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Some Reflections on the Concept of ‘Timeless God’ in Western Thought

Abstract

Anyone who is interested in the question of the existence of God has to study first of all the divine attributes; for to say that God exists is to say that there is something that has some attributes. If ‘God exists’ is to be true, then the divine attributes must at least themselves be coherent and compatible. The coherence of the notion of God with His traditional divine attributes is a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for the acceptance of God’s existence. This article investigates the concept of ‘timeless God’ which we meet often in discussions about divine attributes.

Key Terms

God, Divine Attributes, Timelessness, Eternity, Human Freedom.

Batı Düşüncesinde ‘Zamandış Tanrı’ Kavramı Üzerine Bazı Değerlendirmeler

Özet

Tanrı’nın varlığı konusuyla ilgilenen herhangi bir kimse işe ilâhi sıfatları incelemekle başlamak durumundadır. Çünkü, Tanrı’nın var olduğunu söylemek, aynı zamanda birtakım sıfatlara sahip bir varlığın mevcut olduğunu iddia etmektir. Eğer ‘Tanrı vardır’ önermesi doğru ve anlamlı bir önerme olacaksa, Tanrı’ya yüklenen sıfatların tutarlı ve birbiriyle uyumlu bir yapıda olması gerektiği gözden kaçırılmamalıdır. Kendisine yüklenen geleneksel ilâhi sıfatlar ile birlikte tutarlı bir Tanrı anlayışının ortaya konması, Tanrı’nın varlığının kabul edilmesinin yeterli olmasa bile zorunlu bir şarttır. Bu makale, ilâhi sıfatlar ile ilgili tartışmalarda sıkça karşılaştığımız bir kavram olan ‘zamandış Tanrı’ anlayışını ele almayı amaçlamaktadır.

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Tanrı, İlâhi Sıfatlar, Zamandışlık, Ezelilik, İnsan Hürriyeti.

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Philosophers and theologians ascribe certain attributes to God. Omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence, immutability, simplicity, eternity etc. are some of these attributes. The attributes of God have often been the subject of lengthy philosophical debate because they are more problematic than the existence of God to talk about. If you intend to say something about the attributes of God you must also say something about the relations between God and universe. Furthermore, when you are talking about them you must describe each attribute in a rational coherence with others.

The notion of divine eternity is especially difficult to discuss since it has been understood in two distinct senses. For some thinkers divine eternity means timelessness; others, however, have urged that God is only eternal in the sense that He is without beginning or end¹. In this article we aim to discuss the timelessness of God.

The first interpretation of God's eternity means that to say that God is eternal is to say that He is timeless, i.e. He exists outside the stream of time. His actions, His thoughts and reactions, His knowledge etc. are timeless, although they may have their effects in time. There is not any temporal succession in God's state. The eternity of God is commonly expressed in western theism as everlasting duration. God always was and He always will be; there never was a time when God was not, and there never will be a time when there is no God. Since the sixth century eternity has been defined as the total and simultaneous possession of unending life, i.e. as timelessness.

Most of classical theologians took it for granted that God exists as a timelessly eternal being. They accepted it as an axiom of theology that God has no memory, and no conception of His own future. He does not change, although He eternally wills all changes.

As we can see, the claim that God is timeless involves two assertions: Firstly, God has no duration. St. Augustine's (354-430) words are on this point: "Thy years do not come and go; while these years of ours do come and go, in order that they might come...Thy present day does not give place to tomorrow, nor indeed, does it take place of yesterday. Thy present day is eternity"².

Secondly, to say that God is timeless is to assert that God has no temporal location, in other words there is no 'before and after' for Him. St. Anselm (1033-1109) declares this point in these words: "So it is not that you existed yesterday, or will exist tomorrow, but that yesterday, today and tomorrow, you simply are. Or rather, you exist neither yesterday, today, nor tomorrow, but you exist directly right outside time"³. Perhaps the most famous exponent of eternity as timelessness is Manlius Boethius (480-524), whose definition of eternity has become classic: "Eternity is the complete, simultaneous and perfect possession of everlasting life"⁴.

