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INTRODUCTION

Thinking About God & Time

GREGORY E. GANSSLE

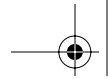


One day when my son David was five, he asked me, “Is all of God in this room, or only part of God?” At the time I was only beginning to work on my doctoral dissertation on God’s relation to time, so I did what many parents do. I deflected the question. I told him that I might know the answer when I finished my dissertation.

David’s question is no less perplexing for an adult than it is for a five-year-old child. We hold that God is everywhere, but it is not always clear what we mean by such a claim. In what sense is God in the room? We do not think he is spread out in space the way I am spread out when I lie down for a nap on the couch. It is not that part of God is here at the foot of the couch and a different part of God is at the head of the couch. Do we want to say that all of God is here and all of God is there? Is God wholly in two places at once?

These options do not exhaust the possibilities. God is not a physical being the way I am. When we think that God is everywhere, perhaps we are thinking that there is no place where his love, power and knowledge cannot reach. God is not limited by space. Every point in space is





directly accessible to him. One philosopher, Richard Swinburne, has expressed God's omnipresence in the following way:

God is supposed to be able to move any part of the universe directly; he does not need to use one part of the universe to make another part move. He can make any part move as a basic action. . . . The claim that God controls *all* things directly and knows about *all* things without the information coming to him through some causal chain, e.g., without light rays from a distance needing to stimulate his eyes, has often been expressed as the doctrine of God's omnipresence.¹

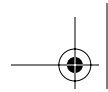
It is God's direct access to every point in space that constitutes his omnipresence. If we do not think of God as existing literally somewhere (that is, at some location in space) it is easier to think of him as standing outside space and creating it, and acting within it. Some of the reason that it is easy to think in this way is that we often think of space as a container—sort of like a box—in which all of the events of the universe happen. God created the box and stands outside it watching. He also interacts with the things in the box.

Where was God when he created the box? If God "stands outside" the box, he does not do so in any literal way. There is no place outside of space. If all of space is in the box and came into being when God created the box, then God was not in any place when he created space. If God stands outside the box, then he does not stand at any place as he stands there. Where can we go from his presence? Nowhere! Everywhere we go, he is there. He is there in that he has direct knowledge and access to every place we could go. We do not mean that God is contained in every place in the universe. When we say that God is everywhere, perhaps we do not mean either that God is spread out throughout the physical universe or that God is wholly located at every point in the universe. Instead maybe we mean that God is not contained in space and that he has direct access to every point in space.

Did God create time in the same way he created space? If so, is he standing outside time? What of God's relation to time? God is, the psalmists affirm, "from everlasting to everlasting." He is not limited by time. He did not have a beginning in time, nor will his existence end in time. But is he in time the way we are? Is there any sense in which he can be

¹Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1977), pp. 103-4.





said to stand outside time as he stands outside space? What is the best way to think about God's relation to time? This is the question taken up by the writers of this volume.

Methodology: Faith Seeking Understanding

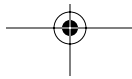
How do we go about thinking about God's relation to time? To be sure, we want our thinking to be rooted in the Scriptures. It is not clear that any particular theory of divine eternity can claim scriptural authority. After all, the Bible does not make many purely metaphysical claims. We might not want to think that we can read our view of God's relation to time directly from the few texts that seem to have relevant implications. What the Bible will do for us, however, is provide the parameters for any adequate understanding of God's relation to time. On the one hand, we read that God is the Creator of all and he did not begin in time. Anything that has come into being was brought into being by his agency. As a result, God is Lord over creation. He is the rightful ruler, and he is subject to nothing outside of himself. The fact that God is the Creator of all implies that God is sovereign over everything, including time. If God brought time into being, then he existed without time. If he existed without time, even if he is temporal now, he was timeless.

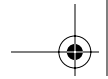
Now I have to admit that it is strange to say that God *was* timeless. It sounds as if I am claiming that there was a point in time at which he was timeless. What I mean to stress here is it is possible for God to exist without time. If past time is finite, and if God brought time into being, he is independent of time in this way.

On the other hand, the Scriptures uniformly portray God as loving and as interacting with created beings. He upholds the creation, he gives life, he redeems and forgives sinful people. He answers our prayers and knows what we need even before we ask. No theory of God's relation to time will be adequate if it does not allow for genuine interaction between God and his people.

These parameters allow for a plurality of positions about how God is related to time. Determining which position is most adequate takes us beyond the particular data of the Scriptures. We will have to think philosophically while remaining within the parameters of Scripture. That is, we must think both Christianly and philosophically about the issue.

