hasker, *God, Time and Knowledge*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 145.

¹⁷Hasker, *God, Time and Knowledge*, 146.

¹⁸Hasker, *God, Time and Knowledge*, 147.

¹⁹Hasker, *God, Time and Knowledge*, 148-49.

²⁰Hasker, *God, Time and Knowledge*, 151.

learned it beforehand. But how can we describe timeless *action*? Here the mind/body problem gives us a clue. Cartesian souls do not exist in space, but they do produce effects. “If this is intelligible (and I believe that it is), then it shows how to speak of God also as a timeless being.”²¹

It is also possible to see how a timeless being could be responsive to human actions. Here Hasker uses the example of chess where it is often possible for one player to anticipate the next player’s move and to plan his response. In an analogous way, the act of bringing about responses in time to the actions of temporal beings need not itself involve temporal action.²²

Hasker then proceeds to consider objections against this formulation. The first is that a timeless God could not be omniscient. For example, Arthur Prior argues that the knowledge of a timeless God must be limited to timeless truths. Therefore, there are a great many things he cannot know, such as “Examinations are now over.” But, as Hasker points out, this problem is not unique to God, and so Prior is not successful in unveiling gaps in God’s knowledge.²³

A more serious problem is the *problem of the presence of time in eternity*. This is the *reductio* problem raised by Swinburne and Kenny. We have heard Swinburne’s version; here is Kenny’s:

On St. Thomas’ view, my typing of this paper is simultaneous with the whole of eternity. Again, on this view, the great fire of Rome is simultaneous with the whole of eternity. Therefore, while I type these very words, Nero fiddles heartlessly on.²⁴

It is this problem that Stump and Kretzmann seek to avoid by their formulation of

²¹Hasker, *God, Time and Knowledge*, 154.

²²Hasker, *God, Time and Knowledge*, 158.

²³Hasker, *God, Time and Knowledge*, 160-61.

²⁴Anthony Kenny, *The God of the Philosophers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 38-39; quoted in Hasker, *God, Time and Knowledge*, 163.

ET-simultaneity. But a dual problem remains, says Hasker: “How can an eternal entity be observed as present in time? How can a temporal entity be observed as present in eternity?”²⁵ The second is the more pressing for it raises the problem of how an eternal God can have knowledge of temporal realities. The answer is to reject the idea that God’s experience is inadequate unless he experiences things the way we do.²⁶ God’s mode of knowing (eternal) need not be the same as the mode of existence of the things that he knows (temporal). Once this is admitted, a solution to the problem becomes available:

How then *can* a timeless God know temporal realities? The answer is, he knows them by knowing, in timeless representation, the content of each moment of temporal existence, as well as the order of moments--an order that he knows to represent temporal sequence, though it cannot be such for him.²⁷

While Hasker admits that this will not satisfy all contemporary philosophers, he thinks that timelessness does require such a view of God’s knowledge--and that the view is coherent and intelligible.

2. His rejection of ET-simultaneity and the truth of timelessness

Despite his defense of divine timelessness, Hasker rejects the view that God is eternal and embraces the everlasting position. He admits that this may be in part due to biases inherent in the tradition of analytic philosophy, of which he is a member. However, he cannot escape the conviction, like many others in this discussion, that the doctrine of eternity is inextricably connected with Augustinian Neoplatonism, and that “the theory of timelessness, if its metaphysical tap root is severed, will eventually shrivel and die.”²⁸

The key unresolved difficulty for Hasker remains the problem of the presence of time in eternity. His own proposed solution, which he admits would not satisfy all

²⁵Hasker, *God, Time and Knowledge*, 165.

²⁶Hasker, *God, Time and Knowledge*, 167.

²⁷Hasker, *God, Time and Knowledge*, 169; emphasis his.

²⁸Hasker, *God, Time and Knowledge*, 183.

contemporary philosophers, in the last analysis does not satisfy him either. This solution comes at too high a price, for it makes God much too removed from his creation:

I cannot keep myself from thinking, like Alston, but unlike Thomas Aquinas, that it is far better if God has “immediate awareness” of facts than if he knows them only as “similitudes” within his own essence. And if, as I have argued against Alston, in order to have immediate awareness of temporal facts, God must himself be temporal, then so be it. To make the other choice leaves too great a distance between the God who is affirmed theologically and the God who is known through Scripture and experience.²⁹

Hasker, therefore, agrees with Wolterstorff that the God who is the Redeemer cannot be a God who is eternal, because a God who redeems is a God who changes, and any being which changes must experience temporal succession.³⁰

D. Richard Swinburne’s Criticism of ET-Simultaneity (1993)

We complete our round of responses to Stump and Kretzmann’s “Eternity” with an article by Richard Swinburne, “God and Time.”³¹ Swinburne continues to champion the position that God is everlasting, which he thinks is found implicitly and explicitly in the Old and New Testaments and the early church. Why then would a theist support the view that God is outside of time? Because, suggests Swinburne, the view that God is everlasting seems to restrain God’s sovereignty over the universe. It appears to make God “time’s prisoner.”³² In this essay, Swinburne upholds the view that viewing God as “timeless” is incoherent, while defending the “everlasting” view against the charge that it makes God a prisoner of time.

²⁹Hasker, *God, Time and Knowledge*, 184.

³⁰Hasker, *God, Time, and Knowledge*, 185. For a more recent and fully developed discussion of this issue by Hasker, see his chapter, “A Philosophical Perspective,” in *The Openness of God*, ed. Clark H. Pinnock, Richard Rice, John Sanders, William Hasker, and David Basinger (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 126-154.

³¹Richard Swinburne, “God and Time,” in *Reasoned Faith*, ed. Elenore Stump (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 204-222.

³²Swinburne, “God and Time,” 204-205.

1. His four principles regarding time

He does this by advocating four principles regarding time. The first is that everything that happens in time has duration and is never instantaneous. Instants are merely the boundary points of the periods of time during which events occur. Even things which appear to happen in an instant are analyzable over a period of time.³³

The second principle is that while time has a “topology” independent of whether there are laws of nature, it is “metric” only if there are laws of nature measurable by some type of clock. In the absence of the laws of nature, there could be no temporal distances, so talk about the time at which some event began and ended would be empty talk.³⁴

The third principle is that the past is that realm of the logically contingent which it is not logically possible that any agent can now affect, and the future is that realm of the logically contingent which it is logically possible that an agent can now affect.³⁵ This makes the present instant the boundary between the past and the future. It also makes circular causality impossible (e.g., if A causes B, then B cannot cause A). It also rules out simultaneous causation (an effect being simultaneous with its cause).³⁶

The fourth principle is that there are truths about periods of time which can only be known at certain periods. For example, that something is happening now can only be known now. That something is going to happen can only be known before it happens. This means, for example, that the knowledge that it is raining today can only be had today (November 3, 1993). On Swinburne’s view, this is *not* the same item of knowledge as that it is raining on November 3, 1993. These two items of knowledge are different.³⁷

³³Swinburne, “God and Time,” 206-207.

³⁴Swinburne, “God and Time,” 211.

³⁵Swinburne, “God and Time,” 211.

³⁶Swinburne, “God and Time,” 214.

³⁷Swinburne, “God and Time,” 215-216.

Parallel arguments likewise show that certain knowledge can only be possessed by certain individuals (e.g., the fact that I am cold can only be known by me, and it is not the same as the knowledge that Swinburne is cold).

2. His rejection of ET-Simultaneity as “unilluminating”

Having articulated the principles, Swinburne proceeds to wield them as weapons against the notion that God is timeless. He tries to hang the position on the horns of a dilemma in regard to the notion that God exists atemporally in a single “moment” or eternal present. If moment is understood as an “instant,” it conflicts with principle one, which states that there is no such thing as an instantaneous state of affairs. However, if the divine moment is a “period,” it runs afoul of principle three:

If God causes the beginning or continuing existence of the world, and perhaps interferes in its operation from time to time, his acting must be prior to the effects that his action causes. Similarly his awareness of events in the world must be later than those events.³⁸

From there Swinburne proceeds to critique the previously described account of “ET-simultaneity” proffered by Stump and Kretzmann. Swinburne recognizes that Stump and Kretzmann’s “observations” are not really observations of simultaneity in the normal sense, but of “concurrence” between the state observed and the one who is observing. Nonetheless, he finds their description obscure and unilluminating. For Swinburne, Stump and Kretzmann have failed to explain how God, if he exists outside of time, can have any relation to events in time similar to “causing” or “observing” them.³⁹ Therefore, for Swinburne the “timeless doctrine” remains incoherent and the doctrine that God is everlasting continues to be the position of choice.

3. Everlastingness does not make God time’s prisoner

However, insists Swinburne, adopting the position that God is everlasting does not

³⁸Swinburne, “God and Time,” 216.

³⁹Swinburne, “God and Time,” 218.

lead to the view that God is time's prisoner, because

although God and time exist together--God is a temporal being--those aspects of time which seem so threatening to his sovereignty only occur through his own voluntary choice. To the extent to which he is time's prisoner, he has chosen to be so. It is God, not time, who calls the shots.⁴⁰

To argue this point, Swinburne picks up a line of thought offered by his doctoral advisee, Alan Padgett, which distinguishes between God's time and the metric time of the created universe. God is not subject to the limitations of metric time in the same way we are. There is no difference between a divine act of self-awareness that lasts a moment or a million years. This is hard to grasp for two reasons. First our conscious acts and thought are governed and measured by the ticking of external clocks, but such is not true of God whose experience of temporality is not dependent upon the metric of creation and would be, therefore, immeasurable. Second, human conscious thoughts and acts are immediately preceded and followed by acts or thoughts of a different kind. But such would not be true for God. Indeed, Swinburne argues, there can be no difference between a divine act of "finite duration" and one of "infinite duration" since the segments are qualitatively identical to each other.⁴¹ He concludes:

The unwelcome features of time--the increase of events that cannot be changed, the cosmic clock ticking away as they happen, the uncertainty about the future--may indeed invade God's time; but they come by invitation, not by force--and they continue for such periods of time as God chooses that they shall. So there is no reason for the theist to object to the view that God is everlasting on the grounds that it makes God time's prisoner; and since the rival view is incoherent, the theist should adopt the view that God is everlasting.⁴²

E. Stump and Kretzmann's Reply to Their Critics (1987, 1992)

Stump and Kretzmann's defense of eternity has come under especially heavy criticism in two areas. The first, pressed by Fitzgerald and Helm, questions how atemporal

⁴⁰Swinburne, "God and Time," 218.

⁴¹Swinburne, "God and Time," 218-219.

⁴²Swinburne, "God and Time," 221-22.

duration can be infinitely extended and yet remain indivisible. The second, pressed by almost everyone, questions the adequacy of ET-simultaneity for explaining the relationship between the temporal and eternal realms.

1. **Their defense of atemporal duration (1987)**

In their “Atemporal Duration: A Reply to Fitzgerald,” Stump and Kretzmann address the first issue, beginning, as in their original article, by grounding the doctrine in the theological tradition.⁴³ Historically, the doctrine of eternity was meant to provide a firm unchanging philosophical foundation for a constantly changing temporal reality:

So the classic ancient and medieval expositions of the concept of eternity are attempts to frame the notion of a mode of existence consisting wholly in a present that is limitless rather than instantaneous. Such a present is indivisible, like the temporal present, but it is atemporal in virtue of being limitless rather than instantaneous, and it is in that way infinitely enduring.⁴⁴

a. **The problem of language**

Part of the difficulty in conceptualizing and articulating such a doctrine is linguistic. Unnatural (but necessary) strain is placed upon language when it is used to describe realities totally outside the experience such language is founded upon. But if we can use such language in the sciences, it is also legitimate to do so in theology and philosophy. Part of Fitzgerald’s problem is that he insists on temporal connotations of words used to describe eternity. While they are sympathetic to the linguistic stretch involved, Stump and Kretzmann make no apology for their technical use of terminology.⁴⁵

b. **The paradigm of atemporal duration**

They do, however, offer a spatial metaphor. The comparison of time and eternity can be compared to two infinite extended parallel lines. The upper one, representing eternity, is entirely and uniformly a strip of light (which represents the present). The lower

⁴³Stump and Kretzmann, “Atemporal Duration: A Reply to Fitzgerald,” 214-219.

⁴⁴Stump and Kretzmann, “Atemporal Duration: A Reply to Fitzgerald,” 218.

⁴⁵Stump and Kretzmann, “Atemporal Duration: A Reply to Fitzgerald,” 218-219.

one, representing time, is dark everywhere except for a dot of light moving steadily along its length:

For any instant of time as that instant is present, the whole of eternity is present at once; the infinitely enduring, indivisible eternal present is simultaneous with each temporal instant as it is the present instant.⁴⁶

On this view, “atemporal duration is the genuine, paradigmatic duration of which temporal duration is only the moving image.” It forms the foundation of all temporal duration, which is rightly termed duration analogical to that of God’s genuine duration which is “the complete possession all at once of an illimitable life.”⁴⁷ These brief points are elaborated in Stump and Kretzmann’s later, more extensive reply to their critics.

2. **Their defense of ET-simultaneity (1992)**

In their article, “Eternity, Awareness, and Action,” Stump and Kretzmann restate their position that eternity and time are two separate modes of existence.⁴⁸ *The former is neither reducible to the latter nor incompatible with it.* In accordance with the definition of Boethius, it consists of four ingredients: life, illimitability, duration, and timelessness.⁴⁹ It is the combination of these aspects that leads to certain difficulties.

a. **The problem of language reasserted**

Some of the difficulties are, as already mentioned, the result of trying to use temporal terms in atemporal senses. However, the need to use familiar terms in unfamiliar ways is unavoidable. This also means that to prove the incoherence of the concepts of eternity it is necessary to demonstrate the incoherence of terms like “duration” and

⁴⁶Stump and Kretzmann, “Atemporal Duration: A Reply to Fitzgerald,” 219.

⁴⁷Stump and Kretzmann, “Atemporal Duration: A Reply to Fitzgerald,” 219.

⁴⁸Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann, “Eternity, Awareness, and Action,” *Faith and Philosophy* 9 (1992): 463.

⁴⁹Stump and Kretzmann, “Eternity, Awareness, and Action,” 464.

“present” in their technical sense as pertains to eternity.⁵⁰

This perspective frames their response to the objection raised by Fitzgerald and Helm (as well as Herbert Nelson) that “extended eternality essentially involves a plurality and thus must be divisible.”⁵¹ In reply, Stump and Kretzmann point out that predicating the same attributes to God and man does not require doing so univocally.⁵² Nor does the denial of divisibility to atemporal duration mean that duration must be predicated equivocally of God and creatures. Human experiences are often indivisible as well (as in the case of a mother who hears her son yell as he falls off his skateboard) leading to the concept of the “specious present” which is both extended and conceptually indivisible.⁵³

b. The avenue of analogical predication

Be that as it may, there is always another linguistic path, the path of analogical predication:

Where univocal accounts are theoretically unavailable and equivocal predication is worse than worthless, we may be said to be in circumstances of irreducibly analogical predication. . . . Acknowledging the impossibility of predicating certain terms univocally of God and creatures does not, as Nelson suggests it does, drive us into using them equivocally. Analogical predication remains available, and, here as elsewhere in subject matter that lies beyond experience, it leaves open a way along which understanding can be developed.⁵⁴

c. Their “Aleph” analogy of time and eternity

Having reintroduced this path, Stump and Kretzmann proceed to walk down it by developing the following imaginative explanatory analogy of time and eternity:

Consider a finite one-dimensional world, Aleph, inhabited by inch-long intelligent beings arrayed sequentially and contiguously in the line-segment that comprises their world. Any of these Alephians may have many others in front of or behind

⁵⁰Stump and Kretzmann, “Eternity, Awareness, and Action,” 465.

⁵¹Stump and Kretzmann, “Eternity, Awareness, and Action,” 467.

⁵²Stump and Kretzmann, “Eternity, Awareness, and Action,” 467.

⁵³Stump and Kretzmann, “Eternity, Awareness, and Action,” 468.

⁵⁴Stump and Kretzmann, “Eternity, Awareness, and Action,” 469.

him, but only one other inhabitant can be immediately in front of or behind him. Because Aleph is one-dimensional, no Alephian can share its place with another. Alephians recognize an absolute *here*, their designation for the location of whichever single Alephian happens to have the mid-point of the line segment within his own length. Alephians come into existence at the A1 end of the line, move slowly and steadily toward here, where they reach the height of their mental powers, and pass on into deterioration, culminating in their termination at the A2 end. They designate places between A1 and here *the hither*, places between here and A2 *the hence*. Alephians thus have spatial analogues for the A- and B-series in time, but with this difference, that in Aleph the spatial relationship corresponding to simultaneity--being-at-the-same-place-as or, in particular, being-here-with--is reflexive only.⁵⁵

Stump and Kretzmann then provide an interesting account of a conversation between a human, Monica, who has the whole world of Aleph in her field of vision and one the inhabitants of Aleph, Nabal, to whom she is able to communicate. When Nabal asks Monica whom she is behind she replies "no one." Nabal interprets this as meaning she is about to be terminated and expresses his condolences. Monica tries to correct this misunderstanding by telling Nabal that all the inhabitants of Aleph are in front of her. This perplexes Nabal who views it as a contradiction that she is behind no one and yet everyone is in front of her. The confusion increases as Monica tries to explain that she is "not in line," that she is "outside his world," and that all the inhabitants of Aleph are "here" to her. Nabal will have none of this and insists that it is fundamentally incoherent to think all the inhabitants of Aleph could be here together in some extended here.⁵⁶

Such a story, says Stump and Kretzmann, is useful not only for showing how to address the linguistic concerns of Nelson and Fitzgerald, but also for clarifying the relationship between eternity and time. This leads Stump and Kretzmann to return to their initial concept of ET-simultaneity and to repeat the two-line illustration previously published in their earlier reply to Fitzgerald. They recap:

An eternal entity's mode of existence is such that its whole life is ET-simultaneous with each and every temporal entity or event. Any particular temporal event, such

⁵⁵Stump and Kretzmann, "Eternity, Awareness, and Action," 471; emphasis theirs.

⁵⁶Stump and Kretzmann, "Eternity, Awareness, and Action," 471-72.

as the opening of the Berlin Wall or the end of apartheid in South Africa is, as it is occurring, ET-simultaneous with the eternal present. But, relative to us, given our location on the temporal continuum in early 1993, the first of those events is past, and the second is future.⁵⁷

d. Their response to William Hasker

Hasker argues, parallel to Wolterstorff, that, if Stump and Kretzmann's analysis of ET-simultaneity is correct, then an eternal God could not be aware of temporal facts. God could merely "observe" human beings as present, but could not share in their present.

Stump and Kretzmann think Hasker's position is based on the following general principle:

(GP) x can be directly aware of or epistemically present to y only if x and y share the same mode of existence.

Seizing (apparently independently) upon the kind of argumentation employed by Helm, Stump and Kretzmann argue that certainly Hasker would not embrace such a principle if it were applied to *space*. But if the principle is unacceptable in regards to space, it is also in regards to time.⁵⁸

e. Their reformulation of ET-simultaneity

Appealing to the explanatory analogy of Monica and Nabal, Stump and Kretzmann utilize it to revise their original definition of ET-simultaneity. Specifically they correct some difficulties raised by Lewis and Hasker over the language of observation, which suggests that God could not really be with or directly aware of human beings. After first formulating a definition of MNP (Monica-Nabal Present) to describe the situation of the two modes of existence in the analogy, Stump and Kretzmann reformulate an improved version of ET-simultaneity as follows:

(ET') For every x and every y, x and y are ET-simultaneous if and only if

(i) either x is eternal and y is temporal, or vice versa (for convenience, let x be eternal and y temporal); and

⁵⁷Stump and Kretzmann, "Eternity, Awareness, and Action," 475.

⁵⁸Stump and Kretzmann, "Eternity, Awareness, and Action," 475-76.

- (ii) with respect to some A in the unique eternal reference frame x and y are both present--i.e. (a) x is in the eternal present with respect to A, (b) y is in the temporal present, and (c) both x and y are situated with respect to A in such a way that A can enter into direct and immediate causal relations with each of them and (if capable of awareness) can be directly aware of each of them; and
- (iii) with respect to some B in one of the infinitely many temporal reference frames, x and y are both present--i.e. (a) x is in the eternal present, (b) y is at the same time as B, and (c) both x and y are situated with respect to B in such a way that B can enter into direct and immediate causal relations with each of them and (if capable of awareness) can be directly aware of each of them.⁵⁹

They think this formulation solves the difficulties that have been raised. "If being metaphysically present is not entirely captured by these specifications, it is not clear to us what else is necessary."⁶⁰ Others are not so convinced, and, as we continue our survey of the debate, we will see a number of criticisms leveled against the new improved version of ET-simultaneity.

From the discussion centering around Stump and Kretzmann, we move on to consider three books published in the 1990's by John Yates, Brian Lefow, and Alan Padgett, each of which attempts to defend some form of divine eternity.

F. John Yates, *The Timelessness of God* (1990)

1. Yates's desire to defend divine timelessness

In *The Timelessness of God*, John Yates argues that the metaphysical tradition of divine timelessness "possesses the resources adequately to explicate and defend its own position, and that 'the doctrine of timeless eternity' is a vital component of a coherent theological position."⁶¹ He desires to defend the doctrine of divine timelessness

⁵⁹Stump and Kretzmann, "Eternity, Awareness, and Action," 478.

⁶⁰Stump and Kretzmann, "Eternity, Awareness, and Action," 478.

⁶¹John Yates, *The Timelessness of God* (Lanham/New York/London: University Press of America, 1990), 1. I have included Yates in the "second generation" discussion, but he may very well be borderline with the first. The publication date is 1990 and he indicates in his Acknowledgements (p. iii) that his project is connected with a dissertation at Queensland University. However, no date for the dissertation is given. A perusal of his extensive bibliography reveals no sources later than 1986.

within the tradition of what he terms “classical theism,” which understands God as “a person without a body (i.e., a spirit), present everywhere, the creator and sustainer of the universe, a free agent, able to do everything (i.e., omnipotent), knowing all things, perfectly good, a source of moral obligation, immutable, eternal, a necessary being, holy and worthy of worship.”⁶² Included in this tradition, notes Yates, is the doctrine of simplicity, which predicates all of God’s attributes essentially (and as a “mutually entailing cluster”), so that reconception of the nature of divine eternity has an impact on our understanding of the nature of God as a whole.⁶³ Equally important to classical theism and embraced by Yates is the Anselmian “Perfect Being” theology, which understands God to be maximally great and unsurpassable in his attributes.⁶⁴ Also presupposed by Yates is the linear, non-repetitive, and successive view of time and history rooted in the Judeo-Christian theological tradition and so influential in Western thought. He believes that any view of timeless eternity inconsistent with such a received Christian view of history must be deemed unacceptable within the classical theist position.⁶⁵ Further, while the transcendence of the classical theistic understanding of God and the immanence of the classical Christian understanding of history might appear on the surface to be on a collision course, Yates wants to show they are, in fact, compatible. So far so good.

Given his commitment to classical theism, it is disappointing that Yates does not wish to appeal to the Bible, for he views the proof-texting of classical theism as “hardly legitimate.” Instead, he believes the Bible is metaphysically underdetermined for addressing philosophical issues, and he agrees with James Barr that the question of God’s relationship

⁶²Yates, *The Timelessness of God*, 1-2. Yates obtains this description from Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1977), 2, whom he quotes with approval. Hence the double quote marks.

⁶³Yates, *The Timelessness of God*, 2-3.

⁶⁴Yates, *The Timelessness of God*, 3.

⁶⁵Yates, *The Timelessness of God*, 5.

to time does not belong to biblical, but to philosophical, theology.⁶⁶

Yates is also concerned to engage what he terms the “two-worlds” problem; that is, how is it that an eternal entity could interact with a temporal creation. Within this “two worlds” problem, Yates identifies two components, both of which need to be answered in any successful defense of divine eternity: The first, or “vertical” component, addresses the issue of “how can atemporality relate to temporality”; the second, or “horizontal” component, considers “how can eternity as *totum simul*, embrace equally past, present and future, given that only the middle temporal term seems to have reality.”⁶⁷

2. Yates’s understanding of the history of the doctrine

Yates begins with a survey of eternity doctrine from Parmenides to Schleiermacher which, he believes, reveals two differing approaches to the time-eternity relation.⁶⁸

The first of these I shall call the “Platonic” model. Its chief representatives are Plato, Plutarch, Plotinus, Neoplatonists, Augustine, Boethius and Anselm. The key mechanism here is “projection”, and the link between time and eternity is thought of in terms of participation. Eternity is the exemplar, the pattern, and time its mirrored image. . . . The second model may be broadly titled “Aristotelian”. Its representatives are Aristotle, Aquinas and Schleiermacher. The key mechanism here is causation and this provides the link between time and eternity. Time is related to eternity as effect to cause or in a ratio of measured to unmeasured. On this basis eternity produces or creates time as its distinctive action. Since this approach is more empirical or existential (Cf. essentialist) than the former, that is, it stresses the concrete reality of the world, the question of the time-eternity gap is raised more overtly and more sharply for this model.⁶⁹

Yates concludes that the concept of atemporal eternity in classical theism is not monolithic, since at least two metaphysical systems are in view. Thus, Boethius and Aquinas, although they use the same word, have two different views of eternity. Which should be

⁶⁶Yates, *The Timelessness of God*, 5-6. Despite his reluctance to use the Bible, it should be noted that Yates’s description of the divine nature in the previous paragraphs is, happily, quite biblically informed.

⁶⁷Yates, *The Timelessness of God*, 54-55.

⁶⁸Yates, “The Classical Concept of Divine Eternity,” in *The Timelessness of God*, 11-55. I will later engage Yates’s historical treatment in Chapter Five.

⁶⁹Yates, *The Timelessness of God*, 52-53.

preferred? Yates argues the superiority of the Aristotelian or Scholastic model.⁷⁰

3. Yates on the nature of time

Yates next considers a number of basic questions concerning the nature of time. He begins by asking whether or not time is real and replies in the affirmative. He rejects Kant's subjective interpretation of time, for, if it were true, it would lead to a compulsory agnosticism as far as any relation between God and the world.⁷¹ The second issue Yates addresses is whether time is absolute (does it exist in itself) or is it relational (is it a feature of other ultimate realities in the world)? The question is of some importance, for if time is absolute (as in the case of Sir Isaac Newton), then God must, of necessity, be temporal.⁷² Leibniz was quick to point out that "[i]f the reality of time and space is necessary to the immensity and eternity of God. . . he will in measure depend on time and space and stand in need of them."⁷³ Yates is convinced by this and other arguments from Leibniz and modern physics to embrace a relational view of time.⁷⁴

4. Yates on the tense or tenselessness of time

Yates also considers whether time should be considered tenseless (static or the McTaggart B-series) or tensed (dynamic or the McTaggart A-series).⁷⁵ Finding the matter

⁷⁰Yates, in *The Timelessness of God*, 53-54. In these pages I simply report Yates's position for the sake of understanding the argument of his book. While I shall address various aspects of his historical analysis more fully in chapter 5, I believe his inductive generalizations are problematic. It should be noted that both Boethius and Aquinas are Aristotelian scholars. It seems unusual, therefore to drive a wedge between their metaphysical perspectives and label one Platonist and the other Aristotelian. If one were to use such labels, an Augustine/Anselm and Boethius/Aquinas grouping would seem to make more sense.

⁷¹Yates, *The Timelessness of God*, 57-58.

⁷²Yates, *The Timelessness of God*, 58.

⁷³G. W. Leibniz, *5th Letter to Clarke*; quoted by Yates, *The Timelessness of God*, 60.

⁷⁴Yates, *The Timelessness of God*, 66.

⁷⁵Yates summarizes these distinctions crisply: "In the process of developing an argument against the reality of time McTaggart made the distinction between two ways in which events can be ordered. He gave the name A-series to positions which run from the 'past' through the 'present' and into the 'future' and the name B-series to the ordering of events from earlier to later. As McTaggart noticed, the distinctions of

unresolved by linguistic arguments, Yates argues in favor of a tensed view of time on the basis of the structure of time and the world (e.g., the experience of the passage of time in the succession of events).⁷⁶ After satisfying himself that modern Relativity Theory does not offer a defeater to the tensed view of time (since the 4-D model is an abstraction, which if interpreted realistically would forbid both change and personality), Yates commits himself to a tensed view of time on the basis of various “down to earth” considerations:

In order to accept a tenseless view of reality, one is required to jettison many concepts about the reliability of perception, the successiveness of consciousness, the perduring character of personal identity, and the objective assignment of moral responsibility. The cost of doing this, in order to adhere to the perhaps neater four-dimensional view of the world, just seems too great. I conclude that the intuitive flowing view of time is to be favoured as a working hypothesis.⁷⁷

By adopting a tensed view of time, Yates commits himself to defending the doctrine of divine timelessness in the context of the most difficult form of the two-worlds problem.

5. Yates on Stump and Kretzmann’s “Eternity”

In Yates’s chapter, “Some Contemporary Attempts to Solve the Time-Eternity Problem,” most of his sparring partners predate the analytic discussion. One notable exception is the original 1981 Stump and Kretzmann article, “Eternity,” which Yates describes as “probably the most significant piece of writing from the pro-classical side in the last twenty years.”⁷⁸ Yates is aware of Fitzgerald’s criticism of Stump and Kretzmann’s

the B-series are fixed, if M is ever earlier than N it is always earlier, but the distinctions of the A-series are not permanent--an event which is now present was future and will be past. McTaggart accepted that the A-series was a necessary feature for time, since without it, that is with only a B-series, there would be no change, and time necessarily involves change. For this point he asserted that since past, present and future are incompatible determinations (no event can compatibly be more than one of them), and yet with the passage of time all events come to possess each of them, a contradiction is generated. Ergo, the A-series must be rejected and with it the reality of time.” Yates, *The Timelessness of God*, 66. Yates is referencing J. M. E. McTaggart, “The Unreality of Time,” *Mind* 17 (1908): 457-474.

⁷⁶Yates, *The Timelessness of God*, 67-80.

⁷⁷Yates, *The Timelessness of God*, 94-95.

⁷⁸Yates, “Some Contemporary Attempts to Solve the Time-Eternity Problem,” in *The Timelessness of God*, 97-130. Yates’s discussion of Stump and Kretzmann’s “Eternity” article is found on pages 126-130.

concept of eternal duration, but notes that they do not use duration in the ordinary sense of “an entity’s succession in time” and so is unmoved by that criticism.⁷⁹ He is more critical, however, of their concept of ET-Simultaneity. Yates questions whether they have succeeded in bridging the “two-worlds” problem, for they seem simply to have restated the problem in a different form so that, “We are simply not given any content to go by, nothing to grasp in understanding how ET-simultaneity might be possible.”⁸⁰

6. Yates’s defense of divine timelessness from eternal causation

Yates himself defends eternity by using the concept of “timeless causation.”⁸¹ Yates believes this concept, taken from Aquinas, helps solve the “vertical” part of the time-eternity problem by showing how there can be a relationship between the temporal and the eternal. Aquinas uses it to deny both that the creation of the world occurs in time and also that God’s causal power has temporal extension by virtue of being involved in change. For, argues Aquinas, God as agent does not “become,” so that efficient causation, while it communicates action, does not communicate change.⁸² This could only be true of a being who was *actus purus*, fully actual, for as Norris Clarke points out, “Only an infinite, omnipotent, and omnipresent spirit could exhaust its relations to the whole rest of the universe in a single act.”⁸³

This moves us a long way toward the concept of eternal causation and we are borne along further by the fact that some causes (e.g., gravity) appear contemporaneous with

⁷⁹Yates, *The Timelessness of God*, 128. Yates is aware that such language has occurred within the classical tradition and cites Aquinas, *ST* 1a.46.3 as an example; see n. 134, p. 128.

⁸⁰Yates, *The Timelessness of God*, 129-130.

⁸¹Yates, “Eternity as ‘Continuous Creation,’” in *The Timelessness of God*, 131-163.

⁸²Yates, *The Timelessness of God*, 132.

⁸³W. Norris Clarke, “Causing and Time,” in *Experience, Existence and the Good*, ed. I. C. Lieb (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1961), 152; quoted in Yates, *The Timelessness of God*, 133.

their effects. While there are those who argue that all effects that occur in time must be temporal, Yates believes those objections can be overcome. Here is Pike's objection:

If something is produced, created or brought into being it begins to exist. To produce something is to effect its beginning. If something begins to exist it has position in time. . . It would seem that if we can assign a temporal location to what one produced, by the logic of 'produces', as revealed in the logic of the specialised verbs falling under this determinable, we can assign relative temporal position to the productive act itself. . . If God were to create or produce an object having position in time, God's creative activity would then have to have occurred at some specific time.⁸⁴

This is easily overcome by Aquinas's solution:

An effect follows from the intellect and the will according to the determination of the intellect and the command of the will. . . just as the intellect determines every other condition of the thing made, so does it prescribe the time of its making. . . Nothing therefore prevents our saying that God's action existed from all eternity, whereas its effect was not present from eternity, but existed at the time when, from all eternity, He ordained it.⁸⁵

Having laid this groundwork, Yates argues that the concept of timeless causation provides the foundation for understanding *creation ex nihilo* as a non-temporal action and for embracing a doctrine of "continuous creation" of the kind described by Aquinas: "God does not maintain things in existence by any new action, but the continuation of the act whereby he bestows *esse*; an act subject neither to change nor to time."⁸⁶ All this together provides a conceptual model for addressing the vertical component of the "two-worlds" problem in order to maintain "both the freedom of the Creator and the contingency of a finite world."⁸⁷

⁸⁴Nelson Pike, *God and Timelessness* (New York: Schocken Books, 1970), 105-107; quoted in Yates, *The Timelessness of God*, 142; ellipses his. Yates's citation is unusual in that the texts divided by ellipses run backwards (from 107-106-105)!

⁸⁵Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 2.36.4; quoted in Yates, *The Timelessness of God*, 142; ellipses his.

⁸⁶Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1a.104, 1 ad 4; quoted in Yates, *The Timelessness of God*, 156.

⁸⁷Yates, *The Timelessness of God*, 163.

7. Addressing the “vertical” issue: Eternity, the personhood of God, and the Incarnation

Yates then addresses a number of issues that arise in conjunction with understanding God as eternal, beginning with the compatibility of the doctrine with the personhood of God and Incarnation of Christ.⁸⁸ Yates notes three models of personhood: (a) those that emphasize that persons have states of consciousness; (b) those that stress personal actions or intentions; and (c) those that emphasize the reciprocity of relationships. These in turn, lead to three corresponding challenges to the doctrine of eternity: (1a) God cannot be conscious because he does not have succession of ideas or experience through reflection or any other characteristic with a temporal component; (2b) a timeless God cannot plan or act intentionally; and (3c) a timeless God cannot have reciprocal relations with human beings. Yates argues against the first two challenges as unproven. He rejects the third as having too narrow a definition of “relations”:

I believe it has been established that an eternal being may meaningfully be said to be conscious, and conative, even though these terms have to be modified somewhat in their meaning to be truly predicated of the divine mind. Reciprocity, however, was found to be incompatible with timelessness. This was taken not to contradict the claim about eternal personhood but to enhance it, for only a being which possesses all of its life at once could conceivably be a fully actualized person. In analysing in some detail the Creator-creature relationship, extensive use was made of the Thomist doctrine of relations. Whereas an unconditioned deity cannot be changed by its relations to finite persons, this in no way detracts from the meaningfulness of a relation constituted by a change, of an absolute nature, on the side of the creature. In this way it is possible to meaningfully affirm a personal non-temporal relation of God to humanity.⁸⁹

In regards to the Incarnation, Yates puts up a spirited defense of the doctrine of divine timelessness, arguing that the eternity of God is not only compatible with the doctrine of the Incarnation, but is also required by it.⁹⁰ He rejects attempts to resolve the matter by discarding the doctrine of divine timelessness (Barth) or the doctrine of the

⁸⁸Yates, “The Personal Redeemer,” in *The Timelessness of God*, 165-196.

⁸⁹Yates, *The Timelessness of God*, 195.

⁹⁰Yates, *The Timelessness of God*, 195.

Incarnation (Tomkinson), by leaving it a mystery or paradox (Kierkegaard and the early Swinburne), or by violating the Chalcedonian doctrine of the *communicatio idiomatum* by eternalizing the human nature (Stump and Kretzmann and Bonhoeffer).⁹¹ Rather, Yates argues that the doctrine of the Incarnation articulated at Chalcedon is not a defeater for divine eternity but an argument in its favor as long as it is recognized that the eternal God is a fully actualized (*actus purus*) being:

It is precisely because he is fully being, *totum simul existens*, that he is able to will from all eternity to take to himself a temporal nature at a point in time and to take up this nature, all without change. As the real term of the relation, the human nature subsists in its temporality in the Person of the Logos; but as the logical term of the relation, the Logos remains timeless. I conclude that the eternity of God is not only compatible with the doctrine of the Incarnation, but. . .required and entailed by it.⁹²

8. Addressing the “horizontal” issue: Eternity, foreknowledge, and providence

Having addressed to his satisfaction the “vertical” aspect of the two-worlds problem (how the eternal and temporal can relate to each other), Yates turns his attention to the “horizontal” issue (how God can be related to the temporal past and future). Since Yates has embraced the A-series, or tensed view of time, the problem presents itself acutely, for most temporalists see only the present as existing since the past no longer exists, and the future does not yet exist. So how can the past, present, and future be present to God if only the temporal present exists? Yates surveys a number of proffered temporalist solutions to the problem such as “foreknowledge by familiarity,” precognition, “gazing,” backward causation, and middle knowledge. However, he finds them all unsatisfactory on the grounds that they either deny certain knowledge of the future by God or presuppose some

⁹¹cf. Barth, *CD II/1*, p. 616; J. L. Tomkinson, “Divine Sempiternity and Atemporality,” *Religious Studies* 18 (1982): 187; S. Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. D. F. Swenson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1936), 72; Stump and Kretzmann, “Eternity,” 453; D. Bonhoeffer, *Christology*, trans. J. Bowden (London: Collins, 1966), 93; quoted in Yates, *The Timelessness of God*, 186-187. Yates is also critical of kenotic approaches to the issue but is more favorably disposed to the Reformed doctrine of the *Extra Calvinisticum*, where “The eternal Word is not only flesh, but he also is and continues to be what he is in himself. He also exists without (*extra*) the flesh” (190).

⁹²Yates, *The Timelessness of God*, 194-195.

kind of block, or B-series, theory of time.⁹³

The classical position argues that, technically speaking, God does not possess *foreknowledge*, for, within the *totum simul*, all things are present to God. Further, the classical position argues that whatever is known is possessed according to the modality of the knower. For Aquinas this means that, since God's knowledge cannot come from outside of himself, he knows all things within himself and the contemplation of his complete knowledge of all things. Does this mean that the past, present, and future can be metaphysically co-present with God on a tensed view of time? Yates does not think so. He believes that Anselm improperly spatializes time, and admits that Aquinas, in saying that God sees all past, present, and future realities as "actually present" (*praesentialiter*) contradicts his self-contemplative epistemology. Nevertheless he believes that Thomism still has the resources to overcome the horizontal problem: God can be the timeless cause of temporal effects on the Thomistic grounds that the exercise of efficient causality does not logically require any change, and hence any passage of time, in the agent itself. God, in knowing himself timelessly as the cause of all contingent beings, by a single timeless act of creation, produces them into being at their successive times. This, however, does not take away God's immanent relationship to his creation since God is eternally present to all being as the source of its existence.

This "solution," however, comes at a high cost. In coupling Aquinas's view of knowledge with a tensed view of time, Yates is forced to admit that God knows only tenseless facts and that there are tensed facts of which he is ignorant (such as what time it is *now*). However, since a timeless God can still know more than a temporalist God, the eternal God remains a more Perfect Being, and the timeless position remains both superior and without serious ramifications.

⁹³Yates, *The Timelessness of God*, 200-210. Yates's discussion of these alternatives is extensive, but space does not permit a more complete summary of his treatment.

Given this admission that God cannot possess what is common knowledge within human experience (namely what time it is *now*), it is questionable whether Yates has succeeded in preserving the classic doctrine of divine eternity against the onslaughts of the divine temporalists. This is a serious admission and is part of the problem of his sliding back into an absolute model of divine eternity. What Yates takes away with his left hand in his chapter 7 on foreknowledge he attempts to give back with his right hand in his chapter 8 on providence.⁹⁴ Yates argues that the doctrine of God's sovereign providence strongly supports the doctrine of timeless eternity. While this line of argument is cogent, the concessions of his previous chapter diminish the force of his conclusion.

In sum, Yates's contribution is thoughtful, learned, and significant. Of greatest value is his extensive treatment of eternal causation. Nonetheless, his discussion is ultimately dissatisfying. Although Yates, out of his concern to defend the classical theistic position, is more historically aware and nuanced than many of those who participate in this discussion, he moves beyond that tradition in becoming overly concerned about modern issues related to the philosophy of time (such as whether it is best described as an A- or B-series relation). This not only makes him insist on a "two worlds" problem, but also renders problematic whether he has succeeded in bridging that gulf.

G. Brian Leftow, *Time and Eternity* (1991)

In his massive and wide-ranging work, *Time and Eternity*, Brian Leftow seeks to develop a new account of divine timelessness within the Anselmian tradition.⁹⁵ According to Leftow, God is the absolute source of everything that is not God. Since God creates time, both God and his act of creation must exist outside of time and without in any way being in time. This means, "there is no time at which He exists, and He does not exist

⁹⁴Yates, "Providence and Perfection," in *The Timelessness of God*, 269-293.

⁹⁵Brian Leftow, *Time and Eternity* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991).

before, during, or after any time.”⁹⁶ His timeless existence entails both that God is alive, that he is non-temporally in full possession of the whole extent of his life, that he is metaphysically simple, and that his understanding encompasses the whole of temporal existence.⁹⁷ Thus, the product of creation exists in eternal simultaneity with God’s creative act and all temporal beings exist in eternity along with God. God’s eternity involves a “quasi-temporal” kind of duration that involves extension without divisibility.⁹⁸

Leftow desires both to defend divine timelessness and to clarify the relationship between timeless and temporal beings through a three-stage argument: In the first stage, he (a) provides examples of timeless beings; (b) outlines the semantics of timelessness; and (c) engages in an analytic discussion of timelessness as found in Augustine, Boethius, and Anselm. While he appreciates the contributions of all three, he ultimately draws upon Anselm’s perspective in developing his own. In the second stage, he develops his positive arguments for divine timelessness. In the third stage, he defends his view against charges that a timeless being could not qualify as being God.⁹⁹ This summary will concentrate on the first stage.

1. Leftow’s understanding of divine timelessness

a. The possibility and semantics of divine timelessness

Leftow begins by defining divine timelessness and arguing for the possibility of timeless truths and entities.¹⁰⁰ His definition is strict and absolute:

⁹⁶Leftow, *Time and Eternity*, 2.

⁹⁷Leftow, *Time and Eternity*, 2.

⁹⁸Leftow, *Time and Eternity*, 4.

⁹⁹Leftow, *Time and Eternity*, 3-5.

¹⁰⁰Leftow, “Some Working Assumptions,” in *Time and Eternity*, 6-19. Here Leftow sets forth his presuppositions about the truth of modal logic among others. Most important for our discussion is his working assumption that “time can be viewed as tensed or tenseless,” and “This book does *not* assume that either a tensed or tenseless view of time is correct. Some philosophers have argued that the claim that God is timeless is incompatible with a tensed view of time. I contend that they are wrong, but in asserting this

If God is timeless, God exists, but exists at no time. Thus God bears no temporal relation to any temporal relatum--God does not exist or act earlier than, later than, or at the same time as any such thing. If God is timeless, such truths as "God exists" are timeless truths: though they are true, they are not true at any time.¹⁰¹

Given this definition, Leftow argues that the "timelessness" of a 4-D universe would not qualify, since in that case time exists at all times rather than at no times. Neither would a transcendent, extrinsically timeless, B-series qualify, for it does not seem possible for a physical causal relationship to exist between the two time series.¹⁰²

Are there timeless beings and truths that can coexist with time? Leftow argues yes and points first to numbers, which are the truthmakers of mathematical truths since it would be odd to say that $2 + 2 = 4$ is true only at or for some particular time.¹⁰³ Leftow also argues that "whatever is temporal is spatial"; since numbers are not spatial they are atemporal and necessarily so. Numbers or truthmakers of any other necessary truth are necessarily timeless:

Thus one cannot rule out the claim that God is timeless on the ground that nothing can be timeless. Further, one can use the natures of such entities as numbers to get an initial handle on what a timeless God might be like.¹⁰⁴

In his chapter on the semantics of eternity, Leftow argues that although a timeless being does not exist earlier, later than, or at the same time as anything, it may have a peculiar sense of omnipresence to time and be contiguous with every time. Thus, Anselm was right to suggest that to speak correctly of eternity might require a special tense, a kind of "eternal-present" tense. The reason is that eternity is a locus that functions "logically like a time," that is, like a date.¹⁰⁵ Eternity also entails absolute necessary existence and

I do not implicitly or explicitly endorse a tensed theory" (18).

¹⁰¹Leftow, *Time and Eternity*, 20.

¹⁰²Leftow, *Time and Eternity*, 21-23. Leftow argues the latter point in subsequent pages.

¹⁰³Leftow, *Time and Eternity*, 40-42.

¹⁰⁴Leftow, *Time and Eternity*, 49.

¹⁰⁵Leftow, *Time and Eternity*, 61; 72.

absolute uniqueness.¹⁰⁶

b. Augustine: Eternity as truest existence

Leftow then notes that Augustine, owing to his Neoplatonist background, viewed the truest existence as being immutable.¹⁰⁷ It is also clear that Augustine agreed to a tensed theory of time in which the present exists, but the past no longer exists, and the future does not yet exist. Immutability and tensed time lead Leftow to conclude that, for Augustine, “timeless beings are more genuinely present in eternity than temporal ones are in time,” on the grounds that the continuant present is superior to the instantaneous, and an immutable being is more fully present than a mutable one.¹⁰⁸ Thus, for Augustine, spatio-temporal entities possess a lower degree of existence than a timeless one because the former are changeable and lack both temporal and spatial unity found in a metaphysically simple and timeless being like God. This reinforces Leftow’s understanding of the relationship between time and space.

c. Boethius: Eternity as duration (QTE)

While some have interpreted timeless eternity as a static, durationless instant, Boethius’s definition of eternity as “the complete possession all at once of illimitable life” implies something more. Leftow suggests that Stump and Kretzmann are correct when they interpret this something more as “atemporal duration,” although he finds it necessary to augment their reasoning.¹⁰⁹ What does it mean for a being to have duration without succession? It could mean, as Stump and Kretzmann understand it, that its life comprises no earlier or later: “Because an eternal entity is atemporal, there is no past or future, no

¹⁰⁶Leftow, *Time and Eternity*, 66-69.

¹⁰⁷Leftow, *Time and Eternity*, 73-74.

¹⁰⁸Leftow, *Time and Eternity*, 84-85.

¹⁰⁹Leftow, *Time and Eternity*, 113-119. It should be noted that Leftow’s understanding, like that of Stump and Kretzmann, more closely approximates the traditional understanding of God’s eternity as duration without succession.

earlier or later, within its life; that is, the events constituting its life cannot be ordered sequentially from the standpoint of eternity.”¹¹⁰ Leftow also suggests the possibility that there could be earlier and later points in the divine standpoint, but no succession between them, in the sense that none of it “passes away” or is “yet to come” as one might describe earlier or later while still holding to a tenseless view of time. This latter alternative, which Leftow prefers, he labels as “Quasi-Temporal Eternity” (QTE).¹¹¹ Leftow elaborates:

A being with QTE which has experience always changelessly experiences the full extent of its duration. If it did not always changelessly experience whatever it experiences, its experience would change and so it would change, and so it would be temporal rather than eternal.¹¹²

On either his reading or that of Stump and Kretzmann, Boethian atemporal duration is a limitless *time-like* extension, but it is also a *time-less* extension. On this Leftow sides with Stump and Kretzmann in their defense against Fitzgerald:

Stump and Kretzmann grant that eternity as they conceive it fails Fitzgerald’s conditions, but they contend that this just doesn’t matter. Fitzgerald, they argue, has modeled his conditions for durationhood closely on temporal duration. But “atemporal duration is the genuine paradigmatic duration of which temporal duration is only the moving image. . . any instance of which is correctly called duration only analogically, since it is only a partial manifestation of the paradigmatic genuine duration.”¹¹³

Leftow believes this response is consistent with the Platonist tradition they are defending, but suggests that atemporal duration is more “timelike” than they are willing to concede, for it is the timelikeness of atemporal duration that enables the analogical language to have any meaning; otherwise, we have no idea what we are talking about.¹¹⁴ Further, Stump and Kretzmann’s radically atemporal notion of atemporal duration appears more

¹¹⁰Stump and Kretzmann, “Eternity,” 434; quoted in Leftow, *Time and Eternity*, 120.

¹¹¹Leftow, *Time and Eternity*, 120.

¹¹²Leftow, *Time and Eternity*, 121.

¹¹³Leftow, *Time and Eternity*, 125; quoting from Stump and Kretzmann, “Atemporal Duration: A Reply to Fitzgerald,” 219.

¹¹⁴Leftow, *Time and Eternity*, 127.

point-like than duration-like.¹¹⁵ Leftow believes that his QTE formulation, by preserving a better analogy with time, provides a better notion of atemporal duration than that of Stump and Kretzmann, and one that is also more suitable to Boethius.¹¹⁶

But how can anything have duration without parts? The doctrine of simplicity, says Leftow, both raises and answers this question. Simplicity entails that there can only be one being that possesses eternal duration: “As Boethius conceives it, eternity is rather like a space necessarily occupied by only one atom. An eternal duration is necessarily occupied by an indivisible, partless, object.”¹¹⁷ Extending the analogy to a *temporal* atom (which suggests that there may be a minimum measurable duration, possibly 10^{-24} seconds) or *chronon*, as it is sometimes called, Leftow notes that “a chronon is *not* an instant but is conceived to have some very small duration.”¹¹⁸ However, it is impossible to divide it into smaller parts. Although it is not certain that chronons exist, if they are possible, then so is QTE.¹¹⁹ A further analogy is found in the “specious present” of the temporally experienced present, described by William James and Alfred N. Whitehead, in which our consciousness of the present moment appears to us to be more than a simple instant so that we seem to experience a kind of duration within our own temporal present:

It can be argued, then, that eternity as Boethius describes it should make more sense to us than time, rather than less. For the eternal present is the one present that really does conform to the experiential character of the present we know best, actually having the duration the temporal present only seems to have.¹²⁰

¹¹⁵Leftow, *Time and Eternity*, 133.

¹¹⁶Leftow, *Time and Eternity*, 134.

¹¹⁷Leftow, *Time and Eternity*, 139.

¹¹⁸Leftow, *Time and Eternity*, 141.

¹¹⁹Leftow, *Time and Eternity*, 142.

¹²⁰Leftow, *Time and Eternity*, 143. In this connection Leftow cites Stump and Kretzmann’s claim that, “it is only the discovery of eternity that enables us to make genuinely literal use of words for duration” (“Eternity,” 445; quoted in Leftow, *Time and Eternity*, 143, n. 66).

One final analogy in support of the timelike character of eternal duration is found in the logic of causal connections. A timeless God can decide eternally to spare Isaac because he hears Abraham's plea and not vice versa: "If we allow an eternal ordering of divine mental events in QTE, then this ordering will be analogous to the absolute ordering causal relations established in time and so will constitute a further timelikeness of QTE."¹²¹

d. The roots of eternity: Eternity as a point

Despite his spirited defense of atemporal duration, Leftow argues that "one can also understand Boethian eternity on the model of an extensionless point."¹²² He believes there is no reason to make these models mutually exclusive and that "perhaps the use of both models is deliberate or even necessary"; once again, the doctrine of simplicity plays an important role:

As eternity is a kind of life, it may require us to model it as a way of enduring, or a sort of duration. As eternity is the life of a simple being, it may require us to model it as lacking parts and so pointlike. Moreover, even if eternity does not *require* both models, it invites both.¹²³

Leftow cites evidence that Boethius, Aquinas, and Anselm all seem to speak of eternity in this dual fashion, because they desire to present God as both a simple being and one who possesses life.¹²⁴ This further nuances his concept of QTE:

[I]f eternity is the mode of life of a simple being, both point and line models can be appropriate in thinking of it. For the point can represent this life's simplicity, and the line the duration that we (we may think) goes with being alive. Moreover, if the previous chapter's reasoning was sound, an eternal life can literally *be* both pointlike and extensive. It can be pointlike insofar as it is without parts, i.e., without past and future, and extensive in the way a chronon of QTE is. QTE may be a duration, but it is a simple or partless duration.¹²⁵

¹²¹Leftow, *Time and Eternity*, 145-146.

¹²²Leftow, *Time and Eternity*, 147. This argument is presented in his seventh chapter, "The Roots of Eternity," 147-158.

¹²³Leftow, *Time and Eternity*, 149.

¹²⁴Leftow, *Time and Eternity*, 149-153.

¹²⁵Leftow, *Time and Eternity*, 158.

e. Boethius and ET-simultaneity

Leftow also provides a critique, similar to Yates's, of Stump and Kretzmann's solution to the problem raised by Boethius as to how a timeless God can possess true knowledge of temporal events and how such knowledge is present to him:

Stump and Kretzmann suggest that to make sense of how an eternal God can have effects in time, or temporal beings can have effects in eternity, we must first work out a simultaneity relation between the atemporal and the temporal. . . . But then any definition of ET-simultaneity which invokes any form of ET-causality (or ET-observation, or other causally implicated ET-knowledge) is implicitly circular. For to fully explain how ET-causation can occur, we must bring in the concept of ET-simultaneity. If we do, we cannot then define ET-simultaneity by invoking ET-causation, for then the concept to be defined in effect recurs in the definition.¹²⁶

f. Anselm, dimensionality, and temporal omnipresence

Such problems lead to Leftow to set aside the Boethian model of divine eternity in favor of an Anselmian one.¹²⁷ Anselm's solution spatializes time and conceptualizes eternity as a kind of temporal omnipresence in which eternity is a dimensionality that contains yet transcends the temporal dimension: "Eternity has its own simultaneity, in which all things exist which exist at the same time and place and which are diverse in times or places."¹²⁸ Thus God can be present to the temporal dimension without developing a ET-simultaneity relationship like that pursued by Stump and Kretzmann.

Like Augustine, Anselm holds to a tensed view of time but still maintains that past, present, and future events possess a certain reality in eternity while preserving their discrete identity.¹²⁹ The dependency of the created and temporal upon God leads to a doctrine of temporal omnipresence "because we know that He is the sustaining cause of all time and

¹²⁶Leftow, *Time and Eternity*, 173.

¹²⁷Leftow, *Time and Eternity*, 182.

¹²⁸Anselm, *De concordia*, I.5; quoted in Leftow, *Time and Eternity*, 183.

¹²⁹Leftow, *Time and Eternity*, 184.

that a cause (or a simple cause) is somehow present with its effect.”¹³⁰ On the one hand, God can be present to the temporal realm extrinsically without being himself temporal. On the other hand, there is a sense in which God intrinsically contains time within himself:

The *Proslogion*'s most significant development. . . is a parallel to the reverse containment thesis, an assertion that eternity literally contains time: “Your eternity contains the ages of time. It is an age because of its indivisible unity, but it is many ages because of its interminable immensity.”¹³¹

Thus Anselm affirms not only that God is with all times, but also that all time is in him and is, therefore, simultaneous with God.

2. The Anselmian advantage and Leftow's “zero-distance” model of time and eternity

Leftow believes Anselm's approach is superior because it conceptualizes the relationship between the temporal and eternal without recourse to ET-simultaneity:

So on this view, eternal simultaneity is not the relation in which two *eternal* events stand if they occur at the same “eternal present,” as Stump and Kretzmann say. It is instead the relation in which *any* events stand if they occur at the same “eternal present.” On this Anselmian view, all temporal events occur at once for God and really do occur at once, in eternity.¹³²

Drawing upon Anselm's perspective, Leftow develops a unique model to explain God's immanence so that events that exist in time, relative to us, exist timelessly, relative to God. On the dual premises that God is “zero distance” from every spatial point and that there is no change without change of place, Leftow argues that God and all spatial objects share a frame of reference in which nothing changes. Therefore, relative to God, all events occur at once, even though they occur sequentially in our temporal reference frame.¹³³

¹³⁰Leftow, *Time and Eternity*, 187. Leftow draws these conclusions from a consideration of *Monologion* 13, 14, and 20-24.

¹³¹Leftow, *Time and Eternity*, 211.

¹³²Leftow, *Time and Eternity*, 219.

¹³³This conclusion occurs on page 228 of *Time and Eternity*. The discussion and development of his Zero Thesis is found on pages 222-228.

Leftow asserts that such a view is compatible with a tensed theory of time.¹³⁴ Appealing to the Relativity of Simultaneity, he argues there is no contradiction in asserting that events exist both in time and in eternity since these modes of existence simply represent separate reference frames, the temporal frame of the creation and the eternal frame of the Creator.¹³⁵

Leftow summarizes:

Some philosophers have in effect argued that if God is present with us, He must be present with us in time. I have tried to suggest that God may be present with us because we are present with Him in eternity--and yet are fully temporal. On these assumptions, timelessness and the biblical picture can indeed be reconciled.¹³⁶

In the balance of his book, Leftow argues for the benefits of his model: (a) it preserves both divine foreknowledge and human freedom (chapter 11); (b) it provides a positive defense of divine eternity (chapter 12); (c) it defends the notion of divine timelessness from number of practical and philosophical objections such as whether a timeless God can be a person, to which Leftow answers, yes (chapter 13); (d) it explains whether God can have knowledge of tensed facts or of what is happening “now,” to which Leftow answers, mostly (chapter 14); (e) it explains how God can have knowledge of factual change (chapter 15); and (f) it explains how a timeless God can be perceived in religious experience (chapter 16). Leftow concludes:

I have argued that God is beyond and in a sense above time. But I have also argued

¹³⁴Leftow, *Time and Eternity*, 231.

¹³⁵Leftow, *Time and Eternity*, 234-235. Leftow’s Zero Thesis model and appeal to the relativity of simultaneity is subject to severe criticism, in particular from William Lane Craig who comments that “Leftow’s entire theory of divine eternity appears to balance like an inverted pyramid on this thesis, so that with the untenability of that thesis the whole theory threatens to topple. Without the Zero Thesis, I do not know how to save Leftow’s theory, for without it there is no “frame of reference” in which all things exist changelessly relative to God” (Craig, *Time and Eternity* [Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2001], 99) Craig’s critique will be discussed more fully in chapter 4.

¹³⁶Leftow, *Time and Eternity*, 245. Leftow’s model is intriguing because it captures one aspect of the traditional doctrine of eternity not addressed in most of the rest of the analytic discussion, that is an emphasis on eternal duration as immutability. On this view, God is immutability present to all temporal objects and reality and is completely unaffected by them. This is consistent with a number of the analogies for divine eternity and duration without succession that we will consider in chapter 7.

that this does not diminish His efficacy within it. The God I depict can have the greatness both of the philosophers' transcendent source of all and of the believers' living Lord. If my arguments are sound, there is just no need to choose between the two.¹³⁷

H. Alan Padgett, *God, Eternity, and the Nature of Time* (1992)

1. Padgett's advocacy of divine "relative timelessness"

In *God, Eternity and the Nature of Time*, Alan Padgett develops a mediating position between God being timeless and temporal.¹³⁸ He argues against what he considers to be the traditional view that God is "absolutely timeless"¹³⁹ and advocates a position of "relatively timelessness," by which he means that God is in time but is not subject to *our* time. He defines these terms as follows:

I distinguish two senses of "timeless." When "time" means duration in the abstract, "timeless" will mean that no duration ever occurs in the life of that which is timeless. Something "timeless" in this sense would lack any extension or location in *any* time whatsoever (Pike, *Timelessness*, 7). On the other hand, by a "time" one may mean a system of Measured Time. In this case, something will be "timeless" if it does not exist within any Measured Time. Measured Time Words, then, would not truly apply to that which is timeless. The former sense is a non-durational timelessness, while the later [sic] sense is a durational timelessness. We can distinguish between these two senses by calling the former an "absolute" timelessness, and the latter a "relative" timelessness. I will argue that God is timeless in a relative sense, and not in an absolute sense.¹⁴⁰

Thus, God is in a durational mode of existence in which process and change are possible, but this existence is not identical with, or subject to, the created temporal universe.

2. Padgett's understanding of the tradition of divine eternity

As is not uncommon in the analytic debate, Padgett sees the doctrine of eternity as

¹³⁷Leftow, *Time and Eternity*, 361.

¹³⁸Alan G. Padgett, *God, Eternity and the Nature of Time* (New York: St. Martins Press, 1992); Padgett's book develops the argument of two earlier articles: "God and Time: Toward a New Doctrine of Divine Timeless Eternity," *Religious Studies* 25 (1989): 209-215; "Can History Measure Eternity? A reply to William Craig," *Religious Studies* 27 (1991): 333-335. Padgett's view is more recently restated and clarified in his "Eternity as Relative Timelessness" in *God and Time: Four Views*, ed. Gregory Ganssle (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 92-110.

¹³⁹In chapter 5, I argue that this is not the traditional view.

¹⁴⁰Padgett, *God, Eternity and the Nature of Time*, 19; emphasis his.

biblically underdetermined and the tradition as compromised by Hellenism: thus, for Padgett, “Scripture knows nothing of a timeless God, as this doctrine is found in Christian tradition,”¹⁴¹ and, “The definition of God’s eternity as a timeless durationless life we will simply call the traditional doctrine of divine eternity. This is the view, first propounded by Plutarch, that God is both timeless and that he lives his life all at once.”¹⁴²

3. Padgett’s criticism of atemporal duration and ET-simultaneity

Padgett stumbles hard over Stump and Kretzmann’s concept of “atemporal duration.” By definition, Padgett finds it incoherent.¹⁴³ He prefers the language of “atemporal extensive mode of existence,” because he believes it possible to conceive of God having an extensive mode of being by possessing a nontemporal succession of some kind.¹⁴⁴

Padgett is even less sympathetic toward ET-simultaneity. The question is how a timeless being could share a moment in time with a temporal being, since, if they are simultaneous, the distinction the temporal and eternal is lost. Stump and Kretzmann recognize that it “is theoretically impossible to specify a single mode of existence for two *relata* of which one is eternal and other temporal,” but they refuse to try to resolve it by committing to a stasis theory of time. They want to reconcile their concept of

¹⁴¹Padgett, *God, Eternity and the Nature of Time*, 2. This stark conclusion is Padgett’s crisp summary of his chapter. I believe his conclusion to be far too radical, but this is due, in part, to the way Padgett misunderstands the tradition. I will discuss Padgett’s treatment of the Bible and eternity more fully in chapter 6 and his interpretation of the history of the doctrine in chapter 5. To be fair, Padgett’s final conclusion in his chapter on “The Witness of Scripture” is less radical than his own summary suggests. There he concedes that a “biblical” view of divine eternity is possible, but he believes that the biblical text moves in the direction of relative timelessness. In this conclusion, I believe he is closer to the truth.

¹⁴²Padgett, *God, Eternity and the Nature of Time*, 48. Although Padgett’s conception of the traditional view as absolute durationless atemporality is not uncommon in the analytic debate, I will argue in chapter 5 that it is insufficiently nuanced and so misrepresents the tradition.

¹⁴³“The word ‘duration’ means an interval of time, namely that interval of time through which something endures. The notion of atemporal duration is, therefore, a contradiction in terms.” Padgett, *God, Eternity and the Nature of Time*, 67; emphasis his.

¹⁴⁴Padgett, *God, Eternity and the Nature of Time*, 68.

ET-simultaneity by way of analogy with the Special Theory of Relativity.¹⁴⁵ However, Padgett is convinced that they misunderstand the STR and are guilty of false analogy:

Because simultaneity is not as “relative” as they need it to be to make sense of ET-simultaneity, the full force of the contradiction stands. The very idea that a timeless present-like instant could share a moment of time with the temporal present is just as incoherent as it was when the argument began.¹⁴⁶

4. **Divine timelessness and the stasis view of time**

Padgett attempts the best possible defense of absolute timelessness prior to offering his critique. Biblical theism is not deism, and so he believes that any coherent model of divine timelessness must preserve the continual sustaining of the creation by God.¹⁴⁷

Padgett argues, contrary to Pike but consistent with Helm, that it is possible to provide a coherent model of timeless causation which would be consistent with divine timelessness, preserve the immutability of God, and still maintain that God sustains the world.

However, given the inadequacy of Stump and Kretzmann’s concept of ET-simultaneity, Padgett insists such a model of divine timelessness requires a stasis theory of time to which, he also believes, Aquinas’s “view of God’s simplicity, immutability and eternity” inevitably lead.¹⁴⁸

Given *absolute* timeless eternity (durationless existence without temporal location and extension) and given *absolute* immutability (that God does not change in any way apart from merely relative changes), God can only actively sustain the universe on the stasis view, since God’s sustaining a dynamic universe would require real temporal change in

¹⁴⁵Padgett, *God, Eternity and the Nature of Time*, 69-70.

¹⁴⁶Padgett, *God, Eternity and the Nature of Time*, 72.

¹⁴⁷Padgett, *God, Eternity and the Nature of Time*, 56.

¹⁴⁸Padgett, *God, Eternity and the Nature of Time*, 66. Padgett admits, however, that whether Aquinas actually held this view is a separate question (66).

him.¹⁴⁹ Padgett argues that, on the stasis view, it is always a fact that some event *E* occurs at a time *t* so that God can eternally will it to be the case that *E* occurs at *t*. In contrast, on the process view, there is no such fact as “*E* occurs at *t*” until *E* actually does occur, so God cannot will it to be the case that *E* occurs at *t* until *t* itself occurs. This is not overcome by God willing that *E* occurs a year from now, since such willing would make it the case *now* that *E* occurs in a year from now, and the future is thus made real, contrary to the process view. Thus, a coherent view of divine timelessness requires the stasis view.¹⁵⁰

5. Padgett’s rejection of the stasis theory

However, argues Padgett, there are good reasons for rejecting the stasis view of time in favor of a process view, although his defense of the process theory of time consists largely of a negative critique of the stasis view.¹⁵¹ Padgett’s overall approach is that the process view of time seems so consistent with common experience that the burden of proof rests upon those in favor of the stasis view. However, arguments for the stasis view are far from satisfactory.

For example, arguments from modern science do not establish the stasis view of time, for physics can ignore the difference between past, present, and future only because it deals with atemporal abstractions, not temporal realities.¹⁵² Similarly, appeals to the STR make the basic mistake of “assuming the *sufficiency of the Special Theory of Relativity for ontology*, in particular for the theory of time,” although STR makes no such claims for

¹⁴⁹Padgett, *God, Eternity and the Nature of Time*, 74-75; emphasis mine, although the language is Padgett’s. Note the absolute language here. However, as we shall see, it is questionable whether the tradition actually holds to this form of absolute timelessness and immutability.

¹⁵⁰Padgett, *God, Eternity and the Nature of Time*, 74-75.

¹⁵¹See his chapter, “The Stasis View of Time: A Critique,” in *God, Eternity and the Nature of Time*, 82-121.

¹⁵²Padgett, *God, Eternity and the Nature of Time*, 85.

itself.¹⁵³

Padgett finds the various philosophical arguments for the stasis theory equally wanting. Here is a sampling: McTaggart's argument from the incompatibility of A- and B-series facts is deemed unacceptable because he imports "the stasis theory of time into the argument, unfairly packing the bench against the process theory."¹⁵⁴ The argument that temporal statements can be translated into nontemporal ones fails to recognize that "[i]f all we knew were tenseless facts, which tell us nothing about the present (unless we know the present date!) we will be ignorant of important facts."¹⁵⁵

D. H. Mellor's argument that reality is tenseless because all tensed truths have tenseless truth conditions is rejected because "some sentences containing process indexicals cannot be given proper truth conditions that do not contain process indexicals. Reality does contain some process facts."¹⁵⁶

The argument against the process view of time that the flow of time requires another "supertime" to measure the flow collapses as soon as the metaphor changes from "the flow of time" to "objects moving through time": "Williams and Black have both been fooled by the grammar of metaphor. Time does not *literally* move, and the process theory is not committed to the proposition that it does."¹⁵⁷

Another argument for stasis theory is the "problem of NOW." On this view, the process view requires a reason outside of the present NOW as to why NOW has occurred, otherwise interesting perplexities occur. For example, all episodes and many events must have duration to occur (e.g., an hour-long wedding). But NOW does not have a duration

¹⁵³Padgett, *God, Eternity and the Nature of Time*, 92.

¹⁵⁴Padgett, *God, Eternity and the Nature of Time*, 100.

¹⁵⁵Padgett, *God, Eternity and the Nature of Time*, 103.

¹⁵⁶Padgett, *God, Eternity and the Nature of Time*, 107.

¹⁵⁷Padgett, *God, Eternity and the Nature of Time*, 111.

of an hour, but only an instant. So does the wedding exist at thirty minutes into it?

Obviously yes, but how can this be justified on a process view of time. Padgett replies:

Let NOW stand for the instant that separates past from future. Let E be any episode of a thing or any event, and $E(x)$ be any durationless time-slice of that same event or episode. We can then say that for any E and for any x , E is N if and only if there is an $E(x)$ which is NOW. To return to the wedding example, the wedding exists because the instant of NOW occurs within it (30 minutes within it, to be exact).¹⁵⁸

For Padgett, such “perplexities” are only perplexing if you assume the stasis view to begin with.¹⁵⁹ The failure of such arguments leads Padgett to reject the stasis theory of time and the coherent theory of divine timelessness. What then is left?

6. Padgett’s alternative model of eternity

By arguing that God is “relatively timeless,” Padgett wants to preserve God’s transcendence, while at the same time permitting God to engage the temporal world and preserving a process view of time. This transcendence involves three aspects: (a) God’s life is the ground of time; (b) God is the Lord of Time who is unchanged by time; and (c) God is relatively timeless.

a. God as the ground of time

Since a timeless world is not impossible, it is clear that God has “chosen eternally to live the kind of life he does, and has chosen eternally to have a temporal universe in which to live. This choice is an eternal one, in that it must have always been made. There is no time before this choice was made.”¹⁶⁰ By choosing to create a temporal world and to interact with it, God is the ground of the temporality of the universe. This makes time “the dimension of the possibility of change,” and time, like space, is part of the created order.

¹⁵⁸Padgett, *God, Eternity and the Nature of Time*, 115.

¹⁵⁹Padgett, *God, Eternity and the Nature of Time*, 116.

¹⁶⁰Padgett, *God, Eternity and the Nature of Time*, 122-123. Padgett’s language is difficult to follow, but, to be fair, these concepts are difficult to describe! Nonetheless, his description of “eternal choice” certainly suggests a timeless eternity.

In this way, as well, God transcends time.¹⁶¹

b. God as the Lord of time

By this description Padgett means that God has a purpose and plan for all of temporal history, although apparently not an entirely determining one:

Thus nothing happens outside the will of God, even though God does not will every event which takes place to happen in exactly the way it does. God set the parameters within which all events take place, even those free events whose exact outcomes are not willed by God (i.e. are underdetermined).¹⁶²

In addition it means that God is not limited by time, or constrained by it in any way, or subject to its ravages. For God, time passes but does not press; time is God's servant and not his master. Coupled with this is the truth that God is immutable, not in the sense of "absolute immutability" (which Padgett deems the traditional view, but which he rejects), but in the sense that he does not change in his nature, character, or perfections.¹⁶³

c. God as "relatively timeless"

This notion is the most original of his treatise, the most problematic, and unfortunately, also the portion that receives the briefest treatment (approximately twelve pages). According to Padgett, God, as relatively timeless, transcends our time in two ways: First, he is not limited by our "measured" or "metric" time, so that (a) God is not subject to the laws of nature, as anything in Measured time must be; and (b) any Measured Time is relative to a particular frame of reference, which need not apply to God. This is because Metric time is part of the created order of things, and God transcends that created order and is not subject to its limitations.

God transcends our temporal existence in a second way, because he is not limited by our four-dimensional space-time continuum. This preserves God's activity in time

¹⁶¹Padgett, *God, Eternity and the Nature of Time*, 123.

¹⁶²Padgett, *God, Eternity and the Nature of Time*, 123.

¹⁶³Padgett, *God, Eternity and the Nature of Time*, 125.

because, strictly speaking, we are participants in aspects of God's time rather than he in ours. It also preserves the notion of God's transcendence over the space-time continuum and "outside" our universe. Padgett explains:

What does it mean to say that God is "outside" our universe? Doesn't he act all the time "in" our history, and "on" our world? While God does act in our history and in our universe, he is not contained within it. God is spaceless, that is, he does not have any spatial location or extension. This is what I understand by God being "outside" our space-time universe. He is free, in himself, to ground our universe, without entering into it as a member of it.¹⁶⁴

Padgett is obviously trying to provide a *via media* between timeless eternity and unqualified temporality, owing to the fact that he views both as theologically important. Whether he succeeds is less clear, for given the parameters in which he is working within the analytic debate, his approach appears inherently unstable. Nicholas Wolterstorff suggests that it is really another form of divine temporalism.¹⁶⁵ Nonetheless, I believe that Padgett's intuition that some third alternative beyond absolute timelessness and unqualified temporality is correct. I believe this third alternative is available in the traditional doctrine which Padgett mistakenly confuses with absolute timelessness.

I. Paul Helm on "Eternal Creation" (1994)

1. Helm's explanation of the relation of eternity to creation

Paul Helm's additional contribution to the "second generation" discussion consists of two articles in which he defends the cogency of timelessly eternal creation.¹⁶⁶ I begin with the first article. As Augustine and Boethius point out, if God is timelessly eternal, it

¹⁶⁴Padgett, *God, Eternity and the Nature of Time*, 129.

¹⁶⁵"I fail to see that Alan Padgett's 'relative timelessness' proposal is really a third model of the relation of God to time. It appears to me definitely to be a variant on the everlasting view. It is, in fact, fully compatible with my own articulation and defense of the everlasting view. In some respects it goes beyond my own commitments; at no point does it go against them" (Wolterstorff, "Response to Alan Padgett," in Gregory E. Ganssle, ed. *God & Time: Four Views* [Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001], 120).

¹⁶⁶Paul Helm, "Eternal Creation," *Tyndale Bulletin* 45 (November 1994): 321-338, and "Eternal Creation: The Doctrine of Two Standpoints," in *The Doctrine of Creation: Essays in Dogmatics, History and Philosophy*, ed. Colin E. Gunton (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1997), 29-46.

makes no sense to ask at what time God created the universe, since no “before” exists prior to the creation of the world.¹⁶⁷ As with numbers, a timeless God has no before or after, but unlike numericals, a timelessly eternal God has life, albeit life that is totally different from those of temporal beings.¹⁶⁸ Yet the Bible does speak of a beginning and to a state of affairs “before” creation, to which Helm replies that “such language is consistent with timelessness, though he would be a bold exegete who claimed that the writers intended to imply the timelessness of God’s existence.”¹⁶⁹

But Helm goes on to point out that there are different senses of “before.” Not only can it refer to temporal precedence, but also the precedence of greater rank or honor, so that when scripture speaks of Christ as being “before all things,” “before” need not be interpreted as referring to his temporal precedence, but the preeminence of his being: “He does not depend on the universe, but the universe, time and space and all that time and space contain, depend upon him.”¹⁷⁰ This also is consistent with understanding God as being timeless:

So when we talk of such a timeless God creating, the verb must be understood in a timeless or tense-indifferent manner, in the same manner in which we say that the number two succeeds the number one, or that the hypotenuse of a right-angled triangle lies opposite that angle. God timelessly creates with time, not in time; and, as Augustine put it, he eternally wills changes without changing his will.¹⁷¹

Helm sees three distinct advantages for seeing God as timeless: First, it prevents him from being subject to the limitations of temporality, which would make aspects of his life either inaccessible or irretrievable in a way inconsistent with his sovereignty. Second, as stated in his earlier writings, it provides the theological foundation of the Creator/creature

¹⁶⁷Helm, “Eternal Creation,” 322.

¹⁶⁸Helm, “Eternal Creation,” 322.

¹⁶⁹Helm, “Eternal Creation,” 322-23.

¹⁷⁰Helm, “Eternal Creation,” 323.

¹⁷¹Helm, “Eternal Creation,” 323; emphasis his.

distinction. Third, it is necessary to maintain the conceptual framework essential for preserving the Chalcedonian doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son.¹⁷²

2. Helm's continued criticism of eternal duration

Helm takes time in his discussion to rescue the doctrine of eternity from two of its defenders, Stump and Kretzmann. Of particular concern is their interpretation of Boethius, which insists that God's timeless eternity involves eternal *duration*. According to Helm, this insistence goes too far and produces more problems than it solves:

For either the duration in question has time-like features or it has not. Either we can ask 'How Long'? questions of this eternal duration or we can not. If we can, we seem to be sliding inexorably back into temporalism. If we cannot, then what is gained by referring to timeless eternity as timeless *duration*?¹⁷³

Helm complains, along with Swinburne, that this concept seems rather *ad hoc*. He cites Katherin Rogers against this interpretation of Boethius and in favor of the view that the notion of eternal duration found in Stump and Kretzmann and in Brian Leftow "is not used to solve a single theological problem."¹⁷⁴

3. Helm's response to Swinburne's "God and Time"

After taking a moment to correct some friends of eternity, Helm turns his attention to one of its adversaries, Richard Swinburne, and his essay "God and Time." According to Swinburne, timelessness flies in the face of two metaphysical principles concerning causation: first, that everything that happens in time happens over a period of time,

¹⁷²Helm, "Eternal Creation," 323-24. While I share Helm's concern how the shift away from the traditional doctrine of eternity might affect the ecumenical creedal understanding of the eternal generation of the Son, his conclusions are more radical than my own in that I do believe divine temporalists may affirm the ecumenical creeds. However, in chapter 6 I do address some implications of moving away from the traditional meaning of eternity in the doctrine of eternal generation.