¹ Cf. Davies, B. , *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, Oxford Univ. Press, Oxford 1982, p.77.

² Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin, Harmondsworth 1961, book XI, 13.

³ St. Anselme, *Proslogion*, in Anselme of Canterbury, vol. I, ed. and trans. Jasper Hopkins and Herbert Richardson, London 1974, chap. XIX.

⁴ Boethius, M., *The Consolation of Philosophy*, (trans. and ed. James J. Buchanan, New York 1957, book V, prose 9.

Here the idea is simply that God just goes on and on, nothing brought Him into existence. There is no time in the future when He will cease to exist. A contemporary philosopher Richard Swinburne accepts this understanding of divine eternity in these sentences:

However, if a creator of the universe exists now, He must have existed at least as long as there have been other logically contingent existing things...On the assumption that an agent can only bring about effects subsequent to his action, he must have existed at least as long as created things. However, traditionally theists believe not merely that this spirit, God, exists now or has existed as long as created things, but that He is an eternal Being. This seems to mean, firstly, that He has always existed- that there was no time at which He did not exist...Let us put this point by saying that they believe that He is backwardly eternal. The supposition that a spirit of the above kind is backwardly eternal seems to be a coherent one...The doctrine that God is eternal seems to involve, secondly, the doctrine that the above spirit will go on existing for ever...I will put this point by saying that he is forwardly eternal. This too seems to be a coherent suggestion⁵.

We should put forward a question here: What is the use of accepting God as a timeless being? It is sometimes said that only a changeless being could be the cause of all things, and only a timeless being could be changeless. The cause of all things that change cannot itself change, it is said.

But if this claim is not to be merely analytic there seems to be no reason why the cause of the universe should not itself change. Such a cause could not be subject to change, be changed, but there seems to be no reason why it could not change of its volition. The argument that is given against this is that only particular things could change and God is not a particular thing.

Now, what does it mean to say that God is timelessly eternal? To find the correct answer to this question is not easy, furthermore, the doctrine is often misunderstood even by those who think to accept it. When properly understood, the doctrine that God is timeless turns out to be a very strange doctrine.

What criteria there must be in an acceptable version of the doctrine of timelessness? The first criterion is that this is to be a doctrine of divine timelessness. That is to say, it must be a doctrine about God, in the sense in which the term is understood in revealed religions. These religions teach us that God is the Creator and Sustainer of the universe. He has given moral rules and desires to human beings. He has acted in history to redeem His people and revealed the ways of redemption in Holy Books. A doctrine of timelessness which could not apply to a being with these characteristics would not be a doctrine about God and would thus be of minimal interest.

Another criterion may be that an acceptable doctrine of timelessness must provide a solution to the problem of free will and foreknowledge⁶. It can be said that not

⁵ Swinburne, R., *The Coherence of Theism*, Clarendon Press, 3 rd. imp., Oxford 1989, p.210-11.

⁶ For this point see Knale, W., "Time and Eternity in Theology" *Proceeding of the Aristotelian Society* (1961),p. 87-108; Prior, Arthur N., "The Formalities of Omniscience" *Philosophy* 32 (1962), p.119-19; Kretzmann, N., "Omniscience and Immutability" *Journal of Philosophy* 63

all philosophers and theologians who have espoused timelessness have put the doctrine in this use. But Boethius, Anselm and Aquinas are the central figures of the timelessness tradition, and all the three used the doctrine to solve the free will problem.

