Introduction

Let us assume that the eternal God of Christian theism has created the universe. How then should we understand God’s relationship with our time-bound universe? Does God experience each moment of time successively or does he transcend time in such a way that all moments are equally present to God? How we understand God’s relationship to time has implications for our understanding of the nature of time, the creation of the universe, God’s interaction with creation, the fullness of God’s life, and God’s knowledge of the future. Many philosophers have skillfully approached this difficult topic, yet each contending for different views. The debate essentially revolves around distinctions between two theories of time. The first theory, the A-theory (classically coupled with a presentist metaphysic\(^1\) ), holds that objective temporal becoming is real and that only the present moment exists. The B-theory asserts a static view of time in which all moments are equally real and temporal becoming is nothing more than an illusion generated by our own subjective perception of reality.\(^2\) Theses of timelessness and temporality seem obviously contradictory. In this paper I will attempt to construct a new model of divine eternity with the purpose of resolving the tension between these two positions. The problem for two contemporary views I will discuss and for contemporary discussions of divine eternity in general, lies in the assumption of ontological univocism and a misunderstanding of God’s essential nature. By appealing to a robust doctrine of divine simplicity and an ontological distinction between creator and creature, I see the possibility of developing a model for divine eternity that makes the propositions “God is timeless” and “God is temporal” consistent. As part of this development, I will address two potential problems; the alleged incoherence of divine simplicity and the problem of theological predication.

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1 Presentism, more specifically, is the view that our most inclusive quantifiers only range over present entities. Conversely, eternalism is the view that our most inclusive quantifiers range over past, present, and future entities. For an in-depth discussion see Thomas M. Crisp, *Presentism, eternalism, and relativity physics*, ed. William Lane Craig and Quentin Smith, (London: Routledge, 2008)

2 Ibid., 14.
Contemporary Models for Divine Eternity and Time

Eternalism and the Hybrid Model

It is worth reviewing two recent attempts to overcome the contradiction between timelessness and temporality.

Paul Helms argues for absolute divine timelessness, a view which entails the complete independence of God from time, by appealing to the metaphysical intuition of God’s complete self-sufficiency and fullness of life; a view often associated with Perfect Being Theology. Helm notes that if God is in time, and his duration is backwardly everlasting, he must have moments or segments of his life which constitute parts of his life that are over and done with. According to Helm, this is incompatible with the eternalist’s position because it seems to imply a lack in God who, according to Christian theism, is the perfect and all-sufficient explanation for everything ad extra. He bases his conception of God’s nature partly on (admittedly ambivalent) Christian scripture but he also appeals to cosmological arguments which move from the fact of change to the existence of a changeless cause.

Helm argues that if God created the world and if the A-theory of time is true, then God would be in time; thus if God is changeless, the only option for the eternalist is to adopt a B-theory of time.

According to Helm:

From the divine standpoint no one moment of the series would be privileged by being present, but as regards presentness, pastness or futurity, some moments would be earlier in relation to others in the series, some later. It is a temporal order, in which causal powers operate. And yet it is a B-series of a rather special kind, whose every moment is also eternally present to God.

The problem with this is it seems to render God’s omniscience incompatible with God’s timelessness.

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3 Eternalism is a view that maintains absolute divine timelessness. Or more specifically, eternalism is the view that our most inclusive quantifiers range over past, present, and future entities. See Thomas M. Crisp, *Presentism, eternalism, and relativity physics*, ed. William Lane Craig and Quentin Smith, (London: Routledge, 2008).


5 Ibid., 34.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid., 58.

8 Ibid.
Given the B-theory it seems that God cannot have knowledge of tensed truths. Helm responds:

It is also a concern that God could not know that we were ever speaking the truth when we say (in 1999) ‘It is now 1999.’ But we know that someone is speaking the truth when they make that utterance in 1999 and only then. And the eternal God (if he is omniscient) knows for any year all the utterances made in that year, and is able to distinguish the truth from the false. And God can eternally decree to respond to Moses at some time by knowing that the present for Moses is the moment immediately after those times that he can have memories of. At such a moment we may suppose that Moses prays to God, and God, eternally knowing this, eternally wills to respond to his knowledge of Moses’ cry at that moment. So God did know that when, in 1999, I say ‘It is now 1999,’ I’m speaking the truth, for he knows that I’m saying this in 1999, and that’s sufficient.  

