

Theology and Tense

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Tense and Temporal Passage

What exists is constantly changing. This fact requires that we take tense seriously.

Let us say that a statement is a “simple tensed statement” just in case it attributes a property *F* to an individual *a* (ascribes a relation *R* to a pair *a* and *b*) and it is logically equivalent to “*a* is now *F*” (“*a* now bears *R* to *b*”). We take tense seriously only if we insist that some simple tensed statements express truths while resisting all attempts at philosophical paraphrase into a tenseless language.

Our question is this: Do those who take tense seriously *also* need to “take tenselessness seriously”? That is, given that we must recognize ineliminably tensed truths in order to make sense of the fact that things change, is there any reason to allow that some *tenseless* statements express truths but resist all paraphrase into a *tensed* idiom? We think not.

Consider a statement of the form “*x* is *F*”, in which the “is” cannot be understood as simply present-tensed—for example, “Bolzano is the first to understand continuity”, in which the “historical present tense” is used to describe an event which is obviously not occurring now. What could this tenseless “is” convey, if it is not equivalent to “is now, was, or will be”? Surely the statement implies and is implied by “Bolzano either is, was, or will be the first to understand continuity”. The historical present tense presents those who take tense seriously with no special reason to also take *tenselessness* seriously.

But there are other kinds of statement which have seemed intractably tenseless to some philosophers. Two types are frequently cited: the “eternal truths”, such as that two plus two is four; and truths about the Deity, who is often said to be

“outside of time”. Neither sort seems to us to provide a persuasive case for ineliminable tenselessness.

The Eternal Verities

Even philosophers who have seen the importance of tense are sometimes tempted to agree that “two plus two is four” cannot be understood as shorthand for something like “two plus two always was, now is, and always will be four”. For the statement “two plus two *was* four” would be implied by this; and the latter has seemed sufficiently bizarre as to be judged nonsensical.¹

But is it really nonsensical? Not every statement that sounds odd but is not obviously false can be dismissed as patent nonsense. There are other explanations for this phenomenon. It may be that it sounds odd because it goes without saying; no one would think of denying it, so no one would ordinarily bother asserting it. And, indeed, how strange it would be to *deny* that two plus two was four many years ago or that two plus two is still four today! Suppose that Hegel made egregious mathematical errors,² and that a latter-day Hegelian were trying to excuse him by pointing out that he was educated in the 18th century. It would be natural enough to reply: “Well, two and two made four then, just as they do now!”

There does not seem to us to be any powerful reason here for taking tenselessness seriously.

The Deity

God is that being upon whom all contingent things necessarily depend.³

The *dependence* in question is causal, but the *necessity* is logical. The minimum vocabulary that we require for expressing what we need to say about necessity involves the adverb “necessarily” but not the adjective “necessary” or the correlative expressions “possible” and “contingent”.

We should take care, of course, not to commit the fallacy of pseudo-essentialism. This is illustrated by the formula: “Necessarily whatever is an *F* is a *G*; therefore whatever is an *F* is necessarily a *G*.” The top surface of a certain clay cube is, of course, square; it is not, however, *necessarily* square. But the formula: “Whatever is an *F* is necessarily an *F*” is valid if substitution for “an *F*” is restricted to categorial terms such as “a substance”, “a state”, or “a property”.

Now we may formulate a mark of the Deity:

- D1 x is the Deity =_{df} If there are individual things other than x , then each of them is necessarily such that x is contributing causally or did contribute causally to its coming into being.

Relying upon our tensed language, we may wish to say that a thing is *coming into being* if and only if there are no properties that it did exemplify. But what of such converse intentional properties as *being dreaded* or *being joyfully anticipated*? Whatever one may want to say about the possession of such properties by a thing that has not yet come into being, the following definition is adequate:

D2 x is coming into being =_{df} There are properties and their negations which are such that x has never had either of them.

It is a presupposition of D1 that every contingent individual has come into being, is coming into being, or will come into being; none is “sempiternal”.

A Timeless Deity?

If we restrict our theological data to those deriving from natural theology, there is little justification—or need—for calling God “timeless”.

It would seem that the following thesis is true: If anything changes, then everything changes. If you change from the state of sitting to the state of standing, then each of us becomes such that you change from the state of sitting to the state of standing. And so does God.⁴

What *reason* could there be for denying this thesis?

Much of the philosophical motivation for taking God to be “outside of time” may stem from the mistaken view that *times* are a kind of contingent *thing*, distinct from the events which are said to happen *in* time. If time were a contingent entity, then—according to D1—it would be just one more thing that God has created. In that case, although He must be in some sense *prior to* the time He creates, this priority could not be *temporal*, since He cannot have existed *before* time. One may thus be led to suppose that God is prior to or independent of time in some *atemporal* fashion. But this line of reasoning depends, as we have said, upon a false first step.