Many theologians have thought that the timelessness doctrine can provide a solution to the problem of God's knowledge of future contingent events. Thomas Aquinas (1224/5-1274) makes use of the doctrine of God's timelessness for this purpose. Future contingents, he maintains, are indeterminate and so can not be the object of any kind of knowledge, divine or human. Nevertheless God can know them because He does not see future contingent facts as being future but as being present; for, future contingents are present to God. According to St. Thomas, it is nearer the truth to say that if God knows a thing then it is, than to say that if He knows it then it will be⁷.

We meet a question here: Can the doctrine of divine timelessness be seen as intelligible? As recent philosophy has shown, questions of this sort are difficult to settle without begging the question, and any general criterion of meaningfulness which might be appealed to will probably turn out to be even more dubious than the case it is called upon to settle. But as a minimum requirement we can say that an intelligible doctrine must be expressible in grammatically well-formed sentences.

We may also require that an intelligible doctrine should not be contradictory or logically impossible. Furthermore, a proposition is not understood unless it is possible to give an account of at least some of the nontrivial inferential relationships that hold between it and other relevant propositions.

The best we can do under these circumstances is perhaps to make the notion of intelligibility person-relative in the following way: If a man claims to have a belief that he expresses in well-formed sentences that are free from contradiction, and of whose inferential connections with other sentences he can give an account, his claim to understand the assertion is to be accepted. If someone else says that he is unable to comprehend what is being asserted, this will be taken merely as an admission of personal incapacity. The sentence that 'I do not understand it then it is unintelligible' cannot be an acceptable inference⁸.

We can now turn to our other criterion for an acceptable doctrine of timelessness: Such a doctrine must solve the problem of free will and foreknowledge. The merit of this requirement, from the present standpoint, is that it imposes very precise constraints on the sense in which God must be timeless. The required notion of timelessness is as follows: God exists, but there is no time at which He exists, nor does He exist at all times. This is of course impossible, unless God exists as a timeless being. Shortly, eternalist theory must say 'at no time God has ever existed'.

(1966), p. 409-21; Sturch, R. L., "The Problem of the Divine Eternity" *Religious Studies* 10 (1974), p. 487-93; Hasker, W., "Concerning the Intelligibility of 'God is Timeless' *New Scholasticism* 57 (1983), p. 170-95; Burrell, David B., "God's Eternity" *Faith and Philosophy* I (1984), p. 389-406.

⁷ Aquinas, T., *Summa Theologiae*, Latin and English text, Blackfriars edn., London 1963, Ia, 13, 14.

⁸ Cf. Hasker, W., *God, Time and Knowledge*, Cornell Univ. Press, Ithaca and London 1989, 145-46.

Why must this theory say so? The reasoning is straightforward: If God exists at any time, He exists at all times. It must be kept in mind that according to eternalist theory God is immutable and incorruptible. If God exists at all times, He knows at all times whatever is true, including future actions of His creatures. From this it follows that the creatures have no free will. There are several ways one may attempt to avoid this conclusion. But the solution by the doctrine of timelessness avoids it by denying that God knows what will happen at some time before it happens. Rather, God's knowledge is timeless, outside of time altogether⁹.

Another way of stating this point is the following: God has neither temporal extension nor temporal location. Other entities, at any given moment, are located at a certain point in time. Their temporal extension covers all of the time during which they exist. But this is not quite correct. As Dennis C. Holt has pointed out, it is strictly speaking not objects and persons but rather events and processes that have temporal location, temporal extension and temporal parts. It is not entirely clear how much difference this makes to the doctrine of timelessness. On the surface, it may seem that all that is required is a trivial restatement, in which not God Himself but His life and actions are said to lack temporal location and extension¹⁰.

There is another point of which we must take notice: According to theistic concept of God, He has infinite effects on universe and His creatures. He wills, intends, creates, acts, sends messages, accepts His people's prayers etc. This means that He is a 'living person'. But can we conceive of a living timeless being? Some philosophers argue that a timeless being could not remember, anticipate, reflect, deliberate, decide, intend anything, or act intentionally and conclude from this that a timeless being could not be a person¹¹. Any attempt to exhibit "God's timelessness" as a meaningful assertion must answer this challenge head-on.