Christian philosophers have traditionally sought to think Christianly



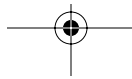
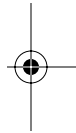


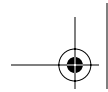
by thinking in the mode of *faith seeking understanding*. This mode was introduced as early as Augustine (354-430) and has been articulated throughout the history of the church. What it means to operate in this mode is that Christian philosophers recognize that they know some things by faith in a reliable authority. For example, they know some things simply because they see them in the Scriptures. As God's written revelation, the Scriptures are reliable indicators of what is true. Philosophers begin with this knowledge (we could call it faith-knowledge) and try to reach another kind of knowledge (understanding-knowledge). Understanding-knowledge is knowledge gained through the application of one's own reason.

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 kind. 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 issue by our reason often involves a process of unfolding what is only suggested or hinted at in the Scriptures. Thus philosophers may differ from each other in what they claim to have grasped.

The great Christian thinkers of the early and high Middle Ages applied the method of faith seeking understanding and came to the conclusion that God is eternal in the sense of being *atemporal* or outside time.² If God is atemporal, he is not in time at all. Usually there are two aspects to such a claim. First, God exists but does not exist *at* any time. Second, God does not experience things in succession. God does not experience the birth of Caesar before he experiences the making of a Caesar salad at the Yorkside Restaurant in New Haven. Both of these events are experienced by God in the "eternal now." This position is similar to the one discussed about God's relation to space. God is not located at any point in time, and his relation to each

²The word *eternal* was used by writers such as Augustine, Boethius, Anselm and Aquinas to mean "outside time." Now *eternal* is used to assert the limitless nature of God's life. As such, it can mean either temporally everlasting or atemporal. When I want to describe God as being outside time, I use *atemporal*. When I wish to describe God as inside time, I use *everlasting*.





point in time is the same as his relation to any other.

Most philosophers today disagree. While agreeing that God is eternal, they understand his eternality as his being temporally everlasting. He exists at all times and through all times.³ God never began to exist, and he will never go out of existence, but he is in time. God experiences temporal succession. God experiences the birth of Caesar before he experiences the making of the Caesar salad. God, on this view, exists *at* all times. He exists at the present moment, he has existed at each past moment, and he will exist at each future moment.

One approach to figuring out which of these positions is stronger is to try to fit what we think about other aspects of God's nature together with a theory about God's relation to time. What we want to say about God's power or knowledge or omnipresence will have some bearing on our understanding of how it is that God is eternal. In addition, we will try to fit our theories together with other issues besides what God himself is like. Some of the most obvious issues include the nature of time, the nature of change and the creation of the universe.

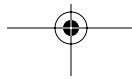
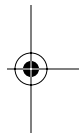
There are a number of concerns that can arise when we try to fit our thinking about these issues together. First, it may be that some of the things we hold about the nature of God or of time or the universe contradict what we want to say about his relation to time. Such a contradiction would be reason enough to change our view of God's attributes or our view of how he is related to time. Second, it may be that some of what we think is true about God or the world is *better explained* either by the view that God is in time or by the view that he is outside time.

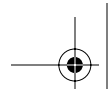
Five Important Issues

Let's briefly consider five important issues that are relevant to thinking about God and time. They are the nature of time, the creation of the universe, God's knowledge of the future, God's interaction with his people and the fullness of God's life.

The nature of time. There are many issues concerning the nature of

³It is interesting that as recently as 1975 it was thought that the majority view was that God is not in time. See Nicholas Wolterstorff, "God Everlasting," in *God and the Good: Essays in Honor of Henry Stob*, ed. Clifton J. Orlebeke and Lewis B. Smedes (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1975), reprinted in *Contemporary Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Steven M. Cahn and David Shatz (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), pp. 77-98, esp. p. 77.





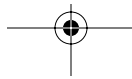
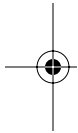
time that are both relevant to our topic and interesting in their own right. The one on which I shall focus has to do with whether “the Now” exists independently of our experience. There are two basic answers to this question. Not surprisingly, they are yes and no. Those who answer yes hold the A-theory of time (also known as the *process* or *tensed* theory). Those who answer no, “the Now” is merely a feature of our experience of the world, hold what is called the B-theory of time (also called the *stasis* theory or the *tenseless* theory). The labels “A-theory” and “B-theory” were introduced by the Cambridge philosopher J. M. E. McTaggart in the early years of the twentieth century.⁴ Although they are not very descriptive, they have become fairly standard ways of distinguishing theories of time.

