

2012

Timelessly Present, Compassionately Impassible: A Defense of Two Classical Divine Attributes

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Recommended Citation

Olsson, Philip R., "Timelessly Present, Compassionately Impassible: A Defense of Two Classical Divine Attributes" (2012). *CGU Theses & Dissertations*. Paper 38.

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DOI: 10.5642/cguetd/38

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**Timelessly Present, Compassionately Impossible: A Defense of Two
Classical Divine Attributes**

**by
Philip R. Olsson**

**Claremont Graduate University
2012**

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Approval of the Review of Committee

This dissertation has been duly read, reviewed, and critiqued by the Committee listed below, which hereby approves the manuscript of Philip Robert Olsson as fulfilling the scope and quality requirements for meriting the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Religion.

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Abstract

Timelessly Present, Compassionately Impassible: A Defense of Two Classical Divine Attributes

**by
Philip R. Olsson**

Claremont Graduate University: 2012

This study articulates a God-concept in the tradition of classical Christian theism, contending with calls to modify significantly or revise classical constructions. Attention falls upon two closely related divine attributes that have, especially in recent decades, come under philosophical and theological attack – God’s timelessness and impassibility (inability to suffer). Is the “classical” Lord truly Immanuel, i.e. with us? This general question motivates the study.

The opening three chapters analyze aspects of the God-concepts put forth by Augustine, Aquinas, and Calvin. Apparent tensions between a timeless transcendence and an affirming union of the Trinity with creation are countenanced, with an eye to doing justice to both doctrines. Chapter One examines the idea of divine timelessness and corresponding thoughts about temporal reality found in the *Confessions*, supplementing Augustinian transcendence with the creational and eschatological insights of two other Church Fathers. Chapter Two documents Aquinas’s affirmation of both God’s strong immutability and the non-necessity of creation, while questioning whether he affirms these in a logically consistent way. Chapter Three then follows the contours of Calvin’s Trinitarianism and Christology,

reflecting on the Triune Creator's gracious "wedding" of himself to the whole work of creation.

The final three chapters operate within the fields of philosophy and philosophical theology. Chapter Four commends a tenseless (or *B*) theory of time, highlighting several problems surrounding tensed (or *A*) theories of time. But this former view implies that there is no "official present," leaving no apparent room for the presence of the timeless God with times and temporally located agents. Thus Chapter Five seeks to address classical eternalism's "present problem." The conclusion is reached that the temporally absent God's "present problem" can be resolved by embracing a "risk-free" understanding of divine providence, best understood in terms of a "Reformed decree" that strongly actualizes all non-divine entities and events. Chapter Six begins by wrestling with what implications the timelessness doctrine might have for "responsive" divine compassion and ends by proposing that the infinite God "embraces" the finite world not by way of a panentheistic inclusion but in some ways more akin to a husband's attentive care for his wife.

To my lovely wife, Heather, for her kind, patient encouragement.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to my Committee Chair, Stephen T. Davis, who reviewed each of the chapters and offered constructive feedback. I also owe special thanks to Genevieve Beenen. Her scrupulous editing led to a multitude of little changes, greatly enhancing the quality of the finished product. For any defects still residing within the text I take full credit.

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INTRODUCTION

This dissertation looks to perform a work of theological re-affirmation and re-articulation. At a quite general level, my purpose is to *re-affirm* two “divine attributes” conveyed to us from within the tradition of classical Christian theism. The first of these is the *timeless* eternity of the Triune Creator. The second is the Triune Creator’s *impassibility* or inability to suffer, an important by-product of His “strong immutability.”¹

Deep Christian reflection about what *sort* of lord the Lord is has led thinkers from “Late Antiquity” to “Late Modernity” to conclude that He whom believers worship is one who enjoys an exalted life. What this means, at the least, is that His life cannot be characterized in a fashion that merely “inflates” human (or even super-human) actions, attitudes, faculties, emotions, dispositions, or qualities. Admittedly, this tendency away from speaking univocally (i.e., with *one voice*) when moving from predication about “earthly” realities to predication about “heavenly” realities has had what I would call its more mystical and agnostic

¹ My case for impassibility will not presuppose that this “attribute” itself entails a form of strong immutability. Indeed, there appear to be decent arguments to the effect that God could be unaffected by created entities or events but still experience changes within Himself more consistent with a “weak” immutability; see *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, s.v. “Immutability,” (by Brian Leftow), <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/immutability/> (accessed December 7, 2010). I trust, however, that there is far less controversy involved in stating that God’s inability to experience (at least “real” if not all “Cambridge”) changes within Himself entails His inability to undergo such changes *as a causal consequence* of the existence of a creation and the events and actions that take place in it. Furthermore, it does bear mentioning at this early point that I am convinced that divine timelessness entails such a version of strong immutability. Because of these perceived entailments, my case for divine impassibility will significantly rest on a version of strong immutability that I find to be consistent with the doctrine of the timelessly eternal creator I will present. That being said, let it be understood from the outset that I am not convinced that the kind of approach I am taking is the only kind that could be taken in defense of the impassible divine essence.

proponents and pitfalls. Clearly, however, this observation provides no warrant for the inference that a certain concern to guard divine “otherness” is entirely absent from the intuitions of even some of the more “immanentistic” and “anthropomorphic” theologians who have claimed a measure of allegiance to the Christian tradition.² And no more does such an observation warrant the supposition that the same tradition’s “guardians of transcendence” have thought of their god as existing in fundamental, metaphysical opposition to “the dust” on which we live and move – whether the dust is taken to stand for Creation, Incarnation, or a consummated New Creation.³

Nonetheless, relating distinctly to the more narrow matters to be addressed in this dissertation, certain prominent Christian theologians have taken an “extreme” position and held that the divine life is devoid of what we call *vicissitudes*. This insight, a piece of “negative theology” which has historically been claimed by its advocates to have scriptural support, has resulted in a discourse about the “negative”

² In attempting to form a synthesis of Christianity and Neo-Platonism, for example, the late medieval priest and mystic, Meister Eckhart, juxtaposed an absolute transcendence of the One over all ontological and epistemic categories with a pantheistic identification of the human soul with that divine Ground from which the Trinity is said to emanate necessarily. For a more recent example from within the neo-Socinian tradition, Gregory Boyd insists that justice cannot be done to the biblical portrayal of God unless divine activity in the world is modeled in a fairly strict fashion on human activity, taking references to divine grieving, say, in a relatively unmeasured univocal sense. In doing so, however, he holds that God still enjoys an inability to undergo certain types of change. In spite of being frustratable in His plans and having the ability to change His mind based on things He learns, for instance, God’s essential goodness is said to be unshakeable.

³ This allusion to dust is quite appropriate in light of the Genesis story’s indication that it was from dust that Adam was created. Whichever sort of reading this fashioning of Adam is given, there appears no simple and obvious way to think of how even a lord over creation who is temporally, if not also spatially, extended and located may or must form *from dust* a conscious, moral agent. If nothing else, this observation helpfully points up a profound ontological contrast between the Triune Lord and that world (including the human creatures living in it at one time or another) which is the causal result of the Lord’s “verbal action.” This would be true for adherents and critics alike of the timeless eternal Creator thesis.

attributes of eternality and impassibility. As the “otherly” sovereign One, God’s eternality comes to be understood as *timelessness*. As the spiritual and self-sufficient One, He has equally been conceived as *unable* to change, being essentially immune to the suffering of any improvements, declines, or even supposedly “*status quo*” alterations (e.g., *coming to know* at Jesus’ conception that “the eternal Logos is *now* incarnate” after knowing a few minutes prior to Jesus’ conception that “the eternal Logos *is going to then be* incarnate”).

Famously contrasting the one Lord who, in His very essence, dwells on high with the world in its fluctuating diversity, Augustine of Hippo advanced beyond the notion of a temporally eternal (beginningless, endless) deity to the belief that God’s eternal nature utterly transcends temporal categories. Temporal terms point to no ontological matter of fact about God’s life (or its purported history). This belief comes to expression here in a “theologizing prayer” to the Almighty, forming part of a broader diatribe addressed to those who have the temerity to ask “What was God doing before He made heaven and earth?”:

Thou hast made all things; and before all times, Thou art: neither in any time was time not. At no time then hadst Thou not made any thing, because time itself Thou madest. And no times are coeternal with Thee, because Thou abidest; but if they abode, they should not be times.⁴

More recently, the philosopher-theologian Ernan McMullin has taken up the mantle of an Augustinian conception of divine eternality. In an interview with Robert

⁴ St. Augustine, *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*, trans. Edward Bouverie Pusey (Franklin Center, PA: The Franklin Library, 1982), 239.

Kuhn, McMullin endorses the notion of the timeless God, now focused on this God as the actualizer of the (perplexingly immense) world in which we live:

[T]emporality is a limitation. And it's imposing a very, very severe limitation on the creator. And my instinct is that if you have a being sufficient to bring the kind of...extraordinary universe to be, with our billions of stars and billions of galaxies...if you have a being of that kind, it seems to me that to set that kind of limitation of temporality on that being is gratuitous. And whatever follows from that has to follow, in my view.⁵

These mainly negative statements about the timeless God both without creation and with creation figure as expressions of an un-attenuated classical Christian conception of divine eternity.

Likewise, with little difficulty one finds among the Church Fathers an unabashed commitment to the proposition that the Triune Lord, as such, is *unable to suffer* in His essence. Cyril of Alexandria, for example, in working out the logic of the Incarnation, managed, on pain of the appearance of incoherence, to conclude that the Word in flesh (*logos ensarkos*) is both unable and able to suffer in different respects:

He [the Son] suffered without suffering. ... If we should say that through conversion or mutation of his own nature into flesh, it would be in all ways necessary for us even against our will to confess that the hidden and divine nature was passible. But if he has remained unchanged albeit he has been made man as we, and it be a property of the heavenly nature that it cannot suffer, and the passible body has become his own through the union: He suffers when the body suffers, in that it is said to be his own body, he remains impassible in that it is truly his property to be unable to suffer.⁶

⁵ Ernan McMullin. Interview by Robert Kuhn, available from <http://www.closertotruth.com/participant/Ernan-McMullin/66>; Internet; accessed 26 November 2010.

⁶ Cyril of Alexandria, *On the Unity of Christ*, trans. J. McGuckin (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Press, 1995), 37.

To whatever extent we admit that Platonic philosophy played a role in accounting for Cyril's embrace here of what Sally McFague has termed a "monarchical" God-concept, this is not what is important presently.⁷ What is important is that he, as perhaps the chief positive contributor to the content and substance of Chalcedonian Christology, functions as a good representative of the classical Christian tradition's commitment to divine immutability. For even Cyril, and the "Chalcedonian formula" with him, in affirming that the Person of the Son of God suffers in the Incarnation, was careful to deny that this entails a change of the divine or human natures, lest they be confused with one another. It seems clear from the writings of Cyril, along with other theologians that we will later examine, that divine immutability (and, thus, impassibility) was not, before the modern era, generally assumed to be in need of any serious modification or revision.⁸ This is true even with respect to the claim that the Incarnate Son (at least in His pre-resurrection state) is, in a carefully specified sense, passible. Nor was God's immutability necessarily to be abandoned by those wishing to say that in the Incarnation the Son is personally, forever united to the creation, the realm of change.

⁷ Sally McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987).

⁸ Herbert McCabe argues that a modern willingness to attribute suffering to the nature of God as such has largely been the result of a failure to sympathize with the Chalcedonian take on the incarnation: "If, with certain theologians, you regress from Chalcedon and affirm that Jesus is not literally divine, you at once block the way from saying that *Jesus* suffered and died to saying that *God* suffered and died. Nevertheless, since there is a profound Christian instinct that the gospel has to do with the suffering of God, these theologians are constrained to say that since God did not literally suffer in Jesus, God must suffer in some other way; as, for example, he surveys the sufferings of Jesus and the rest of mankind. One consequence of this, of course, is that whereas a traditional Christian would say that God suffered a horrible pain in his hands when he was nailed to the cross, these theologians have to make do with a kind of mental anguish at the follies and sins of creatures." See Herbert McCabe, *God Matters* (London: Cassell Publishers Ltd., 1987), 46.

It must be conceded at this point, however, that the challenge that proponents of classical Christian theism have always faced has been that of bringing together in their understanding – even more generally than in the Incarnation – the exalted life of the Triune God with the reality of Immanuel, God with us.⁹ If God’s eternity is to be construed as utterly timeless and if a necessary and sufficient condition of some thing, event, process, or sentient entity being the eternal God’s creation is its being part of temporal reality (at minimum, being capable of having one property *and then* lacking that property), then how can we sensibly speak of this God being intimately present with “the world” (in a distributive sense, i.e., with respect to its “parts”)?¹⁰ And if God is unable to change and is, therefore, “metaphysically

⁹ My use of the expression “Immanuel” or “Immanuel principle” makes use of this word and concept in a broader way than the sense that appears in the Christian Scriptures, viewing the Triune God on a widescreen rather than giving a “close-up” on Jesus of Nazareth. The Scriptural *locus classicus* for this appellation is, of course, Matthew 1:23, in which Jesus is proclaimed as Messiah. In much of this dissertation, however, I will use the term in an extended sense to speak about a creative, providential presence the Triune God sustains with the creation. Just as importantly (but not a particular focus of the following chapters), I also consider the Holy Spirit’s indwelling of believers since the Day of Pentecost recorded in Acts to be the Father’s and the Son’s bestowal upon believers of a salvific divine presence, the continued “tabernacling” of God with His eternally elect people (leaving to the side legitimate questions about the “common operations of the Spirit” that might touch the lives of those not belonging to this latter category).

¹⁰ A main reason for speaking of the distributive as opposed to the collective sense here stems from the traditional Christian belief that God’s omnipresence means that God is personally present at all times and places and not merely in a generic sense with the whole of creation (with mere “parts” of Him being distributed to various spatio-temporal locations). In line with this, my later argument for impassibility based on the concept of *infinity* will involve the assertion of an unconditional, creative Triune decree. In this decree, the Triune council states *timelessly* the truth conditions for (i.e., the “facts” about) the actual world – i.e., the spatio-temporal reality in which things and events take their place. The things and events are spatio-temporally indexed but *the facts* about the times at which the things and events are located and about the relations between them form part of a timeless, seamless decree expressive of God’s infinite nature. It is thus, arguably, easier to conceive of the timelessly eternal Creator’s presence with the actualized *whole* of the *timeless* decree than it is to conceive of God’s presence with the actualized *temporal parts* of that decree. Nevertheless, I will hold that the timeless and, therefore, impassible God enjoys a particularized presence with all of creation’s parts.

Furthermore, I am not assuming that the second conjunct in this question’s hypothetical clause will in all quarters be uncontroversial. Indeed, the fact that it is highly controversial serves as a major impetus for the present dissertation. Just as those who conceive of divine eternity as

impervious” to being affected by His contingent creatures, then how can we consistently hold that the Lord is compassionately disposed to those who can and do, at times, struggle and suffer in diverse manners?¹¹ To these questions, many

temporal everlastingness would deny that temporality is a *sufficient* condition of being part of the world created by the Triune God (because the Triune Creator’s own [uncreated] life is temporal in some sense), so also some classical panentheists (in the tradition, say, of the early Schleiermacher) who affirm a radical ontological union of creator and creation can dialectically deny the proposition that a *necessary* condition of being a part or aspect of the creation is being temporal. Some may, that is, wish to affirm a sort of monism. I, however, do not find the latter to constitute a promising metaphysical project, as it would seem ontologically to threaten essential features of human experience, features that are essential, I hold, to distinguishing creatures from the Creator. These would include a kind of epistemic access to one’s past (through memory) and the (at least relative) lack of such access to one’s future (leaving room for little more than, say, a belief in the principle of bivalence for even future tensed statements and inductive expectations, both of these themselves having been subjected to skeptical critique in the history of philosophy), along with a sense of the transience and novelty of one’s experience. To “philosophically cancel” the realm in which change is possible amounts to the removal of necessary preconditions of intelligible, finite experience. Through a dissolution of the world into a temporally undifferentiated eternal realm, the “life” of the world as a “whole” and the lives of individuals as its “parts” are made devoid of *before* and *after*. Against both the deniers of the Creator’s atemporality and those prone to inciting monistic hostility toward the possibility of change, this dissertation will contend for the following propositions: To affirm that genuine temporality is a *sufficient* condition of some thing or personal agent being part of creation does not entail commitment to an incoherent metaphysical thesis. More specifically, it does not entail a monistic denial (at least by implication) of the idea that genuine temporality is a *necessary* (much less *sufficient*) condition of some thing or personal agent belonging to creation (i.e., the Triune Creator is in His essence *without* time and we as “parts” of His freely decreed creation are ontologically *in* time). Nor does it entail that a viable, non-panentheistic (or, assuming that they are logically distinguishable, non-*pantheistic*) but real union of Creator and creation is unavailable to those who hold that the Creator is timelessly eternal.

¹¹ I wish to say, at this stage, something about what seems to be a denial of God the Son’s true Incarnation by those who claim that a significant aspect of the Incarnate Son’s suffering is something He experiences *qua* God. This claim would, if true, render it possible that a fair degree of the apparent human suffering endured by Jesus in His life and cross-work was only that – an appearance. It would not imply that *all* of the Incarnate Word’s suffering was merely apparent but it would seem to serve as a potential defeater for the proposition that the Son, as found in human form, is *truly human*. Given the presumably radical difference between God’s life and our lives, even for those who impute temporality to the Triune Lord, to say that the Son suffers *in His divine nature* suggests the possibility that the Son’s suffering *in history* differs *in kind* from our own human suffering. And if this is the case, is justice done to the belief that Incarnation involves a union of the Son’s Person with a true *human* nature? Not quite, I think. On the contrary, the Son’s apparent solidarity with us may not prove to be the genuine article if He is able to experience suffering through a “divine filter” – one that, as it were, turns vinegar into cheap but palatable wine. Furthermore, the Personal union of the two natures is such in classical orthodoxy that the suffering of Jesus on the cross, for example, is the suffering of *the Son*. If the Son’s suffering, however, is allowed to upset the integrity of the divine nature, then the union would not consist of two distinct natures but of a *conflation*. The God-man would then be neither fully divine nor fully human but rather some holy *mixture*, wherein the natures are ultimately dissolved into a sort of super-human hybrid. Two Chalcedonian hallmarks of orthodoxy, therefore, the *true union* of the Son’s two distinct natures in

contemporary thinkers would answer that the antecedent in both cases must be significantly qualified or altogether denied, thus relieving the apparent tension and allowing us to affirm an unalloyed divine immanence and love.

But if one wishes to affirm without qualification the antecedents in the above questions, is it possible to articulate the reality of Immanuel in a fashion that is conceptually cogent in addition to being consistent with the data of Holy Scripture? I believe that it is. That is, I do not believe that the perceived tension(s) between divine timelessness and the divine presence with temporal creatures amounts to as much as a genuine, conceptual or metaphysical tension. Chapter 5 will focus almost exclusively on characterizing in a positive way (that is, not simply by way of negation) this Creator-creation relationship. Furthermore, the absence of a fundamental, metaphysical *tension* between Creator and creation does not entail the absence of a fundamental, metaphysical *distinction* between Creator and creation. Indeed, I will, in Chapter 6, maintain that there is a contingent but real *union* of the timeless Triune Creator and His creation, a marriage that goes beyond the divine Son's Incarnation and yet refuses to blur the Creator-creation boundary through any sort of panentheistic joint venture. In arguing this, I will try to show that the impassible God is not "distant from" tumults in the creaturely realm. Rather, He

one Person *and* the belief that it is a *true human nature* united to the Son, are put at risk when one affirms that the Son suffers with respect to the divine essence. These problems go along with a broader contention of this dissertation that it is with respect to God's very essence as the timeless, strongly immutable Trinity that He cannot be affected adversely by His creatures. And this, as we have seen above, has classically been maintained even in the context of the most poignant joining together of the divine and human in the enfleshed Logos. See Thomas Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 2000); also, Michael J. Dodds, *The Unchanging God of Love: Thomas Aquinas & Contemporary Theology on Divine Immutability* (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2008).

enjoys the privileged position of the eternal Creator vis-à-vis His creation. His transcendence is such that He is able to be wholly, personally present to any finite, spatio-temporal location and efficaciously wills to be so. The Trinity thus, without being temporally bound, sustains governmental Lordship and thereby communicates the Holy Triune presence to all the (places and) “times of creation” and all agents located at those times (and places).¹² As such, the Triune Lord is present with and caring for His needy (and, in the case of humans, sinful) creatures, wherever and whenever they are situated. This sustained presence is the expression of an unconditioned decree. The world, therefore, being “encompassed by” God’s presence, features no un-decreed “newness” that might entail divine finitude or passibility. This summarizes, then, some of the ways in which the present dissertation will *re-articulate* two key doctrinal components of an unmodified, classical Christian theism.¹³

But these are only slight previews of what is to come. At this juncture, I must set up the more specific philosophical and theological challenges to be addressed in the following pages.

¹² As William Hasker has rightly highlighted (or so I will maintain), timeless eternity prohibits any temporal localizing of the divine essence. Any attempts to articulate and defend the presence of timeless God with the times of creation, therefore, must not transgress what he calls “Anselm’s Barrier” (in honor of Anselm’s principle that God “neither exists, nor acts, nor knows in time.”). William Hasker, “The Absence of a Timeless God,” in *God and Time: Essays on the Divine Nature*, eds. Gregory E. Ganssle and David M. Woodruff (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 183.

¹³ At any point that I use terms such as “unmodified,” “modified,” or “revised” to describe versions of classical theism or modern theism in this work, it should be known that I am loosely employing a typology drawn mainly from John Cooper, *Panentheism: The Other God of the Philosophers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006).

Before introducing the specific challenges that await us at the beginning of the next section, however, it will be good to say a few words here about the fields of inquiry on which the ensuing discussion will take place. This dissertation will consist of a series of endeavors in historical theology, the philosophy of time, systematic theology, and philosophical theology. The sort of enterprise in mind here is one that is committed to the principle of *Sola Scriptura*.¹⁴ It might seem, then, that I have thus far somewhat presumptuously skirted the issue of what the Hebrew-Christian texts might have to say that importantly bears on the present topic. But appearances can be deceiving.

Firstly, I believe that the Bible provides “one liners” that teach a vast difference between Creator and creation that is compatible with the “timeless God” thesis. Moreover, it is not strange to see such statements about divine transcendence juxtaposed with statements underscoring the Creator’s intimate nearness to particular creatures (e.g., humans, i.e., bearers of the divine image). Consider, for instance, Isaiah 57:15:

For thus says the One who is high and lifted up, who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: “I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly, and to revive the heart of the contrite.”

¹⁴ Integrally tied to this approach as well is the idea that, although we may read Scriptures through the lenses of various traditions, we must seek to have even our examining lenses examined by the divine Word that confronts us in the words of men as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

Also, consider the words of the incarnate Christ in his correction of those who challenged his claim that the patriarch Abraham looked forward with anticipation to his “day.” In John 8:57-59, we read:

So the Jews said to Him, “You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?” Jesus said to them “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.” So they picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple.

The fact that Jesus’ rhetorical opponents in this exchange sought to kill him upon hearing this statement (the last straw, as they perceived it) points to a presupposed fundamental difference between Creator and creature. This Creator-creature distinction, I suggest, was robust enough, at least for those scandalized hearers in the text mentioned here, to serve as a sort of aid in their resistance to the idea that Yahweh would uniquely identify Himself with one particular human being located at particular times, Jesus of Nazareth.

Secondly, those teachings of Scripture that poignantly contrast the Creator and the creature often serve equally to reinforce thoughts of the Triune Creator standing in a relation of close proximity to His “temporal others” or “timely creations.” The radical, *sui generis* difference between Creator and creation that we see depicted in the Bible is not depicted as a difference of absolute metaphysical incompatibility, as if to suggest that the Creator’s creative action is not expressive of the Creator’s essential character or that the creation is not open to careful divine super-intendence. Philosophers of religion in the Wittgensteinian tradition, such as D.Z. Phillips and Herbert McCabe, in the interests of guarding theological grammar from the encroachments of other “language games,” have made remarks to the effect

that “God is not a something (but He is not nothing either)” and “If Creator and creation are taken together, they do not add up to two.” And such remarks can be helpful in preventing us from adulterating the grammar of God through anthropomorphism (as say the Phillipsians) or doing metaphysical injustice to God by treating him under categories in terms of which created entities are classified and understood (as say many Thomists and Maimonedeans). But such remarks can just as easily be unhelpful if they are made without a significant effort to then say what positive connections exist, knitting the Creator to the creation in important ways. In my articulation of classical eternalism, I will make such an effort, utilizing biblical language and exemplars.

On the other hand, I do not find the timelessness doctrine to be Scripturally spelled out in such a way that would justify its being made a central, indispensable tenet of orthodox Christian belief. More to the point, I agree with those who have doubted that the divinely aided Scripture writers enjoyed (or suffered) a reflective context in which the metaphysical question of God’s relationship to time was raised, much less answered in any definitive, philosophical fashion.¹⁵

This being the case, as an evangelical I will confine my conclusions to what I take to be consistent with the biblical revelation and will be especially self-critical if I should be charged with running afoul of it. On this topic, I take biblical statements to be like “arrow” signs, “do not enter” signs and “warning” signs. The

¹⁵ James Barr, *Biblical Words for Time* (London, S.C.M. Press, 1962). Paul Helm impressively brings out this point in “The Issue of Divine Eternity,” the opening chapter of an important defense of divine timelessness. See *Eternal God: A Study of God without Time* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988).

Bible gives us “arrow signs” to show us, with some specificity, ways that the eternal Creator and timely creation can and must be thought together. But to the extent that these signs lack metaphysical specificity the Scriptures must be obeyed when we perceive that they are halting us from going down certain speculative roads. One speculative road in front of which I find “warning” signs but not a “do not enter” sign is the road of philosophical theology, specifically that “evangelically safe” stretch that keeps Scripture clearly in view.

In trying to be consistent with this approach, I find enough Scriptural latitude on this matter of God and time to permit one’s non-central, philosophico-theological tenets to be significantly shaped and influenced by one’s assessment, say, of various theories of time. Thus, there is at least some room for debates over different theories of time and for allowing the sides one takes in those debates to be at least partially determinative for one’s understanding of the God-time relationship.¹⁶ For this

¹⁶ I say *partially* determinative here because the epistemic situation is a bit more complicated than that of simply selecting which theory of time one finds most cogent and allowing that theory to dictate one’s understanding of the God-time relationship. A defensible conception of the God-time relationship obviously would require a cogent, coherent conception of time itself. But, firstly, the conceptual difficulties of articulating and defending any theory of time make the discussion within the philosophy of time, it seems to me, not the easiest location from which to launch one’s understanding of an even more controversial metaphysical thesis (much less, to orient one’s existentially significant religious attitudes) about God and time. Secondly, there are differences of theological belief and belief policy moving in the other direction that help to account for why philosophers of religion are motivated to defend particular theories or conceptions of time over others. Moreover, because certain conceptions of time will cohere more easily with certain conceptions of God the creator (usually related specifically to the nature of God’s knowing and willing), if one is at all epistemologically self-conscious, one’s set of beliefs about God and one’s set of beliefs about time will tend mutually to reinforce each other. Likewise, critical attacks on beliefs belonging to the former set will tend to be construed as critical attacks on beliefs belonging to the latter set, and vice versa. This having been said, it is clear that a defense of the timelessly eternal God that succeeds in fending off charges of incoherence and showing some ways to understand the divine presence given a particular conception of time does not provide an open and shut case for concluding that God exists as the timelessly eternal creator. There could still be some *prima facie* biblical and/or theological bases for preferring some other conception to the unqualifiedly atemporal eternal creator thesis. Furthermore, there might still be, unbeknownst to them, areas of incoherence

reason, I will not hesitate to rest a significant part of my case for the timeless God's presence with His timely creations on the philosophical conception of time that I find most logically and phenomenologically satisfactory. Similarly, in the later chapter on divine impassibility I will attempt to construct a philosophical argument for that doctrine that utilizes the concept of Infinity. What is interesting about this is that the argument will take much the same form as the argument from Infinity used by some panentheists for their conception(s) of the God-world relationship. But in arguing for a non-panentheistic God-world union I will replace a particular panentheistic concept of Infinity with one that I find to be more faithful to the Scriptural portrayals of God and world. So, even though arguments and philosophical questions of conceptual cogency will have a significant place in this dissertation, a strong effort will be made to fill premises with scriptural content and place the bounds of speculative inquiry under scriptural constraints.

I. Challenge One: Think of the Timeless God's Presence with "Timely Others"

It bears mentioning that much of the specific philosophico-theological study to be undertaken in these pages as it particularly relates to God and time looks to be quite narrowly circumscribed – part of an in-house, evangelical dispute. Such a limited scope of discussion is virtually inevitable, given the multi-faceted nature of (and extensive literature addressing those many facets of) the subject of “God and Time.” To see this, we need to glance over only a few of the diverse positions

in the particular conceptions of time defended by the advocates (as well as the opponents, of course) of timeless eternity.

staked out by philosophers that bear on the “God and Time” topic. To begin with, there are proponents of atheism (like Quentin Smith) who have affirmed the existence of both temporal properties and temporal relations *and* proponents of atheism (like Bertrand Russell) who have denied the existence of temporal properties and affirmed only the existence of temporal relations.¹⁷ Also, there are (panen)theists (e.g., Isaac Newton) who have held that absolute time and unbounded space amount to substantive divine attributes and modified classical theists (e.g., Richard Swinburne) who deny that God is spatial but maintain that God is temporal in a Newtonian (i.e., non-Relational) sense.¹⁸ Moving further, another modified classical theist, Nicholas Wolterstorff, holds that God is temporal *simpliciter* but yet another, William Lane Craig, says that there is a first moment of creation at which God is temporalized and asks why we should not think of God as *contingently* atemporal without creation. Furthermore, among those setting forth a positive theory about time that involves what is called “temporal becoming,” some (such as

¹⁷ This fact is enough to show, I believe, that in no obvious way does a particular analysis of the metaphysical nature of time itself demand theistic belief, at least not without some more ambitious and controversial argument(s) to show how this would be the case. The simple proposition, for example, that all times exist tenselessly does not, on its own, presuppose or entail that there exists a personal agent who enjoys a timeless standpoint. On this, see Paul Helm, “Eternalism contra Craig,” *Helm’s Deep*, January 1, 2008, <http://paulhelmsdeep.blogspot.com/2008/01/eternalism-contra-craig.html> (accessed November 3, 2010). For a recent paper whose ambitious and, no doubt, controversial arguments cut somewhat in the other direction, see Alan R. Rhoda, “Presentism, Truthmakers, and God,” *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 90 (2009), 41-62. Rhoda argues that within a Presentist ontology (the belief that only the present exists, as opposed to the past and future) one’s best bet for grounding truths about the past is to have a deity whose present memories serve as the ground. If Rhoda is correct and the grounding of truths about the past is of requisite importance to someone, then the choice to adopt Presentism would in itself appear to warrant for that person belief in a temporally eternal god with inerrant memory beliefs.