Helm’s solution appears to involve the use of quasi-indicators. Therefore, instead of God knowing at time $t_1$ that it is “now” $t_1$ and not $t_2$, God knows at $t_1$ that it is “then” $t_1$ and not $t_2$. The word “then” does not express indexical reference by the speaker but rather attributes indexical reference to the knower. If I am saying at $t_1$ that Bob knows it is then $t_1$, I am attributing to Bob the use of an indexical reference. The knower will use the word “now” in his sentence. The word “then” can be used at any time by anybody to make the same statement. By way of contrast, the word “now” doesn’t have that feature. Only the speaker uses the word “now.” If they both use it, then they are making different statements, whereas the word “then” can be used repeatedly to make the same statement. But, this would also involve use of the transitive principle of knowledge. So, if $S$ knows that $R$ knows that $P$, then it is the case that $S$ knows that $P$. If Bob knows that Jim knows that 2 plus 3 is 5, then Bob knows that 2 plus 3 is 5. So the eternalist can say that at $t_1$, $S$ knows that it is then $t_1$ and $S$ knows that somebody would know at $t_2$ that it is then $t_2$. Using the transitive principle, we get the following: $S$ knows that $R$ knows at $t_2$ that it is then $t_2$. We can then say that $S$ knows that at $t_2$ that it is then $t_2$. At $t_1$, $S$ knows two things. The second thing he knows implies, still at $t_1$, that at $t_2$ it is then $t_2$. Thus, since God knows both of these things at $t_1$, there is no change in God. He already knew at $t_1$ that at $t_2$ it would then be $t_2$. In sum, if this idea is tenable, advocates for God’s timeless existence may simply claim that knowledge had by God and creature is identical in content, but different with regard to mode.

William Lane Craig also has a creative take on the issue; the most interesting aspect of Craig’s hybrid model of divine eternity pertains to his understanding of God’s relation to his creation. He argues the notion of divine atemporality is coherent but when God created the universe, He stood in a new relationship and this resulted in a change in God (at least, extrinsically). Craig argues:

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9 Ibid., 89.
Simple and Temporal God: A Model of Divine Eternity

1. God is creatively active in the temporal world.
2. If God is creatively active in the temporal world, God is really related to the temporal world.
3. If God is really related to the temporal world, then God is temporal.
4. Therefore, God is temporal.\(^1\)

But he believes both views are coherent: God is atemporal and God is temporal: God is timeless without creation and temporal with creation. Note that it is not that God was timeless before creation as this would imply the existence of time before the existence of time which is of course a contradiction.\(^2\)

The hybrid model is also useful according to Craig because it dissolves a common objection to the temporalist, “Why didn’t God create the world sooner?” Let \(t\) represent any time prior to creation and \(n\) represent some finite amount of time. The objection can be explained in the following terms:

\[
\begin{align*}
[A] & \text{ If the past is infinite}^{13}, \text{ then at } t \text{ God delayed creating until } t + n. \\
[B] & \text{ If at } t \text{ God delayed creating until } t + n, \text{ then he must have had a good reason for doing so.} \\
[C] & \text{ If the past is infinite, God cannot have had a good reason for delaying creation until } t + n. \\
[D] & \text{ If the past is infinite, God must have had a good reason for delaying at } t \text{ and God could not have had a good reason for delaying at } t. \\
[E] & \text{ Thus, the past cannot be infinite.}^{14}
\end{align*}
\]

Given the A–theory, premise [A] appears to be true. At time \(t\) God could have created, but would have purposefully waited until a later time \(t + n\). Premise [B] is plausible since it would seem to be necessarily true that a perfectly rational being could not lack anything, namely a reason for creating the universe. Regarding premise [C], if at some moment God comes to acquire a good reason for creating the world, this reason must result from either a change in God or in something apart from God. But the only change occurring apart from God is the lapse of time itself. Since all moments of time are alike, there could be nothing significant or special about the moment of creation that would cause God to delay creating until

\[\text{William Lane Craig, God and Time: Four Views, ed. Gregory Ganssle (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 140.}\]

\[\text{Ibid., 141.}\]

\[\text{This is due to the fact that many believe time came into existence with the Big Bang or the first event.}\]

\[\text{If God is essentially temporal, given the dynamic view of time (the A – theory), he never begins to exist and never ceases to exist (on the Christian worldview). Thus, he would exist at every moment of time. But if he exists at every moment, this seems to imply that he has an infinite past and an infinite future.}\]

\[\text{William Lane Craig, God and Time: Four Views, ed. Gregory Ganssle (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 154.}\]
time \( t + n \). If \([A]-[C]\) are indeed true, then \([D]\) and \([E]\) logically follow.\(^{15}\) One may argue that this entails the timeless view. But according to Craig, his model can accommodate this. He writes:

> There is an old problem that bedevils proponents of an infinite empty time, prior to creation: why didn't God create the world sooner? On a relational theory of time, time does not exist in the total absence of events. Hence, time may begin at the moment of creation. Time comes into existence with the universe, and so it makes no sense to ask why it didn't come into being at an earlier moment.\(^{16}\)

Thus, the hybrid view promises to answer objections about the incompatibility of God's activity and God's timelessness. We have the best of both worlds: God may be timeless, \textit{sans} creation, while temporal, with creation. But, the question remains whether or not it's possible for God to be both timeless and temporal, without assuming a change in his nature. We take up that challenge in the next section.