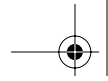
The B-theory holds that the most important thing about locating events in time is their relation to other events. So something happens before, after or at the same time as something else. The A-theory does not deny that events stand in these relations, but it holds that the more important thing about events is that some are in the past, some are in the future and some are happening now. The B-theorist thinks that the relations of past, present and future can be explained in terms of the relations *before*, *simultaneous with* and *after*. The A-theorist denies that these explanations are adequate. They are not adequate, it is argued, because they leave out the reality of the Now.

What is the Now? The A-theorist says that the Now exists in a way that the past and the future do not. The Now is a privileged temporal location. The B-theorist holds that the Now is dependent on the psychological states of knowing minds. In other words, it is part of how we are conscious of the world. If there were no minds, there would be no Now. It is part of our subjective take on the world. Each moment of time, according to the B-theory, is as real as any other moment.

Take some particular event, such as the event of a particular elephant taking a drink of water 141 years ago. Most A-theorists will hold that this event does not exist. It is not real. It did exist (141 years ago), but it no

⁴J. M. E. McTaggart, *The Nature of Existence*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1927), chap. 33. The argument in this chapter appeared in an earlier version in the journal *Mind* (17 [1908]: 457-74). The chapter is reprinted in *The Philosophy of Time*, ed. Robin Le Poidevin and Murray MacBeath (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 23-34.





longer does.⁵ The B-theorist will believe that the event in question is real. It does exist. It exists now even if it is not occurring now. It occurred 141 years ago.

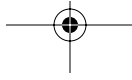
These theories are important to our topic because many philosophers think that if the A-theory of time is true, then God must be a temporal being. God can be atemporal only if the B-theory is true. Not every philosopher thinks there is this connection between the atemporality of God and the B-theory, but many, including some of our authors, do. Why do some philosophers make this connection? There are two reasons. First, they believe that, if the A-theory is true, God must change (and therefore he must be temporal). Second, they also think that if the A-theory is true, an atemporal God could not be omniscient. The claim that God knows everything that can be known is a claim with strong scriptural support.

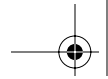
God must change, it is held, because he stands in relation to a changing reality. For example, if God sustains a changing world in existence, he sustains Caesar's existence before he sustains the existence of the Caesar salad. On the A-theory, the existence of Caesar is most fundamentally past. So God no longer sustains Caesar's existence. Now he is sustaining the existence of the Caesar salad. God is doing different things at different times. He is changing.

If the A-theory is true, there is an irreducible fact about what is happening now. The fact is irreducible in that it cannot be fully explained in terms of its relation to other events. Suppose my wife, Jeanie, is eating a Caesar salad at Yorkside right now. That this fact is happening now cannot be fully explained by saying things like "Jeanie eats the salad at the same time that Greg types this sentence (or at the same time that you read this sentence)." It is true that Jeanie eats the salad at the same time that I type or that you read. What is not the case is that this sentence explains fully what we mean by "Jeanie is now eating the Caesar salad at Yorkside." We can learn about all of the events that happen at the same time that Jeanie eats the salad and still not know that it happens now.

If God is atemporal, his relation to each event is the same. He knows them all in his eternal Now. How does he know which of them occurs

⁵Garry DeWeese has reminded me that some A-theorists, such as Michael Tooley and himself, think that both the past and the present are real but the future is not.





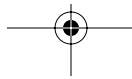
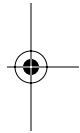
now and which has already occurred? Since every event is “present” to him, he cannot know which is actually present. Some atemporalists will embrace this difficulty and hold to the B-theory. There is no Now independent of our temporal location. Since God is not temporally located, there is no objective Now. By knowing that Jeanie eats the salad at the same time that you read this sentence (and at the same time as a whole lot of other events), God knows everything there is to know about when Jeanie eats lunch.

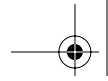
These, then, are two of the reasons that some believe that if the A-theory is true, God must be temporal. Whether they are correct is, I think, still an open question.

God and creation. Another parameter for our thinking that is given to us in the Scriptures, besides the fact that God is omniscient, is that God created the universe. The Bible is not too clear about exactly how he did this, and there are exegetical controversies over *when* he did it, but the fact remains that the universe is a created thing. The fact that the universe is a created thing raises several important questions for our study. I shall discuss two of them here. First, can the universe be infinitely old? Second, even if the universe had a beginning, must time have a beginning?

