

Article

Does Providence Entail Divine Temporality? Maybe

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Abstract: Within contemporary Christian philosophical theology, there are three broad theories of providence being debated. These are theological determinism, Molinism, and open theism. Of course, there are nuances amongst proponents of each theory, but the nuances are not terribly important for my purposes in this essay. I will argue that the basic conceptual machinery of each theory seems to entail divine temporality. Since open theists are already committed to divine temporality, there is nothing for me to argue there. Things get interesting when I consider theological determinism and Molinism. There are proponents of each view who already affirm divine temporality, but there are also proponents of each view who affirm divine timelessness. What I will argue is that theological determinism and Molinism are incompatible with divine timelessness. In order to make my case, I will start by defining some terms. Then, I will offer some arguments related to acting for a reason, divine freedom, and so-called logical moments in the life of a timeless God.

Keywords: providence; eternity; time; God

1. Setting the Stage

I take the concept of God to be that of a perfect being which is the single, ultimate foundation of reality. This basic concept of God is one that different conceptions or models of God all seem to agree on. A conception or model of God is a unique articulation of what it means to be perfect and what it means to be the foundation of reality. Allow me to start with perfection.

In order to be perfect, God must essentially have all of the great-making properties, and of the degreed great-making properties, God must have those to the maximal degree. There is a certain set of divine attributes or great-making properties that I shall call the *uncontested divine attributes*. These are attributes that pretty much every model of God agrees upon. These are attributes like necessary existence, aseity, self-sufficiency, eternality, maximal power, maximal knowledge, perfect goodness, perfect freedom, and perfect rationality. These are distinct from what I call *the contested divine attributes*. The contested divine attributes are the alleged great-making properties that philosophers and theologians disagree over. For example, is God passible or impassible? Is God mutable or immutable? There are fierce debates over these contested divine attributes. For this paper, I want to focus on the contested attributes of timelessness and temporality. But before that, I should briefly define the uncontested divine attributes.

God necessarily exists in that God cannot fail to exist, but rather must exist. To be eternal is to exist without beginning and without end. That follows straightforwardly from necessary existence. A necessary being cannot begin to exist, nor can it possibly cease to exist. God is *a se* in that His existence does not depend upon, nor is it derived from anything external to Himself. God is self-sufficient in that His essential nature does not depend upon, nor is it derived from, anything external to Himself. I take God's omnipotence to be the most power-granting set of abilities without any liabilities. Liabilities are weaknesses, and thus must be excluded from a maximally powerful being. The most power-granting set of abilities includes maximal cognitive excellency. Maximal cognitive excellency involves the ability to know all the facts of reality, thus God is omniscient. This further involves being appropriately responsive to reasons, which means that God is perfectly rational. Since



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moral facts are one kind of reason to respond to, God will be perfectly good. Further, the maximal power-granting set of abilities includes the ability to perform efficacious actions on the basis of reasons in order to achieve some goal. Thus, God is perfectly free.

This much is typically uncontested, so allow me to say something about the contested attributes.¹ Throughout the history of philosophical theology in the East and the West, there is a dispute about certain additional claims that theists wish to make about this eternal God. Some say that God is timeless, whilst others say that God is temporal. Both agree that God is eternal, but both sides make additional claims.

If God is timeless, God must also exist without succession and without temporal location. A timeless God does not do one thing and then another, nor does He exist right now, earlier than, later than, nor simultaneous with some moment of time. It is often said that a timeless God exists all at once, without a before and after, in a single timeless moment or an eternal now. To understand this, one will need to know what a moment of time is. A moment of time is a way things are but could be subsequently otherwise. It is a *when* things occur. Moments of time can be successively ordered into a timeline. A timeless moment is meant to be similar but with some notable differences. First, a timeless moment is a way things are, but there cannot be a subsequently otherwise. If the moment is truly timeless, it cannot change, nor stand in any sort of temporal relations to other moments. Second, there is a sense in which a timeless moment is a “when”. As Brian Leftow explains, God’s eternal now functions logically as a date. This is important to know when assessing different claims about God’s providence. When does God make His plan for creation? From eternity.

That is enough about timelessness for now. I need to discuss divine temporality. Proponents of divine temporality affirm that God is eternal in that God exists without beginning and without end. Yet they go further and say that God can undergo succession and can have temporal location. God can do one thing and then another. God can and does exist right now. Also, God can stand in earlier-than and later-than relations to other moments. For example, God existed all alone prior to the creation of the universe.

This brings me to the next feature of a model of God that I wish to discuss. A part of the concept of God is that God is the single, ultimate foundation of reality. This can be developed into a model of God in several ways. For example, one might affirm emanationism, which says that God’s nature necessarily entails the existence of a universe, multiverse, or cosmic stuff of some sort. This is distinct from creation, which says that God volitionally brings about a universe, multiverse, or what have you. Historically, a doctrine of creation is further divided into creation *ex nihilo* and eternal creation. A doctrine of eternal creation says that God is eternally creating, and thus eternally exists with a universe, multiverse, or cosmos of some sort. God and His creation are co-eternal, both without beginning and without end. This is distinct from the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*. Creation *ex nihilo* says that there is a state of affairs prior to creation in which God alone exists. Nothing is co-eternal with God. First, there was God all alone, and then there is God with a bunch of cosmic stuff. For the sake of brevity, and because I am skeptical of multiverse theories, I will only focus on God creating our particular universe.