¹⁸ For discussion in support of the thesis that Newton was a type of panentheist, see Philip Clayton, *God and Contemporary Science* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 89; also, cf. Grace Jantzen, *God’s World, God’s Body* (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1984), 41ff.

J.M.E. McTaggart) have asserted that temporal relations (before, after, and simultaneous with) are analyzable in terms of temporal properties (of pastness, presentness, and futurity), while others (such as A.N. Prior) have rejected both temporal properties and temporal relations, countenancing only (present) tensed facts. These are just a few examples of issues and disputes germane to the subject of God's relationship to time. And this is without having even made mention of the tangled debates among theoretical physicists, philosophers, and theologians over the interpretation and relevance of Einstein's Special Theory of Relativity and the conception of the universe as a four dimensional space-time block or continuum that has often been inferred from it.¹⁹

Some of the above issues will receive attention in Chapter 4 but the greater aim of the project concerning God and time will be limited to: (1) revisiting, with the help of some historical specimens, what is involved in affirming an unqualified timeless eternity of the Creator, (2) giving a brief conceptual and phenomenological defense of the theory of time that I believe best squares with the timelessly eternal Creator, and, in Chapters 5 and 6, (3) addressing in a robust

¹⁹ It will probably suffice to say here that I lack the competence to evaluate these debates within modern physical theory. For this reason, along with my philosophical preference for something like Bas Van Fraassen's scientific anti-realist stance, I will stick to conceptual and phenomenological analyses in conjunction with my own efforts to make intelligent, scripturally informed theological judgments. For a defense of the tenseless theory of time promoted in the following pages, one which takes more of a tempered scientific realist stance than I do in thinking through the relevance of Einstein-Minkowsky spacetime for ontology, see Joshua M. Mozerky, "Time, Truth and Realism: An Essay on the Semantics and Metaphysics of Tense" (PhD diss., University of Toronto, 1999), 36-60. For a briefer treatment, see Graham Nerlich, "Time as Spacetime," in *Questions of Time and Tense*, ed. Robin Le Poidevin (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998) 119-134. All the same, I tend to agree with Mellor when, on the assumption that the tenseless view of time accommodates the special and general theories of relativity, he asserts that this is "not a *sine qua non* of the view itself." D.H. Mellor, *Real Time* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 68.

Trinitarian way some possible concerns about the understanding of time and temporal agency set forth here and its implications for how we can and cannot think of the eternal Creator as Immanuel.

In focusing on the timeless Trinity as Immanuel, this dissertation, I should make plain, is not limiting itself to the comparatively easy (though not so easy, at that) task of defending the coherence of a timelessly personal *God* as such. It is particularly with God under the description of *Creator* that the present project has to do. To deal only with the timeless *God* and not the timeless *Creator* would, in fact, risk reinforcing in the minds of many process thinkers as well as analytic philosophers of religion the already prevalent idea that classical theism sets forth a remote, static, and lifeless would-be deity who is blissfully indifferent to the world's many entities and events. While *sans* creation the existence of creation is not *necessitated* by the divine essence (or any other reality independent of the divine nature), the created world figures as a *consistent expression* of the divine essence. And to refrain from emphatically asserting this here as a fundamental premise will only succeed in encouraging the notion that defenders of the timelessly eternal God are promoting propositions that are only the rightful property of Parmenideans, Platonists, and Neo-Platonists.

The choice, furthermore, to focus on defending and commending an understanding of the timelessly eternal Creator as Immanuel means that the concept of the timelessly eternal God existing alone will be treated as relatively unproblematic. As far as it goes, this is right. Contending for a real relation

between eternal God and temporal creatures (much less, an intimate, compassionate presence of the former *with* the latter) is indeed a more formidable task than is defending against charges of incoherence the idea of a timeless, conscious being that exists without a creation. But plenty of philosophers have found the concept of a timeless, personal God to be deeply problematic, without even dragging creation into the picture, and this cannot be altogether ignored.

J.R. Lucas, for example, insists that time cannot be a created “thing” because time is a “necessary concomitant of the existence of a personal being.”²⁰ This follows from his belief that a personal being is a conscious being and from the unargued premise that the divine consciousness would involve a succession of contents of consciousness in God’s mind. William Lane Craig concedes that a succession of contents in the divine mind would constitute a temporal series and accepts the validity of Lucas’s argument.²¹ He manages (successfully, I would say) to sidestep the conclusion, however, by questioning the plausibility of the premise that God’s mental life must necessarily be characterized as consisting of discursive, successive thoughts or ideas rather than something on the order of a changeless Intentional stance.

Craig’s apologetical commitment to the Kalam Cosmological argument disposes him against the idea that God’s life is *intrinsically* stretched out along a

²⁰ J.R. Lucas, *The Future: An Essay on God, Temporality, and Truth* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 213.

²¹ This concession would cohere with Craig’s insistence elsewhere that “it is plainly not the case that something is in time if and only if it is in space.” See William Lane Craig, “On the Alleged Metaphysical Superiority of Timelessness,” in *The Importance of Time*, ed. L. Nathan Oaklander (Dordrecht, the Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2001), 185.

temporal continuum.²² But even he contends, alongside proponents of a more “standard” sort of divine temporality, that an eternal God’s activity and infallible beliefs with respect to His actualized creation are temporally qualified and not timeless.²³ Clearly, if the notion of a timeless, personal being cannot get off the ground in the absence of a posited creation, then the attempt to think or speak of that being as one who is timeless when considered under the description of “creator of ‘temporal others’” is a non-starter. But if even a respected defender of the cogency of a personal, timeless being *without* creation finds it necessary to conceive of God as temporally located and extended *with* creation, then the proponent of an unmodified classical eternity faces a significant challenge if he would seek to do justice to the Immanuel principle.

The bottom line from Craig’s standpoint is that an adherence to unmodified classical eternalism winds up being too philosophically costly (and thus he defends a modified version instead). And he is surely not alone in thinking this or taking such a route. Over the past half-century, several respectable philosophers of religion have

²² Craig’s version of the Kalam argument concludes for the existence of God as cosmic first cause based on the (argued for) premise that an actual infinite number of events could not exist in a temporal series. A denial of this premise, he holds, lands one in absurdities. Per example, if time consists of a series of an actual infinite number of events, then what we are experiencing as the present could never have arrived in order for us to experience it. See William Lane Craig, “The Kalam Cosmological Argument,” in *Philosophy of Religion: An Anthology*, ed. Louis P. Pojman (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1998), 24-30. For criticisms of the Kalam argument, see John Byl, “On Craig’s Defense of the Kalam Cosmological Argument,” in *Facets of Faith and Science: Interpreting God’s Action in the World Vol. 4*, ed. Jitse M. Van Der Meer (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1996), 75-90.

²³ William Lane Craig, “The Tensed vs. Tenseless Theory of Time: A Watershed for the Conception of Divine Eternity,” in *Questions of Time and Tense*, ed. Robin Le Poidevin (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 221-250. Below, I will briefly discuss further Craig’s own conception of the Creator-creation relationship with respect to time, an attempted hybrid of classical eternalism “prior to” creation and the thesis that the creator is ontologically *in time* with creation.

argued that the conception of a temporally eternal God (a God *in* time) is more cogent than the conception of an allegedly personal Creator who is supposed to have no experience of temporal progression and sequence in His own self.²⁴ Their belief tends to be that Creation has an inherently processional, “stream-like” quality and that a truly involved and all-knowing Lord over Creation cannot sensibly be thought of as occupying a “stream” that is all His own, a stream which lacks several of what would otherwise be thought of as essential stream-like properties.

One philosopher who has evaluated the concept of a timelessly eternal Creator and found it wanting is Richard Swinburne. In particular, Swinburne focuses on the notion that a timeless god maintains a presence with every moment in time. He takes us back to Boethius, whose classical statement of the eternalist doctrine is claimed to have depicted God as having a “time” all His own – an enduring singularity that is present to all created times. In contradistinction to temporally situated agents who only experience one event after another or know one present moment at a time, the god of Boethius “sees” all times, as it were, in a single glance. As such, the “before” of divine foreknowledge is not a temporally indexed “before” but rather hierarchical in nature. God does not know “in advance” that an event (e.g., the price of gold reaching \$2,000/oz) will take place. God knows the event as taking place, that is, in its very “presentality,” in spite of the fact that it would be future to us.²⁵ Likewise, God does not remember an event (e.g., Lincoln’s

²⁴ Though this is not to say that such a God would have no experience of temporal reality, in which *things* change.

²⁵ Again, how one understands the status of propositions about (or the ontological status of) future states of affairs will be controversial, as it is tied to one’s beliefs about the ontological nature

precedent-setting suspension of *Habeas corpus*) but “sees” as occurring what humans could only know by experiencing events in time, recalling them, or learning of them based on testimony. This, however, is surely an odd way of speaking. For if God’s knowledge is criteriological and God knows all times as “present” to Himself, then this would seem to undermine the objectivity of our categorization of various times using the notions of past, present, and future.

More precisely, Swinburne interprets the Boethian conception of a divine presence at all times as involving a relation of *simultaneity* between God’s knowledge and those times. But if we interpret it this way, he argues, we are led into conceptual absurdities. The reason for this is that simultaneity is a *transitive* notion. If X is simultaneous with A and X is also simultaneous with B, then A is simultaneous with B. Now, this might not be so objectionable were it not the case that, for the Boethian, A and B are taken as occupying not a single but rather *different* points on a time-line. Swinburne puts the point succinctly:

The inner incoherence can be seen as follows. God’s timelessness is said to consist in his existing at all moments of human time – simultaneously. Thus he is said to be simultaneously present at (and witness of) what I did yesterday, what I am doing today, and what I will do tomorrow. But if t_1 is simultaneous with t_2 and t_2 with t_3 , then t_1 is simultaneous with t_3 . So if the instant at which God knows these things were simultaneous with both yesterday, today, and tomorrow, then these days would be simultaneous with

of time – a subject of central importance in this dissertation. Positions range all over. A brief sampling would include: (1) the idea that “the future” is relative to a given temporal agent’s position within a particular spatio-temporal framework, all of whose temporal positions exist on par with one another ontologically, (2) the idea that “the future” exists as a field of possibilities or potentiality but not as actual, particular existents, and (3) the idea that there is no existent “future” to speak of (in an even stronger sense than is stated in (2)) and that some, if not all, future tensed propositions are neither true nor false; they are indeterminate.

each other. So yesterday would be the same day as today and as tomorrow – which is clearly nonsense.²⁶

As such, it does appear that the Boethian would be committed to enclosing temporal reality in a divine super-time.²⁷ This would mean negating the ontological distinctiveness of creation as that context in which things are located at different times and in which events precede, succeed, *or* coincide with each other. There would only be one big coincidence given this conception and, therefore, no creational history.²⁸ Not only would temporal indexical indicators, which are used to denote the present or various sections of our past and future, fail to pick out objective facts about time's "passage," but also there would be no possibility of "intra-creational" instances of *before* and *after*. Intra-creational times would, in such a case, be transcended by a strange sort of simultaneity relation between those diverse times and God's timelessness. This, however, would seem to procure a dubious concept of transcendence (and unity) by compromising the ontological integrity of indubitable immanence (and plurality).

²⁶ Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism*, Rev. ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 228.

²⁷ The idea of a divine super-time would seem to follow from Swinburne's reading of Boethius because he utilizes what is clearly a temporal concept (i.e., simultaneity) in order to elucidate the relationship that obtains between God's knowledge or being and the times within creation. If it makes sense to speak of God being *simultaneous* with each of the members of some set of created events (or times), then it makes sense to speak of God sustaining a relation of being temporally *before* or *after* (or both) some other phases (or events) of God's own life. But I would insist that it does not make sense to speak of the *timeless* god as sustaining such relations. This marks a crucial point at which I would part company with J.M.E. McTaggart, who held that an ordered series objectively characterized only in terms of the relations of *before*, *after*, and *simultaneous with* (without reference to, say, a moving NOW or properties of pastness, presentness, and futurity) is insufficient to constitute a true temporal series.

²⁸ See William Lane Craig, "Tensed vs. Tenseless Theory of Time," in *Questions of Time and Tense*, ed. Robin Le Poidevin (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), 245.

Swinburne suggests that this tragic end of a theological doctrine could only possibly be eluded if one were willing to stretch ‘simultaneously’ beyond its normal sense. That is, one would need to provide a notion of “simultaneous with” that permits eternal God’s presence with different times without conflating all times into a single pseudo-event through a transitive relation. The eternalist, Paul Helm, however, objects to Swinburne’s imputation of a concept of simultaneity to the idea of divine presence affirmed by Boethius. In addition, he proposes that the advocate of divine timelessness can simply forego the gratuitous assumption that a timeless god would bear a type of temporal relation to the ordered times of creation. I quote him at some length here in order adequately to see his point:

Why cannot the use of simultaneity in expressing the relation between the timeless God and individuals in time be abandoned altogether? For the concept of simultaneity is obviously one which implies time. If *A* and *B* are simultaneous they exist or occur at the same time. But God is *timeless*. Suppose that there exists (timelessly) a set of propositions expressing the history of some event which is of the form ‘*A* at *t*₁ and then *B* at *t*₂’. The occurrence of *A* is at a different time from the occurrence of *B*. Why should the question of what the temporal relation is between such a set of propositions and what they say about *A* and *B* ever be raised? It could be raised about the inscribing of the sentences, which is an event, but surely not about the inscription with a fixed meaning? Call the inscription a record; why does it make any sense to ask whether the record is simultaneous with the occurrence of *A* or *B*, and if so whether *A* and *B* must be simultaneous, thus reducing the idea of a timeless record of the events to absurdity? Swinburne objects to timeless eternity because he takes God’s timelessness to ‘consist in his existing at all moments of human time – simultaneously’. But it is far from clear that this follows from Boethius’ account, or from any account of timelessness that is attractive. Why cannot divine timelessness consist in a manner of existence which sustains no temporal relations with human time? If God timelessly exists he is neither earlier nor later nor simultaneous with any event of time. He exists *timelessly*.²⁹

²⁹ Helm, *Eternal God*, 27. The idea that defenders of the doctrine of the timelessly eternal God thesis can fend off charges of incoherence by dropping the notion of a divine *simultaneous*

I think this line of reasoning blocks at least Swinburne's specific charge of incoherence considered here and takes significant steps toward showing us how the timeless presence of the eternal Creator should *not* be understood. It should not be understood to rely on a simultaneity relation between timeless God and the moments or events of time.

But can we, in a more positive fashion, cogently think together the Creator with the temporal parts of creation, if that presence is not simultaneous with creational times but a unique divine presence nonetheless? And if so, how? Can one consistently affirm a real relation of Creator to creation (which runs contrary to a sort of Gnostic deism), if the Creator is not temporally related to the creation in any respect? And are the needs of the Creator's dependent, temporal others (i.e., created entities, especially human beings) truly cared for and compassionately met by a lord whose life is, in this "classical" sense, removed from their various temporal locations?

William Lane Craig finds such questions as these to be deeply probative with respect to the nature of temporal reality and God's relation to that reality. And his belief that these questions deserve negative answers from philosophers leads him to reject the unmodified classical theism promoted by the Calvinist Helm and some Thomists and Anselmians along with him.³⁰ In a bold move, Craig advances a

presence with (or knowledge of) different times was first suggested to me in a discussion I had with the Thomistic scholar, James F. Ross.

³⁰ One feature distinguishing Helm's version of divine eternity from that of some of his more outspoken Thomistic colleagues within the classical eternalism camp is his belief that divine eternity is best thought of as non-durational in character. The most recognized *durational* version

hybrid conception of God. In this conception, God is said to exist timelessly without creation but *then* God creates the world by an act that has the effect of bringing God into temporal relation with the creation. Indeed, there is a first moment of creation, contends Craig, which is simultaneous with the Creator's creative act. And this initial act has the consequence of definitively imbuing the Creator's life with that "temporal becoming" which Craig believes to be an essential hallmark of time. Thus, the Lord, he maintains, experiences a sublime atemporality "followed by" a temporalized series of experiences drawn out along a never-ending, historical continuum.³¹ Broadly speaking, the second component of Craig's attempted

of classical eternalism available recently is that which is set forth by Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann, "Atemporal Duration: A Reply to Fitzgerald," *Journal of Philosophy*, 84 (1987), 214-19. For another recent advocate of *non-durational* eternalism, writing from within the Anselmian tradition, see Katherin A. Rogers, "Eternity Has No Duration," *Religious Studies* 30 (January, 1994), 1-16.

³¹ I cast the quotation marks around "followed by" here because it is not clear how Craig means to conceive of the "transition" or difference between the two states of being – God's atemporality and temporality – respectively. He has strongly denied in print that on his model "temporal states...come chronologically after God's changeless state." But he also, in the same essay, claims: "At the moment of creation myriad future-tense propositions *suddenly* switch truth-values, and God believes only and all those that are true [*italics added*]." But what is the sense of this "suddenly" if it does not denote a change from X to X₊₁ within a broader *temporal* framework? And does not the purported "switch" indicate that a period is marked off from a temporally prior period? It is because of tensions such as this that I am not convinced, when all is said and done, that Craigian divine "atemporality" and temporality should not be thought of as two distinct phases (perhaps a quiescent phase and an expressive phase) of God's *temporal life*. These quotes from Craig are taken from his responses to Paul Helm's critique of his view in Gregory E. Ganssle, ed., *God & Time: four views* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 185, 86.

A further difficulty I find with Craig's view has to do with the fact that he is *unwilling* to conclude that a timelessly eternal deity capable of "temporalizing" himself by actualizing a temporally extended creation is also capable of "de-temporalizing" himself, i.e., willing a "return" (through, say, an annihilation of the temporally ordered creation) to the arguably more simple state of a solitary, timeless eternity. Firstly, if the Lord is capable of existing in such radically different ontological states vis-à-vis time – performing such feats as condescending from an uplifted permanence in order to experience process and change in Himself – then the feat of reversing course (from being temporal to being timeless) should pose at least no additional difficulties. After all, Craig argues that *sans* creation God is literally timeless, His timelessness being a modal consequence of His willing such a condition for Himself. In an interview with Robert Kuhn, he claims that to reverse course would be "impossible" for God, for at that "later" timeless standpoint it would "always" make sense to state that events (such as the world's having existed or God's having

eternalism-temporalism hybrid – his commitment to the thesis that God *qua* Creator is ensconced in time with the creatures – stems from his philosophical preference for a particular version of what is known as the *A*-theory of time, as opposed to the *B*-theory.

annihilated it) had occurred (at a time beforehand or in the past). And this would be absurd on the supposition of the Lord existing *timelessly*. Interview by Robert Kuhn, available at <http://www.closetotruth.com/video-profile/Is-God-Temporal-or-Timeless-Part-2-of-2-William-Lane-Craig-/996>; Internet; accessed on 9 February 2011. But this line of reasoning would seem to prove more than Craig's theology can handle. For the same argument can be brought against the notion of a timeless God becoming temporal, as it would make sense to state from the "earlier" timeless standpoint that the world's creation was still (later) to occur. Why wouldn't this knowledge constitute a temporalizing of God? (Or perhaps it would. Does the timeless [and, for Craig, temporalizable] God know of His plans for the creation *in advance* of their being executed?) If, say, the timeless God having "memories" or knowledge of (statements about) a "previously" annihilated, temporally ordered creation constitutes a conceptual objection to a "course reversal," then why would the supposition of God's having knowledge of (propositions about) an "eventual" actualized, temporally ordered creation not constitute an objection to the "launch" of the creation project as such? Secondly, this tension in Craig's understanding is further complicated when one takes into account his belief that it is possible (however improbable) that God is the actualizer of more than one universe (or of two or more causally unrelated domains of a single universe). See again the interview by Robert Kuhn, available at <http://www.closetotruth.com/video-profile/Did-God-Create-Multiple-Universes-William-Lane-Craig-/640>; Internet; accessed 9 February 2011. But let us suppose, for argument's sake, that not only is this possible but that God is in fact the actualizer of more than one universe. If so, is any "atemporal depth" left in God for a supposedly "*sans* creation scenario"? Does it even make sense on this hypothesis that a *sans* creation scenario is in fact actualized, if actualizable at all? Does a universe (or do numerous universes) precede our universe's existence in a sort of meta-time? Presumably, Craig would answer in the negative, in line with his thesis that God exists *timelessly sans* creation. But if he does answer thus, do one or more of these universes (with the exception of at least one, say, ours) all belong to an actually atemporal creator? Presumably, Craig would again answer in the negative because, on his view, if God is the creator (whether of ours or another universe), then God is in time. Could God possibly, somehow maintain distinctive "temporalities" in multiple universes? Would this make God "multi-temporal"? It appears, in light of this labyrinth of speculative quandaries, that when Craig's hybrid view is brought together with the possibility that God actualizes more than one universe, it is more reasonable to conclude that God is either necessarily, unconditionally timeless or is under no conditions actually timeless (and even possibly has a "multi-temporal" existence, if He can manage it). That is, when Craig's eternal-temporal hybrid theory is brought together with the possibility of multiple universes, the prospect must be faced of a deity who is never without a creation (i.e., is under all conditions temporal). On this hypothesis, one could claim that God is possibly timeless and under no conditions actualizes that state of affairs. But there is a real question of whether the 'possibly' here can be ontologically underwritten. If God is temporal, it seems sensible to believe that His being temporal is an *essential* modal attribute of His. Either way, at the very least, a combining of Craig's hybrid theory with the hypothetical possibility of multiple universes presents Craig with some not so easily negotiated complications.

Now a brief introductory sketch of these two general theoretical approaches is in order. Coming down from J.M.E. McTaggart's well-known article "The Unreality of Time," we receive two broadly different ways of conceiving of a time series. One way is to conceive of a temporal matrix consisting of ordered temporal positions, dates, or events. The matrix is considered from a standpoint that is indifferent to any particular temporal position or location. McTaggart called this the *B* series. There is no privileged temporal position, such as the present. Indeed, when the matrix is viewed as a whole, it becomes clear that there is no objective present, or past, or future. For this would require one to take a standpoint from within the matrix at a particular location. In fact, given a *B* series, there are only objectively ordered events or dates that are related to one another in terms of before, after, or simultaneous with. Requiring only a quite parsimonious ontology, this conception denies that past, present, and future tensed statements refer to actual ontological properties purportedly belonging to dates or events or complexes of events. Whether they are held to be *translatable* into tenseless statements (as in the "Old" *B*-theory) or to have their tenseless *truth conditions provided* (as in the "New" *B*-theory), tensed statements are asserted by *B*-theorists to be superfluous if what one is interested in is a broad, metaphysical account of the nature of time.³² The events

³² As I will later discuss, this does not imply that all *B*-theorists hold that temporally tensed discourse either is or someday will be superfluous in all respects. Nor does it imply that they dismiss the phenomena that are often *interpreted as* indubitable experiences of "temporal becoming" as mere illusion. Rather, they will look to interpret those those experiences tenselessly. See L. Nathan Oaklander, "Craig on the Experience of Tense," in *The Ontology of Time* (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 2004), 235-37.

ordered in a *B*-series exist where they do in the matrix no matter at what time one may find oneself; they exist tenselessly. This is the *B* series conception of time.

Another way is to conceive of time as involving a constant flow. Events at a time in the remote future “move” (as if on a conveyer belt) to the more proximate future, to the present, to the recent past, to the distant past, etc. Alternatively, to avoid the implications of an already existing future, one might use the metaphor of a forwardly moving NOW spotlight under which events have perhaps their greatest moment of temporal fame (or degrees of existence) in what is known as the present. While different versions of this conception vary, the broadly important thing here is that something called “temporal becoming” is reckoned as real. For McTaggart, this meant that the tensed terms indicating future, present, and past times are taken to refer to actual temporal properties that are possessed by all the moments, dates, or events on an indefinitely long time line. On this conception of a temporal series, tensed statements unveil tensed facts, which are deemed necessary ontological furniture if one is interested in a broad, metaphysical account of the nature of time. There is also a privileged position on the time-line – the present, in all its perpetual transience and ephemerality. ‘The present’ names that crucial juncture at which actions and events that were, at a prior time, still future (or, depending on which A-theorist one talks to, potentially future or non-existent *simpliciter*) come to exist, only to hasten unhesitatingly into a sort of “has-been” status. This describes what McTaggart called the *A* series.³³

³³ These characterizations of the *A*- and *B*- theories are obviously of a general sort and roughly follow a summary given in Oaklander, *The Ontology of Time*, 17. I do not, at this point,

It was McTaggart's belief that the *B* series (or tenseless theory) described above does not provide a substantial enough ontology for it to capture the true nature of temporality. If a time series is to be genuine, he insisted, temporally tensed terms and statements must be understood as being more than indicators of the temporal position and *disposition* of a conscious agent, translatable into tenseless descriptors. They must point to a truth about the nature of time itself. Tense must be understood to exist independently of humans and their use of temporal indexicals (e.g., "now," "tomorrow," etc); it does not merely index the subjective experiences or locations of temporal agents.

Craig shares this belief with McTaggart, defending a version of the *A*-theory known as Presentism. It is crucial, however, to recognize that amidst his arguments in favor of the reality of tense and temporal becoming Craig acknowledges the tenseless theory of time to fit most coherently with the classical idea of an absolutely timeless Creator.³⁴ He even reserves some praise for Helm for the latter's being perhaps the lone advocate of absolute eternality who is willing to pin his hopes to this theory.³⁵ Helm holds that if the Creator is to be thought of as having a life

address "McTaggart's paradox" and the inference he drew from it that time is unreal because: a) The present purpose is to introduce these theories and pave the way for my arguments in Chapters 4 and 5 and b) I do plan to touch on McTaggart's paradox in chapter 4 as part of my argumentative case for embracing a particular conception of time.

³⁴ As Helm has helped to show, Craig's opting for an eternalism-temporalism hybrid makes perfect sense when his commitment to thinking of time as an *A*-series is brought together with his belief that an *A*-series consisting of an actually infinite series of events is impossible (a premise of the Kalam argument). These along with his commitment to a relational view of time – the idea that time only exists if events exist – virtually guarantee the compromise view he constructs, a view that Craig himself admits is puzzling and strange. See Helm, "Eternalism contra Craig," *Helm's Deep*, January 1, 2008, <http://paulhelmsdeep.blogspot.com/2008/01/eternalism-contra-craig.html> (accessed 11 November 2011).

³⁵ See Craig, "The Tensed vs. Tenseless Theory of Time: A Watershed for the Conception of Divine Eternity," in *Questions of Time and Tense*, ed. Le Poidevin, 248.

essentially untouched by changes over time, then the creation's temporality is best conceived in terms of the *B* series.

I believe that Craig has rightly assessed the conceptual state of affairs here with respect to the coherence of these two ideas: 1) a classically timeless Creator and 2) the creation's temporality being *B*-theoretic in nature. What I do not believe he has rightly assessed is the conceptual adequacy or cogency of the *B*-theory itself. In particular, Craig in his writings seems most clearly persuaded that the *B*-theory should be rejected for the fact that it denies that there is a privileged NOW that can be experienced by conscious or intentional agents. In fact, he has asserted that the *B*-theorist's denial of an "objective present" runs so contrary to our intuitions and experience that the latter, as it were, preemptively, defeat any potential defeaters brought by *B*-theorists against theories of tensed time and temporal becoming.³⁶

In Chapter 4, I will defend a version of the *B*-theory of time. The main goal there will be to show the logical and phenomenological preferability of tenseless time to tensed time. This will involve trafficking in the metaphysics of time. Issues to be addressed include: the conceptual difficulties raised by McTaggart's (in)famous paradox for a belief in temporal properties, the conceptual difficulties plaguing Craig's version of Presentism, and accounting (in tenseless terms) for the direction of time as well as our "sense" of direction as temporal agents. I do not and will not, however, deny that thinking of time in strictly *B*-theoretic terms runs

³⁶ William Lane Craig, *The Tensed Theory of Time: A Critical Examination* (Dordrecht, the Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2000), 138, 164-65; cited in Oaklander, *The Ontology of Time*, 235-36.

contrary to some of our entrenched habits of thought about time. And it is this acknowledgement that will provide the impetus for Chapter 5.

Though some would be inclined to resist it, I accept the proposition that those affirming the *B*-theory are tethered to the denial of an objective or “privileged” present. And unlike Craig, I do not see this amounting to a refutation of the *B*-theory, for reasons to be explored. A greater difficulty I see concerns the theological implications of affirming the existence of a timelessly eternal Creator and a creation of His having an essentially temporal aspect. With no *A*-theoretic “meeting points” at which the Creator could, in His atemporal essence, *temporally* interface with various locations in time or creaturely agents situated in those locations – in particular, “the present” – how can we sensibly speak of the Creator’s *presence* with them? How can the Immanuel principle be faithfully observed in one’s understanding of the God-world relationship, if the Creator’s presence with the creatures, to whatever extent this is at all conceivable, must be conceived apart from objectively tensed properties or facts? Chapter 5 will present an attempt to address and answer these questions from the standpoint of Christian theology. The main two goals there will be: 1) to think about Trinitarian, Incarnational, and Creational theology, aided by the writings of St. Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, John Calvin, and thinkers following in their footsteps, and 2) to articulate a theological outlook in which the temporally absent Lord maintains a unique presence with temporal agents.