Can the universe—a created universe—be infinitely old? Most of us think of creation as creation *ex nihilo*, out of nothing. That God created the universe out of nothing is usually thought to imply that the universe is not infinitely old. It had a beginning. Christian thinkers such as Aquinas, however, thought that the universe could have been infinitely old and still have been created out of nothing by God. God’s creative action would not be the act of *bringing* the universe into existence. Rather, it would be the act of *sustaining* the universe in existence. If God did not hold the universe in existence, even for a moment, it would fall out of existence into nothingness. God, then, holds it out of nothing rather than brings it out of nothing.

Considerations such as Aquinas’s are important for thinking through God’s relation to time. If the idea that the universe has an infinite past is consistent with the doctrine of creation, then it is also possible that time never began. If time never began, then it is possible that God has been in time for the complete extent of his existence. The Scriptures say that he is “from everlasting to everlasting.” If time is infinite and God is in





time, then this passage can be taken at face value. God is in time and he never began to be in time and he will never cease being in time. God has existed throughout the infinite past and will exist throughout an infinite future.

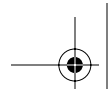
It might be the case, therefore, that the biblical doctrine of creation allows room for an infinitely old universe. Whether this is the best view on the topic is another matter. Most of us think that God did bring the universe into existence. If this is the case, there is still the open question of whether God brought time into existence as well. Time may have had an infinite past but the universe only a finite one. If this is the case, then at some moment in time God created the universe. He existed throughout an infinite amount of time and then brought the universe into existence.

There are, it turns out, some good reasons to think that this story is not the way it happened. Whether these reasons should be persuasive remains to be seen. First, there is the nagging question of why God created the universe exactly when he did. It nagged Augustine until he began to think of God as atemporal. It seems as though any point in the infinite past is as good as any other, since there is nothing that makes them different from each other. Did God arbitrarily pick out some point and decide "Now I will do it," as on a whim? Or did God have some reason to prefer one moment to all of the others? Either way of answering this question seems a bit strange. Whether the strangeness is enough to send us looking for a different answer or not is an open question.

The second reason it may not be the case that time has an infinite past is that there is a strong argument that such a thing is not possible. I call it a strong argument because I find it persuasive and am not impressed by any of the objections I have seen. I must admit, though, that many philosophers do not think it is very strong. It is called the Kalam cosmological argument.⁶ The basic idea is that it is impossible for the past to be infinite because *it is impossible to complete any infinite*

⁶For more on the Kalam cosmological argument, see William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1994), chap. 3, and J. P. Moreland, *Scaling the Secular City* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1987), chap. 1. For more technical discussions of the argument, see William Lane Craig, *The Kalam Cosmological Argument* (London: Macmillan, 1979), and William Lane Craig and Quentin Smith, *Theism, Atheism and Big Bang Cosmology* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), sec. 1.



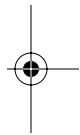


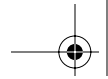
series by successive addition. I can explain what I mean by using an example. Think about this question. Why is it impossible to count to infinity? The reason is not that we will die before we reach the end. It is that no matter how many numbers we count (even if we count by tens) we will always be at some finite number and will always have an infinitely many more numbers to go. An infinite series cannot be completed one at a time. The past is a complete series. Furthermore, it was completed by successive addition. Each moment was added to the past one at a time. If no infinite series can be completed in this way, then the past must be finite.

Some philosophers have objected to this argument by pointing out that when you count *to* infinity, you begin at a particular number, the number one. The whole point of thinking that the past may be infinite is that there is no starting point. Thus they conclude that the analogy with counting to infinity is not very strong. I think there are two replies that can be made to this concern. First, we can run the counting analogy in the other direction and ask whether it is possible to count backward from infinity to zero (or forward, from negative infinity to zero.) This case is more analogous to the claim that the past is infinite. It is apparent to me that completing an infinite series by successive addition is shown to be impossible whichever direction we count. The second reply is to recall that each past moment in time was, at one time, present. If the past is infinite, then an infinite number of moments were present one at a time. The only way an infinite number of moments can have been present one at a time is if it is possible that an infinite series of moments can elapse one at a time. The counting to infinity analogy appears, in light of this, to be strong after all.

The question of why God created the universe when he did and the Kalam argument give us good reason to think that time came into existence. To be sure, there are objections to both of these points, and some of our authors will discuss some of these objections, but for now I want to point out that the position that both the universe and time came into existence has some reason behind it. If time came into existence but God did not, then God existed without time. God *was* atemporal. It may be the case that God *became* temporal as he created time, or he could be atemporal even with the existence of time.