Now some people doubt my claims about this precreation moment because they lack a basic knowledge of the history of philosophical theology. In order to assuage such doubt, allow me to briefly offer some affirmations of this precreation moment from each Abrahamic faith.

The Jewish philosopher Moses Maimonides writes, “In the beginning God alone existed, and nothing else” (Maimonides 1956, p. 171). The Christian philosopher Boethius agrees. He says,

Now this our religion which is called Christian and Catholic is founded chiefly on the following assertions. From all eternity, that is, before the world was established, and so before all that is meant by time began, there has existed one divine substance of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. (Boethius 1918)

The Islamic philosopher al-Ghazali makes a similar remark. He says that,

God brought it [the universe] into being after its non-existence, and made it something after it had been nothing, since from eternity He alone was existent and there was nothing along with Him. After that, He originated creation as a manifestation of His power and a realization of what He had previously willed, and of what from eternity had been truly His word. He did this not because of any lack of it or need for it. (Renard 2014, pp. 112–13)

Of course, terms like “prior”, “before”, “after that”, and “and then” are difficult to parse since many proponents of divine timelessness affirm creation ex nihilo. This “prior” is sometimes referred to as pre-eternity, and the precreation moment. Trying to capture this priority in terms of timelessness has been a major problem throughout history. It is difficult to state it without immediately landing one in paradox. Personally, I think it is impossible to state without landing in paradox. Consider the following attempt to avoid paradox.

The 20th Century theologian Emil Brunner asks what was before the universe. He answers, “Before Time there is God Alone” (Brunner 1952, p. 15). Brunner admits that this is paradoxical, but he tries to remove the paradox by claiming that the *before* is a pre-temporal before (Brunner 1952, p. 15). As I see it, this does nothing to remove the paradox. I do not know what a *pre-temporal before* could possibly be. The prefix *pre* implies *before*, thus making the statement look like *before-temporal before*. That is not very illuminating, but I shall set that worry aside for now.

For the remainder of this paper, I will assume a doctrine of creation ex nihilo because it is by far the most popular view within Christian thought, and I am writing as a Christian theologian. Before moving forward, I wish to alert readers to the connection between creation ex nihilo, divine freedom, predestination, and providence. The Calvinist A.W. Pink writes,

God was alone when He made His decrees, and His determinations were influenced by no external cause. He was free to decree or not to decree, and to decree one thing and not another. This liberty we must ascribe to Him who is supreme, independent, and sovereign in all His doings. (Pink 1975, p. 15)

Here, Pink is affirming something I call *creational freedom*. Creational freedom says that God is free to create or not create, and God is free to select from a range of possible universes. This is a very popular view of divine freedom within the Abrahamic religions. For the remainder of this paper, I shall assume creational freedom.

Next, I need to discuss predestination and providence. Predestination is God’s plan for the future. According to theological determinism, Molinism, and open theism, God creates our particular universe for a reason or set of reasons. God has a goal or destiny in mind for His created universe, and He has a plan for how to achieve that goal. Those reasons and goals set a framework for the kinds of actions that God will subsequently perform (Schultz 2020, p. 15). These subsequent divine actions for the purpose of achieving God’s stated goal are called providence. Predestination is God’s plan. Providence is the execution of that plan.

There are 3 main views on providence that are typically debated today and throughout history: theological determinism, Molinism, and open theism.² I will have more to say on these below, but a few quick descriptions are in order. Theological determinism says that God knows the future because He has freely decided to causally determine that a particular timeline will occur. Prior to His choice to create, God surveys the different timelines that He could causally bring about, and then God chooses a specific timeline that satisfies His purposes. Some determinists think that human freedom is compatible with this divine determinism, whilst others deny it. Examples of theological determinists are Thomists and Calvinists. Molinism says that God freely decides to bring about a particular timeline, but without causally determining everything that will happen, thus allegedly preserving libertarian human freedom. Prior to His decision to create a universe, God is said to know what creatures would freely do in any possible circumstance. God uses this hypothetical knowledge to select which timeline He wants to bring about. Open theism says that God

has freely decided to create a universe that does not have a specific, settled timeline in order to give humans a robust libertarian freedom. Prior to creation, God develops an exhaustive contingency plan to factor in all of the possible ways that the future might unfold in order to guarantee that His purposes for creation are successfully achieved.

2. An Initial Problem for Timelessness

If you affirm divine temporality, you might be thinking that all of this just obviously entails divine temporality. First, there is God all alone without any created universe. Then God decides to create a universe for a particular reason. God devises a plot to take over the world before He creates it, and then God providentially governs our world towards His destined goal. All of this sounds hopelessly temporal because it involves a series of successive states, actions, and so on. If you are like me and already affirm divine temporality, you will take all of this to be obviously temporal. In fact, the obviousness of temporality is actually quite ancient.