II. Challenge Two: Think of the Impassible God as Gracious in Creation

A crucial premise of this dissertation is that the phrases ‘the temporal realm’ and ‘the realm in which change is both possible and actual’ share the same referent.³⁷ They both point to the created world. On the flipside, ‘timeless reality’ and ‘the immutable’ share the same referent, the Triune Creator and His standpoint vis-à-vis the Creation. These claims should make clear my allegiance to a Relational, as opposed to a Newtonian, view of time. Time does not exist in the absence of events; it is not a substance or an event-less continuum of abstract moments. Time exists only in case events exist in a series, ordered from earlier to later. Of course, some A-theorists who hold to a Relational view of time would undoubtedly be quick to claim that such a series of events would not be *sufficient* but may only be *necessary* to constitute a genuine temporal series. They often say, as seen above, that temporal relations can be explained in terms of a more ontologically basic reality, the reality of tense, temporal becoming, and, for some, temporal properties (denoting the present, along with parts of the past and, for some, the future). The point is clear enough, however, that time is only real if *change* is real, whether or not that change amounts to the more ontologically freighted type of flux

³⁷ I am not neglecting, much less denying, here the possibility of the Creator actualizing more than one world or universe but am simply focusing the current study on the world that I have good reason to believe God has actualized, the one we live in. If there is space available in Chapters 5 or 6, I might reflect on these possibilities a little more in discussing divine self-sufficiency and the gratuitous character of creation in relation to questions that arise about the nature of human freedom, time, and God’s knowledge in consummated New Creation. These questions tend to arise naturally in light of how I conceive of the nature of time and human freedom and God’s relation to these in the present, “Old Creation” order of things.

known as *A-theoretic becoming*. If reality consists of no more than one “event,” then there is no time, because then there exist no *relata* that are related to one another sequentially. Thus, to say that God’s essence is *timeless* (which is consistent, I will argue, with God *possessing* the temporal creation) is to commit to a strong version of divine immutability. While acknowledging that an “event ontology” is not necessarily applicable to a timeless being, Helm offers insight on why a timeless god is, of necessity, a strongly immutable god:

[H]ow could the life of a timeless being *not* consist of only one event, whether by an ‘event’ one means something that is simple, like the falling of a leaf, or an event that has complex elements, like the Battle of Waterloo? Surely the life of a timeless being must consist of only one event, however ramified the consequences of that event may be in created time. Because for it to consist of more than one event these events would have to be temporally ordered, and this would mean that the supposedly timeless existence of God was in fact a temporally ordered life, albeit a temporal order in ‘super-time’.³⁸

Thus, if God’s life consists of no events *simpliciter*, then God’s life is timeless and immutable. His life is not marked by *eventuation* or by *transition* from one condition to another. His is a life of duration-less, self-sufficient Trinitarian love and glory.

But our *creaturely* lives certainly are marked by transition and take place within the context of eventuation. Humans experience one thing after another; that is, they experience vicissitudes. Sometimes, the changes in their lives can be characterized as belonging to the *status quo* variety of change. This variety includes changes that are neither advantageous nor disadvantageous, at least not obviously so.

³⁸ Helm, *Eternal God*, 28.

For example, a person might choose to eat *Post* Raisin Bran after a long history of eating only *Kellogg's* Raisin Bran, say, because he never had tried the former in times past. More interestingly, we creatures, especially we humans, experience “ups and downs” – these being points of positively and negatively evaluated conditions and events along a continuum. We not only experience improvements or “upswings” in our lives, but we also experience setbacks or “downturns” of various kinds. These can be emotional, mental, or physical in nature and they can be individual or relational in character. Touching this last point, change in our lives is not limited to isolated events we experience within ourselves autonomously or individually. It also includes alterations we undergo due to the actions of others, along with other events that happen around us. It includes experiences, for example, triggered by fluctuations in the stock market due to individual choices to buy or sell. But it also includes the effects of what are typically thought of as less personal phenomena such as the fears we might “acquire” due to a severe electrical storm in our local area.

One of the main supposed advantages of the timelessly eternal Creator is that He is, in a profound sense, thought to be above all of this. Because He does not experience sequence in His own life, He does not experience highs and lows mentally or suffer through emotional shocks and setbacks, whether due to events in His own “original” consciousness or (mental or physical) events in the world. And when the premise is added that the Triune Creator, as such, is not physical, it follows that the Triune Creator, as such, cannot be affected physically either.³⁹ These

³⁹ A necessary condition of God's lacking the aptitude to be affected by the creation would be His lacking the aptitude to be physically affected by physical individuals. Of course, to say that

propositions together summarize much of the basis historically for inferring that the Triune Creator cannot, in His essential divine nature, suffer.⁴⁰

God is not physical and therefore cannot be physically affected by physical individuals does not entail that God cannot be affected by the creation in some other respect(s). Classical theists, however, do appear to imply a distinctive asymmetry in their idea that a non-physical god can affect physical reality but not be affected by it physically. Is this a defensible notion? As a brief address to those who are initially doubtful about this causal asymmetry's cogency, I offer the following points. Firstly, there is little disputing the proposition that a postulated ontological difference between the being of God and the being(s) of the world is not the exclusive property of "impassibilists." It certainly does seem that any theologian who affirms *creatio ex nihilo* would be committed to the premise that any divine affecting of physical reality (apart, perhaps, from the exceptional case of the Incarnation, discussed below) is essentially *non-physical*. For instance, the generous production of physical reality from nothing would not utilize a physical causal agent as a means. And if said production does utilize a physical agent, this would be sufficient, I wager, to refute for most theologians the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. Secondly, to speak simply of God as the One who "affects physical reality" is to risk reducing God's relationship to the world and God's distinctive causal agency and action (as the independent, self-sufficient Creator) to the experiences of a dependent, a creature. Even if there is (and I maintain that there is) an inextricable divine government over the world's events and individuals, something profound about the Trinity's Lordship over the world is left out of constructions that are content to describe Him as one capable of "affecting physical reality." If His producing of "effects" by way of a unique causal prowess lacks a physical component or aspect, this in itself is enough to differentiate significantly *His* relating to the physical from those who are physical or have physical components or aspects to their being. It is plausible to suggest, furthermore, that the same fact about God – that He is non-physical in His essence – accounts both for His capacity to transcend the physical world and His incapacity to suffer physically, in His essence, as a result of world events. Thirdly, I do not find the two considerations above to be at logical odds with the assertion that the Second Person of the Trinity has the capacity to *unite Himself* to a human nature. Nor does this union preclude the Son's human nature from physically affecting and being physically affected by physical individuals and objects, the Son being a physical individual Himself (though also more than that). But there is also one important difference (*at least* one) between the concepts of God as Creator and God (in the Second Person) as the Incarnate Lord. In the case of the Son's enfleshed life, He brings about effects *within* an existing context of events and actions. In the case of God's union with the creation, He is the *establisher* or *provider of* that very context of events and actions. Both unions, I will later argue, exhibit the same truth about God but, as noted, also importantly differ from the other in that exhibition.

⁴⁰ They also summarize much of the basis historically for the belief that God does not experience an accruing of benefits in His own Triune Self. For instance, it has been said that God's knowledge cannot expand or increase in virtue of Creation or Providence. As Ernan McMullin emphatically states, "No, no, God doesn't learn...it's a very happy condition, one that we don't share unfortunately." He says this in the earlier cited interview conducted by Robert Kuhn, available from <http://www.closetotruth.com/participant/Ernan-McMullin/66>; Internet; accessed 26 November 2010. Another basis historically for denying that God's life can improve or decline in quality is the idea that God is simple; He is not a composite being, consisting of parts, whether physical, attitudinal, or temporal. The present dissertation will not repudiate this doctrine as such, though it will propose that at least one slight modification to St. Thomas Aquinas's understanding of it is necessary. I do believe that some version of the simplicity doctrine is necessary in order to do justice to the premise that there are essential attributes or names of the Lord that are uniquely His. The Lord's holiness, for example, is not a "general holiness" that it would be proper to treat apart from all those other predicates that would be true of the Lord. Christian theologians have historically taken it to be true

At just this point, however, we meet with a severe objection, one that has been persistently voiced in modern theological literature. The objection goes like this: If God is impassible, then God does not appear to have what it takes to be graciously disposed to the world as a whole or to particular (especially personal) entities who occupy space and time in that world. Jurgen Moltmann at one point states frankly, “A God who cannot suffer cannot love either.”⁴¹ Similarly, P. Fiddes argues: “Now, if God is not less than personal, and if the claim that ‘God is love’ is to have any recognizable continuity with our normal experience of love, the conclusion seems inescapable that a loving God must be a sympathetic and therefore a suffering God.”⁴² The main idea here seems to be that a sort of “coming alongside

that God is a *unity*. But they have not done so in a way that irons out real *distinctions* (with respect to Persons, attributes, or actions) attributed to the Triune Godhead. The challenge for much Christian theology over the centuries has been to affirm distinctions that do not turn out to be *divisions*; yet, these distinctions must amount to more than a mere trafficking in redundant names (nominalism). It would seem that the simple Triune Lord is, therefore, sublimely complex. Without delving much further into these issues here, it will need to suffice to maintain the cogency of distinguishing diverse *senses* (or real predicates) in our discourse about the Triune Godhead without committing oneself to the thesis that these pick out diverse *referents*. ‘Divine holiness’ does not refer to a *part* of God with ‘divine graciousness’ referring to another *part*. In both cases, the Triune God *simpliciter* is the referent. This would be analogous to the well-known use of ‘morning star’ and ‘evening star’ to denote the planet Venus. The Triune God does not “have” these qualities but, more properly, *is* these “things.” They are, as it were, dispositions that are intrinsic to God being who He is and consistent with each other. As we read in I John 4:8, “Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God *is* love [italics added].” I will, however, argue at a later point that a defensible doctrine of divine simplicity or, following from it, immutability, should not be construed as strictly identifying the divine essence and existence as Aquinas does. In particular, I hold that it is possible for God to *have* certain extrinsic qualities; this does not entail, from what I can tell, that God has *parts*.

⁴¹ Jurgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and Kingdom of God* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1981), 230; quoted in Thomas G. Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 2000), 9.

⁴² P. Fiddes, *The Creative Suffering of God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 17; quoted in Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 9. It is, at the very least, difficult to understand Fiddes’s claim here that God’s love, which is an essential divine attribute (“God *is* love”), is “essentially extroverted” or “essentially sympathetic with an other or others” in anything other than a pantheistic sense (that is, if a disbelief in Triune love is not a function of the denial that the Triune God lives). If God is essentially love and love is essentially directed toward a non-Triune other, then it would appear that the absence of a non-Triune other, the absence of an object of divine love, would imply the absence of an essential Triune love and, thus, the absence of the Triune God who is said to be love in His

of those in the world” is required if God truly loves us in some sense, and that this sort of disposition must take the form of an externally induced sympathy for the beloved. And if love is intrinsically sympathetic in this sense, then so much the worse for theologies that fail to appreciate the divine vulnerability. One’s inability to suffer sympathetically, given the challenges of historical existence and the, often enough, tragic aspects of a world which is home to sin and its sometimes excruciating consequences, is considered by these critics to figure as a character flaw in one otherwise alleged to be personal and compassionate. Thus, if God is to be asserted as good and loving, then, according to Moltmann and Fiddes, God must be construed as one who is passible, one who is able to suffer.

It might very well suffice to rest a counter-objection to this divine passibility thesis on a case like the one I plan to make in support of the presence of the timeless God with temporal others (to be set forth in Chapters 4 and 5). In Chapter 6, however, I plan to expand on this case by drawing on an argument historically set forth by advocates of a panentheistic God-world union. As a recent philosopher-theologian within the panentheistic tradition, Philip Clayton contends for the proposition that nothing can exist completely outside of God; rather, the world exists *in* God ontologically. Following several of his predecessors in that tradition, Clayton utilizes as one line of reasoning in favor of this proposition an insight about what it means to ascribe infinity to God. To say that the reality that is God is absolutely infinite, according to Clayton, is to say that God is not limited by

essence. Therefore, the existence of the essentially loving Triune God, whose love is essentially sympathetic with a non-Triune other, would appear to entail a panentheistic union of some kind or at least a creation that exists necessarily, alongside God.

anything relatively infinite or finite. But if something exists ontologically *outside of* God, then that something figures as a limitation on God, and God, therefore, is not absolutely infinite. Therefore, if it is true that, in a significant respect, God is infinite, it follows that all things – the world and all its parts – exist in God ontologically.⁴³

I find this to be a powerful argument. And, as I will proceed later on to argue, under a certain interpretation I believe that it is sound. But the interpretation under which the argument is sound, I assert, is not the interpretation that Clayton and those following his panentheism defend. Operating on the basis of this premise, I will bring together my arguments in favor of the timelessly eternal and, therefore, strongly immutable Creator with the formal validity of the argument for a union of God and world based on the concept of absolute infinity. The conclusion I will draw will be in favor, however, of a God-world union that is understood in terms of classical theism. Namely, the God-world union set forth in this later chapter will involve construing the world as timeless (with respect to the whole) and temporal (with respect to the parts). As such, the world is the product of a specifically Creative “causality” and figures as the contingent expression of the absolutely infinite God’s efficacious, timeless decree to create temporal others. God the Creator, therefore, can be understood as encompassing the world within His absolute infinity without being dialectically blended with His creation. The Creator and the creation are two profoundly distinct realities safeguarded by the Scriptures. In virtue

⁴³ Philip Clayton, “Panentheism in Metaphysical and Scientific Perspective,” in *In Whom We Live and Move and Have Our Being: Panentheistic Reflections on God’s Presence in a Scientific World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 81.

of the Triune God's encompassing of the world in this way, space can be made for maintaining that the timeless Creator is able and willing, in a sense, to distribute His entire, personal presence to all the times and places of creation (indeed, He may, in an important sense, be not only unwilling but also *unable* not to do so). In this way, the Creator is Immanuel, God with us, coming alongside His creatures by generously and exhaustively establishing the conditions of their living and moving.

Areas of specific Christian theological interest covered from a later part of Chapter 3 through Chapter 6 will include reflections on the belief that: (1) Creation is the extro-version (or "narrativizing") of the self-sufficient God, being a consistent expression of divine agapic love which introduces non-Triune others to the life of perichoretic (i.e., mutually indwelling) love existing between the Persons of the Trinity, (2) Creation, as Trinitarian expression, is contingent or free, and (3) Creation (comprising many individuals), existing freely but dependently, stands as a testimony of prolific divine grace. With respect to the first of these topics, I will give attention to Herbert McCabe's argument that the timeless God cannot be said to "have a history" save in the Incarnation, particularly in the earthly life of Jesus. While agreeing with much of the substance and spirit of McCabe's argument, I will contend that the timeless God can be accurately said to "have a history" given that He creates the world, sustains it, and governs it teleologically. This argument rests on a significant biblical connection between Creation and Incarnation. Riding on the coat-tails of this connection, I argue, is a crucial similarity between what it might take "metaphysically" for the timeless God to add or "take on" Creation and what it

might take for that same timeless Creator to add or “take on” human nature in the Incarnation.

In this dissertation, then, there are two, closely related fundamental challenges: (1) to think of the timeless Creator as present with timely, created others, and (2) to think of the, therefore, impassible God as graciously disposed to His creation, with particular reference to us humans as “parts” of the creation who are distinctively made in the divine image. However, before we move to the later chapters, which will be largely argumentative in nature and focused on contemporary problems regarding the doctrine of God, the stage must be set. This will be done by examining some thoughts that bear relevantly on the present topic(s), thoughts written out by three prominent representatives from within the tradition of classical Christian theism.

III. Setting the Stage: Augustine, Aquinas, and Calvin

In its first three chapters, this dissertation will feature examinations of the respective literary contributions of St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, and St. John Calvin, with an eye to utilizing critically their insights to address the present topics of divine timelessness and impassibility. There are at least two advantages to this. First, it should serve to inform or remind readers of the fact that the present re-affirmation and re-articulation of classical Christian theism takes its place within a larger Christian tradition. That tradition features within its confines a wealth of piety and reflection and deserves to be heard among the many theological voices that

surround us in our modern context. Second, there is considerable promise in a study of these thinkers. They each had unique life experiences that played into their respective theological imaginings, they each benefitted from diverse modes of education and training (not to mention spiritual journeys), and each published his own thoughts within socio-religious environs that posed distinctive challenges. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that there are important differences between these three theologians, not all owing to differences in their external circumstances, to be sure. Yet, amidst the real differences between them, these three churchmen-scholars stand surprisingly close together in articulating, in significant respects, similar conceptions of God and the world to which He is related as Creator.

In each of these three early chapters, I will proceed with an inquiry into each man's thoughts, first on the subject of divine timeless eternity and then on the subject of divine impassibility. In each chapter I will ask questions such as: Is X's God timeless? If so, what does X mean by that? What is time, then, according to X? Are X's thoughts consistent on this? What are the relevant strengths or weaknesses in the way X expresses those thoughts? What resources does X provide for thinking of the transcendent God as present, involved, or immanent? Are there factors in X's thought or mode of expression that inhibit his presenting the strongly immutable God as present and compassionate in a robust and attractive way? If so, what are they? If not, what can we constructively learn from X? How developed is X's theology of the Trinity? How does this play into how X articulates his positions on these matters? What does X have to say about the relationship between Creation

and Incarnation? And so on. It is hoped that these early historical theology chapters will empower the later chapters, giving them a depth and richness of reflection that they would, almost certainly, otherwise lack.

CHAPTER 1

ST. AUGUSTINE ON THE GOD-WORLD RELATIONSHIP

It is well known that St. Augustine had a “high” conception of the divine eternal nature. Many textual testimonies indicate his place as an early contender for a robust Trinitarian theism. If one consults the *Confessions*, for instance, it becomes clear from Augustine’s doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* that he held God to be *Creator* and not a mere *artificer*; indeed, on his view, the act of creation provides the necessary conditions of any “artificial” activities.⁴⁴ The concept of *artifice*, after all, involves the forming of some artifact or set of artifacts (be they abstract or concrete) out of available entities or existents. But Augustine’s Creator acts without availing Himself of entities that have their own autonomous existence. In addition, it becomes clear that the Lord’s creative *fiat* is not need-based but erupts from His freedom.⁴⁵ And, furthermore, it becomes clear that Augustine believed that, inasmuch as the Lord is not a creature, He is as non-locatable and non-extendable temporally as He is supposed to be spatially.⁴⁶ These considerations, when combined with Augustine’s famously expressed ideas of linear history and predestinating grace in *City of God*, credential him as a defender of the doctrine that the Lord is timelessly eternal and, therefore, an unmovable or impassible Creator-Governor. This study will focus mostly on Augustine’s *Confessions*, with special attention paid to Book 11, “Of God and the Nature of Time.”

⁴⁴ *Confessions*, 234.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 232.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 234, 235.

In the following passage, taken from the aforementioned section of *Confessions*, Augustine piously expresses his thoughts on the atemporal character of the transcendent Creator's being:

[T]hou predest all things past, by the sublimity of an ever-present eternity; and surpasses all future because they are future, and when they come, they shall be past; but Thou art the Same, and Thy years fail not. Thy years neither come nor go; whereas ours both come and go, that they all may come. Thy years stand together, because they do stand...⁴⁷

A significant aspect of Augustine's thoughts on God and time here is the *transitory* and *ephemeral* character of human history and life. Such thoughts form a major theme in his reflections on what the "story" of one must be like who is responsible for establishing the necessary conditions of human history and life.

As for considering and evaluating Augustine's cogitations on the question of whether or not the Lord is essentially subject to suffering, he does not appear to provide a separate doctrinal category dealing with impassibility. Thoughts in this vicinity of the theological arena seem rather to be treated in a more general way, being viewed as implications of the concepts of divine atemporality, love, self-sufficiency, or some combination thereof. The latter two of these come to expression in the following excerpt:

O Lord my god, give ear unto my prayer, and let Thy mercy hearken unto my desire: because it is anxious not for myself alone, but would serve brotherly charity; and Thou seest my heart, that so it is. I would sacrifice to Thee the service of my thought and tongue; do Thou give me, what I may offer Thee. For I am poor and needy, Thou rich to all that call upon Thee; *Who, inaccessible to care, carest for us* [italics added].⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Ibid., 239.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 232.

It is certainly not difficult to imagine these words being written by a proponent of a more “down to earth” deity who is passible. For the passibility doctrine does not imply, say, that the suffering God would require the help or care of others in order to be extricated from trials. But the depiction we have here is of a pitiable, needy, beggar, Augustine, bowing contritely before the merciful provident king. Taken together, ruminations such as these on divine needlessness and the total dependence of sinful humans on the Creator’s mercy support the conception of a strongly imperturbable deity in his writings.

Now, in reading the *Confessions*, one undoubtedly perceives a conceptual tension between, on the one hand, a residual sympathy in Augustine for his former Manichean and Neo-Platonic aversion to the particularity and plurality of the physical world and, on the other, his confessedly Christian affirmation of the goodness of that world in virtue of its created-ness. We need not deny, however, the presence of the first of these in attempting to vindicate theologically Augustine’s strongly immutable Creator as a *Christian* doctrine. For in admitting this pagan conceptual residue a place in his thinking we do not risk setting aside a conspicuous Christian notion of divine steadfastness that he would have found in the Hebrew-Christian Scriptures. The first quotation above, for instance, utilizes the language of Psalm 102:27 in extolling the Creator’s transcendence – “but Thou art the Same and Thy years fail not.”

It is also important to appreciate the kind of philosophical commitments and behavioral habits from which Augustine was departing. When the highly dualistic

and quasi-gnostic flavorings of his Manichean and Neo-Platonic background are taken into account, along with a strong sense of the Christian remorse he felt over his specifically *bodily* misbehaviors as a former fornicator, it is little wonder that he had a lingering resentment and suspicion of physical bodies with their passions and vicissitudes. Although a Pauline ethical opposition to the “fleshly” sin nature is sometimes confusingly mixed, in the Augustinian corpus, with a “Greek” metaphysical opposition to “fleshly stuff,” it would be a mistake to suppose, based on this fact, that all comparable oppositions – such as that between permanence and change – have solely pagan origins. And it would be an even more serious mistake to think that hasty suppositions of this kind automatically undermine the legitimacy or cogency of Augustinian theological formulations that traffic in such oppositions. Sometimes, as instanced in the citation from the Psalms above, Augustine’s penchant for depicting a stark Creator-creation duality succeeds in mirroring distinctions made by the biblical writers. Yet, quite clearly both he and the Scriptural authors affirm a fundamental metaphysical agreement, as it were, between the eternal Lord and the contingent creation. These realities do not stand in opposition to one another as absolute antinomies.⁴⁹

As explained below, in several respects Augustine shows that he has turned an important corner in departing from an absolute metaphysical antithesis between the one and the many, between permanence and change, between spiritual and bodily reality. Although this may not seem to be the case initially, in light of his

⁴⁹ Genesis 1:31a, “And God saw everything that He had made, and behold, it was very good.”

radical distinction between time and eternity, the fact is that he is not asking *whether* eternal God *can* express Himself by way of a creaturely context or creation. That sort of ultimate tension no longer exercises control over Augustine the Christian's thoughts. Rather, he is animated by questions about *how* the exalted, imperturbable divinity *does* interface with and care for that which is not divine – the creation:

Therefore Thou Spakest, and they were made, and in Thy Word Thou madest them. But how didst Thou speak? ... By what Word then didst Thou speak, that a body might be made...? Thou callest us then to understand the Word, God, with Thee God. Which is spoken eternally, and by It are all things spoken eternally. For what was spoken was not spoken successively, one thing concluded that the next might be spoken, but all things together and eternally. Else have we time and change; and not a true eternity nor true immortality.⁵⁰

It appears evident from such passages that Augustine was motivated by key questions surrounding the absolute transcendence of God and sought some clarity about how this transcendence could be simultaneously affirmed alongside the profound presence of God with His creatures.

From the fact, however, that for the converted Augustine a fundamental dichotomy between permanence and change retained only a residual, receding presence in his thinking it should not be concluded that this presence is entirely negligible. As Colin Gunton has persuasively argued, Augustine's theology of creation is often hampered by an *a priori* appeal to what the divine will and power *must* be like (as opposed to an *a posteriori* approach that, for example, is instructed by a strong biblical connection between Creation and Incarnation).⁵¹ Also, Gunton

⁵⁰ Ibid., 235.

⁵¹ Colin Gunton, *The Triune Creator: A Historical and Systematic Study* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

holds (and it is not too controversial to assert) that the influential tendrils of a Neo-Platonic hierarchy of being manage to maintain an unhealthy grip on Augustine's metaphysics, in which heaven and earth are together created from nothing but the former is easily dubbed "near Thee," leaving the latter languishing in a "near to nothing" rank.⁵² These remaining pagan elements in Augustine's ideational stock, I propose, have the effect of exaggerating the difficulty he should have had in thinking of the timeless, impassible deity as one who is intimately present to and graciously disposed toward His creation (in both whole and parts). To be sure, Augustine's exaggeration of the difficulty is, if not necessary, at least sufficient to account for his opening words in "God and the Nature of Time." There he, almost expressing an existential despair, begins by prayerfully drawing a contrast between the uplifted eternal deity and his own efforts to address that deity, inquiring about the sort of epistemic access the eternal Lord could have to such lowly, creaturely actions. And in answering his own opening questions, he stresses the divine otherness and asserts an utter absence in the Lord of the sort of passivity that is native to human knowing:

Lord, since eternity is Thine, art Thou ignorant of what I say to Thee? Or dost Thou see in time what passeth in time? Why then do I lay in order before Thee so many relations? Not, of a truth, that Thou mightest learn them through me, but to stir up mine own and my readers' devotions toward Thee, that we may all say, Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised.⁵³

These opening words, in addition to signaling Augustine's intermittent tendency to be allergically disposed toward the earthly and physical, give plain expression to two

⁵² *Confessions*, 258.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 231.

significant Christian truths that he sought to set forth: (1) a profound difference marking off the Creator *from* those that emanate from His creative Word and (2) affirming the very present Lordship of the Creator *with* the times and places of creation.

Below, I will first concentrate my efforts on sketching an interpretation of Augustine's conception of the eternal God's timeless nature as well as his conception of time (or temporal reality), defending the propriety of his holding them together as a single package. The conclusion(s) drawn here will function as the first of three "layers of consideration" to be presented regarding the question of Augustine's effectiveness in affirming and articulating that the timeless God is also Immanuel. The second and third layers will consist in brief examinations and appraisals of Gunton's contention that the Creator-creation interface in Augustine is impeded by an abstract theology of the divine will and by a Neo-Platonic metaphysics that competes with the Hebrew-Christian notion of history or eschatology. Rather than figuring as specific defenses of the impassibility doctrine, these latter two layers will serve more generally to remove objections to that doctrine by showing how Augustine's "classical" understanding of the God-world relationship could have been enhanced in its cogency through a more careful attention to the Incarnational theology of Irenaeus and to a certain aspect of the theology of creation propounded by Basil of Caesarea.

I. An Eternal God Who Is Intimately Acquainted with Creation

In first setting out to examine Augustine's understanding of the way in which the eternal Sovereign communicates His personal presence to the times of creation, a minimal requirement, it seems to me, should be that he provide conceptions of God and temporal reality that fit together coherently. For example, if God's being timeless precludes the existence of what contemporary metaphysicians of time call "tensed facts" (though not necessarily tensed *expressions* or *thoughts*), then either God is timeless or there are tensed facts, not both. Moreover, we should be cautious not to beg a crucial question against the Augustinian eternalist by insisting without argument that a conception of time minus tensed facts is in some important but unspecified way inadequate and therefore of no use in Christian theology.

Regardless, I will, for the time being, be content to examine Augustine's "God+Time" package in the belief that its coherence is a prerequisite to gleaning much theological or philosophical support from Augustine for the present thesis. This question of coherence is of pivotal importance not only in reference to the *defensibility* of classical Christian eternalism in the face of charges of logical contradiction but also to its *commendability* to those prone to disparage it as cold and unattractive. None will dispute, after all, that if a conceptual incompatibility exists which precludes the co-existence of an atemporal Creator and a creation that has temporal characteristics, then this would prove fatal for the even more seemingly incongruous notion that the Creator relates as the intimately involved Immanuel with

Creation and her inhabitants, communicating a mysterious presence with times and with those in time.

There are at least two distinct aspects of the apologetic Augustine deploys in support of his belief that the Creator's life uniquely transcends the teleological flux of creation. These are: 1) A belief that God *spacelessly* creates spatially located and extended things and that there is a sufficient analogy between space and time to conclude that the Creator's *sui generis* act of world-creation is no more temporal than it is spatial; 2) A conception of foreknowledge which is construed in vertical-hierarchical terms rather than horizontal-diachronic terms.

a. On the Analogy Between Space and Time

Augustine's idea that the Creator produces the world from no spatial standpoint functions as a facet of his more general conviction that the Creator creates *ex nihilo*, i.e., without utilizing existing materials. That the belief in divine spaceless creation is essential to understanding "out of nothing" for him can be seen here:

But how dost Thou make them? How, O God, didst Thou make heaven and earth? Verily, neither in the heaven, nor in the earth, didst Thou make heaven and earth; nor in the air, or waters, seeing these also belong to the heaven and the earth; nor in the whole world didst Thou make the whole world; because there was no place where to make it, before it was made, that it might be.⁵⁴

Here Augustine interestingly answers a *how* question regarding the mode of divine creative action with negative statements concerning a supposed *where* of the creative

⁵⁴ Ibid., 234.

action. There is no such *where*, no space or place to serve as an operational launch-pad for the work of creation.