God's knowledge of the future. The most prominent issue in many



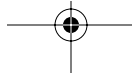


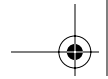
people's thinking about God's relation to time is God's foreknowledge of free actions. It has long been held that the Scriptures portray God as knowing everything. He knows the secrets of our hearts, he knows every event that is now occurring, and he knows everything about the past and the future. There is no problem with God's knowledge of the future if future things are fixed in some way. For example, given the way the world is and the laws of physics, it is true that the earth will be in a certain position relative to the planet Jupiter exactly one year from now. This kind of future truth is not problematic. Consider another kind of future truth. Suppose that tomorrow morning I shall choose, as my boys David and Nick often do, between Lucky Charms and Fruity Pebbles for breakfast (my daughter prefers macaroni and cheese). Suppose also that my choice will be a free choice. Can God know which cereal I shall choose ahead of time? It seems as though there is the following problem. If God knows today that I shall choose Pebbles, then when I get up tomorrow, it is already true that I shall choose Pebbles. If it is true that I shall choose Pebbles, am I really able to choose Lucky Charms? The only way I can choose Lucky Charms is if I can make it the case that God had different beliefs from those he had. Since God knew before the foundation of the world that I would choose Pebbles, I can choose Lucky Charms only if I can act on the past. But I cannot act on the past. I cannot make it the case that God believed something other than what he did believe. So I cannot choose Lucky Charms after all. The choice that I thought was free turns out not to be free after all.⁷

Many thinkers have noticed that the argument I discussed works only if God is in time. It works only if God's knowing things is something that happens *at* times. As a result, if God is not in time, he does not know things at times, and his knowledge of my breakfast choice does not occur before my choice at all.

In fact the position that God is not in time but is outside time is often cited as the best solution to the problem of reconciling God's knowledge of the future and human freedom. Boethius, Anselm, Aquinas and many others have appealed to God's atemporality to solve this problem.

⁷The literature on God's knowledge of future free actions is enormous, and I have left out lots of details here. For a good discussion of the problem of divine foreknowledge and human freedom see James Beilby and Paul Eddy, eds., *Divine Foreknowledge: Four Views* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2001).





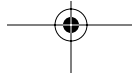
If God is atemporal, after all, he does not *foreknow* anything. His knowledge of any event is not something that happens at some time. It is eternal. If it is not temporally located, it is not located *before* the free choice in question.

While the atemporalist's solution seems to offer a good strategy, at least one significant problem remains. This problem is prophecy. Suppose God tells Noah, among other things, that I shall eat Fruity Pebbles for breakfast tomorrow. Now we have a different situation entirely. While God's knowledge that I shall eat Fruity Pebbles is not in the past, Noah's knowledge that I shall eat Pebbles *is* in the past. Furthermore, since the information came from God, Noah cannot be mistaken about the future event. By the time I was born in 1956, it was already true that I shall eat Fruity Pebbles in the year 2000. The only way I can pick Lucky Charms, then, is if I can act on the past.

Prophecy is a problem, some will argue, only if God actually tells Noah (or anyone else) what I shall do. God, it seems, does not tell much to Noah or any other prophet. After all, why should God tell Noah? Noah certainly does not care about my breakfast! Since prophecy of this sort is pretty rare, we can be confident that God's knowledge does not rule out our freedom. Some have argued, however, that if it is even *possible* for God to tell Noah (or anyone else for that matter) what I shall do, then we have a version of the same problem we would have if we held that God is in time and foreknows my choice of breakfast. We could call this version the "possible prophet" problem. If the possible prophet problem is serious enough to show that God's atemporal knowledge of future acts (future, that is, from our present vantage point) makes it the case that those acts are not free, then holding God to be atemporal does not solve the problem of foreknowledge.

Even if prophecy of this kind is rare, Scripture includes cases of very specific prophecies. Jesus, for example, told Peter that he would deny him three times before the cock crowed. Yet it seems that Peter's denial was a free action. Examples such as this one are important reminders that Christian philosophy must deal faithfully with the Scriptures. It will not do for us to be dismissive of these cases.