There is a fundamental problem for divine timelessness related to providence that predates Christianity, yet for some reason it is often ignored in the Christian tradition. It is a problem that the Islamic tradition takes much more seriously. The basic problem is this.³

- (1) If God creates the universe for a reason, then God is temporal.
- (2) God creates the universe for a reason.
- (3) Thus, God is temporal.

This is a problem since the different theories of providence that I will discuss all assume that God creates the universe for a reason, and has a specific goal in mind for creation. So by simply affirming any theory of divine providence, one will have already granted (2). Of course, one will want to know how (3) follows.

When an agent acts for a reason, she does so to obtain some goal that she does not presently have. If she already had that goal, she would not act. You don't act to obtain something that you already have. You act to accomplish some new goal. That is thoroughly temporal because there is a state of affairs where you set a goal, *and then* you act to bring about that goal, *and then*, hopefully, you accomplish that goal. That involves a succession of moments.

Here is what it means for God. If God creates the universe for a reason, then God is temporal. This is because there will be some state of affairs where God does not have a universe, and God's reason motivates Him to act to bring about a universe. God acts in order to bring about something that He does not have. In the precreation moment, God exists all alone. For whatever reason, God decides to bring about a universe, and govern it towards His determined destiny. In this process God will be accomplishing a goal that does not eternally obtain.

Within the Christian tradition, this argument was dismissed by people like Augustine. Augustine says that God just eternally wills that the universe exist. God just eternally has a reason to create. One version of the problem that Augustine considers is this. Some argue that if creation has a beginning, then the idea of creating a universe must be a new idea in the mind of God. Perhaps God had never thought to create before, or maybe God's decision to create is something new in the life of God. Augustine will have none of this. He replies that God eternally planned to create, so there is no change in God (Augustine 1984, Book XI.4 and XII.18). Call this the Problem of New Decisions.

- (PND1) If the universe began to exist, then God's decision to create began to exist.
- (PND2) The universe began to exist.
- (PND3) Thus, God's decision to create began to exist.
- (PND4) If God's decision to create began to exist, then God changes.
- (PND5) Thus, God changes.

In accepting the doctrine of creation ex nihilo, Augustine is affirming (PND2). Since Augustine affirms divine timelessness and immutability, he cannot accept the conclusion in (PND5). As I shall discuss below, the intuition behind (PND1) was considered quite

plausible in the history of Western thought, and a major point of contention within Islamic philosophy (e.g., [Al-Ghazali 2005](#), pp. 13–14). The idea is that if God has always planned on creating, then the universe should always exist. The eternal willings of eternal beings should be eternally realized, or so the thought goes. However, Augustine rejects this intuition, and thus rejects (PND1). He maintains that God is in fact eternally planning to create the universe, but somehow the universe does not eternally exist.

That might not seem to answer the previous objections because it ignores the analysis of acting for a reason or making a decision. Those arguments are trying to focus on the transition from acting for a reason or purpose *to* the accomplishment of that purpose.⁴ If you deny that there is a transition there, you might end up in a rather different situation. You might end up saying that God eternally wills that the universe exists, and thus the universe eternally exists alongside God. Augustine is aware of this eternal creation problem, but he never gives a thorough answer to it. In fact, a major debate throughout Western history is creation *ex nihilo* vs eternal creation (Cf. [Adamson 2016](#)). So Augustine's musings seem to settle nothing.

As I see it, the claim that God is just eternally willing casts doubt on the intelligibility of divine freedom, and thus in turn casts doubt on the intelligibility of divine predestination and providence. If you affirm divine timelessness, you will want to resist the temporality of all this "and then" talk that seems deeply embedded in the story of predestination, creation, and providence. You will need to explain how God can exist all alone without creation, *and then* devise a plan, *and then* execute that plan without any succession or any temporal location. That is a tall order, but thankfully for timelessness there have been attempts to fill that order. John Duns Scotus develops the idea of logical moments in the timeless life of God in order to solve various puzzles related to divine freedom and providence. These logical moments have a profound impact on the way subsequent Christian generations develop the theories of providence that we now call theological determinism, Molinism, and open theism.

3. Logical Moments and Different Theories of Providence

There are various problems in articulating the freedom of a timeless God. This is because freedom is typically cut in explicitly temporal terms. Consider Peter Lombard's discussion of freedom.

And this is to be known, that free choice does not refer to the present or past, but to future contingencies. For what is in the present is already determined; and it is not in our power that it should then be or not be, when it already is. For it can afterwards not be, or be otherwise; but it cannot not be while it is, or be otherwise while it is what it is. But whether it will be this or something else in the future pertains to the power of free choice. ([Lombard 2008](#), Dist. XXV.I.3)

On this analysis, the freedom to select from among alternative choices concerns moments subsequent to the present. This is not going to help one understand the freedom of a timeless God since such a being has no future. The Lombard understands this, and says that God's freedom of choice is not exactly like ours, but he gives no explanation of what that really means ([Lombard 2008](#), Dist. XXV.2).