But what about the supposed *when* of creation? Is not the belief in a temporally indexed divine *fiat* demanded by reason, even if one sees sense in speaking of a creative action performed by the Lord who launches creation from exactly *nowhere*? Not so, says Augustine. For him, the *how* of *creatio* is equally answered by a careful refusal to attribute a *when* to the divine creative utterance:

But how didst Thou speak? In the way that the voice came out of the cloud, saying, This is my beloved Son? For that voice passed by and passed away, began and ended... . When it is abundantly clear and plain that the motion of a creature expressed it, itself temporal, serving Thy eternal will. And these Thy words, created for a time, the outward ear reported to the intelligent soul, whose inward ear lay listening to Thy Eternal Word. But she compared these words sounding in time, with that Thy Eternal Word in silence, and said "It is different, far different. These words are far beneath me, nor are they, because they flee and pass away; but the Word of my Lord abideth above me for ever."⁵⁵

One encounters here, it seems, an intriguing convergence of something on the order of a mystical dualism and a symphonically smooth connection between the spoken Intention of the Lord and events in the world.⁵⁶ Augustine's contrast between the Eternal Lord and creation is signified by distinguishing that which is *above* from that which is *below*, differentiating He who *abides* from those things, actions, or persons

⁵⁵ Ibid., 235.

⁵⁶ Although there is some *prima facie* justification for reading Augustine's "nor are they" in the above quote within the context of his proclivity for Neo-Platonism's metaphysical demotion of the finite, a phrase like this one also squares with a biblical Creator-creature difference. Consider the words of Nebuchadnezzar, found in Daniel 4:34ff, which praise the "Most High" god: "[F]or his dominion is an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom endures from generation to generation; all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as *nothing*, and he does according to his will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth... [italics added]"

that are *fleeting*, and conceptually demarcating, for example, *outwardly spoken words* from the *inwardly spoken Word*.

It appears that for Augustine the crucial analogy to be drawn between space and time hinges on the fact that together they form a context characterized by *diversity* – that is, *variety* in the things that exist and *change* in those things over time. The possibility of change would seem to be both a necessary and sufficient condition of a thing being non-divine on this understanding.⁵⁷ He plainly recognizes, however, significant dis-analogies between space and time as well. For instance, it does not seem to have eluded Augustine that time, unlike space, has an intrinsic direction. Indeed, he seems to have recognized a determinate direction to be basic, if not the *most* basic and distinguishing, feature of time, as opposed to space. And yet, though there is more to be said about what kind of ontological furniture Augustine may have required for his conception of time, he cannot be

⁵⁷ It does not appear that for Augustine space and time are so completely analogous that time is “spatialized.” One way to spatialize time would be to recognize no intrinsic direction to time. On one supposition, *before* and *after* would not be understood as basic ontological relations but in terms of an ontology that would, for example, render time’s “today” and “tomorrow” conceptually indistinguishable from space’s “here” and “there.” “Today” would precede “tomorrow” *if one was located at* the region known as “today.” But if time were spatialized nothing, logically, could prevent one from “starting out” at “tomorrow” and moving to “today.” Another way to spatialize time would be, in a sense, to *temporalize space*. It would seem to somehow involve attributing an intrinsic direction to space or spatially extended objects (for example, calling the simultaneous [in an ordinary, temporal sense of this term] *difference* between the cold end of a poker and the hot end of that same poker a *change*). Augustine evidences a commonsensical conception of the asymmetry between diachronic *alteration* and synchronic *difference*.

A question arising from such a sharp division between the Lord and creation, of course, has to do with whether the world as a whole constitutes a “thing.” Because the present dissertation articulates the presence of God with the world’s times and agents in terms of a single, unchangeable decree whose expression is the world as a whole, the world as a whole should not here be understood as a thing. Mediating God’s presence to the parts of the world is the timeless quality of that world taken as a decreed whole in which all things and events are situated. The Triune decree establishes the spatio-temporal conditions of the existence of things, though, *ex hypothesi*, without *temporally preceding* the existence of things (or events), which are extended and/or located throughout time and space.

viewed as having approached questions of time or temporal reality as an abstract metaphysician. As will be discussed shortly, his concentration in the domain of temporal metaphysics focuses on the contrast between what life and experience is like for those whose activities are *in* time and what the life of the timeless Creator who is transcendentally *with* time is like. Thus, it is not ‘time’ as ideationally conceived that he reflects upon but actual, concrete “timely creations.” In this sense, Augustine’s statements on spatio-temporal reality are not set forth as the opinions of abstract philosophy but as the meditative fusion of a type of primitive phenomenology and sacred theology.

It is arguable that one of the strengths of Augustine’s notion that God is non-spatial and non-temporal is that it permits us to affirm an unencumbered conception of the *wholly personal* transcendence and immanence of God. If God is conceived as the Creator and Lord who is acquainted with every part and aspect of creation, then it is not clear that this could be made sense of if God is thought to consist of spatially and temporally extended parts that are distributed throughout the cosmos. For it would seem to follow from the “divine stretching” through time, if not also through space, that a conception of divine immanence or presence could be redeemed in this fashion only by sacrificing a wholly personal divine transcendence. To wit, if God’s spatio-temporal extension localizes Him or His awareness as distributed parts and not as a whole, then it becomes difficult to see how an assertion of His omni-presence would not move us toward a panentheistic thesis – the idea that the world is to God as the body is to its animating soul (following something

like Plato's idea of the world-soul, discussed in the *Timaeus*). In such a case, God's presence with the world would not be easily (if at all) distinguishable from the world itself. Thus, at the least, only parts of God could be present with the particular places and times of creation. But Augustine clearly contends for a deity of much greater unity than this would permit.

Yet, if this is so, then what theological ideas do facilitate for Augustine a conception of divine presence for this wholly personal transcendent Lord? How does he see the two kinds of reality – creative and created – connecting up with each other? And what, for him, bridges the vast ontological cleavage distinguishing the one Lord from the Lord's multiplicity of dependent(s)? I argue that the answers to these questions come at least partially in the form of Augustine's conception of a rarefied divine foreknowledge.

b. Augustinian Foreknowledge: vertical-hierarchical, not horizontal-diachronic

It is imperative to realize that Augustine does not build up his doctrine of God in a piecemeal fashion. In particular, his conception of divine foreknowledge appears to be built right into his conception of creation. Because the creation exists as a wholly dependent whole, produced and kept by God, because it exists as a “container” of changing entities maintained by God, who Himself does not change, and because God's knowledge is not *gained* by way of learning, foreknowledge and creation seem to be all but indistinct from each other. I would suggest that the crucial difference between them conceptually does not concern the content of what

is created or known but rather concerns two different, but mutually consistent, depictions of the stance or disposition of God toward His world. ‘Creation,’ on one hand, depicts the Lord as intending or willing the world’s existence. ‘Foreknowledge,’ on the other hand, stresses the fact that this Creator-creation relation is sustained by the Lord’s intimate acquaintance with the world.

I wish to argue further, however, that these two depictions, creating and foreknowing, are manifested in the twin conceptions of a singular speech act and a singular mode of awareness. There are plain reasons for treating speech under the rubric of volition, as it produces immediate phenomena (words or the consequences of a single Word) rooted in desire or disposition. There are, as well, plain reasons for treating awareness under the rubric of intellection, as it is easier to characterize as a type of passive “taking in” of the world. But to say that one speaks with an intention is to say that speech, far from being an act of sheer, uninformed will, is an intelligent action expressing (often anyways) cognitive content. And, as philosophers, especially since Kant, have noted, directed awareness is not a purely passive event or phenomenon but involves an active, organizing capacity brought by the knower. Therefore, whether one indexes divine speech strictly to the act of creation and divine awareness strictly to foreknowledge or treats them together (one more loosely than the other) under either of these rubrics, it is evident that these concepts enable Augustine to form a sense of the presence of the timeless God with the times of creation. To say that the Lord *speaks* creationally is to say that his active, deliberate attention is given to introducing the world; his action

communicates existence and vitality to the world. And to say that the Lord is *aware* of the world is to see him related to the world – its whole and its parts – by way of an *immediate acquaintance*.

A strong example of both contrast and connectedness between Creator and creation is available in the *Confessions* if we will reflect on the singular speech act of God and Augustine’s imputation of a “created speech” to the fashioned cosmos. The Creator exercises lordship and shows His own set-apartness by way of speech:

The day is Thine, and the night is Thine; at Thy beck the moments flee by.⁵⁸
For what was spoken was not spoken successively, one thing concluded that the next might be spoken, but all things together and eternally. Else have we time and change; and not a true eternity nor true immortality.⁵⁹

Likewise, the products of divine speech show themselves to be distinct and semi-autonomous in that they are marked by contingency and variation:

Behold, the heavens and the earth are; they proclaim that they were created; for they change and vary.⁶⁰

The contrast between the Lord and creation above is poignant; not so much, however, connectedness. And yet it is there. The connectedness consists in the way the relationship between God and world smacks of dialogue. But this is not a dialogue between equals. The Lord speaks, establishing creation and exhibiting His Lordliness. The heavens and earth speak, proclaiming whose they are, expressing their created-ness. Each side maintains a peculiar integrity and communicates, according to its nature. For Augustine, this communication does not appear to require anything less than a strongly immutable divinity. Nor does the fact that the

⁵⁸ *Confessions*, 232.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 235.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 234.

created realm is, in a genuine sense, ontologically overshadowed by the eternal Lord's creative and directive prowess, according to Augustine, cancel the fact that the former is truly contingent and temporally extended. What *is required*, however, is a recognition that this Creator-creation communication is of a highly rarefied form, to put it mildly. The divine Word that decrees and directs the actualized world is neither obeyed nor disobeyed, neither heeded nor ignored – not in any ordinary sense. In this context anyway, there is a much more far-reaching ontological depth to the notion of divine speech. The divine speech, quite simply, holds an unqualified sway over creaturely eventuation in virtue of the character and position of the Speaker. On the flipside, the “silent communiqué” dispatched by creation through the buzz of its various inhabitants does not approach the Lord as strange, new information. Creation's unified but diversified voice, rather, represents that the world is not its own, that it is what it is thanks to Another. The creation's speech here, then, signifies its otherness from the Creator, an otherness elicited entirely by the Creator's own purposeful Expression.

Generally, throughout the *Confessions* and, more specifically, in the section on God and the nature of time, Augustine also affirms a notion of divine awareness. Through the development of this notion he portrays an intimate interface that the eternal sovereign sustains with creation. Notice, to begin with, that Augustine's mode of communication throughout the *Confessions* broadly portrays the Lord as an attentive perceiver. In particular, owing to his own distinctively *mystical* and *penitential* disposition, Hippo's bishop often succeeds in *showing* his conception of

God through his prayerful approach. For starters, he is gripped by a penetrating sense of his own guiltiness and folly. He understands himself to be a sinner in need of forgiveness as well as illumination; he bows as an *object* worthy of divine displeasure. As such, the Lord is construed as the inspecting Subject to whom Augustine must go:

Lord, have mercy on me, and hear my desire. ...Behold, Father, behold, and see and approve; and be it pleasing in the sight of Thy mercy, that I may find grace before Thee, that the inward parts of Thy words be opened to me knocking.⁶¹

But it is clear from this and other passages that there is a real, two-way exchange portrayed between Augustine and his Lord. The divine Subject is not portrayed as exercising the sort of power or control that overrides or undercuts the individuality of the penitent. Rather, the Lord is presumed to be so generously disposed that He is able to “take in” the cries of His servant and show mercy and understanding – to repair what is broken. The Lord’s “communicative might,” we can say, does not prevent the Lord from distinguishing his own action from the thoughts and actions of other agents; that is, the Lord is *aware* that there are others who have their own burdens to bear.

More specifically, however, Augustine articulates the Eternal Presence in terms of a singular awareness by which the Lord is privy to the entire panoply of creation, notably, as it extends from earlier to later times. Much of Augustine’s thinking about the Eternal and the temporal and how they stand with respect to the other, as was earlier mentioned, takes the form of a meditative fusion of primitive

⁶¹ Ibid., 232.

phenomenology and sacred theology. That statement's truth is especially realized when it comes to articulating the divine awareness of creation's times. For Augustine's positive construction of the Creator-creation interface seems to rely heavily upon a principal contrast between a conceptualized singularity, which we will here call "divine experience," and the human experience of temporal reality, which has an incremental, step-wise quality. Yet, importantly, he applies an implicit, over-arching rule, which is both epistemic and ontological, to both divine and human cases of awareness. Namely, both humans and their Lord, if they are to be perspicuously aware of a (temporally located) state of affairs can only be aware of that state of affairs if it is, in an undiminished sense, present to them.

For the sake of drawing the essential human-divine contrast it will suffice here to record his observation that an undiminished human awareness of things and events is narrowly confined to an evanescent intersection of the "future" and the "past." Future events are, at best, anticipated, and past events, remembered. In essence, Augustine construes a horizontal-diachronic awareness of things and events as fallible and unstable. An ever-approaching future relentlessly becomes past by moving through a tiny window in which events are experience-able, giving the agents in time a permanent sense of transience and novelty.

The divine awareness is, if not in every respect, another kind of thing. Indeed, Augustine, while assuming an analogy between instances of temporally located human awareness and the atemporal divine awareness, surely requires an

equivocal component in his use of the term ‘present’ when oscillating between these human and divine “domains.” He asserts in one place, for example:

The present, should it always be present, and never pass into time past, verily should not be time, but eternity.⁶²

It can be conceded that the use of ‘always’ in this statement constitutes an intrusion of language more compatible with the doctrine of divine durational, temporal everlastingness (or sempiternity) into Augustine’s more “refined” conception of a non-durational, timeless eternity. We will charitably assume that he was not thoroughly absorbed in a self-conscious monitoring of his use of temporal terms. Regardless, the ubiquitous and never-fading “present” he discusses here appears in important respects to be the sort of immediate divine presence that is only compatible with a being who is timelessly aware of the events or moments of time. For such a deity, there is no sense of “passing on” from one event to another. Rather, there is an awareness, remotely resembling the direct perceptual access humans have to a “moving” present, that nonetheless enjoys a fixed and direct access to all temporal locations, be they moments or events. Augustine, in taking issue with those who talk as if God decided at a certain time to create (instead of at an earlier or later time), expounds on this idea. Note especially in the opening lines below how he: (1) employs the passive voice in speaking of the Maker (giving those who are apt to label him as an un-nuanced determinist or fatalist some reason for pause) and (2) states that the creation is in some sense included *within* the transcendent Lord:

⁶² Ibid., 239.

Who speak thus, do not yet understand Thee, O Wisdom of God, Light of souls, understand not yet how the things be made, which by Thee, and in Thee are made: yet they strive to comprehend things eternal, whilst their heart fluttereth between the motions of things past and to come, and is still unstable. Who shall hold it, and fix it, that it be settled awhile, and awhile catch the glory of that ever-fixed Eternity, and compare it with the times which are never fixed, and see that it cannot be compared; and that a long time cannot become long, but out of many motions passing by, which cannot be prolonged altogether; but that in the Eternal nothing passeth, but the whole is present; whereas no time is all at once present: and that all time past, is driven on by time to come, and all to come followeth upon the past; and all past and to come, is created, and flows out of that which is ever present? Who shall hold the heart of man, that it may stand still, and see how eternity ever still-standing, neither past nor to come, uttereth the times past and to come?⁶³

In this passage there reside some intense juxtapositions: created things are *in* the Lord, being caught up in motion and instability, and the Lord's "dwelling place" is an "ever-fixed Eternity." Note also Augustine's willingness in a later place to state that his timelessly present Lord, the One with whom he entrusts his prayers, is an unaffected, i.e., impassible, sovereign:

For not, as the feeling of one who singeth what he knoweth, or heareth some well-known song, are through expectation of the words to come, and the remembering of those that are past, varied, and his senses divided, -- not so doth any thing happen unto Thee, unchangeably eternal, that is, the eternal Creator of minds.⁶⁴

By way of negation, Augustine manages to say a good deal positively about the timeless Lord's intimate acquaintance with an intrinsically teleological creation. Not suffering expectations, memories, or atomistic sensations, the Eternal Light sees every temporal interval of the whole sweep without suffering alterations in His unified, unfaltering vision. And from this standpoint Augustine does appear to offer

⁶³ Ibid., 237.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 252.

some resources on thinking the Eternal together with the temporal. As Creator, the Lord wills the existence of the world and, as He who is fully aware of creation's times, the Lord allows the creation to be what it is even though it is absolutely dependent in its parts upon His sustaining Lordship.

But what conception of time or temporal reality does Augustine combine with this notion of a timeless, impassible divinity? Does a cogent notion of time emerge from this idea of a timeless deity who is the Creator of and eminently cognizant of a temporally elongated world? Does his idea of an absolutely atemporal Lord fit coherently with whatever metaphysical ideas of time he sets forth? And where would the latter fall within contemporary theory and discourse? To such questions, we now turn.

II. Augustine's Understanding of Temporal Reality

Inquirers into Augustine's ideas about temporal reality must at the outset caution themselves against anachronistically imposing contemporary concepts and language on this Christian writer of Late Antiquity. That being said, following Craig, it is my belief that the idea of a necessarily timeless god squares with a certain conception of time and fails to square with others. In particular, I am persuaded that the strongly immutable Lord emerging from the idea of a necessarily timeless divinity fits with what current philosophers refer to as *B*-theoretic time and does not fit with *A*-theoretic time.⁶⁵ Recalling the sketch of these theories from the

⁶⁵ Craig, *The Tensed Theory of Time*, 138, 164-65; cited in Oaklander, *The Ontology of Time*, 235-36.

opening chapter, note that *B*-theorists conceive of time strictly in terms of the temporal relations of *before*, *after*, and *simultaneous with* and assert that there is no privileged, objective temporal position known as “the present.” Whereas, various proponents of the *A*-theory contend that these aforementioned temporal relations are not the most basic facts about time as such. Rather, they are analyzable in terms of a more fundamental ontology of temporal properties (such as *pastness*, *presentness*, and *futurity*) or are parasitic on an even more “slimmed down” Presentist ontology (the idea that only “the present” strictly exists). While it is not my intention to squeeze all of Augustine’s thoughts on time into contemporary categories and priorities, for the sake of the present thesis I do wish to consider the concepts he employs and the priorities he has in putting together his thoughts on time or temporal reality. I will, therefore, in what follows, attempt to give a rough estimate of where his thoughts would reside on the map of these contemporary theories of time. It is hoped that this effort to gauge his location vis-à-vis contemporary theorizing will, in addition to standing on its own as a brief historico-theological reading of a particular aspect of Augustine’s thought, give initial plausibility to the idea that the absolutely timeless Lord can be coherently thought of as Immanuel – God with us – if one is willing to affirm a particular conception of temporal reality.

One of the central contentious issues debated by *A*- and *B*- theorists concerns the status and significance of *temporal indexicals*. These are what we might call *locating terms*, terms that pick out a particular position or stretch in time by *pointing*. In specific ways they point to *this* or *that* location. For example:

The heyday of the American empire is *now* a thing of the past.

The term ‘now’ here indicates, at least, that the temporal location of the speaker’s verbal token comes *after* what is taken to be the American empire’s highest point of flourishing. What much of the debate centers around is the question of whether such statements containing temporal indexicals merely pick out the speaker’s location or disposition with respect to given events or moments or whether they, when true, are true in virtue of something called *temporal becoming*, indicating that *tense* is an intrinsic property of time.

If one approaches Augustine’s statements about time in the *Confessions* with the assumption that he endorses what amounts to a *tenseless* theory (i.e., a theory denying that tense is an intrinsic property of time), one is liable to be taken aback by his rather free-wheeling use of concepts that are typically thought to be at home in a tensed or A-theoretic conception.⁶⁶ Consider the two statements below, both of

⁶⁶ In one sense, the apparently contradictory presence in Augustine’s thoughts of what contemporary philosophers would call “A-theoretic” and “B-theoretic” concepts should not greatly surprise his readers. The A- and B- conceptions *qua* theories, after all, officially arrived on the scene only in the twentieth century with McTaggart’s famous article. It stands to reason, however, that if the A- and B- theories describe mutually incompatible ontologies (as I would contend), then it is not entirely anachronistic to note tensions in Augustine’s thinking that would today be understood as an implicit affirmation of certain elements of these, at least arguably, incompatible theories. If the distinction between the A- and B- theories denotes real, apprehensible differences, then Augustine can at least be said to have failed to identify clearly those apprehensible conceptual differences. But this might not be so bad, both in view of Augustine’s unquestionably formidable role as an early Christian thinker and also in light of the fact that not all present metaphysicians of time agree that the A- and B- theories are incompatible with each other. There are, for example, those who argue for a hybrid A/B theory. For this sort of theory, see Michael Tooley, *Causation: A Realist Approach* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), and *Time, Tense, and Causation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997). That such thinkers are among us at least shows that if the alleged incompatibility of, say, basic tenseless facts and the “flow” of time, is in fact genuine, then not all respected metaphysicians of time are convinced that it is. Nonetheless, his own reading of some of the prominent ancient and medieval writers considered in the present work leads Robin LePoidevin to the following balanced judgment with respect to the imputation to them of certain currently recognized conceptual nuances: “[I]t is one thing to produce a coherent representation of someone’s thought which makes use of a certain distinction. It is quite another to attribute awareness of that distinction to the thinker in

which sound like the utterances of someone inclined to adopt a dynamic or tensed theory of time. In one place we read

[I]n the Eternal nothing passeth, but the whole is present; whereas no time is all at once present: *and that all time past, is driven on by time to come*, and all to come followeth upon the past... [italics added]⁶⁷

Several pages later we come across this one: “What now is clear and plain is, that neither things to come nor past are.”⁶⁸ Granted, these are just blurbs. But on their face these statements can be read as initial evidence that Augustine favored a tensed theory of time. In the first statement, the language of motion from future to the past approximates the “standard” A-theory idea that there are properties of pastness, presentness, and futurity attaching to moments or events. In the second statement, Augustine sounds much like contemporary Presentists who affirm only the existence of the present.

Yet there are two reasons that come to mind for resisting this initial reading; both of them place a check on any propensity one might have for effectively baptizing Augustine’s thoughts in contemporary priorities and categories. First, it ought to be observed that the two statements appear to conflict with each other, one of them entertaining at least a qualified existence of pasts and futures and the other refusing to do so. At minimum, this observation suggests that Augustine would be uncomfortable with these statements being construed as unqualified representatives

question. Rational reconstruction is not (or not necessarily) exegesis. But our brief glance at Aristotle, Augustine, and Aquinas has shown that the intellectual pressure for the distinction made so clearly by McTaggart is indistinguishably there in writings which antedate his by a matter of centuries.” This quote is found in Robin LePoidevin, “The Debate about Tense,” in *Questions of Time and Tense*, Robin LePoidevin, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 27-28.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 237, 38.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 243.

of a distinctive theory or unified set of theories. And this leads to a second observation, to wit, that when both statements are examined within their surrounding contexts they indicate that Augustine's thoughts on temporal reality in these contexts take as their point of departure what it can *feel* like to be in time. As will be further discussed below, Augustine tends to reserve his treatment of time from within a wider, "metaphysical" frame for those contexts in which he is particularly considering creation from the eternal, divine standpoint. Moreover, many of his ruminations on temporal reality are geared not to constructing a metaphysical theory of time for its own sake, independent of his eternalism, but to contrasting the divine life with the lives of humans, caught up as they are in a historically conditioned mode of existence. That is, his ideas of time emerge insofar as they meet the combined demands of sacred theology and a perspicuous characterization of human experience (particularly in its temporal aspects).

In addition to these observations, however, there are two features supporting the thesis that Augustine construes time as *B*-theoretic or tenseless. These are: (1) his belief that divine eternity is of the non-durational sort and that the world is made *with* time and (2) statements he makes indicating that all the positions (events or moments) in time are homogeneous and not heterogeneous.

To see why Augustine's non-durational conception of eternity and the idea of a wholesale creation of time with the world count as support for thinking him a "proto-*B*-theorist," it will help once again to resort to a retort of his made to those seeking to attach a *when* to the act of creation:

But if any excursive brain rove over the images of forepassed times, and wonder that Thou the God Almighty and All-creating and All-supporting, Maker of heaven and earth, didst for innumerable ages forbear from so great a work, before Thou wouldest make it; let him awake and consider, that he wonders at false conceits. For whence could innumerable ages pass by, which Thou madest not, Thou the Author and Creator of all ages? Or what times should there be, which were not made by Thee? Or how should they pass by, if they never were? Seeing then Thou art the Creator of all times, if any time was before Thou madest heaven and earth, why say they that Thou didst forego working? For that very time didst Thou make, nor could times pass by, before Thou madest those times. But if before heaven and earth there was no time, why is it demanded, what Thou then didst?⁶⁹

Based on this collection of thoughts, it is reasonable to conclude that Augustine would not have us interpret the “before” in the last sentence in a temporal sense. There is, therefore, literally nothing that happens temporally prior to the creation, according to him. But if this is so, then there exists no temporal scheme against which an objective NOW could be placed at a supposed first moment of creation. For an *objective* NOW, it stands to reason, comes subsequent to some earlier event – a THEN – if it is to exist at some point, any point, within a temporal series. To say that tense is an intrinsic feature of time, after all, is to counter the claim that tenses merely index the location of a particular temporal agent. It is to say that there is a NOW which is not merely *stipulated*; the NOW is what it is regardless of any temporal agent’s temporally localized indexical thoughts or linguistic tokens. But are we not merely *stipulating* a supposedly objective NOW at an alleged first moment of creation if that NOW does not come subsequent to some earlier times or events? And if the NOW is *merely* stipulated, is it not then an arbitrary and *ad hoc* philosophical maneuver to stamp the NOW with our ontological imprimatur –

⁶⁹ Ibid., 238.

“objective”? What features of reality, after all, distinguish this supposed NOW as real? What plain considerations should lead one to conclude about a purported first moment or event of creation that a hypothetical agent saying at that time “History is starting now” is alluding, perhaps unwittingly, to a tensed fact? Why not concede that the agent may only be signaling his awareness of events at a particular time, perhaps with expectations of what will follow? At least on the surface, predicating an objective NOW at some early (or, for that matter, subsequent) point in world history appears to inject superfluous ontological furniture into Augustine’s conception of temporal reality.⁷⁰ And if all of this is cogent and a supposed first moment of creation can at least be conceived to exist as a member within a temporal series without the objective NOW, then it is difficult to see why any subsequent moments or events in that series should be any less free of objective tenses. This all appears to form a solid line, reasoning from what Augustine has to say about the non-temporal address of the Lord’s creative act.

Moving a step further, the earlier repeated sketch indicated that the unit positions within a B-theoretic time series are *homogeneous*; collectively, they are of a uniform nature or kind. From the vantage-point of fundamental metaphysics, there

⁷⁰ Moreover, if the so-called objective (but, as we see here, stipulated) NOW and its “forward motion” is a necessary precondition of the earlier-later relation, then how could the hypothetical Augustinian A-theorist dodge the charge of having absorbed time into eternity (or, in some other way, of annihilating the former) any more ably than the hypothetical Augustinian B-theorist? This line of reasoning in support of a particular reading of Augustine, I should note, while working against William Lane Craig’s hybrid of eternalism and (A-theoretic) temporalism, leaves non-hybrid conceptions of temporal eternalism untouched, as far as I can tell. Proponents of these conceptions, for one, are free to reject Augustine’s belief that God creates time in creating the world. But then they might see the need to ready themselves for Craig’s Kalam argument and its denial of the possibility of an actual infinite temporal series of events, along with the considerations weighing in favor of a Relational and against a Newtonian theory of time.

is no privileged NOW; there is no truth of the matter regarding what events exist as future or present or past that is abstracted from some particular, temporally localized agent's memories, perceptual awareness, and expectations. Agents exist within a sprawling temporal field, within which each point is no less (or more) real than the next.

One continues to get the idea that Augustine favors such a *B*-theoretic scheme when surveying his statements about the creative upholding of the world order by the divine Word:

Thou callest us then to understand the Word, God, with Thee God, Which is spoken eternally, and by It are *all things* spoken eternally. For what was spoken *was not spoken successively*, one thing concluded that the next might be spoken, but *all things together and eternally* [italics added].⁷¹

Of course, as has been documented in this chapter, Augustine places an important, especially epistemic, premium on *the present*, with respect to both human and divine knowledge or acquaintance. But it is just as important to underscore how Augustine's ruminations on the transient, fleeting quality of the humanly apprehended present moves him away from something resembling the ontology of contemporary Presentists. In the following, Augustine conveys his sense that all times exist uniformly on a grand platform, with any position being "present-able" for agents appropriately located:

I ask, Father, I affirm not: O my God, rule and guide me. "Who will tell me that there are not three times (as we learned when boys, and taught boys), past, present, and future; but present only, because those two are not? Or are they also; and when from future it becometh present, doth it come out of some secret place; and so, when retiring, from present it becometh past? For

⁷¹ Ibid., 235.

where did they, who foretold things to come, see them, if as yet they be not? For that which is not, cannot be seen. And they who relate things past, could not relate them, if in mind they did not discern them, and if they were not, they could no way be discerned. Things then past and to come, are.”⁷²

A crucial backdrop to this portion of Augustine’s discussion consists, firstly, in his belief in genuine cases of humans having true, warranted beliefs about their pasts and futures. Secondly, it consists in his belief in a *sui generis* presence with or awareness of those times (and their events) available to the timeless Lord, holding that the Lord’s acquaintance with various “presents” entails (“past” and “future”) truth values and sometimes serves as a revelatory source of information regarding statements made about so-called future contingencies in those cases of predictive prophecy.

Augustine marks a fundamental difference between a) time conceived as a whole or as an ordered set and b) time conceived as an environment in which agents experience one event after another, organizing their memories, perceptions, and expectations through the use of the “objectifying” concepts of past, present, and future.⁷³ He, in fact, alternates between these two standpoints as he proceeds in his discussion. This is why within a few paragraphs Augustine can go from saying “Things then past and to come, are” to saying “What now is clear and plain is, that neither things to come nor past are.” In the first instance he is imagining the whole from a divine knower’s standpoint. In the second instance he is focusing on the fact that humans only ever experience what lies before their consciousness or awareness.

⁷² Ibid., 241, 42.

⁷³ I should stress that this difference ought not be construed as an incompatibility; for Augustine, they appear to be distinct standpoints that are not absolute metaphysical antitheses.