¹⁷³Helm, "Eternal Creation," 326. As I shall discuss in chapters 5 and 6, one answer that might be given is that it reflects the language of scripture, which speaks of God's enduring forever but in a way that points to God's aseity and so requires more than a temporal notion of duration.

¹⁷⁴See Richard Swinburne, "God and Time," in *Reasoned Faith*, ed. Eleonore Stump (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 217f. Also Katherin A. Rogers, "Eternity Has No Duration," *Religious Studies* 30 (1994): 1-16. I will discuss the Rogers article at length at the end of chapter 5.

therefore making it impossible to have a timeless effect in time; and second, that it is logically impossible for an agent to have backward or simultaneous causative influence. Helm agrees about backward causation but is more cautious about simultaneous causation. Swinburne argues that to permit simultaneous causation is to leave the door open to the Humean principle that “anything can produce anything.”¹⁷⁵ Yet, even if this were true, Helm is not sure it addresses the issue of timeless eternity,

[f]or what the eternalist is arguing is that God, the eternally timeless cause, produces effects in time; indeed, produces time along with the effects in time. He is not arguing, or need not be arguing, that God’s timelessly eternal cause is temporally simultaneous with some event or events in time. While . . . certain accounts of timeless eternity [e.g., Stump and Kretzmann] may require an account of simultaneity, not all accounts do.¹⁷⁶

If Swinburne means that all causes and their results must be in time, he assumes that there is only one clear sense of cause, and this begs the question and rules out atemporal causation on *a priori* grounds. Further, says Helm, if Swinburne is arguing that it is better to use language in its literal sense when possible, this is true. Yet the meaning of a word cannot be determined *a priori*, but only by considering its use in a particular situation. In the case of eternal causation, even if the sense of causation is being stretched, we can still identify what that stretched sense is:

God eternally causes the existence of the universe or some event within the universe when for that event E, (a) If God had not willed E, E would not have occurred, (b) God’s willing E ensures that E occurs; and (c) E does not occur at the same time as God willing it.¹⁷⁷

While Helm admits that cause is being used in a somewhat stretched sense, it is still intelligible, and, as Helm points out, “Intelligibility is all that we need.”¹⁷⁸ Helm believes that even Swinburne would have to admit that the use of causation in this connection, while

¹⁷⁵Swinburne, “God and Time,” 211; quoted in Helm, “Eternal Creation,” 327.

¹⁷⁶Helm, “Eternal Creation,” 327.

¹⁷⁷Helm, “Eternal Creation,” 329.

¹⁷⁸Helm, “Eternal Creation,” 329.

analogical and moderately equivocal, is certainly acceptable for theological purposes. Further, if cause can refer to bringing about some temporally later event (as Swinburne allows), it is also possible to apply a univocal sense of causation to, say, a timelessly eternal God bringing about the universe: "It is difficult to see that this sense of cause is either logically incoherent or unintelligible in some other way."¹⁷⁹

Helm goes on to consider Swinburne's attack on the eternal existence of God. Swinburne wants to hang the eternalist on the horns of a dilemma: Either God's eternal existence is instantaneous or it has duration. The first horn is self-contradictory because nothing exists instantaneously. The second horn is self-defeating since if something has duration it cannot be timeless. Further, if God creates or intervenes in the universe, he must be temporally prior to those events and, therefore, be temporal.¹⁸⁰

Helm replies by pointing out that the doctrine of divine timelessness sees God as timelessly causing the existence of the universe in one timeless creative act. Swinburne's insistence that causation is an essentially temporal notion does not apply in the special case of extra-mundane causation. Something similar can be said regarding God's knowledge of the world. Swinburne wants to argue that God's knowledge of the world is caused by the objects of his knowledge and is, therefore, temporal. Helm argues that "God's awareness is not strictly comparable to my visual awareness. . . his eternal awareness of the universe is not conditioned by space and time."¹⁸¹ His conclusion is that while God's knowledge may be logically dependent upon the state of the universe, it does not follow that it is temporally dependent.¹⁸²

¹⁷⁹Helm, "Eternal Creation," 330.

¹⁸⁰Helm, "Eternal Creation," 330.

¹⁸¹Helm, "Eternal Creation," 332.

¹⁸²Helm, "Eternal Creation," 332.

4. Helm's positive attack on divine temporalism

In the final part of his lecture, Helm switches from a defensive to an offensive stance and launches a two-pronged attack on the temporalist position. First, temporalists cannot explain how God is not the prisoner of time. Second, as mentioned earlier, the temporalist understanding of God eternity is hard to square with the Nicene conception of the eternal generation of the Son.

Regarding the first, Swinburne insists that God is not a prisoner of time, for prior to creation, the time in which God dwells would be unmeasured or unmetricated, so that any succession of thoughts on God's part would be purely voluntary. Hence God is not a prisoner of time, since he has the whole situation under control, and he therefore "calls the shots." This, however, complains Helm, is no solution:

The supposition to which Swinburne's argument drives us is somewhat bizarre. It seems that the only way in which God can fail, in his words, to be the prisoner of time, is for God to have a successionless intention to have a succession of intentions. There are only two other alternatives. One is that God remains in successionlessness, enjoying (we might say) all the advantages of timeless eternity; the other is that he is the prisoner of time.¹⁸³

Regarding the second concern, Helm suggests there may be a difficulty in affirming the classical Nicene doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son while maintaining the temporalist position. If God is everlasting, it becomes more difficult to deny the classic Arian position that "there was when he was not," and, indeed, Gregory of Nyssa and other defenders of the doctrine of eternal generation appear to have been eternalists in part to avoid such an entailment.¹⁸⁴ According to Helm, to avoid this, the temporalists are hung on the horns of a dilemma. Either they can deny the ontological necessity of the eternal generation of the Son, and thereby make the intertrinitarian relationships only contingently true, or they can argue that "begotten" in this context must be taken in a special or stretched

¹⁸³Helm, "Eternal Creation," 335.

¹⁸⁴Helm, "Eternal Creation," 336-37.

sense--in which case they weaken their own objection to the specialized or stretched sense in which the atemporalists speak of eternal causation.¹⁸⁵

J. Paul Helm on “The Doctrine of Two Standpoints” (1997)

In his second article, Helm examines some confusions related to holding to the doctrine of eternal creation, the cogency of which he defended in “Eternal Creation.”¹⁸⁶

1. Common confusions regarding eternity and creation

The first is the tendency to confuse science with metaphysics. Creation is neither a scientific nor a unique historical event; rather, “It is the bringing of the universe into being from a standpoint outside of it.” Thus God’s existing before the world began is not a temporal “before,” so that creating is not making.¹⁸⁷

Second, there is a tendency to confuse time with contingency. From a biblical perspective, the contingency of the universe means that its existence is not logically necessary and that it owes its existence to God’s agency: “But it does not follow from the contingency of the universe. . .that there was a time when the world was not; only that there might not have been a universe.”¹⁸⁸

Third, there is a tendency to confuse what we are able to conceive with how things must be. This is especially true of our conceptions of time. For example, the fact that we can always conceive of a time earlier than a certain time does not mean that the universe had a beginning but the very opposite. We need to understand how our conceptions of time and space tend to regulate and restrain how we look at the world.¹⁸⁹

Fourth, and most important, we tend to confuse the standpoint of the Creator with

¹⁸⁵Helm, “Eternal Creation,” 337-38.

¹⁸⁶Paul Helm, “Eternal Creation: The Doctrine of Two Standpoints,” 29-46.

¹⁸⁷Helm, “Eternal Creation: The Doctrine of Two Standpoints,” 31-32.

¹⁸⁸Helm, “Eternal Creation: The Doctrine of Two Standpoints,” 32.

¹⁸⁹Helm, “Eternal Creation: The Doctrine of Two Standpoints,” 33.

that of the creature:

From the Creator's standpoint his creation is a whole. It is not a creation in time but with time. From the standpoint of an intelligent creature the universe is co-eternal with God, for there is no time when the universe is not. For such an agent the universe unfolds as a temporal sequence, with a past, a present and a future.¹⁹⁰

Although the notion of different standpoints find analogies in the varying perspectives of human experience, the difference between the temporal and eternal standpoints is much more pronounced and essentially so:

If God is timelessly eternal then he is necessarily so, and he could not occupy a temporal standpoint; and no temporal creature could be timelessly eternal. . . . That temporal order which is the created universe is necessarily to be understood either from a timeless standpoint, as a timeless God understands it, or from a temporal vantage point, as you and I understand it. There is no third vantage point and every agent occupies either the one or the other standpoint.¹⁹¹

Thus from our standpoint, God's creation is continually unfolding, and God could be said to be continuously creating the universe. From the divine standpoint, it is one temporally extended universe. From our creaturely perspective, there was a time when God was not incarnate in Christ. From the Creator's standpoint, Jesus was the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world (Rev. 3:18). God's view is not a literal one but a unique perspective on the world free of temporal and spatial indexicals.¹⁹²

2. The doctrine of two standpoints in Augustine

Helm argues that the idea of two standpoints is discernible in a certain tension in Augustine's thought. On the one hand, Augustine frequently discusses how only the present exists. The past no longer exists and the future does not yet exist. On the other hand, in several other passages Augustine asserts that the past and future do exist. Helm accounts for this as follows:

In accordance with his fundamental tenet that only what is present exists, he argues

¹⁹⁰Helm, "Eternal Creation: The Doctrine of Two Standpoints," 33.

¹⁹¹Helm, "Eternal Creation: The Doctrine of Two Standpoints," 34.

¹⁹²Helm, "Eternal Creation: The Doctrine of Two Standpoints," 35-37.

that if the future exists it must exist as a present. . .and likewise with the past. Past and future exist, if and only if someone is able to refer to those times as ‘the present.’ Who could do this? It is only the eternal one to whom all times are present, and the eternal one for Augustine is God himself, who is related to God in the following fashion: ‘It is not in time that you precede times. Otherwise you would not precede all times. In the sublimity of eternity which is always in the present, you are before all things past and transcend all things future, because they are still to come.’¹⁹³

Such statements should be interpreted to mean that God created the temporal order by an eternal act and as a special kind of B-series in which every “moment of the series is eternally present to God in an identical fashion.”¹⁹⁴ This is the divine eternal standpoint.

The creaturely temporal standpoint is also discernible in Augustine’s treatment of time. From this perspective, the present exists, the past no longer exists, and the future does not yet exist. Although the past no longer exists, it once did exist (because it was present) and we are able partially to retain the past through our memories (which are present). Although the future does not yet exist for us, it exists for God, for all moments of the created temporal realm are timelessly real for him and temporally real for those who exist at the moment when they are present to them:

So the Battle of Waterloo no longer exists for us, and the Battle of Armageddon does not yet exist for us. But Waterloo and Armageddon each exist for God because each is eternally real to God, and are all mundane events, and Waterloo existed for Napoleon at the time when he could truly say, ‘The Battle of Waterloo is taking place now.’¹⁹⁵

3. Eternity, immutability, and the doctrine of two standpoints

As we have seen, however, such a view lays the eternalist position open to the oft-cited objection that an eternal God could not know certain temporal facts such as “what time is it now?” Helm parries this objection by appealing to the two standpoints and asking whether the two perspectives lead to an inconsistency:

¹⁹³ Helm, “Eternal Creation: The Doctrine of Two Standpoints,” 38-39. Helm is quoting Augustine’s *Confessions* xi.13.16.

¹⁹⁴Helm, “Eternal Creation: The Doctrine of Two Standpoints,” 40.

¹⁹⁵Helm, “Eternal Creation: The Doctrine of Two Standpoints,” 42.

The state of affairs known by God, and the state of affairs known by me, may or may not be the same state of affairs, but it is hard to see that, if they are not the same state of affairs, they express incompatible states of affairs. Relativism is the doctrine that truth is relative to a person's position or set of beliefs, or intellectual context. Is it relativistic in this sense to suppose that it is true for God that he knows that I am writing this paper on 15th September 1994 while I know, on 15th September, that I am writing this paper now? Hardly. . . . Our question is not, does God know precisely what we know, but is God's knowledge of the created order inconsistent with our knowledge of it, inconsistent to the extent that we have to adopt some form of relativism? Why should we think that?¹⁹⁶

A second frequently raised objection is that the notion of a timelessly eternal, impassive, immutable God is a throwback to Neoplatonism and that such a God could not be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Is not God's being in his becoming? Why not, as Barth does, simply affirm divine constancy and deny Hellenistic immutability?

To this objection Helm sketches a brief two-point reply. First, divine constancy needs to be grounded ontologically, and the only prime candidate for guaranteeing constancy "lies in the immutability of timeless eternity."¹⁹⁷ Second, eternity and immutability do not reflect a deficiency in God, but instead point to the fullness of his life and the pure actuality of his being:

It is because of who God is that he cannot be acted upon for the better and does not need to change. Could such a God be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ? Most certainly. For in the incarnation God the Son does not become something he was not, but assumes humanity into godhead. The incarnation is not the achieving of divine fullness, it is the expression of that fullness which only the timelessly eternal God can provide.¹⁹⁸

III. Chapter Summary and Conclusions

With the completion of the second generation survey, a number of conclusions can be drawn. First, the discussion continues to reflect a general position that the traditional doctrine of divine eternity is biblically underdetermined. No vigorous biblical defense of eternity is offered. In fact, there seems to be a reluctance to bring the Bible into the

¹⁹⁶Helm, "Eternal Creation: The Doctrine of Two Standpoints," 44-45.

¹⁹⁷Helm, "Eternal Creation: The Doctrine of Two Standpoints," 45.

¹⁹⁸Helm, "Eternal Creation: The Doctrine of Two Standpoints," 46.

discussion, even by those who are trying to defend something resembling the traditional view of divine eternity (e.g., Yates).

Second, the view that the origins of the doctrine are primarily philosophical rather than theological remains dominant, although concern about dehellenization is diminishing. This may be because more and more of the participants have begun to defend some form of divine eternity. It may also be that the debate has taken to heart Paul Helm's "first generation" statement that the primary issue is adequacy, not genetics.

Third, the Stump and Kretzmann article "Eternity" provided most of the grist for the second generation mill. While some defend aspects of their perspective (Leftow, Yates), both friends and foes are critical of ET-simultaneity. Leftow alone understands their concept of "atemporal duration" as reflecting the fullness of the divine life and defends his own version of it. He also is criticized. Almost everyone else, including eternalist Paul Helm, is highly critical of both ET-simultaneity and atemporal duration.

Fourth, both Stump and Kretzmann and Leftow appeal to analogies from Einstein's Special Theory of Relativity (STR) in conceptualizing their models of divine eternity. Padgett also discusses it in some detail as a possible argument for the stasis theory of time, which he believes is unsuccessful. In the next chapter, I will survey Craig's discussion of the problems and perils of appealing to the STR as a defense of divine eternity.

Finally, the interpretation of the traditional view of divine eternity as absolute timelessness, and the assumption that eternity and temporality are, *by definition*, incompatible remains dominant despite attempts by Stump and Kretzmann, Leftow, and others to argue otherwise, and despite Stump and Kretzman, Leftow, and Helm's effort to connect the doctrine of eternity with the plenitude or fullness of the divine nature.

CHAPTER 4

Survey of the Analytic Literature (Part III) The “Third Generation” Discussion

I. Introduction

“Third generation” is the non-technical designation that I have given to most recent developments and participants in the debate since the turn of the new millennium. This chapter consists of two main sections: A careful consideration of the book-length treatment of William Lane Craig’s mediating position and an examination of a collection of essays involving some individuals and issues not previously considered, as well as the more nuanced positions of those involved in earlier discussions.

By the end of the twentieth century, the battle lines within the analytic debate are clearly drawn between those who are willing to defend some form of divine timelessness (e.g., Helm, Ganssle, Leftow, Stump and Kretzmann, Wierenga), those who are opposed to it (e.g., Wolterstorff, Senor, Hasker, Zimmerman), and those who seek to maintain some type of mediating positions that preserves elements of both (e.g., Craig, Padgett, DeWeese). In addition, these conversations also cluster around a new set of topics such as the character of the divine life, the possibility of retrocausation, the mode of God’s knowledge, divine agency, human-divine dialogue, and the issue of the Incarnation. Finally, as a generalization, within the analytic literature, the pendulum appears to be swinging slowly away from the view that God is everlasting towards a new openness for some form of divine eternity.

II. William Lane Craig’s *Time and Eternity* (2001)

In 2001, William Lane Craig published his *Time and Eternity*, as an introduction

for those who want “to grapple seriously with the concept of God’s eternity.”¹ While intended as a popular book, it is fairly technical and is based upon four highly technical works recently authored by Craig.² Craig is not a newcomer to this discussion and could equally well be placed in the “second-generation” grouping. He published a number of journal articles on the topic from 1978 through the 1990s.³ I have placed him at this point in the discussion for two reasons. First, Craig has largely devoted himself to the subject of eternity for the full decade of the 90s. This, coupled with his position that God is timeless apart from creation and temporal with it, leads him to develop a critique and a defense of both positions and provides a kind of “capstone” or executive summary of the analytic discussion. Second, Craig has far and away the most expertise in Newtonian and Einsteinian science among those engaged in this debate. His most recent work provides his mature reflections on the relevance of Einsteinian relativity theory to the discussion of divine timelessness. The result is that Craig has chastened and rendered problematic attempts by a number of participants in the debate to appeal to Einsteinian relativity to conceptualize the relationship between the temporal and eternal.

¹William Lane Craig, *Time and Eternity* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2001), 11.

²William Lane Craig, *The Tensed Theory of Time: A Critical Examination* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2000); *The Tenseless Theory of Time: A Critical Examination* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2000); *Time and the Metaphysics of Relativity* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2001); and *God, Time, and Eternity* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002). In addition, he was one of the four principals (along with Helm, Padgett, and Wolterstorff) in Gregory Ganssle, ed., *God and Time: Four Views* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001).

³William Lane Craig, “God, Time and Eternity,” *Religious Studies* 14 (1978): 497-503; “Was Thomas Aquinas a B-Theorist of Time?” *New Scholasticism* 59 (1985): 473-83; “Time, Creation and the Continuum,” *International Philosophical Quarterly* 25 (1985): 319-26; “God and Real Time,” *Religious Studies* 26 (1990): 335-347; and “Divine Timelessness and Necessary Existence,” *International Philosophical Quarterly* 37 (1997): 217-224.

A. A Summary of Craig's Discussion in *Time and Eternity*

1. Craig's methodology

Although Craig is both a trained theologian and philosopher,⁴ he is convinced that Christian philosophers are more helpful in addressing the subject of God's eternity than are Christian theologians and that the best tool for considering it "is not poetry or piety, but analytical philosophy."⁵ This is because most present-day theologians have little background in either science or philosophy, and this subject requires both. The former is necessary because failure to understand the scientific issues has resulted in some sophomoric applications of relativity to the subject. The latter is essential since Craig believes that divine eternity cannot be properly understood without exploring the nature of time itself, which is "a daunting prospect."⁶

Craig admits that it is exceedingly difficult to provide an analysis of time that is not circular. If you define time as duration, this duration is usually described as an interval of time. If we say that time is that aspect of the world which is understood by certain relations such as past, present, or future, the present usually ends up being the "time" that exists.⁷ But such analyses are still valuable because they highlight the essential features of time (such as the relations of earlier than and later than), which are not unfamiliar but common to human experience. Time is a "familiar stranger," and Craig, like many others, cites Augustine's famous dictum in this connection: "What then is time? If no one asks me, I know; but if I wish to explain it to one who asks, I know not."⁸

⁴He has two earned doctorates, a Ph.D. in philosophy from the University of Birmingham, England (1977) and a D.Theol. from the University of Munich (1984).

⁵Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 11.

⁶Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 11.

⁷Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 13.

⁸*Confessions* 11.14; quoted in Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 14.

2. Craig's survey of the biblical data on divine eternity

The Bible speaks of God's being eternal, which, at the very least, means he has no end or beginning. About this everyone is agreed. To go beyond this leads to two mutually exclusive options: Either God is a temporal being (who exists in time and possesses a past, present, and a future) or he is timeless (that is, he does not exist in time but transcends it). Craig points out that it is "surprisingly difficult" to determine whether the Bible favors either of these views.⁹ On the one hand, the Bible clearly describes God as being engaged in certain temporal activities such as foreknowledge and remembering, and it describes his existence as an endless duration. This has led some, such as Alan Padgett, to conclude that "The Bible knows nothing of a timeless divine eternity in the traditional sense."¹⁰ But Craig is more cautious. For, on the other hand, there are a number of passages in scripture (which Craig surveys in considerable exegetical detail) which suggest that God existed before time began and, therefore, must be atemporal.¹¹ He concludes by citing James Barr:

Thus, although scriptural authors speak of God as temporal and everlasting, there is some evidence at least, that when God is considered in relation to creation He must be thought of as the transcendent Creator of time and the ages and therefore as existing beyond time.¹²

3. Craig's motivation for articulating a theory of divine eternity

Craig believes it is important to articulate clearly a theory of divine eternity for two reasons. First, some, like Paul Davies, have attacked the biblical conception of God on the grounds that it is incoherent. In *God and the New Physics*, Davies argues that God can be

⁹Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 15.

¹⁰Alan G. Padgett, *God, Eternity and the Nature of Time* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), 33; quoted in Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 15.

¹¹Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 15-20. I will summarize Craig's treatment of the biblical material in chapter 6.

¹²Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 20. The citation from Barr is taken from *Biblical Words for Time* (London: SCM, 1962), 149.

neither timeless nor temporal. If he is timeless, he could not act in time or become incarnate. If he is temporal, he would be subject to the laws of relativity and could not have been the one who created them. Therefore, the God of the Bible does not exist.¹³ Another modern physicist and cosmologist, Stephen Hawking, in *A Brief History of Time*, denies the necessity of a big-bang singularity by “rounding off” space-time, leaving a universe that has no beginning or end and producing Hawking’s famous rhetorical question, “What place then, for a creator?”¹⁴ An adequate response to these kinds of challenges, Craig believes, requires the development of a coherent theory of divine eternity and God’s relationship to time.

Craig’s second reason for articulating a cogent model of eternity arises from the need to respond to and correct some careless writing on God’s relationship to time from the Christian community. For example, Philip Yancey, in *Disappointment with God*, develops a theodicy on the basis of God’s relationship with time by appealing to a pair of mutually contradictory analogies. The first, says Craig, is based on a misapplication of Einstein’s special theory of relativity, which, rather than making God transcendent, turns him into a temporal being who experiences the flow of time and is embroiled in a tensed view of time. This is inconsistent with Yancey’s second analogy of the relationship between the time of an author and the time of the characters in a book or film, which would make God timeless but at the expense of adopting a static or tensed view of time. Thus the two analogies are incompatible and lead to different conclusions.¹⁵ Craig believes that Anthony Campolo

¹³Paul Davies, *God and the New Physics* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983), 133-34; 38-39; quoted in Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 21.

¹⁴Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time* (New York: Bantam Books, 1988), 141; discussed in Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 21-22.

¹⁵Philip Yancey, *Disappointment with God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 194-199; discussed in Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 22-23.

makes a similar error.¹⁶

Craig is equally critical of Hugh Ross, who, in *Beyond the Cosmos*, after explicitly rejecting the Augustinian-Thomistic doctrine of divine timelessness, replaces it with a concept of hyper-time or multiple-time dimensionality as a means of conceptualizing, not only God's relationship to time, but also the Incarnation and the doctrine of the Trinity.¹⁷ Craig points out that several of Ross's analogies and diagrams are either mistaken or misleading and concludes that "Ross's views [on multidimensionality], while ingenious, are neither coherent nor consistent with orthodox theology." Craig finds this all the more troubling since Ross insists that several cardinal Christian doctrines cannot be understood apart from his multidimensional models.¹⁸

Examples could be multiplied, and Craig cites Max Black approvingly that "a rough measure of the importance of a concept is the amount of nonsense written about it."¹⁹ Judged by this standard, Craig concludes, "We therefore have good reason to turn to philosophical theology for an articulation of a doctrine of divine eternity."²⁰

4. Craig's thesis: God as atemporal apart from creation and temporal with creation

Craig's solution embraces both the timeless and temporal perspectives but not both at once, because, consistent with the presuppositions of the analytic debate, he perceives them to be incompatible. Both, however, are consistent with the biblical record of God's

¹⁶Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 24, n. 28. Craig believes Tony Campolo in *A Reasonable Faith* (Waco: Word, 1983), 128-134, makes an unsuccessful attempt to solve the problems of predestination and the intermediate state by appeal to the relativity of simultaneity.

¹⁷Hugh Ross, *Beyond the Cosmos* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1996), 24; discussed in Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 24-26.

¹⁸Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 26.

¹⁹Max Black, review of *The Natural Philosophy of Time*, by G. J. Whitrow, *Scientific American* 206 (April 1962), 179; quoted in Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 27.

²⁰Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 27.

relationship to time. He reconciles them by arguing that “God is timeless without creation and temporal since creation.”²¹ That is, upon his creation of the temporal world, God himself became temporal by an act of the divine will. Craig comments:

This remarkable conclusion merits our reflection. Like the incarnation, the creation of the world is an act of condescension on God’s part for the sake of His creatures. Alone in the self-sufficiency of His own being, enjoying the timeless fullness of the intra-Trinitarian love relationships, God had no need for the creation of finite persons. His timeless free decision to create a temporal world with a beginning is a decision on God’s part to abandon timelessness and to take on a temporal mode of existence. He did this, not out of any deficit in Himself or His mode of existence, but in order that finite temporal creatures might come to share the joy and blessedness of the inner life of God. . . . In the incarnation God stooped even lower to take on, not just our mode of existence, our temporality, but our very nature.²²

This conclusion comes at the end of a systematic treatment of the subject of eternity that surveys and provides a critique of the arguments in favor of both divine timelessness and divine temporality and also the dynamic and static conceptions of time.²³

B. His Review of Arguments for Divine Timelessness

1. Divine simplicity and immutability

Traditionally, theologians like Thomas Aquinas have argued for timelessness on the basis of God’s simplicity and immutability. The argument is that, if God is simple and immutable, he must be timeless. According to Craig, divine simplicity states that God has absolutely no composition in his nature or being. He is an undifferentiated unity who reflects the pure act of existing. This, says Craig, removes all distinctions in God, including his Triunity.²⁴ Such a being certainly would be atemporal and would possess his

²¹Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 241.

²²Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 241.

²³These four subjects are each given a chapter-length treatment in chapters 2 through 5 respectively.

²⁴Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 30. Craig’s commitment to philosophical theology seems to lead him astray from the actual tradition of simplicity found in historical theology and therefore weakens his subsequent critique. While the traditional doctrine of simplicity denies that there are divisions in God’s nature and argues that he is, rather than simply possesses, his attributes, it does not deny all distinctions in

life, as Boethius put it, “all at once” (*totum simul*), but he would also be arelational. That is, he would stand in no real relations to his creatures or be able to really love or know them.

Likewise, argues Craig, if God is immutable, even if he is not simple, he cannot be temporal:

Like simplicity, the immutability affirmed by the medieval theologians is a radical concept: utter immobility. God cannot change in *any* respect. He never thinks successive thoughts, He never performs successive actions. He never undergoes even the most trivial alternations. God not only cannot undergo intrinsic change, he cannot even change extrinsically by being related to changing things.²⁵

Craig argues that even if the definition of immutability is softened to “incapable of intrinsic change,” God could not be temporal, for a temporal God would still be growing older or gaining knowledge. If God is only intrinsically immutable, he remains timeless.²⁶

Therefore, if God is immutable or simple, he is eternal (timeless). The problem, believes Craig, is that these two attributes are even more difficult to defend than the doctrine of eternal timelessness itself. Craig believes they find absolutely no support in scripture, which, at best, speaks of immutability in terms of God’s faithfulness and unchanging character. In conclusion, while “a simple or immutable God would be timeless, we have even less reason to think God simple or immutable than to think him timeless, and so can hardly infer that He is timeless on the basis of those doctrines.”²⁷

2. The general and special theories of relativity

Craig also considers an argument in favor of divine timelessness which appeals to

God, especially that of the Trinity. Craig may be unwittingly setting up a straw man here.

²⁵Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 30-31. Here again, Craig formulates his doctrine of immutability philosophically, rather than according to the offerings of historical theology, that is, as the orthodox tradition actually formulates it. Craig mistranslates *immobile* as immobility rather than as unmoved. The tradition never said that God was incapable of movement or that God could not undergo extrinsic change. This issue will be discussed more fully in chapter 5 of this thesis.

²⁶Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 31.

²⁷Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 32.

Einstein's Special Theory of Relativity (hence, STR).²⁸ According to STR, there is no such thing as absolute time and space, because time and space differ according to the relative difference in velocity between the observer and the observed. Only observers sharing the same inertial frame (that is relative rest) experience the same time and space. The result is that what is simultaneous for one may not be simultaneous for another.

This is what is known as the "relativity of simultaneity," and it results in a potentially significant objection to the view that God is a temporal being. If God is in time, then the obvious question is "Whose time is he in?" or "What is God's 'now'?" Some advocates of timelessness argue that if STR is true, the temporalist can provide no satisfying answer to these questions. First, if God is in time, how do we pick out God's particular inertial frame since he is not a physical object in uniform motion? Second, how could God, who was confined to one time frame, be causally related to events that are relative to other inertial frames but not God's? Third, if God is in time, his knowledge would be restricted to his own time frame, leaving him ignorant of others. Fourth, if God is in time, there would also be no "now" associated with the time of every inertial frame, thus destroying the unity of God's consciousness. Therefore, God must not be in time, He must be timeless. In sum, if the STR is true, then God must be timeless.²⁹

In his response, Craig surprisingly challenges the premise that STR is true in its description of time and argues against the popular notion that Einstein's STR destroyed the concept of absolute time. First, he points out that the idea that Newton held to a concept of

²⁸Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 32. Before discussing his objections, Craig provides considerable explanatory material regarding the STR.

²⁹Although Craig does not cite him in this connection, these kinds of objections were raised by John T. Wilcox, "A Question from Physics for Certain Theists," *The Journal of Religion* 41 (October 1961): 293-300. Wilcox's main concern is process theology, but many of his arguments directed against the temporal God of process theology on the basis of STR are parallel to the ones outlined by Craig against divine temporalists. Similar argumentation occurs in Royce Gruenler, "Process and Simultaneity in God: Logical Difficulties in the Process of View of Time," chap. in *The Inexhaustible God: Biblical Faith and the Challenge of Process Theism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983), 75-100.

absolute time is misleading, for modern scholars forget how strong a theist Newton was.³⁰ Newton himself considered God to be an everlasting temporal being, who is omnipresent throughout the creation. These metaphysical presuppositions shape his understanding that “[a]bsolute time and space are therefore relational in that they are contingent upon the existence of God.”³¹ In other words, time and space are emanative effects and immediate consequence of God’s very being. While not attributes of God, they are nonetheless metaphysically grounded in the existence of God. Further, since God’s “now” is the present moment of absolute time, Newton’s temporal theism also provides the basis for absolute simultaneity.³²

Craig points out that none of these metaphysical assumptions are set aside by Einstein’s STR. What Newton did not realize, nor could have suspected, is that physical time is not only *relative* but also *relativistic*. In other words, physical time depends upon the motion of the clock so that unless a clock were at absolute rest it would not and could not register absolute time. This insight awaited the advent of relativity theory. However, if shown to Newton, he would no doubt have welcomed it, for “it corrects Newton’s concept of physical time, *not* his concept of absolute time.”³³

What then of the claim that Einstein’s work discredits the Newtonian concepts of absolute time and space? Craig counters this claim by pointing out that Einstein’s work was based upon his own set of epistemological presuppositions, namely the verificationist epistemology of Ernst Mach. Einstein simply sets aside Newton’s concepts of absolute time and space as meaningless, not on the basis of scientific discovery or even philosophical argument, but because they do not follow from the dictates of the

³⁰Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 45.

³¹Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 45.

³²Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 46.

³³Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 46; emphasis mine.

epistemological presuppositions of verificationism. Craig comments:

Einstein's theory, far from *disproving* the existence of absolute space, actually *presupposes* its non-existence. All of this is done by mere stipulation. Reality is reduced to what our measurements read; Newton's metaphysical time and space, which transcend operational definitions, are assumed to be mere figments of our imagination.³⁴

However, as Craig points out, verificationist epistemology has fallen on hard times in twentieth-century philosophy. With the discrediting of verificationism, the philosophical support for STR as providing the correct description of time collapses and with it the threat of STR for those who advocate divine temporality.³⁵ Even evidence from Big Bang cosmology that cosmic time may have had a beginning does not provide a trump card for the advocate of timelessness, who might argue that, since cosmic time had a beginning, God must transcend time. The divine temporalist could simply counter that cosmic time provides an approximate measure of God's absolute time since the moment of creation but does not, in itself, determine that God had no temporal existence prior to the creation.³⁶

In sum, Craig concludes that the appeal to Einstein's STR and GTR in support of divine timelessness is unsuccessful. It is questionable whether the STR provides a correct description of the nature of time since (a) it is based upon a discredited epistemology and is less consistent with the results of later experiments than other explanations; (b) the deliverances of the GTR on a cosmological scale provide evidence of a cosmic time parameter that could provide an approximate measure of God's time since the creation; and

³⁴Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 48.

³⁵Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 51. What happens to STR if God is temporal? Craig argues that we simply need to embrace the Lorentzian rather than the Einsteinian interpretation of relativity. The Lorentz-Poincaré model of relativity, which predates Einstein's, has the same predictive power as STR, while at the same time preserving much of Newton's thinking, including his notion of absolute time and the distinction between metaphysical time and physical time. Craig prefers this move, not only philosophically but also scientifically, since he believes that it better coincides with Bell's Theorem and the vindication of quantum mechanics over the relativity of simultaneity of STR by the EPR experiment. He is not alone in this assessment, since both John Bell and Karl Popper believed the outcome of the EPR experiment warranted a return to the Lorentzian interpretation of relativity.

³⁶Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 65.

(c) the possibility that cosmic time had a beginning does not eliminate the possibility of divine temporality prior to the creation.

3. The incompleteness of temporal life

Craig also considers the Anselmian-Boethian argument that, since temporal existence is a less perfect mode of existence than timeless existence, God must be timeless. It is an argument central to the work of Stump and Kretzmann and Leftow.³⁷ According to Craig, this argument is plausible and is the most promising of all the arguments for divine timelessness, for it is based on powerful intuitions concerning the irretrievable losses connected with temporal life, which seem inconsistent with the life of a perfect being.³⁸

Craig believes the attempt to overcome the force of this argument by appealing to a tenseless or static view of time (which argues nothing is lost or changes in the passage of time except human consciousness) is unsuccessful, for it does nothing to alleviate the genuine losses incurred in temporal life.³⁹ Craig also views as inept the attempt to counter this argument by appeal to the divine “specious present,” which enables God to experience the fullness of life all at once and yet still remain temporal. This position succeeds only at the price of placing upon God the same kinds of limitations regarding what he can know (such as what time is it “now”) and how he can respond, which the divine temporalists maintain is objectionable in the position of the divine atemporalists.⁴⁰

Yet, despite his sympathy for this argument from the incompleteness of temporal

³⁷cf. Brian Leftow, *Time and Eternity* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 278; quoted in Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 67; and Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann, “Prophecy, Past Truth, and Eternity,” *Philosophical Perspectives* 5 (1991): 395; cf. idem, “Eternity, Awareness, and Action,” *Faith and Philosophy* 9 (1992): 463; quoted in Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 69.

³⁸Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 67-68.

³⁹Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 70. Craig notes that Einstein tried to comfort bereaved friends by appealing to a scientific static model of space-time, which argues that nothing really changes and that the distinction between past, present, and future is really an illusion (69-70).

⁴⁰Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 71-72.

life, Craig finds it unsatisfying for two reasons: First, it is based upon an analogy from human experience. However, even if an infinite God were temporal, the fact that he is omniscient and ultimately loses nothing means that “time’s tooth is considerably dulled for him,” so that it is not clear that God’s passage through time would be as sad or tragic as it is for us.⁴¹ Second, it is not clear that timelessness is a superior mode of existence to that of temporality. For example, a timeless being would not be able to experience music. But would a mode of existence without music really be better than one that possessed it?⁴²

4. Summation

Craig concludes that the arguments for divine timelessness remain inconclusive. It cannot be argued from the doctrines of simplicity or immutability, for these doctrines are even more problematic than divine timelessness itself. The appeal to Einsteinian STR and GTR is unpersuasive since STR is based on a discredited epistemology, and GTR suggests a cosmic time parameter. Finally, the argument based upon the superiority of atemporal existence is an experiential argument that lacks force when applied to God and that can be challenged on other grounds.

C. His Review of Arguments for Divine Temporality

1. The impossibility of atemporal personhood

Craig examines in detail three arguments in support of divine temporality. The first is that if God is timeless, he cannot possess the characteristics that would make him a personal being. Since he is a personal being, he cannot be timeless.⁴³ In his examination of the argument, Craig lists philosopher of mind Daniel Dennett’s six requirements for personhood including rationality, possession of states of consciousness, being regarded by

⁴¹Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 72.

⁴²Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 73. This is an interesting line of argument that I shall consider more fully in chapter 7.

⁴³Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 78-79.

others as possessing states of consciousness, the ability to regard others as having states of consciousness, the capability of verbal communication, and self-consciousness.⁴⁴

Could a timeless being possess these characteristics? Craig considers two philosophers who say no. John Lucas argues that a timeless being could not be personal, because time is not something God creates but exists as a necessary concomitant to the personhood of God. If God is personal, time must exist. However, Lucas provides no arguments why a being that possesses a changeless consciousness of truth could not be atemporal.⁴⁵ Richard Gale argues that consciousness is a temporally elongated process but fails to show that being temporally extended is an essential property of consciousness rather than a common one.⁴⁶ Craig is aware of no other arguments aimed at showing that atemporal consciousness is impossible. Since these two seem insufficient, he concludes that the case against divine timelessness has not been made on these grounds. Indeed, Craig believes that the conditions of personality could be met in a timeless being and being self-conscious seems to be a sufficient condition of being personal.⁴⁷

Other philosophers, such as Robert Coburn, have argued that a timeless God could not be self-conscious and, therefore, could not be personal, because he would be incapable of certain activities associated with personal beings such as remembering, anticipating, reflecting, deliberating, deciding, intending, and acting intentionally.⁴⁸ The hidden assumption here is that God's being timeless or eternal is an essential property, but Craig

⁴⁴Daniel Dennett, "Conditions of Personhood," in *The Identities of Persons*, ed. Amelie Oksenberg Rorty (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 175-196; quoted in Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 79.

⁴⁵J. R. Lucas, *The Future: An Essay on God, Temporality and Truth* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989) 212-13; quoted in Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 80.

⁴⁶Richard M. Gale, *On the Nature and Existence of God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 52; quoted in Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 81.

⁴⁷Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 81-82.

⁴⁸Robert C. Coburn, "Professor Malcolm on God," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 41 (1963): 155; quoted in Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 82.

views this assumption as dubious:

[A]part from highly controversial claims on behalf of divine simplicity or immutability, I see no reason to think that God is either *essentially* temporal or *essentially* timeless. So if timelessness is a merely contingent property of God, He could be entirely capable of remembering, anticipating, reflecting and so on; only were He to do so, he would not be timeless. So long as He freely refrains from such activity, He is timeless even though He has the *capacity* to engage in those activities. Thus, by Coburn's own lights God must be regarded as personal.⁴⁹

In addition, Craig does not believe that Coburn's list of activities is essential to personhood in the case of God. As an omniscient being, God need not remember, reflect, or deliberate for "his free decisions are either everlasting or timeless, rather than preceded by a period of ignorance and indecision."⁵⁰ It would seem that the capacity for engaging in personal relationships, rather than the actual engagement in them, is all that is required for personhood.⁵¹ Nor, as the doctrine of the Trinity suggests, must such relationships be necessarily temporal. The interaction of the persons of the Trinity within the self-sufficiency of the divine being could, on a relational view of time, be timeless.⁵²

Craig concludes that the argument for divine temporality based on the personhood of God is unsuccessful. A timeless being can be a self-conscious relational individual endowed with freedom of the will and engaged in personal relations. However, given that a temporal world exists, it remains to be seen whether God can remain untouched by its temporality.

⁴⁹Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 83; emphasis his. In this quotation Craig is revealing the assumptions that make room for and undergird his overall thesis that God was timeless without creation and temporal after it. However, this is a more radical move than Craig's low key introduction of it might suggest. Traditionally, an attribute of God has been understood as an aspect of the divine being, which, if absent, would cause him to cease to be God. It should be noted that Craig is removing God's infinity with respect to time from the traditional list of the attributes of God.

⁵⁰Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 84.

⁵¹Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 84.

⁵²Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 85.

2. Divine relations with the world

The basic thrust of this argument is that God cannot stand in real relationship to the temporal world without being or becoming temporal. In other words, if God is really related to the temporal world, he must be temporal:

Even if in creating the world God undergoes no *intrinsic* change, He at least undergoes an *extrinsic* change. . . . His free decision to create a temporal world also constitutes a free decision on his part to exist temporally.⁵³

Craig believes that Thomas Aquinas tries to get around this argument by denying, on the basis of his strong simplicity doctrine, that God has any such relationship. To illustrate, Joe is jealous of John. Only Joe's relation to John is real. John's relationship to Joe (being envied) is not. It makes no real difference to John. Likewise, creatures are really sustained, known, and loved by God, but God would be the same whether the creatures existed or not. God undergoes no extrinsic change in creating the world.⁵⁴ To Craig, this is an "extraordinary doctrine" and full of problems, because God's relationship to the world is a causal one--it is therefore not analogous to "be envied by." That God is not really related to the world seems unintelligible.⁵⁵

Craig dismisses Stump and Kretzmann's versions of ET-simultaneity on grounds similar to those proposed by Helm and Leftow.⁵⁶ But he also faults Leftow's alternative solution, namely that temporal beings do, in fact, exist in eternity. Since they share God's mode of existence, Leftow argues, they can be causally related to God. He argues this on

⁵³Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 87; emphasis his.

⁵⁴Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 88.

⁵⁵Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 88-89.

⁵⁶Drawing an analogy from the relativity of simultaneity in Einstein's STR, they see the relationship between God and the world as intersecting, not at *one and the same time*, but at *one and the same eternal present*. Craig complains that this is not really analogous to STR at all; "A better analogy would be to say that *x* and *y* are ET-simultaneous just in case they both exist at the same eternal present relative to the eternal reference frame and both exist at the same moment of time relative to the temporal reference frame. But then God would be temporal relative to our mode of existence, which Stump and Kretzmann do not want to say" (*Time and Eternity*, 90).

the basis of three premises: (a) the distance between God and everything in space is zero; (b) spatial things do not change in any way unless there is a change of place (a motion involving a material thing); and (c) if something is in time, it is also in space. Craig finds several serious problems with Leftow's argument. The first is that premise (a) involves a category mistake. It cannot really mean that the distance between God and everything in space can be measured as zero; it can only mean that the category of distance does not apply to being who transcends space. But without this premise, his argument collapses.⁵⁷ Second, premise (b) is also false if time is dynamic or tensed, for if temporal tenses are real, spatial objects can change without spatial motion simply by temporal change such as becoming older. Even if the universe were frozen into immobility, there still would be temporal change relative to God.⁵⁸ Third, premise (c) is also questionable. Why could a being not exist in time through mental succession but not be material?⁵⁹ In defense of (c) Leftow appeals to STR space-time to argue that if something is in time, it must be in space as well. But Craig counters that neither Einstein's STR nor GTR require space-time realism. Since Leftow asserts rather than argues for his space-time realist position, he has therefore, "given no good grounds for thinking that temporal beings exist in timeless eternity."⁶⁰ For Craig, the idea that God must be temporal in order to stand in relationship to the world is a powerful argument in favor of God's being temporal.⁶¹

3. Divine knowledge of tensed facts

The third line of argument in support of divine temporality rises out of the

⁵⁷This argument is found in Brian Leftow, "Eternity and Simultaneity," *Faith and Philosophy* 8 (1991): 148-179 and Leftow's *Time and Eternity*, chapter 10; discussed in Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 92-93.

⁵⁸Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 94.

⁵⁹Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 94.

⁶⁰Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 96.

⁶¹Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 97.

philosophy of language rather than science, namely that a timeless God cannot know certain tensed facts such as what is happening “now.” A being who knows tensed facts cannot be timeless, for such truths are in constant flux. The argument states that if God is omniscient, then he knows tensed facts, and if he knows them, he cannot be timeless.⁶²

Defenders of timelessness have tried to refute this position by arguing either that a timeless God can know tensed facts or by altering the definition of omniscience, so that God can still be omniscient even if he does not know tensed facts. Jonathan Kvanvig takes the first approach and argues that God can still understand the individual essence of indexical words and expressions. An atemporal God might not know them *directly*, but he can know them *indirectly*.⁶³ But Craig believes this approach fails, for it strips the essence of these expressions of their temporal reference. Indeed, Kvanvig reduces tense to a linguistic element so that, on his analysis, there are no tensed facts to be known. But if there are tensed facts, then God is less than omniscient.⁶⁴

Edward Wierenga takes a similar but modified approach. On his view the factual content of a present-tense sentence includes the tense expressed in the sentence. Wierenga maintains that a timeless God can understand the factual content of a tensed sentence, but without forming a present-tense belief as we do: “God knows tensed facts without having tensed beliefs.”⁶⁵ Craig believes this argument works only if Wierenga adopts the view of time known as *presentism*, in which the only time that really exists is the present time (there is no past or future). But how can God know such facts if they only exist in the present,

⁶²Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 100.

⁶³Jonathan L. Kvanvig, *The Possibility of an All-Knowing God* (New York: St. Martin's, 1986), 150-165; quoted in Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 100-101.

⁶⁴Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 101.

⁶⁵Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 102. His discussion of Wierenga is taken from Edward R. Wierenga, *The Nature of God: An Inquiry into Divine Attributes*, Cornell Studies in Philosophy of Religion (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 179-185.

and God cannot know tensed facts?⁶⁶

In support of his position, Wierenga draws an analogy with first person indexical words. For example, “I (Doug Felch) feel miserable.” God can grasp that Doug Felch feels miserable, although he cannot affirm the first person indexical. So also with time indexicals. But Craig points out that the two indexicals are not precisely analogous. “John left three hours ago” works as long as the time being indexed is not the present time. If it is, then God must be temporal, if he is going to know when John left. Craig believes that in making presentness a part of the individual essence of every time, Wierenga only succeeds in temporalizing God.⁶⁷

Brian Leftow takes a different approach. All events exist in eternity where they are eternally actual, even though in time these events are past, present, and future. However, relative to God’s frame of reference, there are no tensed facts to be known. At the same time, Leftow wants to maintain that God also knows events as they exist relative to various temporal frames of reference. Craig believes that Leftow’s approach also leads to the conclusion that there are no tensed facts and that all of God’s knowledge is tenseless. Thus, his view fails to supply God with knowledge of tensed facts.⁶⁸

Since Kvanvig, Wierenga, and Leftow all fail to explain how God can be timeless and yet know tensed facts, the argument for temporality on the basis of tensed facts seems secure. The only recourse is to deny that omniscience entails a knowledge of tensed facts. This can be done either by (a) revising the traditional definition of omniscience; or (b) maintaining that tense, while an objective feature of time, does not strictly belong to the factual content expressed by tensed sentences.

The first approach runs the danger of “cooking” the traditional definition of

⁶⁶Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 102.

⁶⁷Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 103.

⁶⁸Leftow, *Time and Eternity*, 312-327; discussed in Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 103-104.

omniscience. This, Craig believes, is what happens to Wierenga, who argues that God's omniscience does not require that He know the tensed fact but only the tenseless fact that, from a certain perspective, a certain tensed fact exists. Craig believes this does not work, for Wierenga is not denying there are tensed facts, only that it is necessary for a timeless omniscient being to know them. This seems implausible, for it makes temporal beings far more knowledgeable than God himself.⁶⁹

Leftow's approach to restricting the meaning of omniscience is to argue that since there are many sorts of truths that God cannot know, there is no harm in admitting another, namely, tensed truths. Craig counters that this is hardly a robust approach to the doctrine of divine omniscience and, at any rate, it seems a poor bargain to trade omniscience for timelessness.⁷⁰ Further, Craig finds Leftow's examples unconvincing. Leftow appeals to God's not knowing how it feels to be another person or the experience of failure as a sinner. However, replies Craig, such examples confuse *knowing how* with *knowing that*. *Knowing how* does not take truth as an object. God cannot know how being a sinner feels depressing. But these are *how* truths. When we talk about omniscience we are talking about *knowing that*. God's not *knowing how* it feels to be a sinner is not an example of a truth that he fails to know, and Leftow gives us no examples of *knowing that* truths that God does not know. So the first strategy of limiting what an omniscient God can know seems to fail.⁷¹

This leaves only the second strategy, that tense does not belong to the factual content expressed by tensed sentences. This involves a very subtle and technical discussion in the philosophy of language which does succeed in separating tense from the factual content of tensed sentences but at the cost of severely restricting what a timeless

⁶⁹Wierenga, *Nature of God*, 189; discussed in Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 105.

⁷⁰Leftow, *Time and Eternity*, 321-323; discussed in Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 105-1-6.

⁷¹Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 106.

omniscient being can or must know. But God is not only factually omniscient; he is maximally excellent cognitively. Certainly a God who does not know temporal knowledge would not be maximally excellent cognitively.⁷² Craig's judgment is that "we now have a second powerful reason based on God's changing knowledge of tensed facts for thinking that God is in time."⁷³

4. Summation

Despite these arguments, Craig believes that to conclude that God is temporal would be premature. For there is an escape route open for defenders of divine timelessness--embracing the static or tenseless view of time in which all events in time are equally existent, so that, if there were no minds, there would be no past, present, or future. Given such a view, God never experiences extrinsic change in relation to temporal events because there is no temporal becoming. Similarly on a static view of time there are no tensed facts. Linguistic tense is an egocentric feature of language users. There is no objective "now" in the world. Only one defender of timeless eternity, Paul Helm, has taken this route.⁷⁴ Nonetheless, Craig believes that it is clear that if we are going to understand eternity, we must first understand time, and he devotes the two remaining chapters of his book to a discussion of tenseless and tensed views of time.

D. His Discussion of the Nature of Time

Craig's discussion of the tensed and tenseless views is detailed, technical, and difficult to summarize. To do so adequately would require an extensive treatment, which space does not permit. Here, however, a brief description is sufficient.

1. The dynamic (tensed) view of time

⁷²Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 107.

⁷³Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 109.

⁷⁴See Paul Helm, "Eternal Creation: The Doctrine of Two Standpoints" in *The Doctrine of Creation*, ed. Colin Gunton (Edinburgh: T& T Clark, 1997), 42.

Craig begins by considering arguments both for and against a dynamic (tensed) conception of time. Strongly in its favor is that the reality of temporal becoming cannot be eradicated from our language or our experience. Craig summarizes:

[A] phenomenological analysis of our temporal experience reveals that we experience events as happening presently, that we have peculiar attitudes toward an event depending on whether it is past or future, and that we experience temporal becoming. . . . These examples serve well to show how basic, deeply ingrained, strongly held, and universal is our belief in the reality of tense and temporal becoming. On a static theory of time we are all of us hopelessly mired in irrationality, prisoners to an illusion from which we are powerless to free ourselves. By contrast, if a dynamic theory of time is correct, our experiences and beliefs are entirely rational and appropriate. Thus, insofar as we think that such experiences are justified, we should embrace a dynamic theory of time.⁷⁵

From there Craig goes on to consider two arguments that have been offered against a temporal view of time. The first is McTaggart's Paradox that since the A-series relations of past, present, and future are incompatible (no event can compatibly be more than one) and yet with the passage of time all events possess those characteristics, a contradiction occurs. Therefore the A-series must be rejected and with it the passage of time.⁷⁶

The second is the Myth of Time's Passage. The myth occurs because the idea of the passage of time leads to unanswerable questions. For example, it is impossible to talk about how fast time flows. Further, an event occurring in an instant would have a history if time passes. However, since it only occurs in an instant, it cannot have a history, unless you posit hyper time. The result, however, is an infinite regress when one asks how fast hyper time flows. However, Craig finds both objections unconvincing:

[N]either McTaggart's Paradox nor the Myth of Passage provides good grounds for rejecting a dynamic theory of time, since these objections are in truth aimed at a hybrid, dynamic-static theory of time. So directed, they are cogent objections. But the pure dynamic time theorist, or presentist, is not at all menaced by these foes. Rather the serious difficulty he must confront is the classic problem of the extent of the present. None of the options here is without its drawbacks. The question is whether this difficulty is so great as to outbalance the arguments in favor of a

⁷⁵Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 142.

⁷⁶See discussion in Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 143-147.

dynamic theory of time.⁷⁷

The answer to that last rhetorical question is, in Craig's mind, no.

2. The static (tenseless) view of time

From there Craig moves on to consider arguments for and against the tenseless view of time. The first argument in its favor is drawn from relativity theory, which according to the Minkowski interpretation for the STR is best described as 4-D "space-time," which in turn leads to a static (tenseless) view of time. But as we have already seen, Craig rejects the STR in favor of Lorentzian relativity, which leads to a dynamic understanding of the nature of time.⁷⁸

A second argument is the one provided by Adolf Grünbaum and others that the concept of becoming is subjective and mind dependent because it requires "conceptualized awareness." That becoming is subjective is supported by (a) the subjectivity of the concept of "now"; (b) the absence of the concept of becoming in modern physics; and (c) the inability to explain why events happen at any particular "now" rather than at some other time.⁷⁹ Craig is not convinced. Further, after discussing perdurantism as the static theorists' solution to the problem of intrinsic change and the damage he believes the static theory does to the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*, he draws the following conclusions:

The static conception of time has little to commend it, being based primarily on a Minkowskian, space-time interpretation of Relativity, an interpretation which we are under no constraint to adopt. On the other hand, the static conception of time faces philosophical and theological difficulties that are truly formidable: It "spatializes" time; it gives an incoherent account of the experience of becoming; its analysis of intrinsic change implies the bizarre and multiply flawed doctrine of

⁷⁷Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 163.

⁷⁸Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 167-180.

⁷⁹Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 180-183. He draws upon the discussion found in Adolph Grünbaum, "The Status of Temporal Becoming," in *Modern Science and Zeno's Paradoxes* (Middleton, Conn: Wesleyan University Press, 1967).

perdurantism; and it emasculates the biblical doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*.⁸⁰

3. Craig's inclusive conclusion

These considerations are sufficient for Craig to commit himself to the dynamic nature of time and to assert that temporal becoming is a real, mind-independent aspect of the world. But since tensed facts exist, and since God must have knowledge of tensed facts, God must himself be temporal as long as a temporal world exists. Coupled with Craig's concern arising out of the Kalam cosmological argument that there can be no such thing as an actual infinite, Craig draws the following conclusion that includes both the timelessness and temporality of God:

It therefore follows from our arguments that God is (present tense) in time. He exists now. But on the Christian doctrine of creation, the world had a beginning, though God did not. Did time exist prior to the moment of creation? Is God, existing alone without creation, timeless or temporal in such a state? I presented three arguments to show that (metric) time is finite in the past, so that God existing without the world must exist either in an amorphous time or, more plausibly, timelessly. In short, given the reality of tense and temporal becoming, the most plausible construal of divine eternity is that God is timeless without creation and temporal since creation.⁸¹

It should be noted that Craig draws his final conclusions and lands where he lands on the basis of philosophical arguments regarding the nature of time. In short, he argues that time is, ontologically, dynamic. If so, God must be temporal. Indeed, Craig's final position depends almost entirely on the nature of time. This confirms the issue raised at the beginning of this thesis, namely that the modern analytic discussion is more concerned about modern concepts of time than ancient notions of duration. This is not an illegitimate interest. However, it suggests that conclusions drawn from the analytic debate ought not to be read back into the theological tradition.

⁸⁰Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 214-215. "Perdurantism" is the way of characterizing how 4-D objects are extended in time. They cannot "endure" through time, since time is one of their dimensions. It is the stasis theory's solution to the problem of intrinsic change, but Craig finds it incoherent (see pp. 201-210).

⁸¹Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 241.

III. Recent Essays in *God and Time* (2002)

We conclude our survey of the “third generation” analytical discussion with a consideration of several essays from a 2002 anthology on the subject of God and time. It includes some of the most recent work from a number of persons we have already encountered as well as some newcomers. It also includes some subjects not previously addressed, such as “typically temporal properties” (TTPs), retrocausation, omnitemporality, intrinsic change, the mode of God’s knowledge, human-divine dialogue, and a more focused discussion of eternity and the Incarnation.⁸²

A. Brian Leftow on the Eternal Present

In “The Eternal Present,” Brian Leftow reexamines Boethius’s view of eternity as “the complete possession, all at once, of an illimitable life,” in order to explore more fully just how rich a life that might be. His intention is to show that, while God’s life is not temporal, it reflects certain typically temporal properties (TTPs), and that it is coherent for a timeless being to possess such properties.⁸³

Leftow points out that most discussions of divine eternity suggest that there are only two options (atemporal and everlasting), when in fact there is a continuum of possible views on God’s relationship to time from absolutely timeless to completely temporal.⁸⁴ *He begins by distinguishing Boethian eternity from atemporality.*⁸⁵ The latter is both timeless

⁸²Gregory E. Ganssle and David M. Woodruff, ed., *God and Time: Essays on the Divine Nature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002). Like many temporal terms, “recent” is a relative concept! In a project like this, it becomes necessary to draw the line somewhere in order to complete it. I decided to do so with this collection of essays published in the spring of 2002. Articles and books more recent than that have been intentionally excluded from this dissertation.

⁸³Brian Leftow, “The Eternal Present,” in *God and Time: Essays on the Divine Nature*, ed. Gregory E. Ganssle and David M. Woodruff (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 21.

⁸⁴Leftow, “The Eternal Present,” 23.

⁸⁵Emphasis mine. Although both Leftow and Stump and Kretzmann have been heavily criticized in the analytic literature for their defense of divine eternity, I believe they have, more than most, properly understood the doctrine not as absolute atemporality but as duration without succession. Their views are not identical, but they are, at least, historically more nuanced.

and durationless. Eternity, in contrast, involves life and can be characterized as an event, even though events in God's life are not involved in succession but are permanently present. God is eternal, but he is also the living God and a perfect being. The fact that God is living gives his existence the characteristic of an event, and since events can be instantaneous, they need not be temporal.⁸⁶ The fact that he possesses this life completely, perfectly, and altogether requires that his life not be divided. Thus, it is not partial, either as anticipating future events or having part of his life slip away into the past. Instead, God enjoys the complete possession of illimitable life.

The fact that God possesses life suggests that he possesses what Leftow describes as "typically temporal properties" (TTP) such as, according to Augustine and Boethius, having a "present." Generally whatever possesses such properties is temporal. Leftow argues, however, that merely possessing some of these properties does not make one temporal. To be temporal requires the right sort of TTPs.⁸⁷ This, Leftow believes, is helpful in understanding Boethius's view of eternity:

As I see it, Boethius, held instead that being non-temporal is compatible with having some typically temporal properties, and being present is not intrinsically or necessarily a temporal property. For Boethius, being eternal does not consist in having no TTPs. It consists in having some TTPs, but not enough to count as temporal. Boethius began with a set of TTPs in mind, then deleted from his account of events in God's life those he thought incompatible with God's perfection. His concept of eternity was the result.⁸⁸

Thus God's life has duration, but not temporal duration, since it does not change or

⁸⁶Leftow, "The Eternal Present," 25-32. My one-sentence summary does not do justice to Leftow's treatment. Leftow engages in an extensive discussion to establish that events need not be temporal.

⁸⁷Leftow, "The Eternal Present," 33.

⁸⁸Leftow, "The Eternal Present," 35. I believe that Leftow's historical analysis is correct. The doctrine of eternity in Boethius is an example of negative theology, as indeed is the traditional view of divine eternity throughout the history of doctrine.

pass away.⁸⁹ Eternity involves a present, but a non-temporal one, for the “now” of eternity is not temporal. As Ganssle points out, “The term ‘now,’ according to Leftow, picks out when the speaker tokens it. Not all whens are times. Eternity, Leftow argues, is also a when.”⁹⁰ Leftow concludes that because eternity is when a timeless God exists, “at eternity” also functions as a date, and this helps us to further understand the relationship between time and eternity:

It does not follow that “God exists” is not true at every other date. What does follow is that it is not facts located at any time *t* which makes it true at *t* that God exists. . . . A timeless God is as objectively there as a temporal God would be. He is just there more permanently than a temporal God could be, and so does not count as temporal. Because he does not, one cannot say that God exists *while* you read this. But one can say that God exists *and* you read this. So too, on a Platonist philosophy of mathematics, one cannot say that $2 + 2 = 4$ *while* you read this, but one can say that $2 + 2 = 4$ *and* you read this. . . . Nor a fortiori does eternity’s being when God exists entail that God cannot act now. God does indeed act now. What this means, for Boethius, is that there occur now events which God directly causes, and God’s contribution to their occurring has no temporal relation to these effects at all. Eternity, then is a date, logically speaking. And this is what one would expect if events can be both eternal and genuinely present.⁹¹

This article is important in two ways: First, it provides an analytic treatment of an analogical comparison. By his concept of TTPs, Leftow is trying to unpack how it is that the life of divine eternal being is both like and unlike temporal life. Second, as Ganssle observes in his introduction, this essay is important because it shows us how the life of a timeless God is not impoverished or restricted but is very rich and, indeed, is fully realized. It is the “richness of God’s life that requires him to be eternal.”⁹² Both of these arguments are consistent with the thesis of this dissertation.

B. Garrett DeWeese’s Defense of Omnitemporality

⁸⁹Emphasis mine. Again, I believe that Leftow is on target in his understanding of Boethius’s doctrine of divine eternity as duration without succession.

⁹⁰Gregory E. Ganssle, “Introduction,” in *God and Time: Essays on the Divine Nature*, ed. Gregory E. Ganssle and David M. Woodruff (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 11.

⁹¹Leftow, “The Eternal Present,” 42-43.

⁹²Ganssle, “Introduction,” 11.

In “Atemporal, Sempiternal, or Omnitemporal: God’s Temporal Mode of Being,” Garrett DeWeese argues that God is neither atemporal nor temporal (sempiternal); rather, he is omnitemporal. To be “temporal,” an object must be “in time” or more formally, and following McTaggart, it must possess either “a monadic A-property (of pastness, presentness, or futurity)” or stand “in a dyadic B-relation (of earlier than, simultaneous with, or later than).”⁹³ DeWeese believes that this view contrasts with that of Brian Leftow, who argues that a being is intrinsically timeless if and only if it does not “contain” or endure through time, so that events without duration are intrinsically timeless even if they are located in time. Thus, instantaneous events are timeless. DeWeese, on the other hand, claims that an entity or event is temporal if it is located in time, and this would include instantaneous events. In defense, he offers a spatial analogy: A point in geometry has no extension, but it does have location and exists in space. It would seem strange to say that it was spaceless even though it was located in space, for it is a spatial point. Similarly, it is possible to see an instantaneous event not as timeless but as a temporal point.⁹⁴

As we have seen before in the analytic discussions, *DeWeese defines atemporal as the opposite of temporality*; that is, something is atemporal if it has no A-properties and stands in no B-relations. Atemporal objects or beings also reflect three further characteristics: (a) they must be abstract since they can possess no temporal causal relations; (b) they most likely must exist necessarily as in the case of mathematical and logical entities; and (c) it is logically impossible that they change, since change entails

⁹³Garrett DeWeese, “Atemporal, Sempiternal, or Omnitemporal: God’s Temporal Mode of Being,” in *God and Time: Essays on the Divine Nature*, ed. Gregory E. Ganssle and David M. Woodruff (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 50.

⁹⁴DeWeese, “Atemporal, Sempiternal, or Omnitemporal: God’s Temporal Mode of Being,” 52.

temporality.⁹⁵

While it might appear attractive to describe God in terms of several characteristics of atemporality (such as being immutable, immaterial, and necessary), God cannot be atemporal, since this would prevent him from being a “concrete entity,” that is, a *relatum* in a causal relation. DeWeese believes that causation is a temporal relation and that no explanation of atemporal causation of a temporal effect has been given or likely can be.⁹⁶ But since the Christian faith describes God as actively bringing about effects in the world, traditional theists should reject the idea that God is atemporal.

On the other hand, DeWeese also argues that God cannot be either temporal or sempiternal since both share the property of contingency. This would make God a contingent being without necessary existence, a view that also falls far short of traditional theistic understanding of God.⁹⁷

What then is left? DeWeese argues for a third alternative: that God is “omnitemporal.” This means that God is metaphysically necessary and that his temporal properties are understood in reference to metaphysical time, over against physical time. Metaphysical time is God’s own time, and, since it stems from his mental life, it is as necessary as he is. Therefore, while physical time is contingent, metaphysical time is not.⁹⁸ An omnitemporal being, since he is not contingent, does not fall prey to the weakness of being temporal. However, since he can enter into causal relations with the created world, he can be both immanent and transcendent and not the abstract entity of an atemporal being. DeWeese cites many advantages of this view. God’s experience of succession in his mental states makes it easier to view him as a person. It permits God to

⁹⁵DeWeese, “Atemporal, Sempiternal, or Omnitemporal: God’s Temporal Mode of Being,” 52-54.

⁹⁶DeWeese, “Atemporal, Sempiternal, or Omnitemporal: God’s Temporal Mode of Being,” 57.

⁹⁷DeWeese, “Atemporal, Sempiternal, or Omnitemporal: God’s Temporal Mode of Being,” 55.

⁹⁸DeWeese, “Atemporal, Sempiternal, or Omnitemporal: God’s Temporal Mode of Being,” 56.

experience change in his relational properties (such as moving from wrath to grace). It makes better sense of the doctrine of providence and the efficacy of petitionary prayer. It allows for a defense of the relationship between divine foreknowledge and human free will. It permits a dynamic understanding of the perichoretic relationship within the Triune Godhead and makes it easier to understand the possibility of the Incarnation.⁹⁹

While he believes this model of omnitemporality is an improvement, he also acknowledges the “long and respectful pedigree” of the atemporal viewpoint and suggests that all discussions of God’s temporal mode of being be offered “in a spirit of humility, of faith seeking understanding.”¹⁰⁰ DeWeese’s article is important because, although it also confuses the traditional view with absolute timelessness (and therefore rejects it), it does reflect the growing position on the part of many in the most recent analytic discussions that something more than simple temporality is required.

C. Alan Padgett’s Critique of Retrocausation

In “Divine Foreknowledge and the Arrow of Time,” Alan Padgett considers and abandons the possibility of retrocausation, suggested in the scientific literature, as a solution to the problem of reconciling divine foreknowledge and human freedom. Retrocausation is “a complex event in which one event causes another event which is prior to its time” and involves “making the past what it was,” not changing the past, which Padgett believes is incoherent.¹⁰¹ If possible, the solution to the problem of divine foreknowledge and human freedom would be both elegant and simple. The free choice or actions of the creature could retrocause God to have--and to have always had--the belief that such choices or acts would be actualized.

⁹⁹DeWeese, “Atemporal, Sempiternal, or Omnitemporal: God’s Temporal Mode of Being,” 57.

¹⁰⁰DeWeese, “Atemporal, Sempiternal, or Omnitemporal: God’s Temporal Mode of Being,” 58.

¹⁰¹Alan Padgett, “Divine Foreknowledge and the Arrow of Time,” in *God and Time: Essays on the Divine Nature*, ed. Gregory E. Ganssle and David M. Woodruff (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 67.

Padgett argues that such retrocausation is impossible. It cannot occur in a timeless world, because causation necessarily involves temporal relations that do not exist in a timeless world. If time exists and the process view of time is true, retrocausation is impossible, because only the present exists; the past is unreal. This means only things in the present, or that will become so (say, as the future becomes the present) can act or be acted upon.¹⁰² The stasis view of time offers more difficulties because a number of the scientific equations used to describe the actions of the physical world appear to be reversible, and some models of world-lines suggest it might be possible to move backward in time. If so, retrocausation might be possible.

In response Padgett suggest three criteria for any world story that permits retrocausation: (a) time must be anisotropic, that is, able to run forward and backward; (b) the purported case of retrocausation must occur in a topologically “open” world-line, one which not only in fact, but even in principle, cannot be closed; and (c) temporal order and causal asymmetry must be ontologically genuine and not simply a matter of perspective.¹⁰³

Applying these criteria, Padgett concludes that retrocausation is also not possible on a stasis view of time. First, as Mellor suggests, “the direction of time is the direction of causation.” This would suggest that the idea of retrocausation implies a contradiction, for “When the arrow of time simply means the direction of causation, backward causation against the arrow of time is conceptually incoherent.”¹⁰⁴ Second, most understandings of the arrow of time involve an increase in entropy. Retrocausation would involve an increase in entropy from the future to the past. Since this seems impossible, so also does

¹⁰²Padgett, “Divine Foreknowledge and the Arrow of Time,” 67-68. It should be noted that Padgett does nuance his position. He admits that the past affects the present “but only through a causal chain, that is, only through *indirect* causes” (68; emphasis his).

¹⁰³D. H. Mellor, *Real Time* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 150; quoted in Padgett, “Divine Foreknowledge and the Arrow of Time,” 70.

¹⁰⁴ Padgett, “Divine Foreknowledge and the Arrow of Time,” 71.

retrocausation and Padgett concludes that philosophers and theologians should not look to scientific theories to reconcile the foreknowledge and freedom debate.¹⁰⁵

D. Dean Zimmerman on Intrinsic Change

In “God inside Time and before Creation,” Dean Zimmerman explores two metaphysical questions facing those who believe that God is temporal: First, does time necessarily involve intrinsic change? Second, was there a sufficient reason for God creating when he did.¹⁰⁶ In Zimmerman’s view, while both of these questions press hard against the idea of God being temporal and time having no beginning, they are not sufficient to refute divine temporality.

The first question poses a dilemma for the divine temporalist: Either the past is infinite or finite. If the former, then God’s life has extended over an infinite number of finite intervals. If the cosmos was created at a particular time, prior to that time God lived for an infinite period of time. But if being in time requires intrinsic change, God has been undergoing an infinite amount of change throughout his existence--which seems to be counter to even a soft view of God’s immutability.

If the past is finite, there is an additional dilemma: either God himself had a beginning, or, as Craig suggests, he was atemporal before creation and became temporal with creation as a consequence of his real relations with the temporal world. Zimmerman believes this set of dilemmas should encourage the temporalist to question whether being in time requires intrinsic change: “It seems coherent, then, to deny that time requires change and to suppose that God existed for an infinite stretch of dead time before creating.”¹⁰⁷

However, maintaining such a position immediately raises the second metaphysical

¹⁰⁵ Padgett, “Divine Foreknowledge and the Arrow of Time,” 71-72.

¹⁰⁶ Dean W. Zimmerman, “God inside Time and before Creation,” in *God and Time: Essays on the Divine Nature*, ed. Gregory E. Ganssle and David M. Woodruff (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 75.

¹⁰⁷ Zimmerman, “God inside Time and before Creation,” 81.

question probed by Zimmerman. It is not a new one. It was raised by Augustine and is commonly wielded against divine temporalists: If God is everlasting and his life is infinitely extended backward in time, why did he create the world when he did? In other words, the temporalist position appears to deny God the possibility of sufficient reason for creating the world at the moment that he did.¹⁰⁸

Zimmerman argues that the only way temporalist can meet this objection is to abandon the substantivist view of time in favor of a relational one. In substantivism, times are viewed as having an objective existence distinct from the events that occur at those times as manifested in the concept of "space-time." The relational view either identifies time with sets of simultaneous events or as marking a particular state of the world, but does not separate time from those events.¹⁰⁹

The adoption of substantivism leads to a dilemma for the divine temporalist: Either there was one partless period of time before creation or there were several periods. If there were several, the problem of the sufficient reason for creation reasserts itself. If there was one, then that extended, indivisible period of time seems self-contradictory.¹¹⁰

Drawing upon Swinburne, Zimmerman argues that a relational view of time relieves these difficulties by permitting a temporal duration without a means of dividing it since prior to the creation there would not be operative laws of nature by which such time could be divided up, measured, or distinguished.¹¹¹

Ganssle suggests that Zimmerman's discussion successfully defends the temporalist view by arguing that "God did not create when he did arbitrarily, and he did not

¹⁰⁸ Zimmerman, "God inside Time and before Creation," 81.

¹⁰⁹ Zimmerman, "God inside Time and before Creation," 85.

¹¹⁰ Zimmerman, "God inside Time and before Creation," 87.

¹¹¹ Zimmerman, "God inside Time and before Creation," 89. Zimmerman appeals to the line of argument found in Richard Swinburne, "God and Time," in *Reasoned Faith*, ed. Eleonore Stump (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 219, discussed in chapter 3.

have to exist through an infinite series of times changing intrinsically all the while.”¹¹² However, the matter is not so certain. One might question whether Zimmerman is consistently defending the temporalist position, since, in his final solution, he describes the time prior to creation as indivisible duration or what might easily be termed “duration without succession.” Interestingly, this is the classic formulation of the traditional doctrine of eternity. Thus, Zimmerman is much closer to Craig’s position or even Augustine’s view, rather than a purely temporalist one. His appeal to a relational view of time does not rescue him, for, as we shall see in chapter 5, Augustine himself held to a relational view of time, and yet he viewed God’s relationship to time as one of duration without succession.

E. William Lane Craig’s Defense of Newtonian Absolute Time and Lorentzian Relativity

In “The Elimination of Absolute Time by the Special Theory of Relativity,” William Lane Craig reasserts the viewpoint presented in *Time and Eternity*, arguing that Newton’s concept of absolute time was grounded in his theistic worldview and that Einstein’s Special Theory of Relativity did not disprove Newton’s theories.¹¹³ Craig also preserves the notion of absolute time by arguing for the Lorentz-Poincaré theory of relativity.¹¹⁴ Since absolute time is grounded in metaphysical time, one corollary of preserving Newtonian absolute time is that God must be temporal. In this case the converse is also true, that if God is temporal than absolute time exists and the Lorentz-Poincaré theory of relativity is correct. Thus, the preservation of absolute time is compatible with both general and

¹¹²Ganssle, “Introduction,” 13. Zimmerman’s essay is quite technical and far ranging and treats many subjects not included here. I am indebted to Ganssle’s summary in developing my own.

¹¹³William Lane Craig, “The Elimination of Absolute Time by the Special Theory of Relativity,” in *God and Time: Essays on the Divine Nature*, ed. Gregory E. Ganssle and David M. Woodruff (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 129-152. A parallel treatment is found in William Lane Craig, *Time and Eternity: Exploring God’s Relationship to Time* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2001), 32-66.

¹¹⁴Craig, “The Elimination of Absolute Time by the Special Theory of Relativity,” 136-140.

special relativity--once it is stripped of its positivist presuppositions.¹¹⁵

F. Edward Wierenga's Defense against Swinburne's Objections to Divine Timelessness

In "Timelessness out of Mind: On the Alleged Incoherence of Divine Timelessness," Edward Wierenga argues that movement toward the view that God is everlasting is primarily negative--that is, it centers on objections to divine eternity rather than reasons in favor of divine temporality. His essay takes aim at two objections raised against the Boethian view: (a) that a timeless God cannot be omniscient; and (b) that a timeless God cannot act in the world. The first objection is based on the premise that if God is omniscient, he should know everything we know. But since some of the things we know may temporally vary in truth value (like, "it is sunny today"), if God knows what we know, what he knows must similarly vary over time. Since that could not happen if God is timeless, he must not be omniscient. If he is omniscient, he must be temporal.

However, this argument, Wierenga observes, rests upon the assumption that if God is omniscient he knows everything we know. This premise ought to be challenged. For example, hardly anyone accepts the parallel claim for omnipotence, that if God is all powerful he can do everything we can do. Why, then, insist on the same for omniscience? Rather, Wierenga argues, we need "a convincing account of the objects of knowledge and belief, one according to which God's knowledge changes over time."¹¹⁶

This brings us to the second objection, that if God is timeless, he cannot perform actions which occur in time. Wierenga cites Aquinas's classic reply to this objection:

[J]ust as the intellect determines every other condition of the thing made, so does it prescribe the time of its making. . . even as a physician determines that a dose of medicine is to be drunk at such a particular time, so that, if his act of will were of itself sufficient to produce the effect, the effect would follow anew from his

¹¹⁵Craig, "The Elimination of Absolute Time by the Special Theory of Relativity," 146-147. Since I have already dealt with Craig's position in some detail, I will not comment further here.