In order to understand the problem of timeless divine freedom, I need to delve a bit deeper into the temporal analysis of free choice. There is something called the necessity of the present. Imagine that Socrates comes to a dinner party. He sees a comfy chair and decides to sit down. Socrates is now sitting down. Can Socrates do otherwise at this moment? Of course not. It is too late to be doing anything else at this precise moment. A moment is the way things are but could be subsequently otherwise. The moment we are talking about involves Socrates sitting. Socrates can do nothing but sit at this moment. This is sometimes called the necessity of the present. This is not a serious threat to Socrates' freedom because Socrates has options about what he will do next. Socrates could be subsequently otherwise by standing up, or by laying on the floor, or by doing something else. He has options at the next moment.

The necessity of the present does not seem like a serious problem for human freedom, but it is for a timeless God. This is because a timeless God lives all at once, at a single, timeless moment without a before or after. There is a way the timeless God is, but He cannot be subsequently otherwise. Whatever a timeless God is doing, He is timelessly doing, end of story. It seems impossible to describe how a timeless God could have the ability to create or not create, since God is timelessly doing whatever it is He is timelessly doing. It seems impossible to describe how a timeless God can develop a plan and then execute it since devising a plan and executing a plan all involve being subsequently otherwise over a series of temporal moments. What is the proponent of divine timelessness to do?

Scotus thinks he has an answer. He develops these things called instants of nature or logical moments. Logical moments have similar features to temporal moments, but with some notable differences (Muller 2017, p. 56). Logical moments are a “when” things happen. It is the way things are, but can be subsequently otherwise. However, this sense of “subsequently” otherwise is allegedly not temporal. Further, logical moments can be successively ordered, but the succession is allegedly not temporal. Finally, multiple logical moments can be embedded in a single timeless or temporal moment (Anfray 2014, p. 348). This sounds odd, I know, but allow me to explain.

Imagine that an angel exists for only a single temporal moment. Can this angel perform a sinful action? Many people might say no because a single moment is not enough time for an angel to deliberately perform an action. At best, the angel would pop into existence doing something, and then cease to exist. There is no way to meaningfully say that this angel deliberately decided to perform a sinful action. When would the angel have made a decision?

Scotus disagrees. He says that he can meaningfully describe the angel deliberately deciding to perform, and then perform, the sinful action. How? By embedding a series of logical moments into a single temporal moment. At the first logical moment, the angel exists and is not doing anything. At the next logical moment, the angel weighs a set of reasons for performing different possible actions. One such action to consider is the sinful act in question. This deliberation could take a series of logical moments. I am tempted to say that the deliberation carries on for quite some time, but that would be to force the temporality of the logical moments. I am not really sure what to say because it sounds confused to utter that “the deliberation carries on for quite some logic.” Anyway, after a series of logical moments, the angel’s deliberation comes to an end. At the next logical moment, the angel performs the sinful action. Now remember, all of this takes place within a single temporal moment. The angel only exists for a single temporal moment, and we have a meaningful way to describe the deliberation and sinful action of the angel. At least Scotus thinks it is meaningful.⁵

Scotus wishes to apply this same strategy to the life of a timeless God. One can meaningfully describe the deliberation and action of a timeless God in terms of a series of logical moments embedded within God’s single timeless moment. For the sake of brevity, I will skip to the way Scotus’ ideas have impacted the articulation of theological determinism, Molinism, and open theism.

All three theories of providence agree on some surprising things. This is the dirty little secret that most theologians wish to ignore. I will start with the standard analysis of God’s so called natural knowledge and free knowledge because everyone seems to agree on this much.

The first logical moment in the life of God is called natural knowledge. At this moment, God knows all of the logically possible universes that He could create. Here is the dirty secret that often gets glossed over. God does not know the future at this logical moment. Why? Because God has not yet decided if He will even create, let alone decided to create any particular universe. At the logical moment of natural knowledge, there simply is no fact of the matter as to whether or not God will create, so there is nothing for God to know. In other words, there is no fact of the matter about what God would do, nor what God will do, at subsequent logical moments. Obviously, open theists are happy to affirm this,

but proponents of other theories are too. This is agreed upon by theological determinists and Molinists.⁶

Since this point often gets skipped over, I wish to belabour the point. The claim is not that there is in fact a set of truths about what God will do at subsequent logical moments, but God simply does not know them. The claim is stronger. The claim is that there are no truths about what God will in fact do at subsequent logical moments (Feinberg 2001, pp. 313–14). If there were such truths, God would not be free. Luis de Molina's own explanation is that if God foreknew His own actions before He decided to create or not create, then God would not have free will (De Molina 1988, p. 171). If the truths about what God would and will do were already settled, God would know them, and thus God would not have free will. As Thomas Flint explains, God's knowledge of the future is subsequent to His decisions to create, and to create a particular universe (Flint 1998, p. 37). The Calvinist William Shedd agrees. He says, "The Divine decree is the necessary condition of the Divine foreknowledge. If God does not first decide what shall come to pass, he cannot know what will come to pass" (Shedd 1888, pp. 396–97). Shedd goes on to say, "Unless God had determined to create a world, he could not know that there would be one" (Shedd 1888, p. 397).