But we would err if we were to take this to imply that he is willing to shrink down his ontology of time in order to match the narrow epistemic confines of the humanly experienced “present.” Instead, what we see is Augustine utilizing a specialized sense of the term ‘present’ to *relativize* the indexical use of the three-fold categorization of past-present-future. He prioritizes the transcendental, timeless standpoint that perceives all times, resisting a temporal localization of the omniscient Lord, the idea that He possesses an awareness of a “moving NOW.” Moreover, he opines that it would be philosophically gratuitous to allow the temporal tenses to denote something fundamental about the nature of time. What they do is function at the behest of the human subject, carving up experience in a certain way. After a fashion, they reside in the human soul:

[Y]et perchance it might be properly said, “there be three times; a present of things past, a present of things present, and a present of things future.” For these three do exist in some sort, in the soul, but elsewhere do I not see them; present of things past, memory; present of things present, sight; present of things future, expectation.⁷⁴

I would conclude, therefore, that Augustine’s writings about temporal reality are best understood as promoting a tenseless (or *B*-theoretic) conception of time. And it should be noted in the drawing of this conclusion that the promotion of a tenseless conception of time by Augustine does not obviate the proposition that tensed concepts and language can have a useful, perhaps even indispensable, role in the day-to-day operations of temporal agents. Indeed, I would suggest that Augustine’s ability to oscillate between the timeless divine standpoint (overseeing, as it were,

⁷⁴ Ibid., 243.

tenseless time) and the earthy standpoint of those caught up in the “tense-heavy” traffic of temporal agency has a healthy effect on his theology. Particularly, it helps to remove the sharp edge from some of his more Neo-Platonic and Manichean tendencies, tendencies that serve to devalue creation and otherwise inhibit his own affirmation of a timeless, divine immanence.

This concludes the first “layer of consideration” with respect to Augustine’s affirmation and articulation of the gracious presence of the timeless, impassible Creator. I maintain that the thoughts he sets forth on the nature of divine eternity and the nature of temporal reality fit together formally as a coherent package. At least from this vantage point, his conception of a strongly immutable deity does not stand at ontological odds with the affirmation of a temporally extended creation and His own intimate acquaintance with it. In what follows, however, I will argue that the gnostic residue in Augustine’s theology of nature does figure as a barrier to a consistently robust articulation of the Immanuel principle in his theology.

III. A Sprinkle of St. Basil: Removing Neo-Platonic Inhibitors to Divine Presence

As I have tried to show in the foregoing, it is reasonable to affirm a conceptual and ontological fit between the concepts of a timelessly eternal Creator and a creation whose temporal character is *B*-theoretic or tenseless. Or, at least, it is reasonable to believe that Augustine affirms such a fit. And, arguably, if it is reasonable to believe this, we thereby move a step closer to making the case for thinking of the classically eternal and impassible Lord as Immanuel – God *with* us.

But are there some shortcomings in the ways that Augustine specifically goes about mediating between the Creator and the creation? Colin Gunton thinks so. Gunton holds that Augustine retains gnostic thought forms in his metaphysics, forms which tend to compete and conflict with his articulation of a profound immanence of the transcendent, Triune Creator with the world and its inhabitants.

In this “second layer” of consideration, I want to explore what I agree is a shortcoming in Augustine’s understanding of the God-world relationship. One can begin by noting the persistent influence of Neo-Platonism on Augustine’s theology of nature. Specifically, attention should be paid to the way in which he relies on the idea that reality consists of something like an ontological caste system in which there are various levels or degrees of being. Justo Gonzalez here gives a brief summary of some of the main features of Neo-Platonism, a metaphysical system synthesized by the eclectic philosopher Plotinus:

His system begins with the ineffable One, which is beyond all essence and every name that could be given to it. From this absolutely transcendent One all that exists comes, although not by an act of creation, but rather by what can best be understood by means of the metaphor of emanation. ...This emanation goes forth from the perfect One toward imperfection and multiplicity. First, there is the Intellect which combines features of Plato’s Demiurge and of Philo’s Logos. Next, there is the Soul of the World, of which every human soul is a part. Thus an entire hierarchy of being unfolds, and its last level is matter in the sense of the extreme of multiplicity.⁷⁵

A crucial premise of this metaphysical construct is that to assign an entity to a particular station in the order of things is not merely to describe or categorize that entity as belonging to a particular type but to assign a particular *value* to it. This is

⁷⁵ Justo L. Gonzalez, *A History of Christian Thought: From the Beginnings to the Council of Chalcedon*, Vol. 1, Rev. Ed., (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1987), 188.

indicated in Gonzalez's summary above, where he describes the emanation as a descent from "the perfect" toward "imperfection." If it is not already obvious, this cascading hierarchy, when coupled with the notion that the ontological strata are intrinsically value-laden, produces dualisms between unity and plurality, permanence and change, and spirit and body. And in each of these oppositional sets, the latter party suffers the indignity of a lower valuation.

For Augustine, these dualisms threaten to undermine his ability to affirm an unequivocal goodness of (at least pre-Fall) creation as such. Even this claim, though, must be qualified. For, on one hand, Augustine's residual Neo-Platonic mindset places him in a position quite amenable to affirming the goodness of the creation. This is in virtue of the fact that, as seen above, Plotinus conceived of the world order in terms of cosmic emanation, a non-eschatological over-flow of being, marked by *necessity*. Applied to Christian theology, this metaphysical hierarchy would have the effect of tying the lower, creaturely emanations intrinsically to the singular Source and simultaneously threatening the very contingency and ontological distinctiveness of those lower emanations. The value attributed to the One would, presumably, apply or transfer univocally to the Many. Yet this univocity would also leave one to wonder if such a Creator-creature duality purchases only a nominal distinction, a distinction with no fundamental ontological difference between the higher and lower levels.⁷⁶

⁷⁶ The *necessity* of the emanation that "spans" from the top of the metaphysical scale (the One) downward (to the Many) is one side – the univocity side – of what appears to be a dialectical tension in Neo-Platonism. The univocal component derives, as mentioned, from the *necessity* of the emanation. The other side, which also gets attention here in what follows, consists in the fact that the

It is noteworthy, however, that I claimed above that the presence of Neo-Platonism in Augustine can be detected in his theology of *nature*. The emanation doctrine is not something infecting his doctrine of God as such, at least not profoundly. This is not to say that the philosophical motivation is not there or even that Augustine altogether avoids employing emanationist language in discussing creation as not only an *act* but also as a *sui generis relation* sustained by the divine Lord. It is to say that the *necessitarian* motif in Neo-Platonism is moderated by various “Christian” features of Augustine’s theology. Particularly, his doctrine that creation is its own distinctive order produced from no-thing, from no-where, and from no-when and the belief that the creation does not exist as an extension of the divine eternity but as the product of a divine *fiat*, a result of self-expressive, Trinitarian *will*; these mitigate the sense that “creation” constitutes a necessitated “valuational Fall” in and of itself.⁷⁷

Not only this, but Augustine is solidly situated within the Athanasian tradition in its strong stand against the position of Arius and his followers. The Arians had mediated the Creator-creation relationship through the person of Jesus Christ. But their conception of this mediation was not limited to some distinguished

emanation is also said to extend its reach toward material multiplicity by means of *diversely valued ontological strata*. The diverse valuations applying to these various strata would suggest that terms applying to entities belonging to one layer or strata could only apply *equivocally* to those belonging to another. The key to overcoming this tension would be to secure some middle way as, for example, Aquinas sought to do with his idea of *analogical* predication, combining univocal and equivocal predicative elements.

⁷⁷ *Confessions*, 237. Unfortunately, I do not have space available here to discuss in substantial enough depth the status of the creating will of God and its relationship to the divine “Substance” according to Augustine. This issue has considerable relevance, however, in reference to the present thesis and is worthy of a deep textual and conceptual exploration in its own right.

“disposition toward incarnation” in the Godhead (or some other sort of “creation-friendly” divine disposition). Nor did it restrict its focus to the very fact of the Incarnation, God the Son clad in flesh, and what supportive implications this teaching might have for the Lord’s attitude toward the material world. Instead, the Arians inserted as mediator between Creator and creation a heavenly *tertium quid* – the Son who is not only begotten of the Father but *made*, a being distinct from both the fully divine One and the world (including the latter’s individual members). The Arians effectively constructed a hierarchy of being, featuring a third category that consists of the Son (or Logos) and the Spirit. Rather than being content to posit the distinctions between the Persons in tandem with an economic subordination of *Logos ensarkos* to the Father within the decree of and for the sake of redemption, the Arians posited a subordination of the Son’s being to the Father’s.⁷⁸ This subordination, contended Athanasius, amounts to a fundamental dismantling of the unity of the Tri-unity.

Augustine’s opposition to the ontological subordinationism of Arius is well known. Indeed, his theology has been criticized for being overly consolidated on the

⁷⁸ Circa A.D. 320, Arius confessed in a letter to Alexander of Alexandria: “We know only one God, who alone is uncreated...the God of the Law and the prophets of the New Covenant, who brought forth the only-begotten Son before eternal times..., by whom he created ...the aeons and all things; he did not bring him forth...in appearance only, but in truth, as being in his own will... . And God [the Father –P.O.] is the cause of all, quite alone without origin, but the Son was brought forth...timelessly [i.e., before there was time] by the Father and created and founded before the aeons, and was not before he was brought forth. He was brought forth timelessly before all things, and he alone received his existence from the Father. For he is not eternal or as eternal or as uncreated as the Father, nor does he have identical being with the Father... .” Quoted in Aloys Grillmeier, S.J., *Christ in Christian Tradition: From the Apostolic age to Chalcedon (451)*, Second Edition, trans. John Bowden (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1975), 225-26.

For a helpful discussion of the matter of the Son’s being begotten of the Father in the context of a contemporary defense of the essentially timeless, eternal God, see Paul Helm, “Time and Trinity,” in *Questions of Time and Tense*, ed. Robin Le Poidevin (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 251-64.

side of unity and uniformity among the Trinitarian Persons. In modern times he has been taken to task for not allowing enough distinct, individual agency to the three members of the Godhead. And as shall be seen later, he may be indictable for not adequately reflecting on the integral connection between Creation and Incarnation and the implications of this connection for how one thinks about the divine transcendence and immanence. Needless to say, however, Augustine sheds a good deal of Neo-Platonism, at least when his theology is viewed in terms of an all-embracing scope that considers Creator and creation in a sustained relation to one another.⁷⁹ In the section quoted below from *Confessions* 13.7, for example, his thoughts turn against the idea that the world emanates from God's self – and this based upon a Christological insight:

For Thou createdst heaven and earth; not out of Thyself; for so should they have been equal to Thine Only Begotten Son, and thereby to Thee also; whereas no way were it right that aught should be equal to Thee, which was not of Thee.⁸⁰

Augustine keenly safeguards the integrity of the Trinity, contrasting the necessary relation between the Father and the Son with the contingent relation unilaterally established by the Lord with the creation. There is, thus, a palpable “break” between the Lord's being and the being of the Lord's creation.

Yet, as Gunton rightly underscores, Augustine's Christological basis here, as well as in other places, tends to endow creation with a distinctive, contingent

⁷⁹ For all this, I will not deny that Augustine's hamartiologico-soteriological framework continued to function in terms of Neo-Platonism's descent-ascent movement, even as he, arguably, demonstrated a propensity to eliminate its more blatantly Gnostic accoutrements over time. See Julie Canlis, *Calvin's Ladder: A Spiritual Theology of Ascent and Ascension* (Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), 33-36.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 258.

integrity by the exclusive means of *Logos asarkos* (the eternal Word). In important ways he appears to neglect the positive implications of the doctrine of *Logos ensarkos* (the Word enfleshed) for, along with distinguishing the Creator from the creation, crucially setting the Creator's face positively toward the creation and all its parts. While firmly demarcating the Trinitarian counsel and its internal, necessary relations from the non-necessary and extensively material realm of "not-God," he falls short in this aspect of his thought of positively orientating the former to the latter.

Additionally, and more to the present point, Augustine welcomes into the created order the same Neo-Platonic-esque hierarchy that he successfully fences off from the order of the divine Persons. Directly on the heels of the above quotation, he places awkwardly together the *creatio ex nihilo* and an ontologically stratified natural order:

And aught else besides Thee was there not, whereof Thou mightest create them, O God, One Trinity, and Trine Unity; and therefore out of nothing didst Thou create heaven and earth; a great thing, and a small thing; for Thou art Almighty and Good, to make all things good, even the great heaven, and the petty earth. Thou wert, nothing was there besides, out of which Thou createdst heaven and earth; things of two sorts; one near Thee, the other near to nothing; one to which Thou alone shouldest be superior; the other, to which nothing should be inferior.⁸¹

There are two important consequences of this understanding. First, by ranking the heavens as "great" and the earth as "petty," Augustine risks flattening out a bit the difference between the Lord and the earth by making them variations located along

⁸¹ 258.

an ontological continuum.⁸² The risk is that the favorable placement of a created set of entities – the heavenly bodies – at an ontological level “nearer” to God introduces an intra-creational difference (between heaven and earth) that competes with the supposedly incomparable difference between God and His creation. Second, this same dualistic ranking of the heavens and the earth, especially because it is a ranking of *created* realms (which are, *ex hypothesi*, already *different* from the Creator), risks inserting a veritable blockade – the heavens – between the Triune Creator and those finite dwellers upon the earth for whom He is supposed to care. In this way, the ghost of Neo-Platonism inhibits Augustine from consistently expressing the Immanuel principle in his theology.

As at least a partial remedy to this weakness, Gunton offers an insight uncovered in the writings of the fourth-century bishop, St. Basil of Caesarea. To be specific, Basil manages in his collection of homilies known as *Hexaemeron* – a set of sermonic commentaries on the six days of creation – to break free of significant Gnostic habits of thought from which Augustine did not so easily extricate himself. As we saw earlier, Augustine conceives of an intimate acquaintance that the eternal Lord sustains with the times of creation and understands this in terms of a homogeneous set of times, in which all times stand on the same ontological footing. What is not so clear is whether he is able to think consistently of the Lord as being present with all of time’s *places* (in space) in the universe.⁸³ This is in virtue of his

⁸² This at least resembles Karl Barth’s famous complaint (to be touched upon again in Chapter 2 in reference to some of the ideas of St. Thomas Aquinas) against the *analogia entis* – or analogy of being – that he found residing in Roman Catholic metaphysical theology.

having a theology of nature fashioned too much in the image of Neo-Platonism, with its application of a scale of value to nature's order of ontological castes. Whereas, in contradistinction to Augustine's sometimes ambivalent affirmation of creation's goodness, Basil brings his hearers to an uninhibited appreciation of creation as the multi-faceted expression of the Creator's own character and purposes.

As Gunton contends, Basil must be credited as an early and rare medieval promoter of the principle of creation's ontological homogeneity. But lest the bishop be confused for a type of monist for his promoting of this principle, Gunton explains:

What is meant by homogeneous here is that, by virtue of his belief that God is the creator of everything, Basil comes to the conclusion, against the assumptions of almost the whole of the ancient world, that there are no degrees of being: that is to say, that everything created has the same ontological status.⁸⁴

This conception of homogeneity, Gunton stresses, is not inimical to a genuine and significant diversity within the created order. What Basil, rather, would have his hearers and readers learn from this conception is that *difference* does not equate to *hierarchy*. And when the admittedly different parts, aspects, and entities that are members of creation are set in contrast to their uncreated Creator, they are profoundly seen as belonging to a greater sub-set. The created parts of the whole have the whole in common and, therefore, enjoy an ontological same-ness in that

⁸³ If one is familiar with the Einstein-Minkowski model of the world as a four-dimensional space-time unity and the claim that there is no NOW existing independent of a particular reference-frame (denoting one's specific location and velocity), then this issue of time's places will be seen to have clear relevance for discussions of an Augustinian conception of time.

⁸⁴ Gunton, *The Triune Creator*, 71.

respect. Moreover, creation's aspects and parts are not divided up in such a way that some come before others in an evaluative line-up.

To be sure, it must be conceded that, his strengths notwithstanding, Basil was a product of his age and evidences certain platonising proclivities of his own in his commentaries on creation. Notably, as Gunton points out, he resembles another early Church Father when he honors Plato's dichotomizing of the mental and the material, giving a cosmic priority to the first of these:

Most significant in this respect is section 5 of the first homily, in which an Origenist meditation on what preceded the creation of the material world intrudes incongruously on the preceding sections: 'all the orderly arrangement of pure intelligences who are beyond the reach of our mind...' The end of that paragraph could have come from Philo: 'after the invisible and intellectual world, the visible world, the world of the senses began to exist.'⁸⁵

Basil can also be found invoking the Greek myth of the Demiurge and employing, at least formally, the language of a superior rank enjoyed by heaven over the inferior earth.⁸⁶ Nevertheless, there is a case to be made that these platonising elements are, as they often are in Augustine's thought, unfortunate vestiges. Only with Basil these remnants appear to be even more pervasively overshadowed by strongly creational elements. I argue, therefore, that Basil's theology of nature will help to fill out the Augustinian eternalist's conception of the divine presence if one will incorporate (a) his appreciation for the great variety of creation's features, (b) his ability to conceive of these various features as together belonging to a single created "kind," namely,

⁸⁵ Ibid., 69.

⁸⁶ St. Basil, *Hexameron*, trans. Blomfield Jackson, eds. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, Second Series, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999), Vol. 8: 5.5, 5.4.

the kind of entities that are created, and (c) his indiscriminate instrumentalist focus on the usefulness of creation's many features in the (at least often) beneficial activities of mankind and (always) good, albeit mysterious, purposes of God.

On a larger scale of natural phenomena, Basil's appreciation for variety shows up in his consideration of the sea. In homily 4.6, in which the Genesis 1:10 statement "And God saw that it was good" is considered, he begins with an artful portrait of the sea's "settled calm," consistent with the "ineffable wisdom" with which its divine Perceiver perceives it. But he quickly moves to a more concerted defense of the sea's goodness in the next paragraph, giving a fairly intricate description of how the sea serves a great instrumental good in the earth (and for the sake of earth's dwellers) in the way that it provides necessary moisture, winding its way across the globe and into the atmosphere.

On a smaller scale, exhibiting the excitement of a proto-botanist, Basil turns his attention to plant-life. Going on at length, he impressively depicts the germination and growth of grass, herbs, and sundry other plants. These depictions are not only meant to evoke gratitude to the Creator but also to point to how mankind could stand to learn from the Creator's symphonic designs:

I want creation to penetrate you with so much admiration that everywhere, wherever you may be, the least plant may bring to you the clear remembrance of the Creator. If you see the grass of the fields, think of human nature, and remember the comparison of the wise Isaiah. "All flesh is grass, and all the goodness thereof is as the flower of the field." Truly the rapid flow of life, the short gratification and pleasure that an instant of happiness gives a man, all wonderfully suit the comparison of the prophet. To-day he is vigorous in body, fattened by luxury, and in the prime of life, with complexion fair like the flowers, strong and powerful and of irresistible

energy; tomorrow and he will be an object of pity, withered by age or exhausted by sickness.⁸⁷

Along with displaying Basil's lively theological imagination and existential bent, this passage importantly exhibits his conviction that all of nature points to and would teach of the Creator. God is not, in Basil's worldview, above communicating His purposeful presence by way of even mundane patches of grass.

Along with his keen eye for the detailed richness of the entire physical world, Basil also at times subjects to rational cross-examination much of the received wisdom available to him as a contemplator of nature's ways. From Gunton's own reading of him, we can compile a small list of Basil's contrarian views: (1) his objections to Aristotle's contention that, because they move in a circular motion, the heavenly bodies must be eternal (1.3), (2) his rejection of Origen's belief that the stars are alive (3.9), (3) his critique of the idea that human life is fated by the motion of the heavenly bodies (6.5), and (4) his contention that the sun is not an exceptional entity insofar as it is as corruptible as any other created thing (5.1).

By way of this simultaneous humiliation of creation's purportedly greater members (e.g., the stars) and exaltation of its so-called lesser members (such as blades of grass), Basil effectively irons out what was supposed to be a vertical step-ladder connecting them. As I see it, this leveling action has two beneficial consequences for those seeking to articulate a robustly Trinitarian conception of the interface between the eternal divinity and the spatio-temporal order. One, it reserves

⁸⁷ St. Basil, *Hexaemeron*, 5.2.

the function of mediator between the Creator and creation as the exclusive domain of the Triune Creator. And, two, by thus moderating (if not altogether removing) intra-creational dualisms he enables one to more easily conceive of creation as an integrated whole. These insights are well-expressed in homily 1.7, where Basil counters pagan notions of an *ad hoc* formation of the world (whether through an involuntary divine creation or through “chance”) with his belief that the Scriptures teach of a deliberate, personal sovereign who competently conducts the show:

Moses almost shows us the finger of the supreme artisan taking possession of the substance of the universe, forming the different parts in one perfect accord, and making a harmonious symphony result from the whole.⁸⁸

His conception of creation’s ontological homogeneity, I maintain, nicely complements the idea of the homogeneity of times that Augustine fits together with the timeless Triune Creator. It also helps, more generally, to remove from the Augustinian model of the world those hierarchical and dualistic inhibitors (inherited from Neo-Platonism) of a perspicuous presence of the Persons of the Triune Godhead with creation and its “spatio-temporal others.” Thereby, doctrinal space becomes available for the Incarnational, world-affirming theology of one such as Irenaeus.

IV. Add a Dash of Irenaeus: Trinity, Incarnation, and Eschatology

It was earlier observed that certain features of Augustine’s theology enabled its proprietor to refuse Neo-Platonism a permanent residence within its confines.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 1.7.

Among these was his understanding that a genuine doctrine of *creation*, as opposed to *emanation*, must construe the cosmos as issuing *contingently* and not *necessarily* from the being of the Lord. Augustine's doctrine focused this construal upon the idea that the divine *will* mediates between the eternal divine being and the being of the world. For without this volitional mediation there would be no conceivable basis for rejecting the proposition that the world *simpliciter* exists co-eternally with God. And it was thought that a failure to reject this proposition would mean coming up short in the attempt to distinguish properly the Creator from creation, dealing a considerable blow to Christian piety.

As one who desires to affirm that the Lord is necessarily timeless and that creation is, with respect to its parts, temporal, I agree at the beginning of this "third layer" that the creation must be understood to spring from the divine freedom. Moreover, one's idea of divine freedom (vis-à-vis disputes over whether it is "compatibilistic" or "libertarian" in nature) must do justice to the twofold requirement that creating this world is not need-fulfilling for God, on one hand, but nevertheless tracks with God's character, on the other. If creation is need-fulfilling, then the self-sufficiency of the God of (non-panentheistic versions of) Christian theism cannot ultimately be upheld. To posit the needy Creator's existence (presuming that God's need for creation, or some good for which creation is a necessary precondition, is a timeless need) would entail the positing of the world's existence, with the theist falling into the clutches of Neo-Platonic necessity. If creation is not consistent with God's character, however, then conceiving of a stable,

intimate union between Creator and creation is precluded. This is because there would then be no conceivable rationale for God actualizing the creation rather than His refraining from doing so (or *vice versa*). Nor would there be any stable divine virtues or dispositions standing behind and providing purpose for the divine freedom to create a particular world or kind of world. Nor, as an implication, would there be any reason to see the creation as a gratuitous out-pouring of (and testament to) divine generosity and love.

My own reflections on especially this last point make me sympathetic, again, to Gunton when he faults Augustine (among others) for inadequately grasping the way in which God mediates between Himself and His world. It is Gunton's claim that "the place given, or not given, to the Trinity is determinative of the character of any doctrine of creation."⁸⁹ One area in which Augustine fails to live up to what his Trinitarianism could be is in his heavy reliance on appeals to divine omnipotence in order to ground God's choice to create. Appeals to omnipotence, Gunton says, are common indicators of weak theological reasoning. In particular, he finds that the mixed reception with which Augustine greets change and embodiment inclines him, unfortunately, toward an *a priori* theological method. Instead of fixing the eyes of his creational theology self-consciously upon what the Triune Lord has done, is doing, and will do *in* and *through* history—enfleshing His Son for the sake of sacrifice, renewing people by the Spirit, resurrecting Jesus and his people unto glory, and renovating by His Spirit the cosmos in order to bring about the New Creation –

⁸⁹ Gunton, *The Triune Creator*, 53.

Augustine reasons more abstractly for the proposition that God “must have created them from nothing...For there is nothing that [He] cannot do.”⁹⁰ Gunton contends that Augustine’s *apriorism* leads him to embrace conceptions of a naked will backed by absolute power rather than a grace-filled will backed by ordered power; the latter would have been better, he urges. These more abstract conceptions of will and power owe their role in Augustine’s thought to certain missteps. Those would include too strictly cordoning off the Trinity from creaturely others, failing to recognize sufficiently the distinctive work of Trinitarian Persons in the governance of creation, and favoring a voluntaristic conception of creation versus one grounded in the same rich grace that unites the Second Person to the Creation for the sake of redeeming it.

As a corrective, he commends the work of Irenaeus of Lyon, an ante-Nicene Father who was careful to locate the Creator-creation mediation distinctly within the Trinitarian matrix. In line with this, Irenaeus asserted that the creation is fundamentally and thoroughly subject to the sustaining and “kneading” presence of God’s two hands, the Son and the Spirit. Specifically, I wish to focus here on one of those hands, the Son.

For Irenaeus, the Son’s enfleshing for the sake of redemption and a proper sense of the goodness of the material universe are mutually reinforcing theological truths. The permanent joining of a human nature to the Son has the decisive importance it does because it signals the deep divine concern for how things go in

⁹⁰ Cited in Gunton, 75.

the world. Irenaean Christology would not have us imagine history as a “far country” into which the Son of God traverses for the purpose of withdrawing from it those souls who were meant for a “higher” or more spiritual mode of being. Beyond the commendable avoidance of a debilitating escapism, however, is the way in which Irenaean Christology fits into an eschatology that breaks the wineskins of “Neo-Platonic return.”

Earlier on, I discussed Neo-Platonism’s picture of the world, describing it as a stratified overflow of being, a flow *from* the Unchanging, Spiritual, One down *to* the Changing, Material, Many. What this portrayal left out is the idea that just as the downward *issuance* or *emanation* is understood to be necessary, so also there is a necessary, upward *return* to the primordial One. Often operating in terms of a Neo-Platonist mindset (though not always self-consciously), Christian theologians have frequently thought in terms of paradise lost and subsequently restored, with the restoration being conceived as fundamentally a *return* to a state of perfection. Irenaeus was an early abstainer from this return motif. His conception was rather that the *telos* or goal of redemption is one that *transcends* the original state of primordial goodness, exceeding its grandeur. This can be seen in the fact that he denied, in an important sense, the perfection of Adam in his unfallen condition. There was, at it were, room for historical upgrades:

For it was necessary, at first, that what was mortal should be conquered and swallowed up by immortality, and the corruptible by incorruptibility, and

that man should be made after the image and likeness of God, having received the knowledge of good and evil.⁹¹

And it is by way of the redeeming and resurrecting activities of the Father's two hands, the Son and the Spirit, that these upgrades are to be accomplished.

By replacing Neo-Platonism's rather static metaphysics with the Trinity's teleologically expressed intentions and the former's necessary emanations with the Creator's deliberate, gracious creation (and then redemption) of the world, Irenaeus's eschatology gives material support to Augustine's portrayal of history as the stage of a divinely orchestrated drama in *City of God*. Although Augustine would eventually give formal expression to the idea that glorified mankind will enjoy a triumph and renovation overshadowing those virtues enjoyed in the garden, Irenaeus brings the clarified idea that God utilizes a historical *process* to bring about the later perfection.

Furthermore, in light of Augustine's Neo-Platonically compromised conception of the goodness of creation, one might be tempted to see history's importance within the purposes of God as merely a *derived* or *secondary* good. It would be good because it is the work and possession of the Lord of unmitigated glory and virtue. But it would be derived because, one might think, it does not have a distinct significance in and of itself. Perhaps it has significance and worth insofar as it functions as a means to the achievement of certain divine ends but then it can be, at least metaphorically, discarded with those ends finally realized. Irenaeus

⁹¹ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, Arranged by A. Cleveland Coxe, eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, Ante-Nicene Fathers (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), Vol. 1: 4. 38. 4.

shows that this way of thinking still maintains an unhealthy dualism between the Creator and His teleologically ordered world.

When we recognize with Irenaeus that the Trinity's creative action is *essentially* deliberate and gracious action – flowing unnecessarily but consistently from the Triune Godhead – then we will see that creation, in all its historical details, has an intrinsic significance in and of itself. This, Christian theologians should recall, is not because the temporal matrix is autonomous and independent of the ways of God but the very opposite. Because the temporal matrix is totally dependent as a diversified whole on the sustaining care of the Triune Lord it has intrinsic significance as an intricate network in which persons and things live and move. Augustine, indeed, had a profound sense of this and shows it in his belief that history serves as host of a cosmic conflict between the City of God and the City of Man, not to mention his strong doctrine of predestination. But it does appear that he could have profited from Irenaeus's insights, firstly, on the Incarnation as a key to understanding the status and significance of Creation and, secondly, on the gracious, gratuitous nature of the Lord's willing to create the world and care for its residents.

V. Summary

In this chapter, I have tried to display some key components of Augustine's thinking about God and time. The goal has been twofold. First, I have showcased some of the theological and philosophical resources Augustine provides for those who wish to defend eternalism, indicating how they might do so without forfeiting

the divine presence with creation's times and the agents that live and move at those times. To this end, I have argued that the plausibility of combining a divine timelessness with a divine immanence is given a *prima facie* basis in the fact that Augustine appears to favor a tenseless theory of time. If material adequacy is to be achieved in the way of a compelling acquaintance and proximity maintained by eternal God with the contingent and temporal creation, then the formal adequacy of a conceptual "fit" between the non-durational, timeless God and a temporally ordered world that He owns is certainly a pre-requisite. The evidence for Augustine's "de-tensing" orientation includes his relativizing of the past, present, and future (and associated indexical terms) through a rarefied conception of the presence or acquaintance that the timeless Lord maintains with creation's times. It also includes his recognition of a stark contrast between this supposed *sui generis* presence and descriptions of human temporal experience. In setting forth the latter, he seems to anticipate analyses offered by contemporary advocates of the B-theory of time.⁹² His persistent, existential focus on the role of memory and expectation, as well as his rather dim view of the narrow epistemic access available to those "unstable" temporal knowers (specifically, humans) reveal that Augustine takes time seriously. But this revelation, I suggest, does not justify the inference that he, therefore, would have agreed with current proponents of A-theoretic time in their assertion that time is intrinsically tensed.