¹¹⁶Edward R. Wierenga, "Timelessness out of Mind," in *God and Time: Essays on the Divine Nature*, ed. Gregory E. Ganssle and David M. Woodruff (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 156.

previous decision without any new action on his part. Nothing, therefore, prevents our saying that God's action existed from all eternity, whereas its effect was not present from eternity, but existed at that time when, from all eternity, He ordained it.¹¹⁷

Wierenga points out that Nicholas Wolterstorff rejects this view on the grounds that the temporality of any event God acts on infects God with temporality.¹¹⁸ Steven Davis objects to it on grounds that there exists no workable concept of atemporal causation.¹¹⁹ Wierenga believes both of these objectors tend to assert that “*something* is wrong with this picture, without saying precisely what it is.”¹²⁰ Wierenga prefers to address the two objections raised by Richard Swinburne because he believes Swinburne tries to identify what that “something” is.

Swinburne argues, as a matter of principle, that persons or things do not possess properties at instants, for if anything has a property then it has it for an interval of time: “A state of affairs must last for a period of time; it cannot occur at an instant. God cannot be omnipotent or omniscient just at an instant.” Since a timeless God is supposedly omniscient at an instant, timelessness is incoherent.¹²¹ Wierenga counters this argument by arguing that objects and persons do possess properties at instants:

Even if it cannot happen that an object is say, green, for *merely* an instant, I do not see why it could not be green for every instant included in any interval during which it is green. But, in the second place, from that fact that some apparent attributions of a property at an instant can be translated into talk of property

¹¹⁷Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*. 2.35.3; quoted in Wierenga, “Timelessness out of Mind,” 156.

¹¹⁸Nicholas Wolterstorff, “God Everlasting,” in *God and the Good*, ed. Clifton J. Orlebeke and Lewis B. Smedes (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 93; quoted in Wierenga, “Timelessness out of Mind,” 156.

¹¹⁹Stephen Davis, *Logic and the Nature of God* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1983), chap. 1; quoted in Wierenga, “Timelessness out of Mind,” 156.

¹²⁰Wierenga, “Timelessness out of Mind,” 157; emphasis his.

¹²¹Richard Swinburne, *The Christian God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 139 and “God and Time,” 216; quoted in Wierenga, “Timelessness out of Mind,” 158. In n. 19 (163), Wierenga reports that Swinburne concedes his argument does not work if eternity is not an instant.

possession over intervals, it does not follow that all such ascriptions can be similarly paraphrased away.¹²²

Swinburne's argument from instants falls short for two additional reasons. First, according to the eternalist position, God is omniscient *in eternity* and not in time, "so there is no interval of time nor instant of time such that, strictly speaking, God is omniscient *then*."¹²³ Second, the eternalist could respond by pointing out that "God is not omniscient at an instant" does not entail "God is not eternal":

There are three categories: instants of time, intervals of time, and eternity. The first two are kinds of time; the third is instead a "mode of existence" which includes a certain perspective on time. That God is not omniscient either for just an instant of time or for a temporal interval leaves it entirely open that he is omniscient in eternity.¹²⁴

The second objection relates to the question of God acting in time. On the basis of a causal model of time, Swinburne argues that both backward and simultaneous causation are impossible. Causes must precede effects in time. Therefore, if God brings out actions in the world he must be temporal. A timeless God cannot perform actions in time.¹²⁵

Wierenga's offers three arguments in response. First, Swinburne assumes that God's performing actions is an example of event causation rather than agent causation. However, God is an "*agent-cause*," and it is inappropriate to speak of agents, as we do of events, as being either prior to or after the events they cause.¹²⁶ Wierenga's second argument parallels his response to Swinburne's first objection:

The second obvious reply is to note that Swinburne's assumption that there are just three possibilities for the relation of a cause to its effect --prior to, simultaneous with, and later than--ignores an important alternative, namely, that a cause is *eternal* while its effect is *temporal*. Just as in his first objection, Swinburne assumes that if

¹²²Wierenga, "Timelessness out of Mind," 158; emphasis his.

¹²³Wierenga, "Timelessness out of Mind," 159; emphasis his.

¹²⁴Wierenga, "Timelessness out of Mind," 159-160.

¹²⁵Wierenga, "Timelessness out of Mind," 160.

¹²⁶Wierenga, "Timelessness out of Mind," 161.

God is omniscient that is *in time*, either at an instant or throughout the temporal duration--without admitting the alternative that God is eternally omniscient--so in this case, too, he assumes that the only way a cause can be related to its effect is *temporally*. Both assumptions thus fail to take seriously the idea of eternity as a distinct mode of existence.¹²⁷

From these and other considerations Wierenga concludes that the attempt to object to the doctrine of divine eternity on the basis of divine agency is unsuccessful. Thus "it is premature to put divine timelessness out of mind."¹²⁸

G. Gregory Ganssle's Defense of Divine Atemporality on the Basis of God's Mode of Knowledge as Direct Awareness

In "Direct Awareness and God's Experience of a Temporal Now," Gregory Ganssle seeks to move away from the Boethian discussion of the nature of God's timeless "fore"-knowledge as a defense of libertarian free will towards the mode of God's knowledge, or how it is that God knows what he knows.¹²⁹ Ganssle takes as his starting point William Alston's claim that God's knowledge does not involve beliefs but comes from absolute immediate awareness of all facts.¹³⁰ Ganssle offers two reasons why he believes Alston is correct that God's knowledge does not include beliefs. First, in God's mental life, beliefs would be superfluous. Second, as Alston points out, knowledge by direct awareness is simply a better mode of knowledge more suitable to a Perfect Being "because it is a direct and foolproof way of mirroring the reality to be known."¹³¹ Ganssle

¹²⁷Wierenga, "Timelessness out of Mind," 161; emphasis his.

¹²⁸Wierenga, "Timelessness out of Mind," 162.

¹²⁹Gregory E. Ganssle, "Direct Awareness and God's Experience of a Temporal Now," in *God and Time: Essays on the Divine Nature*, ed. Gregory E. Ganssle and David M. Woodruff (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 165-66. Ganssle thinks that most philosophers have thought much more about God's relationship to time than about the mode of God's knowledge, a situation that he believes will change as the discussion continues (180). I agree with this assessment and share his hope.

¹³⁰cf. William P. Alston, "Does God Have Beliefs" in *Divine Nature and Human Language: Essays In Philosophical Theology* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 178-93; referenced in Ganssle, "Direct Awareness and God's Experience of a Temporal Now," 166.

¹³¹Alston, "Does God Have Beliefs," 190; quoted in Ganssle, "Direct Awareness and God's Experience of a Temporal Now," 167.

goes on to argue that if the mode of God's knowledge is by direct awareness, then he must be atemporal, because "knowledge by direct awareness *cannot span time*."¹³²

Ganssle develops his argument on the assumption that God is temporal. If so, then God's temporal now must at least be analogous to our own. Minimally, this would require God's temporal experience to be sequential.¹³³ It would also mean that God's knowledge of the present must differ from his knowledge of the past and the future. If God is temporal, while his knowledge of the present can be immediate, his knowledge of past and future must be mediated in some way, since knowledge by direct awareness cannot span time. Therefore, if God is temporal he does not know all facts by direct awareness.¹³⁴ This conclusion is true whether one holds to an A-theory of time (or tensed theory, which claims that the present is a privileged temporal location) or B-Theory of time (a tenseless theory, which rejects the objective privileged position of the present).¹³⁵

One interesting consequence is that whether one has a tensed or tenseless view of time, if God is temporal but possesses knowledge by direct awareness, God still cannot know what is time it is:

The A-theory of time does not provide a way to allow God to be in time and have direct awareness of all facts (past, present and future). So whether the A-theory or the B-theory is true, if God's direct awareness can span time, God cannot experience a temporal now.¹³⁶

Since a temporal God can only have direct intuitive awareness of present facts, if the same mode of knowledge is to extend to all facts, God must be atemporal. Recognizing direct awareness as superior mode of knowledge, Ganssle believes, will encourage more

¹³²Ganssle, "Direct Awareness and God's Experience of a Temporal Now," 167; emphasis his.

¹³³Ganssle, "Direct Awareness and God's Experience of a Temporal Now," 168

¹³⁴Ganssle, "Direct Awareness and God's Experience of a Temporal Now," 169-71.

¹³⁵ Ganssle, "Direct Awareness and God's Experience of a Temporal Now," 173-178. My brief summary here does not do justice to Ganssle's extensive discussion of this point.

¹³⁶Ganssle, "Direct Awareness and God's Experience of a Temporal Now," 178.

philosophers to the view that God is atemporal:

Changing our minds about the mode of God's knowledge involves a smaller adjustment to our view than revising our position about whether God is in time. As more work is done about the mode of God's knowledge, more philosophers will become convinced that God's knowledge is in virtue of direct awareness of facts. In turn more philosophers will adjust their views about God's relation to time.¹³⁷

Whether Ganssle's optimism is justified remains to be seen. As I shall argue in chapter 6, I myself am convinced that this line of argument is correct and that reflection on God's mode of knowledge leads to the conclusion that God is eternal. This is because the notion of God's knowledge by direct awareness is another example of his plenitude. I also believe that Ganssle's treatment of the issue provides another example of how the attributes of God (in this case his omniscience and eternity) interpenetrate. Ganssle, together with Alston, has identified an important component of the discussion that needs to be further explored. One such investigation, which leads to opposite conclusion, is that of William Hasker.

H. William Hasker's Defense of Divine Temporality on the Basis of God's Mode of Knowledge as Direct Awareness

In "The Absence of a Timeless God," Hasker argues that if God's mode of knowledge is by direct awareness, then God must, of necessity, be temporal. This stems from Hasker's conviction that certain concepts of divine timelessness are incoherent. In this regard, Hasker is particularly interested in what he describes as "Anselm's Barrier":

According to Anselm it is improper, strictly speaking, to assign any location in the temporal continuum to God: "You were not, therefore, yesterday, nor will you be tomorrow, but yesterday and today and tomorrow you *are*. Indeed you exist neither yesterday nor today, nor tomorrow but are absolutely outside all time." This implies that while God knows temporal realities, his knowledge of them is not in time, and while God performs actions that have temporal consequences, the acts themselves are not temporal. We shall refer to this principle of Anselm's, which holds that God neither exists, nor acts, nor knows in time, as "Anselm's Barrier." . . . It needs to be said, however, that in spite of this Anselm did hold that

¹³⁷Ganssle, "Direct Awareness and God's Experience of a Temporal Now," 180.

God is in a certain sense present to temporal realities.¹³⁸

Hasker observes that many adherents of divine timelessness use “Anselm’s Barrier” as a solution to the problem of maintaining both divine foreknowledge and libertarian free will. Hasker turns first to Alston’s conception of God’s immediate or intuitive, knowledge of God, which he finds incoherent. A being who directly experiences temporal realities must experience them in temporal succession. But this is exactly what an atemporal being cannot do.¹³⁹

Hasker agrees that a strong case can be made for the mode of God’s knowing as absolute immediate knowledge.¹⁴⁰ The question is not whether this is the mode of God’s knowledge, but how would it be possible for an atemporal God to be directly aware of temporal realities. Hasker considers Stump and Kretzmann’s story of Aleph, in which Nabal, in his one-dimensional world, has difficulty comprehending Monica’s description of her three-dimensional world. Hasker finds this story lucid and enjoyable, but also weak and unconvincing:

[T]here is one disanalogy that effectively disqualifies the story from providing any sort of insight into the relationship between eternity and time. *Monica in the story fully shares in the single dimension that measures Nabal’s existence.* The single linear dimension of the world Aleph is only one of the three dimensions of her world, to be sure, but it *is* a dimension of her world, and there is nothing in the story that even suggests any sort of problem concerning her access to Nabal’s linear spatiality. But on the doctrine of timelessness, *God does not share in the temporal dimension of the created world*--to suppose that he does is to breach Anselm’s Barrier. It is, of course, precisely this that creates the problem, and there is nothing analogous to it in the story of Nabal and Monica. The question of how it is possible for an eternal God to be directly aware of temporal realities remains without an answer.¹⁴¹

¹³⁸William Hasker, “The Absence of a Timeless God,” in *God and Time: Essays on the Divine Nature*, ed. Gregory E. Ganssle and David M. Woodruff (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 183-84. Hasker’s citation of Anselm is taken from the *Proslogion*, Charlesworth translation (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1965), 141; emphasis his.

¹³⁹Hasker, “The Absence of a Timeless God,” 185.

¹⁴⁰Hasker, “The Absence of a Timeless God,” 185.

¹⁴¹Hasker, “The Absence of a Timeless God,” 189; emphasis his.

Having dispensed with Aleph, Hasker considers Ganssle's argument that a temporal God can only be immediately aware of present facts, with the consequence that a temporal God also cannot know what time it is. Hasker is sympathetic to this conclusion, but uncertain whether it is required by Ganssle's argument since it rests on the assumption that God's knowledge consists entirely of immediate awareness. In three times, $t1$, $t2$, $t3$ where the first is in the past, the second is in the present and the third is in the future, why could not God not *judge* that at a certain time, $t2$, that $t2$ is now present? If so, by making this judgment at $t2$, this time is distinguished from $t1$ and $t3$, and in making it God knows which moment is present:

I conclude, then, that Ganssle's argument does not quite accomplish what he intended, which was to show that a temporal God cannot have immediate awareness of past and future facts. It does show, however, that contrary to Alston's assertion, Alston's model of divine knowledge as consisting entirely of intuitive awareness cannot be applied to a temporal God. And that is no mean achievement!¹⁴²

However, Hasker counters that timeless intuitive knowledge is incoherent, for it would involve God having immediate awareness of some facts when they either no longer or do not yet exist. Since only existing facts can be known, it is impossible for God to have timeless intuitive knowledge of all facts. He formally summarizes this line of argument as follows:

1. If God has timeless immediate awareness of temporal objects, that awareness occurs at the times when those temporal objects exist.
2. At all times God is aware of everything that he is aware of at any time. Therefore,
3. If God has timeless immediate awareness of temporal objects, God has this awareness at times when the objects do not yet exist or no longer exist. But,
4. God does not have immediate awareness of temporal objects at times when those objects do not exist. Therefore,

¹⁴²Hasker, "The Absence of a Timeless God," 192; emphasis his.

5. God does not have timeless immediate awareness of temporal objects.¹⁴³

Hasker concludes that unless there is a way to avoid this argument, the prospects for timeless divine immediate awareness are grim. Hasker considers one possible solution provided by Anselm in his *Harmony of the Foreknowledge, the Predestination, and the Grace of God with Free Choice*:¹⁴⁴

For within eternity a thing has no past or future, but only a present; yet without inconsistency, in the dimension of time this thing was and will be. . . . However, although within eternity there is only a present, nonetheless it is not the temporal present, as is ours, but is an eternal present in which the whole of time is contained. For indeed, just as present time encompasses every place and whatever is in any place, so in the eternal present the whole of time is encompassed at once, as well as whatever occurs at any time. . . . For eternity has its own "simultaneity" wherein exist all things that occur at the same time and place and that occur at different times and places.¹⁴⁵

According to this position, temporal things do not simply exist for a brief duration, but endure in eternity. At the heart of Anselm's argument is a spatial analogy. Just as the present time embraces the existence of all things at every place, so also the eternal present encompasses the existence of all times. As Hasker comments, "The real existence of past and future events (though not, of course, their existence *in the temporal present*) is strongly affirmed."¹⁴⁶

Hasker admits that what he terms "Anselm's solution" does address many of the issue raised by his own argument against immediate awareness of a divine timeless being. Premise 1, of Hasker's argument,

1. If God has timeless immediate awareness of temporal objects, that

¹⁴³Hasker, "The Absence of a Timeless God," 195.

¹⁴⁴Hasker cites Delmas Lewis, "Eternity, Time, and Tenselessness," *Faith and Philosophy* 5 (1988): 75, as providing evidence that both Boethius and Aquinas held a similar position to that of Anselm ("The Absence of a Timeless God," 195).

¹⁴⁵Anselm, *The Harmony of the Foreknowledge, the Predestination, and the Grace of God with Free Choice*, in *Anselm of Canterbury*, ed. and trans. Jasper Hopkins and Herbert Richardson, 4 vols. (New York: Edwin Mellen, 1974-76), 2:189; quoted in Hasker, "The Absence of a Timeless God," 195.

¹⁴⁶Hasker, "The Absence of a Timeless God," 195; emphasis his.

awareness occurs at the times when those temporal objects exist.

assumes that temporal objects exist only for a brief period. Anselm's solution says that they endure in eternity. For the same reason, the force of Hasker's premise 4,

4. God does not have immediate awareness of temporal objects at times when those objects do not exist,

is simply false, given Anselm's assertion that such objects endure in eternity so that there is never a time when they do not exist. Since eternity has its own simultaneity, all temporal things coexist and are available for God's immediate awareness.¹⁴⁷

However, the problem with Anselm's solution, argues Hasker, is that it proves too much. According to Hasker, if Anselm's view is correct, then ordinary and everyday objects and events do not pass away but exist eternally and not simply "in the mind of God" but literally so. Hasker finds such "metaphysical extravagance" implausible.¹⁴⁸

Further, various defenders of timeless eternity such as Boethius and Stump and Kretzmann argue that the "moving and transitory moment" and "radically evanescent existence" of the temporal now is insufficient to place existence on a solid footing, thereby witnessing to both the value and the need for an eternal now that better provides such a metaphysical foundation. However, if Anselm's Solution is correct, such arguments lose their force, since all these allegedly wispy elements of temporal life turn out to have an existence as solid and eternal as that of God himself.¹⁴⁹ Similar considerations arising out of Anselm's Solution seem to be hard on the usefulness of the doctrine as a defense of libertarian free will. If nothing can or will be changed, because it all exists in eternity, this excludes alternative possibilities and leads to a determinism that presses hard on any free-

¹⁴⁷Hasker, "The Absence of a Timeless God," 195-196.

¹⁴⁸Hasker, "The Absence of a Timeless God," 196.

¹⁴⁹Hasker, "The Absence of a Timeless God," 197.

will defense of divine timelessness.¹⁵⁰

Hasker concludes by reasserting the argument that a timeless God cannot have knowledge of present-tense facts or know what time it is.¹⁵¹ While he admits that the difference in information content between a timeless and temporal description of the same event or experience is minimal, there is, nonetheless, something “perfectly definite and concrete” that a temporal being knows at the present time that is different from what he or she knows concerning the past or the future, and that “something” cannot be expressed from a timeless eternal perspective.

In support, Hasker considers the two-lines analogy of Stump and Kretzmann where the upper line represents eternity and the lower line, time.¹⁵² Hasker sees this analogy as illustrating the point that there are facts, such as the temporal present, which are necessarily invisible from the eternal so that there are “facts that are well known to human beings of which the eternal God knows nothing.” Given the stark choice between embracing divine timelessness and rejecting divine omniscience, Hasker thinks there is no contest and he waxes eloquent as he draws his conclusions:¹⁵³

I believe that these considerations add up to a compelling case for rejecting the doctrine of timelessness. It is with considerable relief--indeed, with a powerful sense of liberation--that we turn from the labyrinth of timelessness to the biblical conception of a God who has freely created our spatiotemporal world and involves himself actively in its history. . . . The ontological aloofness so prized by Parmenides, Plato, and Plotinus is altogether lacking from the biblical picture of God. . . . The climax of the story, of course, is the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ. This event is astonishing on any reading, but taken together with the doctrine of timelessness it comes close to being incoherent. On that account, *the eternal divine Logos is not aware of the events of “his” incarnate Life as they occur!* All of human history finds its focus in that incarnate Life--but for a timeless

¹⁵⁰Hasker, “The Absence of a Timeless God,” 197-198.

¹⁵¹Hasker had earlier criticized these arguments in *God, Time and Knowledge* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), but reconsiders them in “The Absence of a Timeless God,” 199-201.

¹⁵²Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann, “Eternity, Awareness, and Action,” *Faith and Philosophy* 9 (Oct 1992), 475; quoted in Hasker, “The Absence of a Timeless God,” 200.

¹⁵³Hasker, “The Absence of a Timeless God,” 201.

knower, the distinction of “before” and “after” the Messiah, so crucial for all the writers of the New Testament, has no significance whatsoever. On the Anselmian view the crucifixion, the siege of Troy, the betrayal of Judas, the day of Pentecost, and the Nazi holocaust *are all occurring now* in the eternity of God; nothing new ever happens, and nothing old, however worthy of being forgotten, is left behind. This, I submit, is profoundly inconsistent with the thoroughly temporal and historical outlook that permeates the biblical text. We may well be thankful that the biblical story has served as a corrective, and has prevented many, who embraced timelessness from suffering the distortion of the life of faith that could have resulted from the doctrine. Surely, however, the time has now come for a decisive break from a doctrine that has in it so much of pagan speculation and so little that is biblical and Christian. There are signs, indeed, that such a break has already begun.¹⁵⁴

Such rhetorical flourish carries with it a serious purpose to persuade. Hasker firmly believes that the doctrine of divine eternity is Greek, not Christian, that it is incoherent, and that a careful examination of the biblical testimony regarding divine action drives one to the divine temporalist position. However, his position is also based, in part, upon a misunderstanding of the nature of the traditional doctrine of eternity. It is not absolute atemporalism. It is duration without succession.

I. Paul’s Helm’s Defense of Genuine Dialogue with an Atemporal God

In “The Problem of Dialogue,” Paul Helm addresses under what conditions genuine dialogue can take place between a divine being and a human being and whether or not the divine being as atemporal, omniscient, or omnidetermining prevents the possibility of genuine dialogue.¹⁵⁵ Helm points out that such dialogue is dramatically portrayed in the Bible as God speaks with Abraham, Moses, Jonah, Hezekiah and others, and he develops his own defense of divine-human dialogue in contrast to the positions articulated by Alston

¹⁵⁴Hasker, “The Absence of a Timeless God,” 202; emphasis his. Including such a long citation is admittedly self-indulgent on my part, but such rapturous prose must be shared. Philosophy is too much hard work not to have some fun with it, and nothing is more pleasurable than to relish its cool refreshing streams of eloquence--which are far too infrequent!

¹⁵⁵Paul Helm, “The Problem of Dialogue,” in *God and Time: Essays on the Divine Nature*, ed. Gregory E. Ganssle and David M. Woodruff (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 207-219. Helm’s treatment in this volume is largely a response to an earlier essay by William P Alston, “Divine-Human Dialogue and the Nature of God,” in *Divine Nature and Human Language* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 144-161.

and Swinburne.

Alston argues that genuine dialogue occurs when two people are in a conversation where there is mutual openness and no “intentional effective control” of one party over the other as might be found in ventriloquism, computer programmed responses, and hypnotism.¹⁵⁶ This leads to Alston’s conclusion that there can be no genuine dialogue if one of the parties is an “omnideterminer.” Surprisingly, however, Alston does not view timeless omniscience as an overdeterminer, since being eternal removes the dimension of God’s knowing “in advance” what his dialogue partner will say and so does not qualify the mutuality between the parties necessary for genuine dialogue.¹⁵⁷

Swinburne, on the other hand, presents what Helm describes as an “attenuated” sense of God’s omniscience: God, though omniscient, does not possess the truth about future states that are not physically determined, not because they are not truths but simply because God has voluntarily chosen to surrender such knowledge in the interests of preserving and promoting his own freedom and that of others.¹⁵⁸ In dialogue, then, both the Swinburnian God (S-God) and the human partner are ignorant of the specification of the outcome of the dialogue. Therefore, neither is hampered in their actions by the knowledge that such a specification exists (even though the S-God has voluntarily forfeited knowledge of that specification).

Helm’s solution is twofold. First, he argues that Alston has misidentified the key factor in dialogue as *mutual* openness. Second, while rejecting Swinburne’s attenuated omniscience, he does agree that what preserves genuine dialogue is the possibility of a

¹⁵⁶Alston, “Divine-Human Dialogue,” 147-148; quoted in Helm, “The Problem of Dialogue,” 208.

¹⁵⁷Alston, “Human-Divine Dialogue,” 152; referenced by Helm, “The Problem of Dialogue,” 208; emphasis mine.

¹⁵⁸Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 176; quoted in Helm, “The Problem of Dialogue,” 215-16.

range of outcomes from the dialogue:¹⁵⁹

Genuine dialogue may occur when one of the partners in dialogue needs to know what the other partner already knows, including what the other partner already knows that the first partner will do, knowledge which can only be disclosed by that partner or his agent. Provided, that is, the partner is willing to disclose his knowledge. So I conclude that Alston has not shown that mutual open dialogue is possible between a timeless omniscient God and a human partner, but that this does not rule out divine-human dialogue of some kind or other under a wide variety of theological suppositions.¹⁶⁰

J. Thomas Senor on the Incompatibility of the Incarnation with Divine Timelessness

In “Incarnation, Timelessness, and Leibniz’s Law Problems,” Thomas Senor argues that the truth of the Incarnation, in which Christ himself was the bearer of temporal properties, provides a powerful *prima facie* argument against divine timelessness. Indeed he believes that the two are incompatible. Stated in a simplified but formal way his argument is as follows:

- (1) Jesus Christ was the bearer of temporal properties
- (2) No bearer of temporal properties is atemporal
- (3) Jesus Christ = God the Son (a divine person)
- (4) God the Son is not atemporal.¹⁶¹

Senor defends this view against the kind of accusation raised by Douglas Blount that Senor’s argument proves too much, since the form of his argument can also be used to prove that Jesus does not possess divine attributes that he is uncontroversially understood as holding (such as omniscience or omnipotence or omnipresence).¹⁶² Senor’s response is that atemporality is in a separate category. Possessing the forementioned properties does

¹⁵⁹Helm, “The Problem of Dialogue,” 216.

¹⁶⁰Helm, “The Problem of Dialogue,” 218.

¹⁶¹Thomas Senor, “Incarnation, Timelessness, and Leibniz’s Law Problems,” in *God and Time: Essays on the Divine Nature*, ed. Gregory E. Ganssle and David M. Woodruff (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 220-235; This essay develops material presented earlier in Thomas Senor, “Incarnation and Timelessness,” *Faith and Philosophy* 7 (April 1990): 149-64.

¹⁶²Senor and Blount did not consult the other’s chapter in the preparation of their respective essays; see Gregory Ganssle’s comment in his “Introduction,” 17.

not pose an intractable difficulty because, although it would certainly be unusual, there is nothing inherently impossible about a human being possessing them. However, the attribute of atemporality is different. While there is nothing in the observable properties of Jesus that require him to be omniscient, he is observed as being temporal:

Now we get a description of a person with a human body whose actions (both the acts and their consequences) are temporally ordered but who is nevertheless timeless. I say “both the acts and their consequences” because the Scriptures portray Jesus Christ as not simply a person who *brings about effects* that are in time, but as *a person who is in time*; so if we add atemporality to this portrait, we get a sketch that no one could possibly satisfy.¹⁶³

Senor admits that there are other attributes (such as incorporeality and impassibility), similarly problematic, which lend weight to the objection that his view proves too much. However he finds the “*qua*-move” (Jesus *qua* God and Jesus *qua* man) solution used by Blount and others to resolve the issue unsatisfactory.

First, if the *qua*-move is simply understood as saying “by virtue of” being divine Jesus is omnipotent, but “by virtue of” being human he is not, this neither solves the problem of the relationship between the two contrary assertions nor moves the discussion forward. Second, if the *qua*-clause is understood to be embedded in the sentence so that “Jesus *qua* human being” is temporal, but “Jesus *qua* the Second person of the Trinity” is not, this avoids the contradiction of the first case because the subjects of the two assertions are different. However, this interpretation seems more Nestorian than Chalcedonian, since it leaves us with two persons, one with a human nature and other with a divine. A third way to salvage the *qua*-move is to attach the *qua* to the properties so that the Redeemer is “omniscient *qua* God” but “limited in knowledge *qua* human being.” Senor finds this move both unsatisfying and costly since it leads to the unhappy alternative of either denying the Law of the Excluded Middle (it is not true that the Redeemer is either omniscient or not omniscient), or asserting a nominalism that denies that there are any properties such as

¹⁶³Senor, “Incarnation, Timelessness, and Leibniz’s Law Problems,” 224; emphasis his.

omniscience *simpliciter*.¹⁶⁴

K. Douglas Blount on the Compatibility of the Incarnation with Divine Timelessness

In “On the Incarnation of a Timeless God,” Douglas Blount addresses the arguments of Senor concerning the incompatibility of divine timelessness with the doctrine of the Incarnation.¹⁶⁵ He rightly clarifies what is involved in the Incarnation as articulated at Chalcedon, namely that the incarnate Christ consists of one person with both a human and divine nature, which are not to be viewed as changed, confused, divided, or separated, such that each of the two natures retains its distinctive character. This point is critical to his subsequent treatment.¹⁶⁶

Citing Stump and Kretzmann, he agrees that “whatever its internal difficulties may be, the doctrine of the dual natures provides *prima facie* grounds for denying the incompatibility of God’s eternity and God’s becoming man.”¹⁶⁷ This kind of defense, what Senor labels as the “*qua*-move,” Blount defends by pointing out how Senor’s objection proves too much:

It is important to notice that whatever problems the Incarnation poses for atemporalists, it poses them for temporalists as well. For, as Brian Leftow suggests, reconciling God’s timelessness with the Incarnation is no more difficult than reconciling God’s omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence or spacelessness with the Incarnation.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁴Senor’s extensive discussion of the three alternatives here briefly described is found in “Incarnation, Timelessness, and Leibniz’s Law Problems,” 228-233.

¹⁶⁵Douglas Blount, “On the Incarnation of a Timeless God,” in *God and Time: Essays on the Divine Nature*, ed. Gregory E. Ganssle and David M. Woodruff (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 236-248.

¹⁶⁶Douglas Blount, “On the Incarnation of a Timeless God,” 236-237.

¹⁶⁷Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann, “Eternity,” in *The Concept of God*, ed. Thomas Morris (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 245-46; quoted in Blount, “On the Incarnation of a Timeless God,” 238.

¹⁶⁸Blount, “On the Incarnation of a Timeless God,” 240. Blount is alluding to the discussion in Brian Leftow, *Time and Eternity* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 19.

For example, one could appeal to the fact that, since the Incarnate Christ was at one location but not at another, Christ *simpliciter* is not omnipresent or spaceless. But this flies in the face of the Nicene tradition as the following quotation from Athanasius suggests:

For [the Saviour] was not, as might be imagined, circumscribed in the body, nor, while present in the body, was he absent elsewhere; nor, while he moved the body, was the universe left void of his working and providence; but, thing most marvelous, Word as he was, so far from being contained by anything, he rather contained all things himself; and just as while present in the whole of creation, he is at once distinct in being from the universe, and present in all things by his own power--giving order to all things, and over all and in all revealing his own providence, and giving life to each thing and all things, including the whole without being included, but being in his own Father alone wholly and in every respect--thus, even while present in a human body and himself quickening it, he was, without inconsistency, quickening the universe as well, and was in every process of nature, and was outside the whole, and while known from the body by his works, he was none the less manifest from the working of the universe as well.¹⁶⁹

This viewpoint anticipates the later Chalcedonian formulation, which affirms that Christ possesses two natures, both of which retain their distinctive properties. Blount points out that arguments similar to the one that Senor has constructed against atemporality can be developed for omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence, and spacelessness--or even the necessary existence of the Son. Yet all Christian theists should insist that such arguments be rejected.¹⁷⁰

Blount also considers Senor's argument, based on kenotic Christology, that for God the Son to assume a human nature involves change and therefore mutability, and mutability entails temporal duration, so the Son cannot be atemporal.¹⁷¹ Blount responds by arguing that in assuming a human nature, the Son is assuming a nature accidental to himself--and, therefore, not one that requires intrinsic change. Thus there "seems to be no

¹⁶⁹Athanasius, "On the Incarnation of the Word," in *Christology of the Later Fathers*, ed. Edward R. Hardy and trans. Archibald Robertson (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954), 70-71; quoted in Blount, "On the Incarnation of a Timeless God," 241.

¹⁷⁰Blount, "On the Incarnation of a Timeless God," 242-243.

¹⁷¹Senor, "Incarnation and Timelessness," 247-249; summarized in Blount, "On the Incarnation of a Timeless God," 243.

reason for thinking that a timeless being could not possess a nature accidental to itself. So, pace Senor, that the Son assumes a human nature does not entail that the Son changes.”¹⁷²

Blount recognizes that simply parrying Senor’s arguments against the compatibility of divine timelessness and the Incarnation does not constitute a positive defense. He believes, however, that a “two-minds” view of the Incarnation, like that suggested by Thomas Morris, provides the elements necessary to develop such a positive defense:¹⁷³

In becoming incarnate, then, God the Son assumed not only a human body but also a human mind. Moreover, the Incarnate Son’s divine and human minds stand in what Morris describes as “an asymmetrical accessing relation” to one another so that, while the former enjoys complete access to the latter, the latter does not enjoy such access to the former. Or at least so says the two-minds view. So, while the Incarnate Son’s divine mind is omniscient, it does not follow that his human mind—lacking as it does, complete access to the contents of his divine mind—is also omniscient. . . . Moreover, on such a view, it appears to make perfectly good sense to say *both* that Jesus qua man lacks knowledge *and* that Jesus (*simpliciter*) lacks no knowledge. But, as things go here for omniscience, so they go for other divine attributes such as omnipotence, omnipresence, and spacelessness.¹⁷⁴

Blount sees several advantages to the “two-minds” model. First, it permits a straightforward reading of the biblical narratives without resorting to a kenotic Christology. Second, it is entirely consistent with the pronouncements of the Councils of Constantinople and Chalcedon, the former of which affirms that Jesus had a rational soul and that he possessed two wills, one human and one divine, and the latter of which affirms Jesus has two fully distinct natures, one human and one divine, in the one person of Christ. This provides the opportunity for at least a “rudimentary account of how a timeless being could be incarnate” by asserting that Jesus’s divine mind is timeless, but that his human mind is

¹⁷²Blount, “On the Incarnation of a Timeless God,” 244.

¹⁷³cf. Thomas V. Morris, “The Metaphysics of God Incarnate,” in *Trinity, Incarnation, and Atonement: Philosophical and Theological Essays*, ed. Ronald J. Feenstra and Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989); discussed in Blount, “On the Incarnation of a Timeless God,” 244-246.

¹⁷⁴Blount, “On the Incarnation of a Timeless God,” 244; emphasis his.

temporal.¹⁷⁵

IV. Conclusions from the Entire Survey of the Analytic Literature

A number of conclusions can be drawn from this survey of analytic literature.

First, most of the participants in this debate are of the opinion that the Bible itself says little or nothing about divine timelessness; that the biblical testimony is, at best, ambiguous as to whether God is everlasting or eternal; and that the issue needs to be settled on philosophical rather than exegetical grounds. This is true even of participants like Craig and Helm, who are much more positive on the question of the biblical testimony regarding divine eternity. On the other side, Hasker and Wolterstorff are convinced that the biblical testimony strongly favors, if it does not require, divine temporalism.

Second, the analytic discussion of eternity seems to assume a basic incompatibility (sometimes by definition) between the temporal and the eternal. These are different modes or dimensionalities between which a great gulf is fixed, which either cannot be bridged or can be bridged only with great difficulty. This is true even of those like Stump and Kretzmann and Brian Leftow, who try to bridge that gap either by ET-simultaneity (Stump and Kretzmann) or the “Zero Thesis” (Leftow).

Third, most of the participants have assumed that the traditional doctrine of eternity should be understood as absolute timelessness. As we shall see in chapter 5, the actual position is that of “duration without succession.” Some, like Stump and Kretzmann and Leftow have taken a more nuanced position that more closely represents the Christian tradition. They have been strongly criticized in the literature, although not necessarily because of their fidelity to the traditional view.

Fourth, the discussion has moderated to a certain degree. While the first generation was strongly defensive of the view that God is everlasting, and equally negative toward

¹⁷⁵Blount, “On the Incarnation of a Timeless God,” 245.

any attempt to move towards atemporal eternity (with the strong exceptions of Helm and Stump and Kretzmann), more recent discussions have been increasingly open to some form of divine eternity (Yates, Leftow) or the need for some kind of mediating position (Padgett, Craig, DeWeese). Thus Padgett wants to see God as extra-temporal or “relatively timeless,” possessing a timeline that interacts with but transcends our own. Craig wants to see God as atemporal prior to creation and temporal after it. DeWeese wants to speak about the “omnitemporality” of God.

Fifth, the analytical approach to the subject, while it has much to commend it as it attempts to explore issues more precisely, has had the unfortunate effect of largely rendering “eternity” in abstract terms like “timelessness,” which have little to do with the traditional doctrine, and “time” in terms of modern notions of metrics. Further, it has been reluctant to entertain (and indeed has been quite critical of) more analogical approaches to the question, such as that provided by Stump and Kretzmann and Leftow.

Sixth, appeals to Einsteinian relativity theory for conceptualizing how an eternal being such as God could relate to a temporal world, while popular in the first and second generation discussions (Stump and Kretzmann, Leftow, Padgett), have become considerably less frequent. This may be due, in part, to their being credibly chastened by Craig’s extensive treatment of the subject. However (and here I state my opinion without the time to argue it), I find Craig’s rejection of Einsteinian relativity in favor of Lorentzian relativity a rather radical solution. Craig criticizes Einstein for rejecting Newtonian absolute time simply on the basis of chosen philosophical presuppositions. However, it is not clear to me that Craig is not rejecting Einstein’s STR for similar chosen theological considerations. His solution, rehabilitating Lorentzian relativity in order to preserve Newtonian absolute time and divine temporalism, seems much more radical than the circumstances warrant. In my opinion, the connection between relativity and eternity remains a subject that deserves further consideration, but cannot be undertaken here.

CHAPTER 5

Survey of the History of the Doctrine

I. Introduction

A. Eternity and Faith Seeking Understanding

It is necessary to understand the history of the doctrine of divine eternity in order to delineate the relationship between the biblical and philosophical concerns out of which it developed. As previously stated, the development of this doctrine is an example of faith seeking understanding. As such, theological issues arising out of the biblical text are articulated in accordance with available conceptual models. Thus, the use of Greek philosophical models is in itself neither good nor bad but inevitable, given the intellectual milieu of the early and medieval Fathers. Obviously, the end product ought to be carefully reviewed and purged of foreign elements. However, as we examine the history of doctrine, it is clear that rumors of the death of Christian doctrine at the hands of Greek philosophy have been greatly exaggerated.

B. The Question of Hellenism

Adolph von Harnack and Albrecht Ritschl inaugurated the drive to dehellenize the Christian faith. Harnack accused the Apologists of turning Christianity into “a deistical religion for the whole world,” while Ritschl judged that the Apologists reduced the Christian conception of God to “a metaphysical idol.”¹ Pannenberg disagrees. He argues that the Apologists “did not link up with the variously styled philosophical doctrines of

¹See Adolf von Harnack, *The History of Dogma*, trans. Neil Buchanan, 7 vols. (Boston: Brown, Little & Co., 1897-1900; reprint, Russell and Russell, 1958), 2:224; and Albrecht Ritschl, *Theologie und Metaphysik* (Bonn, 1887): 20; both quoted in Wolfhart Pannenberg, “The Appropriation of the Philosophical Concept of God as Dogmatic Problem of Early Christian Theology,” in *Basic Questions in Theology* (London: S.C.M., 1971), 2:119-183.

God without examining them, but with well-aimed judgment, chose the form of doctrine that came closest to the Christian message.”² As examples, Pannenberg appeals to the commitment of Tatian, Theophilus of Antioch, Irenaeus, and Justin to the Christian doctrines of a personal God, creation *ex nihilo*, and the resurrection.³

What Pannenberg asserts of the early Apologists remains true for the later Fathers. Most of these theologians were keenly aware of, and remarkably sensitive to, the divergence of Greek philosophy and Christian doctrine, and, almost without exception, consistently asserted the truth claims of the latter over the former. The doctrines of God’s aseity, immutability, simplicity, and eternity that inform God’s relationship to time in the history of Christian doctrine stem, first of all, from concerns that arise out of the biblical text, not out of philosophy, although they found expression, elaboration, (and sometimes unfortunate enhancement) in formally similar concepts found in Parmenides, Plato, and Aristotle. However, we ought not interpret that influence as a Greek tail wagging the Christian dog.

If we understand the legitimate FSU concerns that underlie these early theological formulations, it becomes clear that there is little need to “dehellenize” early Christian doctrine in order to recover some small kernel of Christian truth. It is neither charitable nor fair to characterize patristic and medieval theology as largely a Greek wolf dressed up in Christian sheepskin. Instead, I believe the metaphors should move in the opposite direction. We should be seeking to remove the Greek topsoil of patristic theology in order to uncover the bedrock of biblical truth that found expression in Greek categories. We should see the history of Christian doctrine as a legitimate Christian enterprise even when the content is articulated in Greek language and conceptual models.

²Pannenberg, “The Appropriation of the Philosophical Concept of God,” 177-178.

³Pannenberg, “The Appropriation of the Philosophical Concept of God,” 178.

C. The Question of Hellenism and the Analytic Debate

However, most of the analytic literature moves in the opposite direction. As noted in chapter 1, William Kneale, an early contributor to the discussion, sees the doctrine of divine timelessness as “a dubious partner for theology,” since he believes it arises almost entirely out of Parmenides.⁴ Nelson Pike questions its inclusion in Christian theology and suspects that the doctrine of divine timelessness arose “because Platonic thought was stylish at the time. . . . Once introduced it took on a life of its own.”⁵ In his “God Everlasting,” Nicholas Wolterstorff is equally critical of the Hellenistic origin of divine eternity although he has more recently tempered this conclusion.⁶ Likewise, Alan Padgett states explicitly that “the Semitic peoples. . . did not have a notion of timeless eternity.”⁷

D. The Analytic Debate and the Theological Tradition

The majority of those engaged in the modern analytic debate are committed to a view of absolute timelessness, which posits a complete incompatibility between the temporal and the eternal. What is eternal cannot be temporal, and what is temporal cannot be timeless. Further, the modern debate holds that absolute timelessness is rooted in Greek philosophy, which was unwittingly embraced by early Christian theologians.

Surprisingly, however, it is very difficult to find such an absolute view of timelessness in Greek philosophy and almost impossible to do so within the Christian tradition. The traditional view of divine timelessness from Origen to Post-Reformation Reformed Orthodoxy (hence PRRO) is that God has duration without succession. This

⁴William Kneale, “Time and Eternity in Theology,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society for the Systematic Study of Philosophy* 61 (1961): 107.

⁵Nelson Pike, *God and Timelessness* (New York: Schocken Books, 1970), 189-190.

⁶cf. Nicholas Wolterstorff, “God Everlasting” in *God and the Good*, ed. Clifton J. Orlebeke and Lewis B. Smedes (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1975), 181. He tempers his judgment in “Unqualified Divine Temporality,” in *God and Time: Four Views*, ed. Gregory E. Ganssle (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 210.

⁷Alan Padgett, *God, Eternity and the Nature of Time* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1992), 38.

position does not forbid interaction between the temporal and the eternal, because the primary concern of the theological tradition is not the relationship between time and timelessness, but between that which endures and that which passes away.

While there is an echo of Hellenism in the theological tradition, it is not a notion of absolute timelessness, but rather the Platonic notion that time is the “moving image of eternity,” the mutable reflection of that which endures. The contrast in the Greek tradition, as in the Christian tradition, is between mutation and non-mutation, between what abides and the temporal flux. For Plato, this was the realm of the Forms and *Nous*. For Christians, according to the biblical testimony, it is that which abides forever and without change, in whom there is no shadow of turning, and it is personified in the one who declares the end from the beginning, the one who bears the title of Alpha and Omega, the one who was, who is, and who is to come, who is the great self-sufficient and self-existent I AM, upon whom all things depend and who depends upon nothing--namely God himself.

Thus, while philosophical issues may have helped frame the questions addressed by the early Fathers, the answers find their source in the biblical testimony concerning God as the one who *endures*. In *neither* the Greek nor Christian tradition is the notion of timelessness *primarily* in view.

What, then, accounts for the analytic insistence on absolute timelessness? Perhaps it reflects a preoccupation with the nature of time consistent with the current scientific milieu. There is nothing inherently wrong with this, and it is certainly appropriate for Christian philosophers and theologians to wring out the implications for the Christian faith of concepts arising out of new scientific and philosophic investigations of time. The need for FSU arises anew and with fresh challenges in every generation and cultural context. The emphasis on time in the analytic debate appears to reflect a modern scientific context rather than a classical philosophical one, and one which concentrates on issues arising out of Newton and Einstein rather than Plato and Aristotle. Fair enough.

What is not so fair is that the modern discussion seems to recast the traditional debate of God's relationship to the creation in modern rather than classical terms and then criticizes the traditional view for holding positions that it does not, in fact, hold. In short, it posits a notion of absolute timelessness, argues that this is the view held by classical Greek thought, and assumes that classical Christian thought borrowed divine timelessness from the Greeks. Since absolute divine timelessness is incompatible with the Christian faith (because it prevents God from being a person, interacting with the world, answering prayer, or knowing what time it is "now"), it ought to be rejected in favor of a view that places God on a temporal timeline, which permits him to be and to do all of these things.

Setting up the problem in this way is both anachronistic and misleading. A more nuanced consideration of the historic material leads to three conclusions: First, neither the mainline Greek philosophical tradition nor the mainline Christian theological tradition emphasizes an absolute concept of divine timelessness as defined in the modern analytic discussion. Second, while the Classical theologians draw upon Greek models and concepts, their use of them is neither slavish or uncritical but is constantly tempered by biblical considerations. Third, the consistent mainline theological understanding of divine eternity is not absolute timelessness, but non-successive duration, a position which, I believe, avoids many of the criticisms raised against absolute atemporal eternity.

II. Concepts of Eternity Arising out of Greek Thought

A. Parmenides' Being as the Eternal Object of True Knowledge

The general consensus among scholars is that the origin of timeless eternity should be ascribed to the pre-Socratic philosopher-poet, Parmenides. The critical passage is found in fragment 8, line 5 of his poem, "The Way of Truth," where Parmenides describes ultimate Being as follows: "Nor was it ever, nor will it be, since it is now, all together,

one, continuous.”⁸ Richard Sorabji points out that the negative of “was” and “will be” deny normal temporal duration and thus presents some concept of eternity--but what concept is difficult to discern.⁹ Part of the difficulty is that Parmenides’ work is highly fragmentary (150 lines!), and its interpretation is, therefore, strongly disputed.¹⁰

According to David Furley, Parmenides’ poem asserts that the object of true knowledge can be perceived only by reason, that it “exists and must exist” and that it possesses the following properties: (a) it is without beginning and indestructible, without growth or decay;¹¹ (b) since what exists can neither be added to or subtracted from, no distinctions can be made within it. Since being does not admit of degree, the object of true knowledge must be undifferentiated and indivisible; (c) since it is subject to neither formation or decay, the being which is the object of true knowledge must be immutable; and (d) (in a section that is particularly fragmentary and difficult to interpret) the object of true knowledge must be “perfect from every angle, equally matched from the middle in every way, like the mass of a well-rounded ball” (Fr. 8.42-44). Furley’s best guess is that

⁸Quoted in Richard Sorabji, *Creation, Time and the Continuum: Theories in Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (London: Duckworth, 1984), 99.

⁹Sorabji, *Creation, Time and the Continuum*, 99. John C. Yates agrees with Sorabji that the negation of “was” and “will be” reflects a rejection of normal temporal duration in favor of some alternative model of eternity, and that the precise concept is difficult to determine (*The Timelessness of God* [Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1990], 12). Indeed, in the scholarly literature there is no consensus as to the meaning of this phrase. Sorabji considers eight different interpretations of them! (99-108). As he notes: “The difficulties in understanding are not surprising, given that we have here a poem, recording the words of a goddess, composed by a philosopher struggling with novel ideas, written at the dawn of Western philosophy, and transmitted via divergent manuscripts” (128).

¹⁰Yates sees the varied interpreters of Parmenides as falling into two groups: a minority who views the fragment as referring to immutable everlasting duration and a majority who view the second part of the quotation as denying all temporal distinctions. Yates leans toward the second view, although he admits there is not much to go on (*The Timelessness of God*, 12). In a footnote on the same page, Yates agrees with J. Hintikka’s comment that “Surely such a sophisticated idea (as atemporal existence) must in any case have developed by stages from something more concrete, such as the idea of omnitemporal existence” (Hintikka, *Time and Necessity*, [Oxford: Clarendon, 1973], 84).

¹¹David J. Furley, “Parmenides of Elea,” in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (New York: Collier MacMillan Publishing Co., 1972): 6:49.

the simile of the ball points to the perfection of the object of true knowledge, which appears complete and unchanging, no matter from what direction and perspective it is viewed.¹²

Kneale agrees that the Greek source of the eternity doctrine is Parmenides but believes that Parmenides's most important contribution is his concept of a mode of existence that is without succession and that denies the distinctions of past, present, and future.¹³ Padgett also recognizes that the interpretation of Parmenides is disputed, but believes we can attribute to him the "discovery" of "a timeless notion of eternity."¹⁴ Padgett points out that Parmenides speaks of Being as "unregenerated and imperishable, entire, unique, unmoved and perfect; it never was nor will it be, since it is now all together, one indivisible."¹⁵ Thus, while Parmenides provides a relative concept of timeless eternity, his notion falls short of the more absolute, "instantaneous," and non-durational concept found in later philosophers and theologians.¹⁶

In contrast, Sorabji sees Parmenides as providing a more absolute view of timelessness which became downgraded in subsequent discussions, particularly by Plato who "clouded the issue by placing alongside the implications of timelessness more phrases implying everlasting duration than can conveniently be explained away. This made it

¹²Furley, "Parmenides of Elea," 49. The crisp summary of Parmenides's position given here is heavily indebted to Furley's article.

¹³Kneale, "Time and Eternity in Theology," 87-88.

¹⁴Padgett, *God, Eternity, and the Nature of Time*, 41. Padgett outlines the controversy, specifically considering the objections raised by Malcolm Schofield and John Whittaker, who argue that Being for Parmenides is everlasting, not eternal (39-40).

¹⁵Parmenides, Fragment 8, Lines 1-9, translated Coxon; quoted in Padgett, *God, Eternity and the Nature of Time*, 38.

¹⁶Padgett, "God, Eternity and the Nature of Time," 40. Padgett appeals to John Whittaker's discussion found in *God, Being and Time* (Oslo: In Aedibus Universitetsforlaget, 1971), 16-32. It is interesting to note that Sorabji is not convinced by Whittaker's argument and still believes it possible that Parmenides held to a non-durational concept of eternity, but he is distinctly in the minority. I agree with Padgett's assessment regarding Parmenides. However, my historical treatment questions whether later philosophers and theologians within the tradition advocate an instantaneous and nondurational concept of eternity.

necessary for Plotinus to make a decision and his decision was in favor of timelessness.”¹⁷ Despite Sorabji’s claim, the wide variety of opinion suggests that no clear case can be made for Parmenides’s providing a non-durational, point-like notion of absolute timelessness.

B. Plato’s *Timaeus* and Time as the “Moving Image of Eternity”

Despite differences in interpreting Parmenides, most philosophers agree that Parmenides influenced Plato’s concept of timeless (but durational) eternity as described in the section on the creation of time found in the *Timaeus*:

When the father and creator beheld the creature which he had made moving and living, the created image of the eternal gods, he rejoiced and in his joy determined to make the copy still more like the original. And as this was an eternal living being, he sought to make the universe eternal, so far as might be. Now the nature of the original living being is eternal, but to bestow this attribute in its fullness on a creature was impossible. He resolved therefore to make a moving image of eternity, and when he set the heaven in order, he made an everlasting image which moves according to number while eternity itself rests in unity. This is what we have called time. For there were no days and nights and months and years before the heaven was created, but when he constructed the heaven he devised them also. They are all parts of time, and “was” and “will be” are created species of time which we in our carelessness mistakenly apply to eternal being. For we say that it was, is, and will be; but in truth “is” applies to it, while “was” and “will be” are properly said of becoming in time. They are motions, but that which is immovably the same for ever cannot become older or younger in time. Nor can it be said that it came into being in the past or has now come into being or will come into being in the future, nor yet that it is subject to any of those conditions which becoming has attached to the moving objects of sense.¹⁸

While everyone agrees that Plato references Parmenides at this point, the question of precisely how he does so is “only a little less confusing” than the interpretation of Parmenides himself.¹⁹ However, Frank Herbert Brabant points out that the Platonic doctrine of the forms provides three distinct notions of eternity: (a) what is *unchanging* and never alters; (b) what is *perfect* and to which nothing can be added; and (c) what is *everlasting* and provides the real cause of things. All of these are “inextricably interfused”

¹⁷Sorabji, *Creation, Time and the Continuum*, 108.

¹⁸*Timaeus*, 37E6-38A6; quoted in Kneale, “Time and Eternity in Theology,” 92-93.

¹⁹Yates, *The Timelessness of God*, 12.

in the spiritual world of the forms.²⁰

First, the forms as *unchanging* reflect Plato's response and assent to Parmenides' criticism of the flux of Heraclitus. As Socrates argues in the dialogue *Cratylus*, there must be something stable, otherwise knowledge itself would be impossible.²¹ According to Parmenides, this stability bears the stamp of eternity. Second, the *perfection* of the forms also entails their immutability and eternity. The ideals of beauty and justice cannot be added to or subtracted from without causing them to lose their identity as forms. Similarly, divinity suggests eternity, as Plato notes in this passage from the *Republic*:

Things which are at their best are also least liable to be altered or discomposed; when healthiest and strongest, the human frame is least liable to be affected by meats and drinks. . . . Everything which is good. . . is least liable to suffer change from without. . . God therefore can hardly be compelled by external influence to take many shapes. . . . If He change at all, He can only change for the worse, for we cannot suppose Him to be deficient either in virtue or beauty" (as would be the case if He could change for the better).²²

Third, the forms are *everlasting* in the sense of being the cause and sustainer of all things. Without them, according to Plato, nothing exists, at least in the way we know them.²³

In order to explain how it is that the world of particulars are eternally generated from the realm of the Forms, Plato supplied a mythological account of the Forms in the process of creation in the *Timaeus*, a book whose interpretation has always been disputed and which appears to be more allegorical than expositional in nature. It also sets forth, through the instrumentality of Plato's theory of Perfect and Imperfect motion, a kind of

²⁰Frank Herbert Brabant, *Time and Eternity in Christian Thought* (London: Longman, Green and Co., 1937), 6-7. The three ways are given in the order of his discussion of them on pages 7-21, rather than the order of his listing on p. 6. The italics are provided by him in the main body of his discussion.

²¹Brabant, *Time and Eternity in Christian Thought*, 7-8.

²²*Republic*, iii.64, trans. Jowett; quoted in Brabant, *Time and Eternity in Christian Thought*, 8.

²³As Brabant notes, "The Forms give reality to the particulars of sense-perception in three ways, by *parousia* (presence with them), by *koinonia* (by which the particulars participate in the Forms), and by *mimesis* (according to which the Forms are models which the particulars imitate)" (*Time and Eternity in Christian Thought*, 8-9); I have transliterated the Greek terms that Brabant provides in his text.

cosmology which, in turn, “explains” why the world should be a “copy” by itself reflecting the structure of the Platonic theory of Forms. The most perfect motion for Plato is that of a circle because it is the most uniform, involves the least amount of change, is always progressing, and yet is also always returning to itself. In the cosmology of the *Timaeus*, this perfect motion is represented by the motion of the fixed stars which is “single and undivided” and located in the highest circle, known as the Circle of the Same. It is contrasted with the Circle of the Other, which reflects the earthly realm of change and flux. Time, “the moving image of Eternity,” is caused by the planets which exist between the two circles and are influenced by both so that their motion, while not uniform, is predictable.²⁴ Unsurprisingly, says Brabant, Plato is more interested with the way that time reflects order rather than flux. It is the “moving image of eternity.” As the *moving* image of eternity it does reflect change. But as the *moving image of eternity* it reflects the stability of the realm of the eternal and unchangeable Forms.²⁵

Padgett follows John Whittaker’s interpretation of the *Timaeus*, arguing that Plato distinguishes between eternity (*aion*) and Measured Time (*chronos*). This, he says, is what enables Plato to say that “time is the moving image of eternity.”²⁶ Yates, however, dismisses both the minority position, which argues that Plato views the eternity of the Forms as simply everlasting duration, and the majority view, which insists that the Forms exist “above succession” in a timeless eternity.²⁷ Instead he follows R. D. Mohr who

²⁴Brabant, *Time and Eternity in Christian Thought*, 18.

²⁵Brabant, *Time and Eternity in Christian Thought*, 21.

²⁶See Padgett’s brief discussion of Whittaker in *God, Eternity and the Nature of Time*, 40. Sorabji considers Whittaker’s argument but is not convinced that Parmenides and Plato did not hold to a durationless concept of eternity (*Time, Creation and the Continuum*, 107, 111-112). Recall that Padgett distinguishes between God’s eternal time (which is unmeasurable) and creational time (which is). If Whittaker’s interpretation is correct, Whittaker provides support for the distinction Padgett desires to make.

²⁷Yates understands Sorabji to take a more moderate form of this position by arguing that Plato permitted the two senses of eternity to coexist in his discussion without offering resolution. Sorabji, *Time, Creation and the Continuum*, 111; referenced in Yates, *The Timelessness of God*, 14.

argues that Plato's Forms and time share the same sense of eternity:

They both fall outside the category of things which it is intelligible to make temporal judgments about dates and duration. Since they are standards (ontologically) of measurement, they cannot be subject to measurement.²⁸

Yates concludes that Plato did not possess a "full blown" model of timelessness (*totum simul*) but still insists that the Platonic model drives a wedge between eternity and time:

[T]he ingredients for a **theological** doctrine of eternity would seem to make there [sic] first appearance for Western thought in this Greek thinker. Whether or not Plato intended it, the concept of total existence without succession is not difficult to read into the *Timaeus*. The other vital ingredient is that this non-durational entity be conceived of as living. . . . More important than these specifics is the shape of the Platonic world view itself. It is Plato who raises for Western philosophy and theology what John Passmore has celled [sic], "the two worlds argument". . . . [T]he question of the logical possibility of a causal relationship between the "two worlds" is a central difficulty for any theistic system which would maintain that God is timeless **and** that he acts in some way in the world.²⁹

To summarize, there is little question that Plato influences later discussions of God's relationship to time. However, we do not find in Plato an absolute non-durational concept of eternity, one which would forbid relations between the temporal and the eternal as in the modern discussions. On the contrary, the forms endure and they are present to the temporal realm where "time is the moving image of eternity," and where time serves as the measure of change and is itself merely mutation or succession.

C. Aristotle, the *Physics*, and "Activity without Change"

According to Brabant, Aristotle makes three significant contributions to the nature of eternity: a "distinction, a definition, and a metaphor."³⁰

The *distinction* involves the difference between movement (*kinesis*) and activity (*energeia*). All movement involves change, but there can be such a thing as activity without movement. For example, the rate of movement (fast or slow) cannot be measured for the

²⁸R. D. Mohr, *The Platonic Cosmology* (Leiden: Brill, 1985), 70-71; summarized in Yates, *The Timelessness of God*, 14.

²⁹Yates, *The Timelessness of God*, 15-16; boldface emphasis his.

³⁰Brabant, *Time and Eternity in Christian Thought*, 22.

state of pleasure, since pleasure is a spiritual activity, or state of being, which, while it lasts, has nothing to do with change. It is an activity without movement.

The notion of activity without change is central to Aristotle's concept of divine eternity. While we can experience activity without change to some limited degree, God alone reflects complete unchanging activity (and thus, for example, unbroken pleasure).³¹ This is further reflected in Aristotle's *definition* of God's eternal activity as *noesis noeseos*, "the thinking of thought," by which God perfectly possesses all knowledge, including knowledge of the world as he contemplates his own mind or thought. The concept of eternal and unchangeable activity is also preserved in the *metaphor* of God as the First Mover which explains how God can influence the world without being changed by it, namely that he "attracts the universe ὡς ἐρώμενον τι, as a beautiful face or statue attracts the observer."³²

According to Padgett, Aristotle, like Plato, has a timeless concept of eternity, although there is little discussion of timelessness in his writings.³³ Yates agrees that the God of Aristotle is durational, which he supports by appealing to the *Metaphysics*:

It is a way of life like the best we ever have for a short time. For he is always (*aei*) in that state, which for us is impossible. . . . If, then, God is always (*aei*) in that good state in which we are sometimes (*pote*). . . . God's self-dependant [sic] actuality is a life most good and everlasting (*aidios*). We say then that God is a living being, everlasting (*aidios*) and most good, so that life and continuous, everlasting (*suneches, aidios*) *aion* belong to him. For that is what God is.³⁴

While he cites no more examples from Aristotle than does Padgett, Yates believes that Aristotle is too quickly passed over in historical surveys, especially in light of his

³¹Brabant, *Time and Eternity in Christian Thought*, 22. In presenting this view, Brabant points to Aristotle's discussion of pleasure in Book Ten of the *Ethics*.

³²Brabant, *Time and Eternity in Christian Thought*, 23-24.

³³Padgett, *God, Eternity and the Nature of Time*, 41-42.

³⁴Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 12.7.1072b13-1073a13. Taken from Sorabji, *Time, Creation and the Continuum*, 127; quoted in Yates, *The Timelessness of God*, 17-18.

importance to later medieval theological discussions.³⁵ Yates argues that Aristotle carries the discussion forward in three ways: First, while the deity of Aristotle is not timeless, his concept of deity as a perfect substance (which is both impassible and immutable) and his notion of the Unmoved Mover (which provides the teleological causation of the cosmos) are certainly consistent with a timeless deity. Second, his description of the relationship between the higher order of reality to the lower as one of causation, rather than Plato's concept of participation, will be of importance in framing and addressing the "two-worlds" problem. Finally, Aristotle's discussion of time and the capability of the "now" to "unite and divide, to be both the same and different" leads nicely into an understanding of a "now" that is permanent and immutable.³⁶

D. The Eternal Present of Philo Judeus

Yates believes that Philo Judeus (ca. 25 B.C.-40 A.D.) first applied the attribute of timelessness to the God of Scripture:

God is withdrawn from both ends of time. For His life is not so much Time as Eternity (*aion*), the archetype or pattern of time. And in Eternity there is nothing past and nothing future, but only present.³⁷

However, Sorabji observes that the interpretation of this passage is disputed and that, at the very least, Philo "does not have an unwavering grasp of the idea," since, in the context, he has been conversing about God's *foresight* and *forethought*. Despite these difficulties, Sorabji still prefers the position that Philo is setting forth a concept of timeless eternity, even though, by Sorabji's own admission, Philo's words might suggest otherwise.³⁸

³⁵Yates, *The Timelessness of God*, 16.

³⁶Yates, *The Timelessness of God*, 18.

³⁷Philo, *Quod Deus Immutabilis Sit* 6.32, trans. L. Chon and P. Wendland (1896), 2:63; quoted in Yates, *The Timelessness of God*, 19. Sorabji cites the same text, using his own translation, *Time, Creation and the Continuum*, 121.

³⁸Sorabji, *Time, Creation and the Continuum*, 121-122. From the numerous citations of Sorabji, it should be clear that he is committed to a thesis that I am resisting, namely, that all these early notions of divine timelessness within the Greek tradition are absolute and non-durational. His book is monumental and

E. Eternity in the Middle Platonist, Plutarch

Padgett agrees with John Whittaker's assessment that the movement toward a concept of timeless eternity appears to begin with the Middle Platonist, Plutarch (ca. 45-125).³⁹ Plutarch argues that the concept of time can be applied to God in a way that goes beyond the sense of timelessness of the Platonic forms:

God, however, if this needs to be said, is not in time, but in eternity (*kat' aiona*), which is changeless and timeless (*achronos*) and undeviating, containing no earlier or later, no going to be or pastness, no older or younger. Single, he has completed 'always' in a single now, and that which really is in this manner only *is*, without having come into being, without being in the future, without having begun, and without being due to end.⁴⁰

Yates also agrees that this passage possesses "a clarity lacking in our earlier references. All the essential elements of a full blown doctrine of divine eternity are present here *in nuce*."⁴¹

F. Eternity in Neoplatonism and Plotinus

Beginning with the distinction between time and eternity found in the *Timaeus*, Plotinus (ca. 185-254) identifies time as the life of the Soul, and eternity as the life of the Mind. In this way, Padgett observes, Plotinus unites eternity and life for the first time in the history of thought.⁴²

Yates views Plotinus as "one of the greatest figures in the development of the doctrine of divine timelessness," for he "provides us with the fullest, clearest and most personalized definition of the divine eternity in the philosophy of non-Christian

impressive. However, his insistence on this thesis, even in cases where he need not, suggests a certain lack of objectivity.

³⁹This according to Whittaker, "Ammonius on the Delphic E," as referenced in Padgett, *God, Eternity and the Nature of Time*, 42.

⁴⁰Plutarch, *On the E at Delphi*, 393 A-B; quoted in Sorabji, *Time, Creation and the Continuum*, 121. Sorabji sees this as an example of the denial of duration in an early source (121).

⁴¹Yates, *The Timelessness of God*, 20.

⁴²Padgett, *God, Eternity and the Nature of Time*, 43.

antiquity.”⁴³ According to Yates, Plotinus understands eternity as full and complete, lacking nothing. Since it cannot be added to or subtracted from, it is both immutable and non-successive: “In Plotinus, then we find the seed of the fully developed notion of an eternal Now coexisting with [sic] all earthly nows; an immutable, timeless and non-durational life which is God.”⁴⁴ Copleston, agrees:

The Demiurge of Plato and the νόησις νοήσεως of Aristotle thus come together in the Plotinian Nous. Nous is eternal and beyond time, its state of blessedness being not an acquired state, but an eternal possession. Nous enjoys, therefore, that eternity which time does but mimic (*Enneads* 5.1.4, 485 b). In the case of Soul, its objects are successive, now Socrates, now a horse, now some other thing; but Nous knows all things together, from having neither past nor future, but seeing all in an eternal present.⁴⁵

Brian Davies believes that for Plotinus, “Time is ‘the life of soul in a movement of passage from one way of life to another,’ and eternity is the life of the intelligible world without successiveness.”⁴⁶ This leads Plotinus to speak of eternity in terms of duration without succession:

One sees eternity in seeing a life that abides in the same, and always has the all present to it, not now this, and then again that, but all things at once (*hama ta panta*), and not now some things, and then again others, but a partless completion, as if they were all together in a point, and had not yet begun to go out and flow into lines; it is something which abides in the same in itself and does not change at all but is always in the present, because nothing of it has passed away, nor again is there anything to come into being, but that which it is, it is; so that eternity is not the substrate but something which, as it were, shines out from the substrate itself in respect of what is called its sameness, in speaking about the fact that it is not going to be but is already, that it is as it is and not otherwise, for what could come to be for it afterwards, which it is not already? For there is nothing starting from which it will arrive at the present moment, for that could be nothing else but what is [now]. Nor is it going to be what it does not now contain in itself. Necessarily there will be no ‘was’ about it, for what is there that was for it and has passed away? Nor any ‘will be’, for what will be for it? So there remains for it only to be in its being just

⁴³Yates, *The Timelessness of God*, 21 and 23 respectively.

⁴⁴Padgett, *God, Eternity and the Nature of Time*, 43.

⁴⁵Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy: Volume I: Greece and Rome* (reprint, New York: Image Books, 1993), 467-68.

⁴⁶Brian Davies, *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 103. Davies is quoting the *Enneads* 3.7.11.

what it is. That, then, which was not, and will not be, but is only, which has being which is static by not changing to the 'will be', nor ever having changed, this is eternity.⁴⁷

Sorabji goes one step further and believes that Plotinus would probably extend his idea of a non-temporal sense eternity to the concept of life:

We think of life as something spread out in time. But the life which constitutes eternity is the life of the intellect, and it consists of a very special kind of thinking. I do not myself understand how any thinking can fail to be temporal. But Plotinus is persuaded that it can, partly because it is a type of thinking which involves no *progress*, and partly because it involves a *sense* of timelessness.⁴⁸

G. Conclusions Regarding the Concept of Eternity in Greek Thought

This brief survey makes it clear that several models of eternity arise out of Greek thought. These are categorized by Padgett into three definitions of eternal:

- (01) Being is unchanging and exists in time, forever.
- (02) Being is unchanging and timeless, having its own unchanging duration.
- (03) Being is unchanging and timeless and non-durational.⁴⁹

The first notion is equivalent to what the modern discussion terms as the everlasting model of eternity. The second model involves duration without succession. The third model is a model of absolute or "instantaneous" timelessness which would be descriptive of something that has neither succession nor duration. This third or absolute "instantaneous" model is usually understood by modern philosophers to be the model adopted in the history of Christian thought and allegedly borrowed from Greek thought.

The first part of this chapter makes that last assertion unlikely since, as we have seen, it is difficult to find a model of absolute timelessness in the Greek tradition to which the traditional doctrine of eternity could be wed. Rather, the Greek philosophers are concerned with the nature of what endures and its relationship to the temporal flux. The concept of eternity that arises is one that is unchanging and timeless, having its own

⁴⁷*Enneads* 3.7.3. Quoted in Davies, *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas*, 104.

⁴⁸Sorabji, *Time, Creation and the Continuum*, 114.

⁴⁹Padgett, *God, Eternity and the Nature of Time*, 39.

unchanging duration. It is not that of absolute atemporal eternity.

The second part of this chapter renders the assertion unsubstantiated since, as we shall see, even if there is a Greek concept of absolute timelessness, it is not embraced by the theological tradition. It is really Padgett's second model (02) that more closely resembles the traditional concept of eternity, which is "duration without succession." The distinction between these two views is subtle, and the latter view is not without difficulties. Nonetheless, if this chapter is correct, then a significant part (although certainly not all) of the analytic debate is misdirected and the way is open to make a more nuanced defense of a more nuanced position.

III. Eternity in the History of Christian Doctrine

A. The Apostolic Fathers and Early Apologists

From the Greek philosophers, we move to the early Apologists who, by defending the Christian faith against false charges from the civil authorities, also instructed the church in the true faith and preserved it from a variety of false teachings.⁵⁰ They are the first generation of Christian theologians whose thinking provides grist for the subsequent theological mills of Nicea, Constantinople, and Chalcedon.⁵¹ Yates lists half-dozen references and allusions to the doctrine of eternity among the early Apologists, most of which deserve a closer look.⁵²

⁵⁰In moving from the Greek reflections on the nature of eternity to its treatment in early Christian theology, it might appear we are bypassing an essential step, namely a consideration of what the Bible has to say about the subject. That discussion, however, is postponed to chapter 6. The present chapter is concerned with how the doctrine arose, was interpreted, and was applied, before addressing the question of whether, in the history of doctrine, the doctrine of eternity is an example of FSU done aright or gone awry.

⁵¹For a detailed treatment of the early Christian apologists see Robert Grant, *Greek Apologists of the Second Century* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1988).

⁵²Yates references Ignatius, *Polycarp*, 3.2; Justin Martyr, *Apology* 1.13.4; *Dialogue* 3.5; Tatian, *Against the Greeks*, 4.1.2; Athenagoras, *Supplication* 10.1; cited in *Timelessness of God*, p. 20, nts. 47-48. Yates, however, is of the opinion there is neither much discussion nor development of the doctrine of divine eternity among the early Fathers. What is mentioned is given only in passing and not as part of any doctrinal controversy.

1. Ignatius's early mention of divine eternity (ca. 30-107)

The testimony of Ignatius, second bishop of Antioch who was martyred during the reign of Trajan (98-117), is significant because it comes so early. Ignatius is most famous for seven letters written while traveling to Rome to face martyrdom. Despite their occasional character, Johannes Quasten views these letters as of “inestimable importance for the history of doctrine.”⁵³ In his *Epistle to Polycarp*, we find the following description of Christ:

Be [still] more diligent than thou yet art. Be discerning of the times. *Look for Him that is above the times, Him who has no times, Him who is invisible, Him who for our sakes became visible, Him who is impalpable, Him who is impassible, Him who for our sakes suffered, Him who endured everything in every form for our sakes.*⁵⁴

While the reference to divine eternity in this passage is admittedly cryptic, what is notable is that it occurs at all and that it is mentioned with a certain ease, almost in passing. While it would be unwise to distill too much out of this text, it suggests that a notion of divine supratemporal eternity was already evident in one of the earliest leaders and theologians of the early church. What is equally significant is that it is seen as an essential part of an interrelated constellation of divine attributes.

2. Justin Martyr on eternity, immutability and Greek philosophy (ca. 110-165)

The second testimony belongs to Justin Martyr, whom Quasten describes as “one of the most important of the Greek apologists of the second century.”⁵⁵ Justin possesses philosophical training, and there is no question that he appeals freely to the conceptual

⁵³Johannes Quasten, *Patrology*, 4 vols. (Allen, Texas: Christian Classics, N.D.), 1:64.

⁵⁴*The Anti-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, 10 volumes (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1867-1872; revised by A. Cleveland Coxe, Buffalo: The Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885-1896; reprint, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1993), 1:99; hereafter *ANF*. Emphasis mine. It is interesting to note that “who has no times” is translated by Quasten by the term “timeless”: “Look for him who is above time--the Timeless, the Invisible” (*Patrology*, 1:65).

⁵⁵Quasten, *Patrology*, 1:196.

models and philosophical language of Plato. At the same time, Justin is not uncritical of Greek philosophy. While he does not despise philosophy, he makes it clear the only real and true philosophy is that found in the school of Christ.⁵⁶ In his brief discussion of eternity, Justin suggests a connection between God's immutability and eternity, already present in Greek philosophy, but also compatible with biblical descriptions of God:

Our teacher of these things is Jesus Christ. . . . [W]e reasonably worship Him, having learned that He is the Son of the true God Himself, and holding Him in the second place, and the prophetic Spirit in the third, we will prove. *For they proclaim our madness to consist in this, that we give to a crucified man a place second to the unchangeable and eternal God, the creator of all; for they do not discern the mystery that is herein, to which, as we make it plain to you, we pray you to give heed.*⁵⁷

In his fifth *Dialogue*, Justin explains, in a way both appreciative and critical of Greek thought, how Plato's conception of the immortality of the soul is incorrect. Plato advocates the inherent indestructibility of the soul. Justin counters that God alone possesses immortality, that he alone is unbegotten and incorruptible, and that he is to be contrasted with those things "which exist after God, or shall *at any time exist*":

For those things which exist after God, or *shall at any time exist*, these have the nature of decay, and are such as may be blotted out and cease to exist; for God alone is unbegotten and incorruptible, and therefore He is God, but all other things after Him are created and corruptible. For this reason souls both die and are punished.⁵⁸

While it would be unwise to draw strong inductive generalizations from a handful of texts, a few comments are in order. Justin is concerned to articulate the teachings of the Christian faith without compromise, despite clear cultural and philosophical pressure to soft-pedal certain doctrines. He is fully prepared to defend the Incarnation and to criticize the Greek doctrine of the immortality of the soul. He is also prepared to defend the

⁵⁶See *Dialogue with Trypho*, 8; quoted in Quasten, *Patrology*, 1:196.

⁵⁷Justin Martyr, *Apology* 1.13.4; *ANF*, 1:166-167; emphasis mine.

⁵⁸ Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 5; *ANF*, 1:197; emphasis mine.

Christian doctrine of creation while preserving the immutability, incorruptibility, and temporal transcendence of God. There is no evidence that, in setting forth positive Christian doctrine, he is driven by Greek philosophical agendas.

3. Tatian's biblical descriptions of divine eternity (ca. 110-172)

While Tatian appears to have been a student of Justin, the two are quite different in their attitudes toward Greek philosophy. Quasten explains, "Whereas Justin attempts to find at least elements of truth in the writings of some Greek thinkers, Tatian teaches complete renunciation of all Greek philosophy on principle."⁵⁹ It is not surprising, therefore, to hear him speak of the eternity of God in terms completely compatible with the language of scripture: God endures; he has no beginning in time; and he is the source of all things that do. As such his remarks would be consistent with a view of God as everlasting (infinitely extended in time) or eternal (the source of time but not subject to time). That his view does not preclude the eternity of God is significant, given his animus against Greek philosophy.

*Our God did not begin to be in time: He alone is without beginning, and He himself is the beginning of all things. God is Spirit, not pervading matter, but the Maker of material spirits, and of the forms that are in matter.*⁶⁰

4. Athenagoras on God and Plato (Second century)

The apologist Athenagoras makes only brief mention of God's relationship to time, but he does so in contexts that reflect a sympathy for Greek thought, for the compatibility of Greek and Christian thought is part of his apologetic strategy. In his discussion of God's relationship to time, Athenagoras emphasizes the Creator/creature distinction, thereby drawing a contrast between that which is eternal (God) and that which is temporal and perishable (all that is not God, presumably including time):

⁵⁹Quasten, *Patrology*, 1:220-221.

⁶⁰Tatian, *Discourse to the Greeks*, 4.1.2; *ANF*, 2:66; emphasis mine.