This brings me to the logical moment of free knowledge. God's free knowledge is subsequent to His decision to create a particular universe. God's free knowledge is His knowledge of which particular universe He has freely decided to create. The theological determinist and the Molinist agree that God's free knowledge includes foreknowledge. This is because the determinist and the Molinist say that God has freely decided to create a universe with a settled future. The truths about the future are fully settled.⁷ Once God decides to create a particular universe with a settled future, the propositions about what will happen in the future have a determinate truthvalue of true or false. The open theist disagrees. According to the open theist, God has decided to create a particular universe with an open future, or a future in which the timeline is not settled. Propositions about what will happen could be indeterminate or all false. It depends on the way any given open theist develops the logic for future tensed propositions.⁸

4. A Worry about Dirty Molinist Revisionism

Thus far, I have discussed the distinction between God's natural knowledge and God's free knowledge. The Calvinist Francis Turretin says that God's natural knowledge is of things that are "merely possible" whereas God's free knowledge is "knowledge of future things" that God has freely determined to bring about (Turretin 1992, pp. 212–13). Molinism is famous for adding in another logical moment between natural and free knowledge. This is called middle knowledge since it is subsequent to natural knowledge and prior to free knowledge. According to the Molinist, at the logical moment of middle knowledge, God knows the truthvalues of the counterfactuals or hypotheticals of creaturely freedom. There are propositions about what creatures would freely do in any possible circumstance that they might be placed in. God uses this knowledge to narrow down which particular universe He wants to create.

Theological determinists and open theists have been quite critical about the coherence of middle knowledge. For the argument that I wish to run, I can grant that middle knowledge is possibly coherent. However, I wish to note another objection. As many of you know, theologians can be quite conservative in their theology. Often times, theologians do not like it when revisions are made to their preferred, narrow understanding of "the" traditional Western doctrine of God. In light of this, it is not uncommon to hear theologians complain that Molinism is revising the doctrine of God by adding in middle knowledge. Of course, we need to ignore the fact that Aristotle's model of God denies that God knows any contingent truths, so the theological determinist is revising the doctrine of God by adding in knowledge of contingent reality. We have to ignore those sorts of revisions because it would detract from the determinist's ability to fabricate complaints of revisionism against the Molinist.

Is the Molinist really guilty of revisionism for adding more than two logical moments in the life of God? If the Molinist is guilty for adding in more than two logical moments, this will be a problem for pretty much everyone else too. Scotus himself had more than two logical moments when he developed his doctrine of providence. For Scotus, there are at least three logical moments embedded within God's single, timeless moment. In the first logical moment, God knows all the necessary truths. In this first moment, God does not have any determinate knowledge of future contingents. In the second logical moment, God decides to actualize one particular series of temporal moments. In the third logical moment, God knows what will come to be in this particular series of temporal moments (Anfray 2014, pp. 336–40).

Most Calvinists also have more than two logical moments when they bother to sit down and develop their account of providence. The Calvinist Richard Baxter says,

Gods Intellect is Relatively denominated *Omniscient*, in respect to three sorts of Objects also in three instants: (1) In the first instant he knoweth all *Possibles*, in his own *Omnipotence*: For to know things to be *Possible*, is but to know *what he can do*. (2) In the second Instant he Knoweth all things, as *Congruous, eligible* and *Volenda*, fit to be *Willed*: And this out of the perfection of his *own wisdom*: which is but to be *perfectly Wise*, and to know what *perfect Wisdom* should offer as eligible to the *Will*. (3) In the third Instant he knoweth *All things willed* by him as such (as *Volita*): which is but to know his *own Will*, and so that they *will* be. In all of these instances we suppose the Things themselves not to have yet *any Being*: But speak of God as related to Imaginary beings, according to the common speech of men. (Muller 2017, pp. 208–9)

Notice several important things from this. First, we have more than two logical moments in the life of God. The distinction between natural knowledge and free knowledge is part of the basic framework for theological determinists, yet most end up adding in more logical moments in order to develop the account further. Second, notice that at the first logical moment, God only knows what He can do. God does not know what He would do, nor what He will do. That knowledge comes after He decides to create.

Yet three logical moments is not really enough for many theological determinists. Consider the fierce debates between infralapsarians and supralapsarians among Calvinists after the Reformation. This is a debate about the precise ordering of the logical moments of God's decree. Did God first decree election, and then creation, and then the Fall, and then redemption? Or did God first decree creation, and then election, and then the Fall, and then the redemption? To be honest, I don't really think this is coherent, but my point is that Calvinists debated the precise ordering of logical moments in God's timeless decision making, and the number of logical moments surpasses three.⁹

The same is true of Molinists who sit down and try to develop a detailed account of God's timeless decision making. Flint discusses 4 and 5 possible logical moments for Molinists to adopt (Flint 1998, pp. 63–64). John D. Laing defends the idea of 5 logical moments for Molinism (Laing 2019, pp. 196–98).