But, before undertaking to answer this challenge, we need to consider a little more about the sort of understanding we seek. It seems we must give up at the outset any thought of imagining or understanding empathetically 'what it is like to be a timeless person'. We always speak of God's actions in terms drawn from our own experiences as finite beings; and, it is not possible for us to experience timelessness. This means the analogy we use to understand God's timelessness is not only incomplete but also incompletionable.

Yet the theologians of timelessness have found a basis they need for analogy here. They have thought that eternity is to be seen as a moment of time rather than a temporal process. For example, R. Swinburne writes these words: "Another way of putting these points is to say that God has His own time scale; and everything which is ever true of God is true of Him at that instant. In a sense, however, that instant of time

⁹ Compare Anselm's words: "In no place or time, then, is this Being properly said to exist". *Monologium*, chap. 22, in *St. Anselm: Basic Writings*, 2d ed., trans. S. N. Deane (La Salle, Ill., Open Court 1962), p. 81.

¹⁰ Holt, D. C., "Timelessness and the Metaphysics of Temporal Existence" *American Philosophical Quarterly* 18 (1981), p.149-56.

¹¹ As an example see Coburn, R. C. "Professor Malcolm on God", *Australasian journal of Philosophy* 41(1963), p. 155-56; Pike, N., *God and Timelessness*, New York-Schocken 1970, p. 121-29.

lasts for ever"¹². We read similar words in Boethius: "The now that flows away makes time; the now that stands still makes eternity"¹³.

So, on the basis of this doctrine, one may claim that any being which can exist in a moment of time, can also exist in no time at all. Whereas in a temporal extended process this is an impossible conclusion. Thus, those attributes of temporal beings which we ascribe to a timeless God must be logically capable of being momentary attributes of a temporal being.

Now we come to the first step of our task. We must sort out those attributes of ordinary persons which are to be seriously attributed to God from those which are not. 'Deliberating' is an example we can use here because it implies a period of time during which God does not yet know what He will do. The same might be said of 'deciding' which suggests that the decision is preceded by a state of indecision.

It may be that God wills and does certain things, but that He never decided to do them. But as the theologians accept, whatever God will do He wills decisively. Of course 'learning' would also be excluded here, in that it implies a previous period of ignorance on God's part.

On the other hand, 'remembering' and 'anticipating' may well be attributes of an everlasting God. But they cannot be attributes of God if He is timeless. Thus, we are to search for certain personal attributes which an eternalist may ascribe to his timeless God. If the eternalist does not take his stand somewhere on this question, he will not be able to save his thesis from irrational qualifications.

So, if 'God is timeless' is to be a meaningful assertion, then it must be possible to say of a timeless God that He knows, that He acts, and that He responds to the actions of His creatures. A doctrine of timelessness which does not allow us to ascribe these attributes to God would not be a doctrine of the timelessness of God in the sense in which that word is used in the revealed religions. We can say without any hesitation that such a doctrine will not have any theological interest.

'Knowing' is perhaps the least problematic in comparison with 'acting' and 'responding' because it is not a time-consuming activity. 'How long did it take you to know that' is a meaningless question unless you mean with knowing 'to learn'. It is not a necessary truth that whatever we know, we must previously have learned. Most of what we know we are not aware of at a given moment. Of course, this is a limitation of our finitude and obviously does not apply to God.

Nelson Pike agrees with this, but he still finds the notion of a timeless knower problematic. For, he doubts that a timeless being could act in such a way as to give us evidence that would warrant our ascribing knowledge to it. In fact, Pike doubts that a timeless being could act at all¹⁴. There may certainly be some challenge to this view. But it seems that if action can be ascribed to a timeless God, the attribution of knowledge to Him will present few additional problems. For example, E. J. Khamara

¹² Swinburne, R., *The Coherence of Theism*, p. 216.