Issues about God's knowledge of future free acts, then, may not give as strong a reason to think of God as atemporal as many have thought. Attempting to answer the possible prophet problem is beyond the scope





of this introduction. It is enough to point out that there is still much work to be done on God's knowledge of the future.⁸

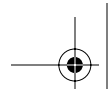
God's interaction with his people. Various reasons have been put forward for thinking that God must change. God, for example, intervenes in the world. He spoke to Jesus at his baptism, and later he raised him from the dead. Later still, he spoke through the apostles in the writing of the New Testament. If God spoke to Jesus *before* he raised him from the dead, then God's actions occur at different times. If his actions take place *at* different times, it looks as though he is temporal.

It may be, though, that the *effects* of God's actions occur at different times but his *acting* does not. In one eternal act he wills the speaking to Jesus at one time and the raising from the dead at another. The fact that the effects of God's eternal will occur sequentially does not imply that God's acts themselves take place in sequence and are therefore temporal.

Apart from God's acting in the world in such dramatic fashion, the Scriptures indicate that God interacts with ordinary human beings. He answers our prayers and forgives our sin. He also comes to our aid and comforts and strengthens us. He is "a very present help in time of trouble." If God is not in time, can he interact in these ways? It all depends, of course, on what is necessary for genuine interaction to occur. If it is not possible to answer a prayer request unless the answer is given *after* the request, then the fact that God answers prayer will guarantee that he is temporal. Some thinkers have argued that although answers to requests normally come after the request, it is not necessary that they do so. In order to count as an answer to a request, an action must happen *because of* the request. These thinkers recognize, however, that not any "because of" relation will do. The answer must be given in order to

⁸I should point out that some theologians and philosophers have argued that God does not know future free actions. These thinkers hold that God knows all that can be known and therefore is omniscient. The position they put forward is that there are fewer things that can be known than we have traditionally thought. These thinkers believe that this view is more consistent with how the Scriptures portray God's nature and interaction with people than the traditional view. Three books on this theme are worth mentioning: Clark Pinnock et al., *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1994); David Basinger, *The Case for Freewill Theism: A Philosophical Assessment* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1996); and John Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1998).





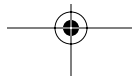
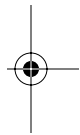
respond to the request. The relation that is relevant to answering a request has to do with intention or purpose. If I make my daughter, Elizabeth, a bowl of macaroni and cheese for breakfast in answer to her request, I make it, at least in part, in order to do what she asked me to do. I make the macaroni and cheese because she asked for it—in response to her request. My action counts as an answer to her request because of my intention to fulfill her request.

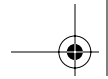
Now when I make breakfast for Elizabeth, the request comes before I make the macaroni. But if I knew ahead of time what she was going to ask for, I could make it ahead of time. My action would still count as an answer to her request. I would perform the action because of and in order to fulfill the request. Notice that the request does not have to come before the answer. If the relation between a request and an answer does not have to be a temporally sequential one, then it is possible that an atemporal God could answer prayer. It may be that he hears all our prayers in his one eternal Now and in that same eternal Now he wills the answers to our various requests.

The fullness of God's being. In thinking about God's nature, we notice that whatever God is, he is to the greatest degree possible. He knows everything that it is possible to know. He can do anything that it is possible to do. He is maximally merciful. This "maximal property idea" can be applied as well to the nature of God's life. God is a living being. He is not an abstract object like a number. He is not inanimate like a magnetic force. He is alive. If whatever is true of him is true of him to the greatest degree possible, then his life is the fullest life possible. Whatever God's life is like, he surely has it to the fullest degree.

Some philosophers have argued that this fact about God's life requires that he be atemporal. No being that experiences its life sequentially can have the fullest life possible. Temporal beings experience their lives one moment at a time. The past is gone and the future is not yet. The past part of my life is gone forever. I can remember it, but I cannot experience it directly. The future part of my life is not yet here. I can anticipate it and worry about it, but I cannot yet experience it. I only experience a brief slice of my life at any one time. My life, then, is spread out and diffuse.

It is this transient nature of our experience that gives rise to much of the wistfulness and regret we may feel about our lives. This feeling of





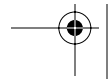
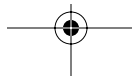
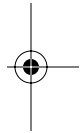
regret lends credibility to the idea that a sequential life is a life that is less than maximally full. Older people sometimes wish for earlier days, while younger people long to mature. We grieve for the people we love who are now gone. We grieve also for the events and times that no longer persist.