Here is my point in all of this. It would seem that both determinists and Molinists have a larger number of logical moments in the life of God than we were originally told. There seems to be an awful lot of successive things going on in the life of this timeless being. That surely sounds odd on its surface. There are far too many "and thens" happening in the life of God for this to really be timeless.

Richard Muller notes this sort of complaint from the Calvinist Paul Helm. Helm is a proponent of divine timelessness, and he complains that all of this talk of logical moments is hopelessly temporal. Muller responds by saying, "The logical *momenta* or *instantes* in God must be recognized as non-temporal" (Muller 2017, p. 56). Of course, Helm already knows that, so this does not really address Helm's complaint (Helm 2015, p. 57). Yet Helm's complaint does not seem to have many details. I will provide those details in what follows.

5. The Problem of Temporary Intrinsic Applied to God's Timeless Life

Within the philosophy of time, there is something called the problem of temporary intrinsic. The argument goes a little something like this. Imagine Socrates sitting at the dinner party. Whilst sitting, Socrates has the property of *sitting*, or some sort of property like *being bent* in such a way that accommodates his sitting on the comfy chair. At the next moment, say that Socrates stands up. He now has the property of *standing*, or some sort of property like *being straight* which captures the physical arrangement of his body. Nothing seems terribly worrisome at this point until we introduce some assumptions about the ontology of time and persistence through time. As I have argued elsewhere, the Western philosophical tradition has overwhelmingly affirmed presentism and endurantism prior to Einstein (Cf. Mullins 2016). Presentism is an ontology of time which says that only the present moment of time exists. Endurantism is a thesis about how objects persist over time. It says that objects exist as a whole, or all at once, at whichever relevant moments of time they exist at. This should sound familiar. When theists in the Western tradition articulated God's timelessness, they drew direct comparisons and contrasts between presentism and endurantism to eternity. Remember, the timeless God lives as a whole, or all at once, in a timeless present that lacks a before and after.

Imagine that you affirm this combination of views—presentism and endurantism. Socrates exists as a whole at the moment of sitting. He has the property of *sitting* at that moment. Given presentism, when things become subsequently otherwise, that moment is gone from existence, and is followed by a new moment that comes to exist. Socrates is now wholly located at this new moment. At this new moment, Socrates has the property of *standing*. Again, nothing is terribly worrisome about this. We have no contradiction. Socrates had the property of *sitting*, but now has the property of *standing*.

Things become a problem if we get rid of presentism and affirm a different ontology of time called eternalism. On eternalism, all moments of the timeline exist in their respective successive ordering. Those moments of the Big Bang to 2024 all exist. Those moments from 2024 to 2525 also exist. From all eternity, these moments of time simply exist in their respective successive ordering relations. With this in mind, consider Socrates at the dinner party. Since all of the moments of the dinner party simply do exist, Socrates is wholly located at each moment. All of Socrates is located at the moment of sitting, and all of Socrates is located at the moment of standing. Thus, Socrates has both the property of *sitting* and the property of *standing*. Those are not the sort of properties that one thing can have altogether. To be sitting implies that one is not standing. So Socrates has the properties of *standing* and *not-standing*. That is a contradiction. What do we do?

An eternalist has a reply. The eternalist says that one should get rid of endurantism and adopt four-dimensionalism. Four-dimensionalism is a doctrine of temporal parts. There are different varieties like perdurantism and stage theory, but the details need not concern us. I will just focus on the perdurantist variety for the sake of argument. This view says that Socrates is not wholly located at both moments. Instead, there is a temporal part of Socrates at one moment, and a numerically distinct temporal part of Socrates at a different moment. The part of Socrates at the earlier moment has the property of *sitting* whilst the part at the later moment has the property of *standing*. Since it is perfectly coherent to talk about one object having parts with conflicting properties, the incoherence is removed. No single part has contradictory properties, but rather the parts have the relevant properties.

Here is the lesson to learn from all of this. No enduring thing can have contradictory intrinsic properties. If some enduring thing being wholly located involves contradictory properties, that is a serious problem. It is a serious problem because that is a contradiction, and thus the thing in question is not possible.

Let's take this lesson and apply it to the timeless God. God exists as a whole, or all at once, at a single timeless moment that lacks a before and after. Both the theological determinist and the Molinist appeal to an array of logical moments in the life of God. These logical moments are embedded in God's single, timeless moment. Hopefully, that much is clear by now. Here is the problem. The logical moments are incompatible. They describe

incompatible states of affairs that cannot be co-realised together. Call this the Problem of Eternal Contradictions.