⁹² Compare, for example, Augustine's ruminations on memory and time in Books 10 and 11 in *Confessions* with Mellor's chapter "The presence of experience" in *Real Time*, 47-57. Also, see L. Nathan Oaklander, "On the Experience of Tenseless Time" in *The Ontology of Time*, 227-42.

A second part of this chapter's goal has been to place a check on strains in Augustine's thought that could threaten an unimpeded God-world interface. This is of special interest in view of the present thesis that God, who is not, as humans are, "locked in" to an experience marked by sequence, is held to be nonetheless aware of and concerned about His temporal others. Without Himself requiring a sequence of ideas, He is aware of the sequential ordering of creaturely lives and approaches the human race as both Judge and Redeemer. As credible as this may sound, Augustine fails to articulate consistently and unequivocally the goodness of creation and to establish history's *intrinsic* significance; this stems, for one, from his Neo-Platonically structured theology of nature. It also stems from his tendency to think of the Triune Creator's mediation between Himself and Creation exclusively in terms of the non-incarnate Logos. This is my diagnosis, following Colin Gunton's study of the matter. With Gunton, I have also recommended as a corrective prescription the creational ontology of St. Basil, who, amidst his appreciation for the diverse arrangement of created things, realized that these created things have a great deal in common with one another when placed before the self-sufficient and eternal Three-in-One. I have also joined Gunton in commending the Trinitarian theology of Irenaeus and his ability to root the doctrine of creation, and hence eschatology, in an Incarnational Christology.

As I will later argue, both Creation and Incarnation appear to function on the same ontological level for the Lord. It is because the eternal God has what it takes ontologically to "add" Creation to His own needless, Trinitarian community that the

eternal God can take to Himself in the Second Person a human nature and not thereby cancel His God-hood. What is more, the fact that God has visited us in the flesh should lead us to see that Creation need not be thought in terms of a panentheistic emanation or some other type of necessity. Both Incarnation and Creation emerge graciously from the sovereign Trinity. And they both testify to the Triune Lord's acute interest in and comprehension of Creation's times.

CHAPTER 2

THOMAS AQUINAS ON DIVINE IMMUTABILITY AND A CONTINGENT CREATION

As should be plain by now, a key question motivating this dissertation concerns how one understands and articulates the presence of the timeless God with creation's times and the temporal agents situated at those times in the absence of an intrinsically tensed present at which such an interface could take place. Another, closely related question, however, concerns how advocates of the classically eternal Creator thesis might cogently hold together the following teachings: (1) the idea that 'creation,' while referring to what the world is *in relation to* the Creator, also denotes Triune *action*, and that, therefore, the Godhead and the world cannot be said to exist co-eternally or co-everlastingly (at least not without important qualifiers) and (2) the equally important belief that this concept of Triune *action* must not be "typecast" and simply portrayed as the primal event or cosmic launch-pad initiating creation's mundane temporal matrix. The creation of creation, that is, in important respects stands apart from the world, being the unique and unprovoked utterance of the Three-in-One. But the Lord's creative action, for all that, does not stand in a sort of awkward opposition or resistance to the world's existence, responsible as it is for that world's being what it is. The Triune Lord, one might say, has a befriending Spirit toward the cosmos. Yet the world is not akin to a long-time comrade or partner; it is more like an infant adopted from a foreign land, in uncanny ways bearing a creaturely resemblance to its transcendent benefactor.

An operating premise of this chapter will be that a proper Christian characterization of the God-world relationship cannot be attained if theists leave off the two requisite teachings stated above.⁹³ On one hand, if the ‘creation’ discussed in Christian theology denotes no action, no addition of a contingent entity or set of entities to the reality of God existing alone, but merely points to the lesser of the two parties involved in an undisrupted God-world union, then some theological doctrines are suddenly jeopardized. These would include the self-sufficiency (or aseity) of the Creator and a palpable ontological distinction between Creator and creation.⁹⁴ At best, the supposition that God and the world subsist in a co-eternal relation involving creative preservation and creational dependence and that no important ontic break distinguishes the Trinity-without-the-world from the Trinity-with-the world appears to imply that the world, right “alongside” God, exists necessarily. On the other hand, there lurks the specter of an overly anthropomorphic deity for those who “over-correct” in another direction by so paring down the concept of creational action that one is forced to think of the Lord as having opted to perform the deed once a particular temporal period was reached (say, “in the fullness of ‘divine

⁹³ This being said, I should note here, as will later be argued in greater detail, that in order to articulate cogently the presence of the timeless Trinity with the creation I recommend that we conceive of creation as especially expressive of the timeless character of eternal God, that creation should be thought of as timeless and immutable when considered as a whole. By combining insights provided by various contemporary proponents of strong immutability and divine atemporalism, however, I will try to show how this characterization can be thought together with a fundamental ontological distinction between the necessary deity and the contingent world, and between the atemporal decree of the Creator and the temporality (i.e., change) *within* creation with respect to its parts. I do not, hereby, equate eternity with timelessness. An entity’s being eternal, I maintain, entails its being timeless, but an entity’s being timeless (in some respect) does not entail its being eternal.

⁹⁴ Regarding the latter of these two, I am thinking in terms of a strong propensity among Christian theologians to mark the world’s contingency by decoupling cosmic origins and eventuation from the essential divine nature or essence by way of a mediating divine freedom or gracious disposition.

time’”). On this side, there is the risk not so much of rendering the world’s existence a metaphysical necessity but of setting forth a God-concept that has been rationalistically purged of some of the more opaque divine mysteries such as timelessness and spacelessness.⁹⁵ The danger would be that a failure to retain such mysteries appears to limit unduly the Creator to being little more than an ancient and immense participant in whatever causal network is available to creatures.⁹⁶

According to some, the preceding thoughts, rather than warranting a careful navigation between the Scylla of a metaphysically necessary creation (even, perhaps, some form of panentheism) and the Charybdis of some alleged anthropomorphic deity, instead undergird the vain pursuit of a chimerical third option – a *sui generis* intersection linking eternity and time. A few unabashed monists may find it reasonable to deny strictly the reality of change, thus conforming time to the image of eternity, thus negating time. As for those “modified” classical eternalists remaining, they will naturally temporalize eternity in some fashion. This will likely be done either by placing the Lord, to whom an intrinsically tensed knowledge of temporal indexicals is attributed, in a beginning-less, providential position vis-à-vis the world or by placing a first moment of creation at a particular juncture in the Lord’s own personal, sempiternal (beginning-

⁹⁵ Following Augustine and standing alongside contemporaries like Paul Helm and Brian Leftow, Douglas K. Blount defends the analogy assumed here between divine timelessness and divine spacelessness in his article “On the Incarnation of a Timeless God,” in *God and Time: Essays on the Divine Nature*, Gregory E. Ganssle and David M. Woodruff, eds., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 236-248.

⁹⁶ To be fair, the spatio-temporal creator could possibly still be explosively creative and powerful, capable of producing from no pre-existing materials the universe with its diverse kinds and individuals. The key point here is that divine operations would take place within a framework which conditions and constrains the creator in at least some of the ways it does the lives and actions of creatures.

less, endless) history.⁹⁷ For those, however, who do not believe that the aforementioned intersection is a chimera, insightful inquirers into that reality that constitutes a bridge from the event-less deity to the eventful world are in high demand. And this is where the Dominican monk, Thomas Aquinas, enters the picture.

If one will recall, this dissertation has as one of its main goals a defense of timeless eternity in terms of a *B*-theoretic (or tenseless) conception of time. A further goal is to vindicate a timeless divine presence with times and those in time given a *B*-theoretic conception's negative implications for an intrinsically tensed present, namely, that there is no such thing. Why then, it might be wondered, would the following brief study of Aquinas not focus on trying to categorize his views on time and eternity based on the concepts inherited from contemporary discussions and disputes over the *A*- and *B*- theories? Would the theses presented herein not stand to benefit from such an analysis? By way of reply, to begin with, such studies have been undertaken already and, in my opinion, quite ably.⁹⁸ Based on my own examination of the relevant texts in Aquinas, Craig is correct to conclude that he is

⁹⁷ Proof that this disjunction does not exhaust the possibilities is seen in Craig's attempted hybrid of classical, atemporal eternalism and an *A*-theoretic, temporal eternalism. It is arguable that Craig, in his own way, at least moderately (if this is possible) temporalizes eternity (1) by making divine timelessness a contingent attribute of God and (2) by reducing divine eternity to a temporal everlastingness that is metaphysically irreversible subsequent to God's creation of the world. If the first of these moves does not temporalize eternity, then the additional second move surely does. One proposal within philosophical theology that I would not include as an exception here is Eleonore Stump's conception of E/T simultaneity. Although I am convinced that Stump's proposal amounts to a temporalizing of eternity, linking the notion that "God is his own duration" with *A*-theoretic time, hers I would classify as an attempt on the part of a classical eternalist to unpack the very eternal-temporal intersection discussed here; the attempt fails, I believe, to preserve a *timeless* eternity, while working with what I hope to show later is a quite problematical conception of temporal reality.

⁹⁸ William Lane Craig, "Was Thomas Aquinas a B-theorist of Time?" *New Scholasticism* 59 (1985): 473-483.

best read as a proto-*B*-theorist who incongruously attempts to blend the metaphysics of temporal becoming with an implicit endorsement of tenseless time and its more familiar and explicitly held correlates, such as strong immutability.⁹⁹ This being the case, to try here to locate Aquinas's understanding on the map of formalized concepts available to contemporary metaphysicians of time as was done in the previous chapter on Augustine would risk redundancy. It would also again invite the plausible criticism that a pre-modern theological thinker is being anachronistically assessed according to conceptual norms refined only recently in the fires of post-McTaggartian analysis.

Beyond these considerations, the fact of the matter is that the present work is an endeavor to affirm and articulate not only the timeless presence but also the impassible compassion of the Triune God toward the world and its residents. As such, it will profit if Aquinas is released from answering to only current time-related disputes and allowed to speak more broadly about this divine Creator whose immutable life is generously lived in the midst of His creatures and not in a distantly transcendent divine envelope. In my judgment, one of the reasons Aquinas is a great theologian is his ability to grapple seriously with some of the more perplexing aspects of classical theism's God-concept. In particular, he shows a critical appreciation for the difficulty involved in asserting that the single, unchangeable Lord positively engages with that domain which is marked by change and multiplicity.

⁹⁹ It will become evident below that the doctrine of immutability occupies a fundamental place in Thomas's theological worldview.

The assumption here is that Christian theology must do justice to a profound *difference* between Creator and creation and to an equally profound *togetherness* relation obtaining between them. To think about this, we might imagine a tree whose limbs are bursting with leaves of various (all at once) and varying (over time) shades, shapes and sizes. In the world, there are many things and events that come together as a package deal in the sense that they all belong to the order of creation. Similarly, each of the leaves on the tree is unique but each one dwells *along with others*, with each leaf and each variety of leaf being members together of the same tree. But let us suppose that the Lord of creation indeed dwells together with the different things and events of creation in some sense. How does He do this? Using the present comparison, this would be a little like claiming that the planter of a tree in some way maintains an intimate presence with the tree. The planter, one would begin by assuming, is not identical with, say, the trunk. The trunk, however immense and prominent, is still a *part* of the tree. And so it becomes difficult to conceive of the world's "planter" being happily joined to something of which He is not a proper part. He is like an arborist who takes responsibility for the tree's being what it is and, arguably, *precisely* how it is (he is a quite competent arborist with special powers), through an intimate interface. Yet the presiding caretaker is also immune to the various growing pains and even bouts with disease and sickness to which the tree is subject.

But there are certainly texts in the Hebrew-Christian Scriptures that would encourage one toward such a portrait of the Lord of creation. In calling on Israel to

arise and repent before her covenant Lord, for example, Isaiah the prophet gives the following instruction:

Seek the LORD while he may be found; call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the LORD, that he may have compassion on him, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. For as the rain and snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.¹⁰⁰

Serving as the Lord's mouthpiece, Isaiah reminds hearers that the Forgiver is close by but also contends that He stands impressively apart from creatures. Affording Him a "different presence" apparently is the Lord's speech act, the "Word" which secures for Him an unrestricted access to and provident dominion over created others.

Whether or not the aforementioned difference-togetherness combination is rightly portrayed by Thomas Aquinas, it will become plain here that he engaged in an admirable struggle to uphold both of its aspects in his theology. In what follows, I intend to document Aquinas's commitment to an un-attenuated divine immutability, to discuss both potential strengths and weaknesses of his precise formulation of that "divine attribute," and to propose some modest corrections to his particular construction of the doctrine of divine immutability in order to square that doctrine more properly with what is otherwise a robust commitment he has to God's

¹⁰⁰ Isaiah 55:6-11 (ESV).

freedom to create and sustain a profound presence with a created “other” or set of others. This study will limit its focus to some pertinent passages within Aquinas’s *Summa Theologiae*.

I. The Case for an Un-attenuated Divine Immutability

It is both ironical and revealing that Thomas Aquinas asserts propositions in the *Summa* that appear to lead toward the idea that creation exists necessarily (right alongside God in eternity, as it were) and also asserts propositions in the same work that could just as easily lead to something like an “estrangement arrangement” in which the Creator and creation ontologically and conceptually repel one another. This is ironical because Aquinas clearly desires to cut a swath between these two alternatives. And it is revealing in that it sheds light on a crucial conviction of his – that the Lord is metaphysically “in His own league,” a fundamental condition of this being that His maximal greatness translates to an inability to change. Aquinas then, as a philosophical theologian, takes up the task of facilitating a conceptual “coming together” that resists conflating divinity and cosmos.¹⁰¹ Implicit in the concept of Immanuel is that there are two or more *relata* united through the divine agency. A main idea here is to accommodate God’s life to the creation without deterministically enfolding not only the fact but also the precise details of creation’s existence within the “blanket” of the unchanging divine essence. That is, a profound

¹⁰¹ An example a recent Thomist who takes up this task, see David B. Burrell, “Distinguishing God from the World” in *Language, Meaning and God*, ed. Brian Davies (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1987), 75-91. Burrell argues that God’s “simpleness and...eternity are part of what assures us we are talking about divinity” (77).

ontological difference must be preserved between Creator and creation. Another, equally important, priority is to avoid accentuating creation's contingent character in a way that threatens to remove the world from God's side, leaving them estranged.

The Thomist Etienne Gilson remarked that immutability is a divine attribute "which no one before St. Thomas really grasped."¹⁰² Although I will demur from Gilson's less restrained esteem for Thomas's understanding on this subject, the doctrine undoubtedly played a role in his theology that was unprecedented in his day for its centrality. Just as fundamental in Thomas's conceptual scheme, however, is the divine simplicity, from which one could derive immutability.¹⁰³ Divine simplicity represents the convergence of at least two prominent intellectual forces in Thomas's mental landscape. The first is his Augustinian belief that the biblical revelation discloses truths about the transcendent Triune Godhead – in which there are said to be distinctions but not divisions and unity but not confusion. The second is something of a philosophical interplay of Neo-Platonic mysticism and Aristotle's more empirical brand of Platonism, an interplay that effectively minimizes the scope of what is knowable about the Transcendent. The former is evident in Thomas's

¹⁰² Etienne Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1956), 102.

¹⁰³ It is not clear, however, that Aquinas in fact derives immutability from simplicity. Instead, both appear (along with aseity, infinity, eternity, and impassibility) to form a sort of theological grammar that would direct our discourse about God. In an unpublished version of an essay entitled "Anthropomorphism Protestant Style," Paul Helm says as much, commending an article by Lewis Ayres, in which Ayres "writes of Augustine's theological grammar as 'the most fundamental rules for speech about God, if we are to speak appropriately, and run as little risk of speaking unworthily as possible'." He goes on, "Using the term 'grammar' in this context is particularly warranted because of Augustine's insistence that God is ultimately incomprehensible; the task for Christians attempting to set out appropriate terms in which to talk of God is not best described as one of learning how to describe God, but as one of learning how to articulate appropriate rules for human talk of God'." For more, see Lewis Ayres, "The Fundamental grammar of Augustine's Trinitarian Theology" in *Augustine and His Critics*, eds. R. Dodaro and G. Lawless (London: Routledge, 2000).

persistent citation of either the Christian Scriptures or Church Fathers when initially setting forth his theological theses. The latter is evident in the fact, for instance, that his five theistic proofs are focused on establishing “God” as the hierarchical *cause* responsible for the world’s extended existence; they are set in careful opposition to the notion that the biblical deity’s existence is self-evident – actually known independently of a series of mediating inferences. Appearing more in line with the theology behind St. Anselm’s famous Ontological Argument than Thomas’s own proofs, this notion of a self-evident deity is generally thought to require a “thicker” concept of God, rising beyond the idea *that* the world has a single, personal being accounting for its existence to more specific ideas about *what kind of God* exists. From within Thomas’s Augustinian-NeoPlatonic-Aristotelian matrix emerges a belief *that* God exists and a fairly agnostic stance regarding God’s *whatness*. A key methodological approach whereby he signposts these commitments is the *via negativa*, according to which clues about what God is like can only be gleaned by systematically *denying* certain properties and attributes to God. And it is in terms of this approach of systematically denying certain predicates that Thomas’s idea of divine simplicity comes to expression.

Before looking at his so-called negative theology as it touches the topic of divine simplicity, however, there is profit in observing something here that is well noted among commentators on Aquinas. Specifically, one should observe that Aquinas’s supposed agnosticism about God’s *whatness* or *quiddity* is qualified, if not contradicted, by a statement that he makes at the outset of his treatment of divine

simplicity. There he claims that “it can be shown how God is not, by denying of Him whatever is opposed to the idea of Him – viz., composition, motion, and the like.”¹⁰⁴ This, of course, begs the question, if one assumes that Aquinas means for his negative theology to function in the absence of at least a “starter concept” of God. If God’s “manner of existence” can *only* be known by knowing what He is *not*, then the systematic denier of attributes or properties cannot utilize an established idea of Him, even if only to generate an initial negation or set of negations from which inferences can be drawn. And, indeed, the above claim comes on the heels of Thomas’s assertion that “because we cannot know what God is, but rather what He is not, we have no means for considering how God is, but rather how He is not.”¹⁰⁵

Yet little reflection is needed to see that the negative theologian will require an initial idea of what God is like in order to perform her modest task. Otherwise, she would be at a loss to supply a coherent set of negations. This chapter will thus not proceed by assuming that the *via negativa* functions for Thomas within the context of an all-out metaphysical agnosticism about God’s manner of existence (though this may have been the route he preferred during what is thought to be the more mystical twilight of his career).¹⁰⁶ Rather, it will assume, firstly, that he wishes to affirm a robust doctrine of divine simpleness. It will assume, secondly,

¹⁰⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Vol. 1, trans. by Fathers of the English Dominican Province, Christian Classics (Notret Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, Inc.), Ia. 3, preamble to questions.

¹⁰⁵ *ST*, Ia. 3.

¹⁰⁶ For further reading in support of the claim that Aquinas hopes to elude in *ST* a mystical agnosticism, see chapter 3 on “God’s Simplicity” in Eleonore Stump, *Aquinas* (London: Routledge, 2003).

that Aquinas believes that this simple God is able to maintain the sort of presence with creatures necessary to justify epistemically the negative theologian's confidence that an initial idea of what God is like is available, even if the next step is to stress the ontological difference (from creatures) and incomprehensibility of that God with respect to creatures in general and humans in particular.

To be sure, if one asks concerning Aquinas's conception of the God-world relationship, whether it gives priority to one side of the "difference-togetherness combo" over the other, a compelling case can be made for the *difference* side. His fundamental point on the side of difference seems to be that God owes no thanks to others (things, persons, ideas) for what He is; for thanks owed to others would suggest that God's life is in some sense the result or product of composition on the part of events or the actions of another.¹⁰⁷ And this would seem to contradict his Christian belief that God is the life to which all others owe thanks for their existence; indeed, God's is the very act of composition of those that are not God. This sets up a contrast between God and world that is certainly comparable to that endorsed by Augustine. God is the provident Subject to which creatures owe gratitude for their inclusion in the created order and for that order's existence.

The unique, systematic importance of Aquinas's understanding of the Creator-creature difference, however, is its precise ontological nature. In eight

¹⁰⁷ In *ST* Ia. 44.4, Thomas writes: "[I]t does not belong to the First Agent, Who is agent only, to act for the *acquisition* of some end; He intends only to communicate his perfection, which is His goodness [Emphasis added]." Though his theocentrally motivated quest to ward off any hint that there subsist primordial *needs* in the divine essence deserves praise, I will argue that he comes up short in support of the proposition that the Triune God creates *for His own possession* a cosmos and a people.

articles under the question “Of the simplicity of God” he advances toward an exalted conception of the divine through a series of negations. By lopping off, one after another, a variety of possible characteristics that non-divine entities could have, Aquinas seeks to spell out an ontological distinction that overshadows all other distinctions. Article One posits, to begin with, that God is not a body. He is a spirit, the unmoved Mover.¹⁰⁸ And in the ensuing articles, effort is made to show the consequences of this affirmation of God as a pure, incorporeal spirit. The message coming across in distilled clarity from this effort is that God’s essence is a vital singularity not consisting of components. There is in Him no composition of matter and form, of genus and difference, of essence and existence. What appears to stand most formidably behind this series of negations is Aquinas’s belief that to be divine is to be perfect and to be perfect is to be fully actualized. God’s perfection, therefore, distinguishes Him from humans, whose bodies are good in virtue of their

¹⁰⁸ Although I will, in the end, admit at least a modified version of divine simplicity, there is more than one feature of Aquinas’s defense of the doctrine that I find particularly objectionable. In response, for example, to the idea in Objection 2 under Question 3 that God seems to have a figure (or body) in light of the fact that man, who is made in God’s image, has a body, Thomas asserts his own distinct (from Platonic and Cartesian versions) conception of mind-body dualism in a way that downgrades the material realm: “Now man excels all animals by his reason and intelligence; hence it is according to his intelligence and reason, which are incorporeal, that man is said to be according to the image of God.” Even if some version of mind-body dualism is correct, this does not necessarily show that human dominion over other creatures is not at least partly a function of the fact that humans have special bodies.

On the flipside, it likely points to Aquinas’s desire to endorse an unobstructed doctrine of the Incarnation – in which God the Second Person *has* or *is* a body (though He is *more* than that, given His divine status) – that he discusses in the first article under simplicity whether God (as such, without specifying the Second Person) *is* a body. A denial of the latter, it can be agreed, does not logically entail a denial of the former. No doubt, his conceptual precision should not go unmentioned here either. If, as he goes on to argue, God’s essence is simple, then, if the divine essence as such is corporeal, it would not be strictly proper to construe the Godhead as such as “having” a body. The idea of God being in *possession* of a body would, if not necessitate, allow for a sort of dualistic composition in which God’s body can be referred to without *ipso facto* reference being made to God. If it were possible to speak coherently of a simple, corporeal deity, then it would be more proper to say of that deity that He *is* a body or is His body.

souls (i.e., in virtue of matter's participation in form).¹⁰⁹ It distinguishes Him from those individuals (e.g., rainclouds) belonging to a genus or kind, each of which is a mixture of essential ("being") and accidental ("having") qualities.¹¹⁰ And His perfection distinguishes him from any other entity (or collection thereof) whose essence and existence are not identical (e.g., angels, who depend on God for their existence).¹¹¹ These are radical disjunctions that delineate for Thomas the distinction between the immutable (and, indeed, timeless) Creator and His mutable, ephemeral creatures. And in view of them one could be excused for thinking that Aquinas refuses to enfold God and the world under a shared ontological category or to impose creational boundaries on the divine freedom.¹¹²

Yet it is exactly for so enfolding God and the world that Karl Barth indicts the theology of the Roman Catholic tradition in general and of Thomas Aquinas in particular. Barth is the theologian best known for his attempt to reconstruct the whole of Christian dogma around the insight that the Triune God is *approached* by humans only when the world and human affairs are graciously *encroached* upon by the disruptive Word of God, revealed exclusively in Jesus Christ.¹¹³ Inimical to this insight, he contends, is the idea that there is an epistemic access to the Lord's life

¹⁰⁹ ST Ia. 3.2.

¹¹⁰ ST Ia. 3.5.

¹¹¹ ST Ia. 50.5.

¹¹² See especially his Eighth Article on Simplicity in which Thomas straightforwardly criticizes the idea that there are parts of God, which can and do commingle with parts not belonging to His own essence. There is believed to be a "togetherness relation" or interface but it does not involve an interaction of parts. For Aquinas, the "Godhead is called the being of all things, as their efficient and exemplar cause, but not as being their essence." He clearly, therefore, strives to avoid purchasing a unity that has confusion as its creditor.

¹¹³ Hans Urs von Balthasar, "The Centrality of Analogy," in *The Theology of Karl Barth*, trans. Edward T. Oakes, S.J. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), 160.

and activity available to those not (or at least not yet) greeting that Word with faith. Specifically, he goes after the practitioners of natural theology for “traducing...the reverence due to God” by moving from predicates about creaturely realities to ideas about the nature of the Creator-Redeemer, presumptuously anticipating “God’s own self-disclosure” by way of an intellectual endeavor.¹¹⁴ This endeavor, which he considers to be an idolatrous exchange of the truth of God for anthropomorphic lies, has as its base of operations the belief that the self-same predicates – e.g., ‘charitable’ – can be attributed to both God and man in virtue of an “analogy of being” that exists. The general category of “being” embraces the Lord and non-divine individuals, securing a metaphysical ground for the proposition that when the same predicate is attributed to both God and one or more created constituents the sense or meaning is not altogether different.¹¹⁵

Considered merely as a description of certain salient aspects of Aquinas’s theological worldview, these characterizations are not wholly off the mark. Following the Platonic dictum that unity precedes multiplicity, Thomas conceives of the Creator and creation in a hierarchical arrangement. All non-divine existents have as their upholding cause the Lord and the relation is not understood in terms of a bare, extrinsic causality. Indeed, the category of “being” does serve as a

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 162.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 162. Balthasar expositis an aspect of Barth’s criticism of the Thomistic concept of “being” as a metaphysical ground in the following way: “The concept of being does not suffice for expressing the decisive element in the relation between God and creature. In fact, it obscures it by making the commonality in the concept of being something that one more or less finds lying about, a fact that seems all too obvious, whereas it is the least obvious reality of all: pure miracle, absolute event and astonishing vitality [*Aktusosität*]. The concept of being inverts this, making the summit of the pyramid the base. This basis is supposed to be what both subjects have in common; but the real basis is what is most unique about both subjects, where there is no similarity. The one subject is self-positing, that is, exists *a se*. The second is other-positing *ab alio*. This is indissoluble contrariety.”

metaphysical backdrop in the Thomistic system – all created beings are understood to *participate* in the uncreated being that is pre-eminently “possessed” by their first cause, the Creator.¹¹⁶

According to Barth, this use of a more or less Neo-Platonic framework succeeds in introducing a pagan confusion of the Creator-creature boundary, a confusion that effectively reduces the throne of Grace, exalts a hubristic human intellect, and stirs them into a single mixture. Such a judgment stems from his conviction that our acquaintance with God the Creator-Redeemer is the strict and exclusive result of the divine revelation found in Jesus Christ. In fact, Barth’s Christocentric concentration is so thoroughly determinative epistemologically for him that there appears to be no place reserved for a knowability of God independent of what (or Who) is *actually* known through faith in Jesus Christ. What he believes Thomas and those following him have done is to pretend that the Christian’s Lord is generally knowable to those human intellects that are capable of ascending the chain of being through their reasoning. But this is a profound error in his view:

¹¹⁶ *ST*, Ia. 44.1. In making reference to *ST*’s often neglected “Treatise On The Creation,” K. Scott Oliphint proposes a reading of Aquinas that moves in another direction, a trajectory to which Barth could not easily object: “[S]uppose we take Aquinas’s own premise [citing *ST* 1.44.1; 1.45.5]. Suppose we take seriously the fact that God as an infinite, eternal, and necessary being is also the Creator of all that is. And suppose, rather than positing “being” as a *transcendental* notion, we posit a twofold or duality theory of being in which being becomes, not a unifying principle, but rather a basic principle of differentiation. That is, if we start with Thomas’s premise, we can start also, not with a transcendental notion of being such that it is set forth to bring unity to all that exists, but with a twofold notion of existence (being) such that the existence (or being) of God is primary and of a different nature than the existence (or being) of everything else, which is secondary. In this way, we cannot simply posit existence without at the same time saying whether it is God’s existence that we are positing or something that exists because created by God.” See K. Scott Oliphint, “God Speaking of God” in *Reasons for Faith: Philosophy in the Service of Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 2006), 104-121.

We possess no analogy on the basis of which the nature and being of God as the Lord can be accessible to us. ...The decisive distinguishing mark of the lordship of God is this fact that He is really the Lord over all things and therefore supremely over ourselves, the Lord over our bodies and souls, the Lord over life and death. No idea that we can have of “lord” or “lordship” will ever lead us to this idea, even though we extend it infinitely. Outside the ideas that we can have, there is a lordship over our soul, a lordship even over our being in death, a genuinely effective lordship.¹¹⁷

One would not be entirely unjustified in responding to Barth here by first noting that his very own statements quoted above appear to commend a form of equivocal theological predication. Having done so, one could go on to suggest, as have some, that a careful following through with this announced disdain for the *analogia entis* has potentially corrosive implications for the Gospel preacher’s confidence that what he is declaring is truly the revelation of *God* in Christ.¹¹⁸ For example, just what does Barth think is afoot in the divine state of affairs when he asserts a “genuinely effective lordship” that is altogether “outside the ideas that we can have”?