¹³ Boethius, M., *De Trinitate*, quoted by St. Thomas in *Summa Theologiae*, I, 10, 3.

¹⁴ Pike, N., *God and Timelessness*, p.125-27.

argues that "knowledge is...like perception in that, as ordinarily understood, they can only be ascribed to agents who are supposed to endure in time"¹⁵.

What can we say about action? It is well-known that the personal God of theism must be active. But what sorts of acts should we consider here? We think it will be suitable to our considerations if we begin with the simplest act ascribed to God by theology: It is God's preservation of the world in being from moment to moment. This act is simple in that it is a completely general action.

Scleiermacher almost reduced all of God's actions to the preservation of the world. Even though most of theistic philosophers would not agree with this reduction, they could accept that preservation is basic in God's dealing with the world because, whatever else God may do with a creature, He must also and at the same time act to preserve it in being.

But how can one understand preservation as the act of a timeless being? How are we to grasp the notion of a timeless action? The traditional answer to these questions proceeds by means of the analogy between space and time. We believe that our efforts to grasp the notion of a nontemporal agent may be facilitated by considering the idea of a nonspatial agent¹⁶. Modern physics has taught us the idea that a causal entity is not necessarily either spatially extended nor spatially contiguous with its effect. The notion of action at a distance, though occasioning some discomfort, was basic to physics at least from Newton to Einstein. Thus, a nonextended being can be a cause and produce effects at spatially remote points. But what about a cause that lacks itself spatial location? Here we leave physics and get into metaphysics and theology, still remaining, we think, within the boundaries of intelligibility. We have learned from Cartesian philosophy that human souls do not exist at any point in space but they produce effects in space, that is to say, in the part of human brain.

In the case of God nonspatial causality possesses distinct advantages: A nonspatial agent is no distance away from, and thus is not spatially separated from its spatial effect. Here God has been compared to the circle whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere. At this point we can say that God is closer to us than our own breathing.

If we accept this conclusion as intelligible (we have already accepted), then it shows us how to speak of God also as a timeless being. Just as the nonspatial God can act outside of space so as to produce effects at every point in space, so the timeless God can act outside of time (in eternity) so as to produce effects at every point in time. We can say rightly that God's preservation of the temporal world in being is just such an action. We read these words in R. L. Sturch's lines: "In the case, then, of the statement 'God sustains the universe', a believer in timeless eternity could presumably say that all he implies is (a) that God wishes the universe to continue in being and (b) that (God being omnipotent) when God wishes something that something happens"¹⁷.

¹⁵ Khamara, E. J., "Eternity and Omniscience", *Philosophical Quarterly* 24(1974), p.211.

¹⁶ Cf. Purtil, Richard L., "Foreknowledge and Fatalism", *Religious Studies* 10(1974), p. 322-23.

¹⁷ Sturch, R. L., "The Problem of the Divine Eternity", p.488.

According to Schleiermacher, God cannot do any particular thing in the world, such as parting the Red Sea for the children of Israel or creating the heavens and the earth out of nothing. Although this limitation has other roots in Schleiermacher's theology taken as a whole, he seems to regard it also as an inference from the doctrine of God's timelessness: "The divine omnipotence can never in any way enter as a supplement (so to speak) to the natural causes in their sphere; for then it must like them work temporally and spatially; and at one time working so, and then again, not so, it would not be self-identical and so would be neither eternal nor omnipotence"¹⁸.

We think there is a confusion in Schleiermacher's argument. He seems to suppose that if a spatially and temporally limited event (such as creating the earth and the creatures on it) is the effect of a divine action, then the action itself must be spatially and temporally limited, and therefore not eternal. But this is inconsistent with the reasoning about preservation. Schleiermacher believes that if the divine act partakes of the temporal character of its consequences, then the preservation of the spatially and temporally infinite universe must itself be infinitely extended (everlasting rather than timeless).