If therefore Plato is not an atheist for conceiving of *one uncreated God*, the Framers of the Universe, neither are we atheists who acknowledge and firmly hold that He is God, who has framed all things by the Logos and holds them in being by His Spirit.⁶¹

We are not atheists, therefore, seeing that we acknowledge one God, *uncreated, eternal*, invisible, impassible, incomprehensible, illimitable, who is apprehended by the understanding only and the reason, who is encompassed by light, and beauty, and spirit, and power ineffable by whom the universe has been created through His Logos, and set in order, and is kept in being--I have sufficiently demonstrated.⁶²

For a thing is either *uncreated and eternal, or created and perishable*. Nor do I think one thing and the philosophers another. "What is that which always is, and has no origin; or what is that which has been originated, yet never is?" [*Timaeus* 27.D] Discoursing of the intelligible and the sensible, Plato teaches that that which always is, the intelligible, is unoriginated, but that which is not, the sensible, is originated, beginning to be and ceasing to exist.⁶³

It should be noted that while Athenagoras finds some common ground between Greek and Christian thought, he is not unwilling to assert their strong differences (like the Christian doctrine of creation). It should also be noted again that Athenagoras does not see eternity standing alone but as an essential part of a constellation of divine attributes.

B. The Later Apologists and Early Fathers

1. Irenaeus on aseity, immutability, and eternity (ca.175-ca. 195)

Irenaeus makes an argument similar to that of Athenagoras, appealing not only to the fact that God is Creator and uncreated, but also that he is self-sufficient and immutable, and, therefore, eternal:

But the things established are distinct from Him who has established them, and what have been made from Him who has made them. *For He is Himself uncreated, both without beginning and end*, and lacking nothing. He is Himself sufficient for Himself, and still further, He grants to all others this very thing, existence; but the things which have been made by Him have received a beginning. But whatever things had a beginning, and are liable to dissolution, and are subject to and stand in need of Him who made them, must necessarily in all respects have a different term [applied to them], even by those who have but a moderate capacity for discerning

⁶¹ Athenagoras, *Supplication*, 6; *ANF*, 2:132, emphasis mine.

⁶² Athenagoras, *Supplication*, 10; *ANF*, 2:133; emphasis mine.

⁶³ Athenagoras, *Supplication*, 19; *ANF*, 2:137-138; emphasis mine.

such things; so that He indeed who made all things can alone, together with His Word, properly be termed God and Lord: but the things which have been made cannot have this term applied to them, neither should they justly assume that appellation which belongs to the Creator.⁶⁴

This paragraph could be interpreted as supporting either the eternal or the everlasting view of God's relationship to time. However, in what is emerging as a pattern, Athenagoras also conjoins his discussion of God's relationship to time with the aseity of God, the immutability of God, and a strong Creator/creature distinction. As doctrinal history unfolds, these ingredients will provide the recipe for divine eternity.

2. Clement of Alexandria on the concept of eternity (ca. 155-ca. 220)

Clement provides a non-technical definition of eternity which, interestingly, bears a resemblance to later more developed views like that of Boethius. However, it is difficult to know precisely how he applies it, for, in context, he argues that both Greek and barbarian philosophy have attained, through the Light of the Logos, to some measure of the truth:

Let all, therefore, both Greeks and barbarians, who have aspired after the truth,--both those who possess not a little, and those who have any portion,--produce whatever they have of the word of truth. *Eternity [aion], for instance, presents in an instant the future and the present, also the past of time. But truth, much more powerful than limitless duration, can collect its proper germs, though they have fallen on foreign soil.*⁶⁵

It is unclear in this text whether the concept of eternity is an example of pagan insight paralleling biblical revelation, whether the concept includes or contrasts with "limitless duration," and whether he believes it should be applied to God. On the last point, presumably he does, for why would he raise the issue otherwise?

3. Tertullian on the nature of the true God (ca. 160/70-ca. 215/220)

The later apologist, Tertullian, appeals to the concept of eternity in the course of defending the faith against false teachers. The heretic, Marcion, had posited two separate

⁶⁴Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3.8; ANF, 1:422.

⁶⁵*Stromateis* 1.13; ANF, 2:313; emphasis mine.

Gods, the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New. In his *Against Marcion*, Tertullian refutes Marcion by arguing that the unity demanded by the very notion of deity opposes such a contrast. The novelty of Marcion's deity refutes his position, for God is of necessity immutable and eternal:

Deity has its origin neither in novelty nor in antiquity, but in its own true nature. Eternity has no time. It is itself all time. It acts; it cannot then suffer. It cannot be born, therefore it lacks age. God, if old, forfeits the eternity that is to come; if new, the eternity which is past. The newness bears witness to a beginning; the oldness threatens an end. God, moreover, is as independent of beginning and end as he is of time, which is only the arbiter and measurer of a beginning and an end.⁶⁶

Similarly, in his treatise, *Against Hermogenes*, Tertullian opposes a person "who thought matter eternal, making it equal to God and positing two Gods."⁶⁷ Tertullian refutes Hermogenes by contrasting the mutability of matter with the immutability of that which is eternal, namely God himself:

Change is therefore admissible in Matter; and this being the case, it has lost its condition of eternity; in short its beauty is decayed in death. Eternity, however, can not be lost, because it cannot be eternity, except by reason of its immunity from loss. For the same reason also it is incapable of change, inasmuch as, since it is eternity, it can by no means be changed.⁶⁸

While it is evident that Tertullian is drawing upon Greek concepts to articulate his notions of eternity and immutability, these arguments do not move beyond similar assertions found in the biblical text. Furthermore, Tertullian is clearly concerned that denying the eternity of God will lead to the heresy of positing a second, inferior "God."

4. Origen on the eternal generation of the Son (ca. 185-ca. 254)

Origen, in his monumental and synthetic systematic theology *On First Principles*, applies timeless eternity to all three members of the Triune Godhead:

The Holy Spirit would never have been included in the unity of the Trinity, that is,

⁶⁶Tertullian, *Against Marcion*, 1.8; ANF, 3:276.

⁶⁷Quasten, *Patrology*, 2:276.

⁶⁸Tertullian, *Against Hermogenes*, 12; ANF, 3:484.

of God, the unchangeable Father and His Son, if he was (*erat*) not always (*semper*) the Holy Spirit. Of course, the words we use, 'always' and 'was,' and any other such word with a temporal meaning (*temporalis significatio*) that we appropriate, must be understood in an elastic way as an artless expression. For the meanings of these words are temporal, whereas the things of which we are speaking, although described in a temporal way for handling in our discussion, go by their nature beyond any understanding of a temporal sense.⁶⁹

It must be stated elastically, when we say that there was no time when he was not. For even these words bear the sense of temporal description. I mean 'when' and 'no time.' But what is said of the Father, Son or Holy Spirit should be understood as being above all time, above all the ages (*saecula*) and above all eternity.⁷⁰

Of greater sophistication and importance to subsequent theological discussion is how Origen applies this concept of divine timelessness to the eternal begetting or generation of the Son. Origen makes it clear that the eternal generation of the Son by the Father does not take place at any particular time, but takes place in the realm of eternity, which is outside of time (or better, before time began):

But because of all this, the high birth of the Son is not clearly presented, when God, for whom it is always today, says to the Son, "You are my son; today I have begotten you". For there is no evening of God, I think, since there is no morning either, but the time (*chronos*) stretching out along with (*sumparekleinon*) his uncreated and everlasting (*aidios*) life, if I may so put it, is for him the today in which the Son has been begotten. In this way, no beginning is found for the Son's begetting, since no day is found either.⁷¹

Wherefore we have always held that God is the Father of His only-begotten Son, who was born indeed of Him, and derives from Him what He is, but without any beginning, not only such as may be measured by any division of time, but even that which the mind alone can contemplate within itself, or behold, so to speak, with naked powers of the understanding. And therefore we must believe that Wisdom was generated before any beginning that can be either comprehended or

⁶⁹Origen, *On First Principles*, 1.3.4 from the Rufinus Latin version; quoted by Sorabji, *Time, Creation and the Continuum*, 115. This passage in Sorabji is also quoted by Yates, *The Timelessness of God*, 25. See also ANF, 4: 253.

⁷⁰*On First Principles*, 4.4.1; quoted in Sorabji, *Time, Creation and the Continuum*, 122. A portion also quoted in Padgett, *God, Eternity and the Nature of Time*, 42.

⁷¹Origen, *Commentary on John*, 1.29 (31), 204; quoted in Sorabji, *Time, Creation and the Continuum*, 123. See also *On First Principles*, 1.2.2, referenced in Sorabji, 123 and Padgett, *God, Eternity and the Nature of Time*, 42.

expressed.⁷²

Origen thus anticipates the later discussions that occur during the Trinitarian controversy.

C. Eternity and the Nicene Controversy

The doctrine of divine eternity was fully forged in the furnace of the Nicene Controversy. The Creed of Nicea (325 A.D.) utilizes the language of eternal generation provided by Origen to counter the temporalist position of Arius who argued that there was a time when the Son was not. The distinction between human and eternal generation will be highly influential and critical to the subsequent discussions of the Arian question at the Councils of Nicea (325 A.D.) and Constantinople (381 A.D.).

1. Arius, Greek thought, and the temporality of the Son (d. 336)

As R. P. C. Hanson points out, it is difficult to understand precisely the nature of the views of Arius, since his writings were banned and most of what we do know comes from detractors.⁷³ However, the position that emerges suggests that we find in Arius a theologian who *is* too closely wedded to Greek philosophy. Accordingly to Arian teaching, the true God is *absolutely* immutable, impassible, simple, and self-sufficient, and, therefore, cannot enter into time and human history except through a mediator. However, since it is clear that Jesus did enter into human history and did suffer on the cross, he cannot be the same as the High God. Jesus, therefore, is *a* God, not *the* God; he is divine, but a lesser divinity than the Father, who he himself worshiped:

At the heart of the Arian Gospel was a God who suffered. Their elaborate theology of the relation of the Son to the Father which so much preoccupied their opponents was devised in order to find a way of envisaging a Christian doctrine of God which would make it possible to be faithful to the Biblical witness to a God who suffers. This was to be achieved by conceiving of a lesser God as reduced divinity who would be ontologically capable, as the High God was not, of enduring human

⁷²Origen, *On First Principles*, 1.2.2; ANF, 4:246.

⁷³R. P. C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy*, 318-381. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988), 99-100.

experiences, including suffering and death.⁷⁴

Hanson believes that the Arian position understood in a nuanced fashion the scandal of the cross in a way not so clearly seen by its Nicene opponents. However, this insight came at too high a cost by rejecting the Christian doctrine of God and putting in its place two Gods of unequal standing: “a high God incapable of human experiences, and a lesser God, who so to speak, did his dirty work for him.”⁷⁵ What is important to note is that the Arian position reflects a very Hellenistic doctrine of God—one that would be rejected by the early church as heterodox.

A somewhat different take on Arianism, which softens but remains compatible with the perspective provided by Hanson, is taken by Robert Gregg and Dennis Groh. They prefer a less philosophical, and more biblical, exegetical, and soteriological interpretation:

We contend that early Arianism is most intelligible when viewed as a scheme of salvation. Soteriological concerns dominate the texts and inform every major aspect of the controversy. At the center of the Arian soteriology was a redeemer, obedient to his Creator’s will, whose life of virtue modeled perfect creaturehood and hence the path of salvation for all Christians.⁷⁶

On their interpretation, there remains no question that in Arianism the Son is “a creature promoted to the status of a God.”⁷⁷ They maintain that it is more accurate to see Arius as motivated more by biblical than philosophical concerns. Specifically, Arius wants to emphasize the true humanity of Jesus as revealed in the Bible (most likely against Gnostic suggestions to the contrary) and his role as an exemplar for salvation, rather than to preserve a philosophical concept of an absolute Father and a mediating and creaturely Son.

If Gregg and Groh are correct, they broaden Hanson’s interpretation of the

⁷⁴Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God*, 122.

⁷⁵Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God*, 122.

⁷⁶Robert C. Gregg and Dennis E. Groh, *Early Arianism--A View of Salvation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), x.

⁷⁷Gregg and Groh, *Early Arianism*, 1.

motivation underlying the Arian position. However, the *content* remains the same: The Son is a divinized creature who is both on a timeline and has a beginning so that “there was when he was not.” He is divine, but a lesser deity than the Father.

2. Athanasius and the eternity of the Son (ca. 296-373)

What also remains the same is the importance of the solution formulated at the Council of Nicea, defended by Athanasius, and embraced at the Council of Constantinople, that the Son is eternally generated from the Father before time began, that he was “begotten, not made,” so that “there was not when he was not”:

The Lord is God’s true Son by nature, and not as merely eternal, but revealed as co-existing in the Father’s eternity. . . . [F]or being the Son, He is inseparable from the Father, and never was there when He was not, but He was always; and being the Father’s Image and Radiance, He has the Father’s eternity.⁷⁸

It is important to recognize what a significant role the traditional doctrine of eternity plays in the Nicene credal tradition. On the Nicene view, the Son is begotten of the Father from before time began; thus there never was a time when the Son was not.

3. Hilary of Poitiers and the Nicene tradition (ca. 315-368)

Following the Councils of Nicea (325 A.D.) and Constantinople (381 A.D.), the later Fathers were uniform in their understanding that the begetting of the Divine Son was eternal not temporal. Thus Hilary of Poitiers comments:

Again, let him who holds the Son to have become Son in time and by His Incarnation learn that through Him, are all things and we through Him, and that His timeless Infinity was creating all things before time was.⁷⁹

4. Gregory of Nyssa on eternal generation (ca. 330-395)

The same is true of Gregory of Nyssa. Paul Helm points out that the concept of “begotten” normally reflects a causal connection, so that if A begets B, then A causes B to

⁷⁸Athanasius, *Four Discourses Against the Arians*, 3.28; *NPNF 2*, 4:409.

⁷⁹Hilary of Poitiers, *On the Trinity*, 8.40; *NPNF 2*, 9:149; quoted in John Frame, *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2002), 546, n. 6.

begin to exist. One implication of the temporalist position would be that there might be a possible world in which only the Father exists.⁸⁰ Helm sees Gregory of Nyssa as providing an antidote to this implication by arguing that the notion of the begetting of the Son from the Father does not involve temporal causation:

For if Eternity is characterized by having no beginning and end, it is inevitable either that we must be impious and deny the Son Eternity, or that we must be led in our secret thoughts about Him into the idea of Ungeneracy. What, then, shall we answer? That if, in conceiving of the Father before the Son on the single score of causation, we inserted any mark of time before the subsistence of the Only-begotten, the belief which we have in the Son's eternity might with reason be said to be endangered. But, as it is, the Eternal nature, equally in the case of the Father's and the Son's life, and, as well, in what we believe about the Holy Ghost, admits not of the thought that it will ever cease to be; for where time is not, the "when" is annihilated with it. And if the Son, always appearing with the thought of the Father, is always found in the category of existence, what danger is there in owning the Eternity of the Only-begotten, Who "hath neither beginning of days, or end of life" [Hebrews 7:3]. For as He is Light from Light, Life from Life, Good from Good, and Wise, Just, Strong, and all else in the same way, so most certainly is He Eternal from Eternal.⁸¹

As Helm notes, Gregory argues that "the existence of the Son is ontologically necessary, the Son being part of the godhead, while the existence of the universe, though eternal, is logically contingent. Presumably this is one reason for distinguishing between the eternal *begetting* of the Son and the eternal *creation* of the universe."⁸²

D. Augustine of Hippo on Eternity and Time

The most complete early Christian treatment of the subject of the eternity of God is that of Augustine. He describes divine eternity in these terms:

Your 'years' neither go nor come. Ours come and go so that all may come in succession. All your 'years' subsist in simultaneity, because they do not change; those going away are not thrust out by those coming in. But the years which are

⁸⁰Helm, "Eternal Creation," 336-337.

⁸¹Gregory of Nyssa, *Contra Eunomium*; *NPNF* 2, 5:99-100.

⁸²Helm, "Eternal Creation," 337. Helm does not cite any text from Gregory in support of this assertion, but references David L. Balas, "Eternity and Time in Gregory of Nyssa's *Contra Eunomium*," in *Gregory Von Nyssa Und Die Philosophie*, ed. H. Dorrie, M. Altenbeurger and U. Schramm (Leiden: Brill, 1976), 128-155. The reference is found in "Eternal Creation," 337, n. 26.

ours will not all be until all years have ceased to be. Your 'years' are 'one day' (Ps. 89:4; 2 Pet. 3:8), and your 'day' is not any and every day but Today, because your Today does not yield to a tomorrow, not did it follow on a yesterday. Your Today is eternity.⁸³

Augustine is fully absorbed by the issues raised by the relationship of time and eternity, and he devotes a considerable amount of his intellectual horsepower to addressing them--much more than most people realize.⁸⁴

1. Augustine and Neoplatonism

It is no secret that Augustine pursued his program of FSU utilizing conceptual tools drawn from Neoplatonism. In an early work, Augustine makes the following comment about the relationship between faith and reason:

There is no doubt that we are impelled to learn by two forces, authority and reason. With me it stands fast never to depart from Christian authority, for I find no stronger. But as for those matters which it is possible to seek out by subtle reasoning. . . I am confident that I shall find among the Neo-platonists that which does not conflict with our religion.⁸⁵

Although Augustine was influenced by Neoplatonism, this influence was not accepted uncritically, and it waned significantly in Augustine's more mature thought. For example, while Augustine drew upon the Neoplatonic notion of evil as the absence of the good as he wrestled with the problem of evil, this did not prevent him from maintaining a vigorous and scriptural concept of sin in connection with his view of human depravity and the need for election.⁸⁶

⁸³Augustine, *Confessions* 11.13.16, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 230.

⁸⁴Most of his major works address it in some detail. It is raised in his discussion in *Against the Manichees*, elaborated more fully in his *Confessions* and later *The City of God*, and completely focused upon in his mature, but less known work, *A Literal Interpretation of Genesis*. This last piece was fifteen years in the making, rivals *The City of God* in size and scope, and centers on the interpretation of the Genesis narratives in light of God's timeless relationship to a temporal creation.

⁸⁵Augustine, *Contra Academicos* 3.43; quoted in Brabant, *Time and Eternity in Christian Thought*, 46-47. Brabant himself cites Montgomery, *St. Augustine*, 46, as the source of the quotation.

⁸⁶Brabant makes this observation in *Time and Eternity in Christian Thought*, 47.

Further, Plotinus, following Plato's *Timaeus*, had insisted that the world was everlasting and history cyclically reoccurring. However, Augustine rejects both these notions in favor of asserting, on the scriptural authority of Genesis 1:1, that the world had a beginning that included the created beginning of time. The world was made not in time but with time.⁸⁷ In addition, Augustine insists (contrary to Plotinus and Neoplatonism) on creation *ex nihilo*. He does this to affirm another unhellenistic thought--that God made all things good, so that the material world should be viewed positively rather than negatively--and to assert a strong Creator/creation distinction.⁸⁸

2. Augustine's relational view of time

Augustine sees time as part of the created order of things. It is, therefore, impossible to see time as existing prior to creation for, "there was no 'then' when time was not" and God's years stand "at once."⁸⁹ As Helm puts it, for Augustine, time is the measure of change. It is not in itself a thing or substance but simply the by-product and necessary corollary of God's creating a mutable world. As such, it is part of the created order and did not exist prior to the creation. Therefore, it also serves to distinguish further the creation from the Creator and to lead to the view that God is eternal:

Augustine comes to see that God's relation to the creation cannot be like that of one created thing to another. This is one reason for Augustine's belief that God, because he is uncreated, is timelessly eternal. Similarly, creation cannot be through the power of words, which come and go, because the words would then be created intermediaries. Creation is through the eternal Word. And so time itself is created;

⁸⁷Augustine, *City of God*, 11.6 in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series, ed. Philip Schaff, 14 vols. (New York: The Christian Literature Co., 1886-1890; reprint, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1989-1994), 2:208 (hence *NPNF 1*); *Confessions* 11.13.16.

⁸⁸As Paul Helm comments: "The idea of *creation ex nihilo* is one area where Augustine clearly departs from the Neoplatonism which so influenced him in his articulation of Christian doctrine, repudiating it on what he believes to be Christian grounds. Despite this, he does provide what is obviously a Platonically influenced account of what follows the act of creation" ("Time and Creation in Augustine's *Confessions*," in *Faith & Understanding* [Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997], 90).

⁸⁹Augustine, *Confessions*, 11.13; *NPNF 1*, 1:168.

not as a substance or entity, but as the measure of change. As, in creating a cup, say, God does not create two things, the cup and the edge of the cup, so God does not create things which change and time. The edge of the cup is created in creating the cup. So time is not created separately, but as a consequence of the creation of things which are liable to change.⁹⁰

Despite this close connection between time and motion, Augustine remains able to distinguish between the two. For in the case of Joshua, “the sun stood still, but time went on.”⁹¹ Nonetheless, as Helm points out, Augustine holds to a relative view of time, seeing time simply as the measure of change, rather than an absolute view of time, in which time is viewed as a container in which the universe is placed at some temporal point.⁹²

That time is connected with change is clear enough to Augustine. But the nature of time itself is elusive and puzzling, as reflected in his oft-quoted statement in Book 11, chapter 13 of the *Confessions*:

What is time? . . . We surely know what we mean when we speak of it. We also know what is meant when we hear someone else talking about it. What then is time? Provided no one asks me, I know. If I want to explain it to an inquirer, I do not know.⁹³

3. Augustine’s three puzzles concerning time

Helm identifies three related puzzles concerning time in the *Confessions*. The first relates to how we speak of time as past, present, and future. Because we are temporal beings, we refer to other events in such a way that assumes we have a position in time. But this is problematic. How can the past and future exist when the past is no longer and the future has not yet arrived? And if they do exist, where are they? In addition, the present seems to be nothing more than the knife-edged boundary between past and future with no identity of its own:

⁹⁰Helm, “Time and Creation in Augustine’s *Confessions*,” 81.

⁹¹*Confessions* 11.23.30; *NPNF 1*, 1:171; Chadwick trans., 238.

⁹²Helm, “Time and Creation in Augustine’s *Confessions*,” 81.

⁹³*Confessions*, 11:15; *NPNF 1*, 1:168; Chadwick trans., 230.

One hour is itself constituted of fugitive moments. Whatever part of it has flown away is past. What remains is future. If we can think of some bit of time which cannot be divided into even the smallest instantaneous moments, that alone is what we can call 'present.' And this time flies too quickly from future into past that it is an interval with no duration. If it has duration, it is divisible into past and future. But the present occupies no space.⁹⁴

What then of time? Here is the problem: If the present has no existence, and the past consists of presents that have occurred, and the future presents that have not occurred, the entire temporal series seems to collapse into nothingness.⁹⁵

Augustine's second puzzle builds on the first and concerns the length of time. Times are often described as being long or short. Paradoxically, however, this cannot really be applied to the future or the past since neither exists in the present; neither can they belong to the present, since it is simply a knife-edge boundary between past and present and has no duration or length of its own.⁹⁶

The third problem has to do with the measurement of time. Such measurements are constantly and easily made. However, upon reflection, such measurements appear to be impossible, since we are either measuring something that does not yet or no longer exists or that which is in the present, which has no measurement.⁹⁷

4. Augustine's solution to the puzzles

According to Helm, Augustine's solution to these problems is "constructivist or reconstructivist."⁹⁸ Since all that exists for temporal beings is the present, descriptions of

⁹⁴Augustine, *Confessions*, 11.15.20, in Chadwick trans., 232; quoted in Helm, "Time and Creation in Augustine's *Confessions*", 83-84. See also *NPNF 1*, 1:169.

⁹⁵Helm, "Time and Creation in Augustine's *Confessions*", 84.

⁹⁶See discussion in Helm, "Time and Creation in Augustine's *Confessions*", 84-85. Helm cites the *Confessions* 11.15.20 in this connection out of the Chadwick translation, 232-233; cf. *NPNF 1*, 1:169.

⁹⁷Helm, "Time and Creation in Augustine's *Confessions*", 85. Helm cites the whole of *Confessions* 11.16.21 from the Chadwick translation (233) in this connection; cf. *NPNF 1*, 1:169.

⁹⁸Helm, "Time and Creation in Augustine's *Confessions*", 85.

past or future do not rest on retrovision or prevision, but upon memory. Remembering is something we do in the present and is what enables us to measure time, compare the length of musical notes, and otherwise solve the dilemmas posed above:

We measure time not on the basis of a direct acquaintance with the future or the past *per se*, but by what is conveyed by our present impression of the future and of the past.⁹⁹

5. Augustine on the relationship between creation and time

According to Augustine, God creates the world, not *in* time but *with* time. Basic to this view is a distinction between temporality and eternity, where the latter involves what is uncreated and immutable, and the former is both created and mutable. Everything that is subject to change is created and, therefore, possess a beginning. Since God is immutable, he is eternal. God is “ever-present” and his perception of the world is “all-at once.”¹⁰⁰ He is metaphysically, but not temporally, “prior” to the creation of the world, since there was no time prior to the creation itself. As Helm notes,

God does not exist before the universe in the sense that breakfast comes before lunch. Rather he is before the universe because he has his being necessarily, while the universe exists contingently, in virtue of his will. He is before the universe in the sense that the universe exists because of him and not *vice versa*.¹⁰¹

6. Augustine’s doctrine of eternal creation

Augustine’s doctrine of eternal creation is notoriously difficult. God, although eternal and not subject to the limitations of time, nonetheless brings about a temporal creation. As Helm puts it, God “timelessly eternally wills the changes that inhabitants of a temporal changing universe such as ourselves, undergo and witness.”¹⁰² This is an exquisitely difficult concept and, in both the *Confessions* and in *The City of God*,

⁹⁹Helm, “Time and Creation in Augustine’s *Confessions*,” 86-87.

¹⁰⁰Augustine, *Confessions*, 11.16.

¹⁰¹Helm, “Time and Creation in Augustine’s *Confessions*” 82.

¹⁰²Helm, “Time and Creation in Augustine’s *Confessions*,” 88.

Augustine struggles to find words with which to describe it:

For it is rare to see and very hard to sustain the insight, Lord, of your eternity immutably making a mutable world, and in this sense being anterior. And then who has a sufficiently acute mental discernment to be able to recognise, without intense toil, how sound is prior to song? The difficulty lies in the point that song is formed sound, and something not endowed with form can of course exist, but can what does not exist receive form? In this sense matter is prior to that which is made out of it. It is not prior in the sense that it actively makes; it is rather that it is made. Nor is priority one of temporal interval here. For it is not that first we emit unformed sound without it being song, and later adapt or shape it into the form of a song, in the way we make a box out of wood or a vase out of silver.¹⁰³

As for us, we are forbidden to suppose that God is in a different condition when he is at rest than when he is at work. In fact it is improper to speak of God's 'condition' which would imply that some novel element might come into his nature, something that was not there before. God knows how to be active while at rest, and at rest in his activity. He can apply to a new work not a new design but an eternal plan; and it is not because he repented of his previous inactivity that he began to do something he had not done before. Even if he rested first and started work later (and I do not know how man can understand this) this 'first' and 'later' refer, without doubt, to things which first did not exist and later came into existence. But in God there was no new decision which altered or canceled a previous intention; instead, it was with one and the same eternal and unchanging design that he effected his creation.¹⁰⁴

Despite the difficulty, it is clear that in both the doctrines of created time and eternal creation, Augustine maintains both a relational view of time and a view of divine eternity which preserves a strong Creator/creature distinction, and that does not make God subject to the limitations of temporal succession.¹⁰⁵

E. Boethius and Eternity

While Augustine's efforts to clarify the relationship of time and eternity ensure their

¹⁰³Augustine, *Confessions*, Chadwick trans., 269; quoted in Helm, "Time and Creation in Augustine's *Confessions*," 82.

¹⁰⁴Augustine, *City of God*, 12.17, trans. H. Bettenson (New York: Penguin, 1972), 495-496; quoted by Yates, *The Timelessness of God*, 27. Yates incorrectly gives the reference as 12.18. Cf. *NPNF 1*, 2:238.

¹⁰⁵According to Padgett, since Augustine's views are compatible with the earlier Platonic notions of a durational eternity, it is not entirely clear whether he holds to that Platonic position or to the more absolute, non-durational, form of timelessness advocated by Plotinus (*God, Eternity and the Nature of Time*, 44). It is doubtful, however, that Plotinus actually held to such an absolute view of eternal timelessness.

place in the history of Christian thought, it is Boethius who articulates the classical form of the doctrine. In *The Consolation of Philosophy*, Boethius elaborates on Augustine, but his unique contribution is to use the doctrine to reconcile the omniscience of God with the free will of human beings.¹⁰⁶

1. Boethius's relationship to Aristotle

Boethius was an Aristotelian scholar who translated several of his works into Latin, published numerous commentaries on Aristotle, and transmitted to medieval thinkers Aristotle's logical system. Thus, the influence of Aristotle on Boethius's work predates, anticipates, and is compatible with the later efforts at synthesis undertaken by Thomas Aquinas when the Aristotelian corpus became more generally available in the West.¹⁰⁷

Boethius addresses the subject of divine eternity in two of his works, *De Trinitate* and *The Consolation of Philosophy*. In the former, observes Yates, Boethius applies the Aristotelian categories to God in order to answer the question, "What does it mean to say God always exists"? Boethius answers the question in this way:

But what is said of God, 'ever is', (*semper*) signifies only one thing, that he was, as it were, in all the past, is in all the present--however that term be used--and will be in all the future. According to the philosophers this may be said of the heavens and of other immortal bodies, but of God it is said in a different way. He is ever, because 'ever' is with him a term of present time, and there is this great difference between the present of our affairs, which is now, and the divine present: our 'now' connotes changing time and sempiternity (*sempiternitas*); but God's 'now' abiding, unmoved, and immoveable, connotes eternity (*aeternitas*). If you add *semper* to eternity, you will get the flowing, incessant and thereby perpetual course of our present time, that is to say, sempiternity.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁶Although there is a debate among scholars as to whether Boethius was a Christian, V. E. Watts notes that "his exultant definition of eternity is remarkably close to the view of St. Augustine," which suggests that he be considered not only a philosopher, but also an Augustinian theologian (*The Consolation of Philosophy*, ed. V. E. Watts [New York: Penguin Books, 1969], 5.6, p. 163 n.9).

¹⁰⁷Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, 2:101-102.

¹⁰⁸Boethius, *De Trinitate* 4:65-67 quoted in Yates, *The Timelessness of God*, 30 and taken from *Boethius: The Theological Tractates and the Consolation of Philosophy*, trans. and ed. H. F. Stewart, E. K. Rand, and J. S. Tester (London: Heinemann, 1973), 21, 23. Also quoted in Sorabji, *Time, Creation and the Continuum*, 115-116, with his own translation.

According to Sorabji, one of Boethius's major contributions is to make a sharp distinction between that which is everlasting (*sempiternitas*) and that which is eternal (*aeternitas*). This brought new clarity to the subject and proved influential in subsequent discussion.¹⁰⁹

2. Boethius's defense of free will

The earlier treatment in *De Trinitate* sets the stage for Boethius's more developed understanding of divine eternity found in *The Consolation of Philosophy*. It occurs in the context of a broader discussion on the question of the difficulty in reconciling human freedom with divine foreknowledge: If God foreknows men's actions, they must necessarily occur. But if they must occur, then there is no longer freedom of the will.¹¹⁰

One possible solution to this dilemma is this: future events do not take place because God knows them, but God knows them because they do take place. Boethius finds this resolution inadequate, since it implies that God's knowledge depends upon temporal events. He believes a better answer is found in the eternity of God:

It is the common judgment, then, of all creatures that live by reason that God is eternal. So let us consider the nature of eternity, for this will make clear to us both the nature of God and his manner of knowing. Eternity, then is the complete, simultaneous and perfect possession of everlasting life (*Aeternitas igitur est interminabilis vitae tota simul et perfecta possessio*); this will be clear from a comparison with creatures that exist in time. Whatever lives in time exists in the present and progresses from past to the future, and there is nothing set in time which can embrace simultaneously the whole extent of its life: it is the position of not yet possessing tomorrow when it has already lost yesterday. In this life of today you do not live more fully than in that fleeting and transitory moment. Whatever, therefore, suffers the condition of being in time, even though it never had any beginning, never has any ending and its life extends into the infinity of time, as Aristotle thought was the case of the world, it is still not such that it may properly be considered eternal.¹¹¹

Two important points come out of this paragraph. First, as Stump and Kretzmann

¹⁰⁹Sorabji, *Time, Creation and the Continuum*, 115-117.

¹¹⁰Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, 5.3 in Watts, 150.

¹¹¹Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, 5.6 in Watts, 163-64.

point out, the timelessness spoken of here is not of an abstract entity, concept, form or number, but involves *life*.¹¹² God may be atemporal, but he is nonetheless the living God. Second, Boethius sees this concept of eternity as protecting the freedom of moral agents while at the same time affirming the omniscience of God regarding all temporal truths and actions. God's perception of the temporal realm is completely embraced in the eternal present. Just as a temporal observer witnesses and knows the actions of another in the temporal present without determining or impeding the freedom of those actions, so God's knowledge, in the eternal present, of all temporal acts and events does not conflict with the free moral choice of temporal beings. Thus God's "foreknowledge" (which Boethius views as a misnomer as applied to God) of temporal events involves no causative relationship that abridges human freedom.

3. Boethius's classic definition of eternity

Boethius's lasting contribution is his definition of eternity as "the simultaneous and complete possession of infinite (unlimited) life" (*interminabilis vitae tota simul et perfecta possessio*).¹¹³ For Boethius, time is successive. Eternity is not. Eternity is an indivisible, "simultaneous" "now" with the last two words being used in a non-temporal sense. Boethius's point is that God possesses his perception and knowledge as a whole without being added to, subtracted from, or divided temporally or any other way. Thus Boethius, like Augustine (and anticipating Aquinas), draws a connection between God's immutability and his timelessness. He argues that a being that is subject to change is subject to time.¹¹⁴

Boethius's assertion of the immutability of God leads to an additional point that Stump and Kretzmann believe is discernible within the *Consolation*: the Boethian concept

¹¹²See Stump and Kretzmann, "Eternity," in *The Concept of God*, 220-221.

¹¹³Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, 5.6.

¹¹⁴Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, 5.6.

of eternity, while atemporal, *endures*. That is, it contains within it a concept of atemporal duration, or better, duration without succession. In recent *philosophical* discussions, the notion of atemporal duration has been challenged as incoherent by both friend and foe of divine timelessness.¹¹⁵ However, the *theological* tradition up through post-Reformation Protestant orthodoxy appears to side with Stump and Kretzmann. The belief that God possesses “duration without succession” becomes an oft-repeated refrain throughout this period as the majority position.

F. Anselm’s Ontological Approach to Eternity

Augustine’s understanding of eternity as clarified by Boethius became the dominant view of the Middle Ages. It was embraced and elaborated upon by Anselm who was a student of both.¹¹⁶ Anselm’s consideration of, and contribution to, the subject of divine eternity, understood as duration without succession, is found mainly in chapters 13 and 19-22 of his *Proslogion*, and chapters 18-24 of the *Monologion*.

1. Anselm’s Perfect Being theology

Anselm’s first contribution to the doctrine arises in conjunction with his “Perfect Being” theology, which, in turn, is connected to his development of the ontological argument in the *Proslogion*. Although engaged in rigorous philosophical discussion, Anselm’s concerns are not simply philosophical but are part of his overall project of FSU

¹¹⁵Furthermore, recent philosophers often misinterpret Boethius. Padgett, for instance, disregards Boethius’s description of the timelessness of God as involving life and duration, preferring to emphasize the “at-once” (*simul*) language. Thus he insists, in contrast to Stump and Kretzmann, that for Boethius “eternity is non-durational as well as timeless” (*God, Eternity and the Nature of Time*, 46). Similarly, Kneale sees an incompatibility between the notion of timelessness and life, for life must involve some incidents of time, and if intelligent life, an awareness of times passing (“Time and Eternity in Theology,” 99).

¹¹⁶Padgett reports Anselm’s comment in the first chapter of the *Monologion* that he is committed to the doctrinal consensus of the Fathers, and “above all” Augustine. He also cites D.P. Henry’s article as evidence that Anselm was influenced by Aristotle via Boethius. Cf. D.P. Henry, “The Proslogion Proofs,” *Philosophical Quarterly* 5 (1955): 150; referenced in Padgett, *God, Eternity and the Nature of Time*, 47.

and are grounded in the biblical revelation concerning God.¹¹⁷ Helm comments:

In these chapters Anselm reflects on the reality and the character of God as (he believes) this is revealed in Scripture as ‘that than which no greater can be conceived.’ By faith he accepts the existence of this God on the authority of the Christian revelation, and he is a participant in the Christian way of life. But, as he tells us, he wishes to gain understanding of the nature of God, in whom he trusts, and this involves him in attempting to discern the inner necessity of God’s existence. Identifying and establishing this necessity and drawing out some of its implications is a good part of what Anselm means when he refers to the rational basis of faith. He is not striving to show that the faith is ‘reasonable’ in some vague sense, but that it has an inner necessity; God necessarily exists, and what God does is congruent with what he is.¹¹⁸

Defining God as “a being of which no greater can be conceived” leads Anselm to conclude not only that God must exist, but also that he is spaceless and timeless.¹¹⁹ His argument involves two steps. First, according to *Proslogion* 13, it is greater not to be constrained by space or time than to be so confined; therefore a perfect being such as God must exist “everywhere and always.”¹²⁰ Second, the “always” is to be understood in relation to the simplicity of God.¹²¹ To be simple is superior to being composed of parts. God, therefore, is not the composite of his attributes; he *is* his attributes. Any temporal being is composed of parts (such as past, present, and future). Since simplicity is greater than divisibility, God, who is a being of which no greater can be conceived, must be atemporal.¹²² Such atemporality strongly echoes the Augustinian-Boethian tradition:

¹¹⁷*Proslogion* 1 in *A Scholastic Miscellany: Anselm to Ockam*, trans. Eugene R. Fairweather (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1956), 73. “For I do not seek to understand in order to believe, but I believe in order to understand. For this too I believe, that ‘unless I believe, I shall not understand.’” This phrase, made famous by Anselm, finds its roots in Augustine’s *On the Trinity*, 14.8.

¹¹⁸Helm, *Faith and Understanding*, 104-105.

¹¹⁹Anselm, *Proslogion* 2.

¹²⁰Anselm, *Proslogion* 13; quoted in Padgett, *God, Eternity and the Nature of Time*, 47.

¹²¹Anselm, *Proslogion* 18.

¹²²Anselm, *Proslogion* 18, 19; referenced in Padgett, *God, Eternity and the Nature of Time*, 47-48.

You exist neither yesterday nor today nor tomorrow but are absolutely outside all time. . . . For nothing contains You, but you contain all things.

You surpass even all eternal things, since Your eternity and theirs is wholly present to You though they do not have the part of their eternity-to-come just as they do not have what is past. . . because You are always present at that point (or because it is always present to You) which they have not yet reached.¹²³

2. Anselm's parallel between space and time

In addition to the insight provided by his Perfect Being theology, Anselm makes a second contribution in chapter 23 of the *Monologion* and chapters 20 to 21 of the *Proslogion*, where he draws an important parallel between space and time. Time and space are part of the created order of things. Just as God is omnipresent, because he transcends the laws of space (which are also part of the created order), he is omnitemporal, because he transcends the limitations of time:

But what rational consideration can by any course of reasoning fail to reach the conclusion, that the Substance which creates and is supreme among all beings, which must be alien to, and free from, the nature and law of all things which itself created from nothing, is limited by no restraint of space or time.¹²⁴

At first glance, this argument might simply sound like Augustine's that time is part of the created order of things. However, it goes beyond Augustine in drawing an analogy between time and space. It spatializes time by viewing time as a kind of container that cannot contain God, since God is not constrained or limited by space or time. Therefore, God must be eternal. This is asserted by Anselm in several passages:

For yesterday and today and tomorrow belong solely to time, but, though nothing exists without thee, thou art not in place or time, but all things are in thee. For nothing contains thee, but thou containest all things.¹²⁵

¹²³Anselm, *Proslogion* 19 and 20 respectively; quoted in Padgett, *God, Eternity and the Nature of Time*, 48.

¹²⁴Anselm, *Monologion*, 22. Quoted from *St. Anselm: Proslogium, Monologium; An Appendix in Behalf of the Fool by Gaunilon; and Cur Deus Homo*, Trans. Sidney Norton Deane, 2nd edition (Chicago: Open Court Publishing Co., 1910), 79.

¹²⁵Anselm, *Proslogion* 19 in Fairweather, *A Scholastic Miscellany*, 86.

For just as an age made up of times contains all temporal things, so thy eternity contains the ages of time themselves. This eternity is an age because of its indivisible unity, but it is ages because of its unbounded immensity. And though thou art so great, O Lord that all things are full of thee and are in thee, nevertheless, thou art so truly spaceless that there is neither middle nor half nor any part in thee.¹²⁶

Even though nothing exists within eternity except the present, nevertheless this is not a temporal present as we know it but an eternal present in which the whole of time is contained. Just as the temporal present encompasses every place and everything whatsoever that is occurring in these places, so too does the eternal present contain the whole of time and everything which is in time. . . . Eternity has its own "simultaneity" and encompasses all of the things that occur at the same time and place and occur at different times and places.¹²⁷

It is clear, therefore, that Anselm upholds and strengthens what is emerging as the traditional doctrine of eternity. First, he undergirds it by appealing to Perfect Being theology and affirming divine simplicity. Since an eternal being is greater than a non-eternal being (since such a being would not be subject to the limitations of time), and since being simple is greater than being divisible (either in the separability of attributes or temporally), God must be eternal. Anselm does not provide much explanation of how being eternal is a perfection, and he is criticized for this.¹²⁸ Second, his analogy between time and space emphasizes duration without succession. That eternity possesses no past, present, or future suggests that it is without succession. That time is contained within eternity suggests that eternity endures: "eternity is an age because of its indivisible unity, but it is ages because of unbounded immensity."¹²⁹ These significant developments are further refined by Thomas Aquinas.

¹²⁶Anselm, *Proslogion* 21 in Fairweather, *A Scholastic Miscellany*, 87-88.

¹²⁷Anselm, *On the Harmony of the Foreknowledge, the Predestination and the Grace of God with Free Choice*. Qn. 1, Chap. 5; quoted in Yates, *The Timelessness of God*, 38.

¹²⁸As seen in our survey of the analytic debate, Nelson Pike criticizes him for this in *God and Timelessness* (New York: Schocken Books, 1970), 131.

¹²⁹Anselm, *Proslogion* 21 in Fairweather, *A Scholastic Miscellany*, 87-88.

G. Thomas Aquinas on Eternity

Thomas Aquinas (ca. 1224-1274), for the most part, agrees with the “traditional” doctrine of eternity in the consensus provided by Augustine, Boethius, and Anselm. There are some differences among this foursome, but Kevin Scott Diller rightly observes that most of these can be accounted for by the influence of Aristotle upon Aquinas.¹³⁰ Since Boethius was also an Aristotelian scholar, it is unsurprising that where differences occur (and they are largely a matter of emphasis rather than contrast), Aquinas often sides with Boethius over against Augustine. Yet, as Diller notes,

It would be a gross generalization to characterize Aquinas’ position on eternity as merely Aristotelian. He draws sharp disagreement with Aristotle on several key points. He does not agree with Aristotle that time is infinitely extended in the past. He argues from the authority of Scripture that time had a beginning. Moreover, Aquinas clearly rejects Aristotle’s conception of a completely disinterested and impersonal prime-mover. For Aquinas, God is personally present to all of creation [ST 1.8.1] and chooses to affect temporal things [ST 1.34.3].¹³¹

1. Aquinas and his predecessors

a. Aquinas and Augustine

Aquinas does not, like Augustine, argue for God’s timelessness on the basis of the temporality of creation. For Aquinas, that time has a beginning is an accidental property of time and, therefore, cannot be used to demonstrate that God is necessarily and essentially atemporal.¹³² Aquinas prefers and embraces Augustine’s argument in *On the Trinity* and Boethius’s in *The Consolation of Philosophy*, both of which ground God’s timelessness in the immutability of God.¹³³ However, he does agree with Augustine and Boethius that

¹³⁰Kevin Scott Diller, “Timelessness, Relationality and the Incarnation” (Th.M. thesis, Calvin Theological Seminary), 9.

¹³¹Diller, “Timelessness, Relationality and the Incarnation,” 9.

¹³²Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, trans. English Dominican Friars (London: Burns, Oates & Washbourne, Ltd, 1924), 2.35, 38, and *Summa Theologica* 1.46.1-3; quoted in Diller, “Timelessness, Relationality and the Incarnation,” 5.

¹³³Augustine, *On the Trinity*, 15.5. Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, 5.6.

God's life is experienced as a whole and without temporal extension.

b. Aquinas and Anselm

Aquinas also agrees and disagrees with Anselm. He agrees in arguing for divine timelessness not on the accidental nature of time but on the basis of the perfect being of God, who cannot be contained by time, since God "is not received in anything, but he is his own subsistent being."¹³⁴ However, Aquinas does not make a direct comparison between time and space or between God's timelessness and omnipresence as did Anselm. Further, Aquinas does not argue directly from God's perfection to his eternity. Instead, he draws that conclusion only after developing a number of intermediate steps. These differences stem in part from his interactions with Aristotelian metaphysics, which influence both his understanding of the nature of God's perfection and also his concept of time.¹³⁵

2. Aquinas's argument for divine timelessness

Aristotle's influence on Aquinas' doctrine of divine timelessness is multifaceted, but for the sake of simplicity (no pun intended), it can be traced to two major contributions. First, with respect to the nature of God, Aristotle's notion of divine perfection provides a conceptual model for both God's immutability and simplicity, each of which, in turn, entails divine timelessness. Second, with respect to the nature of time, Aquinas follows Aristotle in understanding that God is not in time because time assumes change: "It is manifest then that time is a number of change in respect to the before and after, and is continuous, for it is a number of what is continuous."¹³⁶ This definition, coupled with

¹³⁴Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1.7.1; quoted in Diller, 8.

¹³⁵I am indebted to Diller's discussion for assistance in summarizing the trajectory of Aquinas's argument; cf. Diller, "Timelessness, Relationality and the Incarnation, 8-16.

¹³⁶Aristotle, *Physics*, 4.11, trans. Edward Hussey (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1993); quoted in Diller, "Timelessness, Relationality and the Incarnation," 10.

Aquinas's concept of divine immutability, leads to the conclusion that, since God is immutable, he not measured by time and is, therefore, timeless. God is not only eternal, "but he is his own eternity."¹³⁷ Of these two lines of argument for divine timelessness, Aquinas devotes much more space and effort to the nature of God rather than the nature of time, although both are significant to his thought.

3. Eternity and the nature of God in Aquinas

a. Eternity and immutability

Aristotle's conception of God's perfection derives from his notion of the Unmoved Mover. According to Chapter Eight of the *Physics*, Aristotle argues that while living beings move on their own, the initiation of movement must rest on something external to themselves. Since an infinite regress of causes is impossible, there must of necessity be a mover upon which all movement depends, but which is, itself, unmoved. It is Aristotle's basic position that only an unchanging God can account for a world in which change is possible, since a mutable being would simply be part of the world and could not, therefore, be the first cause.¹³⁸ Such a being would have no potential but would be purely actual and, therefore, would possess an absolute immutability.

In his discussion of immutability, which precedes that of eternity, Aquinas gives three reasons why God is unchangeable, cannot experience successiveness in the Divine Life, and is, therefore, eternal. First, God is purely actual so there is no potential for change in God; there is nothing he could become. Second, God is absolutely simple. Things which change are always a composite of what they were, are, and will be; thus they are partly different and partly the same. God, being simple, is not subject to this kind of

¹³⁷Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1.10.1; quoted in Diller, "Timelessness, Relationality and the Incarnation," 10.

¹³⁸For a larger discussion of this point, see Brian Davies, *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 102.

change and so could not experience a succession of states. Finally, anything that changes acquires something new, not previously attained. But since God is both limitless and perfect, he cannot be associated with this kind of change.¹³⁹ Therefore, God's immutability entails his eternity.

Yates points out that this entailment is embedded in the organizational structure of Aquinas's discussion of the nature of God. Although Aquinas's treatment of the doctrine of the divine eternity is concentrated only in a few passages in the *Summa Contra Gentiles* and the *Summa Theologica*,¹⁴⁰ in both cases he is considering the attributes of God, and in both cases his discussion of eternity follows, and is logically connected with, a discussion of immutability.¹⁴¹ Thus, from the *Summa Contra Gentiles*:

From the foregoing it is also clear that God is eternal. For whatever begins or ceases to be, suffers this through movement or change. Now it has been shown that God is altogether unchangeable. Therefore he is eternal, having neither beginning nor end.¹⁴²

And from the *Summa Theologica*:

We have shown already that the notion of eternity derives from unchangeableness in the same way that the notion of time derives from change.¹⁴³

b. Eternity and simplicity

Padgett agrees that the doctrine of immutability is important to Aquinas' argument for divine timelessness. However, in contrast to Yates, Padgett sees God's simplicity as more essential than immutability in Aquinas's doctrine of eternity. In the *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas's synthesis of Aristotelian and Christian thought leads to the Five Ways of demonstrating the existence of God. But no sooner does he set forth these

¹³⁹Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1a.9.1.

¹⁴⁰See especially *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 1.15 and *Summa Theologica*, 1a.10.1-4.

¹⁴¹I am indebted to Yates, *The Timelessness of God*, 39, for this observation.

¹⁴²*Summa Contra Gentiles*, 1.15; quoted in Yates, *The Timelessness of God*, 39.

¹⁴³*Summa Theologica*, 1a.10.2; quoted in Yates, *The Timelessness of God*, 38.

arguments, then he proceeds to unpack what he believes to be God's most important attribute--his simplicity.

According to this doctrine, God does not possess his attributes, he *is* his attributes. He does not simply possess love, he *is* love. He is not simply just, he *is* justice. And these attributes are so much a part of the essence of God that they are indispensable. If God were to cease to possess them, he would cease to be God. Following the Augustinian-Boethian-Anselmian theological tradition, Aquinas embraces and clarifies the Boethian definition of eternity.¹⁴⁴ He defends it in the light of the doctrine of divine simplicity which he believes entails both immutability and eternity. As Padgett notes:

God is timeless because he is changeless and time is the measure of change. . . .God is changeless because God is simple. Given God's simplicity as perfect Being unified with essence, eternity is nothing less than God Himself [ST, Ia, q.10, a.2]. . . . In addition anything that changes must have parts: but God does not have any parts, being absolutely simple [Ia, q. 9, a.1]. . . .From the simplicity of God, therefore, flows the divine timeless eternity.¹⁴⁵

c. Eternity and the divine will

The immutability of God's nature carries over into the immutability of God's will or purpose. God does not act from necessity, but rather on the basis of his will. However, his will is unchanging and timeless. It is constant so that God never changes his mind although he still works his will in the world. As Aquinas himself puts it, "It is one thing to change one's will; quite another to will change in things."¹⁴⁶ Padgett explains that, for Aquinas, this unchanging will bring about both the effect and the time of the effect.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁴Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1a.q.10.

¹⁴⁵Padgett, *God, Eternity and the Nature of Time*, 49-50.

¹⁴⁶Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1.19.7; quoted in Brabant, *Time and Eternity in Christian Thought*, 69.

¹⁴⁷Padgett, *God, Eternity and the Nature of Time*, 50. Padgett references *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 2.35.

d. Eternity and the mode of God's knowledge

An important component to Aquinas's understanding of divine eternity is the mode of God's knowledge, which provides further evidence of a lack of successiveness in the life of God. According to Aquinas, God knows all without sense perception. To explain how this is possible Aquinas appeals to the use of the *Ideae*, an adaptation of the Aristotelian concept of the *Eidê*. As Brabant notes,

For Aristotle every separate type had its eidos, the perfect example it was trying to realize. . . . But whereas (for Aristotle) the type is merely the quasi-purpose of a semi-personified Nature (φύσις), the Christian doctrine of the Creator gives far fuller content to the idea. Just as the builder or artificer has in his mind the form or idea of the house he is to build or the statue he is to make, so before God creates anything, He has in His mind the idea--the special type of perfection, different for each different thing, which is meant to be realized. This is the very meaning of creative purpose; God does not know the whole course of things as a historian surveys a period from without, but as a general watches the movements of an army, all planned by him.¹⁴⁸

This distinguishes God's mode of knowledge from that of human beings. Our minds abstract from particulars because our minds are passive not creative. They receive their knowledge of universals from without. But God's intelligence is active and creative. His knowledge comes from within not without, so that God thoroughly knows the work that he has planned. In this way "God grasps things by an immediate and complete intuition which is far higher and truer than our partial and divided faculties."¹⁴⁹

4. Eternity and the nature of time

The source of Aquinas's understanding of time appears to be Book 4 of Aristotle's *Physics*, which Aquinas discusses in detail and which informs his understanding of eternity. Aristotle argues that time is essentially connected with change. Time is not, however, identical with change since change may be fast or slow, while what is fast or slow is determined by time itself. Nonetheless, without change there would be no sense of

¹⁴⁸Brabant, *Time and Eternity in Christian Thought*, 72.

¹⁴⁹Brabant, *Time and Eternity in Christian Thought*, 71.

time:

When we ourselves do not alter our mind or do not notice that we alter, then it does not seem to us that any time has passed. . . . If the now were not different but one and the same, there would be no time. . . . It is manifest, then, that time neither is change nor is apart from change, and since we are looking for what time is we must start from this fact and find what aspect of change it is.¹⁵⁰

Aristotle's solution to the problem is somewhat obscure: "It is manifest then that time is a number of change in respect to the before and after, and is continuous, for it is a number of what is continuous."¹⁵¹ However, this much seems clear, that for Aristotle we cannot understand what it would mean for time to pass in the absence of change. With this perspective, Aquinas is in complete agreement:

For since succession occurs in every movement, and one part comes after another, the fact that we reckon before and after in movement makes us apprehend time, which is nothing else but the measure of before and after in movement.¹⁵²

We say that time passes when we sense a before and after in change. It follows therefore, that time is consequent upon change in respect to before and after.¹⁵³

This understanding of time, coupled with Aquinas's concept of divine immutability and the method of *via negativa*, leads to the conclusion that, since God is immutable, he is not measured by time and is, therefore, timeless in the sense of being without succession:

Just as we can only come to know simple things by way of composite ones, so we can only come to know eternity by way of time, which is merely the numbering of before and after in change. . . . Now something lacking change and never varying in mode of existence will not display a before and after. So just as numbering antecedent and consequent in change produces the notion of time, so awareness of invariability in something altogether free from change produces the notion of

¹⁵⁰Aristotle, *Physics*, trans. Edward Hussey (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 42ff; quoted in Brian Davies, *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas*, 105.

¹⁵¹Aristotle, *Physics*, 4.11; quoted in Diller, "Timelessness, Relationality and the Incarnation," 10.

¹⁵²Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1a.10.1; quoted in Brian Davies, *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas*, 105.

¹⁵³Aquinas, *Commentary on the Physics*. Lecture 17.579; quoted in Brian Davies, *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas*, 106.

eternity.¹⁵⁴

The notion of eternity derives from unchangeableness in the same way that the notion of time derives from change. Eternity therefore principally belongs to God, who is utterly unchangeable.¹⁵⁵

Thus, God not only is eternal, “but he is his own eternity.”¹⁵⁶ It is important to recognize that Aquinas’s understanding of eternity is an analogical one derived from negative theology. The eternity of God is understood in terms of unchangeableness, as God possessing *duration but without succession*.

5. Eternity and atemporal duration

The concept of atemporal duration is a difficult one that has frequently been challenged. Padgett, for instance, denies it to Aquinas, as he denied it to Boethius, preferring to interpret Aquinas’s view of eternity as without duration. Padgett appeals to Aquinas’s analogy of the relationship between the centerpoint and circumference of a circle, interprets the centerpoint as being punctilinear, and concludes that “God’s eternity is durationless and timeless.”¹⁵⁷

Yates is more nuanced, believing there are a number of texts that suggest that for Aquinas “the timelessness of God is not that which excludes time but it embraces it all at once without itself becoming temporal.”¹⁵⁸ In other words, God’s eternity possesses a certain kind of duration. In support of this conclusion, Yates appeals to a larger portion of the very text cited by Padgett but which provides a broader context:

¹⁵⁴Aquinas, *Commentary on the Physics*. Lecture 17.579; quoted in Brian Davies, *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas*, 106.

¹⁵⁵Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1a.10.1; quoted in Brian Davies, *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas*, 107.

¹⁵⁶Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1a.10.1; quoted in Diller, “Timelessness, Relationality and the Incarnation,” 10.

¹⁵⁷Padgett, *God, Eternity and the Nature of Time*, 50.

¹⁵⁸Yates, *The Timelessness of God*, 42.

Again, since the being of the eternal never fails, eternity synchronizes with every time or instant of time. Somewhat of an example of this may be seen in the circle: for a given point in the circumference, although indivisible, does not coincide in its position with any other point, since the order of position results in the continuity of the circumference; while the centre which is outside the circumference is directly opposite any given point in the circumference. Accordingly whatever exists in any part if [sic] time is **coexistent with** the eternal as though present thereto, although in relation to another part of time it is present or future.¹⁵⁹

Yates believes this kind of language does not reflect any inconsistency in Aquinas, but rather a perceptive sensitivity to the paradoxical nature of the relationship between the temporal and the eternal.¹⁶⁰

Brian Davies is the most emphatic at this point, arguing that if timelessness is defined as “God has no duration or temporal location,” this is “arguably not Aquinas’s view of eternity.”¹⁶¹ Davies points out that Aquinas thinks of time as relative to change, so God’s immutability entails non-temporality. This means it is proper to speak of God as timeless. However, Davies proffers several reasons to be cautious about attributing some form of absolute timelessness to God. First, Aquinas affirms Boethius’s definition of eternity as a means of distinguishing between time and eternity. But, contrary to some interpreters, Boethius’s treatment is not unequivocal that God’s eternity lacks duration.¹⁶²

Second, the idea God has no duration is contrary to the way Aquinas speaks of God:

Like Boethius, he distinguishes between time and eternity, as we have seen. But he also accepts that eternity is ‘a measure of duration. . . measuring abiding existence,’ [Ia.10.1, cf. also Ia.14.13 and Ia.42.2], that the eternity of God ‘embraces (*includit*) all times,’ [Ia.10.2.ad. 4], that eternity is ‘present to all time and embraces all time’ (*toti tempori adest, et ipsum concludi*) [Ia.57.3] and that ‘God

¹⁵⁹Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 1.66.6; quoted in Yates, *The Timelessness of God*, 42. Boldface is Yates’s. Padgett cites a smaller version that he takes from Stump and Kretzmann.

¹⁶⁰Yates, *The Timelessness of God*, 43.

¹⁶¹Davies, *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas*, 107.

¹⁶²Davies is aware that Sorabji takes the position that Boethius unequivocally denies duration to God (*Creation, Time and the Continuum*, 115). However he believes a more competent interpretation of Aquinas is presented by Stump and Kretzmann’s article, “Eternity.” See n. 26 in Davies, *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas*, 108.

exists always' (*Deus semper est*) [*Comp.* ch.7]. Far from thinking of God as unequivocally durationless and as absolutely out of relation to past, present and future, Aquinas seems to hold both that God has duration and that he exists at all times (from which we might be forgiven for inferring that God always existed, that he exists now, and that he will always exist).¹⁶³

It is considerations like this that lead Davies to conclude that Aquinas's view of eternity is not an absolute one that denies any duration in God but one which views God as possessing duration without succession: "His teaching that God is eternal amounts to the view that the life of God cannot be measured in terms of successive states and is equivalent to the claim that God is wholly immutable."¹⁶⁴

6. Eternity and analogy

In his discussion of eternity, Aquinas offers a number of analogies, the most famous being that between the center and circumference of a circle:

God's understanding has no succession, as neither does His being. He is therefore an ever-abiding simultaneous whole--which belongs to the nature of eternity. On the other hand, the duration of time is stretched out through the succession of the before and after. Hence, the proportion of eternity to the total duration of time is as the proportion of the indivisible to something continuous; not, indeed, of that indivisible that is the terminus of a continuum, which is not present to every part of a continuum. . .but of that indivisible which is outside a continuum or with a determinate point in the continuum. . . . We may see an example of sorts in the case of a circle. Let us consider a determined point on the circumference of a circle. Although it is indivisible, it does not co-exist simultaneously with any other point as to position, since it is the order of position that produces the continuity of the circumference. On the other hand, the center of the circle, which is no part of the circumference, is directly opposed to any given determinate point on the circumference. Hence, whatever is found in any part of time coexists with what is eternal as being present to it, although with respect to some other time it be past or future. Some thing can be present to what is eternal only by being present to the whole of it, since the eternal does not have the duration of succession. The divine intellect, therefore, sees in the whole of its eternity, as being present to it, whatever takes place through the whole course of time. And yet what takes place in a certain part of time was not always existent. It remains, therefore, that God has a knowledge of those things that according to the march of time do not yet exist.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶³Davies, *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas*, 108.

¹⁶⁴Davies, *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas*, 109.

¹⁶⁵Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 1.66. This translation taken from *On the Truth of the Catholic Faith: Summa Contra Gentiles: Book One: God*, trans. Aton C. Pegis (New York: Image Books, 1955), 218-19.

As previously observed, Padgett sees this description of God as a point as evidence that Aquinas holds to a non-durational (or absolute) view of God's timelessness.

However, this interpretation misses the point of the analogy. As the context shows, the illustration is not attempting to explain the nature of God's eternity within himself but in relation to the temporal realm. In this very passage Aquinas states, *pace* Padgett, that God is, within himself an "ever abiding simultaneous whole." The point of this analogy is that God's knowledge of the temporal realm is complete, direct, unchanging, and without succession, and does not share in the linear temporal-order successive relations of before and after that characterize the points on the circumference.

A second, almost equally famous analogy is found in Aquinas's illustration of eternity as parallel to that of an observer viewing a road from a height:

Things reduced to act in time, as known by us successively in time, but by God (are known) in eternity, which is above time. Whence to us they cannot be certain, forasmuch as we know future contingent things as such; but (they are certain) to God alone, whose understanding is in eternity above time. Just as he who goes along the road, does not see those who come after him; whereas he who sees the whole road from a height, sees at once all travelling by the way. Hence, what is known by us must be necessary, even as it is in itself; for what is future contingent in itself, cannot be known by us. Whereas what is known by God must be necessary according to the mode in which they are subject to the divine knowledge as already stated, but not absolutely as considered in their own causes.¹⁶⁶

While this illustration is less geometrical and more down to earth, the point is the same, namely to show the contrast between God's complete and non-successive knowledge of all things over against the temporal viewpoint.

Finally, according to Aquinas, time itself provides a kind of analogy for eternity and our temporal present a kind of model for the eternal present:

Just as we can only come to know simple things by way of composite ones, so we can only come to know eternity by way of time, which is merely the numbering of before and after in change. . . . Now something lacking change and never varying its mode of existence will not display a before and after. So just as numbering

¹⁶⁶Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1.14.13, reply obj. 3, in Christian Classics Edition, 1: 83.

antecedent and consequent change produces the notion of time, so awareness of invariability in something altogether free from change produces the notion of eternity.¹⁶⁷

In this illustration, time itself provides the necessary raw material, processed by the *via negativa*, to arrive at a conception of eternity.

7. A summary of eternity from Augustine through Aquinas

Diller provides a nice summary of the doctrine of divine timelessness from Augustine through Aquinas:

In conclusion, the Augustinian tradition of timelessness is built on a variety of philosophical and theological commitments. For Augustine the aseity of God coupled with a view of time as a creation leads to the conclusion that God is wholly unbounded by time. Augustine also alludes to the definition of eternity which Boethius develops and Anselm and Aquinas affirm--that eternity is simultaneous and without successive extension. Anselm agrees with Augustine that God's aseity is on the line, and he also agrees that time is something God completely transcends. But Anselm adds the analogy of time to space and the notion of God's relationship to time as analogous to omnipresence. Aquinas downplays the analogy to space and builds his argument around Aristotelian notions of time and potentiality. Because God is free of all potentiality, on the grounds of both divine simplicity and immutability, God must be timeless.¹⁶⁸

H. The Reformers and Calvin on Eternity

The Reformers, despite their break with Rome and their suspicions of Aristotelian influence on theology, were not innovators regarding the doctrine of God, and they accepted the Augustine-Boethius-Anselm-Aquinas (hence ABAA) tradition of eternity as duration without succession with little comment.¹⁶⁹ Calvin, while he does not discuss the doctrine of eternity at any great length, is in essential agreement with the ABAA tradition:

¹⁶⁷Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1a.10.1; quoted in Brian Davies, *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas*, 106.

¹⁶⁸Diller "Timelessness, Relationality and the Incarnation," 17.

¹⁶⁹There is so little discussion, in fact, that many have concluded the Reformers had no interest in the doctrine. Thus Padgett notes that "The Reformers were uninterested in philosophical issues like the nature of time and eternity. They affirm the eternity of God but without making the kind of philosophical distinctions that interest us" (*God, Eternity and the Nature of Time*, 52). Yates, too, roundly (and mistakenly) declares that "there is no discussion of the timelessness of God in Calvin's *Institutes*" (*The Timelessness of God*, 44-45).

When we attribute foreknowledge to God, we mean that all things always were, and perpetually remain, under his eyes, so that to his knowledge there is nothing future or past, but all things are present. And they are present in such a way that he not only conceives them through ideas, as we have before us those things which our minds remember, but he truly looks upon them and discerns them as things placed before him. And this foreknowledge is extended throughout the universe to every creature.¹⁷⁰

I. The Defense of Eternity in Post-Reformation Reformed Orthodoxy

Post-Reformation Reformed Orthodoxy (hence PRRO) was equally committed to the ABAA tradition regarding divine eternity, but was much more extensive in its treatment than were the Reformers. Even though it is often glanced over or ignored completely in historical surveys of the doctrine, PRRO includes a host of important theologians who addressed the subject with the kind of detail, sophistication, and quality of thought comparable to the four thinkers who developed the tradition.¹⁷¹

1. PRRO and the relationship of faith and reason

Broadly speaking, the movement known as Protestant Orthodoxy involved a self-conscious attempt to construct a theological perspective on the divine attributes, consistent with reason but firmly rooted in the assertions of scripture about God. It differed from the Reformers primarily in the adoption of a more scholastic method and polemic tone and in the way it utilized the tools of humanist rhetoric and logic.¹⁷² However, while there was an appreciation for the philosophical issues and models that illuminated the doctrine of the

¹⁷⁰Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3.21.5. I first encountered this quotation when I read Edward R. Wierenga's article, "Timelessness out of Mind: On the Alleged Incoherence of Divine Timelessness" in *God and Time: Essays on the Divine Nature*, ed. Gregory E. Ganssle and David M. Woodruff (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002): 153. Wierenga mistakenly cites the reference as 3.20.5. The correct source is 3.21.5. Calvin is addressing this issue in the context of a discussion of predestination, foreknowledge, and the divine decree.

¹⁷¹For this brief summary of a huge topic, I am almost entirely indebted to Richard Muller's *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 3, *The Divine Essence and Attributes* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2003), 325-364 (hence *PRRD*). I will return to PRRO when I consider the biblical defense of divine eternity in chapter 6. Here I simply summarize and contextualize its contribution to the history of Christian doctrine.

¹⁷²Muller, *PRRD*, 3:326.

divine attributes, PRRO was not hesitant to distance itself from philosophical models in favor of the biblical text whenever it was required. In other words, while both appreciative of reason and absolutely committed to scriptural authority, PRRO was not unaware of the potential tensions between the two. It should not, therefore, be accused of a rationalistic reading of the biblical text in light of Hellenistic categories and concepts of being. Its end product, while bearing some formal resemblance to Aristotle, is often radically different from what he proposed.

As an example, Richard Muller points to God's relationship to time. As with the medieval scholastics, the Protestant scholastics saw God's eternity as an aspect of his infinity, a position it shared in parallel fashion with God's relationship to space (his immensity or omnipresence).¹⁷³ In addition, their discussions of God's infinity, or the "greatness of God," in both of these areas (eternity and immensity) were organized around the dual perspectives of how God possesses these attributes in himself and in relation to his creation (*ad intra* and *ad extra*, or "intrinsically considered" and "extrinsically considered").¹⁷⁴ This distinction is a vital hallmark of their treatment of these attributes.¹⁷⁵

Further, in their pursuit of FSU, the Protestant Orthodox were fully committed to the authority of scripture (over against that of philosophy) and yet highly nuanced in their use of scripture in discussions with philosophical overtones. Muller observes how, in their treatment of infinity and eternity, the Reformed Orthodox were sensitive to the difficulties of drawing philosophical conclusions from biblical texts, and were certainly not guilty (as sometimes accused) of blindly embracing unbiblical philosophical models in constructing their theological positions. Indeed, they made a careful distinction "between eternity in an ultimate sense and everlastingness in relation to the things of the finite and temporal

¹⁷³Muller, *PRRD*, 3:327.

¹⁷⁴Muller, *PRRD*, 3:328.

¹⁷⁵Muller, *PRRD*, 3:328-329.

order.”¹⁷⁶

The Protestant Orthodox treatment of the doctrine of eternity involved a variety of approaches. Some (such as Cocceius and Turretin) saw it as an extension of God’s infinity and a reflection of the mode of his existence. God, who is temporally boundless and immeasurable, nonetheless stands in positive relation to the creation. Further, the immutability of the eternal realm provides the grounding of the relative permanence possessed by the temporal realm. Others (like Brakel) saw the road to this doctrine as one of negation, since the attribute itself is incommunicable and therefore beyond human comprehension and experience. Still others (like Pictet) saw eternity as an aspect of God’s self-existence, who is therefore incapable of beginning or end as testified to in Ps. 102:24-28 and 1 Tim. 6:16. This view grounds the doctrine of eternity in the Creator/creature distinction and sees time (as did Augustine) as a measure of the mutability of the created order that does not precede the creation. God, as one who inhabits eternity, is therefore without beginning, end, or succession.¹⁷⁷

While these discussions have a certain philosophical flavor, they do not reflect a blind commitment to a strict Aristotelian rationalism but simply reflect the Augustinian/Anselmian tradition of FSU, which assumed a certain compatibility between faith and reason but which was informed as much exegetically as philosophically:

Their conclusion of an unbounded eternity belongs as much to the traditionary hermeneutic of comparing text with text as it does to the reliance on extra-biblical traditionary criteria. Cocceius’ and Pictet’s assumption is that the received results of exegesis—for the Protestant tradition, exegesis of the text in its original languages—substantiate his position. As Pictet states in the course of his exposition, “what reason teaches, the whole of Scripture far more demonstrates.” Our errors and difficulties of comprehension concerning the relationship of time and eternity, of world and God, arise from the finitude of our mind and from our custom of “conceiving of God along with or after the establishment of the

¹⁷⁶Muller, *PRRD*, 3:346.

¹⁷⁷Muller, *PRRD*, 3:346-347. Muller references Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 2.10.2, Cocceius, *Summa theol.* 3.9.37 and Brakel, *Redelijke Godsdienst*, 1.3.9.

world.”¹⁷⁸

2. Eternity and the relationship of the attributes

In their treatment of the biblical text, the Protestant Orthodox placed a strong emphasis on mutual entailment of the attributes leading to multiple perspectives on the theological formulations of the Divine attributes, so that these many roads led to the same conclusions. This is represented in the plurality of approaches to the doctrine of eternity. The doctrine is not simply derived from the handful of texts that refer directly to God’s relationship to time. Instead, it is the product of reflection on the whole constellation of God’s attributes, including, most significantly, his infinity, aseity, immensity, immutability, omniscience, and omnipotence (particularly in relationship to the creation and to divine providence) and the logical relations among them. Thus his perfection entails his eternity, since, if he were temporal, he would be contingent in some sense. As Creator of all things, including time, he must be transcendent of temporality. God’s changelessness also forbids interpreting his existence as being subject to time. Thus eternity arises not simply out of simplicity, but also out of God’s immensity, the Creator/Creature distinction, the aseity of God, the perfection of God, and a host of other attributes. While the robe resulting from such theological weaving might not be entirely seamless, *no part of it could be removed or altered* without significant implications for the doctrine of God. It is important, therefore, to appreciate the multi-pronged approach to the doctrine of eternity maintained by Reformed Orthodoxy.

3. The defense of non-successive duration

Obviously, for temporal creatures like ourselves, the notion of an existence transcendent of time is impossible to comprehend. Indeed, as Brakel points out, any

¹⁷⁸Muller, *PRRD*, 3:347. Muller cites Pictet, *Theol. chr.* 2.11.3 and 2.12.7 and references Cocceius, *Summa theol.* 3.9.37.

attempt to understand the concept of eternity by temporal categories dishonors God.¹⁷⁹ This leads to PRRO's embrace of eternity as duration without succession rather than absolute timelessness.¹⁸⁰ This view is designed to preserve both the unchangeableness of God and a relationship between God and the temporal creation. As Muller notes, PRRO (and the tradition that undergirds it) maintains that eternity, because it is duration, "coexists with all times without disrupting or confusing the times of individual things."¹⁸¹ This nuanced position is often misunderstood in the modern analytic discussions:

This doctrine, as it stands, does not fall precisely into the modern category either of a radically "timeless God" or of an "everlasting God" nonetheless "in time." Eternity is not "timelessness," the term favored in many modern discussions of the issue, but a successionless existence immediately related to all moments of time or, more precisely, a successionless duration directly related to temporal succession: after all, it is defined not as an "absolute" but as a "relative" attribute.¹⁸²

Thus, the notion of eternity defended by PRRO does not prohibit a relationship and interaction between the mode of God's eternal existence and the temporal realm. Quite the opposite. It denies succession in God in order to "assume a direct and necessary relationship between God and the temporal order" as required by the doctrines of creation and providence and *concursum*.¹⁸³ Muller comments:

This in itself ought to make readers of the seventeenth-century documents wary of modern generalizations concerning "timeless eternity." Indeed, the *Synopsis purioris theologiae* indicates that God is without (*expers*) end or terminus, not that he is lacking or without time: his essence is such that he contains or possesses "no limit" of essence, magnitude, places, or times—specifically, in the doctrine of eternity, without "limitation of time" or "circumscription of time." The notion of eternal or "infinite duration" as a synonym for eternity underlines this issue: eternal duration is *beyond* time in the sense of transcending temporal limitations, but is not descriptive of God as being *without* time, and certainly not as *outside of* time—as if

¹⁷⁹Brakel, *Redelijke Godsdienst*, 1.3.9; quoted in Muller, *PRRD*, 3:354.

¹⁸⁰Muller, *PRRD*, 3:354.

¹⁸¹Muller, *PRRD*, 3:348. In making these assertions Muller references Rijssen, *Summa*, 3.12, controversia, obj. 4 and Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 3.10.8.

¹⁸²Muller, *PRRD*, 3:348.

¹⁸³Muller, *PRRD*, 3:354-355.

time were an objectively existent container around things. According to the scholastics, God is without change and without succession, but not without duration—the few who deny duration can specify that it is *duratio successiva* that is being denied.¹⁸⁴

PRRO echoes the position of Aquinas (and Stump and Kretzmann) in seeing eternity as an infinite and successionless duration which stands, nonetheless, in relationship to time. Aquinas puts it this way:

the proportion of eternity to the total duration of time is as the proportion of something indivisible to something continuous; not, indeed, of that indivisible that is the terminus of a continuum, which is not present to every part of a continuum . . . but of that indivisible which is outside a continuum and which nevertheless coexists with any given part of a continuum or with a determinate point in the continuum.¹⁸⁵

Not only does PRRO borrow Aquinas's argument; it also assimilates his famous circle illustration¹⁸⁶ In defending the notion of successionless duration, PRRO preserves a distinction that is frequently lost in modern day discussions, namely the distinction between the eternity of the divine essence considered in itself apart from creation (intrinsically) and the eternity of the divine essence considered in relation to the temporal order (extrinsically). This distinction is applied with equal vigor to God's relationship to space as it is to God's relationship to time. Thus, *in himself*, God lacks succession but maintains duration. However, *in relation to his creatures*, God exhibits an everlastingness and omnipresence in both time and space at each point of the temporal succession. In other words, there is eternity as possessed by God in himself, eternity proper, and an eternity possessed by God in relation to his creation, namely, eternity as everlasting duration.

¹⁸⁴Muller, *PRRD*, 3:355. In making these remarks Muller references Charnock, *Existence and Attributes*, 5:278-279, 303; Boston, *Body of Divinity*, 1:84); Ridgley, *Body of Divinity* (1855), 86-87; *Synopsis purioris theol.* 6.27; Leigh, *Body of Divinity*, 2.4 (p. 176); Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* 3.10.6; Ward, *Philosophicall Essay*, 1.3 (p. 27); Flavel, *Exposition of the Assembly's Catechism*, in *Works*, 6:148; and Brian Davies's discussion in *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas*, 107-109.

¹⁸⁵Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 1.66.7; quoted in Muller, *PRRD*, 3:356.

¹⁸⁶Muller, *PRRD*, 3:356.