It may turn out that in other parts of the *Church Dogmatics* Barth finds a graciously procured arena for discourse about God (different than Aquinas’s) into which humans may enter, thereby granting him some defense against those assailing

¹¹⁷ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Vol. 2, ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1956-75), 75. To the extent that Barth’s remarks in this quoted portion are indeed aimed at Aquinas’s views, I am not sure that Aquinas would disagree with all that is said here. His is not, after all, an Enlightenment version of natural theology. It is clear from what he says about the Trinity, for example, that this doctrine is not one that he thinks can possibly be derived from observations of the manifold effects of divine action in creation. See *ST* Ia. 32.1. Though Barth succeeds here and elsewhere in at least humbling the pretensions of natural theology, the idea that “an idea we can have of ‘lord’ or ‘lordship’” can “lead us” to the idea of Lordship conveyed to us in the Christian faith is not a necessary implication, that I can see, of the *analogia entis*. We should not, therefore, confuse an agreement with Thomas’s claim that theological predicates need not all be “altogether equivocal” in nature with a commitment to the Five Ways and the somewhat rationalistic trajectory they presume to take from finite human experience toward the admittedly infinite, qualitatively different (from creational life) divine life.

¹¹⁸ Michael S. Horton, “A Stony Jar: The Legacy of Karl Barth for Evangelical Theology,” in *Engaging with Barth*, ed. David Gibson and Daniel Strange (Nottingham: Apollos, 2008), 354-58.

his own approach. In his well-known work *The Theology of Karl Barth*, for example, the Roman Catholic scholar Hans Urs von Balthasar argues that Barth in fact maintains a form of the *analogia entis* under the aegis of the latter's doctrine of *analogia fidei* – the analogy of faith. This doctrine, he says, admits a genuine knowledge of God but a knowledge that rests on the prior revelation of God, centers on Jesus Christ, and stands as the fruit of a “freely surrendering...act of faith.”¹¹⁹ According to Balthasar, Barth found the concept of “being” theologically unavoidable, while despising its use as a “neutral instrument.”¹²⁰ Regardless, whatever problems may or may not plague Barth's own efforts to speak about God, the charge that Aquinas appropriates a Neo-Platonic hierarchy of being to the detriment of a gratuitous, surprising grace – whether right or wrong – is one that can be held up and considered independent of Barth's own theological constructs.

And to this charge I would initially respond by saying that it is not altogether obvious that Aquinas has illicitly appropriated a Greek concept of “being” in order to forge an idolatrous path to the Triune God. At the very least, if he is guilty of doing so, he is less than completely consistent with his Hellenizing *modus operandi*. Aquinas, after all, has often been criticized for overstating the profound chasm between the Creator and creation. As a Christian, he looks to God as an “other” who creates and grants forgiveness. This “otherness” component therefore, it can be

¹¹⁹ Balthasar, 163ff.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 164. For further critical discussion of Barth's theology, see Bruce L. McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development 1909-1936* (Oxford: OUP, 1995); also, concerning Balthasar's reading of him on this important topic of analogy, see “From Dialectic to Analogy”: *The Theology of Karl Barth*,” in Stephen D. Wigley, *Karl Barth and Hans Urs von Balthasar* (New York: T & T Clark, 2007).

assumed, must come across in our discourse about God. It will be reflected in a proportionate stretching of our language in order to talk about Him, to the extent that this is possible. Lest we stretch language to a breaking point and undermine the theological enterprise, however, we must have at least a modest understanding of what we mean when we talk about God. Thus, in order to assert a creaturely “descent” from God and an “involvement” He sustains with those which are His handiwork, one must acknowledge at least some significant points of overlap between God-talk and those successful predicative acts of ours that are performed in contexts in which God is not the referent.¹²¹ These assumptions and acknowledgements suggest the possibility of an intermediate space for theological discourse located between univocal and equivocal predication about God. And it is just this sort of space that Thomas attempts to carve out in his conception of *analogical* predication. What must not be missed is that if Aquinas’s conception of analogical or “proportional” reference should fall under Barth’s critique it will not do so very easily. One important reason for this is that Aquinas, according to Gilson, finds no genuine mean between univocity and equivocity.¹²² Furthermore,

¹²¹ In an important sense, Aquinas treats positive, true God-talk as non-problematical in virtue of the fact that much theological discourse is blatantly figurative or metaphorical. For example, it is pretty common for religious believers to speak of God as a mighty fortress. But suppose they are asked: ‘is God *really* a mighty fortress?’. Aquinas believes that the question can be appropriately answered both affirmatively and negatively. One can truly deny that God is a mighty fortress in view of His not being composed of, say, wood, steel, or concrete. What saves Aquinas from a full-blown, self-conscious theological agnosticism is his insistence that there are some non-figurative things that can be said about God that it would be inappropriate to deny. For discussion on this point, see Anselm K. Min, “Contemplating the Triune God,” in *Paths to the Triune God: an encounter between Aquinas and recent theologies* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), 173; also, Brian Davies, “God-Talk,” in *Aquinas* (London: Continuum, 2002), 62-71.

¹²² Gilson, 105.

he can be understood as at least formally rejecting the idea that the same predicates can apply univocally to creatures and their Creator:

[F]or instance, wisdom in creatures is a quality, but not in God. Now a different genus changes in essence, since the genus is part of the definition; and the same applies to other things. Therefore whatever is said of God and of creatures is predicated equivocally. Further, God is more distant from creatures than any creatures are from each other. But the distance of some creatures makes any univocal predication of them impossible, as in the case of those things which are not in the same genus. Therefore much less can anything be predicated univocally of God and creatures; and so only equivocal predication can be applied to them.”¹²³

It appears, then, that for Aquinas, *analogy*, a literal way of predicating about God, operates under the rubric of *equivocal speech*.

At first blush, such a starkly dualistic ontological construal of the God-world relationship would appear to prevent the Triune God from being positively conceptualized by those would-be contemplaters of His life and ways. The philosopher-theologian, Anselm Min, puts his finger on the problem:

We are limited to knowing God only on the basis of sensible creatures, which poses a quandary. Because of the infinite distance between God and creatures, knowledge of creatures does not enable us to see the essence of God through...effects, thus ruling out any univocal knowledge of God. On the other hand, a purely equivocal knowledge is no knowledge.¹²⁴

Yet, as Min himself recognizes, Aquinas is well aware of this difficulty and sets about to distinguish his position from the views of more thoroughgoing “agnostic theists” by holding that literal statements about God can nevertheless be made from

¹²³ *ST Ia.* 13.5. These words, though drawn from the *sed contra* (“On the contrary...”) of article five, are unapologetically set in opposition to a “straight across” sharing of predicates between creatures and the Creator. As I will indicate, they do not represent Aquinas’s most nuanced (i.e., “*I answer that...*”) thoughts on the subject. It is noteworthy, however, that his considered position is that our rightly informed predications about God are neither univocal nor “purely” equivocal (*ST Ia.* 13.5).

¹²⁴ Min, “Contemplating the Triune God,” in *Paths to the Triune God: an encounter between Aquinas and recent theologies*, 172.

across the Creator-creature divide. In an essay “Aquinas on What God Is Not,”

Brian Davies begins by quoting Thomas as saying:

The most perfect [state] to which we can attain in this life in our knowledge of God is that he transcends all that can be conceived by us, and that the naming of God through remotion (*per remotionem*) is most proper ... The primary mode of naming God is through the negation of all things, since he is beyond all, and whatever is signified by any name whatsoever is less than that which God is.¹²⁵

Davies then asks what Aquinas means when he holds that we need not know *what* God is in order to speak truly of Him.

While it deserves attention that Aquinas favors “remotion” as the “primary mode” of representing God, he surely doesn’t consider it the *only* mode. Davies grasps both of these facts and stresses that Aquinas means not to affirm an unqualified ignorance in matters of divinity but to draw attention to the *sui generis* quality of any knowledge of God, due to the unique reality that is God.¹²⁶ “His meaning,” Davies says, “is that God is not an object in our universe with respect to which we can have what we would nowadays call a ‘scientific understanding’ ... he is chiefly denying that God belongs to a natural class and that God can be defined on this basis.”¹²⁷ On this understanding, God is so uniquely characterized that at least certain essential “attributes” (putting off for now questions about secondary or “accidental” qualities or attributes) are signified by terms that have distinguishable

¹²⁵ Commentary on Dionysius’s *Divine Names*, I, iii, 83-84; quoted in Brian Davies, “Aquinas on What God Is Not,” in *Aquinas’s Summa Theologiae: Critical Essays*, ed. Brian Davies (Oxford: Rowan & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.), 129.

¹²⁶ For more general reading on the topic of theistic reference, see the volume edited by Paul Helm entitled *Referring to God: Jewish and Christian Philosophical and Theological Perspectives*, Routledge Jewish Studies Series (New York: Routledge, 1999).

¹²⁷ Davies, “Aquinas on What God Is Not,” 129-130.

senses but not distinguishable *referents*. The “divine features” these terms pick out are realities in God’s life and only in God’s life. For instance, God is not merely wise or good. It makes sense to say that “God is wise” or that “God is good” but, as Davies points out in unpacking Aquinas’s doctrine of divine simplicity, “it makes equal sense to say ‘God is goodness’ or ‘God is wisdom’.”¹²⁸ Such cannot be said of any creature (excluding Christ, the incarnate deity).

Yet, according to Aquinas, the infinite inequality between God and creatures is consistent with a *creaturely participation* in those virtues enjoyed by God, though not according to the same supereminent mode. Hence, a term such as ‘wise’ can have the same *meaning* when used in reference to the Creator as it has in reference to a creature, though its precise *sense* will be specified in terms of the metaphysical nature of the mentioned entity.¹²⁹ From here, then, Aquinas would direct us toward the “way of eminence.” In this third step (following causality and negation), Min explains, one can “then elevate the perfections [that properly belong to created beings in their ‘mode of signification’] to the supereminent mode of infinity worthy of God in whom essence and existence coincide and affirm them of God properly

¹²⁸ Ibid., 120. In asking how we ought to view analogy as it is invoked by Aquinas when talking of God, Davies approvingly quotes Peter Geach, who writes: “It would be better to say that it turns out to be analogical: what happens, on Aquinas’s view, is that we first call God ‘wise’; then discover that ‘the wisdom of God’ is a designation of God himself, whereas the like does not hold of any other being whom we rightly call ‘wise’; and thus reflecting upon this, we see that ‘wise’ cannot be applied to God in the same way as to other beings.”

¹²⁹ Davies, 137. That I know of, this is Davies’s distinction and is not itself specifically utilized by Aquinas. In illustrating the distinction, Davies points out: “We do not have special words meaning ‘good as beef,’ ‘good as a spin-dryer,’ and ‘good as a neighbor.’ One word serves for all. But we are not saying the same of all the things which we call ‘good’ since, as we might say, we use the word with different senses – meaning that we put it to varying uses.”

and ‘literally’.”¹³⁰ And although this “remote participation” in the Creator and the cognitive access it furnishes are underwritten by a similarity between God and creatures (as between cause and effect), Thomas seems to offer both intellectual and psychological resistance (via negation and eminence) to Neo-Platonism’s “degree” ontology and necessitarian motif. As such, it is at least debatable whether in postulating an *analogia entis* Aquinas is guilty of promoting what Barth would consider an idolatrously (i.e., humanly) manufactured interface between heaven and earth.

Critical questions surely remain over the theological and philosophical viability of analogy.¹³¹ Whatever problems may attend his attempt to affirm literal theological predication by way of analogy, however, Aquinas is not rightly labeled a dialectical or radically agnostic theologian.¹³² At the end of the day, he wishes to be

¹³⁰ Min, 172. Herbert McCabe also helps to clarify the role assigned to analogy when he writes that “for St. Thomas, when we speak of God we do not know what we are talking about. We are simply taking language from the familiar context in which we understand it and using it to point beyond what we understand into the mystery that surrounds us and sustains the world we do partially understand.” See H. McCabe, “The Logic of Mysticism – I,” in *Religion and Philosophy*, ed. Martin Warner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 58. Following McCabe’s line of thinking, Davies goes on to make an intriguing comparison of Aquinas’s theology and the references to *das Mystique* in the work of a young Ludwig Wittgenstein: “What Aquinas thinks about God may be compared with what we find at the end of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Here we read: ‘Not *how* the world is, is the mystical, but *that* it is.’ For Wittgenstein, *how the world is* is a scientific matter with scientific answers. But, so he insists, even when the scientific answers are in, we are still left with the *thatness* of the world, the fact *that* it is. As Wittgenstein himself puts it: ‘We feel that even if *all possible* scientific questions be answered, the problems of life have still not been touched at all.’ Aquinas seems to be saying something similar when he speaks of *esse* and creation. Unlike Wittgenstein, however, Aquinas sets himself to probe and to try to talk about the mystical. In a serious sense he does have a doctrine of God and his position is optimistic. But it is also highly modest.” Davies, “Aquinas on What God Is Not,” 142.

¹³¹ Some of these are discussed in William P. Alston, “Aquinas on Theological Predication,” in *Reasoned Faith*, ed. Eleonore Stump (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 145-178.

¹³² Even if David Burrell is correct when he says that, insofar as Aquinas has a doctrine of God, “it is a dreadfully austere one,” Aquinas’s efforts on behalf of analogical predication structurally differentiate his version of negative theology from that of, say, Moses Maimonides. For Burrell’s

able to retain a core of cognitively accessible truths about the Triune Creator in the face of, for example, Maimonidean agnosticism.¹³³ That being said, his way of marking the *difference* between Creator and creatures indicates that a blended root consisting of *a priori* intuitions about a sovereign One and a respect for the majesty of sacred Scripture runs just as deeply in Thomas as does his commitment to a version of natural theology that moves in a supposedly *a posteriori* fashion from created existents to an existing First Cause.¹³⁴ Therefore, it stands to reason that the

comment, see his *Aquinas: God and Action* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), 21ff.

¹³³ *ST Ia. 13.2*; also, cf. *Ia. 13.3*, where we read: “Some words that signify what has come forth from God to creatures do so in such a way that part of the meaning of the word is the imperfect way in which the creature shares in the divine perfection. Thus, it is part of the meaning of ‘rock’ that it has its being in a merely material way. Such words can be used of God only metaphorically. There are other words, however, that simply mean certain perfections without any indication of how these perfections are possessed – words, for example, like ‘being’, ‘good’, ‘living’ and so on. These words can be used literally of God.” So, he alas does acknowledge that references to the God who reveals will, at certain junctures, require a univocal component. This passage is cited in Paul Helm, *John Calvin’s Ideas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 190-91. As Helm discusses, and as seen in *Ia. 13.6*, Aquinas’s theory of analogical predication moves in a “top-down” direction, with names such as ‘good’ or ‘wise’ applying *primarily* to God and *secondarily* to creatures. This is within the order of *being*. As regards our way of knowing (*modus cognoscendi*), however, “names...are primarily applied by us to creatures which we know first. Hence they have a mode of signification which belongs to creatures...” For further reading on the difficulties surrounding Thomas’s attempt to bundle a top-down ontology and a bottom-up epistemology, see again Oliphint, *Reasons for Faith*, 95-103.

¹³⁴ It is important to distinguish Thomas’s natural theology from a version like that which was set forth by Peter Martyr Vermigli (1500-1565). Vermigli would have been somewhat better equipped to dodge at least parts of Barth’s critique, even while affirming a doctrine of general revelation that would also earn Barth’s disdain. For one, he understood the fact that the Lord is “other than men” in a way that led him to deny the *analogia entis*. See Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Dogmatics: Prolegomena to Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1987). Of interest would be to reflect upon how Vermigli’s attempt to maintain natural theology’s epistemic ladder fares in establishing theism *without* an *analogia entis*, not only when considering what appear to be the agnostic implications of Barth’s more dialectical approach but also when taking into account the critical attack launched against natural theology by other recent theologians in the Reformed tradition. It seems that Vermigli might suffer at least a mild chastisement from two directions, for example, at the hands of the 20th century Westminster Professor, Cornelius Van Til. Van Til was a formidable critic not only of natural theology but also of Barth’s post-Kantian, pro-Kierkegaardian dogmatics. For a single volume expositing Van Til’s “transcendental” approach to Christian apologetics, see Greg Bahnsen, *Van Til’s Apologetic: Readings and Analysis* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing, 1998); for his views on Barth, see Cornelius Van Til, *Christianity and Barthianism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing, 1962). For a

Summa's author recognizes an imposed ontological (though not, thereby, a sufficient hamartiological) check on the temptation to think that largely by his own ratiocinative prowess man can attain to a cognitive interface with the Lord.¹³⁵

Indeed, the acute difficulty that readers of the *Summa Theologiae* will have in imagining a "point of contact" or "meeting place" for the unchangeable Creator and changing creatures has as one important explanation the fact that Thomas at least flirts with contradiction in discussing the relationship of the Triune God's essence with that same God's free action.¹³⁶

more recent and more optimistic appraisal of the use of natural theology from a Reformed theological standpoint, see Michael Sudduth, *The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology* (UK: Ashgate Publishers, 2009).

¹³⁵ While one can certainly argue with considerable success that Thomas fails to appreciate duly the corrupting influence of sin on the human will and intellect, it must still be borne in mind that for him natural theology is done very deliberately in the service of Christian faith. He does not begin so blatantly, I would contend, where later Enlightenment thinkers do, by assuming the full autonomy of the human mind, however compromised by Greek loyalties his conception of the mind is. Divine grace is needed for the intellect to raise itself up to a knowledge of God. See *ST* Ia. 12.5. It was in his "naturalizing" of grace, according to Julie Canlis, that he unwittingly undermined a divine-human communion: "Motivated by his desire to take creation seriously as a realm of God's grace and goodness, Aquinas formed an ontology that led him to invest created forms with 'vestiges' of God. Over the years, these forms – the *imago*, humanity, the soul, the sacraments – became larger than life: instead of pointing people to the God in whom they participated (and upon whom the forms depended for their very essence), they began to segregate people *from* God. They became substitutes for his presence rather than what mediated his presence." See Julie Canlis, *Calvin's Ladder* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2010), 69. This observation resembles one made in the previous chapter in reference to Augustine's failure to prevent the "heavens" – a would-be creational mediator of the divine to the earthly realm – from functioning as a "buffer zone" that keeps the Lord at bay.

¹³⁶ I will insist below, in fact, that on at least one interpretation of Thomas's version of divine immutability he would be prevented from presenting a theology in which God's nature and ways are sufficiently accommodated to our knowing capacities, this being understood both in reference to the knowledge of God as Creator and the knowledge of God as Incarnate Redeemer. That is, he ultimately would seem to come up short in providing the theological and conceptual resources one needs to articulate that and how the strongly immutable Trinity is Immanuel.

II. Thomas's God and World: Are they Divided? Are they Conflated?

In what would likely be viewed as a more common sentiment in Christology than in the doctrine of God at-large (without necessarily placing a watershed between these), the present thesis is concerned to see the natural world and its maker positioned together in a relationship that preserves an ontological integrity for both parties. Many Christian theologians who are unwilling to enter the panentheist camp desire a way of distinguishing between what God *is* and what God *does* without bifurcating them. And if one accepts the premise that all possibilities are indexed, in one way or another, to the divine essence and will (which Aquinas does), then the distinction can be even more rigorously drawn to delineate between the states of affairs that God *can* actualize and those states of affairs that God *does* actualize.

The problem this poses for Aquinas is that, as we have seen, his concept of divine immutability is attached to his concept of simplicity. I suggest that this would not necessarily be a problem but for the fact that his concept of simplicity is one that *identifies* God's essence with God's existence. Moreover, this identification is a function of Thomas's belief that God is the *actus purus* or pure actuality. There is no unactualized potential in Him. But if this is true, then one is faced with trying to elude the conclusion that there is nothing analogous to a "realm of possibility" in God apart from what God in fact *does* actualize by, say, issuing the decree to create, govern, and redeem a sin-tarnished world.¹³⁷ That is, Thomas seems to define

¹³⁷ I speak so tentatively and vaguely of a "realm of possibility" in light of James Ross's critique of a common way of conceiving of the modalities of possibility and necessity with respect to God's knowledge. In addition to opposing other aspects of possible-world semantics, Ross has this to say about the idea that God's activity *ad extra* is rooted in a choice from among pre-existing abstract

immutability so as to eliminate the option of God actualizing states of affairs different than those He in fact actualizes.

But surely this definition runs up against a wave of Christian doctrinal commitments. Christians have historically reckoned that there is “space” reserved in God for free action. For example, we address Him as Lord not because we think Lordship is essential to His being but because we creatures (the class of which includes non-personal individuals) are His wholly dependent subjects. He is acknowledged as the Supreme Judge not because evil springs eternal (as in Manicheanism) but because *His* discernment serves as *our* ultimate ethical measure. His loving nature procures the cross, presumably, not out of compliance with an eternal necessity to redeem but because His life-giving Word, in fact, comes to

possibilities in God’s mind: “What is possible *ad extra* is a result of what God does. God’s power has no exemplar objects, only a perimeter (that is, finite being) plus a limit (that of internal consistency, compatibility with the divine being). God creates the kinds, the natures of things, along with things. And he settles what-might-have-been insofar as it is a consequence of what exists. . . . Thus, there is no *mere* possibility with content . . . there are only descriptions, actual and potential, that might, for all we know so far, have been satisfied. . . . In sum, God creates the possibility, impossibility, and counter-factuality that has content (real situations) involving being other than God.” James F. Ross, “God, Creator of Kinds and Possibilities: Requiescant Universalia Ante Res,” in *Rationality, Religious Belief, and Moral Commitment*, ed. Robert Audi, William J. Wainwright (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986), quoted in Oliphint, *Reasons for Faith*, 321. Ross’s position surely appears difficult to accept, one reason being that it would limit one’s attempts to think of God as having a life of His own apart from the world. Nonetheless, there are slightly more modest proposals out there that have come to similar conclusions, and this, if nothing more, should lead us to take Ross’s own proposal seriously. Strong arguments, for example, have been brought against the theory of Middle Knowledge by William Hasker, to the effect that, apart from God’s decree to actualize a world, there are no true counter-factuals of freedom available for God to know. In other words, there is no basis for believing that there are abstract, determinate possibilities regarding what an agent Q will choose to do in any given circumstance that exist independently of either the existence of agent Q or, at least, some sort of metaphysical guarantee that agent Q *will* exist, have certain stimulus-free beliefs and desires, etc. If Hasker is correct, then a vast number of propositions about what agents would do under certain conditions, propositions that are sometimes thought to reside abstractly with or in God (ready at hand for His perusing) do not exist apart from a decree to actualize creation. See William Hasker, *God, Time, and Knowledge* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), 29-52.

expression in that way; the Triune God creatively conspires to spare some of the offenders of His essential holiness from the wrathful blowback that is their due. What these statements all express is the conviction that the Triune Creator *is* more than He *does*. There is a “remainder” in Him corresponding to the fact that, upon condition of His being the Creator, Redeemer and Lord, this world that He cares for, as important an undertaking as it is, need not have been. Things could be otherwise for God. Not only is there more in the Trinity’s decree to actualize the world than is dreamt of in human philosophy; there is “more” in the Trinity than what is included in the decree to actualize. And Aquinas shares these historic concerns, believing God to have “free will with respect to what He does not necessarily will.”¹³⁸ So, while, for instance, God necessarily wills His own goodness, He does not will *necessarily* the existence of finite agents to participate imperfectly in the goodness He has originally. Their existence, rather, is asserted to be the consequence of God’s free choice.

Furthermore, freely chosen divine activities, it is assumed, insofar as they express the Lord’s intentions or purposes, express the bedrock character of God. Final Judgment, for instance, is not the willy-nilly diversion of a Sartrean strongman, an agent of no established identity.¹³⁹ To be dogmatic, the Lord’s enactments (that is, His creative and redemptive revelations – both general and special) do show what He is like, whether or not creaturely participants in the story

¹³⁸ *ST* Ia. 19.10.

¹³⁹ I here hearken back to the French existentialist, Jean-Paul Sartre, who asserted that existence precedes essence, meaning that humans form their own identity by what they *do*. They do not act out of an already given identity.

are able to render a proper “reading” of those enactments. Indeed, to be at all “revelatory,” divine action (or the “effects” of divine action, as Thomas puts it) must be understood as consistently expressing a stable quality, such as the divine goodness, albeit in an imperfect (i.e., creaturely) way.¹⁴⁰ This is all to say that even though the fullness and self-sufficiency of the Divine Life leaves the Lord needing no company, the free addition of angels, demons, Adam, Eve, and their posterity to the picture is nonetheless *of consequence* to Him.

If it is conceded, however, that God creates freely (i.e., that creation exists contingently) *and* that God enjoys an infinite fullness *independent of* creation, then one is led to conclude that, although the Lord’s creative-redemptive enactments are truly of consequence, they are of *little* consequence when placed upon the canvas of greater divine glory. It would seem that even some temporal eternalists could accept this, as it would square with a libertarianly free creation that is not need-fulfilling for God.¹⁴¹ Regardless, the remoteness of the analogy between divine creation and human artifice will certainly be appreciated once one doubts that the former should be thought of as an event (however momentous and unrepeatable). It is in his efforts to spell out the implications of this Augustinian move that Aquinas designates God as the Pure Actuality who possesses no accidental (i.e., non-essential) qualities or properties in Himself.¹⁴² These are Thomas’s scholastic expressions for the belief that God’s life is so utterly rich within Himself that even a profound condescension

¹⁴⁰ *ST* Ia. 6.4. See especially the last paragraph of the article.

¹⁴¹ Hampering a tidy or unqualified, libertarianly free creation would be the problem of conceptually or ontologically bridging from the divine scheme of concepts and intentions, “through” an unnecessary (in an important sense) action (i.e., the divine choice to create).

¹⁴² *ST* Ia. 3.6.

(in order, say, to tabernacle among us, as John 1:14 declares) on His part can, in no way, compromise that richness.

The danger posed by Aquinas's particular construction of immutability, however, is that it might leave us with a cosmic production that is of *no* significant consequence as far as God is concerned. An implication, unfortunately, of Thomas's strict identification of the divine essence and existence appears to be that either one of the following is true:

P1-The creation's existence is inconsistent with the character of God.

or

P2-The creation's existence is consistent with the character of God but is not the *free* or *contingent* creation of God.

The reason for this is that he has fixtures in his notion of divine self-sufficiency that disallow the ascription of "accidental" properties to God.

Now, Eleonore Stump argues that Aquinas follows Peter of Spain in construing accidental properties as those that can be acquired or shed *in* time. She takes him to be denying only God's temporality in his denial of accidents in God; this leaves open the possibility that the divine immutability permits a formal distinction between possibility and actuality in God, so long as they are not, in any way, distinguished by a *change* God undergoes. And when it is added that, in fact, Aquinas holds creation to be due to God's free choice or *liberum arbitrium*, one might think that the negative, necessitarian theme need not be taken as conceptually or ontologically prohibiting or entailing divine action.

As mentioned, however, Aquinas also presents his God-concept more positively in terms of the idea of “pure actuality.” On a reasonable interpretation of this idea, God’s “always, already” complete self-actualization leaves no space even *conceptually* for His performing of an unnecessary action. Yet, when God is assumed to be the Creator His full self-actualization appears to be undermined by the contingency of the creation. Consider:

- 1) If God is the Creator of the world by a free choice, then God has “conceptual space” for performing an unnecessary action.
- 2) God is the Creator of the world by a free choice.
- 3) Therefore, God has “conceptual space” for performing an unnecessary action.

Moreover, if Aquinas fails to give strong evidence that he rejects this interpretation of pure actuality (and I find that he does) then there is no sense in which God can be properly described by contingent predicates.

But if that is the case then anything that is true of Him is necessarily true of Him. This would include the proposition that God chooses to actualize a creation. In the syllogism below, I construe ‘actualize’ in a way consistent with a compatibilistic account of human freedom, that is, an account asserting that all human choices are compatible with their being determined by God and, therefore, necessary in an important sense. This is done in order to show that the necessity seemingly implied by the thesis that God is Pure Actuality is of a higher order than even the necessity imposed by a “strongly actualizing” Creator:

- A1- Every attribute of God is essential.
- A2- God has the attribute of timelessly issuing the decree to actualize the creation.

A3- Therefore, God *necessarily* has the attribute of timelessly issuing the decree to actualize creation.

A4- Therefore, the creation exists necessarily.

C- Therefore, God is not free to refrain from issuing the decree to actualize the creation.

Thus, though it may still be possible to conceive of the creation as a consequence of God's creative action, God's pure actuality seems to imply that this would be, at best, a *necessary* consequence of God's existence. As such, there appears to be no conceptual room for the idea that God does something *new* in creation; the so-called "act" of creation comes off looking more like an act of *preservation*.

Therefore, if we will refer back to the two alternatives given above, it stands to reason that if P1 is true, assuming that the world exists (i.e., that "acosmism" is false), then the world obviously does not have the Triune God as its Creator. One could conclusively reach this proposition in the following way. If God can be conceived under the description of "not creating or governing" – which is presumably what He "does" *sans* creation – then that "activity" would sum up His essence, according to divine simplicity. In that case, however, because God is fully actualized (i.e., has no potential for newness in His activity), His essence would maintain the eternal *status quo*, precluding creation. If, on the other hand, creation's existence is consistent with God's essence, then creation could be said to be of no consequence to God in the very real sense in which it is not a *contingent consequence* of God's creative action; rather, creation on this supposition would seem to denote only a *preservation*, permitting no conceptual disjunction between the "no-cosmos" situation and the "God with us" situation. The state of being "Lord

of the universe” would then amount to an essential attribute or property of God; to admit God’s existence would *entail* the existence of creation. So, Thomas’s stringent conception of strong immutability appears to place him on a three-horned dilemma, having to choose between God with no creation (“theistic acosmism”), a world (either theistic or non-theistic in nature) without the *Triune* God, and a world that exists *essentially* (non-contingently) with God “the Creator.”