But here, instead of reasoning so, we must rather say that the act of preservation is timeless, while its temporal effect is of infinite duration. Although a single, timeless divine act may produce effects throughout all of time, it need not do so. There is no reason why a timeless divine act may not have as its temporal effect a specific, limited event¹⁹. We must keep in mind that God is not only timeless but also omnipotent and omniscient. So, He can easily find the way of producing spatial and temporal effects, even though He is timeless Himself. We conclude, then, that it is intelligible to speak of a timeless being as acting. And this is not only in the form of general actions that occur everywhere and at all times indiscriminately, but also in the form of particular actions whose results happen once for all and never recur.

Some objections have been advanced against the doctrine of timeless God. One argument is concerned with the notions of coherence and conceivability. According to some philosophers and theologians one cannot talk reasonably about a timeless God since the notion of timeless existence is incoherent or unintelligible. Firstly, we can have no idea of what such existence would be like. Secondly, if anything exists at all, it must exist at some time, for to exist at all is to exist at some time.

This reasoning is sometimes related to a similar argument. According to this one God cannot reasonably be said to be timeless since some other things must be said of Him, and these other things are incompatible with His being timeless. In other words, it is meant here that the notion of a timeless God would render theism internally contradictory.

The things that critics find incompatible with God's timelessness are God's personal perfection, God's ability to act, and His knowledge. A group of theologians called Process Theologians have argued that God's personal perfection rules out His timelessness. The most famous of this group, Charles Hartshorne, says we regard people

¹⁸ Schleiermacher, F., *The Christian Faith*, 2d ed., trans. H. R. Mackintosh and J. S. Stewart, T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh 1956, p. 212.

¹⁹ Cf. Hasker, W., *God, Time and Knowledge*, p.155.

as fully personal if they are capable of love and if they are both passive, and thereby responsive to their environment, as well as active. So, God's personal perfection requires that He be able to love and that He be both passive and active. God must therefore sympathize with His creatures and be affected by what they do. God undergoes joys and sorrows; in short, God changes. But if God changes He cannot be timeless since a timeless being cannot really change in itself²⁰.

If we consider God's ability to act we see it is a conceptual one. It is meant here that if God acts then he must be in time since to act at all logically depends on acting at some time. If someone says God brought about the world, we can sensibly ask when did He bring it about? And if someone says God punishes, again we can ask sensibly when and why does He punish? Because, God's punishment requires at least one human action which leads to it; and all human actions are at some time²¹.

As for the argument about God's knowledge, it is simply that if God is omniscient, then he must know things now and he must have known them in the past. Furthermore, He must know them when they come about in the future. And, all that means is that God exists in time²².

Now, what is the value of these objections? Are they conclusive? We must admit that all these objections declare some important difficulties we meet in talking about God and His relations with universe. Since the existence of God and His attributes are above and beyond human being's comprehension, our explanations in these subjects naturally will not be able to reach mathematical certainty.

But, it seems that none of the above objections has the power to undermine the doctrine of timeless God. Those who believe in God have regularly wanted to ascribe to Him a kind of permanence or independence which will enable them to be confident that He will not cease to exist. Clearly, if God is timeless then the idea of His ceasing to exist is to be fully senseless.

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²⁰ Hartshorne, C., "Whitehead's Revolutionary concept of Prohension", *International Philosophical Quarterly*, XIX (1975), p. 261.

²¹ Cf. Swinburne, R., *The Coherence of Theism*, p. 221.

²² Anthony Kenny argues that if God is timeless then His knowledge is extremely restricted: "It seems an extraordinary way of affirming God's omniscience if a person, when asked what God knows now, must say 'nothing', and when asked what He knew yesterday, must again say 'nothing', and must again say 'nothing' when asked what God will know tomorrow", Kenny, A., *Aquinas: A Collection of Critical Essays*, London and Melbourne 1969, p. 263.

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