4. Eternity and God's relationship to the world

By distinguishing between God as he is in himself and as he is in relationship to us, PRRO is not forced to drive a wedge between the eternal and the temporal. Indeed, the denial of change in succession in God, far from resulting in the destruction of the relationship between God and his creatures, affirms that relationship.¹⁸⁷ How God who, in himself, experiences no succession of moments, can even possibly be viewed as having succession in relationship to us is illustrated by another analogy provided by Henry More. God's eternal duration, says More,

contains *virtually* all the successive Duration imaginable, and is perpetually *applicable* to the succeeding parts thereof, as being always present thereunto, as the Chanel [sic] of a River, to all the water that passes through it; but the Channel is in no such successive defluxion, though the water be. Such is the steady and permanent duration of the necessary existence of God, in respect of all successive Duration whatsoever.¹⁸⁸

As the previous discussion suggests, the distinction between eternity and temporality does not result in an absolute incompatibility between them. Muller comments:

Both are kinds of duration, the former without mutation, the latter with mutation. Turretin states quite specifically that God's "eternal duration embraces all time" and that eternity, in a very specific sense "coexists with all the differences of time." Just as in his immensity "God embraces. . . all the extended and divisible parts of the world," so in his eternity does God embrace "all divisible times, not coextensively or formally, but eminently and indivisibly." Turretin concludes that "it is not absurd" to teach that "the world and time should be contained in a point of eternity," given that a "point" need not be conceived merely mathematically as "the beginning of a line or of time" or physically as "the shortest extension either of mass or time" but also metaphysically as indicating "the negation of extension and divisibility."¹⁸⁹

The result is a precise parallel between the relationship between God's immensity to his omnipresence and his eternity and everlasting duration. Muller summarizes:

¹⁸⁷Muller, *PRRD*, 3:358.

¹⁸⁸Henry More, *Divine Dialogues, containing sundry Disquisitions & Instructions concerning the Attributes of God and His Providence in the World*, 2 vols (London: James Elesher, 1668), 1:62. A similar analogy is found in Hopkins, *On the Lord's Prayer*, in *Works*, 1:96; quoted in Muller, *PRRD*, 3:358 in both text and footnote.

¹⁸⁹Muller, *PRRD*, 3:358-359.

The distinction, then, is between the infinitude of the divine essence considered in itself, apart from creation, and either the eternity of God as contrasted with the temporal limitation of creation or the everlasting duration of the divine essence considered in its relation to the temporal order. The intrinsic infinitude of God can be understood, extrinsically or *ad extra*, either as the ultimate absence of temporal and spatial limitation, namely, eternity and immensity, or as the everlasting duration and omnipresence of God in his relationship to both time and space.¹⁹⁰

Thus, PRRO not only views God's relationship to time negatively in terms of the lack of temporal succession, but also positively in terms of God's relationship to the temporal world that he has made.¹⁹¹ This distinction is of great importance to the modern discussion and suggests that the concerns about the Hellenization of theology and the absolute disjunction between the temporal and eternal may be misplaced:

We have once again encountered the phenomenon of a Christianized Aristoteleanism, as different here from its ancient philosophical source as the scholastic conception of God as First or Unmoved Mover is different from the original Aristotelian conception. If, moreover, this hypothesis is correct, then it follows that many modern critiques of the traditional concept of eternity as positing a God who cannot relate to time are misplaced, inasmuch as they confuse the relative attribute of eternity and everlasting duration with the absolute attribute of infinity, in effect, addressing only the first member of the distinction and then complaining of a lack of relation to time when there is no time to which to be related—rather than examining the second member, which specifically identifies the way in which an eternal God does relate to time. . . . This understanding of eternity and time quite consciously on the part of the orthodox voids the objection that an eternal being cannot know what is happening in a given moment as distinct from what is happening at another moment.¹⁹²

5. The biblical defense of eternity

In contrast to most modern discussions, PRRO provides a spirited biblical defense of the doctrine of divine eternity understood as reflecting duration without succession. Since I will draw upon a number of their arguments more fully in chapter 6, here I simply summarize their discussion. As Muller points out, their approach is multi-pronged and highly nuanced hermeneutically:

¹⁹⁰Muller, *PRRD*, 3:359.

¹⁹¹Muller, *PRRD*, 3:360.

¹⁹²Muller, *PRRD*, 3:360-361.

[T]he full argument for eternity demands the interpretation of Scripture with Scripture and the hermeneutic of drawing conclusions from the juxtaposition of texts. Inasmuch as some passages speak of God as “everlasting” and others of God as “changeless,” the everlastingness cannot be understood in successive or temporal terms. The biblical texts, they insist, consistently contrast God’s nature to the changeableness of created beings: Calvin notes that “everlastingness” is “referred not only to the essence of God, but also to his providence” for “although he subjects the world to many alterations, he remains unmoved.”¹⁹³

Muller sets forth five ways in which PRRO thought that the doctrine of eternity, understood as duration without succession, was fully attested in the Scriptures:¹⁹⁴

First, by simple and plain asseveration (Gen. 21:33; Isaiah 40:28 and 15:15; Dan. 7:27; Rom. 16:26). Thus, “God is not subject to the vicissitudes of time; he endures or has duration without mutation or succession.”¹⁹⁵

Second, by denying to God time and succession (Job 36:26; Isa. 43:10; Ps. 90:2-5; 2 Pet. 3:8). PRRO followed the Reformers in believing that texts such as these, which speak of God’s *enduring* forever in contrast to the mutability of creational life, provide direct evidence that the mode of God’s existence is duration without succession.

Third, by the attribution of “eternal properties and operations” to God (Pss. 103:17; 136:1-26 and others). A number of Reformed orthodox observe how the designation of eternity in scripture is predicated of other attributes and abilities of God including his mercy (Pss. 103:17; 136:1-26); counsel (Ps. 33:11); kingdom (Ex. 15:18); power (Dan. 6:26); glory (1 Pet. 5:10); dominion (Dan. 7:14); and righteousness and truth (Ps. 119:142).¹⁹⁶

Fourth, by a metaphorical description, days and years are attributed to him; but most distinct from our days and years. PRRO sees the reference to God’s days as a

¹⁹³Muller, *PRRD*, 3:351-352. Muller cites Calvin, *Commentary on the Psalms*, Ps. 90:2 in loc. (*CTS Psalms III*, p. 462).

¹⁹⁴Muller’s discussion is very briefly described here. It is found in *PRRD*, 3:348-354. The italicized headings are framing quotations taken directly from Muller’s text.

¹⁹⁵Muller, *PRRD*, 3:349.

¹⁹⁶Leigh, *Treatise*, 2.4 (p. 41); reported in Muller, *PRRD*, 3:352.

deliberate anthropomorphism, which provides *not a comparison but a contrast* between the temporal and eternal modes of existence.

Fifth, by logical argument from other biblically grounded, divine attributes. This argument points to the way the whole constellation of God's attributes mutually entail divine eternity.¹⁹⁷

6. Post-Reformation Reformed Orthodoxy, eternity, and the divine decree

According to PRRO, the creation itself is a testimony to the infinity of God since its complexity and the variety of its creatures and modes of existence could not have been the product of a finite being.¹⁹⁸ In a similar way, the concept of the divine decree, which underlies the works of creation and providence, entails God's infinity:

The concept of a divine decree on which all things depend also demands the concept of immensity or eternity inasmuch as it stands beyond time, having nothing before, whether according to nature or origin: the decree is an act of infinite wisdom that from all eternity comprehends all possibilities, in all of their varieties, modes and aspects. Logically a being who is confined to a place or to a time--of whom it could be said "it is necessarily here"--certainly, is certainly, of necessity, not God.¹⁹⁹

IV. Summary and Conclusions

A. A Test Case for this Chapter: Katherin Rogers on Eternal Duration

1. Rogers's thesis against eternal duration

In "Eternity has no duration," Katherin Rogers mounts a frontal assault against the notion of atemporal duration as defended by Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann and

¹⁹⁷Muller, *PRRD*, 3:353-354.

¹⁹⁸Muller, *PRRD*, 3:333.

¹⁹⁹Muller, *PRRD*, 3:333.

Brian Leftow.²⁰⁰ Nor does she believe it represents the Christian tradition. Rogers finds the concept of atemporal duration “curious” and she attacks it historically and contextually as improbable, logically as incoherent, and metaphorically as contrary to the centerpoint and circle metaphor actually used by Plotinus, Boethius, and others in the history of the doctrine. She also argues that the position of durational eternity cannot be rescued by appeal to Aquinas’s doctrine of analogy. Instead, she maintains (a) that the consistent point of comparison between the temporal and eternal is that of *presentness*; (b) that the persistent metaphor of the relationship between the two is that of a centerpoint to the circumference of a circle; and (c) that both presentness and the circle analogy require an instantaneous and non-durational model of eternity.

Rogers’s article presents a serious, detailed, and thoughtful challenge to the concept of eternal duration maintained in this chapter. Nonetheless, I believe her argument is unsuccessful because (a) she tends to read a modern temporalist emphasis into the notion of duration in the theological tradition; (b) she is guilty of the same kind of presuppositional bias of which she accuses her opponents; (c) she misreads the analogy of the temporal and eternal present in Augustine; (d) she misses the primary purpose of the centerpoint-circle metaphor, which she so strongly advocates; (e) many of her citations can best be used in service of the view she opposes; and (f) if the *via analogia* of Aquinas cannot be applied to durational eternity, her argument from it equally undermines her own defense of instantaneous eternity.

Since a number of these weaknesses occur at several points throughout her essay, I will summarize her discussion in sequence as it unfolds and point out her vulnerability to

²⁰⁰Katherin Rogers, “Eternity Has No Duration,” *Religious Studies*, 30 (1994), 1-16. See Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann, “Eternity,” *Journal of Philosophy* 8 (1981): 220, 225; “Atemporal Duration: A Reply to Fitzgerald,” *Journal of Philosophy* 84 (1987): 214-219; Brian Leftow, *Time and Eternity* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 117; and discussions in chapters 2 through 4 of this dissertation.

these criticisms whenever applicable. In this way I hope to provide both a careful exposition of her argument as well as a systematic and thorough response to her concerns.

2. Rogers's critique of Stump and Kretzmann

Rogers believes that Stump and Kretzmann and Leftow “fundamentally misread” Boethius away from the historical and philosophical context in which he is found. Their literal reading of Boethius’s description of eternity as “remaining” and “enduring” is questionable since Boethius’s language about eternity obviously departs from normal usage.²⁰¹ More importantly, other texts in Boethius suggest that he understands eternity more as an instant rather than as enduring or extended:

God’s knowledge of all time, writes Boethius, is ‘knowledge of a never-passing instant’ (*numquam deficientis instantiae*). God sees ‘all things as though from the highest peak of the world.’ God, from the one highest point that is His eternity, instantaneously sees all the temporal world spread out ‘below’ Him, but there is no hint that God is somehow ‘stretched out alongside it’.²⁰²

Rogers’s point that Boethius’s language for eternity departs from normal usage is well-taken; thus, one should exercise caution in interpreting his temporal and spatial language. Stump and Kretzmann would agree, and they take pains to emphasize the limitations of language in describing the relationship of the temporal and eternal.²⁰³ However, turnabout is fair play. This caution is equally applicable to apparently non-durational language such as “instantaneous” or “all at once” and “instant.” In context, these terms also depart from “normal usage.” In both cases, it is not the words themselves but their usage in context that determine their meaning. Considered contextually, however, the durational interpretation certainly holds its ground. For example, in the passage cited by

²⁰¹Rogers, “Eternity Has No Duration,” 2.

²⁰²Rogers, “Eternity Has No Duration,” 2. Rogers cites Boethius, *De consolazione philosophiae*, Book 5, Prose 6, lines 68-69, 71-72.

²⁰³See Stump and Kretzmann, “Atemporal Duration: A Reply to Fitzgerald,” 218-219, and “Eternity, Awareness and Action,” *Faith and Philosophy* 9 (1992): 465.

Rogers, God's knowledge is described as a "never passing instant." Certainly an instant that never passes departs from normal usage. But does it not also sound like an instant that endures, if not temporally, at least in some sense? Rogers criticizes Stump and Kretzmann for being uncritically literal in their reading of Boethius and then takes an unwarrantedly literal approach in support of her own interpretation.

Rogers also believes that Stump and Kretzmann's appeal to Plato, Plotinus, Augustine, and Aquinas is circular. Since the texts they cite do not unambiguously present a concept of eternal duration, she believes they read their interpretation of Boethius back into those associated with his thought:

If we agree with Stump and Kretzmann's analysis of Boethius we may indeed interpret these other thinkers as accepting eternity with duration when they use language similar to that employed by Boethius. But if we are sceptical of this reading of Boethius we will bring the same doubts to Stump and Kretzmann's interpretation of Plotinus *et al.*²⁰⁴

In other words, according to Rogers, Stump and Kretzmann argue in a circular fashion when they interpret Boethius in a certain way and then see similarities with earlier and later philosophers and theologians on the basis of their interpretation of Boethius. However, this circular saw cuts both ways. Rogers, no less than Stump and Kretzmann, also insists on a certain interpretation of Boethius and then sees this perspective reflected in the thinking and metaphors of other philosophers.

3. Rogers's criticism of Brian Leftow

Rogers is equally unconvinced by Leftow's treatment of Boethius and Plato. The first text Leftow appeals to is taken from the *Consolation* where Boethius describes eternal being as that which "nothing future is absent from it, and nothing past has flowed away."²⁰⁵ Leftow admits this text is ambiguous as to whether an eternal being possesses a

²⁰⁴Rogers, "Eternity Has No Duration," 2.

²⁰⁵Boethius, *De consolazione philosophiae*, Book 5, Prose 6, lines 27-8; quoted by Leftow in *Time and Eternity*, 112, and Rogers, "Eternity Has No Duration," 2.

past and a future all at once or whether such a being is copresent or “stretched out alongside” all of time. Nonetheless, Leftow favors the metaphor of being “stretched out” as a superior description of Boethius’s position over the analogy that Boethius himself actually uses and which Rogers prefers (that of the relationship of the centerpoint of a circle to its circumference).²⁰⁶ Rogers’s criticism reechoes the charge of circularity already leveled at Stump and Kretzmann:

The text is ambiguous only if we have some further reason to believe that Boethius might have accepted the view of eternity as duration. I will argue below that there is every reason to deny this, in which case the text is not ambiguous at all. It says that God is present to all time as the centre of the circle is present to all the points on the circumference.²⁰⁷

In Leftow’s second reference, Boethius refers to eternal being embracing “its whole extent simultaneously.” From this, Leftow argues for eternal duration on the grounds that “a being that embraces its whole extent has an extent to embrace.”²⁰⁸ Against this argument, Rogers accuses Leftow of misquoting Boethius:

What Boethius said, speaking of a hypothetical, infinite, but temporal being, was that, ‘it does not embrace its whole extent (*spatium*) simultaneously. . .’, whereas the eternal ‘comprehends and possesses the whole fullness (*plenitudinum*) of unlimited life at once. . .’. Boethius never says that the eternal embraces its whole extent simultaneously. The eternal has *plenitudinum* not *spatium*.²⁰⁹

However, in her objection, Rogers pushes too hard linguistically and again reveals her own presuppositional bias by insisting on precisely nuanced meanings of words in a context that she has already admitted departs from “normal usage.” Boethius is comparing

²⁰⁶Leftow, *Time and Eternity*, 116-117; quoted in Rogers, “Eternity Has No Duration,” 2-3. It is worth noticing that Leftow’s metaphor is consistent with, and bears some formal relationship to, the two-line metaphor of Stump and Kretzmann.

²⁰⁷Rogers, “Eternity Has No Duration,” 3.

²⁰⁸This discussion is found in Rogers, “Eternity Has No Duration,” 3. She is citing Leftow, *Time and Eternity*, 117. Leftow is basing his argument on Boethius, *De consolazione philosophiae*, Book 5, Prose 6 lines 22-24.

²⁰⁹Rogers, “Eternity Has No Duration,” 3. Rogers is referencing Boethius, *De consolazione philosophiae*, Book 5, Prose 6, lines 25-7.

and contrasting temporal and eternal being. In this context, Leftow appears within his rights to apply the positive of a negative contrast with a temporal being to the eternal being and to infer from this quotation that the eternal being does what the temporal being does not, namely, embrace the whole extent of its life simultaneously. While “fullness” and “extent” may be distinguishable, they are not opposites. Their semantic fields can overlap and seem to do so in this context.

The third argument proffered by Leftow arises out of an inference from Plato’s description of the temporal and eternal in the *Timaeus*. Since Plato describes temporal everlastingness as the mutable image of eternity, and since the former is certainly durational, it is reasonable to conclude that eternity is also durational.²¹⁰ Rogers responds by suggesting that Leftow has made the wrong inference:

Since, for Boethius, the eternal is characterized by the ‘plenitude of unlimited life,’ it may be better to suppose that Plato and Boethius saw a universe, infinite in time, as a better image of the eternal than a finite universe because it possesses more being, not because it is ‘stretched out.’²¹¹

While Rogers’s interpretation is plausible, it is not clear what makes it preferable to Leftow’s, beyond her own commitment to an instantaneous model of eternity and avoidance of any hint of duration. However, Rogers insists that her position is historically grounded, that the textual evidence for a durational eternity is “slender at best,” and that what durational language does occur can best be understood by how God appears from our temporal perspective (*quoad nos* rather than *in se*).²¹²

²¹⁰Leftow, *Time and Eternity*, 119; described in Rogers, “Eternity Has No Duration,” 3.

²¹¹Rogers, “Eternity Has No Duration,” 3.

²¹²Rogers, “Eternity Has No Duration,” 3-4. Rogers’s last comment regarding distinguishing between God as he is *in se* and *quod nos*, is, I believe an important and correct one. However, it is not inconsistent with the view that God possesses duration without succession, and it is a distinction that finds much use within the PRRO defense of the traditional doctrine.

4. Rogers's historical argument for non-durational eternity

In support of her historical argument, Rogers appeals first to Augustine, then to Boethius himself, and, finally, to Plotinus. Her argument from Augustine involves an inference from his analysis of the temporal present. In the *Confessions*, Augustine takes great pains to argue that the temporal present has no duration but is simply the dividing line between the past, which no longer exists, and the future, which does not yet exist. From this, Rogers draws the following conclusion:

If Augustine chooses to describe eternity as 'present,' given that the main feature of the present which we know, the temporal present, is that it is unextended, it is reasonable to suppose that he intends us to see God's 'present' as without duration. Other things he says support this. All of God's years 'stand simultaneously' (*simul stant*), and that are all but a 'single day, . . . today' (*dies unus, . . . hodie*). God wills all that He wills 'in a single act and all at once and eternally' (*semel et simul et semper*).²¹³

Rogers's interpretation of Augustine is unconvincing and, to use her own language against Stump and Kretzmann's interpretation of Boethius, appears to "fundamentally misread" Augustine. To say that Augustine describes the temporal present as pointlike is true enough. However, to argue that the eternal present must also be pointlike in the same way as the temporal present appears to miss the point of Augustine's inquiry into the relationship of time and eternity. It is the very pointlike character of temporal present that leads Augustine to consider that the eternal present must be *different* from the temporal present. According to Augustine, on a process view of time only the present exists, the past no longer does, and the future does not yet. Yet the temporal present is almost a phantom. It is a thin dividing line between past and future. As such, Augustine finds it insufficient to bear the ontological weight of reality or the divine being.

Why then does Augustine describe eternity in terms of the eternal present? It is not that they are both "pointlike." It is because, in the temporal realm, only the present *exists*.

²¹³Rogers, "Eternity Has No Duration," 4. Rogers is quoting excerpts from Augustine's *Confessions* 11.13 and 12.15.

Since the present is all that exists, of course God's mode of existence must be described as being *present*. However the eternal present is *not* like the temporal present in simply being the pointlike dividing line between past and future, which Augustine finds so ontologically lacking. No, God's eternal present embraces the whole of his existence. There is no past or future in God, only that which *is*, the eternal present, as Roger's own citation from Augustine so clearly reveals. In this context, it is quite appropriate to conceive of the eternal present as that which endures and is steadfast in contrast to the transitory and rather ephemeral temporal present. In sum, Rogers is right that the eternal present is based upon comparison with the temporal present. But she is mistaken in maintaining that it is instantaneousness, rather than existence, which is the key point of comparison.

Rogers's second historical argument draws upon an analogy of the view from eternity authored by Boethius and used again later by Aquinas. The illustration is of a person from a high vantage point looking down upon travellers on a road below. Those on the road cannot see those who are before or behind, but the person on the high point can see everything "at once." Rogers admits that the analogy is crude, but that does not prevent her from drawing two rather technical and precise conclusions from it. First, she argues, the analogy reflects a non-durational concept of eternity since the observer is at a "single point." Second, she uses it to argue against the durational view, since there is no hint of the observer being "stretched out" alongside the road. In both these ways, the road analogy is a "singularly poor" metaphor for durational eternity.²¹⁴

This discussion reveals Rogers's tendency to over-interpret the details of metaphorical analogies when it suits her purpose. The point of this analogy, as Rogers herself states, is to picture how an eternal being transcends the temporal perspective in his view of the world. One might argue the weakness of such an analogy, say on the grounds

²¹⁴Rogers, "Eternity Has No Duration," 4.

that the whole analogy occurs within a temporal setting. But to argue that the high point of the observer suggests that the eternal perspective must be “pointlike” seems forced.

Something similar could be said of her comment about the observer not being “stretched out” along the road. This appears to be a caricature of Leftow’s position. There is no reason to believe that Leftow thinks the observer should be literally “stretched out” along the road. Leftow’s point is the same as Stump and Kretzmann, that in eternity the entire temporal perspective is present to an eternal observer. That is also precisely what the analogy is meant to illustrate. However, in embracing the whole of the temporal perspective, the eternal viewpoint reflects a depth, breadth, or extension which Stump and Kretzmann and Leftow conceptualize as a kind of duration without temporal succession.

Rogers’s third and last historical argument draws upon Plotinus and his centerpoint and circle analogy of the relationship between time and eternity. As Rogers points out, this metaphor has a long pedigree, but it is first and most frequently used in a variety of contexts by Plotinus. In regards to time and eternity he writes:

Time in its ceaseless onward sliding produces parted interval; Eternity stands in identity, pre-eminent, vaster by unending power than Time with all the vastness of its seeming progress; Time is like a radial line running out apparently to infinity but dependent upon that, its center, which is the pivot of all its movement; as it goes it tells of that centre, but the centre itself is the unmoving principle of all the movement.²¹⁵

The analogy also is used by Boethius in the *Consolations* where time is to eternity as a “circle to its centre point” and by Aquinas as an illustration of how an eternal God can be present to whole of time:

We may see an example of sorts in the case of a circle. Let us consider a determined point on the circumference of a circle. Although it is invisible, it does not co-exist simultaneously with any other point as to position, since it is the order of position that produces the continuity of the circumference. On the other hand, the center of the circle, which is no part of the circumference, is directly opposed to

²¹⁵Plotinus, *Enneads* 5.5.11; quoted from the MacKenna translation by Rogers, “Eternity Has No Duration,” 5. Rogers reports in note 25 of the same page that the analogy of the circle also appears in 1.7.1; 5.1.12; 6.5.4-5; 6.8.18; and 6.9.8.

any given determinate point on the circumference. Hence, whatever is found in any part of time co-exists with what is eternal as being present to it, although with respect to some other time it be past or future. Something can be present to what is eternal only by being present to the whole of it, since the eternal does not have the duration of succession. The divine intellect, therefore, sees in the whole of its eternity, as being present to it, whatever takes place through the whole course of time.²¹⁶

Since the ancient and medieval thinkers appeal to the circle and centerpoint analogy, Rogers sees this as evidence that they viewed eternity as point-like and non-durational. Further, this analogy, within the Platonic tradition, is also intended to represent the unified undivided center point as the *source* of the circumference. In this context, extension of any kind is a limitation or weakness and to be “stretched out” is inferior to being unextended. As Plotinus puts it, “That which can make all can have, itself, no extension; it must be limitless and so without magnitude; . . . all extension must belong to the subsequent.”²¹⁷ Rogers concludes:

Stump and Kretzmann held that, on the more natural reading of Boethius’s definition of eternity, ‘illimitable life’ would mean an existence which is ‘infinite duration, unlimited in either “direction.”’ [“Eternity” (1981), 222]. But given the tradition within which Boethius is working, and given that he uses the circle analogy so popular with Plotinus, it is much more likely that Boethius would see extension itself as a limitation. To the classical mind duration, being ‘stretched out,’ is a fall from perfection.²¹⁸

Rogers has done a great service to the discussion of eternity to remind us how ubiquitous is the analogy of the centerpoint and the circle in the history of Christian thought. However she does a disservice by insisting that the centerpoint of the circle in the analogy suggests that eternity is “point like” and therefore “instantaneous” and non-durational.

One must be careful with metaphorical analogies, as with biblical parables, not to exegete their details too precisely, but to grasp the main points of comparison. Rogers

²¹⁶Augustine, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 1.66.7, Pegis translation, quoted by Rogers, “Eternity Has No Duration,” 5.

²¹⁷*Enneads*, 6.7.32; quoted in Rogers, “Eternity Has No Duration,” 6. Elipsis hers.

²¹⁸Rogers, “Eternity Has No Duration,” 6.

makes too much of the idea that the centerpoint of the circle is a *point*. From that she draws the inference that since eternity is like a point, and a point is like an instant, then eternity is like an instant. This works only if that is the point (no pun intended) of the analogical comparison. But it is not. The thrust of the analogy is that just as the centerpoint sustains the same relationship to every point on the circumference regardless of its position on the circle, so also God sustains the same eternally present relationship to every point on the temporal realm. The analogy is an attempt to conceptualize what could be present to the whole of temporal reality “all at once.” God grasps it all. God is not in time, time is in God. Yet his perception (if that is the best term) of the temporal reality that he has created is not successive. According to Plotinus and Boethius, the eternal present exists. It is complete. It is unchangeable. It is the ground of all temporal reality. And in that sense it *endures*. Here is another example of Rogers unjustifiably interpreting the details of the metaphor in service of her own position.

Further, the text in the *Enneads*, cited by Rogers herself, suggests an interpretation more favorable to an “extended” or “durational” view of eternity over against an “instantaneous” or “pointlike” model. Plotinus says, “Eternity stands in identity, pre-eminent, vaster by unending power than Time with all the vastness of its seeming progress.” Here again we bump up against the limitations of language. Nonetheless, surely Plotinus’s description of eternity as possessing a vastness greater than that of the temporal realm suggests something more than being pointlike. It is the “unmoving principle of all the movement.” As the source of all, it endures. As the unmoving eternal source of all, it is without succession. It is duration without succession. This conclusion is reinforced by Roger’s citation from Aquinas. When Aquinas says, “the eternal does not have the duration of succession,” he is not denying that eternity has duration. He is denying that eternity has succession.

Finally, Rogers argues that in the classical philosophical milieu of Plotinus and

Boethius, what is extended is of a lesser nature than that which is unified. I suspect she is right. But this is applicable only if what is extended is also divisible. That is what Stump and Kretzmann and Leftow, and indeed the theological tradition of duration without succession, deny.

5. Rogers on the incoherence of eternity as duration

Rogers goes on to argue that even if *historically* it could be shown that Boethius *et al.* embraced the concept of atemporal duration, *logically* they should not have. Since duration normally means extension in time, a timeless duration seems *prima facie* incoherent, so that without compelling grounds there would be no reason to accept it.²¹⁹ Rogers parries Stump and Kretzmann's contention that to be unextended renders God's life "static" or "frozen."²²⁰ More damaging, she points out that the notion of durational eternity is not used by Stump and Kretzmann to solve a single theological problem related to time and eternity (or anything else) and elicits a confession from Leftow's book that "for the present it is a needless complication."²²¹

According to Rogers, incoherence means more than the difficulty of the temporal articulating the nature of eternal being because it is beyond our ability to grasp (which it is). If that were the standard, Rogers rightly observes, we would need to set aside modern physics right along with medieval metaphysics.²²² Nor does incoherence mean paradoxical, for paradox is the "bread and butter of the platonic tradition." The charge of

²¹⁹Rogers, "Eternity Has No Duration," 7. This objection, which we have encountered a number of times in our survey of the analytic literature, follows the pattern of reading a modern temporalist emphasis into the notion of duration. According to the ancient perspective, time is the measure of change. It is not a thing which existence passes through. To possess duration is to endure or to remain the same. Duration need not mean extension in time, and, if it does not, there is no *prima facie* incoherence.

²²⁰Rogers, "Eternity Has No Duration," 7.

²²¹Rogers, "Eternity Has No Duration," 7. The citation from Leftow comes from *Time and Eternity*, 267.

²²²Rogers, "Eternity Has No Duration," 7.

incoherence runs deeper:

What the charge of incoherence means here is that the very best attempts to explain the *prima facie* paradoxical notion of timeless extension only succeed in making the concept more opaque, or, at worst, are simply contradictory.²²³

We might expect that following such a strong charge, Rogers would immediately go for the jugular and attack the logical adequacy of the notion of eternal duration. Curiously, she does not. Instead, she continues to argue metaphorically, challenging the descriptive adequacy of the analogies used by Stump and Kretzmann and Leftow. It should be noted that this is something considerably less than demonstrating logical incoherence.

She commences with Stump and Kretzmann's analogy of two parallel lines, one with a moving illuminated dot (temporal line) and one with a fully illuminated line (eternal line). Beginning with the dictionary definition of parallel lines, she proceeds to pick apart the analogy. If the E line really is a line, then it must have points. If it does, then along the line of eternity and the present point of the temporal line, the "distance" must change in some way along God's "extension." But since the infinite extension of the E line is neither temporal or spatial, the whole analogy becomes a hopeless muddle as to what kind of extension is involved. Further, this analogy conflicts with the received and preferred metaphor of the centerpoint and the circle:

The analogy of the parallel lines expresses a view of eternity in which only a single point in the divine duration can be perfectly present to any given point in time. This seems to run exactly counter to the aim of the circle analogy which was intended to show that an eternal God is wholly and equally present, in every possible respect, to each moment of time. The parallel lines analogy inevitably suggests a God who is "stretched out" some here, some there, some closer, some farther and so is, at least conceptually divisible and hence limited and imperfect. The metaphor of the parallel lines at best, is no use at all in mitigating the paradox of a timeless duration, and, at worst, conjures up the image of a sort of piecemeal eternity.²²⁴

Rogers admits that Stump and Kretzmann deny any sequential order in eternity, although she thinks a line a "singularly poor analogy" to convey that. In this assessment, Leftow

²²³Rogers, "Eternity Has No Duration," 8.

²²⁴Rogers, "Eternity Has No Duration," 9.

partially agrees, believing that Stump and Kretzmann's model collapses into a "non-enduring, pointlike mode of being."²²⁵ Leftow's own model, titled "Quasi-Temporal Eternity" (hence QTE) tries to preserve both the "all at once" element of divine eternity and the notion of ordering "earlier" and "later" but in a non-temporal sense. Rogers finds this also a hopeless muddle:

If Quasi-Temporal Eternality is expressed as living earlier and later moments all at once, then it still appears contradictory. For God, at least, a 'moment of His life' must be synonymous with experience of that moment. . . . God cannot experience 'at once' what He experiences as earlier and later. He cannot, in Leftow's words, live 'at once (*"totum simul"*) all moments of a life whose moments are ordered as earlier and later.'²²⁶

The only way to salvage the proposal, suggests Rogers, is either to posit some kind of split-level consciousness in God (which seems less than helpful) or to appeal to other forms of priority, such as logical priority, to conceptualize the notion of atemporal extension. The problem is that logical priority is not temporal priority and the more it is appealed to, the more reduced is the temporal element in the Quasi-Temporal analogy:

The introduction of 'earlier' and 'later' as logical, rather than temporal, terms saves Leftow's descriptions of QTE from contradiction, but at the cost of jettisoning the very aspect which made the Eternality 'Quasi-Temporal'. . . . The more he says about eternity as duration, the less like duration his eternity becomes. . . . The idea that God's life is a timeless extension is incoherent and ought to be rejected.²²⁷

Roger's discussion of the incoherence of durational eternity does raise some interesting challenges. One of the most serious, if allowed to stand, is the charge that the doctrine is of no theological importance and solves no theological problems. However, in response I believe that Stump and Kretzmann's silence in this connection is not total and that Leftow's capitulation is both premature and unwarranted.

Regarding the former, Stump and Kretzmann do appeal to atemporal duration as a

²²⁵Leftow, *Time and Eternity*, 134; quoted in Rogers, "Eternity Has No Duration," 9.

²²⁶Rogers, "Eternity Has No Duration," 10.

²²⁷Rogers, "Eternity Has No Duration," 12.

way of explaining how an eternal God can possess *life* and not just life, but the *complete possession of illimitable life all at once*. It is this theological consideration that convinces them that the eternal present should not be viewed as “a static instance,” “frozen instant,” or “instantaneous,” but rather as “extended.” Thus, even though they do not develop this application within their discussion, they are not entirely silent on the theological significance of the doctrine. Even so, the same question can be turned against the more absolutized “instantaneous” view of the eternal present. Rogers’s discussion is equally undeveloped regarding what theological problem it solves (apart from avoiding even the hint of temporality), and it leaves a number of problems more aggravated (such as how to conceptualize an instantaneous infinite life).

I also believe Leftow, by his comment that durational eternity is, at the moment (!), a “needless complication,” has surrendered the field prematurely. As we shall see in chapter 6, that God is the one who endures in face of all the changes in the world is a major theme in scripture and is of great importance regarding God’s aseity and immutability and to God’s people as that which enables him to be their dwelling place in every generation.

Rogers’s charge of incoherence is, I believe, more readily answered. First, her argument for incoherence is based more on metaphorical considerations than logical ones. Her major concern is that Stump and Kretzmann’s metaphor conflicts with the received metaphor of the centerpoint and circle, which, I have already argued, she over-interprets in order to lead to the unwarranted conclusion that the centerpoint must signify an “instantaneous” or “point-like” eternal present. However, in arguing the incompatibility of the two metaphors, Rogers again over-interprets the details of their metaphor in order to provoke the conflict between the two. In fact, the two metaphors are not incompatible, although they use different geometric models. In both cases, they are trying to show how

God, in the eternal present, stands in the same relationship to every temporal point.²²⁸

Without trying to defend Leftow's model of QTE, let me simply say the suggestion of using logical priority as a means of conceptualizing eternal duration is not as sticky a wicket as Rogers suggests. She complains that since logical priority is not temporal priority, the more Leftow says about eternity as duration, the less like duration his eternity becomes. However, this is true only if duration is defined in temporal terms as extension in time. That is not the sense here (that is why it is "*quasi-temporal eternity*"), and so the objection fails. Thus the analogy of logical priority, just because it reflects a non-temporal sense of priority, is more, not less, suitable for conceptualizing atemporal duration.

6. Rogers on the insufficiency of the *via analogia*

According to Rogers, the only remaining avenue for the defenders of durational eternity is to appeal to some form of the Thomistic doctrine of analogy. However, she believes that this door also is closed.

Aquinas argues that our talk of God can be neither equivocal or univocal but must be analogical, since there is relationship, but not identity, between God and his creatures. Whatever "is said both of God and creatures is said in virtue of the order that creatures have to God as to their source and cause in which all the perfections of things pre-exist transcendentally."²²⁹ However, Aquinas's doctrine of analogy cannot save the notion of eternal duration since we cannot establish terms of comparison drawn from experience that would make the analogy meaningful. If God possesses eternal duration, his duration is not like that of the creature in that it is not temporally extended. But there are no positive terms of comparison, since our extension is either temporal or spatial, and eternal duration would be neither. Thus analogy cannot save the doctrine:

To apply a predicate analogically to God we must do more than state that the

²²⁸I will return to the issue of the compatibility of the two geometric models in chapter 7.

²²⁹Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1a.13.5; quoted in Rogers, "Eternity Has No Duration," 13.

meaning of the word is somewhat like and somewhat unlike the meaning as applied to creatures. If we cannot, in however limited a way, show where the similarity lies between Creator and creature, we may use the same word of both, but we are using it equivocally. . . . Invoking the *via analogia* does not save the concept of eternal duration from the charge of incoherence. Since God's supposed duration has nothing in common with the duration we know, which just *is* temporal extension, 'eternity as duration' is no more meaningful than 'eternity as gorp.'²³⁰

To this challenge, two responses can be offered. First, this argument, if pressed, proves too much. Even if the eternal present is an instant, it still does not possess a point of comparison with our empirical temporal present. While the eternal present is not bounded by a past or a future, or understood as the dividing line between them, our experience knows of no "present" which is not so bounded. Therefore, since God's unbounded present, which embraces the temporal past, present, and future, has nothing in common with the bounded present we know as temporal creatures, then "eternity as present without past or future" is no more meaningful than "eternity as gorp."

Second, however, there *are* points of comparison between the temporal and eternal drawn from experience, and Rogers herself has drawn upon them in the course of her discussion. I speak of geometric or multi-dimensional analogies (such as the observer on the high hill, or the centerpoint and circle diagram, or the temporal present), which can be appealed to to conceptualize the kinds of relationships that exist between time and eternity, whether understood instantaneously or durationally. Rogers is mistaken. The *via analogia* is still an open road for both sides of this debate.

7. **Rogers on the temporal present as "the least inadequate analogy"**

Rogers closes her discussion with a brief consideration of that element which she believes provides the best analogy for eternity, variants of which are found in both Augustine and Anselm: "The temporal phenomenon with which we are familiar which is most like eternity is the present, durationless, instant."²³¹

²³⁰Rogers, "Eternity Has No Duration," 14.

²³¹Rogers, "Eternity Has No Duration," 15.

Augustine asserts that our present memory of events past provides an analogy as to how God's knowledge can encompass the whole of temporal reality in the eternal present. Consider some event like the Norman Conquest or the American Revolution. In a single thought we have captured a whole constellation of events that comprise these historical occasions. God is like a "a splendid historian" who can absolutely and infallibly grasp the perfect detail of every moment in a single thought, although in God's case the "historian's" perspective includes the future as well.

Anselm provides a different "original and striking analogy" of a more multi-dimensional nature: "Just as the present time contains all place and whatever exists in any place: in the same way all time and what exists in any time is enclosed in the eternal present."²³² Rogers points out that here again the point of comparison between time and eternity is the instantaneous temporal present in which temporal knowers experience something which, like eternal present, is not temporally extended.²³³ Thus the best analogy of the eternal present remains the instantaneous temporal present. But even this "least inadequate analogy" is sorely limited. She closes:

We may use the analogy of the splendid historian's present memory to represent how a thought, not extended in time, might help encompass temporal sequence. Looking at the present instant of time may help show how what is unextended in one dimension may contain the extension of another. But the very fact that the divine mode of being must be expressed through analogies means that beyond a certain point it is best to keep silent.²³⁴

I find little fault with Rogers's discussion here or her appeal to the particular analogies of Augustine and Anselm except to say that she is using them in service of the wrong argument. Since both of them serve to broaden, deepen, and yes, *extend*, the notion of divine eternity beyond simply an instantaneous or pointlike concept, they support, rather

²³²Anselm, *De concordia*, 1.5; quoted in Rogers, "Eternity Has No Duration," 15.

²³³Rogers, "Eternity Has No Duration," 16.

²³⁴Rogers, "Eternity Has No Duration," 16.

than undermine, the coherence of durational eternity.

B . Final Comment

In the Introduction to this chapter, I anticipated and described in some detail the conclusions to be drawn from a survey of the history of the doctrine of divine eternity. Here I briefly recapitulate those conclusions.

First, the common assumption that the doctrine of divine eternity is more Greek than Christian ought to be reconsidered. While early Christian thinkers and fathers share some common concerns with Greek thought, and while most of the early fathers were appreciative of philosophy and extrabiblical learning and were willing to draw on its concepts, there is no evidence of any wholesale capitulation to Hellenism in the mainline theological tradition. Instead, we find much evidence of a highly nuanced, highly selective, and critical use of philosophy, and frequent rejection of Greek thought when it conflicted with biblical doctrines of creation, incarnation, and the resurrection.

Second, this survey reveals that the traditional doctrine of divine eternity does not involve, as much of the contemporary discussion assumes, a notion of absolute timelessness (which defines the temporal and eternal as incompatible). Indeed, it is surprisingly almost impossible to find such an absolute model within either early Greek philosophy or the Christian tradition. Instead, the two traditions share a common understanding of eternity as duration without succession. Thus, while there may be a correspondence between the two traditions, it is not the one usually assumed in the contemporary analytic discussions.

Third, while there are minor variations in the details among advocates, the understanding of eternity as non-successive duration is the mainstream understanding of divine eternity from Augustine through Post-Reformation orthodoxy. This position is a much more nuanced and biblically informed position than that of absolute timelessness, and I believe avoids many of the criticisms raised against absolute atemporal eternity.

Fourth, the traditional view as “duration without succession” has come under considerable criticism by Katherin Rogers and others in the analytic debate. However, the careful examination of the Rogers’s article, “Eternity Has No Duration,” leads to the opposite conclusion and successfully preserves the thesis of this chapter.

Finally, these conclusions are important, for if true, they suggest that a significant part (although certainly not all) of the modern discussion of the traditional doctrine is misdirected. This opens the way to make a more nuanced defense of a more nuanced position concerning divine eternity.

CHAPTER 6

A Biblical and Theological Defense of Divine Eternity

In the surveys in the previous chapters, I outlined three objections to the traditional doctrine of divine eternity, namely that it is too deeply wedded to Greek philosophy, that it is more Greek than Christian, and that it is, accordingly, incoherent. My response has been that this evaluation rests upon an absolute notion of divine timelessness which, in effect, *defines* eternity and temporality as incompatible. However, such a notion of absolute timelessness is rare even in the Greek models and is almost entirely absent in the mainline tradition of Christian doctrine. The tradition suggests a less absolute model of divine eternity in which time is part of the created order and in which God (a) transcends time; (b) is in no way limited by time; (c) engages the temporal order through a kind of temporal omnipresence; and (d) exists in a mode of duration without succession. Of course, it is one thing to assert that this is what the tradition states. It is another to defend this understanding of eternity. In this chapter and the next I provide a biblical, creedal, biblical-theological, systematic theological, and analogical defense of the traditional doctrine of eternity.

I. The Role of Scripture in the Current Analytical Debate

To provide a biblical defense of the doctrine of divine eternity is seen by many as an exercise in futility, since they argue that the issue is at worst contrary to, or at best grossly underdetermined by, the testimony of scripture.

A. Setting the Stage: Oscar Cullmann and James Barr

One influential source for this position has been Oscar Cullmann's *Christ and Time*, in which he argues that the biblical words for time prevent their being applied to an atemporal concept of eternity. His thesis centers around two words, *kairos* and *aion*:

The characteristic thing about *kairos* is that it has to do with the definite *point of time* which has a fixed content, while *aion* designates a *duration of time*, a defined or undefined *extent of time*. In the New Testament both terms serve, in a manner that corresponds remarkably well to the matter at hand, to characterize that time in which redemptive history occurs.¹

Of particular importance is Cullmann's interpretation of *aion*, which he argues has only two meanings: "an exact period of time" and "an undefined and incalculable duration."² The latter definition comprises what Cullmann believes is the primitive, and therefore pristine, Christian understanding of eternity as "endless time" in contrast to limited time. Cullmann believes that this temporal understanding of *aion* is justified (a) by New Testament usage; (b) by the way the word can occur in the plural form, demonstrating "that it does not signify cessation of time or timelessness"³; and (c) by the Bible's portrait of God as functioning within time rather than in some transcendent timeless realm. He concludes that the notion of timeless eternity is a foreign concept that finds its origin in Greek or Gnostic thought, not the New Testament.⁴

This linguistic argument has been influential in the modern discussions, even though it has also been severely criticized. In *The Semantics of Biblical Language* and *Biblical Words for Time*, James Barr is highly critical of the etymological approach to theology exemplified in Kittel's *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* and utilized by Cullmann. Barr insists that the meaning of words ought to be determined by their usage, not the history of their meaning:

It must be clear that no kind of theology can be built upon such material as the occurrence of this word in each of these places, or the occurrence of different words in two places. A valid biblical theology can be built only on the *statements*

¹Oscar Cullmann, *Christ and Time: The Primitive Christian Conception of Time and History* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 39.

²Cullmann, *Christ and Time*, 45.

³Cullmann, *Christ and Time*, 46.

⁴Cullmann, *Christ and Time*, 55.

of the Bible, and not on the words of the Bible.⁵

Armed with this linguistic perspective, Barr directly addresses Cullmann's arguments in *Biblical Words for Time*. First, Cullmann argued that there were only two senses of *aion* (an *age*, or period of limited duration, and *eternity*, a period of unlimited duration) and that the latter is simply an unlimited case of the former. Barr, however, challenges both Cullmann's methodology and his conclusions. That *aion* has these two meanings does not require that they be connected with one another. The meaning of any particular usage is determined by the context and must not be absolutized. Cullmann's approach explains away, rather than explains, the meaning of those texts that have traditionally been thought to refer to something beyond mere temporality.

Second, Cullmann argued that the plural form of *aion* means it can only refer to the continuance of time, not the cessation of time, since the plural represents "the linking of an unlimited series of limited world periods."⁶ Barr thinks this argument is also a non-starter, since it involves an abstract concept of plurality rather than one grounded in linguistic usage. In Hebrew there are many cases, such as *olam* and *olamim*, in which the plural form bears no necessary connection to the concepts asserted by the singular.⁷

Barr concludes that the linguistic data alone cannot be used to deny an atemporal or supratemporal understanding of eternity. Nor is it adequate to establish one. Instead he argues "that if such a thing as a Christian doctrine of time has to be developed, the work of discussion and developing it must belong not to biblical but to philosophical theology."⁸

⁵James Barr, *Biblical Words for Time* (London: SCM, 1962), 147.

⁶Cullmann, *Christ and Time*, 46.

⁷Barr, *Biblical Words for Time*, 64.

⁸Barr, *Biblical Words for Time*, 149.

B. Alan Padgett: The Bible Neutral at Best

In *God, Eternity and the Nature of Time*, Alan Padgett agrees with Barr that questions of divine eternity belong to philosophical theology. At the same time, he rightly insists that Christian theological inquiry should begin with scripture, although he suggests that in discussions related to philosophical theology, the “Bible alludes, assumes, and implies more often than it actually teaches.”⁹ He agrees with Cullmann that the Bible does not support absolute divine timelessness, but he is not convinced that it simply supports the view that God is everlasting. Instead, he interprets the biblical evidence as pointing toward “relative timelessness.”

Padgett examines the word studies of Ernst Jenni and Calvin Robert Schoonhoven on the Hebrew term *olam*, which suggest that the term cannot be applied to divine timelessness.¹⁰ Johannes Schmidt, in *Der Ewigkeitsbegriff im alten Testament* (The Concept of Eternity in the Old Testament), disagrees. But Padgett finds Schmidt too closely tied to Thomistic assumptions and outdated etymological methodology to be very useful.¹¹ While Padgett is more appreciative of Schmidt’s exegetical efforts to ground biblically a notion of divine timelessness, his review of the texts leaves him unconvinced:

The everlasting (or at best relatively timeless) nature of God's eternity has been clearly implied in Ps. 90:2, Isa. 40:28, 41:4, 43:10, and 44:6; while Isa. 48:3 allows any view. Eccl. 3:11, too, will not support an absolute timelessness. Thus Schmidt's thesis that the OT supports a Boethian understanding of non-durational timeless eternity cannot be maintained.¹²

⁹Alan Padgett, *God, Eternity and the Nature of Time* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1992), 23.

¹⁰Ernst Jenni, “Das Wort *olam* im alten Testament,” *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 64 (1952): 197-248, and 65 (1953): 1-35; Calvin Robert Schoonhoven, “Eternity” in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, rev. ed., 2:162-164; referenced in Padgett, *God, Eternity, and the Nature of Time*, 24.

¹¹Johannes Schmidt, *Der Ewigkeitsbegriff im alten Testament*, *Alttestamentliche Abhandlungen* 13/5 (Münster in Westfalen: Verlag des Aschendorffschen Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1940); quoted in Padgett, *God, Eternity and the Nature of Time*, 24-25.

¹²Padgett, *God, Eternity and the Nature of Time*, 29.

Turning his attention to the New Testament (which he curiously characterizes as a “more Hellenistic document”), Padgett embraces the position of Oscar Cullmann in *Christ and Time*, declares it to be “exegetically sound,” and defends it against numerous critics.¹³ He concludes by twice asserting that the Bible, in both the Old and New Testaments, “knows nothing of a timeless eternity, at least in a traditional sense.”¹⁴ He tempers this conclusion slightly by acknowledging that, although the biblical evidence is tenuous, there may be independent reasons for maintaining some modified notion of divine eternity:

It just might be possible, then, to develop a “Biblical” view of divine eternity. But the verses I have examined will only hint at a particular direction. Exactly what notion of eternity one develops from Scripture will depend as much on our philosophical theology as on our exegesis. Nevertheless, Scripture does seem to this exegete to point in the direction of relative timelessness.”¹⁵

C. Nicholas Wolterstorff: Unqualified Temporality

In contrast, Nicholas Wolterstorff sees the traditional doctrine as not underdetermined but undermined by the testimony of scripture and goes on to defend what he refers to as “unqualified temporality.” In his essay, “God Everlasting,” Wolterstorff sketches a biblical-theological argument against divine timelessness, which he later develops more fully in “Unqualified Temporality.”¹⁶

¹³Padgett describes *Christ and Time* as “arguably the single most important book on the subject of time and eternity in the Bible” (*God, Eternity and the Nature of Time*, 30) and defends it particularly against Joachim Guhrt (Joachim Gurht, “Time” in *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, 3:826-833; referenced in Padgett, *God, Eternity and the Nature of Time*, 30-33). Padgett also agrees with Cullmann that the source of the doctrine of eternity is Greek, not Christian, and stems from the influence of Platonism on the Christian tradition (Cullmann, *Christ and Time*, 69-80; referenced in Padgett, *God, Eternity and the Nature of Time*, 35).

¹⁴Padgett, *God, Eternity and the Nature of Time*, 33, top and bottom of page.

¹⁵Padgett, *God, Eternity and the Nature of Time*, 37.

¹⁶Nicholas Wolterstorff, “God Everlasting,” in *God and the Good*, ed. Clifton J. Orlebeke and Lewis B. Smedes (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1975), 181-203; and “Unqualified Divine Temporality,” in *God and Time: Four Views*, ed. Gregory E. Ganssle (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 187-213.

In his earlier essay, Wolterstorff provides a biblical *prima facie* case in favor of God's being everlasting (without beginning or end) rather than eternal (atemporal). The biblical writers clearly present God as both an active agent in human history and, even more specifically, as bringing about redemption in human history in response to human sin. These two facts alone are sufficient, in Wolterstorff's mind, to demonstrate God's temporality, for God's acting in human history to bring about redemption is incompatible with his being atemporal:

God the Redeemer cannot be a God eternal. This is so because God the Redeemer is a God who *changes*. And any being which changes is a being among whose states there is temporal succession. Of course, there is an important sense in which God is presented in the Scriptures as changeless: he is steadfast in his redeeming intent and ever faithful to his children. Yet, *ontologically*, God cannot be a redeeming God without there being changeful variation among his states. . . . A theology which opts for God as eternal cannot avoid being in conflict with the confession of God as redeemer. And given the obvious fact that God is presented in the Bible as a God who redeems, a theology which opts for God as eternal cannot be a theology faithful to the biblical witness.¹⁷

Wolterstorff agrees with the conclusions of Cullmann but escapes Barr's critique by avoiding etymological methodology:

Though we have traveled a very different route from Cullmann's we have come out at the same place. We have not engaged in any word studies. Yet, by seeing that God's temporality is presupposed by the biblical presentation of God as redeemer, we too have reached the conclusion that we share time with God. The lexicographical and philosophical cases coincide in their results.¹⁸

In his more recent expanded biblical defense of "unqualified divine temporality," Wolterstorff appeals to God's dialogue with Moses in Exodus 3 and 4 in support of his assertion that God has a history of acting and responding to the actions of others. He points out that this "representation of God as having a history, which can then be narrated, is not exceptional but typical of Scripture's representation of God."¹⁹ It also suggests that God

¹⁷Wolterstorff, "God Everlasting," 181-182.

¹⁸Wolterstorff, "God Everlasting," 203.

¹⁹Wolterstorff, "Unqualified Divine Temporality," 188.

must be temporal.

In support of this conclusion, Wolterstorff posits a literal methodological principle for biblical interpretation: “An implication of one’s accepting Scripture as canonical is that one will affirm as literally true Scripture’s representation of God unless one has good reason not to do so.”²⁰ This principle, argues Wolterstorff, places the burden of proof on those who would defend the traditional doctrine of divine timelessness.²¹ The biblical portrayal of God as having a narratable history is sufficient to establish this burden. It carries with it the obligation of those who would defend some notion of divine timelessness to provide cogent arguments why the biblical portrayal of God as having a history is not to be taken literally.²² Wolterstorff observes that this burden of proof seems to have been met in some biblical portrayals of God (e.g., biblical descriptions of God having wings) so he is not assuming that it cannot be met. He does, however, insist that it *must* be met, and that he believes it has *not yet been* met.

Wolterstorff also refutes the interpretation of passages often cited in support of divine timelessness, which he observes is “all together an exceedingly small number.”²³ Ps. 90 cannot support divine timelessness, because it speaks of how God existed *before* creation, a term that suggests temporality rather than timelessness.²⁴ Likewise, Moses’ assertion in the same psalm that “a thousand years in your sight are like yesterday when it is past” (Ps. 90:4 and its parallel in 2 Pet. 3:8) suggests that God experiences a felt

²⁰Wolterstorff, “Unqualified Divine Temporality,” 188.

²¹Wolterstorff, “Unqualified Divine Temporality,” 188-189.

²²Wolterstorff, “Unqualified Divine Temporality,” 189.

²³Wolterstorff, “Unqualified Divine Temporality,” 189.

²⁴Wolterstorff, “Unqualified Divine Temporality,” 190.

temporality.²⁵ Finally, the passage in John 8:58 where Jesus assumes the divine name by declaring “Before Abraham was, I AM” supports a temporal rather than timeless interpretation, for “if I AM existed *before* Abraham, how could I AM be timeless?”²⁶

In a similar fashion, Wolterstorff rejects attempts to establish God’s eternity by appealing to passages which describe his immutability. Mal. 3:6, “For I the LORD do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, have not perished,” should be understood as asserting a moral or covenantal immutability not an ontological one, which might entail God’s timelessness.²⁷ Likewise the descriptive declaration of God found in Ps. 102:27 that “you are the same” should not be interpreted so as to “stimulate our ontological imaginations” but seen as evidence that God is not eternal but everlasting: “God endures. God has years, indeed, but to those years there is no end.”²⁸ While Wolterstorff admits that James 1:17 (which describes God as having “no variation or shadow due to change”) might be interpreted as evidence of divine immutability, he believes this is only possible, not likely. It is better to understand it in context as asserting God’s moral constancy and purity, who, instead of being like an object rotating in a light source and revealing shadows, is like the light source itself.²⁹

These considerations lead Wolterstorff to conclude “that the situation for God’s ontological immutability is like that for God’s timelessness: there are *no passages* in Scripture which can be cited as supporting this doctrine.”³⁰

²⁵Wolterstorff, “Unqualified Divine Temporality,” 190.

²⁶Wolterstorff, “Unqualified Divine Temporality,” 190.

²⁷Wolterstorff, “Unqualified Divine Temporality,” 191.

²⁸Wolterstorff, “Unqualified Divine Temporality,” 191-192.

²⁹Wolterstorff, “Unqualified Divine Temporality,” 192-193.

³⁰Wolterstorff, “Unqualified Divine Temporality,” 193; emphasis mine.

II. The Importance of Eternity in the Ecumenical Creeds and the History of Doctrine

If the previous discussion contained all that could be said about the scriptural testimony concerning divine eternity, the early returns would not be encouraging. Cullmann and Wolterstorff are convinced that the biblical text is hostile to the traditional doctrine. Padgett and Barr are more open, but still maintain that the biblical witness is at best neutral and indeterminate so that the issue must be decided by philosophical, rather than biblical, considerations.

While the second pair are less critical of the traditional view, they are hardly more comforting. From the *sola scriptura* perspective of Reformed theology, to say of any purported Christian doctrine that it is philosophically cogent but biblically underdetermined is the kiss of death. To remove the biblical leg, and leave only a philosophical one to stand on, provides insufficient support for any Christian doctrine. As if that were not enough, many critical of the traditional doctrine remove the philosophic leg as well by arguing that divine eternity is not only biblically insupportable, but also philosophically incoherent. If this is correct, there is not much left. So why bother to defend the traditional doctrine?

I would suggest that one caution against abandoning the traditional doctrine of eternity is its significance in the history of doctrine including the development of the ecumenical creeds.³¹ Specifically, the doctrine contributes to some of the *reasoning* underlying the early creedal position of both Western and Eastern Christianity forged in the First, Second and Fourth Ecumenical Councils. It does so by informing the Nicene understanding of the eternal generation of the Son and the original application of the

³¹In this section, I simply introduce this thesis and discuss briefly the relationship of divine eternity to the ecumenical creeds. It will be the burden of the remainder of this dissertation with its biblical, theological, and analogical defense to show why divine eternity has been valued in the history of doctrine and should continue to be so.

Chalcedonian doctrine of the communication of attributes.³²

A. Eternity, Arianism, and the Nicene Consensus

The councils of Nicea (325 A.D.) and Constantinople (381 A.D.) wrestled with the extent of the divinity of Christ in light of dual challenges posed on the one hand by Gnosticism, which denied the full humanity of Jesus, and on the other hand by Arius, who denied the full divinity of Christ. Arius argued that the Son's divinity was of a lesser sort than that possessed by the Father, because the existence of the Son was derivative from the Father. Because the Son was begotten of the Father as firstborn of all creation, he must have had a beginning, a conclusion Arius captured and popularized in his slogan, "there was when he was not." Since his life is conferred upon him by the Father, the Son does not possess aseity, as does the Father, but is of necessity subordinate to the Father. Therefore, he does not share in the same essence, nature, or substance of the Father, or at least not to the same degree. So the Son is divine, but a lesser divinity than the Father.

The early church carefully weighed the view of Arius, but found it wanting. Jesus cannot be a lesser divinity than the Father, since scripture is clear that there is no God before or after Jehovah (Isa. 44:6-8). The Bible is equally emphatic that Jesus rightly claims all of the divine prerogatives and abilities (such as the absolute allegiance of the first commandment, and the ability to forgive sin and command the forces of nature) including

³²For those readers who may be unfamiliar with this historical theological shorthand, these three councils formed the orthodox consensus of the Person of Christ in the early church. They are the Council of Nicea (325 A.D.), the Council of Constantinople (381 A.D.), and the Council of Chalcedon (451 A.D.); see chapter 5. By this thesis statement I am not saying that divine temporalists cannot affirm the Nicene and Chalcedonian creedal formulations. I am, however, suggesting that the traditional doctrine of eternity underlies some important aspects of the creedal formulations, which aspects are lost or diminished if divine eternity is reinterpreted as divine everlastingness. For a helpful compilation of relevant texts that inform our understanding of the creeds in this connection, see William G. Rusch, ed. and trans., *The Trinitarian Controversy* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980) and Richard A. Norris, Jr., ed. and trans., *The Christological Controversy* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980).

the divine name of Jehovah himself (John 8:58).³³

In response to Arius's insistence that Jesus must be a lesser divinity than the Father because he is the only-begotten of the Father, the Council of Nicea pursued a solution anticipated in the work of Tertullian and Origen, and later defended by Athanasius and others. Drawing upon the language of Tertullian, which described the Trinity as sharing one Nature in three persons, and the language of Origen, which suggested the Son was eternally generated of the Father, Athanasius offered the following solution: Given that the Scripture speaks of one God existing in three persons, all of whom are fully divine, the Son is to be understood as consubstantial (*homoousios*) with the Father. Given that the Son was generated of the Father in eternity ("before all ages"), he is to be understood as "begotten, not made." Being eternally begotten, there never was a time when the Son did not exist ("there was not when he was not"). In this way the doctrine of eternal generation both preserves the Son's ontological status in the Godhead and explains how, although he is begotten of the Father, he is without a beginning.³⁴

This position, which became incorporated in both the Creed of Nicea and the

³³As seen above, Wolterstorff wants to put the emphasis in this text on the "before" ("before Abraham was, I AM"), arguing that, if Jesus was before Abraham, he must be temporal, since "before" indicates a temporal relationship to Abraham. However, this seems to place an undue emphasis on the philosophic force of "before" in a way that minimizes the theological import of the text, namely, that Jesus is declaring himself equal with God. It is clear that while "before" may set forth a temporal relationship, it can also denote a relation of position or preeminence (e.g. "You shall have no other gods *before* me"; "He is *before* all things and in him all things consist"). Given the emphasis on the divinity of Christ in this text, it is the most natural reading to interpret the "before" in this passage in the latter, non-temporal sense.

³⁴Thus Athanasius: "Furthermore, you will no longer reproach us with saying that there are 'two eternals.' On the contrary, you will understand that the Lord is God's true and natural Son and that he is known to be not just eternal but one who existence concurrently with the eternity of the Father. There are things which are called 'eternal' of which he is the Creator, for in Psalm 23 it is written, 'Lift up your gates, O rulers, and be lifted up, O everlasting doors [Ps. 24:7]. It is apparent, though, that these everlasting doors also came into being through his agency. If he is himself the Creator of the things which are 'everlasting,' which of us can any longer doubt that he is more noble than these everlasting things and that he is made known as Lord not so much from his being eternal as from his being the Son of God? Being Son, he is inseparable from the Father, and there was not a "when" when he did not exist.' He always existed. Moreover, since he is the image and radiance of the Father, he also possesses the Father's eternity." Athanasius, *Orations Against the Arians* III.28 (Norris, *The Christological Controversy*, 86-87.

Nicene Creed (adopted at the Council of Constantinople), embraced the full divinity of the Son and, against the Arian position, insisted that the Son was “begotten, not made.” It has been the consensus position of the Eastern, Roman Catholic, and Protestant branches of Christendom for sixteen centuries.

Note well, however, that this position assumes that time is part of the created order of things, that God dwells in eternity, and that the Son was eternally generated (“before the ages”) of the Father in a sphere of existence distinct from the temporal realm we inhabit. In contrast, divine temporalists insist that God is on a timeline similar or equivalent to our own, and that he is everlasting (infinitely extended in time) rather than eternal.³⁵

Of course, divine temporalism is not equivalent to Arianism and need not lead to it. Arius did not deny the eternity of the Father, only the Son. The Son was begotten in time and was, therefore, neither eternal nor fully divine. Thus, divine temporalism, which places *both* the Father and the Son on a timeline, is not equivalent to Arianism. Further, it is possible for divine temporalists to assert that the Son has always (everlastingly) been the Son of the Father. Therefore, divine temporalism need not lead to Arianism. It does, however, ignore the Nicene Father’s understanding of eternal generation as providing a partial response to Arianism and some of their *reasoning* in support of the creedal position.

Given their commitment to divine eternity, the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers likely would have resisted the divine temporalist position on two grounds. First, for the

³⁵It should be remembered, as detailed in chapter 5 above, that the perspective of divine eternity was not debated but uniformly assumed by the early Fathers who were involved in the Nicene and Chalcedonian discussions. Even Arius agreed to the divine eternity of the Father (and insisted that the Son did not share in it). Thus, historically, the doctrine of divine eternity informs their understanding of the attributes of God, the relationship of Father to the Son, and relationship of the human and divine natures of Christ. The debate between eternity and everlastingness was not engaged at the time, not because the distinction between divine eternity and temporality was viewed as unimportant, but because the truth of the doctrine of divine eternity was not in question. Of course, this historical point alone does not establish that divine eternity is the correct or even preferable viewpoint. That must and will be argued separately in the balance of this dissertation. It does, however, remind us that the perspective was valued and drawn upon by the framers of the ecumenical creeds.

Father to be temporal means he would be subject to change and therefore no longer self-sufficient or self-existent. Likewise, the Son could not be the same yesterday, today, or forever. Thus placing the Father and the Son on a timeline diminishes the strong sense of immutability required to preserve the creator/creature distinction and to affirm the divinity of the Son.³⁶

Second, for the Nicene Fathers, temporal begetting might suggest a causal relationship that makes it more difficult to preserve the view that the Son was “begotten, not made” and to maintain that there “was not when he was not.” In this connection, Paul Helm argues that divine temporalism leaves open a door to Arianism that the Nicene Creed intended to shut. As noted in the previous section, Wolterstorff insists that (a) God has a history that can be narrated; (b) “*ontologically*, God cannot be a redeeming God without there being changeful variation among his states”; and (c) we must “affirm as literally true Scripture’s representation of God.”³⁷ Paul Helm counters that if “begetting” is to retain any literal sense of generation, if God ontologically shares a timeline with his creation, and if the Father begets the Son, then this at least leaves open the possibility that “there was, when he [the Son] was not”:

What the temporalist view requires is that there was a time in God, the Father’s biography, whether that time was metricated or not, when the Son had yet to be

³⁶Thus Athanasius: “Scripture by means of heaven and earth declares that the nature of all originated things and of every creature is mutable and changeable. Since it excludes the Son, it shows that the Son is in no way originated; rather, Scripture teaches that he changes other things not changed himself. It speaks about this: ‘You are the same, and your years will not cease’ [Heb. 1:12]. And this is reasonable, for originated things, being from nothing and not existing before they came into existence, because not being they came into existence, they have a changeable nature. But the Son being from the Father and peculiar to his substance is unchangeable and immutable as the Father himself. It is not right to say that from the substance of the Immutable was begotten a mutable Word and a changeable Wisdom. How is he still the Word if mutable? Or how is Wisdom a changeable thing, unless as an accident in substance? They wish it to be thus so that in any peculiar substance some grave and habit of virtue occurs accidentally. This thus called Word and Son and Wisdom, so it is possible to take away and to add to it. Thinking such things they [the Arians--df] often said them. But this is not the Faith of Christians.” *Oration against the Arians* I.36. Quoted from Rusch, *The Trinitarian Controversy*, 99.

³⁷Wolterstorff, “God Everlasting,” 182; 188; emphasis his.

begotten. And if there was such a time, and the Son was begotten at that time, then this would seem to strongly favor, if not actually entail, some form of Arianism.³⁸

I believe Helm overstates his case.³⁹ However, his comments at least suggest that the traditional definition of eternity cannot be altered without at least changing the *reasoning* underlying the response to Arianism found in the creeds of Nicea and Constantinople.

To the charge that the source of “eternity” assumed in the creeds is more Greek than Christian, three things may be said: (a) while the Ante-Nicene and Nicene Fathers did use conceptual models drawn from Greek thought, it is important to remember that the creedal tradition is an *exegetical* tradition; (b) the Trinitarian controversy in the church was settled only after much wrestling with the biblical text and in the context of carefully examining rival approaches to what became the orthodox position; and (c) it would be both uncharitable and inaccurate to assume the Fathers were more influenced by Greek philosophical models than the biblical text, since they clearly uphold the doctrines of the creation, incarnation, and resurrection which the Greeks found particularly objectionable.

B. Eternity, Incarnation, and the Chalcedonian Consensus

A second ecumenical creedal position affected by this discussion relates to the Incarnation and the relationship between the human and divine natures of Christ. Rejection of the traditional doctrine of eternity runs counter to some of the concerns underlying not only Nicea and Constantinople, but also that of Chalcedon.

Such an assertion may come as a surprise or seem counter-intuitive, since the Incarnation is often offered as a potential defeater for any form of atemporal or supratemporal eternity. Reginald Luhn makes this point uncompromisingly:

³⁸Paul Helm, “Eternal Creation,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 45 (1994): 336.

³⁹I have just stated that divine temporalism is not equivalent to Arianism and need not lead to it, and despite my reference to Helm, I am not retracting that point here. Leaving a door open is not the same as walking through the door. The divine temporalists can certainly avoid doing so, and provide an alternative way of shutting it. Thus, I do not agree with Helm that divine temporalism entails Arianism.

The most crucial objection to God's timelessness must be that it makes God's intervention in history impossible. In particular it would make nonsense of the Christian belief in the incarnation.⁴⁰

Consistent with this position, Thomas Senor argues that the doctrine of the Incarnation provides a strong *prima facie* argument against divine atemporality on the grounds that they are incompatible. Since Christ is God the Son, he bore temporal properties; since no being which bears temporal properties can be atemporal, God the Son cannot be atemporal.⁴¹

Nicholas Wolterstorff draws a similar conclusion based upon divine action, and in the process questions the Chalcedonian orthodoxy of certain divine eternalists:

God's action, on the view of the eternalist, consists of timelessly bringing about events, the events brought about often having a location in time. God's speaking to Moses consists of timelessly bringing about the event consisting of those sounds emerging at that precise time from the unburned flaming bush. The most important question for the Christian to consider, in reflecting on this understanding of divine action, is whether it is compatible with an orthodox understanding of what happens in the incarnation. So far as I can see, it is not; whatever we may think in general about Aquinas's strategy, at this point it fails. The actions of Jesus were not simply human actions brought about by God, plus human actions freely performed by Jesus in situations brought about by God; they were God's actions. In the life and deeds of Jesus it was God who dwelt among us.⁴²

Such concerns and argument have not gone unanswered. As we noted in chapter 4, Douglas Blount has criticized Senor's argument on the ground that it proves too much, so that if his form of argument is successful, the Incarnation would not only be a defeater for divine eternity, but for divine omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence, and spacelessness as well.⁴³ More important for our purpose here is the response of Stump and Kretzmann.

⁴⁰Reginald S. Luffman, "The Concept of God: Some Philosophical Considerations," *Evangelical Quarterly* 54 (1982), 94; quoted in Kevin S. Diller, "Timelessness, Relationality and the Incarnation" (Th.M. thesis, Calvin Theological Seminary, 2002), 62.

⁴¹Thomas Senor, "Incarnation and Timelessness," *Faith and Philosophy* 7 (April 1990), 149-64; and "Incarnation, Timelessness, and Leibniz's Law Problems," in *God and Time: Essays on the Divine Nature*, ed. Gregory E. Ganssle and David M. Woodruff (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 220-235.

⁴²Wolterstorff, "Unqualified Divine Temporality," 209.

⁴³Douglas Blount, "On the Incarnation of a Timeless God," in Ganssle and Woodruff, ed. *God and Time*, 240.

They recognize that the Incarnation poses a special kind of problem, since in this case the eternal entity becomes a component of the temporal effect.⁴⁴ While they do not pretend to give this issue the attention it deserves, they suggest that the complexity of the doctrine of the Incarnation, and particularly its emphasis on the two natures of Christ, may well rob the objection of its force while at the same time providing a potential path for resolving it:

We hope simply to have pointed out that the doctrine of the Incarnation cannot be reduced to the belief that God became temporal and that, if it is understood as including the doctrine of the dual nature, it can be seen to have been constructed in such a way as to avoid being reduced to that simple belief.⁴⁵

The matter can be put more positively. Not only does Chalcedon provide a way to harmonize the traditional doctrine of eternity with the Incarnation, the doctrine of eternity plays a significant role in the Chalcedonian understanding of the two natures of Christ.

The Council of Chalcedon is important to the traditional doctrine of eternity for a number of reasons. First, it assumes the truthfulness of that doctrine and reaffirms the Nicene anti-Arian argument that Christ was generated by the Father before time began.⁴⁶

Second, while the Chalcedonian Fathers embrace the doctrine of eternity, they strongly reject certain implications of Greek thought by affirming the doctrine of the Incarnation. The early church was plagued by the Greek and Gnostic tendency to view the material realm as inferior to the spiritual and to resist the truth of the Incarnation by arguing that it is both impossible and unseemly for God to become a man. Chalcedon, while carefully preserving the distinction between the two natures, nonetheless affirms in no uncertain terms the reality of God becoming man in the person of Christ. If there were ever

⁴⁴Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann, "Eternity," *Journal of Philosophy* 78 (1981): 429-458; reprinted in *The Concept of God*, ed. Thomas V. Morris (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 244 (page citations are to the reprint edition).

⁴⁵Stump and Kretzmann, "Eternity," 246.

⁴⁶The Council of Chalcedon, in addition to producing the creed which bears its name, specifically and strongly reaffirms the symbols of both the Creed of Nicea (Nicea, 325 A.D.) and the Nicene Creed (Constantinople, 381 A.D.). See Norris, *The Christological Controversy* 155-159.

a time when it might be said that Christian thought was too heavily influenced by Greek philosophy, *this was not that time*. The authors of the Creed of Chalcedon clearly side with the Biblical text over against the worldview presuppositions of Greek thought.

Third, the Council of Chalcedon preserves the eternal generation of the Son according to his Godhead (“born from the Father before the ages”) and the temporal manifestation of the Son according to his Manhood (“born in the last days from the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God”). According to Chalcedon, the Incarnation does not mean that the eternal Son divested himself of any part of his divinity in order to assume a human nature. He is fully human and fully divine. Christ is both *homoousios* with the Father as concerning his divine nature and *homoousios* with us regarding his human nature, thus affirming both natures in full measure. Indeed, instead of affirming one nature at the expense of the other, the Creed of Chalcedon insists on seeing the relationship between the two natures as that expressed in the *communicatio idiomatum* (communication of attributes). The Creed asserts that the full characteristics of both natures can be predicated of the incarnate person of Christ, whereas the characteristics of each nature cannot be predicated of the other nature. This one and the same Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son [of God] must be confessed to be in two natures, divine and human, unconfusedly, immutably, indivisibly, and inseparably.

This solution does two things: First, it captures, in a remarkably nuanced manner, the precise way that the New and Old Testaments actually speak of the person of the incarnate Christ. Second, it permits both the communicable and incommunicable attributes of the Triune God to be communicated to the Divine Son without contradiction. This is not possible in regard to human beings. We cannot be both eternal and temporal. We cannot be both immutable and responsive to forces around us. We cannot be required to obtain knowledge by learning and be omniscient. We cannot be holy as God is holy and still learn obedience through what we suffer. For human beings, such predications are incompatible

and contradictory. But that is not true, says Chalcedon, of the person of Christ. All of these attributes can and must be applied to Christ and that without contradiction because that is the way the scriptures speak of Jesus.⁴⁷ To do otherwise is to take away from or deny the full biblical testimony regarding the person of Christ and the plenitude of the divine nature he shares. Again, this is a remarkable inductive synthesis of the biblical testimony regarding the humanity and divinity of Jesus.

However, some divine temporalists, like Senor above, appear to run contrary to the spirit of Chalcedon because they insist on seeing within the doctrine of the Incarnation a contradiction between divine eternity and temporality which the doctrine of the communication of attributes maintains does not and need not exist. While the attribute of eternity or temporal omnipresence is not communicable to human beings, it is communicable to the Son through the communication of attributes.

Further, at the same time it resists any contradiction between these human and divine attributes of Christ and affirms their interplay within the person of Christ, Chalcedon also forbids their mixture or merging. Some divine temporalists (such as certain Open Theists) insist that God's immanence requires that God's attributes be like human attributes.⁴⁸ Such assertions run contrary to the spirit of Chalcedon. To say that the Son

⁴⁷Cyril of Alexandria, in his *Second Letter to Nestorius* (which was specifically commended by the Council of Chalcedon in support of its creed) explains the two natures/one person doctrine in this way: "Furthermore we say that while the natures which were brought together in true unity were different, there is nevertheless, because of the unspeakable and unutterable convergence into unity, one Christ and one Son out of the two. This is the sense in which it is said that, although he existed and was born from the Father before the ages, he was also born of a woman in his flesh. . . .for it is at once stupid and pointless to assert that one who exists prior to every age, coeternal with the Father, is in need of a second way of coming into being. . . .We assert that this is the way in which he suffered and rose from the dead. It is not that the Logos of God suffered in his own nature, being overcome by stripes or nail-piercing or any other injuries; for the divine, since it is incorporeal, is impassible. Since, however, the body that had become his own underwent suffering, he is--once again--said to have suffered these things for our sakes, for the impassible One was within the suffering body." Take from Norris, *The Christological Controversy*, 133.

⁴⁸This is suggested in a number of assertions by various authors in Clark Pinnock, et al., *The Openness of God*. Thus, God's love must be like our love in that he interacts with the world in a "give and take" fashion and his inner experience of the world is rich with emotion (Rice, 22), because his love

cannot be eternal because he is temporally incarnate is not consistent with the Chalcedonian solution to the mystery of the Incarnation, which is emphatic that these human and divine dimensionalities of the incarnate Christ must remain distinct and unmixed. In other words, it is no more impossible for Christ to be eternal than it is for him to possess any of the communicable or incommunicable attributes as the Divine Son.

Divine temporalists insist that the doctrine of the Incarnation requires that both the human and divine experience of time be understood in a common way that includes temporal succession, sequence, and change. While not exactly or univocally the same, this commonality is sufficient to soften, if not surrender, the distinction between the ontology of the two natures in this connection. But it is the very issue of merging or unifying the two natures that is resisted by Chalcedon.

In making this observation, I am *not* saying that divine temporalists cannot affirm the Chalcedonian formula concerning the two natures of Christ. They can.⁴⁹ However, I do believe their position softens the Chalcedonian doctrine of the communication of

depends upon the response of human decisions and actions (Rice, 25), is stirred by the conduct and fate of human beings (Rice, 26), and because it is characterized by risk-taking (Pinnock, 125). His will must be like our will in that he is subject to the choices of other free beings just as we are, so that what God decides to do depends on what people decide to do (Rice, 32), and so that God's will, like ours, does not guarantee the outcome he desires (Rice, 54-55). His experience of time must be similar to our own, otherwise he could not relate to our temporal world (Pinnock, 120), for after God acts, both the universe and God's experience of the universe changes so that divine actions entails divine temporality (Rice 36). It also means that the future is for God, as it is for us, open and indeterminate so that the distinction between what is possible and what is actual is true for God just as it is for us (Pinnock, 120). His knowledge must be like our knowledge because it is limited by the free actions of others, lest human freedom and genuine relationship be jeopardized, because it is ever increasing as God temporally experiences the world, and because it is not inclusive of the future, since the future does not yet exist for God or us to know it (Pinnock, 123). This does not count against God's omniscience for it is not a limitation to not know what cannot be known (Basinger, 163). Rice summarizes: "If human beings and God have nothing whatever in common, if we have utterly no mutual experience, then we have no way of talking and thinking about God and there is no possibility of a personal relationship with him" (35). Of course, it must be remembered that not all divine temporalists are Open Theists, or share their views.