When we think about the life of God, it is strange to think of God longing for the past or for the future. The idea that God might long for some earlier time or regret the passing of some age seems like an attribution of weakness or inadequacy to God. God in his self-sufficiency cannot in any way be inadequate. If it is the experience of the passage of time that grounds these longings, there is good reason not to attribute any experience of time to God. Therefore God is atemporal. He experiences all of his life at once in the eternal present. Nothing of his life is past, and nothing of it is future. God possesses his life “all at once.” Boethius’s famous definition of eternity captures this idea. “Eternity, then, is the whole, simultaneous and perfect possession of boundless life.”⁹

Those who think that God is in some way temporal do not want to attribute weakness or inadequacy to God. Nor do they hold that God’s life is less than maximally full. They will deny, rather, that God cannot experience a maximally full life if he is temporal. These philosophers will point out that many of our regrets about the passage of time are closely tied to our finitude. It is our finitude that grounds our inadequacy, not our temporality. We regret the loss of the past both because our lives are short and because our memories are dim and inaccurate. God’s life, temporal though it may be, is not finite, and his memory is perfectly vivid. He does not lose anything with the passage of time. Nor does his life draw closer to an end.

If our regrets about the passage of time are a function more of our finitude than of our temporality, much of the force of these considerations is removed. Furthermore, if the tensed theory of time is correct, it may be that fullness of God’s life will require his temporality. The discussion about whether an atemporal God can know facts or proposi-

⁹“Aeternitas igitur est interminabilis vitae tota simul et perfecta possessio,” *Consolation of Philosophy* V prose VI, in Boethius, *Tractates and The Consolation of Philosophy*, trans. H. F. Stewart, E. K. Rand and S. J. Tester, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1918), pp. 422-23.





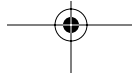
tions about the present concerns the fullness of his life. As we have pointed out, some philosophers hold that God's knowledge, and therefore his life, will be impoverished considerably if he is eternal, since there will be propositions or facts about the present time that he will not know.

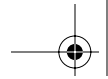
One important issue that this argument concerning the fullness of God's life ought to put to rest is the idea that those who hold God to be atemporal hold that God is something inert like a number or a property. Whether or not they are correct, the eternalist holds that it is the *fullness* of God's life (rather than its impoverishment) that determines his relation to time.

The Essays, the Authors

I have briefly introduced five of the issues that are relevant to understanding God's relation to time. My goal has been to set some direction and to whet your appetite for the discussion that follows. Our authors are some of the leading thinkers in the area of God and time. They have published many technical books and articles on this and related topics. There are no better people to bring to you four views of God and time. Each author will present an essay in which he argues for his view of the relation between God and time. Each essay is followed by a brief response from each other author. Finally, each author will have a chance to respond to the criticisms of his view that his three coauthors raise. The format of this book allows for a substantial interaction between philosophers holding various positions. All that is left for me to do is introduce our authors.

Paul Helm is the J. I. Packer Professor of Theology and Philosophy at Regent College in Vancouver, B.C. Previously he taught as professor of the history and philosophy of religion at King's College at the University of London from 1993 to 2000, and he has published numerous books and articles, including *Eternal God: A Study of God Without Time* (Clarendon, 1988) and *Faith and Understanding* (Eerdmans, 1997). In his chapter, "Divine Timeless Eternity," he defends the traditional view that God is absolutely timeless. Helm adds the qualifier *absolutely* to emphasize that God's timelessness is not affected by his creation of the temporal universe. God is timeless without the universe (if the universe is not everlasting), and God is timeless with the universe (now that the universe exists). God's timelessness is completely independent of the existence and nature of the universe.

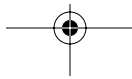


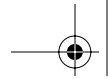


The doctrine of timelessness is defended against both philosophical and biblical objections, and several reasons are given in support of this view. The most salient reasons, Helm claims, rest on “the idea of divine fullness or self-sufficiency.” It is the fullness of God’s life that makes timelessness the more appropriate mode of his being. God’s experience of his own life and being is too full to be contained in any time or to be experienced part by part or moment by moment. Thinking of God as temporal, then, is thinking of his life as somewhat impoverished. Because God is atemporal, Helm argues, God experiences the full extent of his own life and being in one atemporal experience.

Alan G. Padgett is professor of systematic theology at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota. He has written *God, Eternity and the Nature of Time* (1992; reprint, Wipf & Stock, 2000) and has coauthored *Christianity and Western Thought*, vol. 2, *Faith and Reason in the Nineteenth Century* (InterVarsity Press, 2000) as well as several papers on God’s relation to time. He argues, in “Eternity as Relative Timelessness,” that both the traditional atemporalist position and the view that God is temporally everlasting are inadequate. The picture of God as everlasting is inadequate because our doctrine of creation implies that God will transcend time in some way. Time, at least if modern physics is near the truth, is a created thing. Therefore it depends on God. God brought it into being, yet he himself was not brought into being. God’s life, then, transcends time.