There are several eternal contradictory states of affairs worth pointing out. First, we have *God not making a decision* and *God making a decision*. Those are incompatible states of affairs. Yet, if God is wholly located at each logical moment, then God will have both properties. From all eternity, God is both *not making a decision to create* and is *making a decision to create*. That is an eternal contradiction. As a general rule of thumb, it is best to avoid positing eternal contradictions in your model of God. The contradictions can be piled up from there. At the logical moment of natural knowledge, there is no fact of the matter about what God would or will do. Yet at the logical moment of free knowledge, there is a fact of the matter about what God would and will do. From all eternity *there are no facts about what God will do* and *there are facts about what God will do*. Say God decides to create our particular universe. From all eternity *there is no fact of the matter about whether or not God will create our universe* and *there is a fact of the matter about whether or not God will create our universe*. And on and on one can go to pile up more eternal contradictions.

How do you remove the eternal contradictions? The divine temporalist has an easy solution. The temporalist can say that the problem is divine timelessness. Once divine timelessness has been rejected, the problem is solved. The obvious temporal flavour of these logical moments should be brought to the surface. One should stop pretending that these successively ordered moments are not temporal. The divine temporalist can say that these so-called logical moments are really successive temporal moments in the life of God, just as we suspected all along.

Of course, the proponent of divine timelessness is not going to like that option, so she will need to look for another solution. Here are some potential solutions. First, she can try to say that these logical moments are merely logical priority, so stop jumping to temporal conclusions. The problem with this often repeated claim is that there are no details to how this could work. In fact, the details of mere logical priority cannot capture the rich goings on of the timeless God that we have been presented with. To see this, consider the following.

In one passage, Molina is reflecting on the fact that the counterfactuals of divine freedom do not have a truthvalue prior to God's act of creating. As stated before, Molinists and Calvinists say that the counterfactuals of divine freedom gain their truthvalue only after God freely decides to create a particular universe and a particular timeline. Hence, knowledge of divine counterfactuals is something God only possesses via free knowledge. In reflecting on this, Molina considers an objection—does this make God's knowledge imperfect? After all, it seems like God's knowledge is incomplete at the moment of middle knowledge. Yet Molina denies that God's knowledge is ever incomplete because the logical moments of God's natural, middle, and free knowledge are "simultaneous in reality" with God's act of determining which universe and timeline shall be actual (De Molina 1988, p. 175).

The "simultaneous in reality" is the problem here. This is because relations of logical priority can only obtain between things that are mutually compatible and that can be co-realized, like the premises and conclusion of a valid argument. Relations of logical priority cannot obtain between incompatible states of affairs. For example, consider the classical Christian claim that, from all eternity, the Father timelessly causes the Son to timelessly exist. In this example, the Father is logically prior to the Son, though both are co-eternal. Also, consider the panentheist claim that God and creation are co-eternal. God is logically prior to creation, though both are co-eternal. As Alan Rhoda points out, logical priority cannot be captured by incompatible states of affairs such as <God is undecided as to whether or not He will create> and <God is choosing to create a particular universe> (Rhoda 2014, pp. 265–66).

Since mere logical priority is out, what else can the proponent of timelessness appeal to? Another option is to say that a timeless endurantism is the problem. If God is wholly located at all of the logical moments, then God has contradictory properties. To remove the

contradiction, one should reject timeless endurantism. Instead, say that God is composed of logical parts. There is the part of God that exists at one logical moment, and then there is a numerically distinct part of God at a different logical moment. This solution gives us a composite God with literal parts. That is not going to be acceptable to most theists. Many, though not all, proponents of divine timelessness also affirm divine simplicity. The doctrine of divine simplicity says that God cannot have any parts, so this solution will not be an option if one also affirms divine simplicity. Of course, those who deny divine simplicity will also most likely reject this solution. Many who reject divine simplicity affirm an attributionist view which says that God has distinct attributes or properties. While the attributionist view affirms complexity in God, it does not affirm composition in God.¹⁰ So this view will also most likely see this particular solution as a non-starter.

At this point in the dialectic, the timeless view still has a set of eternal contradictions in the life of the timeless God. Here is another potential solution. Timothy O'Connor says that all of this talk of logical moments in the life of a timeless God is implausible. This is implausible because it treats the logical moments as if they describe an open future when in fact there is no open future (O'Connor 2012, p. 135). As noted before, at the moment of natural knowledge, God has not decided if He will create anything at all, and thus there is no fact of the matter as to whether or not God will create. That certainly looks like an open future. Yet the proponent of divine timelessness also says from all eternity God is creating our particular universe with its settled timeline. For example, James Dolezal says, "There has never been a temporal or logical "moment" in the divine life which God stood volitionally open to other possible worlds" (Dolezal 2011, p. 206). That is most certainly not an open future for God or creatures. What is going on? A proponent of divine timelessness could say that all of this talk of logical moments in the life of God is merely a useful fiction. One should not take it in a realist way where these logical moments are extramental items in reality. If one takes this anti-realist approach to the logical moments, the problem of eternal contradictions goes away.