⁴⁹Believing that God and humans share the same ontology of time does not, in itself, lead to a blending of the other human and divine attributes of Christ in opposition to the communication of attributes, or cause that doctrine to unravel. Divine temporalists can affirm Chalcedon. However, as we shall see later in this chapter, how we understand God's relationship to time significantly influences our understanding of the nature of those attributes and the Creator/creature distinction.

attributes by pressuring the tradition to interpret the human and divine natures of Christ in relationship to time in an equivalent sense.⁵⁰

To sum up, I believe the intuition of Stump and Kretzmann is correct. The Chalcedonian doctrine of the two natures of Christ and the communication of attributes prevents the Incarnation from being appealed to as a defeater for the doctrine of divine temporal omnipresence. But it does more. It demonstrates how it is possible, indeed even necessary, for there to be an interface between the realm of the human and divine in the two natures and one person of the incarnate Christ.

Of course, simply revealing that divine temporalists do not agree with the traditional doctrine of divine eternity reflected in the creeds does not mean that they are in error. Neither does the assertion of divine eternity by the creedal tradition, in itself, establish the biblical validity of the doctrine.⁵¹

However, consideration of the creeds should at least give theologians pause before abandoning the traditional doctrine of divine eternity for the following reasons: (a) the creeds reflect an *exegetical* tradition that does not sell its biblical birthright for a bowl of Hellenistic pottage; (b) the biblical basis of the creeds renders suspect any claim that the Bible has *nothing* to say about atemporal eternity; (c) because the writers of the creeds assume without question the notion of atemporal eternity to counter heterodox views of the person of Christ, such as Arianism, theologians should be sensitive to any potential

⁵⁰Of course, there may be ways of escaping this problem. William Lane Craig escapes it by understanding God's relationship to time as volitional, rather than metaphysical. God, by virtue of creating a world has chosen to stand in temporal relation to it. Therefore, God is eternal apart from creation and temporal with it. Thus, God can stand in temporal relationship to the world by virtue of his having created the world, just as God the Son can stand in temporal relationship to the world by virtue of his incarnation. However, as previously mentioned, this solution comes at the cost of removing eternity from among the essential or ontological attributes of God.

⁵¹Both the creeds and the reasoning underlying them could be mistaken. Even within the Reformed tradition, the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (31.3) reminds us that the councils of the church "may err, and many have erred," which is why the Bible must be the final authority in all matters of faith (1.10).

consequences involved in a readjustment of the doctrine.

To be fair, neither position avoids bumping up against the mystery of the Incarnation. However, if the traditional doctrine of eternity is to be jettisoned, it remains for the divine temporalists to produce as nuanced and full-orbed a Christology as that articulated by the ecumenical creeds.

Some divine temporalists argue that a burden of proof falls upon those who uphold divine eternity. In reply, I believe an equal burden of proof falls upon those who, on the basis of a few decades of reflection, would set aside a view of eternity that has informed the creedal tradition for sixteen centuries. However, in the pages that follow, I hope to assume the burden of proof placed upon defenders of divine eternity, and to muster a host of biblical, theological, and analogical arguments to show, not only why the theological tradition valued the doctrine of divine eternity, but why we should continue to do so.

C. Eternity and the Attributes of God

The doctrine of eternity is important to understanding not only the person of Christ, but also all the attributes of God.

First, it extends to them by way of qualification. According to the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, in answer to Question 4, “Who is God?”, “God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth.” What is important to note is the way the incommunicable attributes of infinity, eternity, and immutability are significant not just in their own right but as modifiers of God’s moral or communicable attributes. God is not only wise, he is infinitely and eternally so. He is not only good but his goodness is without measure and remains constant--eternally so. If you alter the doctrine of eternity, it has a serious effect on how you understand the doctrine of God in general, for God cannot be compartmentalized as if one aspect of his being were separate from another.

It might be argued that if God is, in relationship to himself, eternal, but in

relationship to the temporal realm, everlasting, such an objection has little or no force. For us to say that God is good is simply to say that God has been, and always will be, Good (everlastingly so). Thus, to say that God was good “before time began” (eternally) is interesting but has little practical implications for our understanding of God since (a) as temporal creatures we cannot conceive of what it would be for God to be Good “before time began” (eternally); and (b) the point of “eternal” in the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* definition is to comfort us that God has always been this way and always shall be. Nothing is lost on the everlasting understanding of God’s eternity.

There is some validity to this response; however, it fails to take into account all that it could and should regarding the divine attributes. The *ad intra, ad extra* distinction may be difficult to sort out, but it does have theological importance. It reminds us that God, as he is in relationship to us, is not all that there is to God. And it preserves the idea that there are aspects of God’s being that are uniquely his, while at the same time being relevant to us. The difficulty with divine temporality is that it puts the emphasis on God’s relation to us--God shares our timeline--such that God’s uniqueness is diminished, if not lost. If God’s duration is merely longer than ours (and this is the force of Cullmann’s argument that everlasting is “the linking of an unlimited series of limited world periods”⁵²) the qualitative distinction between the Creator and the creation are lost. Recall that several divine temporalists argue that God is ontologically changeable and necessarily so, or he cannot participate in the temporal world. This argument moves in the direction of reducing God to what he is *ad extra*. The doctrine of eternity, on the other hand, retains God’s unique transcendence (*ad intra*) and temporal immanence (*ad extra*).

The Westminster Divines, therefore, were wise to choose infinity, eternity, and immutability as descriptive qualifiers of God’s moral attributes, for these attributes reflect

⁵²Cullmann, *God and Time*, 46.

the fullness and completion of the divine nature. God's infinity teaches us that all God possesses he does so without limitation. God's immutability reminds us that God's attributes never waver and he remains the same. God's eternity reflects both his infinity and immutability with respect to time. In other words, God is self-existently unchangeable, unlimited, and complete from before time began. To say that God always has and always will (everlastingly) possess these attributes is true but does not preserve the notion that God's mode of existence is unique and in a class by itself. To say only that God is everlasting describes his relationship to time, but does not point to the unique nature of his being. It is to reduce an incommunicable attribute to a communicable one. This is especially true if God is simply on a temporal timeline like our own and subject to the same temporal limitations.

D. Eternity and the Negative Trajectory of Open Theism

As an illustration of how altering the concept of eternity can alter the concept of God, consider for a moment the findings of Open Theism. Open Theism is not the primary subject of this dissertation, although it could have been.⁵³ However, Open Theism has provided personal motivation for developing a defense of divine eternity, for it reveals one possible theological trajectory for those who deny the traditional doctrine.

Open Theism is the name given to a theological movement which has some loose connection to the Wesleyan tradition and reflects a radical Arminian perspective--far more

⁵³Instead, I have largely limited my sparring partners to the Christian analytical philosophers of the last four decades, only two of whom, William Hasker and David Basinger, have declared themselves to be Open Theists. See William Hasker, "A Philosophical Perspective," in *The Openness of God*, ed. Clark Pinnock, et al. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994): 126-154. In his introduction, Hasker declares, "The purpose of the present chapter is to provide a philosophical explication of the issues of this discussion--to exhibit the rational coherence of the theology of divine openness, and to show where it is superior to competing ways of understanding God and his works" (126). See also David Basinger, "Practical Implications," 155-176, in the same volume.

radical than Arminius himself would have advocated.⁵⁴ Open Theism takes as its starting point the assumption of libertarian free will of an incompatibilist sort and proceeds to rewrite all of Christian theology in light of this presupposition. Since human beings have libertarian free will, there are certain things over which God has no control, specifically the free choices of human beings. This doctrine clearly moves away from the traditional understanding of God's sovereignty, but Open Theists argue that it does not count against his omnipotence, since he freely chose to create a world in which human beings have libertarian free will.

In a parallel fashion, Open Theists reconceive God's omniscience. Since human beings have complete and libertarian free will, God cannot possess certain foreknowledge of future contingent events. Further, they argue that, since God is himself temporal and the future does yet exist, God has no knowledge of the future, for there is as of yet no future to be known. However, it does not count against God's omniscience not to know what cannot be known.

Further, since God is limited by libertarian free will and cannot possess knowledge of the future, it follows that God is mutable, since he must gain knowledge in the same way all temporal beings do, by gaining new experiences in the unfolding of time. God is a God who grows and so is not immutable in the traditional sense.

Through similar considerations, the traditional understanding of God's infinity is reconstructed: God is no longer infinite, because he possesses genuine limitations in what he can know and how he can act.

Since God's incommunicable attributes have traditionally been understood as

⁵⁴Arminius himself, while arguing that every human being had sufficient freedom of the will in order to make a decision to accept the salvation made universally available through the work of Christ and freely offered in the Gospel, understood that freedom to be restricted. He also believed that election was based and conditioned upon God's foreknowledge of human faith freely exercised, so that God had positive and certain knowledge of future free events. The conclusions of Open Theism go far beyond anything with which Arminius would have recognized or to which he would have agreed.

modifiers of his communicable, or moral, attributes, the whole doctrine of God becomes affected by the reconfiguring of the attributes of God in ways that should make, and have made, the Reformed and Evangelical community uncomfortable.⁵⁵ I am not arguing here that all those who embrace divine temporality are Open Theists. That would be unfair.⁵⁶ But there is not doubt that divine temporality is an important component to the Open Theist position. Further, if we ask, “What is at stake in this discussion?” the answer is potentially the way we understand the doctrine of God. To change the way we look at God’s relationship to time modifies our understanding of all the attributes of God, since, traditionally, divine eternity is a descriptive qualifier of God’s moral attributes. To say that a “proper” view of God as everlasting avoids such a redescription raises the question of what that proper view might be and places a burden of proof upon divine temporalists to show how their view of God avoids reconfiguring the attributes of God. Since such a change also includes moving away from an exegetical theological consensus which endured for almost sixteen hundred years, it is one that should not be entered into lightly, if at all.

III. Towards a Biblical Defense

A. Suggestions from the Analytic Debate

In the analytic debate on eternity, not everyone is as skeptical regarding the relevance of scripture as Cullmann, Padgett, Barr, and Wolterstorff appear to be. Paul Helm and William Craig are much more positive, although both agree that the biblical data

⁵⁵Open Theism has generated a considerable amount of discussion within Evangelical Christianity, most of it strongly negative. Among those strongly critical of the view are John Frame, *No Other God: A Response to Open Theism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2001) and *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing Company, 2003); Millard Erickson, “Free Will Theism,” in *God the Father Almighty* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998): 67-92; and Bruce Ware, *God’s Lesser Glory: The Diminished God of Open Theism* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2000).

⁵⁶As a general principle, I try not to label theologians with theological shorthand titles that they have not themselves embraced. As mentioned above, of the analytical philosophers in the survey of literature, only William Hasker and David Basinger have declared themselves as Open Theists.

is not conclusive and that the issue may need to be decided on other grounds.⁵⁷ Despite these qualifications, their discussions set the stage for a biblical defense of the doctrine.

1. **Paul Helm: The biblical testimony consistent with eternity**

In contrast to Wolterstorff, Helm believes that the biblical text is not opposed to divine atemporality and that the doctrine is consistent with scripture.⁵⁸ The doctrine is not, however, *entailed* by scripture and in that sense it is underdetermined. However, such a situation is common in the development of theological doctrine and need cause no concern. As a parallel case, Helm appeals to the doctrine of the full divinity of the Son articulated in the Trinitarian controversy in the fourth century. Here the doctrine of Christ being *homoousios* with the Father is clearly informed by and dependent upon the raw data of scripture, but its full expression had to await a reflexive context which provided both the controversial impetus and conceptual implements necessary fully to formulate the doctrine.⁵⁹ Helm believes that the development of the doctrine of the Incarnation and the development of the doctrine of divine timelessness can be seen as parallel so that if one has no objection to the formulation of the former, he ought not object to the development of the latter.⁶⁰

For similar reasons, Helm is unsympathetic towards arguments that suggest that the doctrine of divine atemporality is simply the incursion of pagan Greek thought into Christianity theology, which thereby requires some form of dehellenization. Helm admits

⁵⁷See Paul Helm, *Eternal God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 6; Helm argues that the doctrine of eternity is consistent with the biblical testimony regarding God. William Craig is more cautious and concludes with James Barr that “if such a thing as a Christian doctrine of time has to be developed, the work of discussing it and developing it must belong not to biblical but to philosophical theology” (Barr, *Biblical Words for Time*, 149; quoted in William Lane Craig, *Time and Eternity: Exploring God’s Relationship to Time* [Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2001], 20).

⁵⁸Paul Helm, “Divine Timeless Eternity,” in Ganssle, ed., *God and Time: Four Views*, 31.

⁵⁹Helm, *Eternal God*, 10. See also Helm, “Divine Timeless Eternity,” 32.

⁶⁰Helm, “Divine Timeless Eternity,” 32; see also Helm, *Eternal God*, 11.

that the writers of the Old and New Testaments did not think or express themselves in Greek metaphysical terms, for they had neither the tools or inclination to move in that direction. But this does not indicate what they would have done or thought had they been given those tools or had they faced the specific challenges to Apostolic doctrine that the early church confronted. The issue is adequacy, not genetics:

Even if it is granted that the idea of timelessness is pure Greek invention, what matters is whether the thought that God is timeless is a necessary truth-condition of all else that Christians want to say of God, which is certainly not a Greek invention. Thus it no more matters whether timelessness is a concept introduced by the Greeks than it matters (for the viability or otherwise of the idea) that the concept of a shepherd is the product of a pastoral society.⁶¹

Helm cites a number of texts, which he believes are consistent with the view that God is eternal:

God is the “lofty one who inhabits eternity” (Is 57:15); though his creation will grow old, he remains the same, his years never end (Heb 1:10-12); before the mountains were brought forth God is from everlasting to everlasting. (Ps 90:2; see also 1 Cor 2:7; 2 Tim 1:9 and other verses that refer to God existing “before the foundation of the world.”) These verses are consistent with eternalism in that they can fairly be interpreted in an eternalist way. Whether the authors intended by their words to teach eternalism is a more difficult question, for the statements can equally well be interpreted in a temporalist way. And it is equally difficult to decide if by their words the writers intended to affirm temporalism.⁶²

Helm’s own view is that other theological considerations lead us to the conclusion that the doctrine of divine eternity makes better sense of the biblical data than the temporalist view by enabling us to preserve what the Bible says about God and preventing us from making certain false assertions concerning God.⁶³ Thus texts such as those referred to by Helm are better understood within an eternalist rather than a temporalist framework.

⁶¹Helm, *Eternal God*, 22.

⁶²Helm, “Divine Timeless Eternity,” 31.

⁶³Helm, “Divine Timeless Eternity,” 33.

2. William Lane Craig: The twin poles of eternity

William Craig argues that God is both temporal and atemporal, although not at the same time! His is a mediating or twin pole position that holds that God is atemporally eternal prior to beginning of creation and temporally everlasting following it. Thus, he appeals to biblical material to support both sides of the controversy.⁶⁴ Indeed, Craig, like Helm, believes the biblical text supports the atemporal position (at one pole) and presents an even more detailed scriptural defense than does Helm. Nonetheless, in the last analysis Craig agrees with Barr that the matter ultimately must be resolved by appeal to philosophical rather than biblical theology.⁶⁵

According to Craig, the Bible does speak of God as eternal, and he cites three passages in this regard. First, Isa. 57:15 speaks of God as the “high and lofty One who inhabits eternity.” Second, Isa. 41:4 declares how the LORD, in contrast to the pagan gods, never came into existence nor will he cease to exist: “I, the LORD, the first, and with the last; I am He.” Finally, the magnificent words of Heb. 1:10-12 declare, “The heavens will perish but God will remain. They will grow up, and be changed, But God remains the same and his years will never end.”⁶⁶ At the very least, God’s being eternal means that he exists without beginning or end, and this conclusion is uncontroversial.⁶⁷ What quickly follows is the partisanship between those who, on the one side, see God’s eternity as reflecting his timelessness and those on the other, who see it demanding his temporality.

Does the biblical teaching favor either one of these views? In contrast to Padgett’s

⁶⁴Although I am using language similar to that found in Process Theology, the twin temporal and eternal poles in Craig’s position are not the same as those found in Process Theology, since for Craig they are not metaphysically necessary to God’s nature.

⁶⁵Barr, *Biblical Words for Time*, 149; quoted in Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 20.

⁶⁶Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 14.

⁶⁷Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 15.

strongly-worded conclusion denying any biblical warrant for the absolute timelessness of God, Craig suggests that this question turns out to be “surprisingly difficult to answer.”⁶⁸ On the one hand, Craig argues that the Bible clearly describes God as being engaged in temporal activities such as possessing foreknowledge and remembering, and it describes his existence as an endless duration (Ps. 90:2 and Rev. 4:8b and the passages already cited).⁶⁹ On the other hand, Craig admits that the biblical data is not wholly one-sided. Schmidt’s *Ewigkeitsbegriff im alten Testament* (The Concept of Eternity in the Old Testament), which, Craig reminds us, Padgett highly esteems, argues for divine timelessness on the basis of creation texts such as Gen. 1:1 and Prov. 8:22-23.⁷⁰ While Padgett dismisses Schmidt’s interpretation of Gen. 1:1, Craig points out that Barr is sympathetic to interpreting this verse as referring to an absolute beginning that includes time itself.⁷¹ It is also consistent with what we know of Egyptian cosmology.⁷²

Likewise, Prov. 8:22-23 is capable of being read in a way which emphasizes not simply the antiquity of Wisdom, but also that there was a beginning to time. Craig points out that this passage is “brimming with temporal expressions for a beginning” and, in support of this, appeals to R. N. Whybray’s comment that the biblical writer

was so insistent on pressing home the fact of Wisdom’s unimaginable antiquity that

⁶⁸Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 15.

⁶⁹Ps. 90:2: “Before the mountains were born or you brought forth the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God.” Rev. 4:8: “Each of the four living creatures had six wings and was covered with eyes all around, even under his wings. Day and night they never stop saying: ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come.’”

⁷⁰Schmidt, *Der Ewigkeitsbegriff im alten Testament*, 31-32; quoted in Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 17. Gen. 1:1: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” Prov. 8:23, 24: “I was appointed from eternity, from the beginning, before the world began. When there were no oceans, I was given birth, when there were no springs abounding with water.”

⁷¹Barr, *Biblical Words for Time*, 145-147; quoted in Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 17.

⁷²See John D. Currid, “An Examination of the Egyptian Background of the Genesis Cosmogony,” *Biblische Zeitschrift* 35 (1991):18-40; quoted in Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 17.

he piled every available synonym in a deluge of tautologies: *rēs'šît*, **beginning**, *qedem*, **the first**, *mē'āz*, **of old**, *mē'olām*, **ages ago**, *mērō's*, **at the first** or "from the beginning" (compare Isa. 40.21; 41.4, 26), *Miqqadē mē'āreš*, **before the beginning of the earth**: the emphasis is not so much on the *mode* of Wisdom's coming into existence, . . . but on the *fact* of her antiquity.⁷³

The Septuagint renders the *me'olam* of Prov. 8:23 (from eternity) as *pro tou aionios* (before time), an interpretation supported by Sirach 24:9 ("Before the ages, in the beginning, he created me, and for all ages I shall not cease to be") and reinforced in 16:26 and 23:20.⁷⁴

Consistent with this, certain New Testament passages also suggest a beginning to time. In Jude 25, "before all time, now and forever" (*pro pantos tou aionos kai nun kai eis pantas tous aionas*) affirms both an eternal duration and a beginning to past time, speaking of God as existing before time began. In Titus 1:2-3, eternal life is promised "before age-long time" (*pro chronon aionion*) but manifested at the proper time (*kairos idios*). Similarly, 2 Tim. 1:9 describes God's purpose and grace as given in Christ Jesus "before age-long time" (*pro chronon idion*) but now are manifested by the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus. Arndt and Gingrich translate this as "before time began." In 1 Cor. 2:7, Paul speaks of the hidden wisdom of God which God decreed "before the ages" (*pro ton aionon*).⁷⁵

Such descriptions are consistent with several Septuagint passages such as Pss. 54:20 and 55:19, "before the ages," utilizing an explicit *pro* construction that connotes more than "for long ages" but suggests "before time began." This is confirmed by the

⁷³R. N. Whybray, *Proverbs*, New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 131-132; quoted in Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 18. Transliteration and emphasis is Craig's.

⁷⁴Cited in Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 19. Sirach 16:26, 27a: "The works of the Lord have existed from the beginning by his creation, and when he made them he determined their divisions. He arranged his works in an eternal order and their dominion for all generations." Sirach 23:20: "Before the universe was created it was known to him; so it was also after it was finished" (RSV). Taken from *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).

⁷⁵Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 19.

similar expressions of God and his decrees spoken or as originating “before the foundation of the world” (*pro kataboles kosmou*) as found in John 17:24, Eph. 1:4, 1 Pet. 1:20, and Rev. 13:18.⁷⁶ Craig concludes in a manner consistent with his own thesis:

Thus, although scriptural authors speak of God as temporal and everlasting, there is some evidence at least, that when God is considered in relation to creation He must be thought of as the transcendent Creator of time and the ages and therefore as existing beyond time. It may well be the case that in the context of the doctrine of creation the biblical writers were led to reflect on God’s relationship to time and chose to affirm His transcendence. Still the evidence is not clear, and we seem forced to conclude with Barr that “if such a thing as a Christian doctrine of time has to be developed, the work of discussing it and developing it must belong not to biblical but to philosophical theology.”⁷⁷

This discussion of Helm and Craig is sufficient to counter the assumption by some temporalists that the Bible has little or nothing to say about atemporal eternity. It remains now to more deeply root and ground this doctrine in the biblical text.

B. Eternity, Post-Reformation Orthodoxy, and the Biblical Text

1. Introduction: Post-Reformation Reformed Orthodoxy as a source

The doctrine of divine eternity has a long and noble pedigree in Christian thought, and some of the greatest minds in the church have reflected carefully on its relationship to the biblical text. In what follows I make no claim to originality but rather set forth some of the best arguments within the tradition. One largely untapped but valuable source is that of Post-Reformation Reformed Orthodoxy (hence PRRO).

PRRO is valuable for several reasons. First, it reflects a clear commitment to the Reformation principle of *sola scriptura*. This means that PRRO is pre-critical in the sense that it does not devote its energies to uncovering the source(s) of the text. Instead, it assumes the integrity of biblical text and concentrates upon its meaning. Second, while PRRO reflects a tremendous appreciation for the Western intellectual tradition, it is

⁷⁶Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 19-20.

⁷⁷Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 20.

scrupulously concerned about imposing foreign or pagan elements onto the text. Third, PRRO insists that philosophy be the handmaiden of theology, not the other way around. In other words, while both philosophy and theology are greatly esteemed, the honor given to each is not the honor among equals. Consistent with the project of FSU, PRRO is not reluctant to use biblical revelation to qualify or even restrain the findings of philosophy. The result is extremely careful theological thought that does not embrace uncritically the tools of reason and logic.

In contrast to most modern discussions, PRRO provides a spirited biblical defense of the doctrine of divine eternity understood as duration without succession. This defense is all the more relevant when we recognize that PRRO was also facing contemporary philosophical challenges to the traditional understanding of God by Vorstius and the Socinians. Vorstius and the Socinians denied the essential infinity of God and, correspondingly, his infinity with respect to space (omnipresence) and with respect to time (eternity). In the first case, omnipresence meant simply that God extended his power over all the world. In the second case, it meant simply that God extended as an everlastingness in and through time. God was not transcendent of time, and indeed the Socinians argued that there was temporal succession in him. According to Muller, in opposition to this challenge the PRRO insisted that

there is a direct attribution of eternity to God in a series of biblical passages—notably, those that speak of God's existence before the foundation of the world and “from everlasting to everlasting,” particularly in relation to other passages that point toward the changelessness of God: the text of Scripture, taken as a whole, cannot be pressed to argue an endless or everlasting existence that is somehow also subject to the category of time. The divine eternity cannot be understood fully by finite creatures—and any attempt to understand the concept by means of temporal categories dishonors God.⁷⁸

The approach of PRRO is multi-pronged and highly nuanced hermeneutically.

⁷⁸Richard Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725*, vol. 3, *The Divine Essence and Attributes* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 354 (hence *PRRD*).

Richard Muller comments:

Significantly, the Reformed theologians and exegetes do not attempt to understand the biblical text always as directly indicating a concept of eternity in its reference to God as “everlasting”: the full argument for eternity demands the interpretation of Scripture with Scripture and the hermeneutic of drawing conclusions from the juxtaposition of texts. Inasmuch as some passages speak of God as “everlasting” and others of God as “changeless,” the everlastingness cannot be understood in successive or temporal terms. The biblical texts, they insist, consistently contrast God’s nature to the changeableness of created beings: Calvin notes that “everlastingness” is “referred not only to the essence of God, but also to his providence” for “although he subjects the world to many alterations, he remains unmoved.”⁷⁹

2. A summary of the scriptural defense of eternity as duration without succession by PRRO

Muller sets forth four ways in which the Reformed Orthodox theologians thought that the doctrine of eternity, understood as duration without succession, was fully attested in the Scriptures:

a. Texts which advocate divine eternity (Gen. 21:33; Isa. 40:28 and 57:15; Dan. 7:27; Rom. 16:26)⁸⁰

According to Muller, PRRO followed the Reformers in believing that texts such as these provide a sound exegetical foundation for the doctrine of divine eternity:

Calvin could declare, in his comment on Isaiah 40:28, that the prophet calls God “eternal” in order to distinguish him “from all idols, which endure but for a time . . . for if God is eternal, he never changes or decays, eternity being uniformly attended by this quality, that it is never liable to change, but always remains the

⁷⁹Muller, *PRRD* 3:351-352. Muller cites Calvin, *Commentary on the Psalms*, Ps. 90:2 in loc. (CTS Psalms III, p. 462).

⁸⁰Gen. 21:33: “Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Beersheba, and there he called upon the name of the LORD, the Eternal God.” Isa. 40:28: “Do you not know? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom.” Isa. 57:15: “For this is what the high and lofty One says — he who lives forever, whose name is holy: I live in a high and holy place, but also with him who is contrite and lowly in spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite.” Dan. 7:27: “Then the sovereignty, power and greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven will be handed over to the saints, the people of the Most High. His kingdom will be an everlasting kingdom, and all rulers will worship and obey him.” Rom. 16:25-26: “Now to him who is able to establish you by my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past, but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all nations might believe and obey him — to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen.”

same.” . . . In several of these texts, the translators and commentators vary—sometimes rendering the Hebrew *olam* as “eternal,” sometimes as “everlasting”; or in Latin as *aeternum* (eternal), *sempiternum* (everlasting), or *seculum*, this latter term indicating an indefinitely long duration, and sometimes as *perpetuitas*. Yet, in all of these translations, the sense remains: God is not subject to the vicissitudes of time; he endures or has duration without mutation or succession.⁸¹

b. Texts which deny to God temporal succession (Job 36:26; Isa. 43:10; Ps. 90:2-5; 2 Pet. 3:8)⁸²

A second line of argument is that various texts deny that there is succession of time in God. Thus Matthew Henry could appeal to Job 36:26, which declares that the number of God’s years cannot be searched out, as pointing to a “Being without beginning, succession, or period, who ever was, and ever will be, and ever the same, the great I AM”.⁸³ Likewise, in interpreting Ps. 90:2-5 (before God made the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting he is God), Henry distills that God is “an eternal God, whose existence has neither its commencement or its period with time, nor is measured by the succession and revolutions of it, but who art *the same yesterday, today, and forever*, without beginning of days or end of life or change of time.⁸⁴

Such comments indicate that God’s existence involves a successionless duration, a

⁸¹Muller, *PRRD* 3:349.

⁸²Job 36:26: “How great is God—beyond our understanding! The number of his years is past finding out.” Isa. 43:10-13: “You are my witnesses,” declares the LORD, ‘and my servant whom I have chosen, so that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he. Before me no god was formed, nor will there be one after me. I, even I, am the LORD, and apart from me there is no savior. I have revealed and saved and proclaimed—I, and not some foreign god among you. You are my witnesses,’ declares the LORD, ‘that I am God. Yes, and from ancient days I am he. No one can deliver out of my hand. When I act, who can reverse it?’” Ps. 90:2-5: “Before the mountains were born or you brought forth the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God. You turn men back to dust, saying, “Return to dust, O sons of men.” For a thousand years in your sight are like a day that has just gone by, or like a watch in the night. You sweep men away in the sleep of death; they are like the new grass of the morning.” 2 Pet. 3:8: “But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day.”

⁸³ Henry, *Exposition*, Job 37:26, in loc.; quoted in Muller, *PRRD* 3:349.

⁸⁴Henry, *Exposition*, Ps. 90:2-5, in loc.; quoted in Muller, *PRRD* 3:350.

conclusion that arises out of his immutability in contrast to the mutability of time. For if God experiences temporal succession, he would also be subject to temporal flux in the move from past to present to future. This, argues Poole, commenting on 2 Pet. 3:8, is contrary to the way scriptures speaks of God's relationship to time:

By a synecdoche, a *thousand years* is put for any, even the longest revolution of time; and the sense is, that though there be a great difference of time, long and short, with us, who are subject to time, and are measured by it; yet with him who is eternal, without succession, to whom nothing is past, nothing future, but all things present, there is no difference of time . . . nay, all the time that hath run out since the foundation of the world is but as a day.⁸⁵

Similarly, Rijseen argues, explicitly against the Socinian doctrine of divine temporal succession, that the biblical text simply will not support such a position. Muller observes:

When, after all, the Psalmist compares the “foundations of the earth” and the heavens with God and writes that “They shall perish, but thou shalt endure: yea, all of them shall wax old like a garment; as a vesture thou shalt change them, and they shall all be changed: but thou art the same, and thy years shall have no end” (Ps. 102:26-27), it must be clear to all who read that nothing can be said to endure in this fashion that also experiences no [sic] succession from past to future.⁸⁶

Muller points out that this line of interpretation of Ps. 102 is consistently maintained by both Calvin and PRRO. Calvin, commenting on Ps. 102:24, contrasts the eternal existence of God with the brevity of our own lives and sees it as testifying to God's immutability. Diodati sees the eternity spoken of in Ps. 102:26-27 as incommunicable, and Poole interprets Ps. 102:26 as pointing both backward and forward, but sees God's existence not as dwelling in time but in eternity prior to the time of creation in which there was nothing but eternity.⁸⁷ Muller concludes:

There was hardly a doubt in the minds of the various major commentators of the age—as there was no doubt in the minds of the Reformers, when they encountered this text—that it taught the doctrine of eternity as held in traditional theological

⁸⁵Poole, *Commentary*, in loc; quoted in Muller, *PRRD* 3:350.

⁸⁶Muller, *PRRD* 3:350. Muller references Rijssen, *Summa theol.*, 3.12.

⁸⁷See Calvin, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 102:24, 28; Diodati, *Pious and Learned Annotations*, in loc., and Poole, *Commentary*, II, p. 157; quoted in Muller, *PRRD* 3:350-351.

systems.⁸⁸

c. Texts which describe God's attributes as eternal (Pss. 103:17; 136:1-26 and others)⁸⁹

It is important to recognize the multi-pronged approach to the doctrine of eternity maintained by PRRO. It is not simply derived from the handful of texts that refer directly to God's relationship to time. Instead, it is the product of reflection on the whole constellation of God's attributes, including, most significantly, his infinity, aseity, immensity, immutability, omniscience, and omnipotence (particularly in relationship to the creation and to divine providence).

According to Muller, a number of Reformed Orthodox commentators observe how the designation of eternity in scripture is predicated of a number of the other attributes of God. Thus Leigh points out that his mercy endures forever (Pss. 103:17; 136:1-26); his counsel is eternal (Ps. 33:11), as is his kingdom (Exod. 15:18), power (Dan. 6:26), glory (1 Pet. 5:10), and dominion (Dan. 7:14); and his righteousness and truth are everlasting (Ps. 119:142).⁹⁰ In his *Body of Divinity*, Leigh makes, reiterates, and elaborates his findings in a way that affirms that God's eternity endures, but without succession:

He is an everlasting King, everlastingly powerful, and glorious; as the conclusion to the Lords Prayer showeth. He is called the King eternal, 1 Tim. 5:17; and the eternal God, Rom. 16:26; the Maker of times, Heb. 1:2; he inhabiteth eternity, Isaiah, 57:15. God only is properly and absolutely eternal; Angels and men's souls are said to be eternal *a posteriori* or *a parte post*, God *a priori* & *a posteriori*, *ex parte ante* & *post*, since he hath neither beginning, nor succession or end.⁹¹

⁸⁸Muller, *PRRD* 3:351. Muller is commenting on the discussion found in Rijssen, *Summa theol.*, 3.12.

⁸⁹Ps. 103:17: "But from everlasting to everlasting the LORD's love is with those who fear him, and his righteousness with their children's children." Ps. 136:1-26: "Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good. {His love endures forever.} Give thanks to the God of gods. {His love endures forever.} . . ." The refrain, "His love endures forever," recurs in each of the twenty-six verses.

⁹⁰Leigh, *Treatise*, II.iv (p. 41); referenced in Muller, *PRRD* 3:352.

⁹¹Leigh, *Body of Divinity*, II.iv (pp. 176-177); quoted in Muller, *PRRD* 3:352-353.

d. **Texts which distinguish God's years from ours (Job 10:5; Dan. 7:9; Dan. 7:22; 1 Sam. 15:29; Ps. 90:2-5)⁹²**

According to this line of argument, the application of days and years to God are clearly metaphorical and so differ from the creaturely application of such terms. Thus, Leigh points out that God's days are described as *not* like our days (Job 10:5). God himself is referred to as the Ancient of Days (Dan. 7:9, 22) and eternity itself (1 Sam. 15:29), whereas Isaiah describes him as the Father of Eternity "most emphatically, to signify that he is eternity itself, and the author of it."⁹³

Thus, Protestant Orthodox commentators see the reference to God's days as a deliberate anthropomorphism, which provides accommodating language to human beings who are limited by a temporal existence and can only conceive of time as succession. So, for example, the comparison of God's time and human time found in Psalm 90:4 (a thousand years in God's sight are as but a yesterday when it is passed)

intends no literal comparison of time spans but rather emphasizes the fact that God is not subject to time and that the seeming delay of the fulfillment of his promises or the implementation of his justice in no way detracts from his eternal counsel.⁹⁴

⁹²Job 10:5: "Are your days like those of a mortal or your years like those of a man?" Dan. 7:9 "As I looked, thrones were set in place, and the Ancient of Days took his seat. His clothing was as white as snow; the hair of his head was white like wool. His throne was flaming with fire, and its wheels were all ablaze." Dan. 7:22: "until the Ancient of Days came and pronounced judgment in favor of the saints of the Most High, and the time came when they possessed the kingdom." 1 Sam. 15:29: "He who is the Glory of Israel does not lie or change his mind; for he is not a man, that he should change his mind." [Here the "strength or glory" (*naetzach*) of Israel is translated the Eternity of Israel]. Ps. 90:2-5: "Before the mountains were born or you brought forth the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God. You turn men back to dust, saying, 'Return to dust, O sons of men.' For a thousand years in your sight are like a day that has just gone by, or like a watch in the night. You sweep men away in the sleep of death; they are like the new grass of the morning."

⁹³Leigh, *Treatise*, II.iv (p. 41); quoted in Muller, *PRRD* 3:353. Muller points out that Leigh's rendering of 1 Sam. 15:29 as "the Eternity of Israel" is not an uncommon interpretation and is also found in both Poole's and Trapp's commentaries on this verse. See Muller, *PRRD* 3:353, footnote 696.

⁹⁴Muller, *PRRD* 3:353, who footnotes Rijseen, *Summa*, III, xii, controversia, objectio 3, as he draws this summary conclusion. PRRO also adds logical inference from other exegetically derived attributes as a fifth source of biblical support for divine eternity. This support will be worked out in the next section on Stephen Charnock.

C. A Case in Point: Stephen Charnock and PRRO on Eternity

The Post-Reformation orthodox defense of divine eternity may be fleshed out by considering the extensive treatment of the subject by Stephen Charnock as supplemented by the work of Wilhelmus à Brakel and Frances Turretin.⁹⁵ Together these three witnesses provide a comprehensive biblical apologetic for divine eternity considered as duration without succession.⁹⁶ Their work is particularly important because it is formed in the face of a challenge from Socinus and Vorstius, who maintained that God is everlasting but not eternal. Thus, their defense of the doctrine is not merely a repetition of the tradition but is intended as a restatement in light of contemporary challenges.⁹⁷

1. Charnock's description of eternal duration

Charnock begins his discussion of eternity by considering Ps. 90, a prayer particularly appropriate to the circumstances of Israelites in the wilderness. God, being their dwelling place in every generation, is “a perpetual refuge and security to his people” in

⁹⁵Stephen Charnock, “Discourse V: On the Eternity of God,” in *Discourses upon the Existence and Attributes of God*, 2 vols. (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1853; reprint Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979) 1:276-309 (page citations are to the reprint edition); Wilhelmus à Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, trans. Bartel Elshout from *Redelijke Godsdienst*, 3rd ed. (Rotterdam: D. Bolle, n.d. [1700s]) 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 1992), 1: 91-93; Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctical Theology*, 3 vols. ed. James T. Dennison, Jr., and trans. George Musgrave Giger (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1992.), 1: 202-204.

⁹⁶While these witnesses are agreed, they are not equal. Charnock's treatment of the subject is far more extensive than that found in Turretin and Brakel. Out of a desire to preserve the flow of argument found in Charnock, I will present most of the contributions of Turretin and Brakel by means of footnotes.

⁹⁷Turretin also anticipates some of the modern day objections to the doctrine of divine eternity by arguing that the coexistence of eternity with all temporal moments in the eternal present does not mean that the temporal moments are simultaneous with each other: “Although eternity may coexist with all the differences of time, it does not follow that they equally coexist among themselves. It does not coexist with them taken together and existing at once, but coexists with them existing dividedly and mutually succeeding each other. Thus the past while it was, coexisted with eternity, the present now coexists with it, and the future will coexist with it. . . . Things which agree with one third thing, agree among themselves, but only with respect to the same third thing. Thus all the differences of time agree together in this--that each, when it exists, coexists with the whole of eternity. However, they ought not therefore to agree amongst themselves so as to coexist at once because the whole eternity does not coexist with them taken at once, but dividedly as they mutually succeed each other” (Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 1:203-204).

the midst of all the dangers the Israelites have faced. This hopeful truth found in vs. 1 is undergirded by two additional assertions in vs. 2, namely, the greatness of God's power in forming the world and the boundlessness of his duration ("from everlasting to everlasting").⁹⁸ Charnock argues that such language necessarily moves us beyond the idea of God simply having always existed to his being eternal.

For Charnock, God "is of an eternal duration" and the notion of eternity as duration is of special importance since, as he points out, God's duration is more frequently mentioned in scripture than his eternity.⁹⁹ While the nature of eternity is beyond our ability to comprehend, its existence is knowable in a way parallel to our apprehension of the knowability and incomprehensibility of God himself. Indeed, it is what we know about God that leads us inexorably to the conclusion that he is eternal in the sense that he possesses duration without succession:

He that hath an incomprehensible power must needs have an eternity of nature; his power is most sensible in the creatures to the eye of man, and his eternity easily from thence deducible by the reason of man. Eternity is a perpetual duration, which hath neither beginning nor end; time hath both. Those things we say are in time that have beginning, grow up by degrees, have succession of parts; eternity is contrary to time, and therefore a permanent and immutable state; a perfect possession of life without any variation; it comprehends in itself all years, all ages, all periods of ages; it never begins; it endures after every duration of time and never ceaseth; it doth as much outrun time, as it went before the beginning of it: time supposeth something before it; but there can be nothing before eternity; it were not then eternity. Time hath a continual succession; the former time passeth away and another succeeds: the last year is not this year nor this year the next. We must conceive of eternity contrary to the notion of time; as the nature of time consists in the succession of parts, so the nature of eternity in an infinite immutable duration. Eternity and time differ as the sea and rivers; the sea never changes place, and is always one water; but the rivers glide along, and are swallowed up by the sea; so is time by eternity.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God*, 1:277-278.

⁹⁹Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God*, 1:279.

¹⁰⁰Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God*, 1:279-280. Turretin and Brakel agree that eternity is duration without succession. In contrast to Socinus and Vorstius, Turretin understands divine eternity to be "the infinity of God with reference to duration," which means that "God is free from every difference of time, and no less from succession than from beginning and end." Indeed, for Turretin, "Time and eternity are not related to each other as part and whole, but as species of duration mutually opposed"

2. Charnock's scriptural and theological argument for eternal duration

For Charnock, eternity is a negative attribute that denies God any measure of time, just as immensity denies him any boundaries of space. Charnock insists that the parallel between eternity and immensity is quite exact and that both reflect God's infinity:

As immensity is the diffusion of his essence, so eternity is the duration of his essence. . . . His duration is as endless as his essence is boundless. . . . As his essence comprehends all beings, and exceeds them, and his immensity surmounts all places; so his eternity comprehends all times, all durations, and infinitely excels them.¹⁰¹

According to Charnock, scripture describes how and in what respect God is eternal.

a. God is without beginning

According to Gen. 1:1, God created the world "in the beginning." This raises the question of whether God had a beginning, since his existence predates all created things. The answer, says Charnock, is that "God was without beginning, though all other things had time and beginning from him." Thus, Abraham called upon the name of the everlasting/eternal God (Gen. 21:33) in contrast to the heathen gods, which are newly coined.¹⁰² Likewise, the gospel is revealed according to the command of the "everlasting" God (Rom. 16:26)--the God who exists before all ages. Furthermore, that God is eternal and without beginning is consistent with the way God's *decree* existed before the foundation of the world (John 17:24), his *election* was determined before the foundation of

(*Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 1:202, 204). Brakel defines divine eternity as "the existence of God which is without beginning, continuation, and ending, all of which are simultaneously true," so that ultimately, "God and time have nothing in common," such that "we must fully divorce God from the concept of time," so that "God unchangeably exists while time is in progression" (*The Christian's Reasonable Service*, 1:91-92).

¹⁰¹Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God*, 1:281. Brakel is especially insistent that the doctrine of eternity can only be articulated by the *via negativa* and that proper reverence for God requires that everything that relates to time must be removed from our understanding of God's eternity (*The Christian's Reasonable Service*, 1:91).

¹⁰²Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God*, 1:281.

the world (Eph. 1:4), and his *grace* was given before the world began (2 Tim. 1:9).¹⁰³

Such testimony points to more than simple preexistence of the moment of creation:

Time began with the foundation of the world; but God being before time, could have no beginning in time. Before the beginning of the creation, and the beginning of time, there could be nothing but eternity; nothing but what was uncreated, that is nothing, but was without beginning. To be in time is to have a beginning; to be before all time is never to have a beginning but always to be; for as between the Creator and creatures there is no medium, so between time and eternity there was no medium. It is as easily deduced that he that was before all creatures is eternal, as he that made all creatures is God.¹⁰⁴

For Charnock, the deduction is simple. If God had a beginning, he would have received it from another being or from himself. The first would disqualify him as the Supreme being; the second is incoherent since a being that does not exist cannot bring about being. But more important than this logical inference is the biblical description of God as the “Ancient of Days” (Dan. 7:9), which testifies to his “being before all days and time, and eminently containing in himself all times and ages.”¹⁰⁵ There can, therefore, be no beginning in him.

b. God is without end

The biblical testimony is equally clear that God, who has no beginning, also has no end. James declares that in him there is no shadow of change (1:17). The Psalmist’s refrain is that he endures forever (9:6) and his years have no end (102:27), and Rev. 4:9-10 informs us that he lives forever.¹⁰⁶ What is clearly stated in these verses is reinforced by

¹⁰³Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God*, 1:281.

¹⁰⁴Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God*, 1:281-282.

¹⁰⁵Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God*, 1:282. Turretin’s comment on Ps. 90:4 is consistent with Charnock’s discussion: “God is called ‘the ancient of days,’ not as stricken with old age and sated with years (as the Saturn of the heathen), but as before and more ancient than days themselves and the birth of time. Therefore days and years are not ascribed to him properly but after the manner of men. For we who live in time can conceive nothing unless by a relation to time, in which we are” (*Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 1:204).

¹⁰⁶Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God*, 1:282. Rev. 4:9-10: “Whenever the living creatures give glory, honor and thanks to him who sits on the throne and who lives for ever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before him who sits on the throne, and worship him who lives for ever and ever.”

theological argument. As the self-existent one, God cannot commit suicide. As the all powerful one, he cannot be murdered or even restrained. Further, the simplicity of God means that he possesses all of these characteristics necessarily and not contingently: “As none gave him his life, so none can deprive him of his life, or the least particle of it.”¹⁰⁷

c. There is no succession in God

This last point, which has generated such controversy in the modern discussion, is obvious to Charnock, the inevitable conclusion of the strong view of immutability testified to by the scriptures and reflected in its description of God’s relationship to time. When Ps. 90 declares that “from everlasting to everlasting you are God,” this means that God is the same God; that is, he does not change. The same point is made in Ps. 102: 25-27:

In the beginning you laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands. They will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like a garment. Like clothing you will change them and they will be discarded. But you remain the same, and your years will never end.

Here the contrast is clear, indeed, exquisite. The psalmist contrasts the Creator and creation not simply in terms of *length of days*, but in *nature of change*. The creation will perish and wear out--indeed God himself will bring about the change--but God does not change. From this Charnock concludes that although “creatures are in a perpetual flux,” since for each person there is each day “a new succession of quantities and qualities,” God experiences no such change: “He receives nothing as an addition to what he was before; he loseth nothing of what he was before.”¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God*, 1:283.

¹⁰⁸Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God*, 1:283-284. Turretin and Brakel follow a similar line of argument although they present it in paragraphs rather than pages. Each outlines the various definitions of eternity and focuses on divine eternity as duration without succession. They also appeal basically to the same passages of scripture in support of their view (Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 1:202-203; Brakel, *The Christian’s Reasonable Service*, 1:991-92). Turretin’s parallel argument is especially crisp: “Again, he is said to be ‘the first and the last’ (Is. 41:4) and ‘the Alpha and Omega’ (Rev. 1:8). He is the beginning without beginning because while he is the beginning of all things, he himself has no beginning. He is the end without end because (since he is the end to which all things are referred) he can have no end. Now that which is without beginning is also without succession because succession depends upon a beginning and implies order according to former and latter. The name Jehovah

Charnock illustrates the concept of non-successive duration by utilizing the analogy of a rock or tree by the side of a river. The rock stands there the same and unmoved while the river flows past it. So also, God “sees all things sliding under him in a continual variation” but he himself “possesses his being in one indivisible point, having neither beginning, end nor middle.”¹⁰⁹

d. The anthropomorphic description of God’s days and years

According to Charnock, the biblical descriptions of God’s days and years are accommodated to our temporal understanding and should be considered anthropomorphic in a way parallel to the ascriptions of God’s having hands and feet. The biblical text itself provides evidence that this is so: “Though years are ascribed to him, yet they are such as cannot be numbered, cannot be finished, since there is no comparable proportion between the duration of God and the years of men.”¹¹⁰ Thus, argues Charnock, Job 36:26, 27 speaks of the number of God’s years as unsearchable, like the drops of rain that have fallen on the earth, while Isa. 60:15 views the nations as a drop in the bucket compared to God, as less than nothing:

necessarily includes this eternity because (as has been said) it designates God to be the first and independent being, liable to no change” (*Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 1:202-203). To this needs to be added an additional biblical argument provided by Turretin in support of divine eternity. Appealing to the description of God in Rev. 1:4 as “the one who is, and was, and is to come,” Turretin makes the following observation: “This is not done formally, but eminently and after the manner of men (*anthropopathos*), to describe (if possible) in this manner the eternity of God. This is not done dividedly as if they might be predicated of him successively, but undividedly because the eternity of God embraces all time at once. Hence the past is affirmed without the negation of the present and the future, and the present is asserted, but without the negation of the past and the future” (*Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 1:203). Turretin reinforces this argument with a citation from Augustine: “Although that immutable and ineffable nature does not admit of he was or will be, but only of he is, yet on account of the mutability of time, with which our mortality and mutability is concerned, we may say without error, he is, was and will be. He was in the past ages, he is in the present, he will be in the future. He was because he never was not; he will be because he will never cease to be; he is because he always is” (Tractate 99, *On the Gospel of John*, NPNF, 7:383; quoted in Turretin, 1:203).

¹⁰⁹Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God*, 1:284.

¹¹⁰Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God*, 1:286.

As one day is to the life of man, so are a thousand years to the life of God. The Holy Ghost expresseth himself to the capacity of man, to give us some notion of an infinite duration, by a resemblance suited to the capacity of man. If a thousand years be but as a day to the life of God, then as a year is to the life of man, so are three hundred and sixty-five thousand years to the life of God; and as seventy years are to the life of man, so are twenty-five millions four hundred and fifty thousand years to the life of God. Yet still, since there is no proportion between time and eternity, we must dart our thoughts beyond all those; for years and days measure only the duration of created things, and of those only that are material and corporeal, subject to the motion of the heavens, which makes days and years.¹¹¹

e. The relation of God's eternity to his other attributes

For Charnock, this truth that God is eternal is not some kind of philosophical extrapolation but is consistent with, and indeed required by, other revealed aspects of God's nature, including his knowledge, his purpose, his being, and his perfections.

First, there is no succession in God's knowledge. God does not know one thing and then another. His knowledge neither augments or deteriorates: "All things are present to him in eternity in regards to his knowledge although they are not actually present in the world, in regard to their existence," for God knows all things from the beginning (Acts 15:18), and their true order of succession is determined by God's eternal counsel:

Since God knows time, he knows all things as they are in time; he doth not know all things to be at once, though he knows at once what is, has been, and will be. All things are past, present and to come in regard of their existence; but there is not past, present, and to come, in regard of God's knowledge of them, because he sees and knows not by any other, but by himself; he is his own light by which he sees,

¹¹¹Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God*, 1:286-287. Turretin makes essentially the same point in approximately the same language. The scriptural contrast of our years with God's does not establish a comparison, but denies one: "When a thousand years are said to be in the sight of God as one day (Psalm 90:4), it refers not only to the estimation (that God considers a thousand years as no more than one day), but also to the comparison of our duration (which is ephemeral) with the divine (which is eternal). It intimates that God is not to be measured by our rule, as if his promise could be retarded, even if in our judgment fulfilled too late. For God is not subject to any differences of time, but a thousand years in his sight are as one day" (*Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 1:204). Brakel agrees: "Even when years and days, or past and present time are attributed to God, and He is called the Ancient of Days and other similar expressions, such is merely done from man's viewpoint. The reasons for this is that we, insignificant human beings incapable of thinking and speaking about eternity in a fitting manner, may by way of comparison--which in reality is a very unequal comparison--comprehend as much of eternity as is needful for us to know. Nevertheless, in doing so we must fully divorce God from the concept of time" (*The Christian's Reasonable Service*, 1:2).

his own glass wherein he sees, beholding himself, he beholds all things.¹¹²

Second, and along those same lines, there is no succession in God's decree. He does not decree one thing and then another, for God's purposes are decreed as a whole even if their realization is sequential: "There is succession in the execution of them; first, grace, then glory; but the purpose of God for the bestowing of both, was in one and the same moment of eternity." In support of this, Charnock cites Eph. 1:4, which speaks of the elect being chosen before the foundation of the world, and concludes, "The redemption of the world is after the creation of the world; but the decree whereby the world was created, and whereby it was redeemed, was from eternity."¹¹³

Third, God is his own eternity. That is, the eternity of God arises out of the essence or being of God: "The eternity of God is nothing else but the duration of God; and the duration of God is nothing else but his existence enduring."¹¹⁴ Charnock argues that the simplicity of God sets the duration of God apart from the duration of the creatures. For the creation, duration is something possessed, but not as a part of their being. To use Aristotle's vocabulary (and Charnock does), it is an accidental property. In contrast, God does not simply possess eternity, he is his own eternity by virtue of his aseity: "as God is his own necessity of existing, so he is his own duration in existing; as he doth necessarily exist by himself, so he will always necessarily exist by himself."¹¹⁵

Finally, the perfections of God are eternal. The attributes God possesses, he possesses necessarily. If he were to cease to possess any of them, he would cease to be God. Therefore, all the perfections of God must be understood as enduring eternally.¹¹⁶

¹¹²Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God*, 1:285.

¹¹³Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God*, 1:285.

¹¹⁴Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God*, 1:285.

¹¹⁵Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God*, 1:286.

¹¹⁶Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God*, 1:286.

f. Eternity and the name of God

According to Charnock, God's revelation of himself to Moses in Exod. 3:14 as the I AM is a proper name reflecting the present tense and suggesting that the essence of God knows no past, nor future:

[I]f it were *he was*, it would intimate he were not now what he once was; if it were *he will be*, it would intimate he were not yet what he will be; but *I Am*; I am the only being, the root of all beings; he is therefore the greatest distance from not being and that is eternal. So that *is* signifies his eternity, as well as his perfection and immutability.¹¹⁷

As the I AM, God's life is infinite, his being cannot be added to or subtracted from in a temporal or any other sense. This prevents any temporal succession in God. It also means that only God can be described as the I AM, an insight that preserves and promotes a strong Creator/creature distinction:

If God therefore be properly "I Am," *i.e.* being, it follows that he always was; for if he were not always, he must, as was argued before, be produced by some other, or by himself; by another he could not; then he had not been God, but a creature; nor by himself, for then as producing, he must always be before himself, as produced; he had been before he was. And he always will be; for being "I Am," having all being in himself, and the fountain of all being to everything else, how can he ever have his name changed to I am not.¹¹⁸

g. Eternity and self-existence

Charnock points out that John 5:26 informs us that the "Father has life in himself," while Dan. 6:26 informs us that he is the "living God" who is "steadfast forever." In other words, God is the source of life to all, but receives it from none. His life is altogether unbounded, limitless, and necessary, and therefore eternal:

What doth necessarily exist therefore, exists from eternity; what hath being of itself could never be produced in time, could not want being one moment, because it hath being from its essence, without influence of any efficient cause. . . . All life is seated in God, as in its proper throne, in its most perfect purity. God is life; it is in him originally, radically, therefore eternally. He is pure act, nothing but vigor and

¹¹⁷Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God*, 1:287; emphasis his.

¹¹⁸Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God*, 1:288. As we have already seen, both Turretin and Brakel understand the revelation of God's covenant name, JHVH, as entailing divine eternity (Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 1:203; Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, 1:92).

act; he hath by his nature that life which others have by his grant. . . . [H]e lives necessarily and it is absolutely impossible that he should not live; whereas all other things “live and move and have their being in him” (Acts 17:28).¹¹⁹

h. Eternity and immutability

Here Charnock’s argument is a bit more philosophical than textual. Appealing to Mal. 3:6, Charnock declares:

God argues here, saith Calvin, from his unchangeable nature as Jehovah, to his immutability in his purpose. Had he not been eternal, there had been the greatest change from nothing to something. A change of essence is greater than a change of purpose. . . . If he were not without succession, standing in one point of eternity, there would be a change from past to present, from present to future. The eternity of God is a shield against all kinds of mutability.¹²⁰

i. Eternity and infinity

On this point Charnock argues God’s perfection entails his eternity: “A finite duration is inconsistent with infinite perfection. Whatsoever is contracted within the limits of time, cannot swallow up all perfections to itself. God hath an unsearchable perfection.”¹²¹ At this point in his discussion, Charnock weaves together God’s perfection, infinity, and incomprehensibility, arguing that perfection entails infinity, and infinity entails incomprehensibility. However, the reverse is also true: God’s infinity is entailed by his incomprehensibility. The reason he cannot be “found out” (that is, be incomprehensible, see Job 11:7) is because he is infinite, and his infinity entails his perfection. To this not easily broken three-strand cord Charnock adds a fourth--the aseity of God, and Charnock’s conclusions clearly echo the reasoning of Anselm:

If God, therefore, had a beginning, he could not be infinite; if not infinite he did not possess the highest perfection; because a perfection might be conceived beyond it. If his being could fail, he were not perfect; can that deserve the name of highest perfection which is capable of corruption and dissolution? To be finite and limited, is the greatest imperfection, for it consists in a denial of being. He could not be the most blessed Being if he were not always so, and should not forever remain so; and

¹¹⁹Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God*, 1:288-289.

¹²⁰Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God*, 1:289.

¹²¹Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God*, 1:289.

whatsoever perfections he had, would be soured by the thought, that in time they would cease, and so could not be pure affections because not permanent.¹²²

j. Eternity and omnipotence

In this connection Charnock argues that God's omnipotence entails his eternity since something that has a beginning or the potential of perishing could not be rightly understood as omnipotent. But since nothing can restrain God or his purposes, or cause him misery, it must be that

[t]he almightiness and eternity of God are linked together: "I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and ending, saith the Lord, which was and which is, and which is to come, the Almighty" (Rev. 1:8): almighty because eternal and eternal because almighty.¹²³

k. Eternity and aseity

Although in this section Charnock uses the language of Aristotle's "first cause," he clearly fills it with Christian content and the biblical notion of divine aseity:

God would not be the first cause of all if he were not eternal; but he is the first and the last; the first cause of all things, the last end of all things: that which is the first cannot begin to be; it were not then the first; it cannot cease to be: whatsoever is dissolved, is dissolved into that whereof it doth consist, which was before it, and then it was not the first.¹²⁴

Since the world is contingent, it cannot provide within itself an adequate ground for its existence, but must depend for its existence on a first cause. However, such a first cause must exist from all eternity, since, if something preceded it, it is no longer first. Further, it could not have given itself a beginning since "whatever begins in time was nothing before, and when it was nothing it could do nothing." Therefore there must be a first cause, and that first cause must be eternal:

If we deny some eternal being, we must deny all being; our own being, the being of everything about us, unconceivable absurdities will arise. So, then, if God were

¹²²Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God*, 1:290.

¹²³Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God*, 1:290.

¹²⁴Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God*, 1:290-91.

the cause of all things he did exist before all things, and that from eternity.¹²⁵

I. Eternity and the Creator/creature distinction

According to Charnock, eternity is incommunicable. The same kinds of considerations described above for arguing for the eternal nature of God also serve to deny that attribute to anything in creation. It must be reserved for God alone. Conversely, to ascribe only a communicable attribute to God in terms of his being timeless or everlasting is to denigrate his divinity. Thus, when the writer of Hebrews wants to demonstrate the divinity of Christ, he points out that Christ is “the same and the years shall not fail (Heb. 1:10-12). Paul points out that God alone possesses immortality (1 Tim. 6:16). While angels and souls can be said to have immortality, this is a gift sustained by God, not an inherent characteristic, for “Whatsoever is not God is temporary; whatsoever is eternal is God. It is a contradiction to say a creature can be eternal; as nothing eternal is created, so nothing created is eternal.”¹²⁶ In support of this assertion, Charnock presents four lines of argument, all of which are rooted in the Creator/creature distinction:

First, the act of creation is to produce something from nothing. Since what was once nothing cannot be eternal, it cannot equal the eternal duration of God. Second, all creatures are mutable and therefore not eternal, since mutability implies the possibility of ceasing to be what it is. God’s perfection implies an immutability applicable only to God: “It is as much the essence of a creature to be mutable, as it is the essence of God to be immutable. Mutability and eternity are utterly inconsistent.”¹²⁷ Third, no creature is infinite, and therefore cannot be eternal. Infinity is an essential corollary to eternity. Just as no creature can be immense (filling all places), neither can any part of the creation be eternal

¹²⁵Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God*, 1:291.

¹²⁶Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God*, 1:292.

¹²⁷Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God*, 1:292.

(extended to all ages). Fourth, finally, and most subtlety, Charnock argues that no creature can be eternal on the basis of free causation. That is, no effect of an intellectual free agent can be equal in duration to its cause. God alone is eternal. Creatures cannot be eternal because they are the contingent product of God's free choice to create them and therefore cannot share his duration, even though God's will to create may extend from all eternity.¹²⁸

3. Some theological implications of eternity

While Charnock's argument is at many points fairly technical, he does not see the doctrine of eternity as remote and abstract but of immense practical importance in providing both theological information and pastoral comfort.

a. Eternity and the divinity of Christ

While many in the modern debate agonize over the compatibility of the doctrine of eternity with the doctrine of the Incarnation, Charnock not only is not nonplussed but also sees the biblical attribution of eternity to Christ as evidence of his divinity:

If God be of eternal duration, then "Christ is God." Eternity is the property of God, but it is ascribed to Christ: "He is before all things" (Col. 1:17), *i.e.* all created things; he is therefore no creature, and if no creature, eternal. "All things were created by him," both in heaven and in earth, angels, as well as men, whether they be throne or dominions (ver. 16). If all things were his creatures, then he is no creature; if he were, all things were not created by him, or he must create himself. He hath no difference of time; for he is the "same yesterday, to-day, and forever": the same with the name of God, "I Am," which signifies his eternity. He is no more to-day than he was yesterday, nor will be any other to-morrow than he is to-day; and therefore Melchizedec, whose descent, birth, and death, father and mother, beginning and end of days, are not upon record, was a type of the existence of Christ without difference of time; "Having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but made like the Son of God" (Heb. vii:3). The suppression of his birth and death was intended by the Holy Ghost as a type of the excellency of Christ's person in regard of his eternity, and the duration of his charge in regard of his priesthood. As there was an appearance of an eternity in the suppression of the race of Melchisedec, so there is a true eternity in the Son of God.¹²⁹

¹²⁸Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God*, 1:292-93.

¹²⁹Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God*, 1:293.

What is spoken of Christ is confirmed by Jesus's own testimony concerning himself. While John 16:28 hints at Christ's eternity ("I come forth from the Father, and am come into the world; again, I leave the world, and go to the Father"), John 17:5 makes the point more explicitly when Jesus refers to the actual (and not merely decreed) glory he "had with the Father before the world was."¹³⁰

Christ's eternity is also spoken of numerous times in the Old Testament. Charnock interprets the personification of wisdom in Prov. 8:22 ("The Lord possessed me in the beginning of his way, before his works of old") as a reference to Christ's existence prior to creation. In Mic. 5:2, Christ is described as the "Ruler of Israel, whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting" (*mimay olam*--"from the ways of eternity"), which he believes is another clear reference to both Christ's eternity and divinity. Likewise, in Isa. 9:6 Christ is granted the title of the "everlasting" or "eternal" Father, "the Father of Eternity," another clear reference to his divine nature. All of this leads Charnock to conclude that Christ's eternity was not only essential to his person, but to his work:

Could our sins be perfectly expiated had he not an eternal divinity to answer for the offences committed against an eternal God? Temporary suffering had been of little validity, without an infiniteness and eternity in his person to add weight to his passion.¹³¹

b. Eternity and succession: The eternal present

The second theological implication Charnock draws from his discussion is that, if God be eternal, he knows all things as present and without succession. While he is very likely reflecting the Boethian tradition at this point, Charnock's grounds are biblical rather than philosophical. Since God knows all without being taught, and nothing can be added or subtracted from knowledge, his consciousness is without succession:

God considers all things in his eternity in one simple knowledge, as if they were

¹³⁰Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God*, 1:294.

¹³¹Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God*, 1:294.

now acted before him: “Known unto God are all his works from the beginning of the world;” ἄπ’ αἰῶνος, à *seculo*, “from eternity” (Acts xv:18). God’s knowledge is co-eternal with him; if he knows that in time which he did not know from eternity, he would not be eternally perfect, since knowledge is the perfection of an intelligent nature.¹³²

c. Eternity and the unfathomable works of God

A third consequence of the doctrine of eternity is the caution with which we should challenge or even seek to probe the inscrutable character of God’s purposes. “Eternity,” says Charnock, “sets God above our inquiries and censures”:

The counsels of a boundless being are not to be scanned by the brain of a silly worm, that hath breathed but a few minutes in the world. Since eternity cannot be comprehended in time, it is not to be judged by a creature of time.¹³³

Elihu was correct to say that God’s works are praiseworthy but are necessarily viewed from a distance, for “[h]ow great is God--beyond our understanding! The number of his years is past finding out” (Job 36:26). God affirms the same point in his challenge to Job in 38:4: “Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?” God’s settling of Job’s complaint in this manner should caution us to curb improper inquiries into his ways.

4. Assessment

The exegetical and theological work of Charnock, as well as the contributions of PRRO, raise three challenges to the analytic discussion. First, the claim by Wolterstorff and Padgett that there is no biblical warrant for the doctrine of eternity must be set aside; not only are there texts that support the traditional doctrine, but there are also many more texts than the few cited and discarded in the analytic discussion. Furthermore, in comparison with the thoughtful and contextual reflection on the biblical text provided by Charnock and PRRO, Wolterstorff and Padgett’s handling of these texts must be seen not only as simply literal, but as simplistically so.

¹³²Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God*, 1:295.

¹³³Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God*, 1:295.

Second, Charnock and PRRO insist that not only *may* the biblical texts be read as supporting the doctrine of eternity, but they *must* be read in that way in order to maintain a robust Creator/creature distinction. Thus they argue that (a) the comparison of God's years and ours does not invite a comparison but denies one; (b) before all ages means before time began; and (c) Ps. 102 contrasts the Creator and creation not simply in terms of *length of days* but also in *nature of change*: the creation will perish and wear out--indeed God himself will bring about the change--but God himself does not change. For Charnock and PRRO, unlike Barr and Helm, the biblical data is not underdetermined but clear.

Third, unlike most of the analytic discussion, Charnock and PRRO do not rest their case on a few proof texts that relate to God and time; rather they see in scripture a constellation of texts that witness to the harmony and indivisibility of God's attributes. God's eternity, as a moral qualifier of the communicable attributes, guarantees that God's love, goodness, justice, and the like will endure, unmoved by the temporal flux.

In and of itself, the argument mounted by Charnock and PRRO does not totally deflate the analytic critique of eternity or promulgation of everlastingness. What it does do, however, is firmly to reattach the biblical leg to the doctrine of eternity. Furthermore, through close philosophic (although not Anglo-American analytic) argumentation, of the "good and necessary consequence" variety, it aligns the philosophic and biblical legs and steadies the doctrine of eternity on its feet.

D. A Systematic Theological Defense of Eternity

The discussion of Charnock et al. demonstrates that part of the biblical defense of divine eternity involves its biblical relationship to, and logical coherence with, the other revealed attributes of God. It is clear that many of the attributes traditionally understood

and ascribed to God strongly support, if not entail, divine eternity.¹³⁴ Space does not permit a thorough examination of all the traditional attributes of God that support divine eternity nor an analysis of the critique they have received in the modern analytic discussions. That would require a thesis-length treatment of each attribute. My more modest goal is to show how the traditional understanding of the attributes of God does not reflect an over-commitment to Greek philosophy but has been motivated by the desire to articulate and assert the plenitude of the divine nature as revealed in scripture--an emphasis sometimes lost in the analytic treatments of these attributes.

1. Absolute timelessness not required

In developing this argument, I do not begin with the absolute (and rather abstract) model of divine timeless eternity arising out of the analytic debate. That model involves a concept of timelessness which, *by definition*, is incompatible with the temporal realm.¹³⁵ Thus, in much of the modern discussion, the debate over whether a timeless God can interact with a temporal world is over even before it begins. In contrast, the traditional view

¹³⁴Many of the traditional attributes of God are being revisited and reconsidered, sometimes radically so, by philosophers and theologians, including those of the Open Theism movement (see chapter 4). There is neither the time nor the space in this thesis to address these developments, but they make it necessary to specify the traditional interpretation of the attributes and clarify the relationship between God's eternity and his other attributes.

¹³⁵This point was made explicitly by Craig at an excellent Ph.D seminar on divine eternity held at Calvin Seminary on November 10, 2004. In opening remarks that framed the debate between divine timelessness (eternity) and divine temporality (everlasting), Craig made this assertion, also found in his book, *Time and Eternity*, "Clearly they cannot both be right, because they are contradictory. *By definition*, he [God] cannot be both" (emphasis mine; see also *Time and Eternity*, 15). From there Craig went on to defend the position, developed in *Time and Eternity*, that God is timeless apart from creation, and temporal with it. Craig is a good representative of the more absolutist approach within analytic philosophy because he firmly believes it is analytic philosophy, with its concern for strict definition and quest for clarity, that is the best instrument for addressing issues concerning theology and apologetics (see *Time and Eternity*, 11). Indeed, in a challenging public lecture given that same evening as part of the Stob Lecture Series, Craig insisted that all who desire to become Christian apologists ought to pursue a Ph.D in analytic philosophy. While I am deeply appreciative of the contributions that various analytic philosophers, including Craig, have made to theology and apologetics, I believe it is important to insist that there are other methods of pursuing the FSU enterprise than that of analytic philosophy. I am also concerned that the quest to make discussions more precise may sometimes make them more narrow or even reductionist. Part of my burden in this section is to identify and resist that tendency.

(which understands God's eternity to be one of duration without succession), while preserving an important distinction between the temporal and eternal, does not drive a wedge between them or render them incompatible *a priori*.

Furthermore, the biblical material that speaks about God's relationship to time should not be interpreted in the light of modern conceptions of time arising out of modern science. That is anachronistic. In the scripture and in the traditional understanding of eternity, time is the measure of change. The discussion of time found in scripture has to do with the way that God endures, i.e., that he does not change, and that he is in this way qualitatively different from us who are completely subject to the temporal flux. Thus God's immutability leads to his eternity. The contrast between God's years and ours is not quantitative, it is qualitative. God endures and we do not. We are like the chaff, which the wind drives away. Therefore, seemingly temporal passages in scripture are really intimately connected with God's eternity.

Thus, the tradition does not require an absolute view of divine timelessness nor should its notions of time be limited to modern conceptions. Rather, the tradition seeks to articulate the notion of eternity as part of a rich doctrine of the attributes of God as these interpenetrate harmoniously within the fullness or plenitude of God's being.

Something similar could be said of the other attributes, which I am examining in reference to divine eternity. The modern analytic discussion of God's attributes has not been limited to divine eternity; other traditional attributes also have been revisited, resulting in additional abstract and reductionist interpretations of these attributes. Unfortunately, this reductionist understanding is read back into the tradition, which is then criticized without considering whether, in fact, the historic Christian tradition ever actually maintained the view in that form. Thus, as we shall see, the traditional doctrine of divine simplicity has been wrongly interpreted by some as denying all distinctions in God including his Trinity, and the traditional doctrine of God's immutability has been mistaken for static immobility.

As I consider these other attributes in relationship to divine eternity, I do so in the form in which they have come down to us through the history of Christian thought. I also argue that it is not necessary to have an absolutized view of God's other attributes for them to lend support to the doctrine of divine eternity.

2. Eternity and the revealed attributes of God

The argument that the doctrine of eternity is intimately connected with other divine attributes is not a new one. However, to some engaged in the modern discussion, this connection is hardly considered a point in its favor. Indeed, some modern commentators observe how divine immutability or simplicity entails timeless eternity, as if that point alone should be a sufficient defeater for the doctrine. Why such disdain? Because the notions of simplicity and immutability are not understood, as they have been traditionally, as reflecting the fullness or plenitude of the divine nature but are interpreted in a way that sometimes leads to abstract reductionism. Simplicity must mean that all the attributes are one and reducible to a property. Immutability must mean that God is static. Thus, Craig can complain that since the doctrine of eternity is based upon these two doctrines, which are even less desirable and defensible than eternity itself, nothing is gained by appealing to them in support of the doctrine.¹³⁶

But surely this is too simplistic. Individuals like Augustine, Boethius, Anselm, and Aquinas, who articulate and defend the traditional understanding of God's immutability, simplicity, aseity, and eternity, are some of the best minds and most accomplished scholars and theologians in the history of Christian thought. While all theologians can and do err, it is not likely that these individuals, whose work is highly refined and nuanced, would make the simple mistake of reducing God to an impersonal property or rendering him statically immobile.

¹³⁶See Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 31 and context.

What the modern analytic discussion is missing is the emphasis on the fullness or plentitude of God maintained by the traditional understanding of the divine attributes. For example, even though Augustine possesses a relational (A-series) understanding of time, he advocates divine eternity. Why? Because the temporal present is insufficient to represent the fullness of the divine life. Likewise, Boethius defines eternity in terms of the divine plentitude as “the complete possession, all at once, of unlimited life.” In a similar way, Anselm embraces the doctrine of eternity as part of his reflection upon how God is a being of which no greater can be conceived. Aquinas draws upon all three of his predecessors in order to describe eternity not in static terms but in Aristotelian terms of fullness (similar to Boethius). *The common element in all of these thinkers is the plentitude of the divine nature and the limitlessness of the divine life.*

In contrast, the modern analytic approach has a different focus. The modern discussion is not as concerned to explicate the fullness of the divine nature revealed in scripture as it is to articulate Christian theology in rigorous logical and philosophical terms, which, it is hoped, will bring greater clarity to the subject. Clarity is not a bad thing. However, the quest for precision is not the same as the quest for divine fullness. Failure to recognize the difference has sometimes led the analytic thinkers to ascribe a mistaken interpretation to the tradition and then unfairly criticize the tradition for it. Such arguments have a certain circular shape. For example, an eternal God cannot be personal (according to analytic argument) so a personal God (as described in the Bible) cannot be eternal. However, according to the tradition, God can and must be both personal and eternal because of the fullness of the divine nature.

a. The infinity of God

The infinity of God refers to how God is without limit in all that he possesses. Thus, his infinity serves as a modifier of his moral or communicable attributes. He is not only loving, he is infinitely so. He is not only good, but his goodness has no limit. He is

not restrained in any way except in that which is contrary to his nature. Because his attributes must be consistent with his nature, not all abilities are consistent with God's infinity. For example, God cannot sin, for doing so would be contrary to his nature. Indeed, for God to be able to sin would be a weakness rather than a strength, a personal failure rather than a fulfillment.¹³⁷

The infinity of God, so understood, suggests that God is not subject to time, because a temporal life involves certain limitations or restrictions. The early fathers objected to divine temporality because they could not understand how a God without limits could be subject to the restraints of temporality. To say that God is not limited by time because he wills himself to be everlasting assumes that time, like goodness, is a positive moral quality and is therefore something that God would will for himself. But, as one of the conditions of the created order and as defined by succession, time necessarily implies change (a succession of moments)--even if that change is for the better, in terms of an increase in knowledge. Such change appears to be incompatible with God's infinity and it was just such considerations that led Christian theologians to interpret those passage which contrast God's days and ours as differences of *kind* rather than *degree*. Neither is the difficulty removed by declaring that God is Lord of Time. He is not Lord of Time--even if one asserts this to be the case--if time in any way regulates his being or his actions, and passing through a succession of moments does just that. However, if God in fact orders, controls, directs, or creates time, he no longer participates in its succession, but transcends it in some way.

In sum, the fullness of divine infinity moves against the idea that God is restrained by time or restricted by the same kind of temporal limitations we experience. Further, if God possesses unlimited life, clearly the whole of his existence cannot be contained in the

¹³⁷Similarly, God would not make a stone he could not lift. God does not play games with his nature. By extension, neither would he create a will that he cannot move.

fleeting dividing line between past and future in the temporal present. The ontological present of his experience and consciousness is much deeper, much richer, much more durative--and requires that he be eternal. Thus the infinity of God, understood in terms of the plenitude of divine life, strongly supports the eternity of God understood as duration without succession.

b. The aseity of God

The aseity of God, that God possesses his life in himself without dependence upon anything else, also points to the plenitude of divine life and testifies to God's eternity. As the self-existent and self-sufficient one, he contains all things but is not himself contained by them. Kevin Diller believes that this doctrine may escape the kind of criticism leveled at the doctrines of simplicity and immutability in the analytic literature and provide theological support for the doctrine of divine eternity.¹³⁸ Not only is it the least controversial, it is also "arguably the most central":

This was the case for Augustine who argued that God was outside of time because time is a creation of God. As a creation of God, time cannot therefore condition God in any way. For Anselm this was also true. He argued for an analogy between space and time and concluded that just as God transcends space, so he must transcend time. Aquinas is really no different from either. His arguments [for divine eternity] on the basis of simplicity and immutability are both reducible to concerns for God's pure actuality.¹³⁹

Thus, the desire to preserve God's plenitude motivates these thinkers to maintain divine eternity.¹⁴⁰

For Augustine, the aseity of God strongly asserts the Creator/creature distinction on

¹³⁸Diller, "Timelessness, Relationality, and the Incarnation," 23-24.

¹³⁹Diller, "Timelessness, Relationality, and the Incarnation," 24. However, what Diller gives with his right hand, he takes away with the left. He notes that in all three thinkers additional assumptions are required to attain the inference from sovereignty-aseity to divine eternity. These have been challenged, leaving the question open as to whether sovereignty-aseity entails divine eternity ("Timelessness, Relationality, and the Incarnation," 25).