Traditionally, God’s timelessness is said to follow from His alleged immutability and simplicity. But—whatever one thinks of the latter doctrines—both implications are tenuous.

The bare fact that God was such that you are standing, and now is such that you are sitting, does not threaten divine immutability; for, as Anselm and many others have pointed out, only certain changes in property “bring some degree of mutability in their train”, while others “do not impair at all the immutability of that in whose case they occur.”⁵ Anselm’s example of a change that implies mutability is change in color. One of his examples of a change that does not is this: one’s coming to be “equal” (presumably in height) to someone else in virtue of the *other* person’s growth. A theologian committed to immutability must say that God is necessarily such that He does not undergo the gain or loss of properties of the former kind; but “mere-Cambridge changes” of the latter sort are no threat to immutability. So there could, in Brian Leftow’s words, be “an immutable permanent thing that coexisted with changing, temporal things”; and, in virtue of the mere-Cambridge changes it undergoes, such a thing would thereby “be enmeshed in time” in at least a weak sense.⁶ Thus divine immutability does not in any straightforward way imply that God is outside of time.⁷

Again, the doctrine of divine simplicity is sometimes said to imply timelessness in a very direct manner: If God were in time, He would be temporally extended; any temporally extended thing has distinct temporal parts; therefore, since

God is simple, He is not in time.⁸ But we deny the metaphysics of temporal parts presupposed by this argument: a thing may be temporally extended, i.e. non-instantaneous, without being composed of different parts at different times.⁹

No Time for Tenselessness

We have argued that neither the tenselessness of statements made in the “historical present”, nor that of the “eternal verities”, justifies taking tenselessness seriously. And, although some have been inclined to say that the Deity does not exist “in time”, we have suggested that there is no philosophical motivation for doing so, apart from a mistake about the nature of “times”. Thus it seems to us that, if one thinks that the fact that time passes can only be accounted for within a tensed language, then one has no reason to suppose that there are also irreducibly tenseless truths.¹⁰

Notes

¹Cf., for example, W. Kneale, “Time and Eternity in Theology”, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 61 (1960/61): 87–108; esp. 97–99.

²Philip E. B. Jourdain claims that Humpty-Dumpty was probably a Hegelian. His evidence includes Humpty-Dumpty’s “synthesis of a cravat and a belt, which usually serve different purposes”, and “his inability to understand mathematics” [Jourdain, *The Philosophy of Mr. B*rr*nd R*ss*ll* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1918), pp. 11–12]. For evidence of Hegel’s mathematical limitations, Jourdain refers us to William Robertson Smith, “Hegel and the Metaphysics of the Fluxional Calculus”, *Transactions of the Royal Society, Edinburgh*, 25 (1869), pp. 491–511.

³If *all* contingent things are dependent upon the deity—including those contingent things that are processes and events,—is there anything left for *us* to do? Can we cooperate with God in bringing things about? We have addressed this question in “On the Logic of Intentional Help: Some Metaphysical Questions”, *Faith and Philosophy* 13 (1996), pp. 402–4.

⁴Compare Franz Brentano, *Philosophical Investigations on Space, Time and the Continuum*, trans. by Barry Smith, ed. by Stephen Körner and Roderick Chisholm (London: Croom Helm, 1988), pp. 19–20.

⁵*Monologion*, Ch. 25, in *Saint Anselm: Basic Writings*, ed. S. N. Deane, 2nd ed. (LaSalle Ill.: Open Court, 1962), pp. 84–85 [cited by Edward R. Wierenga, *The Nature of God* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), p. 171].

⁶Brian Leftow, *Time and Eternity* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), p. 80. Such a temporal but immutable being would be, in Nicholas Wolterstorff’s terminology, “trivially noneternal” but not “fundamentally noneternal”; cf. Wolterstorff, “God Everlasting”, reprinted in Steven M. Cahn and David Shatz (eds.), *Contemporary Philosophy of Religion* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), pp. 77–98.

⁷For detailed criticism of arguments for timelessness on the basis of immutability, cf. Brian Leftow’s discussion of Aquinas and Paul Helm, *Time and Eternity*, pp. 76–80.

⁸Cf. Paul Helm, *Eternal God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), p. 25; and Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann, “Absolute Simplicity”, *Faith and Philosophy* 2 (1985), p. 353–382, esp. p. 354.

⁹For criticism of a number of arguments from simplicity to timelessness, cf. Leftow, *Time and Eternity*, pp. 150–157. Leftow does, however, try to rehabilitate an argument of Augustine’s for divine timelessness (Ch. 5), one which presupposes that existence comes in varying “degrees”.

¹⁰We are indebted to Brian Leftow for helpful criticisms.