Padgett argues that the atemporalist position is also inadequate. The inadequacy here is philosophical. God can be atemporal, Padgett reasons, only if the stasis theory (or B-theory) of time is true. If the process theory (A-theory) is true, then God must be temporal in some sense. Padgett argues that this conclusion follows from God’s sustaining the changing world in its existence. Padgett’s third view is that God is relatively timeless. He is timeless relative to physical time, but he is temporal relative to metaphysical time. Metaphysical time is a pure duration that can flow without any changes. It is not dependent on the physical universe and is not created. God, then, is not constrained by any created thing. God’s being is ontologically prior to the metaphysically temporal aspect of his life. God is not limited by metaphysical time. He is the ground of it. God is timeless relative to our physical time, but God exists in his own time.

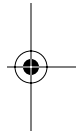


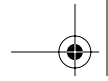


William Lane Craig is research professor of philosophy at Talbot School of Theology. He has published many articles and books about time and God's relation to time, including *The Tensed Theory of Time: A Critical Examination* and *The Tenseless Theory of Time: A Critical Examination* (both Kluwer Academic, 2000) and *Theism, Atheism, and Big Bang Cosmology*, coauthored with Quentin Smith (Oxford University Press, 1993). In "Timelessness and Omnitemporality" he argues that since the creation of the universe God has been temporal. Independent of creating the universe ("before" creation) God is best thought of as being timeless. There are two reasons God must be temporal if a temporal world exists. First, God has real relation to any created world, and a real relation to a temporal world cannot be had by a timeless being. Second, God must be temporal if he is omniscient. If there is a temporal world, there are tensed facts God must know. Attempts to eliminate tensed facts fail, Craig argues, and any revision to the concept of omniscience that does not require God to know tensed facts seems ad hoc.

Craig thinks that if there were no temporal creation, God would be timeless. Any appeal to some kind of amorphous time that has no metric prior to creation will not make it possible that God has existed everlastingly. Craig rejects this alternative because even given an amorphous, nonmetrical time, God would have to endure "a beginningless series of longer and longer intervals," which is impossible. Such an infinite series of longer intervals is as impossible to complete as an infinite series of temporal intervals of some equal metric in duration. So God is timeless without the temporal creation, and he has become temporal since creating a world in which time is real.

Nicholas Wolterstorff is Noah Porter Professor of Philosophy at the Yale Divinity School. He has published many books and articles, including *Locke and the Ethics of Belief* (Cambridge University Press, 1996) and *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim That God Speaks* (Cambridge University Press, 1995) as well as the seminal paper "God Everlasting." In "Unqualified Divine Temporality," he points out that Christian philosophers ought to take the language of Scripture literally unless there are good reasons not to do so. Given the way that God is portrayed as having a history, those who hold that God is atemporal bear a heavy burden of proof. Wolterstorff's arguments that God is in time are not meant to be independent of the scriptural testimony. Rather, he is providing





additional reasons for taking those claims as literal.

Wolterstorff brings two considerations to support his contention. First, he argues that the A-theory of time is true. If the A-theory is true, then God must be temporal. He must be temporal because he must know what is happening now. Wolterstorff defends his position against attempts to eliminate the A-series. Our usage of temporal indexical terms, he argues, is not strictly parallel to our usage of spatial indexicals. As a result, temporal indexicals cannot be eliminated the way spatial indexicals can be.

Wolterstorff's second major consideration is that the language of Scripture describes God as unfolding his plan to redeem the world in history. The historic nature of God's unfolding his plan implies that God performs certain actions before he performs others. Wolterstorff holds that this history cannot be interpreted as God timelessly bringing it about that, for example, *Moses is spoken to* before *Jesus is spoken to*. He insists that the sequence is of *God speaking* first to Moses and then later to Jesus. This interpretation is required because the Scriptures affirm that God responds to his people's crying out to him. He can respond to our cries only when it is the case that we are crying out. He must, then, be in time.

The Christian church has always believed that God himself invites us to explore his nature. These brief descriptions of the essays in this book highlight the varied considerations that are important in thinking out God's relation to time. There is no better place to start this investigation than with the following essays.