¹⁴⁰Although Diller does not mention Boethius, he certainly could be added to the list; a being who exhibits "the complete possession all at once of unlimited life" is not only eternal, but also self-existent.

the basis of plenitude or fullness of the divine life. Only the Triune God (the Creator) is necessarily self-existent and self-sufficient. Everything else (the creation or that-which-is-not-God) is contingent and dependent upon God for its existence. If time is part of the created order of things, and God is subject to time in some way, then this is contrary to his aseity. Thus aseity entails God's eternity. This would not be true only if time were of the essence of God and a necessary part of his nature.¹⁴¹

For Anselm, God's aseity points to God's transcendence. Just as God transcends space, he transcends time. Therefore God is eternal. Some may object to Anselm's approach on the ground that he spatializes time. Even if that were a serious objection, it is not the engine that is driving Anselm's argument. What is driving it is Anselm's concern for the fullness and perfection of the divine life and a conviction that God not be limited or restrained by anything outside of himself, which is part of the creation. God is not limited by space, he transcends it. He is omnipresent. God is not limited by time, he transcends it. He is eternal.

The same is true of Aquinas. A self-sufficient and self-existent being is a complete being. He lacks nothing. In Aristotelian terms he is fully actualized. This is reflected in his simplicity and immutability. It also is reflected in his eternity. In all these attributes, he is the God who is. The modern discussion argues that immutability is a Greek doctrine that leaves God static. However, the philosophy of Aristotle does not present a system that is static. It is a system that is dynamic and full. It includes form, matter, and *purpose*. The Unmoved Mover of Aristotle, and the corresponding concept of the biblical God in

¹⁴¹Craig speaks in just this way and, following Newton, sees the concept of absolute time as grounded in the divine life. But even Craig holds that God is only contingently temporal and that prior to the creation God was eternal. But if the temporal order is contingent, then the doctrine of aseity leads to divine eternity. Wolterstorff does argue that time is a necessary part of God's essence, but he also insists that God shares this timeline with his creatures. Time, therefore, becomes not merely a communicable attribute, but rather a condition in which both Creator and creature share, which makes it difficult to defend the doctrine of aseity, of God's self-existence.

Aquinas, describe a God who is not static, but Pure Act, who embraces all of reality within the fullness of divine life. Such a God is complete in knowledge and being, and out of that fullness, Aquinas maintains, he should be understood as eternal.

In sum, if the aseity of God is understood as reflecting the fullness of the divine nature (as it should be), it suggests that unless time is an essential part of the divine nature (and there is no reason to believe that it is) the Creator/creature distinction asserted by the aseity of God, coupled with his self-sufficiency, requires that God not be subject to or dependent upon the temporal mode of existence. Of course, this does not mean that he cannot be involved with time or any other part of the creation. But it does mean that the temporal realm is subject to God and not *vice versa*.

c. The immensity of God

In the relationship among the divine attributes, the immensity of God (his infinity with respect to space) does not so much entail divine eternity as provide a parallel attribute to that of eternity (God's infinity with respect to time), which renders the doctrine of eternity both likely and coherent. In fact, some discussions speak of God's eternity as a kind of temporal omnipresence.¹⁴² Just as God fills all things (i.e., is not limited by all that he fills but is present at every point of space with his whole being), so also he embraces all times in the eternal present (i.e., is not restrained or bounded by the temporal sphere, but is present at every point of time with his whole being). This is a very important theme because in theological discussions through the ages there is a strong parallel between omnipresence and eternity. In chapter 2, I discussed Paul Helm's argument that the theological consensus that God can fill all things without being restrained by space is consistent with God's filling all time without being restrained by time. He uses such a

¹⁴²Kevin Diller prefers this language. So also does John Frame, *Doctrine of God*, 557-559, and Millard Erickson is sympathetic to it (*God the Father Almighty*, 139-140). I am also, although I have spoken in these terms only occasionally.

parallel to develop a *reductio* space-indexical argument against Wolterstorff's time-indexical argument. PRRO and Charnock also argue in support of eternity on the basis of the parallel between God's omnipresence and his eternity.

It is important to recognize this parallel and to see how both cases (omnipresence and eternity) are driven by a concern to capture the plentitude of the divine nature found in scripture. God has created all space and is present at every part of the creation so that there is no way one can escape the presence of God (Ps. 139). Therefore, it is wrong to believe that the infinite God, who has created space and filled it according to his creational purposes, is not present in every place he has made, even though he has neither spatial location or spatial extension. However, it would be equally wrong to think that the space God creates confines him in some way or puts him in a box as it does us. He is not confined by the space that he has made, nor can he be. If the high heavens cannot contain him, how much less the temple that Solomon has built (1 Kings 8:27).

The parallel to eternity is exact. God has created all times, and there is no time to which he is not present and fully aware. He declares the end from the beginning (Isa. 46:10). He appoints the times and places of all humanity (Acts 17:26). He is the dwelling place of his people in every generation (Ps. 90:1-4). Therefore, it is wrong to believe that the infinite God who created time and designated all its moments according to his creational purposes would be absent from any moment of time he has brought to pass in the creation, even though he does not possess temporal location or temporal duration. However, it would be equally wrong to think that the time God creates confines him in some way or brackets him as it does us. He is not, nor can be, confined to the temporal realm. His days or years are not like ours, and this contrast is a matter of kind not of degree. Therefore, by theological parallel to spatial omnipresence, God is eternal or temporally omnipresent.

d. The immutability of God

The immutability of God refers to the changelessness of God and is closely related

to his aseity. Louis Berkhof nicely captures the traditional view when he defines it as “that perfection of God by which he is devoid of all change, not only in His Being, but also in His perfections, and in His purposes and promises.”¹⁴³

Traditionally, theologians like Aquinas have argued for divine eternity on the basis of God’s simplicity and immutability. The argument is that, if God is simple and immutable, he must be timeless. However, like the doctrine of eternity, the doctrine of divine immutability has been severely criticized by analytic philosophers and theologians for being too closely tied to Greek metaphysics and therefore leading to a static concept of God. For example, according to Craig, divine simplicity states that God has absolutely no composition in his nature or being. He is an undifferentiated unity who reflects the pure act of existing. This, says Craig, removes all distinctions in God including his Trinity.¹⁴⁴ Such a being certainly would be atemporal, and would possess his life, as Boethius put it, “all at once” (*totum simul*). However, he would also be a-relational. That is, he would stand in no real relations to his creatures or be able really to love or know them. Likewise, Craig argues, if God is immutable, even if he is not simple, he cannot be temporal.

However, Craig’s view of immutability is as absolute as his view of divine simplicity:

Like simplicity, the immutability affirmed by the medieval theologians is a radical concept: utter immobility. God cannot change in *any* respect. He never thinks successive thoughts, He never performs successive actions. He never undergoes even the most trivial alternations. God not only cannot undergo intrinsic change, he cannot even change extrinsically by being related to changing things.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴³Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1974), 58.

¹⁴⁴Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 30. Craig’s commitment to philosophical theology seems to lead him astray from the actual tradition of simplicity found in historical theology and therefore weakens his subsequent critique. While the traditional doctrine of simplicity denies that there are divisions in God’s nature and insists that he is, rather than simply possesses, his attributes, it does not deny all distinctions in God, especially that of the Trinity. Craig may be unwittingly setting up a straw man here.

¹⁴⁵Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 30-31. Emphasis his. Here again, Craig formulates his doctrine of immutability philosophically rather than as the orthodox tradition actually formulates it.

Craig argues that if the definition of immutability is softened to “incapable of intrinsic change,” God could still not be temporal, for a temporal God would still be growing older or gaining knowledge. So, even if God is only intrinsically immutable he remains timeless.¹⁴⁶ Therefore, says Craig, if God is immutable or simple, he is eternal (timeless). The problem, says Craig, is that these two attributes are even more difficult to defend than the doctrine of eternity itself. Craig believes they find absolutely no support in Scripture which, at best, speaks of immutability in terms of God’s faithfulness and unchanging character. In conclusion, while, “a simple or immutable God would be timeless, we have even less reason to think God simple or immutable than to think him timeless, and so can hardly infer that He is timeless on the basis of those doctrines.”¹⁴⁷

If Craig’s analysis is correct, he has presented a strong case against divine eternity on the basis of God’s immutability or simplicity. The problem is that the view of immutability maintained in the Christian tradition does not correspond to Craig’s interpretation. Craig has developed an absolute, abstract, and reductionist concept of divine eternity and read that model back into the tradition.

While the traditional view of God’s immutability maintains that God is not subject to the effects of time, it does not advocate an absolute notion of immobility. Craig has misinterpreted the Latin term, *immobile*, used by the Scholastics. Muller comments:

The scholastic notion of God as *immobile* does not translate into English as “immobile”--one of the many cases of cognates not being fully convertible--but as “unmoved.” This is, doubtless, the Aristotelian conception of the “unmoved Mover,” but it is not a conception which in and of itself implies stasis or incapability of relation with externals. Rather it indicates a being who has not been “moved” or brought into being by another. That God is *immobile* or unmoved in this sense few would deny--not even the process theologians who predicate change

¹⁴⁶Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 31.

¹⁴⁷Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 32.

of God and certainly not Karl Barth, or, we add, Clark Pinnock.¹⁴⁸

By way of remedy, Muller provides a crisp summary of the traditional doctrine of divine immutability taken from Protestant Orthodoxy. Citing the technical definition of Johannes Quenstedt (1617-88) that “Immutability is the perpetual identity of the divine essence and all its perfections, with the absolute negation of all motion, either physical or ethical,” he distills its significance as follows:

The Protestant orthodox state three implications of this immutability: first, God is changeless in essence, not “liable to any conversion into another essence, to any alteration, to any change of place”; second, he is immutable in his attributes: his goodness cannot cease to be good, his holiness cannot cease to be holy, his omniscience cannot cease to know all things; and third, he is immutable in his decree, his purpose his promises. If the first portion of the definition appears purely philosophical, the second and third portions do not. They bear directly upon reading of such texts as Num 23:19. . . . Or Mal 3:6-7. . . . Clearly the text bears witness to an ethical, moral, intentional and volitional changelessness in God.¹⁴⁹

The argument of Craig and others that the doctrine of immutability renders God static and a-relational (and therefore is unbiblical) appears reductionistic and headed in the wrong direction. When the Bible speaks about God not changing, it is not because he is frozen or inert; it is because he is complete. Immutability is not a defect in God, it is a reflection of his fullness and is important for both the faithfulness and eternity of God. As Helm notes:

It may be thought that a timelessly eternal God, impassive, immutable, and immobile could not be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Ought we not to ditch timelessly eternal immutability along with all other Platonic and Neoplatonic baggage, and, with Karl Barth and many others, to settle for divine constancy instead? . . . In the first place, the constancy rightly affirmed by Karl Barth surely requires some ontological grounding. . . . If God could change, then perhaps he is changing, and then the constancy of his promises or of his love cannot be guaranteed. The only guarantee, or if not the only guarantee then a prime candidate for such a guarantee, lies in the immutability of timeless eternity. Secondly, immutability, immobility and all the rest do not signal weakness and insufficiency in God, but the precise opposite, fullness of being. They affirm the actuality of

¹⁴⁸Richard Muller, “Incarnation, Immutability, and the Case for Classical Theism,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 45 (1983), 27-28.

¹⁴⁹Muller, “Incarnation, Immutability, and the Case for Classical Theism,” 25-26.

God. It is because of who God is that he cannot be acted upon for the better and does not need to change.¹⁵⁰

Diller observes that the doctrines of simplicity and immutability “have come under criticism and revision by theologians wary to avoid philosophical impositions on a biblically faithful theology.”¹⁵¹ However, if I am correct, it may be that the opposite has occurred. Perhaps criticism and revision have been directed at what is, in fact, a biblically faithful theology on the basis of certain impositions arising out of a quest for philosophic precision.

e. The simplicity of God

The doctrine of divine simplicity, which is closely connected with the doctrines of God’s self-existence, or aseity, and immutability, has traditionally provided additional grounds for asserting the eternity of God. The doctrine of divine simplicity maintains that God is both indivisible and non-composite in his nature. God does not simply possess his attributes as if he were the sum total of them or as if they were added to his essential being. Instead, God *is* his attributes in a necessary sense so that if one of his attributes were removed he would cease to be God. Augustine provides a crisp statement of the doctrine:

There is accordingly a good which alone is simple and for that reason is alone unchangeable, and that is God. All good things are created by this good, but not simple and for that reason changeable. . . . For this reason, then, a nature is called simple in which it is not the case either that it has something that it could lose, or is different from that which it has; as a vessel is different from that which it has; as a vessel is different from some liquid, or a body from its colour, or air from heat or light, or a soul from wisdom. . . . Therefore, according to this those things are called simple which are pre-eminently and truly divine, in which a quality is not one thing, the substance another, nor are they divine or wise or blessed by participation in other things.¹⁵²

The end result is that God is not made up of parts, including temporal parts. If God

¹⁵⁰Paul Helm, “Eternal Creation: The Doctrine of Two Standpoints,” in *The Doctrine of Creation: Essays in Dogmatics, History and Philosophy*, ed. Colin E. Gunton (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1997), 45-46.

¹⁵¹Diller, “Timelessness, Relationality, and the Incarnation,” 23.

¹⁵²Augustine, *The City of God*, 11.10; quoted in Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 214.

is temporal, then his life would consist of a past, present, and future--a succession of moments. By reason of succession, his being would have divisible aspects and, therefore, be contrary to the doctrine of divine simplicity. God must possess completely his unlimited life as a whole.

However, the simplicity of God is a doctrine that has come under close scrutiny. Even some, like Ronald Nash, who are usually sympathetic to the traditional understanding of divine attributes have questioned it.¹⁵³ Part of that critique has been the result of the severe criticism leveled against the doctrine by Alvin Plantinga. In *Does God Have a Nature?*, Plantinga rejects the doctrine of divine simplicity on the grounds that it conflicts with two important intuitions we have concerning God: First, that he possesses several properties, and, second, that he is a person. Plantinga understands the doctrine to deny all distinctions in God and, therefore, reduce God to a property. Since a property is not a person, the doctrine denies the personhood of God as well and “seems an utter mistake.”¹⁵⁴

Plantinga’s critique appears unassailable until you realize that it is directed at an abstracted notion of simplicity that does not precisely correspond to the traditional doctrine and should not be read into it. Plantinga’s concept of simplicity denies all distinctions in God--a perspective the tradition never held. Once modified from an abstract philosophical notion of simplicity, a kinder, gentler doctrine of simplicity emerges that is consistent with scriptural concerns about the fullness of God and that can be biblically defended. John Frame puts it this way:

As foreign as the concept of divine simplicity seems to modern persons it was formulated to express an important truth about God: the unity of his nature, the harmony of his attributes, and the fact that his actions involve the whole of what he

¹⁵³Ronald H. Nash, *The Concept of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 85-97, esp. 95-96.

¹⁵⁴A. Plantinga, *Does God Have a Nature?*, 47.

is.¹⁵⁵

As I have stated repeatedly, one aspect of the traditional attributes of God is to portray the fullness of the divine life. Consistent with this, the doctrine of simplicity is not an attempt to reduce the attributes of God into one or deny all distinctions in God (as does Craig). Such attempts misinterpret the doctrine. Neither does the traditional doctrine of simplicity reduce God to a property as Plantinga suggests. Such reductionism is contrary to the spirit of the doctrine, for the doctrine of divine simplicity is an attempt to describe the fullness of divine life. God is not simply a composite of a number of independent properties. That God *is* his properties and does not simply (i.e., contingently) possess them means that they are a necessary part of his nature reflecting the fullness, richness, and completeness of the divine life, which entails that he be immutable and indivisible. There is nothing reductionistic here.

f. The omniscience of God

The omniscience of God has to do with both the content and mode of God's knowledge. The traditional doctrine asserts that God knows all things without having to learn or acquire that knowledge. In regards to the temporal realm, he is described as knowing the end from the beginning. These clear biblical descriptions reveal that the mode of God's knowledge is different from our own in that it is not acquired or learned: God is not instructed by, nor does he learn from, events that occur in time. He possesses a complete knowledge, for his knowledge issues out of his knowledge of himself and of the divine decree. Since this is knowledge that God necessarily possesses *a priori*, it would also best be described as eternal.

The argument for God's eternity based upon the divine omniscience is an important area that is just beginning to be explored. As we saw in chapter 4, Gregory Ganssle,

¹⁵⁵John Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 230.

drawing upon William Alston's argument that God's knowledge does not involve beliefs but comes from absolute immediate awareness of all facts, argues that this mode of God's knowledge cannot span time and that, therefore, God must be atemporally eternal.¹⁵⁶ William Hasker tries to counter this by arguing that God's mode of knowledge as direct awareness leads to the opposite conclusion, that God must be temporal.¹⁵⁷ However this discussion unfolds in the future, it is clear that the traditional view does see the fullness and mode of God's knowledge as supporting divine eternity.

g. The transcendence of God

The transcendence of God relates to his aseity, sovereignty, infinity, and holiness. According to God's aseity, he is distinct from his creatures and above them, in the sense that they all depend upon him while he is entirely self-sufficient. According to his sovereignty, he rules over all that he has made in accordance with his divine purpose. According to his infinity or perfection, he possesses all of his attributes without limit and, therefore, stands in contrast to the creation that he has made. According to his metaphysical holiness, he is entirely separate from his creation. The point is that God is "above" the created temporal realm in that he rules over it completely and is not dependent upon it or restrained by it in any way. This aspect of his fullness provides additional evidence for divine eternity.

E. Eternity, Divine Sovereignty, and the Divine Decree

The doctrine of God's sovereignty and the closely related doctrine of the divine decree are clearly testified to in scripture and lend considerable support to the doctrine of

¹⁵⁶Gregory E. Ganssle, "Direct Awareness and God's Experience of a Temporal Now," in Ganssle and Woodruff, ed., *God and Time*, 165-167. He is drawing upon William Alston, "Does God Have Beliefs?" in *Divine Nature and Human Language* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 178-193. For a fuller summary of that discussion, see chapter 4.

¹⁵⁷William Hasker, "The Absence of a Timeless God," in Ganssle and Woodruff, ed., *God and Time*, 182-206. For a summary of his argument, see chapter 4.

divine eternity. Indeed, the testimony is so extensive as to demand separate consideration.

1. The Biblical testimony concerning divine sovereignty

The scriptures clearly teach God's sovereignty over every aspect of creation, including the natural world, the unfolding of human history, individual human lives (including the freely-made choices of individuals), and the application of salvation. Indeed, God's sovereignty is so extensive as to embrace both natural calamity and the actions of wicked men and angels. Although it might appear at times that circumstances and the wicked actions of men and angels are beyond God's control, the crucifixion of Christ alone defeats any such notion. According to Scripture, in what could be considered the arch-crime of history, the Lord is crucified at the hands of wicked men in accordance with what God had purposed and predestined (Acts 4: 27-28). To properly demonstrate these assertions would require a chapter-length discussion which space does not permit.

Fortunately, that task has been competently discharged elsewhere.¹⁵⁸

a. God's sovereignty over the natural world

God rules over the world in such a way that he is responsible for natural events. He waters the land in order to provide crops (Ps. 65:9-11). He commands the variety of weather according to his good pleasure (Pss. 147:15-18; 135:6-7) and uses it in accordance with his divine purpose as in the hailstorm in Exod. 9:13-26 and the famine in Amos 4:7. Such control extends right down to falling sparrows and strands of hair (Luke 10:29-30; 12:4-7). Even so called "random" events are governed by God; what we commonly describe as "accidents," are under his control (Exod. 21:13; Judg. 9:53; 1 Kings 22:34).

¹⁵⁸For a comprehensive and almost exhaustive treatments of the subject I would direct the reader to three recent sources: John M. Frame, "God's Control: Its Efficacy and Universality," in *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg: P & R Publishing, 2002), 47-79; his somewhat shorter but parallel treatment in "Is God's Will the Ultimate Explanation of Everything?," in *No Other God: A Response to Open Theism* (Phillipsburg: P & R Publishing, 2001), 57-87; and Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998), 358-372. My treatment follows the order and content of the discussion provided by Frame, although without remotely approximating his thoroughness. To this I add some of the material found in Reymond's survey of the biblical material.

In sum, the biblical description of the natural world as governed by God's "meticulous providence" is an intensely personal one, in contrast to the mechanical model suggested by philosophical materialism and the modern naturalistic scientific worldview.

b. God's sovereignty over human history

What is true of God's sovereignty over the "natural" realm is equally true in the realm of human history. Indeed, the former undergirds the latter. Frame points out that even the birth of individual human beings is a result of God's providentially bringing together a particular sperm and egg in order to produce a specific person.¹⁵⁹ God's control at the micro level extends to the macro as Paul explained to the Athenian philosophers: "From one man [God] made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live."¹⁶⁰

God's sovereignty over the nations is repeatedly illustrated in redemptive history. God uses Joseph's betrayal by his brothers to save the sons of Israel from famine (Gen. 45:5-8). Although they intended to do evil to Joseph, God ordered it for good (Gen. 50:20) to bring them down to Egypt, according to his promise to Abraham (Gen. 16:13-16). God uses the Assyrians to do his bidding (Isa. 10:5-12; 14:24-25; 37:26 and esp. Isa. 14:26-27). He uses Babylon to discipline Judah and bring them into captivity, and then humbles Nebuchadnezzar to acknowledge God's dominion over all nations (Dan. 4:34-35). He uses Cyrus to bless Israel (Ezra 1:2-4) as he had prophesied through Isaiah a century before (Isa. 44:28; 45:1-13). Similarly, in the New Testament, God puts the whole inhabited world into motion as the result of Caesar Augustus's tax census, in order that Mary and Joseph might make it to Bethlehem in the nick of time for the Messiah to be born in Bethlehem according to God's revealed purpose (Mic. 5:2-5; Luke 2:1-7; Matt. 2:5-6).

¹⁵⁹Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 53; *No Other God*, 59, 62-63.

¹⁶⁰Acts 17:26; quoted in Frame, *Doctrine of God*, 53; *No Other God*, 59.

While such illustrations could be multiplied, these are sufficient to establish God's rule over all the nations and the course of human history: "The LORD foils the plan of the nations; he thwarts the purposes of the peoples. But the plans of the LORD stand firm forever, the purposes of his heart through all generations" (Ps. 33:10-11).

c. God's sovereignty over individual human lives

God's sovereignty extends to individual human beings even before they are conceived, for the complete history of human procreation is governed by God (Gen. 4:1, 25; 18:13-14; 25:21; 29:31-30:2; 30:17, 23-24; Deut. 10:22; Ruth 4:13; Pss. 113:9; 127:3-5; 139:13-16). God, however, does not simply give human life; he orders human lives according to his purposes. All of our days are ordained for us and were written in God's book before one of them began (Ps. 139:16). God tailor makes our circumstances so that we can endure temptation (1 Cor. 10:13); he places each of us together with our gifts and graces in the body of Christ exactly as he desires (1 Cor. 12:18); and he creates us in Christ Jesus for good works which he prepared beforehand that we should walk in them (Eph. 2:10). James reminds us to acknowledge God's sovereignty at every point by saying, "if it is the Lord's will we will live and do this or that" (James 4:15).

d. God's sovereignty over human decisions

Consistent with God's sovereignty over individual human lives is his sovereignty over human choice. This is a controversial theological issue within the Christian community. It is one, however, I believe is best joined by affirming both that human beings are responsible for the choices they make and that God is sovereign over those choices. *How* these two assertions relate to each other is difficult to discern and the source of much controversy. Nonetheless, *that* God is sovereign over the decisions and actions of human beings is biblically irrefutable.

The origin of human decision making is the heart, properly understood as the inside of a person over against his or her outside (1 Sam. 16:7) and not as the seat of human

emotion in the contrast to the mind, as the seat of human will or intellect. Jesus makes it clear that out of the storehouse of the heart comes good or evil words and actions (Luke 6:43-45). Likewise, it is not what goes into a person, but what comes out that defiles an individual (Matt. 15:19-20). However, the Bible teaches that the heart is in the Lord's hands: "The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD; he directs it like a watercourse wherever he pleases" (Prov. 21:1). But what is true of rulers is equally true of all human beings: "In his heart a man plans his course, but the Lord determines the steps" (Prov. 16:9).

This truth is reinforced by the way that the Bible reaffirms the free actions of human beings in accordance with God's plan. Thus Joseph's brothers meant to do harm, but God intended it for good (Gen. 50:20). Likewise, Jesus was freely put to death at the hand of wicked men in accordance with God's predetermined plan (Acts 4:27-28). It is also reinforced by predictive prophecy, which demonstrates God's control over free actions by his ability to predict what is going to happen far in advance. Thus Pharaoh, king of Egypt, is God's tool in refusing to let God's people go as foretold to Moses. By contrast, Cyrus is God's servant in his willingness to let the people go. Likewise the Gospels frequently declare that certain events happened in fulfillment of scripture. After surveying a number of these passages, Frame notes that "the point is not merely that God has advance knowledge of an event, but that he is fulfilling his own purpose through that event."¹⁶¹

e. God's sovereignty over sin

Does God's control over the human heart include his control over the sinful decisions and actions that may stem from a sinful heart? The biblical answer is clearly that while people freely choose to do evil, their choice is still according to God's divine purpose. As Proverbs 16:4 puts it: "The Lord works out everything for his own ends--

¹⁶¹Frame, *No Other God*, 67; *The Doctrine of God*, 64.

even the wicked for a day of disaster.” Samson wrongly desired to marry a Philistine woman, but that decision is part of God’s plan to judge the Philistines (Judg. 14:4). Again and again scripture speaks of God’s hardening certain individuals or nations in order to accomplish his purposes: Pharaoh of the Exodus; Sihon, king of Heshbon (Deut. 2:30); Israel (Rom. 11:7-8, quoting Isa. 29:10); and the Gentiles (Rom. 1:19-20). What John Murray has called the “arch-crime of history,” the crucifixion of Jesus according to God’s divine purpose and predestination, fits this same pattern.

f. God’s sovereignty in salvation

According to the Bible, “salvation comes from the Lord” (Jon. 2:9). This does not mean simply that God provides the way of salvation, but that he is also the ultimate cause of salvation.¹⁶² It is when we were without hope and were children of wrath that God showed his sovereign grace:

For it is by grace you have been saved through faith--and this not of yourselves, it is the gift of God--not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works which he prepared in advance for us to do. (Eph. 2:8-10)

Paul informs us in that same book that this grace finds its roots in God’s electing love:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. For *he chose us* in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. *In love he predestined* us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will — to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding. And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, *which he purposed* in Christ, to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment —to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ. In him *we were also chosen*, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, in order that we, who were

¹⁶²This section could easily be broadened into a chapter or book-length treatment. Since more complete discussions do exist, these few paragraphs are no more than a reminder of the classic Reformed position of God’s sovereignty over salvation.

the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory. (Eph. 1:3-12; emphasis mine)

The book of Romans is equally emphatic in its insistence on the sovereignty of God in salvation. Rom. 8:28ff tells us that all things work together for good of those who are called according to God's electing purpose so that nothing can separate them from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Romans 9 asserts the principle of God's electing love with regard to Jacob and Esau, grounding the salvation of the former and the rejection of the latter in God's sovereign choice before either of them was born. Paul does not see God's electing purposes as a challenge to his justice, since all are subject to God's sovereign purposes (Rom. 9:19-24). Instead he seems them as a matter of special praise (Rom. 11:33-36).

g . Four passages summarizing God's sovereignty

Frame completes his biblical survey (under the headings above) of how God's decretive will is the ultimate explanation for everything with the following declaration:

I do not apologize for including such a large number of Scripture passages in this chapter. Nothing is more important, especially at this point in the history of theology, than for God's people to be firmly convinced that Scripture teaches God's universal control over the world, and teaches it over and over again. . . . This sheer quantity and variety of teaching on the subject is the major point of this chapter.¹⁶³

Similarly, I believe it is important to review at some length the explicit teaching regarding God's universal sovereignty over the world.

Frame concludes his discussion with four passages. First, Lam. 3:37-38 ("Who can speak and have it happen if the Lord has not decreed it? Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that both calamities and good things come?") declares that God's rule includes all calamities and good things and that nothing happens that is outside of God's decree. Second, Rom. 8:28 declares that *all things* work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose. Third, Eph. 1:11 declares that "In him

¹⁶³Frame, *No Other God*, 83; essentially the same quotation is found in Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 76-77.

[Christ] we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him *who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will,*” suggesting that salvation is part of God’s overall control of the world he has made. Finally, Romans 9-11 clearly affirms God’s sovereignty over salvation and all things by appealing to the metaphor of the potter and arguing that the clay has no right to challenge the potter regarding his purposes in creating him. It closes with a doxology to God that declares that from him and through him and to him *are all things*, suggesting three aspects of God’s involvement in the world: He is its Creator (from), its governor (through him) and the source of its ultimate purpose (to him). In sum, God is sovereign over all.

2. The divine decree and God as the author of human history

Closely related to the doctrine of divine sovereignty is that of the divine decree.

The *Westminster Standards* clearly and crisply define the Reformed Doctrine of the divine decree:

God’s decrees are the wise, free, and holy acts of the counsel of his will, whereby, from all eternity, he has, for his own glory, unchangeably foreordained whatsoever comes to pass in time, especially concerning angels and men (*Westminster Larger Catechism*, Q. 12).

The decrees of God are his eternal purpose, according to the counsel of his will, whereby, for his own glory, he hath foreordained whatsoever comes to pass (*Westminster Shorter Catechism*, Q. 7).

God, from all eternity, did, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass: yet so, as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures; nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established (*Westminster Confession of Faith*, 3.1).

As Berkhof points out, within Reformed thought the doctrine of the divine decree receives an emphasis and prominence not found in most other theological traditions. This can most likely be accounted for by the Reformed commitment to divine sovereignty, its interest in covenant theology, and its emphasis upon seeing the biblical text as reflecting God’s purposes in creation and redemptive history.

The biblical testimony with regards to God's divine sovereignty is incredibly extensive. The concept of sovereignty entails that God has the power to carry out his purposes so that none can thwart his intentions or stay his hand. The notion of the divine decree entails that God's purposes are one, singular, unchangeable, and eternal. God's divine decree and the certainty of God's purpose suggest that God knows the end from the beginning because he is the author of human history, which he has purposed from all eternity to bring about. This is a very wide and deep theme in scripture and provides additional support to the idea that God's relationship to the creation is not restrained in any way, including temporally. The singularity and comprehensiveness of the divine decree as consistent with God's mode of being involves the complete possession, as a whole, of an illimitable (infinite) life.

Such an understanding of divine sovereignty is shared by PRRO. As Muller points out, according to the Protestant Orthodox commentators, the creation itself is a testimony to the infinity and omnipotence of God since its complexity and variety of its creatures and modes of existence could not have been the product of a finite being.¹⁶⁴ In a similar way, the concept of the divine decree, which underlies the works of creation and providence, entails God's infinity. Muller comments:

The concept of a divine decree on which all things depend also demands the concept of immensity or eternity inasmuch as it stands beyond time, having nothing before, whether according to nature or origin: the decree is an act of infinite wisdom that from all eternity comprehends all possibilities, in all of their varieties, modes and aspects. Logically a being who is confined to a place or to a time--of whom it could he said "it is necessarily here"--is, certainly, of necessity, not God.¹⁶⁵

At the same time, according to the Reformed Orthodox, the works of God in creation and providence, while they manifest the infinity and limitlessness of God, are themselves finite. This means that although God's decree is eternal, the execution of his

¹⁶⁴Muller, *PRRD* 3:333.

¹⁶⁵Muller, *PRRD* 3:333.

decree is realized in time.¹⁶⁶ The contrast between Creator and Creation (i.e., between the unlimited and infinite nature of God in the works of the divine decree and the limited and finite character of his works of creation and providence) provides a kind of dual dimensionality helpful for conceptualizing the relationship of the eternal God to his temporal creation, while at the same time preserving the Creator/creation distinction. On the one hand, God's purposes reflected in the divine decree are eternal and unchangeable and his knowledge of the world is full and complete. It can neither be added to nor subtracted from. Such an understanding of the mode of God's being and knowledge is clearly atemporal. On the other hand, God's purposes are sure, and he is intimately connected with the events and persons of human history, which he intends to bring about. He is not aloof from the world that he has conceived and produced, and there is nothing deistic about the doctrine of the divine decree. God is actively involved in the temporal realm he has created. After all, he is the author of human history. In other words, the doctrine of the divine decree suggests that God and his purposes for human history are eternal *and* that he is intimately connected to their execution without himself sharing in the temporal realm, which he has created.

3. Divine eternity and the analogy of the novelist

The understanding of God as the author of human history invites comparison between the temporal perspective of the world of a novel and (relatively) atemporal perspective of the author. The analogy of the novelist is a not a new one, but it is a powerful one that coincides with the doctrine of the divine decree. God has from all eternity determined whatever will come to pass. He is the author of human history who determines both the sets (i.e., the geography and natural events) and the characters within the drama of redemptive history he has purposed. He has formed the variety of living

¹⁶⁶Muller, *PRRD* 3:334.

creatures and the destiny of the human participants, whom he has patterned after himself. He knows and summons them to a particular stewardship even before they are actualized in the storyline of human history. He declares the end from the beginning; that is, he knows the storyline inside and out. I will discuss the strengths and weaknesses of this analogy more fully in chapter 7.

4. Conclusion

In sum, the doctrine of divine sovereignty given in scripture speaks of how God is the ultimate cause of all things. This is affirmed by the doctrine of the divine decree which declares that God, has from all eternity, decreed whatever shall come to pass. Taken together these two doctrines clearly portray God as the sole author of human history. This in turn leads to a conceptual analogy between God and creation, and the novelist and novel, which helps reveal both the coherence and benefits of maintaining the eternity of God.

F. A Biblical-Theological Defense of Eternity

1. Wolterstorff's biblical-theological argument for divine temporality

As I have already noted, Nicholas Wolterstorff argues that if we affirm a literal interpretation of the Bible, appreciate the flow of redemptive history, and believe that God is actively involved in it, we must embrace the view that God is fully temporal and shares our timeline. Since the biblical writers clearly portray God as one who is actively involved in human history, God must be temporal. Further, a God who is a Redeemer must be temporal because he is a God who changes, and one who changes must experience a temporal succession of states.¹⁶⁷ For Wolterstorff, such considerations provide more than a *prima facie* biblical-theological argument in favor of God being everlasting and place the burden of proof on those who would contest a literal temporal interpretation. Indeed, he insists, "there are no passages in Scripture which can be cited as supporting this doctrine

¹⁶⁷Wolterstorff, "God Everlasting," 181-82.

[of divine eternity].”¹⁶⁸

2. A counter biblical-theological argument for divine eternity

I have already addressed one part of this burden by showing, through the resources of PRRO and others, that there are many passages that effectively support the doctrine of divine eternity. I have also shown how the doctrine of the divine decree, which is intimately connected with God’s purposes in redemptive history, also supports the doctrine of divine eternity and so serves as a counter biblical-theological argument. In this section, I want to expand that line of thought and provide an additional biblical-theological argument in favor of divine eternity based upon the problem of preserving meaning in redemptive history, if one commits to a strong view of divine temporality.¹⁶⁹ I begin by reconsidering Augustine’s perplexity over the nature of time.

a. Augustine and the ontological insufficiency of the temporal present

If the temporalist is correct that the temporal present is ontologically privileged by being the only member of the temporal order (past, present, future) that exists, what is the nature of its existence? This issue, as we saw in chapter 5 on the history of doctrine, was carefully considered by Augustine.

Augustine’s exploration of the enigma of time generates a number of puzzles. According to Augustine, from a temporal standpoint, it would appear that only the present exists. The past no longer exists and the future does not yet exist. What then of the present? The present is simply the dividing line between two no-longer or not-yet existing realms! Augustine is anxious about this because if the present is all that exists, and it is largely the dividing line between that which no longer exists and does not yet exist, the

¹⁶⁸Wolterstorff, “Unqualified Divine Temporality,” 193.

¹⁶⁹This argument is somewhat experimental and may not work against all divine temporalists. I believe it is successful against certain temporalists (like Open Theists) who so ontologically privilege the present that the future remains open and indeterminate. It also may serve as a caution to temporalists who believe that there are no negative consequences to privileging the present.

temporal present does not provide a sufficient ontology upon which to ground the existence of either the world or its creator.

However, the experience of memory does seem to suggest the possibility of a solution to this problem. Augustine notes that memory is able to deepen or extend the experience of the human temporal present by enabling the human knower to reflect on past events (which no longer exist) *in the present* (which does). In other words, the past can be made the object of present observation by means of memory. In this way, memory provides extension or duration to the instantaneous temporal present.

Further, according to Augustine, the way memory functions with regard to the temporal present provides a conceptual model or analogy of how God, in the eternal present, can possess his illimitable life and knowledge as a whole (or “all at once” in a non-temporal sense). Just as the experience of the instantaneous human temporal present can be “stretched” or “extended” or can “endure” by the instrumentality of memory, so also God, to whose knowledge nothing can be added or subtracted, can be conceived as possessing the fullness of the divine life in an non-successive but durational eternal present.

It should be noted that the ontology of this limitless extended (or durational) eternal present differs markedly from the temporal present, which possesses little or no existence of its own but is simply a dividing line between past and future.

It is the desire to assert a more substantial ontology that leads Augustine, Boethius, Anselm, Aquinas, and others within the tradition to assert the doctrine of the eternal present as providing the metaphysical substratum for the temporal realm. Thus, although Augustine has a relational A-series understanding of the temporal realm, he is not a divine temporalist. Instead, the ontological inadequacy of the temporal present is one of the engines that drives his argument in favor of divine eternity. While this is not a new argument, I believe that it still offers a severe challenge to all divine temporalists who insist upon privileging the existence of the temporal present. Further, it provides the context for

developing a biblical-theological argument against divine temporalism.

Most temporalists reject the argument for an eternal present and prefer to understand God as on a timeline because they believe failure to do so diminishes God by making him less than a person or less immanent to his creation. In previous sections of this chapter, I have argued that this is not the case. Here I would argue that it is the temporal position that diminishes God. Keeping God on a timeline and requiring for him a succession of moments raises not only ontological, but also epistemological issues. To be precise, doing so makes it very difficult to preserve the stability and perfection of God's knowledge and to preserve the meaning of the temporal present.

b. Temporalism, memory, and meaning

Augustine suggests how this is so. In conceptualizing the durative or broad nature of the eternal present, Augustine finds an analog in the temporal present. Although the temporal present is a narrow boundary between past and future, it can be broadened by way of memory. Our experience of the present is expanded by memories, which also occur in the present. For Augustine, this provides a way of conceptualizing how God can embrace the whole of temporal past, present, and future in the eternal present.

The ontological insufficiency of the temporal present is paralleled by an epistemological one. The temporal present is insufficient to preserve meaning by itself. Indeed, if it were not possible for the temporal present to be expanded and contextualized by memory, the meaning of the present would be diminished or lost. At least for human beings, meaning is dependent upon the present plus memory in a temporal timeline.

A dramatic illustration of this is found in the film *Memento*.¹⁷⁰ This film begins with a murder and then moves backward through time in order to trace the development of events leading to the crime. However, this is no ordinary murder mystery. The sequence

¹⁷⁰*Memento*, produced by Suzanne Todd and Jennifer Todd; directed by Christopher Nolan, 113 min., I Remember Productions, 2000. Team Todd Production, 2001, videocassette.

of events becomes impossible to trace, because the film is presented through the perspective of the main character, who unfortunately suffers from a condition that has completely disabled his short-term memory. Thus, his experience of life is confined and limited to the immediate present.

In this setting, the film reflects the desperate attempt of the main character to make sense of life by preserving what he can of the past by tattooing significant facts on his body or generating polaroid photographs of people he has met (the “mementos”). On the back of these photographs he scribbles interpretive notes in order to provide himself some kind of framing context to make sense of his life and to discover the persons responsible for both the death of his wife and the injury which has disabled him (which apparently occurred prior to the beginning of the storyline of the film). His quest, however, is fruitless, for he is at the mercy of the framing contexts that other people provide for him either by taking advantage of his condition, by altering his “mementos,” or by feeding him false information. Thus, the manager of the motel where he is staying rents him several different rooms and charges him for all of them. Wicked associates manipulate him to commit other murders on their behalf by leading him to believe that in doing so he is avenging the death of his wife. In this way the postmodern message of the film is both graphically and cunningly displayed: There is no ultimate meaning or framing context to existence. The only meaning is meaning that you create for yourself or that others create for you. The only meaning is meaning that is constructed out of a past that is constantly changing.

Although *Memento* dramatizes a pathological condition, it illustrates what those of us with elderly parents know by experience: dementia and loss or confusion of memory lead to a narrowing of existence. If the A-series theory of time is asserted ontologically, something additional must be provided in order to contextualize the temporal present. The temporal present alone is not self-interpreting. It would seem, however, that for temporal beings the meaning of temporal existence can be preserved by a functioning memory, and

certainly God's memory, even if he is temporal, is fully functional.

However, an additional epistemological problem remains. For a human being on a temporal timeline, meaning is dependent upon the temporal present plus memory.

However, memory itself is also dependent upon the temporal present (or the constant accumulation of present moments, which then become memories). But if memory depends upon the temporal present (and the temporal present has the thinnest of existence), it seems wrong to argue that temporal memory alone preserves the meaning and significance of the temporal present. It provides a history, but history is not self-interpreting. Further the temporal present (and the history) is in constant flux.

In a parallel fashion, a temporal God is also at least partially dependent upon the temporal present plus memory if he is indeed temporal. A temporal God, therefore, is a God who is dependent upon time, and for whom meaning and knowledge are also (at least partially) dependent upon time. This makes it difficult to preserve a strong view of divine omniscience because he is constantly gaining new information from his temporal mode of existence. Even if we assume that God has an extensive core of fixed knowledge, it is being added to constantly. And if it is, then what God knows is changing and the meaning of his life and existence is being reshaped as he experiences temporal succession, just as it is being reshaped for human beings.

To put it another way, for a temporal being, including a temporal God, the pastness of experience is not a fixed entity, because it is determined by memory, and memory consists of accumulated "presents." It is, therefore, constantly changing as a result of succession of moments. Neither is such a temporal God truly omniscient, for his knowledge is being constantly augmented by his experience.

It might be countered that a temporal God could still be omniscient through perfect memory and perfect prescience of the future. However, there is a price to be paid for insisting that the mode of God's knowledge is in a succession of moments. Such a God

must be a God who *learns*. And a God who learns is not a God who is omniscient. If the fullness of the divine mind is such that you cannot add or subtract from his knowledge, then he does not exist in a succession of moments, but is both immutable and eternal.

3. Eternity, the divine decree, and meaning of redemptive history

All of this leads to a biblical-theological argument for divine eternity. As we saw in the previous section on the divine decree, the unfolding of redemptive history coupled with the sovereignty of God leads to the doctrine of the divine decree. However, there is a reciprocal relationship here. The meaning of redemptive history is dependent upon the divine decree, which is also dependent upon God's sovereign omniscience, not simply his memory and precognition. This means that understanding the nature and structure of redemptive history leads to the conclusion that God is eternal. If God is truly temporal, his purpose is no longer certain, because it is necessarily mutable. This is because it rests upon a knowledge that is not full and complete but growing and expanding.

The problem here is the problem of succession. The body of a temporal God's knowledge, which shapes the meaning of his (and our) present existence, is constantly changing through the successive temporal "presents" or "nows." It is also being shaped though the memory of "thens" that are receding farther and farther from the temporal present and perhaps becoming less important. It is not that God has forgotten them, but that those memories no longer bear upon the significance of the present moment. Furthermore, even if God knows the future, the succession of moments means that he, like we, must wait to see that future actually fulfilled.

In contrast, the biblical texts assert again and again that God's knowledge of both past and future is certain and complete and that his purposes are embedded within the structure of redemptive history, as well as in our individual lives as Christians. The end result is that reflection on the nature and structure of redemptive history and the divine decree leads to the conclusion that God is eternal.

Wolterstorff argues that the structure and events of redemptive history require that God be temporal. Building upon the argument just made, I believe a case can be made for the opposite view. The biblical revelation of redemptive history reminds us at every point of what God has done and what he will do, and it is that which gives meaning to every moment or event in biblical history. Scripture also makes it clear that the unfolding of redemptive history is, in turn, the product of the sovereign working of God as directed by the sovereign purpose of God according to the divine decree. This requires a robust view of God's omniscience.

That this is correct is supported by the twin themes of remembrance and hope, of the already and not yet, revealed within the structure of redemptive history. According to the Bible, the present is neither self-sustaining or self-interpreting. It is meaningful in the context of God's purposes, which are worked out in time but decreed from eternity. That is why scripture constantly exhorts us to remember what God has done and to hope for what he will yet accomplish. It is in the context of the past and the future, both of which are firmly anchored in God's purposes, that the events of redemptive history have meaning.

If there is no fixed over-arching divine purpose, if God is simply a fellow traveler on the temporal road for whom the mode and content of knowledge is subject to a succession of moments, then the significance and meaning of redemptive and personal history is jeopardized and the comfort we have in the sure purposes of God is diminished by uncertainty. However, that is not the case. God's sovereign work, revealed in the structure and events of redemptive history and grounded in the divine decree, testifies to his transcendent unchanging eternal purpose, not his temporal existence. It also provides the framing context that preserves the meaning and significance of redemptive and personal history. The biblical-theological testimony of redemptive history and the doctrines of divine omniscience, omnipotence, and the divine decree suggest that God must possess the whole of his existence altogether and that God is eternal in the Boethian sense.

IV. Chapter Summary and Conclusions

In developing a biblical and theological defense of divine eternity (understood as duration without succession), this chapter has covered a great deal of ground and addressed the issue from a wide variety of angles. In response to the strong challenge on biblical grounds offered by Cullmann, Wolterstorff, and Padgett, this chapter has (a) asserted the significance of the doctrine of eternity for the creedal tradition of the church (which is also an *exegetical* tradition); (b) showcased the negative trajectory of Open Theism; (c) reviewed the modern positive biblical testimony for divine eternity provided by Helm and Craig; (d) strengthened that case by appeal to the exegetical and theological work of Post-Reformation Reformed Orthodoxy with particular attention to the case for divine eternity made by Stephen Charnock (and friends) and their special interest in the biblical emphasis on divine *duration*; (e) provided a systematic theological defense of eternity showing how the traditional doctrine is closely intertwined with the other revealed attributes of God described in scripture, all of which reflect the plentitude of the divine nature; (f) provided an additional theological defense on the basis of the sovereignty of God and the doctrine of the divine decree; and (g) formulated a biblical-theological argument for divine eternity as important to preserving the meaning of both personal and redemptive history.

Taken singly, each of these lines of argument has force. Taken together, their cumulative effect cannot be dismissed or easily set aside. The very *least* that can be said is that the traditional view of divine eternity is biblically and theologically defensible. That it is also conceptually coherent is the subject of the next chapter.

CHAPTER 7

An Analogical Defense of the Coherence and Plenitude of Divine Eternity

Two charges frequently are made against the doctrine of divine eternity: first, that it is incoherent; and second, that it makes God too abstract and removed from the world and is, therefore, unbiblical. These charges are supported by the following specifications: (a) if all events occur within God's eternal present, they are simultaneous with each other; (b) an eternal God cannot be a person; (c) an eternal God cannot act upon a temporal world; (d) an eternal God cannot be actively involved in a temporal world or bring about redemption; (e) an eternal God cannot know what is happening "now"; and (f) the concept of duration without succession, which characterizes the traditional doctrine of eternity, is itself incoherent.

The use of analogies helps in responding to these two charges and accompanying specifications. Analogical reasoning cannot *demonstrate* the truthfulness of divine timelessness, nor, indeed, can analytic reasoning *demonstrate* the truthfulness of divine temporality. But analogical reasoning can address the issue of coherence by providing a variety of models or metaphors drawn from human experience to conceptualize the relationship between time and eternity. It addresses the charge of unbiblical abstraction by preserving, through similar analogical representation, the fullness of the life of the eternal God as he is in himself as well as in relation to his creatures as revealed in scripture.

The analytic discussion suggests there is a great gulf fixed between the temporal and the eternal, so that for temporal creatures even to talk about what it means to live within an eternal mode of existence is fraught with obstacles impossible to penetrate. Because we are temporal creatures, our entire way of thinking is bounded by temporal categories from

which we cannot escape. It is like a two-dimensional creature trying to try to envision a three dimensional world, the dilemmas of which are spelled out in the classical mathematical fantasy, *Flatland*, and its more recent geometrically upgraded sequel.¹ However, even such a simple comparison suggests that analogies may provide a way of making a *prima facie* case for the coherence of divine eternity.

I. Analogy and Theological Thought

A. Analogy and the Problem of Theological Language

Intimately connected with the subject of formal analogies is the subject of analogical language about God, a subject with a long and somewhat unsettled theological history. According to Brian Davies, the issue of theological language goes back at least as far as Augustine, who insisted that, while God was in many ways unknowable, it was still possible to say positive things about him. However, during the medieval period a general skepticism arose about the ability to speak positively of God. Instead, it was argued that God could only be referenced by the *via negativa* and that God could only be described in terms of what he was not, rather than what he was.² As we shall see, while Aquinas himself draws upon the method of the *via negativa*, his classic treatment of the doctrine of analogical language reflects, at least in part, a desire to avoid such skepticism and to defend human ability to speak positively and truly about God.³

An important modern discussion and defense of the theological use of analogy and

¹Edwin A. Abbot, *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions*, 5th edition, revised with a foreword by Isaac Asimov (New York: HarperPerennial, 1994). See also Dionys Burger, *Sphereland: A Fantasy About Curved Spaces and an Expanding Universe*, trans. Cornelia J. Rheinboldt with a foreword by Isaac Asimov (New York: HarperPerennial, 1994).

²Brian Davies, *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 58-59. In this connection Davies cites Denys, John Eriugena, and the Jewish writers Avicbron and Moses Maimonides in support of the view that theological language about God must be entirely negative.

³Davies, *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas*, 60-62.

metaphor is found in the work of Janet Soskice.⁴ In the modern period, the legitimacy of theological language has been challenged on the post-Kantian grounds that it is impossible to cross the epistemological boundaries of thought from the human to the divine. This criticism reached its high water mark in Logical Positivism, which restricted meaningful language to that which was empirically verifiable and judged all religious language nonsensical. Although positivism has been discredited as a philosophical movement, its spirit lives on in theology that emphasizes divine immanence and is skeptical regarding religious language. Soskice's argument for religious language points out that (a) analogical language is universal; (b) it is used constantly in the phenomenal realm of science to describe realities and gain understanding of subjects that cannot be fully known; and (c) if it is valid in science, there is no reason why it cannot also be used for religious thinking.

B. Thomas Aquinas's Classic Defense of Analogy

1. Aquinas, religious language, and the *via negativa*

Aquinas's views on analogy and analogical language are closely connected to the *via negativa*, the causal theory of meaning, and the Christian doctrine of creation.⁵ In his discussion of divine simplicity, Aquinas argues that God is not a composite of his attributes, but that he *is* his attributes. In saying this, Aquinas is not declaring something that is incoherent or nonsensical. Rather, he is making a positive assertion of a negative theological point, namely that God is *neither* a composite of his attributes *nor* are his attributes some kind of add-on to his essential being or nature. In other words Aquinas, following the *via negativa*, is saying what God is not.⁶

⁴Janet Martin Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985).

⁵For this summary discussion I am largely dependent upon two works by Brian Davies: *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas*, 58-79, and *Thinking About God* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1985), 119-147.

⁶Davies, *Thinking About God*, 128.

However, Aquinas does not embrace the view that talk about God should be wholly negative. Although we may not understand many things about God, we are not limited to talking about what God is not. We do not simply deny things about God; we also positively describe him as possessing certain attributes such as being “good” or “wise.”⁷ How is this possible?

2. Religious language and the doctrine of creation

Some in Aquinas’s day accounted for such positive attributions by appealing exclusively to a causal theory of meaning, which ascribes certain characteristics to God on the basis of what he brings about in the world. Thus to say that God is good is just to say that he causes good things. Aquinas offers two objections to this overly narrow view. On the one hand, it proves too much, for if God can be said to be good just or because he causes good things, it could also be argued that he has a body just because he creates bodies. On the other hand, it proves too little, for it suggests that no attributes can be ascribed to God prior to the creation of the world, thus making his attributes dependent upon his works.⁸

Nonetheless, Aquinas argues, our ability to talk about God is directly related to God’s work in creation since “Any creature, in so far as it possesses any perfection, represents God and is like him, for he, being simply and universally perfect has pre-existing in himself the perfections of all his creatures.”⁹ This does not mean that God literally resembles the things he has made, but rather that *the cause reveals something of itself in its effect*. In other words, objects in creation reveal something of the Creator

⁷Davies, *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas*, 60; *Thinking About God*, 129.

⁸Davies, *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas*, 61.

⁹Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Ia.13.2 (hence *ST*); quoted in Davies, *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas*, 63.

because they come from God.¹⁰

3. Equivocity, univocity, and analogy

But how are we to describe the similarity and difference that exist between God and his creation? Aquinas's answer is developed in his concept of analogy. According to Aquinas, language about God cannot be applied to creatures and to God univocally (that is, with precisely the same meaning). So, for instance, "when we say that a man is wise we signify his wisdom as something distinct from the other things about him--his essence, for example, his powers or his existence. But when we use this word about God we do not intend to signify something distinct from his essence, power or existence."¹¹ However, this does not mean that words must be used equivocally of God and creatures, for if the words used always have a different meaning, we would be unable to ascribe any particular attributes to God.¹²

Having rejected equivocal and univocal accounts for language about God, Aquinas proposes a third alternative, analogy, which enables us to speak in a literal way about God and which reflects "a certain order" between the ways we apply words to ourselves and to God.¹³ Davies explains:

To take the example of Aquinas, we may say that a man is healthy, and that his diet is healthy. In neither case are we speaking metaphorically (if we ask whether both the man and his diet are healthy, the answer can be 'Yes'). But health in human beings and health in diets (or a healthy man and a healthy diet) are different. In the same way, so Aquinas holds, we can apply certain terms both to God and to creatures so as really to mean what we say without saying precisely the same thing in both cases yet without meaning something entirely different. Terms can be used of creatures and God without being used univocally or equivocally.¹⁴

¹⁰Davies, *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas*, 63-64.

¹¹Aquinas, *ST*, Ia.13.5; quoted in Davies, *Thinking About God*, 138-139.

¹²Aquinas, *ST*, Ia.13.5; quoted in Davies, *Thinking About God*, 139.

¹³Aquinas, *ST*, Ia.13.5; quoted in Davies, *Thinking About God*, 139-140.

¹⁴Davies, *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas*, 140.

It is important to notice that Aquinas's concept of analogy is grounded in the doctrine of creation and relationship that exists between the Creator and the creation. The cause reveals *something true* of itself in the effect. This *something true* makes the connection between God and his creation and must be understood analogically rather than univocally or equivocally. Nonetheless, according to Aquinas there is something genuine and real to be obtained in speaking analogically about God.

C. Janet Soskice's Modern Defense of Analogy

Soskice is not responding to the *via negativa*, as addressed by Aquinas. Nonetheless, she makes much the same point regarding analogy. Like Aquinas, Soskice wants to speak truly about God. She also seeks to ground her viewpoint in the creation, and she believes there is something genuine and real to be obtained in speaking metaphorically and analogically about God. However, she goes beyond Aquinas by providing a more complete "this world" defense of "other world" language through her defense of critical realism. The use of metaphors and analogies in theological language is legitimate because it is precisely parallel to the way analogies, models, and metaphors are used in science and scientific inquiry. Further, the use of such models and analogies is not only permissible, it is productive. Analogies and metaphor actually move scientific discussion forward. They also enable students of science to know and use science. The same is equally true, she argues, for the theological enterprise.

1. Soskice's method: Critical realism as a solution to skepticism regarding theological language

Soskice is aware that dependence on metaphorical language is viewed as problematic. Critics argue that Christians, who tend to move from metaphor to metaphor, insist that their language is always qualified. However, at some point, one must "break out of this circle of imagery and speak unequivocally of God, for otherwise we cannot know

that his utterances have any sense at all.”¹⁵ Responses to this criticism have been plagued by two problems: (a) terminological imprecision such that metaphor, model, analogy, and myth are used as equivalents; and (b) the tendency to regard problems of metaphor as problems exclusive to religious language.¹⁶

Soskice avoids the first problem by defining metaphor as a conceptual vehicle that makes genuine and justifiable assertions about its subject. Metaphors have explanatory value: “They are reality depicting without pretending to be directly descriptive.”¹⁷ She addresses the second problem by arguing that explanatory metaphor is not limited to the realm of religion, but is used in many forms of discourse, especially science.¹⁸

2. Model and metaphor in science and religion

In contrast to literary metaphors, which may have a shattering effect upon meaning, scientific metaphors focus meaning.¹⁹ While Soskice is careful to avoid a conflation of metaphors and models, she understands how they are closely linked, since we often appeal to models as the source of our metaphors.²⁰ Thus, a model is not necessarily linguistic but does have a “resemblance, real or hypothetical, to some other object or state of affairs.”²¹ Soskice distinguishes between two kinds of models found in science. A *homeomorphic model* is one in which the subject of the model is also its source (e.g., model airplane, dummy used to teaching life-saving skills). A *paramorphic model* is one in which source

¹⁵Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, x.

¹⁶Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, x.

¹⁷Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, 145.

¹⁸Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, 107.

¹⁹Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, 98.

²⁰Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, 101-102.

²¹Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, 101.

and subject differ (e.g., billiard balls as model for properties of gases) and is the key to the use of metaphor in science:

Rather than demonstrating clear parallels, the paramorphic model suggests candidates for similarity and gives form to deliberation on unfamiliar subject matters, whether they be considerations of light as waves, or of linguistic competence as guided by innate structures, or of God's relation to man as that of a father. In science, social science, ethics, theology, indeed the whole realm of abstract theorizing, it is the paramorphic models which are used in attempts to speak about the "mysterious overplus."²²

Soskice argues that two alleged differences between models in science and religion are demonstrably false. The first is the view that models of science are explanatory and those of religion are affective.²³ This idea finds theoretical grounding in the New Hermeneutic and the writings of Robert W. Funk and John D. Crossan, who argue that the language of Bible is not reality depicting but reality shattering; there is only story, no "reality." But this dilemma is false. It is not that language is *either* explanatory and descriptive *or* affective and compelling but that it is both:

The model can only be affective because it is taken as explanatory. . . . The cognitive function is primary. By definition, all paramorphic models suggest an explanatory grid between model source and model subject.²⁴

The second alleged difference is that models of science are disposable (can be replaced or translated into math) whereas those of religion are not.²⁵ This idea, which arose from Logical Positivism, is now difficult to defend. Soskice explains:

A theory that can be formulated without a model, J. J. C. Smart argues, is a dead theory. It contains no more explanatory or predictive powers; it no longer suggests any possibilities, and its implications can be found by mathematics alone. . . . The same view is echoed by Harré. . . . The fertility of a theory lies in its ability to suggest possibilities of explanation which, while not inconsistent with, are more

²²Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, 103.

²³Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, 108.

²⁴Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, 109.

²⁵Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, 112.

than simply the logical extensions of mathematical formulas.²⁶

In sum, both scientific theorizing and religious discourse are heavily and necessarily dependent upon paramorphic models: “The model or analogue forms the living part of the theory, the cutting edge of its projective capacity and, hence, is indispensable for explanatory and predictive purposes. This strengthens comparison with religious models.”²⁷ In this connection, Soskice notes, all paramorphic models (religious and scientific) are qualified; they are models, not replicas, and cannot

be pushed too far without consequent absurdity; Christian presuppositions make it absurd to extend the model of God’s fatherhood so far as to say that he has a wife; scientific presuppositions make it absurd to push the billiard ball model for gas molecules so far as to suppose that gas molecules might be composed of plastic.²⁸

3. Metaphor, reference, and critical realism

To say that religious language uses the same kind of explanatory models as those found in science suggests that religious language is referential and that it actually depicts spiritual reality. Soskice believes this is true, and she argues for a critical realist approach to scientific and religious metaphorical models and analogies on the grounds that rival approaches are insufficient.

Naive realism, which argues that models provide a description of how things are in themselves, is untenable in both science and religion.²⁹ For instance, *logical positivism* was a retreat to the observables in a way that made all theoretical language parasitic and obscure. Models were considered to lack observational correlates, so that models and metaphors were reduced to heuristic aids. But positivists cannot provide an objective basis for science, because many scientific terms do not designate observable entities and events

²⁶Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, 113-114.

²⁷Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, 115.

²⁸Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, 116.

²⁹Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, 118-119.

(i.e., fields, sub-atomic particles, etc.).³⁰ At the opposite end of the spectrum, *idealism* sees models and metaphors as vital to science but maintains they are artificial constructions of the human mind, *not* descriptions of external reality, which again provides no objective basis for science.³¹

In contrast to these positions, *critical realism* views the models and metaphors of science as referring “to possibly real entities, relations, and states of affairs.”³² They are not simply instrumentalist fictions but are “*reality depicting*.” The critical realist agrees with positivist empiricism that science is explanatory, but disagrees that knowledge can only be of observed regularities and not of underlying structures.³³ The critical realist agrees with the idealist that science must involve creative models, but disagrees that these are only fictions:³⁴

The realist, then, is committed not to any one particular account of the world or even to the possibility that a perfect account could be provided, but to the intelligibility of what is essentially an ontological question, “What must the world be like for science to be possible?” The scientific realist’s argument is that the success of science means that its practitioners must assume not only that the world, its structures and relations exist independently of our theorizing but also that our theorizing provides us with access to these structures, limited and revisable as that access may be at any given time.³⁵

In clarifying this position, Soskice raises two important points: First, critical realism does not mean seeing certain theories as privileged accounts of the world as it is; rather certain metaphors and analogies afford epistemic access because they correspond to important features of the world. Second, critical realism has a social and a context-relative

³⁰Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, 119-120.

³¹Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, 121.

³²Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, 120.

³³Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, 121.

³⁴Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, 122.

³⁵Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, 122.

nature. Divisions and models are relative to the context of inquiry. For example, whales are not now classified as fish, but if reclassification was along the lines of locomotion, whales might still be considered fish and some other creature with non-fishy movements would be designated as non-fish. Nonetheless, “the world informs our theory, although our theory can never adequately describe the world.”³⁶

Soskice’s critical realism meets the three criteria for scientific realism outlined by Mary Hesse: (a) theoretical statements have truth value; (b) the natural world does not change as a consequence of scientific theory; (c) the realistic character of science depends on some capture of true propositions corresponding to the world.³⁷ Thus, metaphor (a) is reality depicting; (b) is central to science, not ancillary--its vagueness is crucial, because it is suggestive; and (c) depicts both entities *and* relations; this is what makes it so useful. Metaphor is not only permissible in theoretical explanation, but also is necessary, because it allows us to speak about states and relations that we only partially understand.

Further, metaphor is referential in two senses: (a) by the denotation of a term in the language; and (b) by the way that term is used within a community of speakers, for “it is not words which refer but speakers using words *who* refer.”³⁸ Words have meaning only in sentences spoken by speakers. Critical realism involves membership in a linguistic community. As Hilary Putman puts it, language does not mirror the world; speakers mirror the world by constructing a symbolic representation of that environment.³⁹

³⁶Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, 132.

³⁷Mary B. Hesse, *The Structure of Scientific Inference* (London: The MacMillan Press, 1974), 290; quoted in Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, 132.

³⁸Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, 135; emphasis hers.

³⁹Hilary Putman, “Realism and Reason,” in *Meaning and the Moral Sciences* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), 123; quoted in Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, 136.

4. Implications of critical realist analogy for theology

Soskice does not argue that because critical realism is coherent with regard to science, it must be coherent with regards to theology. Rather, it is just because the Christian tradition has been undeniably realist that it is important to defend a version of theological realism, especially in light of the anti-realist perspective of much modern philosophical theology.⁴⁰

What are the implications of this critical realist approach to metaphor and analogy in religious language? First, it means we can genuinely refer to God without claiming definitive knowledge: “The theist can reasonably take his talk of God, bound as it is within a wheel of images, as being reality depicting, while at the same time acknowledging its inadequacy as description. This, we believe, is the position a critical theological realist must take.”⁴¹

Second, it means we do not have to give into the religious skepticism of certain empiricists who insist that for cognition one must have strictly applicable definition, clarity, certainty, and significant description.⁴²

Third, as in the parallel case of science, this model of metaphor recognizes the importance of the religious community, which utilizes those metaphors, and of the interpretive tradition, which preserves them without succumbing to relativism.⁴³ Reference is established in part by the meaning of specific language or models but also in part by their use by speakers in a particular context.⁴⁴ Of course, the critical realist position allows that

⁴⁰Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, 137.

⁴¹Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, 141.

⁴²Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, 144.

⁴³Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, 150.

⁴⁴Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, 151.

metaphorical descriptions of spiritual experience or of God may be misguided. However, most theological metaphors are not chosen haphazardly, but develop over time in the community and become a texture of allusions that are almost emblematic.⁴⁵ As an example, Soskice points to the metaphorical language preserved and promoted in the traditional hymnody of the Christian community.

D. Aquinas and Soskice, Analogy and Eternity

The treatment of analogy in Aquinas and Soskice is important for understanding how analogy can be used to defend the doctrine of divine eternity because both authors appeal to the causal relationship between the Creator and the creation in order to establish the metaphorical and analogical connection between the two. Aquinas believes that the doctrine of creation suggests that the cause reveals *something* of itself in the effect. Soskice goes further. Analogy and metaphor are not simply grounded in the causal relationship between God and the creation; they are also knit into the fabric of the creation and the way we think and talk about matters about which we have only partial understanding. Thus metaphorical language in science is not only permitted, but essential. As these models are tested and confirmed by reality and experiment (this is *critical realism*, after all), they become more widely accepted and utilized by the scientific community until such time as they may be modified or superseded by a superior model or metaphor.

The parallel to the theological enterprise is exact. Metaphorical and analogical language or models enable us to think and talk about God about whom we have only partial, but, nonetheless, real knowledge. The accuracy and adequacy of this understanding can be tested and confirmed by appeal to both general and special revelation as well as the canons of reason (this is *faith seeking understanding*, after all). As these models or analogies are tested and confirmed in the church, they become more widely

⁴⁵Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, 158.

accepted and utilized by the theological community. This orthodox position remains dominant until such time as the traditional viewpoint may become modified or superseded by a superior metaphor.⁴⁶

Some might argue that analogical theology is less desirable than analytical because the former tends to be more relaxed and fuzzy while the latter strives for strict definition and precision. While Soskice does not address this question directly, I believe she would respond as follows: The fuzziness of analogy is not an argument against it but one in its favor. For the very fuzziness of metaphor and analogy produces the expansiveness and suggestiveness that moves the discussion forward in both theology and science. A statement that can be reduced to a mathematical formula is no longer productive. Analogies and metaphors are not identical with reality, for they reflect difference as well as similarity. Nonetheless they work because they actually do give us a glimpse of reality and say something true about it. That is why it is called critical *realism*.

Why then speak analogically? First, because we must. There is no escaping the use of analogy in language, whether we are speaking terrestrially or celestially. Analogy and metaphor are part of the fabric of language and cannot be avoided. Second, because analogy and metaphor enrich our language and understanding. Think of how empty and barren human language would be if Russell and the early Wittgenstein had succeeded in creating an ideal language of correspondence in the *Tractatus*, or if the followers of A. J. Ayer had succeeded in applying logical positivism to literature. Third, its suggestivity is productive for enabling us to conceptualize a richer and deeper understanding of our natural

⁴⁶The pattern here is reminiscent of the pattern identified in the history of science by Thomas Kuhn in his suggestive study on the making and modifying of scientific paradigms in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2d ed., enlarged (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1970). Kuhn's model of how progress is made in the history of science has been nuanced in subsequent studies in philosophy of science. (For a discussion of these developments see Del Ratzsch, *Philosophy of Science* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1986). Nonetheless a similar pattern is discernible in the development of theological understanding. For further discussion on this matter see Vern Poythress, *Science and Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing Co., 1988).

world as we engage in scientific investigations and gain a deeper and fuller appreciation of who God is as we engage in theological investigation of general and special revelation.

In this way, analogy is the handmaiden of fullness or plenitude. It is, therefore, unsurprising that the history of the doctrine of the divine attributes is replete with the use of analogical descriptions and models. The traditional exposition of the divine attributes invariably uses analogy to capture or articulate the plenitude or fullness of the divine life, whereas the analytical approach, in its quest for precision, sometimes leads to reductionism: Immutability reduces God to immobility; Simplicity reduces God to a property; Eternity limits God so that he cannot appreciate music, know what time it is, or is truncated as a person, despite the fact that he is the creator of all three (music, time, and personality).

Further, the analytic approach pressures the discussion of eternity away from analogy and toward univocity. One example of this is the perspective of William Lane Craig, who *defines* eternity and temporality as both incompatible and contradictories:

God is timeless if and only if He is not temporal. This definition makes it evident that temporality and timelessness are contradictories: An entity must exist one way or the other and cannot exist both ways at once.⁴⁷

However, this formulation makes bridging the gap between the eternal and the temporal a logical impossibility. It also drives Craig away from an analogical solution toward a univocal one in which the time experiences of God and humans are exactly parallel.

Analogy provides an alternative path. The analytic argument against eternity is that divine eternity is neither biblical or coherent. However, as we have seen, the doctrine of divine eternity reflects an attempt to make sense of the richness or plenitude of the divine being described in scripture. Analogy helps to capture the biblical themes of the plenitude of God without either reducing him to a being like us only bigger or making him wholly

⁴⁷William Lane Craig, *Time and Eternity: Exploring God's Relationship to Time* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2001), 15.

other. It preserves both the incomprehensibility and knowability of God.

Analogies for modeling divine eternity are both plentiful and productive, and serve the traditional doctrine in a number of important ways. First, such analogies offer a *prima facie* argument in favor of the coherence of the doctrine of divine eternity. Second, the many traditional analogies for divine eternity suggest how qualitatively different modes of existence can be related, whereas the view that God is everlasting insists that God and the creation exist in a single mode that differs only quantitatively. Thus, the traditional doctrine (and the analogies that portray it) preserve the fundamental Creator/creation distinction. Third, such analogies are important because they move us beyond the level of univocal thought concerning God to the other dimensionalities possessed by God without leading us into equivocation. Fourth, the use of analogies provides a way to conceptualize incommunicable attributes, like eternity, even though we cannot comprehend them. Of course, analogies only give us a partial picture or glimpse. But analogical reasoning provides a way to understand something truly without having to understand it exhaustively.

II. Modeling Eternity: An Examination of Analogies for Divine Eternity

A. Eternity and the Plenitude of the Divine Nature

Divine eternity is the attribute most frequently discussed in terms of specific analogies (partly, I believe, because analogy is useful for bridging the “two-worlds” problem, but also because analogy helps conceptualize the fullness of the divine life). Boethius’s definition of divine eternity reflects an attempt to capture the breadth, or plenitude of the divine nature as revealed in scripture in four ways: (a) God’s divine eternity transcends creational temporality and is not limited by it; (b) the eternal present is full and complete and embraces within its purview [and knowledge] the whole of temporal reality, past, present, and future; (c) God immutably endures, in contrast to the flux of

creation, yet his duration is without succession; and (d) God's eternity reflects engagement with the temporal creation in the exercise of his sovereignty and eternal purpose.

These four aspects of the divine fullness correspond roughly to four types of analogies. The categories are not mutually exclusive, so some analogies may be helpful in conceptualizing more than one of these four aspects of divine eternity.

In this section I will introduce each analogy primarily in the words of its principal proponent(s). I will then discuss significant criticisms and defend the analogy against those objections.⁴⁸ To remain useful, analogies must not be over-interpreted or read univocally. The goal is not to reduce analogy to allegory, but simply to identify significant points of comparison.

B. Analogies of the Eternal God's Transcendence over the Temporal Creation

Analogies that emphasize how God's eternity transcends creational temporality tend to reflect some kind of multi-dimensionality. First, there can be the spatial dimensionality as when three-dimensional (3-D) creatures like ourselves peer into the life of two-dimensional (2-D) beings in a lower dimensional world, as in Flatland; or when we find ourselves transcended by a four dimensional (4-D) level of existence of space-time, according to certain realistic interpretations of relativity theory. Indeed, relativity theory does not even begin to exhaust the possibilities of theoretical dimensionality in science. The current best candidate for a unified field theory of reality, known as string theory, posits eleven such spatial dimensionalities!⁴⁹

⁴⁸This will be a more spotty endeavor than might at first be imagined. Surprisingly, there is remarkably little discussion of the validity of these analogies within the analytical literature. I have culled out what I can in the course of my reading. Perhaps this discussion can serve as a corrective.

⁴⁹For a reasonably lucid account of a complex theory that only a half dozen people in the world fully understand, see the book written by one of those people, Brian Greene, *The Elegant Universe: Superstrings, Hidden Dimensions and the Quest for the Ultimate Theory* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999).

Second, there can also be categorical dimensionality in which two modes of existence coexist yet possess or inhabit a qualitatively different realm of reality. Millard Erickson uses the example of music and color. Both of them exist and even coexist, but it makes no sense to ask what color is middle C or what pitch is green because music and color possess different categorical dimensionalities.⁵⁰ This provides us another way to model God's immanence and transcendence.

These two types of dimensionality reflect a kind of "dimensional beyondness" that "enables us to think of transcendence and immanence together. God is in the same place we are yet he is not accessible to us in a simple way, for he is in a different dimension."⁵¹ Analogies examined under this heading are engaging and insightful, for multidimensional relationships are a part of our normal experience. Consequently, the ability to draw comparisons between earthly experience and theological issues like God's eternity provide a graphic defense of the coherence of such notions that cannot be easily dismissed. They offer a vivid way of seeing what was before obscure or revealing what was once hidden.

1. Flatland and similar geometric analogies (Abbott, Schwarz)

Geometric analogies emphasize the transcendence of a higher dimension and clarify the difficulties in conceptualizing multi-dimensionality, particularly on the part of one who inhabits the lower dimension. In his forward to the HarperCollins edition of Edwin Abbott's *Flatland*, Isaac Asimov comments that not only are the inhabitants of Flatland "incapable of understanding the limitations of their view but are enraged by any attempt to enforce them to transcend those limitations."⁵²

In a similar fashion, the difficulty of moving from one dimensionality to another

⁵⁰Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 342.

⁵¹Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 342.

⁵²Isaac Asimov, foreword to Abbott, *Flatland*, vii.

has been creatively exploited by Clifford Pickover, who uses it to develop a marvelously complex, stunningly illustrated, and immensely entertaining science fiction mystery regarding creatures from the fourth dimension. Pickover concludes:

The definitive discovery of 4-D beings would drastically alter our worldview and change our society as profoundly as the Copernican, Darwinian, and Einsteinian revolutions. . . . Just imagine the rewards of learning a 4-D being's language, music, art, mythology, philosophy, biology, even politics.⁵³

A more prosaic, but no less geometrical, version is given by Hans Schwarz, who provides a diagram of a two-dimensional plane being intersected by a three-dimensional cube. From this relationship Schwarz draws theological inferences concerning God's immanence and transcendence:

If we now assume that God is related to us in a dimensional way, being present in a way in which he is dimensionally higher than we are, God would embrace all our available possibilities in space and time plus possibilities which are not available to us in our present dimension. Thus both elements, God's presence in our space-time continuum and God's superiority to it could be maintained. But it would be futile for us, being confined to our space-time continuum, to look in it for traces of divine transcendence. Everything we perceive in our world is perceived as being exclusively a part of this world. The higher dimension is in principle inaccessible to us. It can be disclosed to us only by someone from that dimension telling or showing us that what we perceive as belonging exclusively to our dimension [sic] is at the same time part of another and totally different dimension.⁵⁴

This geometric analogy is simple, but helpful in several ways. First, it reflects a concept of transcendence that is easily understood from common experience and is totally coherent. Second, it conceptualizes how two dimensions (such as time and eternity) could intersect, how the one could engage the other without becoming reduced to the same. For example a 3-D cube intersecting a 2-D plane could be immanent to the whole of the 2-D plane *without becoming a plane* and while still *remaining more than a plane*. By analogy, it is possible to conceive how God, who is eternal, could be immanent or present to the

⁵³Clifford A. Pickover, *Surfing Through Hyperspace: Understanding Higher Universes in Six Easy Lessons* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 164-165.

⁵⁴Hans Schwarz, "God's Place in a Space Age," *Zygon* 21 (1986): 365-366.

temporal realm without himself becoming temporal. It also pictures the plenitude of the divine nature as embracing all that is contained in the temporal realm without being reduced to it and remaining, in its existence, qualitatively greater than the temporal.

It might be objected that this kind of analogy is unacceptable because it “spatializes” time. Even if that is a genuine objection (and I am not convinced that it is--there seems to be a number of important parallels between time and space), it is not necessarily true. What this analogy does do is “dimensionalize” time and eternity. But as we have already explained, overlapping dimensionality need not be spatial; it can also be categorical. In either case, the analogy of intersecting dimensionalities in which one transcends and even intersects the other without becoming identical remains both coherent and intact.