### Eternity and Covenantal Time

Given the desire to show consistency between timelessness and temporality, I see two problems common to each view. It appears that each author presupposes a univocal concept of “being” applies to God and to creation. This in turn leads to a misconstrual of God’s essence and thus a misunderstanding of time and eternity. In \textit{God with Us: Divine Condescension and the Attributes of God}, K. Scott Oliphint writes:

> It seems to me awkward that in virtually all the discussions about time and eternity it never seems to cross the minds of those engaged in the discussions that their comparisons and contrasts are apples and oranges. That is, the discussion is automatically set up as a contrast between time and eternity. When God enters the discussion, the arguments center on God’s environment as one either of eternity or of time. The problem with this kind of approach is that it fails to see that what we are discussing is one of God’s essential characteristics, and not his environment. We should be clear about the fact that, as essentially God, the environment for God is none other than God himself. So, this is not a question, first of all, about God’s context of existence, his atmosphere, as it were. It is a discussion about who he essentially is. And none of the authors discussed want to say that God is essentially time. They want to say that he is \textit{in} time, or temporal, but this again is to talk of God’s environment and not of God as he is in himself. This crucial distinction must be made at the outset, but is not made in much of the contemporary discussion of God’s eternity.\(^{17}\)

\(^{15}\) Ibid.

\(^{16}\) Ibid., 153.

\(^{17}\) K. Scott Oliphint, \textit{God with us: Divine Condescension and the Attributes of God}, (Wheaton, Il: Crossway, 2012), 79. Oliphint also writes “It may be that all of these authors are simply presupposing a discussion of \textit{ad extra} eternity with respect to God. If so, they should say so clearly. My concern here is first to affirm
I consider this a promising basis for a new model for understanding God’s relationship to time however it presupposes the truth of a doctrine that is by no means uncontroversial, the Doctrine of Divine Simplicity (DDS). God is essentially independent and as such he essentially cannot be contained by time or some “context” of existence. Hence, if God exists timelessly alone sans creation, then his eternity must be an essential property, one which cannot be ontologically prior to God since that would contradict his absoluteness. Thus, he must be identical with his attributes, which is what the DDS teaches. Specifically, the doctrine teaches that (1) God is identical with his existence and essence and (2) that each of his attributes (such as eternity) is ontologically identical with his existence and with every other one of his attributes. There is nothing in God that is not God. Similarly, Aquinas writes:

> Every composite is posterior to its components: since the simpler exists in itself before anything is added to it for the composition of a third. But nothing is prior to the first. Therefore, since God is the first principle, he is not composite.

Therefore, if God is simple, God's timelessness and creaturely timelessness are not univocal since God, as personal, is not exemplifiable like a property. But God's relation with his creation requires that he take on contingent or covenantal properties. This, many philosophers argue, undercuts God's absoluteness in the sense that it adds more being to what is supposedly actus purus. I agree that it does add more being, but it is being of a completely different kind. Adding contingent properties to God is similar to adding finite quantities to the actual infinite – for any natural number n, \( \aleph_0 + n = \aleph_0 \): the quantity remains perfectly infinite. Similarly God's ultimate perfection remains the same. Therefore, provided that the claim is understandable, we may begin to see how the two seemingly contradictory propositions, “God is timeless” and “God is Temporal,” can be true in the same possible world: Timeless and temporal mean different things depending on whether they are applied to God or to creatures.

But since Thomas many have struggled to articulate a coherent understanding of the DDS. In fact, the that God’s existence, when there was no creation, had no beginning or end or succession, though it did have duration. That duration, which is simply God’s life and existence, is God’s eternity.” Ibid., 79n68.