There is some precedent for being an anti-realist about these logical moments. Calvinists like Helm and Louis Berkhof sometimes speak of the logical order of decrees as nothing more than a distinction within the human mind. According to them, the reality of the situation is that God only performs one simple, timeless act (Helm 2019, pp. 96–99; Berkhof 1984, p. 102). Berkhof seems to acknowledge this point when he writes,

There is, therefore, no series of decrees in God, but simply one comprehensive plan, embracing all that comes to pass. Our finite comprehension, however, constrains us to make distinctions, and this accounts for the fact that we often speak of the decrees of God in the plural. This manner of speaking is perfectly legitimate, provided we do not lose sight of the unity of the divine decree, and of the inseparable connection of the various decrees as we conceive of them (Berkhof 1984, p. 102).

Other examples can be found among Calvinists as well. The French Calvinist Moses Amyraut became embroiled in controversy over his particular ordering of the logical moments in God's decrees. Amyraut was accused of being an Arminian on the basis of his ordering of the logical moments. In an effort to avoid the charge of Arminianism, Amyraut denied that the logical moments actually apply to God. According to John Quick, Amyraut's biographer, Amyraut said that the order of decrees is only a distinction within human reason. In God, the decree is one eternal moment without succession of thought, order, priority, or posteriority. In other words, the decree is one eternal act in God without distinction (Amyraut 2017, p. 167). The lack of order and priority would seem to clearly be a rejection of the entire notion of a logical order of decrees. In which case, it looks like Amyraut is an anti-realist about logical moments in the life of God.

This solution will face two kinds of complaints. The first complaint will come from Calvinists and Molinists themselves who are realists about the logical moments. Molina says that these logical moments, or instants of nature, "are the conceptions of *our* intellect in God, with a foundation in reality." A few lines later he says, that God's creative act is "*simultaneous in reality* with that knowledge, though *later in our way of conceiving it*, with

a basis in reality.”¹¹ Twice Molina has said that these conceptual distinctions that we call logical moments, or instants of nature, have a basis in reality. In fact, Molina repeatedly speaks of priority and posteriority “in our way of conceiving it, with a basis in reality.”¹² There are a host of Calvinists who would agree that these logical moments have a basis in reality, and are not merely in our minds (Muller 2017, p. 293). What these Calvinists and Molinists can say is that the anti-realist has completely abandoned Calvinism and Molinism. As a general rule of thumb, one should not defend a view by abandoning it.

Here is the second, and most important, complaint for the anti-realist about logical moments in the life of a timeless God. The anti-realist has completely wasted our time. Divine timelessness faces a series of problems about the very intelligibility of divine freedom, predestination, and providence. We were told that the solution to all of this is to posit a series of logical moments in God’s single timeless moment. That was the solution. Now all of a sudden we are being told that the solution is a fiction that does not apply to extramental reality. I’m sorry, but a fiction does not solve real world problems. The problems that divine timelessness originally faced have not been answered, and we have been taken for a ride in the process of being denied an answer.

6. Concluding Thoughts

Allow me to summarize the dialectic thus far. I have considered a classical problem for a timeless God’s free and providential action. One solution is to posit logical moments in the life of God, but that leads to the problem of eternal contradictions. One solution to the problem of eternal contradictions is to be an anti-realist about logical moments, but that brings us back to the original problem of a timeless God’s free and providential action. At which point, I suggest that one consider affirming divine temporality because it offers a much easier analysis of everything one must say of God’s providential actions.

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Notes

¹ You do find various disagreements from what I have said, but they are not typically the norm, or do not disagree in substance. For example, Mark Murphy denies that God is morally good, and that has been controversial (Murphy 2019). Also, Thomas Jay Oord denies omnipotence, but still affirms the maximal power approach that I articulated above (Oord 2023).

² Though it is worth noting that process theology has some interesting and unique views on providence as well, but I shall be ignoring this since process theology already affirms divine temporality.

³ (Schultz 2020, p. 322) For more on this in the Islamic tradition, see (Hoover 2022).

⁴ For more arguments of this sort, see (Mullins 2020).

⁵ For the details of this account, and the subsequent influence of Scotus’ thought on theories of providence, see (Anfray 2014).

⁶ (Tiessen 2019, p. 181) Molinists agree with this analysis too. Cf. (Flint 1998, pp. 46, 55–57; De Florio and Frigerio 2019, p. 167; De Molina 1988, pp. 173–75).

⁷ Here, I am only speaking about the truthvalues of future-tensed propositions about what will happen. There is another sense in which tensed propositions change their truthvalues over time as various events go from future to present to past.

⁸ For more on the semantics of the open future, see (Todd 2021).

⁹ For discussion on the incoherence, see (Mullins 2022).

¹⁰ For more on the attributionist view, see (Harvey 2021; McGinnis 2022).

¹¹ (De Molina 1988, p. 175) Italics in the original.

¹² E.g., (De Molina 1988, p. 179) However, later on, it looks like Molina is waffling between realism and anti-realism about the logical moments by saying that it is only in our way of conceiving things (De Molina 1988, pp. 211–12).

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