2. Line on paper (C. S. Lewis)

A similar multidimensional geometric analogy is provided by C. S. Lewis, only in this case the analogy is made between a one dimensional line and a two dimensional plane (or between “Lineland” and “Planeland” in Flatland terminology). Lewis invites us to consider the relationship between eternity and time as parallel to a sheet of paper (representing eternity) upon which a line (representing time) is drawn. Along that line are three points designated as A, B, and C. Lewis explains the analogy:

If you picture Time as a straight line along which we have to travel, then you must picture God as the whole page on which the line is drawn. We comes to the parts of the line one by one: we have to leave A behind before we get to B, and cannot reach C until we leave B behind. God, from above or outside or all around, contains the whole line and sees it all.⁵⁵

As Lewis’s last sentence suggests, in this analogy the mode of God’s existence transcends the whole of the line representing the mode of temporal existence. He might be viewed as “above it,” or “outside it,” or “all around it” or even as “containing it,” but it is clear that he is not limited by it in any way. This analogy therefore preserves God’s

⁵⁵ C. S. Lewis, “Time and Beyond Time,” in *Mere Christianity* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1952), 132-135; the citation is taken from page 134.

transcendence and with it the Creator/creature distinction. At the same time, it preserves divine immanence in that he is “present” to the whole line (all of time). However, the mode of God’s existence does not become linear. He does not cease to be a plane or become a line by being in contact with it. Thus, in engaging the temporal realm, he is not temporalized. Instead the fullness of the divine life is fully preserved.

3. Observer on a high hill (Boethius, Aquinas)

The comparison of the view from eternity to that of a person on a high hill overlooking the landscape or road below is first suggested by Boethius in his discussion of how God, in the eternal present, can possess knowledge of the actions of human being without affecting their free character:

If you wish to consider, then, the foreknowledge or prevision by which He discovers all things, it will be more correct to think of it not as a kind of foreknowledge of the future, but as the knowledge of a never ending presence. So that it is better called providence or “looking forth” than prevision or “seeing beforehand”. For it is far removed from matters below and looks forth at all things as though from a lofty peak above them. . . . [T]he divine gaze looks down on all things without disturbing their nature.⁵⁶

Thomas Aquinas concurs:

Things reduced to act in time, as known by us successively in time, but by God (are known) in eternity, which is above time. . . . Just as he who goes along the road, does not see those who come after him; whereas he who sees the whole road from a height, sees at once all traveling by the way.⁵⁷

Although it is not as obvious as in the earlier examples, this is also a dimensional analogy designed to showcase the transcendence of God’s eternal vantage point. Boethius offers it to show how God can have knowledge of temporal events which do not affect their free character because his vantage point is always in the present--the eternal present. Just as our witnessing an event in the present places no necessity upon those events, so

⁵⁶Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, Bk. 5, Prose vi, lines 68-69, 71-72 (Penguin Classics edition, pp. 165-166).

⁵⁷Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1.14.13.reply obj. 3 (Christian Classics edition, vol. 1, p. 83).

also, by analogy, God's witnessing of events in the eternal present does not place any necessity upon them or deprive them of their free character. From the theological perspective of this thesis, this is a creative, but ultimately unsuccessful, attempt to preserve human freedom because it sidesteps the biblical teaching, previously discussed, that God knows what is going to happen, not simply because he is witness to them, but also because he is going to bring those events about in accordance with his purpose contained in the divine decree. However, the analogy of God's perspective being like an observer on a high hill remains a useful picture of God's relationship to the temporal realm as being "from above" and embracing the whole of the temporal realm past, present, and future "all at once" in a non-temporal sense of at-once-ness (i.e., as a whole) in the fullness of the divine life.

As previously mentioned, Katherin Rogers, in her assertion that the "high point" or "height" spoken of here witnesses to the "point-like" and non-durational character of the eternal present, over-interprets the details of the analogy. So also do those who criticize this analogy and others like it (e.g., Stump and Kretzmann's world of Aleph) as not successful, since both the observers and the observed are in time.

If we do not get bogged down in the details, the point of the analogy is clear and effective in showing that the perspective of an eternal vantage point would not be limited to the temporal present but would embrace the whole of the temporal order of things, past, present and future.

4. The land of Aleph (Stump and Kretzmann)

A more sophisticated version of the "on the road" analogy is provided by Stump and Kretzmann in their imaged world of "Aleph." It combines the geometric multi-dimensionality of the first two analogies with the "privileged perspective" of the high observer in Boethius and Aquinas's road analogy. Further (and the rarity of this should not be taken for granted in theological writing), it is also entertaining!

Consider a finite one-dimensional world, Aleph, inhabited by inch-long intelligent beings arrayed sequentially and contiguously in the line-segment that comprises their world. Any of these Alephians may have many others in front of or behind him, but only one other inhabitant can be immediately in front of or behind him. Because Aleph is one-dimensional, no Alephian can share its place with another. Alephians recognize an absolute *here*, their designation for the location of whichever single Alephian happens to have the mid-point of the line segment within his own length. Alephians come into existence at the A1 end of the line, move slowly and steadily toward here, where they reach the height of their mental powers, and pass on into deterioration, culminating in their termination at the A2 end. They designate places between A1 and here *the hither*, places between here and A2 *the hence*. Alephians thus have spatial analogues for the A- and B-series in time, but with this difference, that in Aleph the spatial relationship corresponding to simultaneity--being-at-the-same-place-as or, in particular, being-here-with--is reflexive only.⁵⁸

Having set up this imaginary world, Stump and Kretzmann then proceed to give an account of an interesting conversation between a human, Monica, who has the whole world of Aleph in her field of vision, and one of the inhabitants of Aleph, Nabal, with whom she is able to communicate. When Nabal asks Monica whom she is behind, she replies “no one.” Nabal interprets this as meaning she is about to be terminated and expresses his condolences. Monica tries to correct this misunderstanding by telling Nabal that all the inhabitants of Aleph are in front of her. This perplexes Nabal who views it as a contradiction that she is behind no one and yet everyone is in front of her. The confusion increases as Monica tries to explain that she is “not in line,” that she is “outside his world,” and that all the inhabitants of Aleph are “here” to her. Nabal will have none of this and insists that it is fundamentally incoherent to think all the inhabitants of Aleph could be together in some extended here.⁵⁹

Such a story, says Stump and Kretzmann, is useful not only for showing how to address the language difficulties that arise when discussing eternity, but also for clarifying the relationship between eternity and time. This leads them back to their initial concept of

⁵⁸Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann, “Eternity, Awareness, and Action,” *Faith and Philosophy* 9 (1992): 471.

⁵⁹Stump and Kretzmann, “Eternity, Awareness, and Action,” 471-72.

ET-simultaneity and to repeat the two line illustration previously published in their earlier reply to Fitzgerald. They recap:

An eternal entity's mode of existence is such that its whole life is ET-simultaneous with each and every temporal entity or event. Any particular temporal event, such as the opening of the Berlin Wall or the end of apartheid in South Africa is, as it is occurring, ET-simultaneous with the eternal present. But, relative to us, given our location on the temporal continuum in early 1993, the first of those events is past, and the second is future.⁶⁰

As noted earlier, Stump and Kretzmann's concept of ET-simultaneity has generated considerable debate within the analytical literature, and I will not re-rehearse those issues here. But William Hasker's criticism is useful for showcasing the contrast between analytical and analogical methods spoken of throughout this thesis:

There is one disanalogy that effectively disqualifies the story from providing any sort of insight into the relationship between eternity and time. *Monica in the story fully shares in the single dimension that measures Nabal's existence.* The single linear dimension of the world of Aleph is only one of the three dimensions to her world, to be sure, but it *is* a dimension of her world, and there is nothing in the story that even suggests any sort of problem concerning her access to Nabal's linear spatiality. But on the doctrine of timelessness, *God does not share in the temporal dimension of the created world*--to suppose that he does is to breach Anselm's barrier. It is of course, precisely this that creates the problem, and there is nothing analogous to it in the story of Nabal and Monica. The question of how it is possible for an eternal God to be directly aware of temporal realities remains without an answer.⁶¹

Hasker's analytical approach leads him to over-interpret the details of the analogy when he objects that Monica shares at least one dimension of the world of Aleph with Nabal, whereas according to the analytical notion of divine timelessness God does not share in the temporal dimension of the created world.

In response, two things can be said. First, as the dimensional analogies of the cube intersecting the plane (Schwarz) and the line placed on the paper (Lewis) indicate, for

⁶⁰Stump and Kretzmann, "Eternity, Awareness, and Action," 475.

⁶¹William Hasker, "The Absence of a Timeless God," in *God and Time: Essays on the Divine Nature*, ed. Gregory E. Ganssle and David M. Woodruff (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 189; emphasis his.

something in one dimension to intersect another does not cause it to *become* the other dimension or to cease to be what it is. When the cube intersects the plane, the cube does not become a plane, even though its mode of existence embraces that of the plane. It continues to be a cube. That Monica as a 3-D person can have a point of contact with a 1-D being does not reduce her to a single dimension or cause her to become less than 3-D.

Second, the Anselmian barrier that Hasker speaks of is not so much a product of Anselm as it is of the analytical discussion that *defines* temporality as incompatible with eternity. We are back to the issue raised in conjunction with Craig earlier in this chapter. According to the geometric analogies, it is possible for a being at a higher dimensional level to embrace and understand what is taking place at a lower level. The difficulty is in the *vice versa*. We cannot ascribe time to God any more than a plane could ascribe planeness to a cube, a line could ascribe linearity to a page of paper, or Nabal could ascribe the world of Aleph to Monica.

Contrary to Hasker's assertion, this analogy does provide insight into the relationship between eternity and time, because an observer in a higher dimensionality is able to grasp the full picture of the lower dimensionality, while an observer from a lower dimensional struggles to gain even a faint understanding of what it would mean to look at things from a higher dimensionality. That is precisely Stump and Kretzmann's point about the problem of language when we try to discuss the issue of divine eternity, and the analogy makes the point quite vividly.

5. Mind and body (Chaos Theory: Bottoms up organization)

Another dimensional analogy is that observed in the relationship between the mind and body or the mental and the physical, where the mind transcends the body while still being a part of it. It should be noted that the mind/body analogy of the relationship between God and the world is problematic because the analogy itself and the language of the world as God's body has been utilized by certain theologians of process to describe the

pantheistic or panentheistic perspective that they advocate. Such views are unacceptable to the historic Christian tradition, which insists on a strong Creator/creature distinction.

However, I believe it is possible to preserve the mind/body relationship as an analogy of the relationship between time and eternity by using it as a model of two levels of dimensionality that intersect but where neither is reducible to the other.

In support of this view, I would appeal to developments in chaos or complexity theory regarding what is known as “bottom-up” organization. According to complexity theory, it is possible in complex dynamic aggregate systems obeying simple rules for a higher level of complexity or behavior to emerge. For example, computerized simulations of virtual birds (or “boids”) or virtual ants (or “vants”) are programmed to respond to a handful of simple rules. When placed together in a group with other virtual entities and permitted to apply those rules individually at will, the boids or vants exhibit complex flocking or foraging behavior, which was not planned as part of the original program. A more complex activity or function has emerged from the “bottom up,” which might appear to an outside observer to be guided by some higher level of control or consciousness but, in fact, is simply the product of an aggregate dynamic system obeying simple rules.⁶²

It is theorized by advocates of complexity theory that something similar to this occurs at the level of human or animal consciousness. The brain is an exceedingly large aggregate system of neurons obeying fairly simple rules (after so much stimulus the neuron “fires” its own output into the network of other neurons). In simple organisms with primitive nervous systems, a number of complex learned behaviors may arise. In higher organisms, the process may account for the presence of consciousness. The theoretical

⁶²For an account of these kinds of experiments, see the descriptions of Christopher Langton’s work on “vants” and Craig Reynold’s work on “boids” as described in Stephen Levy, *Artificial Life: The Quest for a New Creation* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1992), and in Mitchell M. Waldrop, *Complexity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992). See also my Th.M. thesis, “Chaos and Christian Theism” (CTS, 1995).

mechanism is indeed sketchy, and the model for how this occurs at the level of human brain activity is still largely a “black-box” model.

However, let us assume for a moment that bottom-up perspective is more or less correct. If so, it provides an analogy of multidimensionality that may be useful for modeling the relationship between time and eternity. It is clear that the firing of neurons is of an entirely different dimensional level than that of human consciousness. The human mind transcends the limitations of the physical just as eternity transcends the limitations of the temporal. The mind comprehends the physical world, whereas the physical world (or even the biological world at the level of neurons) is completely unable to comprehend the mental realm. The difference between these two levels exhibits categorical dimensionality and reflects a difference of kind and not of degree. It is this categorical dimensionality that enables it to be used as an analogy of the relationship between eternity and temporality.

Because of the underlying monism connected with this illustration, and, in particular, the materialist way I have described in it in terms of bottoms up organization, it might be considered inappropriate as an analogy. But that would be true only if we were to press the details of the analogy too tightly, as I have continuously cautioned against.

6. Assessment

In this section we have been discussing analogies that reflect transcendence in terms of a higher, more complex dimensionality, which can understand and engage the lower dimension without surrendering its higher dimensionality in the process, and where the lower dimension cannot comprehend the higher one. Such a concept mirrors the way the tradition understands the relationship between eternity and temporality and emphasizes the Creator/creature distinction.

Clearly these analogies do not substantiate the truth of the divine eternity doctrine. For such evidence, we must appeal to the testimony of scripture and the way this doctrine integrates with what we know of the revealed attributes of God (as discussed in chapter 6).

However, the multiple examples do witness to the coherence of such an understanding of divine eternity as one aspect of the divine transcendence.

C. Analogies of the Fullness of the Life of an Eternal God and the Eternal Present as Embracing the Past, Present, and Future of Temporal Creation

1. Centerpoint and circumference (Boethius, Aquinas, and others)

As noted in the earlier discussion of Katherin Rogers's article in chapter 5, the geometric analogy of the circle has a long pedigree in the history of Western and Christian thought but needs to be interpreted with care so as not to over-interpret it. Aquinas provides an extensive description of the analogy and its relationship to time and eternity:

Since the being of what is eternal does not pass away, eternity is present in its presentiality to any time or instant of time. We may see an example of sorts in the case of a circle. Let us consider a determined point on the circumference of a circle. Although it is indivisible, it does not co-exist simultaneously with any other point as to position, since it is the order of position that produces the continuity of the circumference. On the other hand, the center of the circle, which is no part of the circumference, is directly opposed to any given determinate point on the circumference. Hence, whatever is found in any part of time co-exists with what is eternal as being present to it, although with respect to some other time it be past or future. Something can be present to what is eternal only by being present to the whole of it, since the eternal does not have the duration of succession. The divine intellect therefore, sees in the whole of its eternity, as being present to it, whatever takes place through the whole course of time. And yet what takes place in a certain part of time was not always existent. It remains, therefore, that God has a knowledge of those things that according to the march of time do not yet exist.⁶³

Rogers emphasizes the point-like nature of the centerpoint and understands the concept of eternity represented here as one that is punctilinear, or "instantaneous," rather than as duration without succession. However, Rogers over-interprets the details of the metaphor. It neither speaks for or against eternal duration. Its primary concern is to model how God, in the plenitude of the eternal present, can stand in the same relationship to all successive points of time--past, present, and future--and so be immanent to his creation

⁶³Thomas Aquinas, *SCG* 1.66.7. Translation taken from *On the Truth of the Catholic Faith: Summa contra Gentiles, Book One: God*, trans. Anton C. Pegis (New York: Image Books, 1955): 218-219.

without himself experiencing succession.

2. Two parallel lines (Stump and Kretzmann)

Another geometrical analogy, provided by Stump and Kretzmann, compares time and eternity to two infinite extended parallel lines. The upper one, representing eternity, is entirely and uniformly a strip of light (which represents the present). The lower one, representing time, is dark everywhere except for a dot of light moving steadily along it:

For any instant of time as that instant is present, the whole of eternity is present at once; the infinitely enduring, indivisible eternal present is simultaneous with each temporal instant as it is the present instant.⁶⁴

On this view, “atemporal duration is the genuine, paradigmatic duration of which temporal duration is only the moving image.” God’s genuine duration is “the complete possession all at once of an illimitable life”⁶⁵ and according to Boethius it consists of four ingredients: life, illimitability, duration, and timelessness.⁶⁶

It is the combination of these four elements that leads to certain difficulties in relating temporal and atemporal duration, for time and eternity are two separate modes of existence. However, the need to use familiar terms in unfamiliar ways is unavoidable and predicating the same attributes to God and man does not require doing so univocally.⁶⁷ Critics of eternal duration argue that “extended eternality essentially involves a plurality and thus must be divisible,”⁶⁸ but there is no necessity to this assertion unless we posit univocity. At the same time, the denial of divisibility to atemporal duration does not mean that duration must be predicated equivocally of God and creatures. Human experiences are

⁶⁴Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann, “Atemporal Duration: A Reply to Fitzgerald,” *Journal of Philosophy* 84 (1987): 219.

⁶⁵Stump and Kretzmann, “A Reply to Fitzgerald,” 219.

⁶⁶Stump and Kretzmann, “Eternity, Awareness, and Action,” 464.

⁶⁷Stump and Kretzmann, “Eternity, Awareness, and Action,” 467.

⁶⁸Stump and Kretzmann, “Eternity, Awareness, and Action,” 467.

often indivisible as well (as in the case of a mother who hears her son yell as he falls off his skateboard) leading to the concept of the “specious present,” which is both extended and conceptually indivisible.⁶⁹ Be that as it may, there is always another linguistic path, the path of analogical predication, which brings us back to the parallel line analogy. Rogers argues that the analogy of the parallel lines runs counter to the centerpoint and circumference analogy because it “expresses a view of eternity in which only a single point in the divine duration can be perfectly present at any given point in time.”⁷⁰ However, here Rogers is mistaken, because every point on the temporal timeline stands in exactly the same relationship to the eternal present. This can be demonstrated by combining the geometries of the two analogies. Imagine a cylindrical spiral CG whose points are exactly equidistant from a line AB running through the center of the spiral. Along the length of the spiral mark three points, D, E, and F.

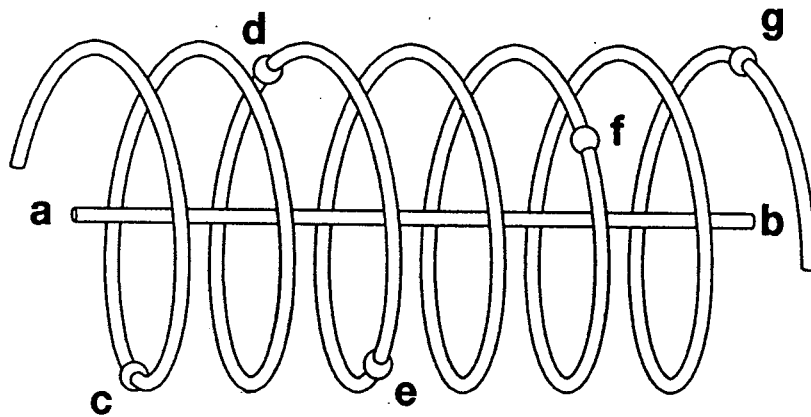


Figure 1.

In Figure 1, the spiral CG represents the temporal timeline, and the line AB through the spiral represents the eternal present. Imagine that the line AB is entirely illuminated and that on the spiral CG there is an illuminated dot that moves along the spiral representing the

⁶⁹Stump and Kretzmann, “Eternity, Awareness, and Action,” 468.

⁷⁰Katherin Rogers, “Eternity has no Duration,” *Religious Studies* 30 (1994): 9.

temporal present. This model is equivalent to that of Stump and Kretzmann, although it is 3-D instead of 2-D. The points on the spiral remain parallel or equidistant from the centerline. However, it is also equivalent to the centerpoint and circumference model, for if a person sights down line AB, *the view becomes the same as the latter model.*

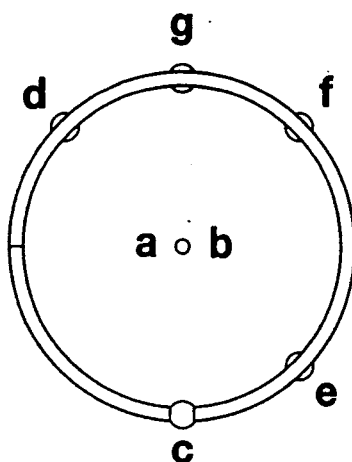


Figure 2.

Rogers insistence on the centerpoint-circumference model of Aquinas over against the two-line model of Stump and Kretzmann is unsuccessful, for the two analogies are making exactly the same point, using two different geometric models.

3. Line on paper (C. S. Lewis) (Repeat)

This remarkably rich analogy by C.S. Lewis manages to model a number of important aspects of divine eternity and so earns a place within three of the four categories of analogies. As we saw earlier, this analogy, by providing a dimensionality for God above that of the temporal realm, preserves the transcendence of God and the Creator/creature distinction. At the same time, this analogy preserves divine immanence in that God is represented as “present” to every moment on the temporal time line. Thus, the analogy reflects the way that God’s eternal present embraces the whole of temporal realm.

4. Observer on high hill and Aleph (Aquinas, Stump and Kretzmann) (Repeat)

In addition to modeling divine transcendence, Aquinas’s application of the high hill

analogy is also designed to illustrate how God's eternal present captures the whole of temporal reality, past, present, and future and so reveals the plenitude of the divine omniscience and of the eternal present. Those of us on the road (in the temporal sphere) cannot see what or who follows after (the future), but God, from the "height" of the eternal vantage point, knows what is on the road (the present) and what will follow after (the future) as a whole. Although Aquinas does not specifically do so, it would also be possible to add what has gone before (the past) to this list. The Stump and Kretzmann analogy of Aleph covers much the same ground. Monica, from her perspective "above" Aleph is able to have a complete picture of the *hither*, the *here*, and the *hence*, corresponding to the past, present, and future.

5. Time and space (Anselm)

As mentioned previously in the discussion of Katherin Rogers, Anselm offers a unique analogy as to how an eternal being might be present to all of time: "Just as the present time contains all place and whatever exists in any place: in the same way all time and what exists in any time is enclosed in the eternal present."⁷¹

In other words, just as the temporal present includes all places, the eternal present might (analogously) include all time. This is a clever analogy based upon categorical dimensionality, which nicely models how an eternal being might be able to embrace within his consciousness the whole of temporal reality. But it does something additional. It also captures a sense of fullness, depth, or duration in the concept of the eternal present.

With this last point, Rogers would disagree, because she argues that the point of comparison between the temporal and the eternal is that of the *instantaneous* present:

The present moment is the best analogy for eternity because in it we limited, temporal knowers experience something which, like eternity, is not extended in time. The closest we are likely to come, in this life at least, to understanding God's

⁷¹*De concordia praescientiae et praedestinationis et gratiae dei cum libero arbitrio*. 1.5; quoted in Rogers, "Eternity has no Duration," 15.

eternal mode of being is to view it in the mirror of our own present existence.⁷²

However, this analogy seems better suited as a model of eternity as successionless *duration*, for it speaks eloquently of the fullness, depth, and extent of the divine knowledge. Like the temporal present, the eternal present exists, but unlike the temporal present, it does not exist in an instantaneous point but in the eternal present, which reflects both the steadfast endurance and unlimited plenitude of the divine life.

6. Memory (Augustine) and the “splendid historian” (Rogers)

In trying to conceptualize the fullness of the divine present, Augustine suggests that God’s knowledge of the temporal future, and indeed of all time--past, present, and future--is analogous to our knowledge of the past taken from memory. By means of memory we can draw together the various elements of an extended time into a single thought.⁷³ Thus a single thought about the Battle of Gettysburg carries along with it a whole host of additional elements such as the battles of Big Round Top, Little Round Top, and Pickett’s Charge. In a similar way, God’s knowledge of past, present, and future in the temporal realm can be drawn together in an indivisible but comprehensive thought.

Rogers seeks to purify this analogy of residual temporal elements by postulating the existence of a hypothetical “splendid historian” who has complete and perfectly clear and extensive knowledge of all past events and embraces it all simultaneously in a single thought. While not a perfect analogy, she believes it illustrates “how a sequence of temporal events might be grasped all at once in a single, instantaneous thought, even by a temporal knower.”⁷⁴

I agree with Rogers, and both of these analogies are useful for conceptualizing how

⁷²Rogers, “Eternity has no duration,” 15-16.

⁷³Augustine, *De libera arbitrio*, 3.4.11; quoted in Rogers, “Eternity has no duration,” 15.

⁷⁴ Rogers, “Eternity has no duration,” 15.

God might contain within himself the knowledge and purview of the whole of the temporal realm in the eternal present.

7. Music (Augustine)

Another analogy related to memory is that of music. In his *Confessions*, Augustine draws the following parallel between music and eternity:

Certainly if there were a mind endowed with such great knowledge and prescience that all things past and future could be known in the way I know a very familiar psalm, this mind would be utterly miraculous and amazing to the point of inducing awe. From such a mind nothing of the past would be hidden, nor anything of what remaining ages have in store, just as I have full knowledge of that psalm I sing. I know by heart what and how much of it has passed since the beginning and what and how much remains until the end. But far be it from you, Creator of the universe, creator of souls and bodies, far be it from you to know all future and past events in this kind of sense. You know them in a much more wonderful and much more mysterious way. A person singing or listening to a song he knows well suffers a distension or stretching in feeling and in sense perception from the expectation of future sounds and the memory of past sound. With you it is otherwise. You are unchangeably eternal, that is the truly eternal Creator of minds. Just as you knew heaven and earth in the beginning without that bringing any variation in your knowing, so you made heaven and earth in the beginning without that meaning a tension between past and future in your activity.⁷⁵

In this passage, Augustine draws an analogy between the temporal example of remembering a familiar psalm to God's ability to know the past, present, and future. Just as a singer has full knowledge of the song he sings, so God has full and complete knowledge of the temporal realm. The only problem with the analogy, Augustine points out, is that it is not strong enough. A person singing a song experiences a certain tension as he or she seeks to remember and anticipate the appropriate words at the proper place in the song. With God there is no such struggle. He knows and that is all.

I am not aware of a specific objection to Augustine's analogy. However, I am aware of an objection that an eternal God would not be able to do what the analogy suggests, namely to know music. Because music is a temporal enterprise, for God to

⁷⁵Augustine *Confessions*, 11.31.41 (trans. Henry Chadwick in *Saint Augustine Confessions* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991], 245).

appreciate it would require him to be temporal. To answer that objection, a few preliminary thoughts are in order.

The idea that an eternal God could create time and not know and understand time and how it functions seems unlikely at best, for part of God's complete knowledge is the knowledge of the temporal world he has made. Some have argued that an eternal God could not listen to, appreciate, or create music. But if that were true, he could also not speak (since both are linear activities)--which of course he does. Does his ability to do so mean he must be temporal?

Time is an aspect of God's creative genius, as is music and language and the revolution of planets or the rotation of the earth. To say that God cannot know what he has made without experiencing it seems strange. Knowledge provides its own form of experience. Although God knows the world as he knows himself, these aspects of God's life and experience are dimensions of his thinking, not limitations of his being.

Further, not everything that God knows (or even does) places a metaphysical necessity upon him. God knows that he will create the world in a certain way (out of a host of possible worlds that he might have created). The fact that he chooses to create a certain world may put restrictions on that world but not on God.

Which brings us back to our original issue. Can an eternal God hum a tune? This is an interesting question but to answer it, perhaps we should choose a different starting point. Can God know a tune without humming it? To answer that question, perhaps we should put the same question before ourselves. Can we know a tune without humming it? If you ask, "Do you know the tune *Row Row Row your Boat?*", can I say yes, without humming it? I believe I can, and here Augustine's reflections are of some help. Knowing a tune is to know that there is a certain progression of notes in accordance with a certain cadence. Can God know that? There is no reason to believe that he cannot, because we also know a tune in a kind of atemporal sense. For a temporal being, to hum a tune is

simply to hum a number of pitches in accordance with a certain cadence. But we cannot hum a *tune*; we simply hum a number of notes in the present, which form a pattern in accordance with our memory. What makes it a tune is our knowledge of the melody and our ability to anticipate and act on what we know. To put it another way, music is a written form of block time, which becomes graphically clear when we look at piece of sheet music.

Can an eternal God, therefore, enjoy music? There is no reason to believe that he cannot, because he knows what it is and how it functions.

Is it not appropriate to say of a conductor that he has all of Beethoven's symphonies in his head? Would we not think it odd if someone said of a conductor that he could only know, appreciate, and enjoy, the symphonies that he is conducting or listening to at any given time? If that is true, why is not equally true that God can also know and enjoy Beethoven's symphonies? But, you say, he cannot really experience the succession of them. But is the conductor who has the symphonies in his head experiencing the succession of them at any given moment? I think not. But could he not know them and take pleasure in them with without having to experience them temporally?

But, someone might object, the conductor can remember the succession. But then you are saying that the real pleasure of music comes in the remembering of music, in the knowledge of music. But cannot God possess such knowledge? Certainly, because he is the one who enables us to do so.

Is the experience of temporality necessary to the knowledge that gives temporality meaning? What makes life rich is the totality of our experience, our knowledge, our skills, only a few of which can be exercised at any given moment. If we were to possess all of those things as a whole and be able to exert our will, as an eternal God can, would this not be better than having to gain all that knowledge and skill piecemeal? Some might argue that there is a joy in learning and that God is denied that joy. That may be true. But is it not also the case that for us there is a joy in learning because learning is the only way we can

acquire knowledge? Since that is all there is for us, it really cannot get better for us than that. But that does not mean there might not be a better mode of life for some other being, say one who was not subject to time and was omniscient.

In the movie *Matrix*, the phenomenal world is portrayed as a complex computer program that comprises the sentient experience of all human beings on life, while, in fact, they are each of them captive, asleep in pods and being cultivated for the energy they produce. Since the world within the matrix is a program, it is possible to gain knowledge instantly through programming. For example, Neo learns complex martial arts and Trinity learns to fly a Huey helicopter simply by having someone else provide a download.

Now, the governing assumptions of that science fiction film limit its value for drawing theological conclusions. But it is still interesting to speculate on the nature of knowledge. If I could have simply downloaded all the knowledge needed to pass my comprehensive exams or to research this thesis, would that not have been preferable to the normal human temporal mode of education? But if it were downloaded, would it not be real knowledge, even if I did not take the exams or complete this thesis?

Can, therefore, an eternal God have knowledge of music and take pleasure in it? Yes, just as he has complete possession, all at once, of everything which is contained in the temporal realm he has created.

8. Assessment

In this section we have surveyed a number of analogies which picture the extended fullness and completeness of the divine life and the way in which God's knowledge can be understood as embracing the whole of temporal reality, past, present and future. Again, these analogies do not prove that the view that God is eternal yet immanent to his creation is true. But they do render such a perspective coherent.

D. Analogies of how God Possesses Immutable Duration without Succession

We come now to consider a difficult concept concerning eternity, that God's eternity involves *duration* (in a non-temporal sense) *without succession*. We have already made some progress. In the previous section, we discussed how divine eternity describes the unlimited fullness or extent of the divine life. In this section we add the additional element that God *endures* (he remains the same) *without succession of moments*.

1. River and ocean; River and rock (Charnock)

Under this heading we consider two related analogies of Stephen Charnock mentioned earlier in chapter 6. The first is that of the rivers flowing into the ocean. According to Charnock, God "is of an eternal duration," which he views as especially important since God's duration is more frequently mentioned in scripture than his eternity.⁷⁶ But the duration exhibited by God differs from the duration that occurs within the temporal realm:

Eternity is a perpetual duration, which hath neither beginning nor end; time hath both. Those things we say are in time that have beginning, grow up by degrees, have succession of parts; eternity is contrary to time, and is therefore a permanent and immutable state; a perfect possession of life without any variation; it comprehends in itself all years, all ages, all periods of ages; it never begins; it endures after every duration of time and never ceaseth. . . . Eternity and time differ as the sea and rivers; the sea never changes place, and is always one water; but the rivers glide along, and are swallowed up by the sea; so is time by eternity.⁷⁷

In this illustration, Charnock is contrasting the immutable duration of eternity with the flux of the temporal creation. The temporal realm experiences growth, change, and succession of parts. Eternity does not, but exhibits a completeness that never changes but always endures, in contrast to temporal flux. The rivers move, but the sea never changes

⁷⁶Stephen Charnock, "Discourse V: On the Eternity of God," in *The Existence and Attributes of God*, 2 vols. (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1853; reprint Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979) 1:279 (page citations are to the reprint edition).

⁷⁷Charnock, "On the Eternity of God," 1:279-280.

place even though it is present to the rivers: so also time to eternity.

In a similar analogy, Charnock appeals to the metaphor of a rock or tree by the side of the river. In this instance, the rock or tree stands unchanged and unmoved while the river flows past it:

The flux is in the river, but the tree acquires nothing but a diverse respect and relation of presence to the various parts of the rivers as they flow. The waters of the river press on, and push forward one another, and what the river had this minute, it hath not the same the next. So are all sublunary things in a continual flux. . . . [B]ut in God there is no change; he always remains the same. . . . All other things pass from one state to another; from their original, to their eclipse and destruction; but God possesses his being in one indivisible point, having neither beginning, end, nor middle.⁷⁸

While I am unaware of any direct commentary or criticism of these analogies, it is clear that they are not without their weaknesses. The first analogy could be interpreted negatively as reflecting a kind of monism. Also, it might be questioned as to how unchangeable an ocean is, especially if the rivers are flowing into it. It is also clear that rivers and oceans (and rivers and rocks for that matter) are both on the same side of the temporal/eternal divide. However, such concerns are bogged down in the details. The basic terms of the rivers-ocean comparison hold: God is present to the flux and engaged by and in it, but is himself unchanged and unmoved. Thus God endures, but his immutability removes him from the succession of temporal change.

Similarly, in the second analogy, it is not clear what relationship the river and rock sustain to each other. Presumably the river is “present” to the rock, but the quality of this comparison is lacking and both points of comparison are on the same temporal dimension (i.e., both rocks and rivers exist in time.) However, it is important not to reduce the analogy to allegory by pressing it too hard. As an analogy of duration without succession, the rock remains the same and demonstrates the immutability of a being whose mode of existence is unlimited and fully actualized.

⁷⁸Charnock, “On the Eternity of God,” 1:284.

2. Line and paper (C.S. Lewis) (Second Repeat)

Here we return a third time to the fruitful analogy posed by C. S. Lewis of the line (representing time) drawn upon a piece of paper (representing divine eternity). In some ways the line and paper analogy is superior to the two analogies just considered. It gives a better sense of duration, of God as the ground of being, and of the fullness, completeness, and limitlessness of the divine life. It provides a helpful model of the eternal present which completely embraces the whole of temporal existence past, present, and future while illustrating how these categories are not applicable to the divine being.

Which ties us into the final point: The line and paper analogy shows that God's relationship to the temporal realm is durational without succession because while the line moves from point to point, it can only do so as long as the paper endures as a single, non-successive ground.

3. Centerpoint and circumference (Aquinas and others) (Repeat)

In the previous section, we saw how the analogy of the centerpoint and circumference applied to God's eternal present standing in the same relationship to all points on the temporal continuum, past, present, and future. This metaphor also portrays the concept of duration without succession by suggesting that, while the eternal present stands in the same relationship to all points on the circle, it does not participate in the succession of moments represented by the points on the circumference. As we have seen, Rogers agrees that there is no succession of moments in eternity but denies there is duration, preferring instead to interpret the centerpoint of the circle as being pointlike. The analogy does not require a punctilinear interpretation, however, because it is possible to translate this into the twin lines analogy which is more explicitly "durational."

4. Two parallel lines (Stump and Kretzmann) (Repeat)

The two lines analogy reflects not only how the temporal realm, past, present, and future, is entirely embraced within the perspective of the eternal present, but also how this

perspective models duration without succession. The life of God “endures” in the non-temporal sense, because it is constantly present to every point on the temporal timeline without change. It is “extended” in the non-temporal sense by the manner in which the illuminated line reflects the fullness and depth of the divine life within the eternal present. The eternal present is not simply the boundary line between past and future, but rather reflects the fullness and totality of the divine life. It is without succession in that the experience of the life of God in the eternal present is indivisible. Although it embraces within its purview all of the temporal present, it does so without the experience of the succession of moments. This latter point is further modeled by the specious present.

5. Memory (Augustine) and the temporal knower’s present knowledge of the past (Augustine, Anselm) (Repeat)

The analogy of mind and memory also models duration without succession by providing us a sense of a present that endures but is non-sequential. Although the human mind is certainly a temporal organ, at any given moment it possesses knowledge through memory that is fixed, extensive, and yet without succession. In this it models the eternal present as that which has duration (it endures, it is fixed, it has extension) without succession. It is true that human thought processes are linear (we humans only think one thought at a time). This means that the human mind must experience the succession of moments in order to retrieve memory. However, we do not have to experience the succession of moments in order to possess them. A mind at rest (or a mind like the divine mind that is full and complete, and to which nothing can be added or subtracted) possesses memory that is non-successive. In sum, we do *retrieve* our memory successively. However, we *possess* it as a whole in a non-successive manner. In this way the human mind can provide a coherent analogy of duration without succession.

Rogers agrees this is a useful analogy for divine eternity, but she insists on a “point-like,” non-durational concept of eternity. However, I believe the analogy better

models divine eternity, understood as duration without succession, because it captures both the plentitude and the immutability of the divine omniscience of God. Because God's knowledge of all things (including the temporal world) remains constant, the eternal present is best understood as duration without succession.

6. Specious present (Alston, Stump and Kretzmann)

Another way of modeling how God can experience the "complete possession all at once of limitable life" in a successionless duration is what is known as the "specious" present. To the best of my knowledge, the first one to use this concept in connection with divine eternity is William Alston:

It seems to me that the psychological concept of the specious present provides an intelligible model for a nontemporal knowledge of a temporal world. In using the concept of the specious present to think about human perception, one thinks of a human being as perceiving some temporally extended stretch of a process in one temporally indivisible act. If my specious present lasts for, e.g., one-twentieth of a second, then I perceive a full one-twentieth of a second of, e.g., the flight of a bee "all at once." I don't *first* perceive the first half of that stretch of the flight, *and then* perceive the second. My perception, though not its object, is without temporal succession. It does not unfold successively. It is a single unified act. Now just expand the specious present to cover all of time, and you have a model for God's awareness of the world.⁷⁹

Stump and Kretzmann pick upon on Alston's suggestion and question whether even every instance of duration *in time* is divisible. Drawing upon the concept of the specious present, they appeal to the example of a mother who hears her son's cry for help as he falls off the skateboard. There is a lot going on in that moment as the mother experiences her son in trouble. Yet breaking the experience down into its constituent parts is both unnecessary and unhelpful for describing her immediate assessment of the situation:

The specious present, then, seems to be an instance of something that is both extended and conceptually indivisible as such. It is also a particularly apposite instance, since, as William Alston has suggested, it is illuminating to think of the eternal present as God's specious present, which covers *all* of time. A temporal being might naturally be inclined to impose on such a universally overarching

⁷⁹William Alston, "Hartshorne and Aquinas: A Via Media," in *Divine Nature and Human Language* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 136; emphasis his.

specious present the divisions appropriate to time, but imposed temporal divisions are as inapplicable to the eternal present as they would be to the mother's specious present.⁸⁰

In sum, the notion of the specious present provides another analogy or model of how we might understand the eternal present. It is particularly useful because of its dual aspects: On the one hand, it is an indivisible experience. On the other hand, it has duration. Admittedly the specious present is a temporal phenomenon, but it provides at least a sense of what atemporal duration might be like--especially the atemporal duration of God perceiving the whole of temporality all at once.

7. Audio and video compression (Felch)

Perhaps another analogy might make this more clear. Back in the 1970s a new electronic compression circuit was invented that was expected (falsely as it turned out) to revolutionize the audio cassette market. This circuit enabled manufacturers to increase the speed at which a cassette containing non-musical oral material could be played back without the speaker sounding like one of the Chipmunks. Since the ability to listen and comprehend is much faster than most people's ability to speak, such an invention would enable one to listen to a recording of a book or lecture in a fraction of the time normally required. Unfortunately, the device never took hold in the marketplace.

Now imagine that the speed at which such comprehension could occur was not limited and that the speed at which the tape could be played without distortion could also be increased as fast as desired. It would be possible to listen to and hear long lectures in a few minutes, or even a few seconds, or less!!

Now imagine further that the same principle could be applied to video equipment as well as audio equipment, and that a video tape of the events of the entire history of the universe could be played without speed limitation, and a mind existed that could keep up

⁸⁰Stump and Kretzmann, "Eternity, Awareness, and Action," 468.

with it. Such a mind would be able to perceive the end from the beginning in a moment--in a specious moment--all at once. Such an illustration gives us a crude (but useful) way to conceptualize how an eternal God could possess an understanding of the temporal realm in the "all at once" of a specious eternal present.

There are, of course, problems with this analogy. Some might argue that it describes a being who is not outside of time but within "super-time." But it is hard to grasp how such all-at-once and illimitable intuition bears much resemblance to any notion of human temporality. Certainly such a being would transcend time as we know it. At any rate this notion of the specious present as a model of eternity is worth further consideration.

E. An Analogy of God's Engagement with, and Sovereignty over, the Temporal Creation in the Exercise of his Eternal Purpose

- **Novelist and the Novel (C.S. Lewis, Philip Yancey, John Frame, Alan Padgett, and others)**

Under this final heading, I would like to discuss more fully the analogy of the novelist introduced in chapter 6. To the best of my knowledge, this analogy is of recent origin. I first encountered it when I was a young Christian in C. S. Lewis's *Mere Christianity*, and it made a vivid and lasting impression on me. In honor of Lewis's contribution to my life and thought I offer this extensive citation:

Almost certainly God is not in Time. His life does not consist of moments following one another. If a million people are praying to Him at ten-thirty tonight, He need not listen to them all in that one little snippet which we call ten-thirty. Ten thirty—and every other moment from the beginning of the world—is always the Present for Him. If you like to put it that way, He has all eternity in which to listen to the split second of prayer put up by a pilot as his plane crashes in flames.

That is difficult, I know. Let me try to give something, not the same, but a bit like it. Suppose I am writing a novel. I write "Mary laid down her work; next moment came a knock at the door!" For Mary who has to live in the imaginary time of my story there is no interval between putting down the work and hearing the knock. But I, who am Mary's maker, do not live in that imaginary time at all. Between writing the first half of that sentence and the second, I might sit down for three hours and think steadily about Mary. I could think about Mary as if she were the only character in the book and for as long as I pleased, and the hours I spent in doing so would not appear in Mary's time (the time inside the story) at all.

This is not a perfect illustration, of course. But it may give just a glimpse of what I believe to be the truth. God is not hurried along in the Time-stream of this

universe any more than an author is hurried along in the imaginary time of his own novel. He has infinite attention to spare for each one of us. He does not have to deal with us in the mass. You are as much alone with Him as if you were the only being He had ever created. When Christ died, He died for you individually just as much as if you had been the only man in the world.

The way in which my illustration breaks down is this. In it the author gets out of one Time-series (that of the novel) only by going into another Time-series (the real one). But God, I believe, does not live in a Time-series at all. His life is not dribbled out moment by moment like ours: with Him it is, so to speak, still 1920 and already 1960. For His life is Himself.⁸¹

There are, of course, weaknesses to this analogy, as there are of most metaphors.

For example, human writers create characters but they do not actually bring them to life.

Certainly God's authorial compositions are of an entirely different order. To borrow another biblical metaphor, he is sculpting his characters rather than simply writing or speaking about them (as in the efforts of a storyteller like Garrison Keillor on *Prairie Home Companion*). Yet while the creation of living, actual characters certainly goes beyond the ability of the novelist, there is a sense in which novelists do, in fact, create real worlds with real characters. Characters in a novel often seem to take on a life of their own.⁸²

A second criticism is that this analogy (together with various other multi-dimensional analogies like Stump and Kretzmann's world of Aleph) does not really model the relationship between time and eternity, since both authors and the timelines of their books are temporal. That is, the author and the created characters possess linear succession of moments, even in their interaction. While this objection is true in the sense that human novelists are temporal and experience succession of moments, it does not take away the value of the analogy. For even at the level of the human novels, the novelist and the characters within the novel possess entirely different frames of reference or dimensionalities with respect to time. At the very least, they do not share the same time-

⁸¹C. S. Lewis, "Time and Beyond Time," 133.

⁸²So much so that Elizabeth Bowen speaks for many novelists when she comments, "I become, and remain, my characters' close and intent watcher: their director, never. Their creator I cannot feel that I was, or am." (*Pictures and Conversations* [New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1975], 60).

strand, and it is not hard to conceive how a novelist, standing before his or her completed literary work, possesses the entirety of that work as a whole in a way analogous to the *totum simul* of Boethius.

But even if we grant some weight to these criticisms, there are a number of aspects of this analogy that make it a useful model of the relationship between God's eternal decree and its temporal outworking in creation and providence.

First, the author in both instances exercises complete control over his or her characters without denying their separate identities. The novelist does not merely control the final outcome of the novel, but also all the minute details of plot, character, and setting. Thus, the illustration is consistent with a God who is both transcendent and immanent. As I argued in chapter 6, this analogy is completely compatible with the biblical portrayal of God's sovereignty as purposed in the divine decree and executed in his works of creation and providence.

Second, the analogy makes sense of, and renders coherent, the existence of different frames of reference between God and creation, on the one hand, and the novelist and characters, on the other. By showing how it is possible for a novelist to transcend the logic, linearity, and timestrand of the novel, the analogy renders coherent the idea that God can possess a time-free and transcendent relationship to the world he has made.

Third, the author-story metaphor enables us to conceptualize two different levels of metaphysical and moral causation because all events in the story have two causes: the one internal to the storyline and the one provided by the author. This is similar to the divine and creaturely levels of causation found in the Creator/creation parallel. The causes within the story line (or created history) are genuine. In both worlds, individuals make certain choices, which carry with them certain consequences and which would not have occurred without those causative choices. However, the same is true of the authorial or Creator causes. These are also genuine causes. They affect, indeed control, the story line. But

these two causative strands do not function at the same level or dimensionality, and it would be improper to confuse them. Recognizing these two levels of causation provides a way of modeling a view of free will compatible with divine sovereignty.

Fourth, the author-story metaphor is useful in that it enables us to conceptualize how God can be “along side” the timeline of his creation (Leftow) or “ET-Simultaneous” (Stump and Kretzmann) with the whole timeline of the creation as laid out according to the divine decree.

Fifth, the author-story model of God’s relationship to his creation does not require us to maintain that God is the “author of sin” in the sense that he commits it or approves of it. Instead, as Frame points out, it provides the mechanism to avoid that. Borrowing from Wayne Grudem’s analogy from Shakespeare he argues the following:

I agree, of course, that both Macbeth and Shakespeare are responsible, at different levels of reality, for the death of Duncan. But as I analyze the language that we typically use in such contexts, it seems clear to me that we would not normally say that Shakespeare killed Duncan. Shakespeare wrote the murder into his play. But the murder took place in the world of the play, not in the real world of the author. Macbeth did it, not Shakespeare. We sense the rightness of Macbeth paying for the crime. But we should certainly consider it very unjust if Shakespeare were tried and put to death for killing Duncan. And no one suggests that there is any problem in reconciling Shakespeare’s benevolence with his omnipotence over the world of the drama. Indeed, there is reason for us to praise Shakespeare for raising up this character, Macbeth, to show us the consequences of sin. The differences between levels, then, may have moral as well as metaphysical significance. It may explain why the biblical writers, who do not hesitate to say that God brings about sin and evil, do not accuse him of wrongdoing.⁸³

In sum, this analogy is an exceedingly fruitful one, which could provide support for all the categories of analogies that we have surveyed in this chapter. It nicely captures (a) God’s transcendence as reflected in a different mode or level of existence (dimensionality); (b) his ability to comprehend the entire temporal realm as a whole; (c) the way in which, relative to the temporal realm, God possesses duration without temporal

⁸³John Frame, *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2002), 179-180. Frame is quoting from Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994), 321-322.

succession; and (d) the way he is both immanent and transcendent in his sovereign rule over the world in accordance with his eternal purpose. Although, as Lewis (and other critics) point out, the analogy is not a perfect one, it is an engaging one that invites us to think more deeply about God's sovereign infinite-personal care for his creation.

III. Chapter Summary and Conclusions

As I bring this survey to a close, I want to reemphasize that the attempt to portray divine eternity by means of analogies is only one aspect of FSU. These analogies do not and cannot prove that God is eternal. The argument for the truthfulness of the traditional doctrine rests on the consistency of the biblical description of God's endurance, his relationship to time, and the compatibility of his revealed attributes with one another. This was the subject of chapter 6. However, analogies do testify to the coherence of the traditional doctrine of eternity. While some analogies may be more compelling or persuasive than others, the cumulative effect of these analogies certainly provides support for the coherence of divine eternity understood as duration without succession.

In addition to undergirding the coherence of the doctrine of divine eternity, such analogies are also productive in enabling us to conceptualize more broadly and deeply what the divine life of an infinite, eternal, self-existent, self-sufficient, immutable, omniscient, and omnipotent being would be like.

As Soskice argues, analogies help us extend our thinking, view things in new ways, make intellectual progress, and expand our horizons. Certainly these analogies do that. Multi-dimensional analogies of transcendence help us understand that God is not simply like us but bigger; rather, he possesses a mode of existence that is qualitatively different from our own. His thoughts are higher than our thoughts and his ways our ways. Analogies pertaining to God's "duration" help us understand what it means that God is steadfast and immanent to his creation. Analogies of how the divine life is without succession testify to the fullness of God's being, and to the fact that nothing can be added

to or taken away from his being or knowledge; he possesses his life immutably and without succession. The analogy of the novelist illustrates how God is the sovereign one who is the author of human history, who declares the end from the beginning, and who works out that history in accordance with the counsel of his own will. It also helps us appreciate how we are God's workmanship created for good works that he prepared beforehand that we would walk in them.

These are deep thoughts, but analogies help us to get our arms around them. They also emphasize the infinite fullness of the divine life and are consistent with the traditional understanding of the divine attributes. They do so not by inserting Greek metaphysics into Christian theology but by providing another way avenue for engaging in the work of FSU.

Following Soskice, I believe that such analogies are helpful by being suggestive; they expand our view so that we are, at least in some way, able to conceptualize that which is beyond our ability to comprehend. Following Aquinas, I would reassert the importance, indeed the necessity, of analogy in theological thought, as an instrument to resist the temptation to succumb to equivocity and univocity. Stump and Kretzmann put it it this way:

Where univocal accounts are theoretically unavailable and equivocal predication is worse than worthless, we may be said to be in circumstances of irreducibly analogical predication. . . .Acknowledging the impossibility of predicating certain terms univocally of God and creatures does not. . .drive us into using them equivocally. Analogical predication remains available, and, here as elsewhere in subject matter that lies beyond experience, it leaves open a way along which understanding can be developed.⁸⁴

⁸⁴Stump and Kretzmann, "Eternity, Awareness, and Action," 469.

CHAPTER 8

Conclusion

This thesis provides a historical, creedal, biblical, theological, and analogical response to the challenge within analytic philosophy to the traditional doctrine of divine eternity. The analytic critics have argued that the doctrine of eternity is more Greek than Christian; that it is, at best, biblically underdetermined; and that it is philosophically and theologically incoherent on the grounds that an eternal God (a) could not redeem, be actively involved in the temporal world, or become incarnate; (b) could not be a person, except in a very limited sense; and (c) could not possess knowledge of certain tensed truths.

Although I am offering a rebuttal against the analytic critique of eternity, this should not be interpreted as an assault against, or a rejection of, the discipline of analytic philosophy. As I stated in the introduction, both the traditional development of the doctrine of eternity and the modern analytic treatment of the subject are legitimate examples of Faith Seeking Understanding. This endeavor begins with the Faith found in biblical revelation, but seeks to use the tools of reason and other sources of knowledge in order to increase the Understanding of that Faith. It is an endeavor actively and productively pursued by Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas, and Post-Reformation Reformed Orthodoxy. It has been pursued with equal zeal--and fruitfulness--by contemporary analytic philosophers. The progress made over the last four decades in contemporary philosophy of religion by Christian analytic philosophers who have brought Christian Theism back into the marketplace of ideas in the Academy is nothing short of breathtaking. Those thinkers who have contributed to this development, including those who are critical of the doctrine of

eternity, should be honored for their labors, and I do so honor them.¹ Analytic philosophy has also carefully and systematically examined a number of important and perplexing theological questions and, in the current discussion, has mounted a formidable critique of absolute timelessness.

This thesis does, however, raise the question as to whether the methodology of analytic philosophy, with its quest for precision, is in danger of narrowing or reducing theological issues (especially in the treatment of the divine attributes in general and the doctrine of eternity in particular) and thereby misunderstanding them. The concern here is that the analytic approach to theology may at times move away from a broader and richer analogical form of theological discourse toward a more narrow and univocal one. Of course, this need not be the case, and even within the analytic debate, there are many participants who have sought to articulate the traditional doctrine in a more nuanced way. However, despite the contributions of analytic philosophy to the theological project of Faith Seeking Understanding, there are sufficient reasons to be cautious.

In response to the challenge against the traditional doctrine of divine eternity, this thesis then draws the following conclusions:

First, the objection that the original doctrine of divine eternity is too closely connected to Greek philosophy ought to be reconsidered. While early Christian thinkers share some common concerns with Greek philosophy, and while most of the early Fathers were appreciative of extrabiblical learning and willing to draw on its concepts, there is no evidence of any wholesale capitulation to Hellenism in the mainline theological tradition and much evidence of a highly nuanced, highly selective, and critical use of it. This frequently resulted in outright rejection of Greek thought when it conflicted with biblical teachings as in the doctrines of creation, incarnation, and the resurrection.

¹For a brief but informative account of this development, see Kenneth Konyndyk, "Christianity Reenters Philosophical Circles," *Perspectives* 7 (1992): 17-20.

Second, the modern analytic discussion is misdirected to the degree it formulates an absolute view of divine timelessness that *defines* the temporal and the eternal as incompatible and then reads that definition back into the traditional doctrine of divine eternity. In fact, there is no indisputable evidence that anyone in the history of thought, *Greek or Christian*, ever actually held to such a view of absolute timeless eternity. The majority position of the mainline tradition of divine eternity suggests a less absolute model in which time is part of the created order and in which God, who transcends time, is in no way limited by it and yet engages the temporal order by a kind of temporal omnipresence. The strong majority view of divine eternity in the history of Christian doctrine does not focus on time *per se*, but rather on duration without succession. While several of the early fathers likely held this position, it is clearly the view of Athanasius, Augustine, Boethius, Anselm, Aquinas, and Post-Reformation Reformed Orthodoxy. To the degree that the analytic discussion misunderstands the tradition by ascribing absolute timelessness to it, its critique is misdirected.

Third, although often characterized in the analytic literature as absolute timelessness, the traditional doctrine of divine eternity is best understood as “duration without succession.” “Duration” is best understood in a non-temporal sense as reflecting the self-sufficiency and self-existence of God, who abides or remains or endures in contrast to the temporal flux. “Without succession” is best understood as reflecting the limitless and immutable fullness or completeness of the divine life. This includes God’s knowledge, which embraces the temporal past, present and future, as well as God’s will and his intention to create and redeem the world. Again, to the degree that this is not understood, the analytic critique fails to engage the traditional doctrine.

Fourth, related to the last point, although the traditional view of eternity is accused of reducing the divine life, it is instead motivated by the desire to explicate its fullness, as is evident in Boethius’s definition that divine eternity is “the complete possession, all at once,

of illimitable *life*.”² God is eternal, not because he is abstracted or removed from time, but because the immutability of his nature, the plenitude of his being, the fullness of his knowledge, and the limitlessness of his life necessitate his being eternal. Ironically, it is the analytic formulation of divine timelessness, not the traditional view, that that is in danger of reducing the divine life by placing God on a timeline.

Fifth, understood as duration without succession, the traditional doctrine of divine eternity is biblically and theologically defensible. The occasional scriptural descriptions of God’s relationship to time might be consistent with viewing God as either eternal or everlasting. However, the biblical descriptions of God and Christ as existing “before time began” or “before the ages” or “before the foundations of the world” (thus making time part of the created order of things) points toward eternity.³ So also do the contrasts between God’s “years” and ours (which are most naturally understood not so much as establishing a comparison as denying one), the numerous absolute contrasts between divine duration and temporal change, the careful integration of the biblically revealed attributes with God’s eternity, and the biblical testimony regarding the sovereignty of God and the divine decree.

Sixth, the traditional doctrine of eternity is assumed by, and informs some of the reasoning behind, the creedal traditions of Nicea and Chalcedon. It is important to both in that the doctrine of the eternal generation appealed to by both uses the term “eternal” in a technical sense. Divine temporalists understand God as being “everlasting” rather than “eternal.” While divine temporalists can uphold these ecumenical creeds, it is arguably the

²Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, 5.6; quoted in and translated by Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann, “Eternity,” *Journal of Philosophy* 84 (1987): 430-431; Reprinted in Thomas V. Morris, ed., *The Concept of God* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1985), 220-221.

³William Lane Craig provides a survey of a number of texts that can be so understood as supporting divine eternity: Jude 25, “before all time, now and forever,” which William Craig sees as equivalent to “before time began”; Titus 1:2, “before age-long time”; 2 Timothy 1:9, “before-age long time,” which Arndt and Gingrich render, “before time began”; 1 Corinthians 2:7, “before the ages”; Ps. 54:20 and Ps. 55:19 (LXX), “before the ages”; Romans 16:25, John 17:24; Eph. 1:4; 1 Peter 1:20, “before the foundation of the world.” See Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 17-20.

case that something significant is lost in the translation.

Seventh, although they cannot demonstrate the truthfulness of divine eternity, analogical models of the relationship between the temporal and the eternal do at least provide a case for its coherence. Attempts to understand these analogies, however, must neither reduce them to univocal descriptions of God nor convert them to allegories.

Although this thesis is not sufficient to establish the overall superiority or certainty of the eternal position against the everlasting position, it has demonstrated several areas in which the traditional view might be considered preferable. The doctrine of eternity was important to both the Nicene and Chalcedonian creedal tradition. It gives full weight to the Creator/creature distinction. It provides comfort to believers by grounding God's faithfulness in his unchangeable nature and the certainty of his eternal decree. It produces rich analogies that are not only descriptive, but that are also productively suggestive, helping us understand God as the author of human history, who created us "in Christ Jesus, for good works that he prepared beforehand that we should walk in them" (Eph.2:10). Finally, and most importantly, the doctrine of eternity maintains a rich account of the biblical testimony of the infinite plenitude of the divine nature and a better account of the interrelated constellation of the divine attributes through which that plenitude is manifested.

While this project has covered a great deal of ground and sought to clarify a number of issues there are several areas related to divine eternity in need of further development. Let me suggest three:

First, more attention needs to be given, both exegetically and philosophically, to the biblical concept of divine duration. In the classic Greek and Christian approaches to eternity, the issue of the relationship between immutable duration and the temporal flux is an essential component. When coupled with the idea that time is the measure of change, duration without succession becomes a consistent and coherent viewpoint. The reification

of time in the modern scientific age does not take away the legitimacy of this concern, although it may raise additional questions regarding God's relationship to time that are worth exploring and to which the contemporary analytic discussions may continue to make significant contributions. Nonetheless, more work on duration is necessary.

The second area to be more fully explored, both exegetically and philosophically, concerns the nature and mode of God's omniscience. As we saw in the debate between Gregory Ganssle and William Hasker in chapter 4, this area is just beginning to receive the attention it deserves. A very important part of the exegetical support for the traditional doctrine of eternity is the biblical testimony to the fullness of God's knowledge.

Finally, more energy needs to be put into analogy. My discussion is exploratory rather than definitive, and in considerable need of nuancing. Obviously analogies, like other forms of discourse, must be tested for valid presuppositions, coherence, and productiveness.

That triad will also be the measure of this thesis, part of whose productiveness, I pray, will be an increase not only in knowledge and understanding, but also in worship and praise to God, the Creator. This thesis began with a citation from Augustine. It is fitting that it should conclude with it as well:

You are unchangeably eternal, that is the truly eternal Creator of minds. Just as you knew heaven and earth in the beginning without that bringing any variation into your knowing, so you made heaven and earth in the beginning without that meaning a tension between past and future in your activity. Let the person who understands this make confession to you. Let him who fails to understand make confession to you. How exalted you are, and the humble in heart are your house (Ps. 137:6; 145:8). You lift up those who are cast down (Ps. 144:14; 145:8), and those whom you raise to that summit which is yourself do not fall.⁴

⁴Augustine, *Confessions* 11.31.41; Chadwick translation, 245.

APPENDIX A

Analytical Outline of Thesis

- CHAPTER 1: Introduction [1]**
- CHAPTER 2: Survey of the Analytic Literature (Part I): The “First Generation” Discussion [11]**
- I. Introduction [11]**
- II. The “First Generation” Beginnings of the Analytic Discussion [14]**
- A. William Kneale’s Initial Inquiry (1967) [14]**
1. Timelessness as a “dubious partner” for theology
 2. Kneale on the Greek origin of divine timelessness
 3. Kneale’s judgment that divine timelessness is incoherent
- B. Nelson Pike’s *God and Timelessness* (1970) [17]**
1. Two elements of predicating “timelessness”
 2. The logical status of “God is timeless”
 3. Timelessness and the negative predicates “immutable,” “incorruptible,” and “immortal”
 4. Timelessness, foreknowledge, and free will
 5. Timeless knowledge of what is happening “now”
 6. Timelessness and power
 7. God as a timeless person
 8. Anselm’s “Perfect Being” theology and divine timelessness
 9. Pike’s conclusions
 10. Assessment
- C. Nicholas Wolterstorff’s Criticism of Divine Timelessness (1975) [29]**
1. Wolterstorff’s general concern about Hellenism
 2. The problem of temporal order relationships
 3. The problem of the modality of temporal events
 4. An eternal God’s inability to redeem
- D. Richard Swinburne’s Double *Reductio* Against Eternity (1977) [33]**
- E. Paul Helm’s Response to Wolterstorff and Swinburne (1980/82/88) [35]**
1. Timelessness is not unbiblical
 2. Some good reasons for embracing timelessness
 3. The parallel between “timelessness” and “spacelessness”
 4. Assessment

F. Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann's Defense of Eternity and ET-Simultaneity (1981) [42]

1. Their interpretation of Boethius's definition of eternity
2. The atemporality of an eternal entity: The distinction between presentness and simultaneity
3. Their concept of ET-simultaneity
4. The relationship of atemporal duration and atemporal life
5. The possibility of an eternal entity acting in time
6. Some final observations by Stump and Kretzmann

III. Chapter Summary and Conclusions [49]

CHAPTER 3: Survey of the Analytic Literature (Part II): The "Second Generation" Discussion [50]

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II. The "Second Generation" Discussion [51]

A. Paul Fitzgerald's Criticism of Stump and Kretzmann (1985) [51]

1. The problem of duration without divisibility
2. The problem of ET-observation

B. Paul Helm's Criticism of ET-Simultaneity (1988) [53]

1. His agreement with Fitzgerald
2. His preference for God's "time-freeness"
3. His argument for God's timelessness

C. William Hasker's *God, Time and Knowledge* (1989) [55]

1. His acceptance of the coherence of timelessness
2. His rejection of ET-simultaneity and the truth of timelessness

D. Richard Swinburne's Criticism of ET-Simultaneity (1993) [59]

1. His four principles regarding time
2. His rejection of ET-simultaneity as "unilluminating"
3. Everlastingness does not make God time's prisoner

E. Stump and Kretzmann's Reply to Critics (1987, 1992) [62]

1. Their defense of atemporal duration (1987)
 - a. The problem of language
 - b. The paradigm of atemporal duration
2. Their defense of ET-simultaneity (1992)
 - a. The problem of language reasserted
 - b. The avenue of analogical predication
 - c. Their "Aleph" analogy of time and eternity
 - d. Their response to William Hasker
 - e. Their reformulation of ET-simultaneity

- F. John Yates, *The Timelessness of God* (1990) [68]**
1. Yates's desire to defend divine timelessness
 2. Yates's understanding of the history of the doctrine
 3. Yates on the nature of time
 4. Yates on the tense or tenselessness of time
 5. Yates on Stump and Kretzmann's "Eternity"
 6. Yates's defense of divine timelessness from eternal causation
 7. Addressing the "vertical" issue: Eternity, the personhood of God, and the Incarnation
 8. Addressing the "horizontal" issue: Eternity, foreknowledge, and providence
- G. Brian Leftow, *Time and Eternity* (1991) [78]**
1. Leftow's understanding of divine timelessness
 - a. The possibility and semantics of divine timelessness
 - b. Augustine: Eternity as truest existence
 - c. Boethius: Eternity as duration (QTE)
 - d. The roots of eternity: Eternity as a point
 - e. Boethius and ET-simultaneity
 - f. Anselm, dimensionality, and temporal omnipresence
 2. The Anselmian advantage and Leftow's "zero-distance" model of time and eternity
- H. Alan Padgett, *God, Eternity and the Nature of Time* (1992) [88]**
1. Padgett's advocacy of divine "relative timelessness"
 2. Padgett's understanding of the tradition of divine eternity
 3. Padgett's criticism of atemporal duration and ET-simultaneity
 4. Divine timelessness and the stasis view of time
 5. Padgett's rejection of the stasis theory
 6. Padgett's alternative model of eternity
 - a. God as the ground of time
 - b. God as the Lord of time
 - c. God as "relatively timeless"
- I. Paul Helm on "Eternal Creation" (1994) [95]**
1. Helm's explanation of the relation of eternity to creation
 2. Helm's continued criticism of eternal duration
 3. Helm's response to Swinburne's "God and Time"
 4. Helm's positive attack on divine temporalism
- J. Paul Helm on "The Doctrine of Two Standpoints" (1997) [101]**
1. Common confusions regarding eternity and creation
 2. The doctrine of two standpoints in Augustine
 3. Eternity, immutability, and the doctrine of two standpoints
- III. Chapter Summary and Conclusions [104]**

CHAPTER 4: Survey of the Analytic Literature (Part III): The “Third Generation” Discussion [106]

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- II. William Lane Craig’s *Time and Eternity* (2001) [106]**
 - A. A Summary of Craig’s Discussion in *Time and Eternity* [107]**
 1. Craig’s methodology
 2. Craig’s survey of the biblical data on divine eternity
 3. Craig’s motivation for articulating a theory of divine eternity
 4. Craig’s thesis: God as atemporal apart from creation and temporal with creation.
 - B. His Review of Arguments for Divine Timelessness [112]**
 1. Divine simplicity and immutability
 2. The general and special theories of relativity
 3. The incompleteness of temporal life
 4. Summation
 - C. His Review of Arguments for Divine Temporality [118]**
 1. The impossibility of atemporal personhood
 2. Divine relations with the world
 3. Divine knowledge of tensed facts
 4. Summation
 - D. His Discussion of the Nature of Time [126]**
 1. The dynamic (tensed) view of time
 2. The static (tenseless) view of time
 3. Craig’s inclusive conclusion
- III. Recent Essays in *God and Time* (2002) [129]**
 - A. Brian Leftow on the Eternal Present [130]**
 - B. Garrett DeWeese’s Defense of Omnitemporality [132]**
 - C. Alan Padgett’s Critique of Retrocausation [135]**
 - D. Dean Zimmerman on Intrinsic Change [136]**
 - E. William Lane Craig’s Defense of Newtonian Absolute Time and Lorentzian Relativity [139]**
 - F. Edward Wierenga’s Defense against Swinburne’s Objections to Divine Timelessness [139]**
 - G. Gregory Ganssle’s Defense of Divine Atemporality on the Basis of God’s Mode of Knowledge as Direct Awareness [143]**

- H. **William Hasker's Defense of Divine Temporality on the Basis of God's Mode of Knowledge as Direct Awareness [145]**
 - I. **Paul Helm's Defense of Genuine Dialogue with an Atemporal God [151]**
 - J. **Thomas Senor on the Incompatibility of the Incarnation with Divine Timelessness [153]**
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 - B. **The Question of Hellenism [160]**
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 - D. **The Analytic Debate and the Theological Tradition [162]**
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 - A. **Parmenides's Being as the Eternal Object of True Knowledge [164]**
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 - C. **Aristotle, the *Physics*, and "Activity without Change" [170]**
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 - E. **Eternity in the Middle Platonist, Plutarch [173]**
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 - G. **Conclusions Regarding the Concept of Eternity in Greek Thought [175]**
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 - A. **The Apostolic Fathers and Early Apologists [176]**
 - 1. **Ignatius's early mention of divine eternity**
 - 2. **Justin Martyr on eternity, immutability and Greek philosophy**

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 4. Athenagoras on God and Plato (Second century)
- B. The Later Apologists and Early Fathers [180]**
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 2. Clement of Alexandria on the concept of eternity
 3. Tertullian on the eternal nature of the true God
 4. Origen on the eternal generation of the Son
- C. Eternity and the Nicene Controversy [184]**
1. Arius, Greek thought, and the temporality of the Son (d. 336)
 2. Athanasius and the eternity of the Son (ca. 296-373)
 3. Hilary of Poitiers and the Nicene tradition (ca. 315-368)
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- D. Augustine of Hippo on Eternity and Time [187]**
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 2. Augustine's relational view of time
 3. Augustine's three puzzles concerning time
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 5. Augustine on the relationship between creation and time
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- E. Boethius and Eternity [193]**
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- G. Thomas Aquinas on Eternity [201]**
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 - 2. Rogers's critique of Stump and Kretzmann
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 - 4. Rogers's historical argument for non-durational eternity
 - 5. Rogers on the incoherence of eternity as duration
 - 6. Rogers on the insufficiency of the *via analogia*
 - 7. Rogers on the temporal present as "the least inadequate analogy"
- B. Final Comment [240]**

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 - A. Setting the Stage: Oscar Cullmann and James Barr [242]**
 - B. Alan Padgett: The Bible Neutral at Best [245]**
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- II. The Importance of Eternity in the Ecumenical Creeds and the History of Doctrine [250]**
 - A. Eternity, Arianism, and the Nicene Consensus [251]**
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 - A. Suggestions from the Analytical Debate [266]**
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- B. Eternity, Post-Reformation Orthodoxy, and the Biblical Text [272]**
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 2. A summary of the scriptural defense of eternity as duration without succession by PRRO
 - a. Texts which advocate divine eternity
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 - e. The relation of God's eternity to his other attributes
 - f. Eternity and the name of God
 - g. Eternity and self-existence
 - h. Eternity and immutability
 - i. Eternity and infinity
 - j. Eternity and omnipotence
 - k. Eternity and aseity
 - l. Eternity and the Creator/creature distinction
 3. Some theological implications of eternity
 - a. Eternity and the divinity of Christ
 - b. Eternity and succession: The eternal present
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- D. A Systematic Theological Defense of Eternity [294]**
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 2. Eternity and the revealed attributes of God
 - a. The infinity of God
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- e. God's sovereignty over sin
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 - b. Temporalism, memory, and meaning
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- 1. Aquinas, religious language, and the *via negativa*
- 2. Religious language and the doctrine of creation
- 3. Equivocity, univocity, and analogy

C. Janet Soskice's Modern Defense of Analogy [334]

- 1. Soskice's method: Critical realism as a solution to skepticism regarding theological language
- 2. Model and metaphor in science and religion
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D. Aquinas and Soskice, Analogy and Eternity [341]

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A. Eternity and the Plenitude of the Divine Nature [344]

B. Analogies of the Eternal God's Transcendence over the Temporal Creation [345]

- 1. Flatland and similar geometric analogies (Abbott, Schwartz)
- 2. Line on paper (C.S. Lewis)
- 3. Observer on a high hill (Boethius, Aquinas)
- 4. The land of Aleph (Stump and Kretzmann)
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- C. Analogies of the Fullness of the Life of an Eternal God and the Eternal Present as Embracing the Past, Present, and Future of Temporal Creation [356]**
1. Centerpoint and circumference (Boethius, Aquinas, and others)
 2. Two parallel lines (Stump and Kretzmann)
 3. Line on paper (C.S. Lewis) (Repeat)
 4. Observer on high hill and Aleph (Aquinas, Stump and Kretzmann) (Repeat)
 5. Time and space (Anselm)
 6. Memory (Augustine) and the “splendid historian” (Rogers)
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- D. Analogies of how God Possesses Immutable Duration without Succession [366]**
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 3. Centerpoint and circumference (Aquinas, and others) (Repeat)
 4. Two parallel lines (Stump and Kretzmann) (Repeat)
 5. Memory (Augustine) and the temporal knower’s present knowledge of the past (Augustine, Anselm) (Repeats)
 6. Specious present (Alston, Stump and Kretzmann)
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- E. An Analogy of God’s Engagement with, and Sovereignty over, the Temporal Creation in the Exercise of his Eternal Purpose [372]**
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APPENDIX B

Propositions for Oral Defense

Propositions from the Thesis

1. A common complaint in contemporary discussions of eternity is that the traditional formulation of the divine attributes is more dependent upon Greek than Christian sources. While this assumption is so common as to have achieved a life of its own, it does not withstand close scrutiny, since, historically, the early Fathers were as critical of Greek thought as they were appreciative of it and, theologically, the Fathers were far more motivated by biblical and theological issues than they were by Hellenistic ones.

2. Although both the traditional development of the doctrine of eternity and the modern analytic formulation of the doctrine of everlastingness are legitimate examples of Faith Seeking Understanding, the contemporary discussion differs from the tradition not only in the conclusions it draws, but also in the assumptions with which it is framed. Three differences are of particular importance: (a) the emphasis on time vs. duration; (b) the emphasis on absolute timelessness vs. duration without succession; and (c) the emphasis on methodological precision vs. theological plenitude.

3. Although often characterized in the analytic literature as absolute timelessness, the traditional doctrine of divine eternity is best understood as “duration without succession.” “Duration” is best understood in a non-temporal sense as reflecting the self-sufficiency and self-existence of God, who abides or remains or endures in contrast to the temporal flux. “Without succession” is best understood as reflecting the limitless and immutable fullness or completeness of the divine life. This includes God’s knowledge, which embraces the temporal past, present, and future, as well as God’s will and his intention to create and redeem the world. To the degree that the tradition is misunderstood, the analytic critique against it is misdirected.

4. Although the doctrine of the Incarnation has frequently been set forth as a defeater of the traditional doctrine of eternity (and while it must be admitted this is a high mystery involving many perplexities), the traditional doctrine of divine eternity is consistent with the Chalcedonian understanding of the Incarnation and the communication of attributes.

5. Analogical language and models are important to the theological enterprise because, like models in science, they help us think more deeply about a subject, and they move the discussion forward, while still being grounded in known realities. Although they cannot demonstrate the truthfulness of divine eternity, analogical models of the relationship between the temporal and eternal do provide a case for its coherence. Attempts to understand these analogies, however, must not reduce them to univocal descriptions of God or convert them to allegories.

Propositions from Course Work

6. Although Augustine did not hold to the position that the creation days described in Genesis One are literal twenty-four hour days, and although he is frequently cited in modern discussions as supporting an alternative to literal interpretation, his position has limited applicability to the contemporary debate regarding Genesis One.

7. Although he predates the rise of modern empirical science and is more familiar with Aristotelian cosmology than Copernican (indeed there is no clear historical evidence that Calvin was aware of Copernicus), Calvin shows in his commentaries, his *Institutes*, and in his “Warning Against Judicial Astronomy” a remarkably positive approach to science and “secular” learning.
8. In 1923, over 1100 ministers in what was the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (PCUSA, or the “Northern Presbyterian Church”) signed a protest letter entitled the *Auburn Affirmation*, declaring, among other things, that the substitutionary atonement was only one theory of the atonement among others and should not be given confessional status. In response, it is important to note that while Calvin seems to be both aware and appreciative of alternative models of the atonement, including the *Christus Victor* and Moral Influence model, for Calvin there was no substitute for the substitutionary atonement.
9. In current theological discussions, some authors (such as Jack Rogers and Donald McKim) drive a wedge between Old Amsterdam and Old Princeton on the doctrine of the infallibility and authority of Scripture. However, one is hard pressed to find any significant differences between Kuyper and Warfield on the subject of Scripture.
10. The philosophical foundations of theological liberalism can be traced back to the beginning of modern philosophy starting with Descartes’s rationalism, Locke and Hume’s empiricism, and Kant’s synthesized rational-empiricism. Kant’s form of rational religion, based upon his epistemology, in turn leads to a theology that largely denies the supernatural elements of the Christian faith, reduces Christianity to ethics, and is embodied in Nineteenth-Century Liberalism.

Propositions of Personal Choice

11. While developments in chaos and complexity theory have strengthened the theoretical undergirding of naturalistic evolution by discovering chemical and biological processes of self-organization unknown forty years ago, the new improved arguments for evolution still do not have sufficient explanatory power to serve as an argument for Naturalism.
12. Although the conflict between Galileo and the Roman Catholic Church has popularly been portrayed as an example of the warfare between Christianity and science, an analysis of the Galileo affair makes it clear that such a characterization is misleading, that there are several levels of discourse in the relationship between science and faith, and that these levels of discourse can be fruitfully applied to contemporary alleged conflicts between Christianity and modern science.
13. The attempt to present theological themes on television has generally met with less than sterling success. The original *Star Trek* series, although frequently treating theological themes, more often than not presented bad theology rather than biblical theology, although by both positive and negative examples, it provides abundant opportunity to illustrate theological issues in the classroom setting! However, despite some unfortunate flirtation with universalism, the recent CBS show *Joan of Arcadia* does a credible job, within a realistic rather than a science fiction or fantasy setting, of presenting the inscrutable ways of God in the work of divine providence and is an intriguing attempt at developing Christian television.

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