18 He cannot be essentially dependent but he can be dependent with regard to extrinsic properties. So, he cannot be essentially “in time,” but it would be consistent for him to be contingently, or non-essentially, time-bound.


aporetics of divine simplicity have prevented many philosophers from considering it in their discussion of time and eternity. There are two issues: One issue involves theological predication, how we are to understand truths of God if he is indeed identical with his essence given that this would eliminate the possibility of univocal predication of God and creatures. As a consequence it is difficult to see how we can claim to know the divine. What then is left for the proponent of the DDS? Traditionally, the Catholic Church and the Reformed have held to the doctrine of analogy: we understand God only in an analogical sense and not as he is in se. But the DDS itself is not clearly coherent and it is worth our while considering Plantinga's objections before addressing the problem of analogy.

**Understanding Divine Simplicity**

Traditionally, the doctrine of divine simplicity states that God is an absolutely simple being lacking any distinct metaphysical parts, properties, or constituents. If God had distinct metaphysical parts, then something more fundamental than God would be responsible for determining God’s essence. The obvious inference, then, is that God would not be metaphysically absolute and would not be the ontological basis for everything ad extra. The best known polemic comes from Alvin Plantinga; Plantinga recognizes the motive for adopting the DDS is to protect God’s supposed properties of aseity and sovereignty. The DDS secures aseity and sovereignty by guaranteeing God’s lack of dependence on his properties. Identifying God with his properties ensures God's absolute independence. But, according to Plantinga, this is a “dark saying” indeed for if God is identical with each and every one of his properties, then ipso facto God is a property. But that’s nonsense! Properties, if they exist, are non-causal impersonal entities, and God, according to the Christian worldview, is the complete opposite.

Jeffrey Brower argues we should understand the DDS in terms of truth-makers. There is nothing in divine simplicity itself that requires us to identify God with a property. On the contrary, the doctrine requires only that God is identical with the entities (such as God’s goodness, God’s power, and God’s wisdom) that are required to explain the truths expressed by true intrinsic predications of the form “God is F”. That is to say, the doctrine requires nothing more than the following:

(DS): If an intrinsic predication of the form “God is F” is true, then God’s F-ness exists and

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21 James E. Dolezal, op. cit., 146.
23 Ibid., 47.
is identical with God.

But if this is all the doctrine requires, then the doctrine itself takes no stand on the precise nature of the entities with which it identifies God. Hence the apparent absurdity of the idea that God is a property follows not from divine simplicity itself but rather from its conjunction with something like the following “property account” of predication.

(PA): If an intrinsic predication of the form “a is F” is true, then a’s F-ness exists, where this entity is to be understood as a property.25

In order to preserve God’s aseity, or independence, and absoluteness, we must follow Brower and discard the property account. Instead, we may think in terms of truth-makers.

(TA): If an intrinsic predication of the form a is F is true, then a’s F-ness exists, where this entity is to be understood as a truth-maker.26

What, then, does the Truth-maker Account refer to if not properties? The answer is of course the divine substance itself, which is, according to the DDS, simply God. Thus, when an attribute is predicated of God it refers to the divine essence, whereas when an attribute is predicated of creatures, it refers to a property in the creature. Therefore, we infer the following: According to the truth-maker account, God is identical with the truth-makers for each of the true intrinsic predications that can be made about him. Thus, if God is just, then he is identical with that which makes him just. If he is merciful, then he is

24 Following Brower, I will simply speak of “true intrinsic predications” as shorthand for “the truths expressed by true intrinsic predications”. I also endorse the following excerpt. “I focus on intrinsic predications throughout, since no medieval ever thought that divine simplicity requires God to be identical with entities (if there are any) such as being thought about by me, which are introduced by purely extrinsic predications. Moreover, I rely on an intuitive notion of intrinsic predication according to which such predications are those which characterize things “in virtue of the way things themselves are”. So understood, the notion must be distinguished both from that of essential and from that of non-relational predication, since intrinsic predications can be either contingent (e.g., “Socrates is wise”) or relational (e.g., “Socrates has parts”).” Jeffrey E. Brower, Making Sense of Divine Simplicity, (Faith and Philosophy 25, 2008), 3n4.

25 Ibid.

26 Brower explains that truth-makers are to be understood as “truth-explainers.” This broad idea of truth-makers does not commit itself to any particular ontological category, such as properties or substances. Truth-makers may appear differently in various ontological categories depending on what it is to which a certain predication refers. Thus, there is no standard universal class identified as truth-makers. See James E. Dolezal, God without Parts: Divine Simplicity and the Metaphysics of God’s Absoluteness, (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2011), 157n81.
identical with that which makes him merciful. Since nothing can be identical with anything other than itself, the claim essentially amounts to the idea that God is the truth-maker for each predication in question. An important qualification is that God is the minimal truth-maker for each true intrinsic predication that can apply to him. Brower helpfully writes:

God is the minimal truth-maker for each of his true intrinsic predications – where an entity \( E \) is a minimal truth-maker for a predication \( P \) just in case \( E \) is such that no proper part of it makes \( P \) true. This qualification is needed since on some theories of truth-making, if \( E \) is a truth-maker for \( P \) then so is anything of which \( E \) is a part. Once the qualification is added, the absolute simplicity of God follows immediately. For if God had any proper parts, there would be true intrinsic divine predications (namely, those parts) whose minimal truth-makers would not be God (but the parts).\(^{27}\)

**Analogy**

Even if we accept the Brower truth-maker account of God’s simplicity, we’re still faced with an epistemological dilemma that calls into question our ability to understand and make true predications about God. Consider the propositions “God is wise” and “Socrates is wise.” Given simplicity and the creator/creature distinction, God’s wisdom and Socrates’ wisdom cannot be identical. But in order to avoid skepticism, they cannot be equivocal either. Instead, we may propose that we understand God’s attributes analogically. A measure of the adequacy of our understanding what it means to say that God is wise is that there must be something appropriately similar between God’s being wise and Socrates’ being wise, for instance. In his essay *On Two Problems of Divine Simplicity*, Alexander Pruss offers a helpful example to illustrate the idea. He writes:

Suppose I tell you there is a very strange alien about whom I have told you nothing yet other than it is very strange and it hears. And suppose I tell you next that it feels, tactiely that is and not emotionally. By “it hears” I just mean “it has sense of hearing” and “it feels” means “it has a sense of touch.” I might then add: “I talked to the alien and it heard me. I then touched its seventh appendage from the top and it felt that.” You no doubt would understand what I said.

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27 Jeffrey Brower, *Simplicity and Aseity*, ed. Thomas P. Flint and Michael C. Rea, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 125. Alexander Pruss agrees with Brower and writes: “The claim that God’s being merciful and God’s being just are identical is, I take it, the claim that the ontological basis for predicating mercy of God is identical with the ontological basis for predicating justice of God. Or it is simply the claim that God’s justice is identical with God’s mercy, i.e., that the same thing is the minimal truth-maker of the claim that God is just and the claim that God is merciful.” He also adds the following formulation: “All non-ontological truths solely about God or his parts have God as their minimal truth-maker [...] It follows immediately from [this formula] that God has no proper parts, since if \( A \) were a proper part of God, then \( A \) rather than God would be the minimal truth-maker of the claim that \( A \) exists” (*On Two Problems of Divine Simplicity*, 153).
However it is important to note how limited your understanding would be. You would not be entitled to infer that the alien had a tympanic membrane that was made to vibrate by my speech, for instance. You might be able to infer that the alien has an ear, understood as nothing more than an organ of hearing…. Suppose I let you know one more thing: the alien’s hearing is the same is its feeling.\(^{28}\)

The objection that our model for simplicity renders our concepts of God incomprehensible would mean that the additional knowledge of the alien undercuts our understanding of the concepts involved in that situation as well. But our understanding is not undercut, it simply illustrates how little we know given the information provided. Just as we cannot infer the nature of the alien’s organs, we cannot infer that the organs are really distinct.

The story of the alien helps us to see that while there is puzzlement with regard to God’s attributes, it is still possible to have genuine knowledge. We struggle with precisely how God’s attributes are, say, ontologically identical, but that alone does not warrant our concluding that a solution is impossible.\(^{29}\)

**Conclusion**

What is the upshot of the DDS for our discussion of God and time? I propose that the entailment would be that God may be identical with his eternity, given simplicity, for on this view, his eternity is none other than God himself. Thus, God is both timeless (in the simple eternal sense) and within time. Following Helm, God would be essentially and absolutely timeless and only contingently temporal, or rather God would take on covenantal contingent properties (such as temporality) with his act of relating with the world through creation. Another benefit of this model is that it does not require an appeal to the static or B-theory of time; it works as well with an A-theory of time, protecting temporal becoming. I agree with Craig and Helm that God's causal activity in an A-series places him “in time” but I disagree that timelessness and temporality are necessarily mutually exclusive. Furthermore, under this view, there is no need to deny God's knowledge of indexicals. He can know that it is “now” some particular time. Finally, by adopting a relational theory of time, we may reject as meaningless, with Craig, questions such as “Why didn't God create the world sooner?” While there may be more, it must be noted that this is by no means a finished model for divine eternity. It requires a more detailed development of the doctrines


\(^{29}\) Ibid., 157.
presented above. What we do have is a skeletal framework to which more may be added.

Bibliography