Given Thomas’s affirming, non-nominalistic, non-solipsistic bent toward perceptible existents, theistic acosmism can easily be dismissed; it is not an option for him. As a Christian, however, he wishes also to maintain the consistency of the Trinitarian God *with* creation, a creation that is not essential to God’s being. Doubtless, he can agreeably embrace none of the three horns listed above. It is understandable, therefore, that, to the extent that Thomas conceives of God and the world as *coupled* (or united), to that extent they are certainly an *odd* couple. On one hand, one struggles to think of how God should somehow *become* united to the world by creation. Up against Aquinas’s banishment of *real* contingent predicates attributed to God, his insistence that creation erupts from the divine free will, frankly, has an *ad hoc* flavor.¹⁴³ On the other hand, when it is taken as a datum that Thomas’s God is the Creator it becomes inconceivable that God should have ever “been” world-less.¹⁴⁴ Although allegedly introduced by way of divine free will, the

¹⁴³ *ST* Ia. 3.6; 45.2, RO 2.

¹⁴⁴ On this point, consider that Aquinas believes that the difference between Trinity-with-world and Trinity-without-world is not rightly described as involving change (because God, even in creating, is unchangeable and nothing else exists in order to change *via* the act of creation); also consider that he fails to be persuaded by the attempts of philosophers to show that an actual infinite series of events is impossible. See *ST*, Ia. 45.2, RO 2; 46.1, 2. For further reading on the notion that

mere fact of creation, when taken in the context of God's inability to adopt contingent properties, renders the creation a *metaphysical* necessity for God.¹⁴⁵

III. A Sympathetic but Critical Diagnosis, Prescription

To reiterate, this dissertation advocates the idea that the presence of the Triune Lord with His temporal others (i.e., times and temporally localized individuals) is such that He is not thereby temporally localized. Yet He has, without being a “peeping Tom” or a tampering manipulator, a privileged position in virtue of which He vitally broods over and speaks through what is His. Another aim is to stave off excoriations of this classical understanding that are based on the charge that the timeless God is, due to His strong inability to change, not capable of exercising compassion toward those caught up in the changes.¹⁴⁶ In this chapter,

change requires an existing subject that changes, see Ralph McInerny, *A First Glance at St. Thomas Aquinas: A Handbook for Peeping Thomists* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1990), 104-108. For a brief summary of Thomas's position on the issue of whether the world could be created from eternity and what his position indicates about his philosophy-theology distinction, consult F.C. Copleston, *Aquinas: An Introduction to the Life and Work of the Great Medieval Thinker* (London: Penguin Books, 1955), 57ff.

¹⁴⁵ This pull toward necessity is strengthened by the Neo-Platonic shape of Thomas's worldview, including his concept of the beatific vision in which human nature is “integrated” into God at the apparent expense of personal distinctiveness. See *ST I/IIae* q109, 2-3, cited in Canlis, *Calvin's Ladder*, 40.

I emphasize ‘metaphysical’ here because later I will argue that, on a modified conception of strong divine immutability (one that is more accommodating to contingent predicates *really* attributed to God), there is a genuine necessity that creation exist, upon condition that the Triune God has a *decree* inclusive of creation (and providence). The distinction thus attempts to maintain the timelessly eternal divinity while recognizing “space” alongside or even within (using that term cautiously) the Trinity for a contingent creation.

¹⁴⁶ It should be remarked again that the main discussion in these pages attempts to address at the most basic level God's disposition or “attitude” toward the creation. But to pursue a cogent and biblically faithful theological construct at this level is not to neglect matters related to the divine love exhibited, say, in the atonement of Christ's cross or more specific questions about the nature and extent of the Trinity's love pneumatologically expressed in the regeneration and resurrection of sinners. Certainly there will be important overlap among the distinguishable works of God, as they are all *God's* works. I believe, however, that there is a practical advantage, if not a conceptual

Aquinas has had relevance because he is a philosopher-theologian who commits himself to an unreduced immutability doctrine, maintaining that God is not, thereby, indifferent to historical and terrestrial realities (events, things, agents). He affirms an immediate divine providence exercised over everything, even taking issue in one breath with both Augustine and Aristotle when they concur in the judgment that in the case of some things, “vile things,” for example, it is “better to be ignorant“ of these if one is altogether good.¹⁴⁷ Indeed, Thomas even gives an analysis in which God’s willing of all things is construed as God’s *freely loving* of all things, as all things participate remotely and imperfectly in the Creator’s goodness, which He loves.¹⁴⁸ At the same time, he also disputes the linking of such an intimate, presiding divine presence to the notion that no secondary causes are in place.¹⁴⁹ To top it off, he formally distinguishes between the Creator’s being and creaturely existence, affirming God as the *efficient* cause of everything and denying that God enters into the composition of anything, “either as a formal or a material principle.”¹⁵⁰

necessity, within the domain of dogmatic theology, in laying the groundwork of the Creator-creation relationship as a prelude to the indispensable matters discussed under the rubric of soteriology and related areas. Cf. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, 1559 edition trans. by Ford Lewis Battles, as part of the Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia and London: Westminster Press and S.C.M. Press, 1960), 1.1.1. Unless otherwise indicated, all subsequent references are from the Battles translation.

¹⁴⁷ *ST* Ia. 22.3.Obj. 3.

¹⁴⁸ *ST* Ia. 20.2. Countering the notion, as well, that divine love is only of a monolithic sort, applying equally to all, Aquinas holds that it can take on diverse forms and various levels of intensity (cascading from the more general creation, to mankind as the divine image bearer, to those who are members of the incarnate Son). *ST* Ia. 20.3.

¹⁴⁹ *ST* Ia. 22.3.R.Obj. 2.

¹⁵⁰ *ST* Ia. 3.8.

As it happens, one of the chief difficulties readers confront when reading Aquinas is that these (even refreshingly) clear parts of his theism can get muffled and mitigated by the more obscure or extreme parts of it. In particular, Thomas's failure to admit, unequivocally, that contingent predicates can refer to God leads him to teeter between the extremes of depriving God of a real relation to creation and removing a traditional facet of the Creator-creature distinction by implying that whatever attributes or names He has – such as “Savior” – belong to His essence. From the “creation-not-yet” standpoint, Thomas's deity appears so swollen with self-satisfaction as to be unable to issue an efficacious welcome to the world. From the “creation-now” standpoint, God appears absolutely bound to be doing what He is doing (being Lord and Savior) because there is nothing else He can do (as that would imply a measure of unexercised potentiality).

Aquinas adroitly insists that the eternity-time intersection ought not be deemed a change. And in this the robust character of his version of divine atemporality comes to perspicuous expression. The God-world arrangement accompanying his idea doubtless requires one to think of the Creator's ontological priority to or over creation, if it can be thought at all, in a *hierarchical* or *normative* fashion, rather than temporally.¹⁵¹ Unfortunately, his overly abstract construal of simplicity (and hence immutability and eternity) in terms of pure actuality prevent Thomas from developing a theological architecture in terms of which one might

¹⁵¹ *ST* Ia. 46.1. RO. 8; though Aquinas confuses matters by bringing in a “priority of duration,” he hits upon the same insight about an atemporal priority that has been succinctly stated in Paul Helm, “Divine Timeless Eternity,” in *God & Time: Four Views*, ed. Gregory E. Ganssle (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 52.

speak of an activity within the divine life having a corresponding, contingent “historical fallout” in the proceedings of creation. In the end, the Thomistic bridge between God and world is somewhat stressed.

But is there a commendable path for one who, like Aquinas, wishes to say that God is strongly unchangeable but would like to avoid having Him stall out in the gear of “neutral transcendence” prior to the cosmic drama’s presentation? Is there a way to forge ahead? I believe that there is. The way forward is indicated, I suggest, in a section of *ST* not dealing specifically with the “forward motion” difficulty of conceptualizing immutable God’s condescension to create but rather with Thomas’s “backward motion” question of whether the universe of creatures has always existed.¹⁵² The latter is a question that tends to flow naturally from the claim that the eternal, necessary agent and a dependent, contingent world are distinct but, nonetheless, bound in a *timeless* Creator-creation relation. What we ought to focus upon is that Aquinas’s negative reply to this query rests not upon a supposed rational demonstration but upon an article of faith, the belief that sacred Scripture declares the newness of the world against the background of God’s solitary life. What is right about this is Aquinas’s willingness to recognize the Christian Bible as ultimately authoritative on the subject, even though its clear pronouncements (e.g., “In the beginning, God created...”) cannot be matched with a (perhaps, desired) metaphysically precise, intellectual grounding that is independent of Scripture. What is not so promising is that the use of scriptural specifics here functions as more

¹⁵² *ST* Ia. 46.1.

of a proof-texting backstop than proactively and programmatically in the greater designs of Thomas's theological grammar.

Most poignantly perhaps, Aquinas's entire treatment of the divine attributes would profit from some humble attention paid to the *Trinity* that one finds jumping from the pages of the divine revelation. The Thomistic scholar, Thomas Weinandy, specifically holds that Aquinas and other spokesmen for classical theism could retain the *actus purus* component of simplicity and immutability and *with it* better express divine creativity and power, if they would only more carefully form that component in the context of an undiminished Trinitarianism.¹⁵³ While we may choose not to follow Weinandy in his Trinitarian reconstruction of the *actus purus*, the motivation behind it (of countering a God-world separation) should spur classical theists toward a self-conscious unpacking of immutability within the life of the Triune Godhead in a way that accommodates the attribution of contingent predicates to God and the Persons of the Godhead (e.g. The Lord *calls* a people to be His own; God the Son *is* Jesus of Nazareth in virtue of *having* a human nature).

Regardless, let us acknowledge that the doctrine of the Trinity must be woven into classical theism's idea of divinity before advancement is made toward any (even modest) speculations. If for no other reason, this is due to the fact that the One-in-Three constituting the Godhead establishes the principle of *difference without separation* that is native to a sound articulation of the Creator-creation duality. In a parallel vein, reflection upon the revealed Triune God secures

¹⁵³ Thomas G. Weinandy, O.F.M., Cap, *Does God Suffer?* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 2000), 114.

additional conceptual aide for the theologian through the furnishing of a doctrinal motif by which a creational bridge from God-by-Himself to God-with-Us might be built. To begin with, the very *love* that essentially unites the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit presupposes their differences in relation to one another.¹⁵⁴ Even more particularly, Weinandy, by basing divine immutability in the *timeless*, dynamic love shared among the different Persons-in-relation of the Godhead, conceptually paves the way for a central idea of this dissertation. This idea specifies that, along with exhibiting its contingency in its housing of changes (i.e., in its featuring a genuine, sequential tapestry of lived stories), creation can also be thought of as a whole or totality. Represented in the Pauline conception a single decree (cf. Ephesians 1:11), the world is understood to have communicated to it the property of being *timeless* (though not necessarily, therefore, eternal), thanks to the generous ministry of the Father's Word and Spirit.¹⁵⁵

In sum, I agree with Aquinas and others in the tradition of classical theism that a profound discontinuity between eternity and time must be guarded. It is over some significant details of his particular explication of that discontinuity that I find cause for disagreement and dissatisfaction. To state things simply, if Thomas may be issued a temporary pass for clothing God and the world in a shared cloak of "being," his effort to shield the divine essence from *change*, it must be said, too

¹⁵⁴ On the timeless character of the Father's begetting of the Son, again see Helm, "Time and Trinity," in *Questions of Time and Tense*, 251-64.

¹⁵⁵ I will distinguish one who is *eternal* from one who (or *that*, in the world's case) is, with respect to the whole, merely *timeless* based on the difference between the former's existence (which is an unconditional necessity) and the latter's existence (which is contingent or, at best, a conditional necessity).

easily opens up the Lord to comparisons with Ebenezer Scrooge, while inviting the charge that too little (or no) room has been left for the *difference* implied in creation.

In order to counter this tendency toward an abstract “divine inhospitality,” I propose that immutability can remain strong and still accommodate secondary or non-essential predicates. In conjunction with this, I propose that the self-sufficiency in terms of which the immutability doctrine has been historically thought needs to be structured within the framework of a thoroughgoing Trinitarian richness. From within infinite fullness, the Triune Persons generously add an arena featuring, among others, human creatures. These finite, temporally located, and “forwardly thrown” beings uniquely and inescapably image the Lord in their own exercise of dominion over that arena. But the dominion exercised by humans, it must be underscored, is not and can never be of a “spiritually neutral” sort. Moreover, as will become evident in the upcoming chapter, the spiritual relationship between humans and their Lord ought not be depicted “Platonically,” on the order of a descent-ascent vis-à-vis the divine *being* (or as an escape from their material habitat). Rather, it ought to be depicted on the order of a descent-ascent vis-à-vis the Triune God under the description of Lord and Reconciler. Though it may presently seem extraneous, this point is key, and not only for those engaged in the pursuit of genuine Christian piety. It is also a key point for the specific doctrinal affirmation and articulation undertaken in this dissertation. I will argue, in fact, that when Reformed theologians acknowledge, as they have done historically, the Triune council’s enactment of creation as a totality in a single decree, they put the

preconditions in place for a sense in which the Trinity can even be said to *need* the world and its various inhabitants.¹⁵⁶ And so an exploration of the Lord's involvement with time will naturally call for a close look at the (Fall-Redemption) particulars of eternal God's "deep comedy."¹⁵⁷

But it should be emphasized that this need of the Creator for His *de facto* Creation is not absolute; it does not refute the Lord's self-sufficient Triune richness. It is certainly well thought of when construed as a consequence of that richness. This much we ought to acknowledge, so long as any sense in which Creation (or, for that matter, the eschatologically realized New Creation) is thought of as a "necessity" for God is not interpreted in terms of it being an *essential* result or implication of His Triune richness. The strong correlation of the essence and action(s) of the Lord, after all, does not amount to an identification of them. It is my understanding that the Three-in-One, whose approach to sinful mankind is inscribed

¹⁵⁶ Unfortunately, I cannot take credit for the insight upon which this claim is built; for that, see Peter Leithart, "God needs us," leithart.com, April 29, 2011, <http://www.leithart.com/2011/04/29/god-needs-us/> (accessed 3 June 2011). Commenting on some remarks Calvin makes in his own commentary on John's Gospel, Leithart writes: "In John 17, when Jesus speaks of Himself as One with the Father, we must remember that Jesus is the Mediator and Head of the church. In this way 'will the chain of thought be preserved, that, in order to prevent the *unity* of the Son with the Father from being fruitless and unavailing, the power of that *unity* must be diffused through the whole body of believers.' . . . Calvin thought that without the members of the body that make up the church, we have only a 'mutilated Christ.' But the second quotation goes further, and says that unless the body of disciples is one, then the unity of Father and Son is 'fruitless' and impotence. God will not be God, Christ will be a mutilated Christ, unless the church is united to Him and within itself. . . . To make sense of this, we need to stress the Barthian/Calvinist point that God is utterly free to create or not create. Having decreed to create, however, He is the God He is only insofar as He brings us to Himself, and brings the world to its end. God would not be the God of this world without the church. . . . But we can finally flip this the other way: If Christ were finally without limbs, if the church were finally fractured, then God would not be God. But God *is* God, the eternally and essentially fruitful God, and so we can be certain that we will *not* end with a mutilated Christ or a fruitless union of Father and Son."

¹⁵⁷ The idea of "deep comedy" is also one that must be credited to Leithart, this time to his illuminating presentation of a hopeful, dynamically Trinitarian eschatology, set in contrast to the tragic trajectory of Greco-Roman literature and its more recent descendants. See Peter J. Leithart, *Deep Comedy: Trinity, Tragedy, and Hope in Western Literature* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2006).

by Spirit-carried men in Scripture, is not constrained to express Himself, either creatively or redemptively, but that He, nonetheless, is pleased to do so. And in doing His good pleasure, He is fully committed to His creative-redemptive project, down to the very last detail.

In Chapter 3, the ways the timeless Triune Persons take to the world will receive amplified attention through a look at some aspects of the theology of John Calvin.

CHAPTER 3

ACCORDING TO CALVIN: THE HIDDEN TRINITY REVEALED

We now turn to a study devoted to examining and employing some particular features of the doctrines of the Trinity and Christology passed down from the Protestant Reformer, John Calvin. Calvin was, in my view, uniquely positioned, as a biblical exegete, as a creative (but restrained) constructive theologian, and as a stylist in the tradition of Erasmian humanism, to connect God to the realm of history in a compelling fashion. And he was positioned to do so in a way that left his credentials as a recipient of the classical theism of Augustine and Aquinas strongly intact. In light of this, I shall attempt here to concentrate on some key principles that Calvin maintains and distinctions that he utilizes in his famous *Institutes* as well as in his *Commentaries*. These principles and distinctions, I argue, supply him the resources in terms of which to affirm a timeless, impassible Trinity without, at the same time, dissolving or neglecting crucial links between the divine *depth* and divine *action*. It is hoped that some careful reflection upon how he uses these principles and distinctions to tie God's absolute character to His works of creation and redemption will help me to articulate my case for the timeless, impassible Creator who is *with* and *caring for* His temporally ensconced creatures.

I. John Calvin, Reformed Heir of the "God Eternal" Tradition

Before launching out on that path, however, we must initially appreciate that Calvin, as with the Reformers at-large, felt his vocation to be the outflow of a divine

calling. He was in the business of reforming the holy, catholic, and apostolic Church and, under the constraints of that priority, also her theology. As a churchman and pastor, he had little patience with those who treated the study of divinity as little more than an opportunity for speculative exercise, a merely academic pursuit.¹⁵⁸ In his view, theologians exist for the purpose of *serving*, for drawing those around them nearer to the Lord revealed through Christ and, as such, are subject to the biblical revelation, the presiding judge over their thoughts.¹⁵⁹ Yet, as very much an Augustinian, he was not in the least bit interested in consigning to history's trash bin all of the traditional institutions and doctrines of the Church. The purpose was to *reform*, after all, not to issue a *recall* of everything thing that had gone before. As Richard Muller observes:

Not only did Calvin formulate his theology in distinct opposition to elements of late medieval and early sixteenth-century Roman Catholicism; he also quite subtly felt the influence of the medieval as well as the patristic past. It is worth recognizing...that the Reformation altered comparatively few of the major *loci* of theology: the doctrines of justification, the sacraments, and the church received the greatest emphasis, while the doctrines of God, the trinity, creation, providence, predestination, and the last things were taken over by the magisterial Reformation virtually without alteration.¹⁶⁰

Calvin was no exception to this Reformation trend. Most notable perhaps among the areas in which he minimally diverged from the path forged by patristic and medieval predecessors is his understanding of the divine attributes.

¹⁵⁸ John Calvin, *Institutes*, I.2.1.

¹⁵⁹ For an incisive reading of Calvin as the consummate "pastoral rhetor," see especially Serene Jones, "Eloquence in Service of Piety," in *Calvin and the Rhetoric of Piety*, Columbia Series in Reformed Theology (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995).

¹⁶⁰ Richard A. Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin: Studies in the Foundation of a Theological Tradition* (New York: Oxford Press, 2000), 39.

Readers of the *Institutes* will see that the author maintains a core of divine attributes that are highly reminiscent of the medieval “theology from above.” In Book 1, Chapter 13, for example, working from what he takes to be the scripturally disclosed virtues of infinitude and a spiritual essence, Calvin engages in his own rhetorically combative kind of negative theology. First, God is most certainly not like the “carnal” God of Seneca who is “poured out into the various parts of the world.” Though in His incomprehensibility the Lord can be said to fill “the earth itself,” His spiritual nature accounts for the fact that He “assigns to himself a dwelling place in heaven.”¹⁶¹ Second, it would be to “wreck God’s unity and restrict his infinity” to postulate with the Manicheans that He is mixed up in a dualistic, cosmic rivalry with the devil.¹⁶² And, third, contrary to a group known as the “Anthropomorphites,” Calvin claims that the Scriptures are misunderstood if their numerous ascriptions of bodily features such as “a mouth, ears, eyes, hands, and feet” to God are counted as reasons to permit a reduced idea of “his loftiness.”¹⁶³ Further indicators of a willingness to meet the stiffer demands of Augustinian theism stand out when, in the process of distinguishing the Triune Persons, he treats it as an unshakeable premise that “the essence of God is simple and undivided,” being “without portion or derivation...in integral perfection.”¹⁶⁴

¹⁶¹ *Inst.* I.13.1. Also, cf. *Inst.* I.5.5.

¹⁶² This criticism of Manicheanism, incidentally, resembles the argument of Hegel and others that classical theism’s sharp creator-creature duality falls short of a “true Infinity” in God. As will later be discussed, Calvin does not overcome the dualism by way of a dialectical monism as does Hegel but instead by way of the infinite God’s all-inclusive decree(s).

¹⁶³ *Inst.*, I.13.1.

¹⁶⁴ *Inst.*, I.13.2.

Calvin also, at various points, removes any doubt that he subscribes to what Nicholas Wolterstorff calls the “God eternal tradition.”¹⁶⁵ No more than in the case of Aquinas, of course, does this fact keep the Reformer from having much to say about divine governance *over* and *through* the time-conditioned lives of creatures. Calvin’s eternalism is not in the least bit mitigated, for instance, when Colin Gunton draws attention to his refusal to speak of providence on the level of a bare, universal causation or a passive foreknowledge.¹⁶⁶ And Gunton is surely right to differentiate Calvin’s portrait of the God-world relationship from one in which “God idly observes from heaven what takes place on earth.”¹⁶⁷ He might, therefore, be grasping for a conception of the divine Knower that is more akin to an active, “Leibnizian” mind rather than to a “Lockean” *tabula rasa* when he expresses the following Boethian thought:

When we attribute foreknowledge to God, we mean that all things always were, and perpetually remain, under his eyes, so that to his knowledge there is nothing future or past, but all things are present.¹⁶⁸

Few would likely dispute that in Calvin’s day the possible presuppositions and implications of timeless eternalism were not being scrutinized and debated to the extent that they have been in recent Anglo-American philosophy of religion. Nor would many disagree that the doctrine enjoyed a much firmer place in the default mindset of sixteenth-century adherents to some form of classical Christian theism than it does in early twenty-first century theological thought. All the more should

¹⁶⁵ For this reference, see Nicholas Wolterstorff, “God Everlasting” in *God and the Good*, eds. C. Orlebeke and L. Smedes (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975), 183.

¹⁶⁶ Gunton, *The Triune Creator*, 151.

¹⁶⁷ *Inst.*, I.16.4.

¹⁶⁸ *Inst.*, III.21.5.

we be alerted, then, when Calvin, who is otherwise reticent “to wander through many evanescent speculations,” is found assuming in a discussion about the order of Persons in the Godhead that “we must not seek in eternity a *before* or an *after*.”¹⁶⁹ With some justification, therefore, he can be read as inclining toward a strict, non-durational idea of timeless eternity.¹⁷⁰

Because Calvin pairs his eternalism with a doctrine of providence that is “lodged in the act,” however, the challenge of unveiling the dispositions of the timeless Lord in the historical arena, before human agents, becomes paramount.¹⁷¹ It stands to reason that a simple, undivided divinity whose essence has no temporal direction, however well-intentioned, lacks the ontology to reveal Himself (either through nature or through dialogue) to non-simple, temporally located creatures, unless He has the capacity to condescend by some means to their level.¹⁷² Thus,

¹⁶⁹ *Inst.* I.13.18.

¹⁷⁰ See *Commentary on John 1:1*, where *Logos* is rendered ‘Speech’: “[H]e does not ascribe to the *Speech* a *beginning* of time, but says that he was *from the beginning*, and thus rises beyond all ages. . . .the *Speech* was with God; for he expressly withdraws us from every moment of time. . . .Those who infer from the imperfect tense of the verb [‘was’] which is here used, that it denotes continued existence, have little strength of argument to support them. . . . [T]hough, in the order of nature, the Father came before his *Wisdom* [the *Son* is the *Speech* who is the Father’s eternal *Wisdom* –P.O.], yet those who conceive of any point of time when he went before his *Wisdom*, deprive him of his glory.” For more reading on Calvin’s dual doctrines of immutability and timeless eternity, see Paul Helm, “The Trinity,” in his *John Calvin’s Ideas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 35-57.

¹⁷¹ *Inst.* I.16.4.

¹⁷² This dissertation will assume that, apart from the incarnate Son, the timeless God is unable to *act at a time*, in the sense that He cannot know tensed facts, though some may care to dispute this. Disputes notwithstanding, a question arises here: If this assumption is correct, would its truth imperil the doctrine of omnipotence found in fairly traditional (read: non-Process) versions of theism? Ed Wierenga cites Descartes and Earl Conee as rare exceptions to his claim that “[h]ardly anyone accepts...that if God is omnipotent he can do anything that any of us can do.” He states this as an *ad hominem* counter to the charge that the atemporalist’s denial of a knowledge in God of tensed facts results in a weakened doctrine of omniscience. See Edward Wierenga, “Timelessness out of Mind: On the Alleged Incoherence of Divine Timelessness,” in *God and Time: Essays on the Divine Nature*, eds. Gregory E. Ganssle and David M. Woodruff (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 155. A major line taken in the next couple of chapters will be to argue that God’s failure to

based on the terms Calvin himself sets, what is required is a significant, though not absolute, disjunction between what the Lord is (or is like) in His *essence*, and the *manner* of the Lord's self-presentation to those to whom He is conveying His character, purposes, or aspects of His plan. And it is no accident that 'plan' here is in the singular, as, for Calvin, the secret will of God is singularly fixed. There is, therefore, a sense in which the attribute of strong immutability is communicated to the secret decree whereby God enacts the world:

[W]e must prove God so attends to the regulation of individual events, and they all so proceed from his *set plan*, that nothing takes place by chance [emphasis added].¹⁷³

That he does not recoil from the impassibilistic implications of this is plainly seen in Calvin's persistent appeals to divine *accommodation*. This is the idea that God "packages" Himself in aptly chosen anthropomorphisms (ascriptions of human form) and anthropopathisms (ascriptions of human emotion) in order to provide an adequate but still profoundly limited sense of the "simple and undivided" God's life and ways.¹⁷⁴ When confronted with Scripture passages in which God is said to be penitent or to have changed course in His particular dealings with peoples or individuals, Calvin hermeneutically prioritizes biblical statements that he takes to express the divine unchangeability and focuses on the pedagogical advantages (for

know an intrinsically tensed present (His failure to be *temporally* present) could only be a problem for omniscience (or for the divine power or presence) were we to be given sufficient reasons for believing that the world houses at least one tensed fact. I am thus far unconvinced that the writers of the Hebrew-Christian Scriptures take positions that directly bear on the modern debate between "tensors" and "de-tensors" over the nature of time. I also remain unconvinced that the advocates of tensed theories of time have succeeded in giving sufficient reasons for believing that tensed facts are necessary to account for time (direction) or temporal experience (our sense of direction).

¹⁷³ *Inst.* I.16.4.

¹⁷⁴ Again, see Helm, "Divine Accommodation," in *John Calvin's Ideas*, 185-208.

us) of having the tri-Personal God “personified.”¹⁷⁵ Regarding, for instance, the statement in Genesis 6:6 that “it repented the Lord that he had made man on the earth,” Calvin comments:

The repentance which is here ascribed to God does not properly belong to him, but has reference to our understanding of him. For since we cannot comprehend him as he is, it is necessary that, for our sake, he should, in a certain sense, transform himself. That repentance cannot take place in God, easily appears from this single consideration, that nothing happens which is by him unexpected or unforeseen. The same reasoning...applies to what follows, that God was affected with grief. Certainly God is not sorrowful or sad; but remains for ever like himself in his celestial and happy repose: yet, because it could not otherwise be known how great is God’s hatred and detestation of sin, therefore the Spirit accommodates himself to our capacity.¹⁷⁶

As Helm notes, Calvin distinguishes his approach slightly from Aquinas’s by emphasizing that God Himself uses and scripturally secures for us a core of exact, normative predicates (which need only *some* qualification) to use in reference to Him.¹⁷⁷ It is also crucial to recognize that he, neither in the above passage nor elsewhere, falls into dichotomizing the *appearances* given in the accommodated language and the *realities* given in the more exact language in a way that encourages a blanket agnosticism as some within post-Kantian Protestantism have done.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 198. As will be discussed in Chapter 5, Helm makes the stronger claim that not only is it, according to Calvin, to our educational advantage to have eternal God present Himself to us *as if* He is a changing, temporally located agent, it is a sort of *logical necessity* that He do so if He is to present Himself as active in history and, sometimes, in responsive dialogue and interaction with people. Also, cf. Paul Helm, “Response to Critics,” in *God & Time*, 79-84.

¹⁷⁶ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Book of Genesis*, 6.6. All quotations from Calvin’s *Commentaries* are from the Calvin Translation Society edition. Consult Bibliography for further details.

¹⁷⁷ Helm, *John Calvin’s Ideas*, 193, 196.

¹⁷⁸ The epistemological distance between Calvin and, say, Kant could hardly be greater. Kant, on one hand, seeks to generalize and say that humans (as they are in themselves?) have their speculative reason restricted to the *phenomena* (roughly equivalent to the appearances available through the grid of Kant’s categories and intuitions). It is arguable that Calvin, on the other hand, understands human knowers to be faced with an immediate, non-redemptive knowledge of God

Prima facie, the so-called accommodative statements about divine “emotions” are not reductively indexed to descriptions of human behaviors or feelings that the biblical writers or Calvin himself finds morally objectionable.¹⁷⁹ Indeed, Calvin can be understood as *precising*, rather than explaining away, the meaning of a statement that claims that the Creator and Judge, at a time, repents. Moreover, his theological grammar is not one that evades *referring* to God’s attitudes. To illustrate, something true about God is communicated in the Lord’s repentance in Genesis 6 on the offered accommodative reading – namely, that wrath is the expression of divine holiness in the presence of sin – even if this may not sufficiently capture the whole truth expressed there according to those who operate with a different conception of God.¹⁸⁰ Additionally, Calvin defies the tendency of some to characterize the “celestial and happy repose” of the divine life as a form of cold indifference; he does so by juxtaposing an acute mental imperturbability and epistemic lordship over creation with a deeply personal stance – “hatred and detestation” – the Lord takes against the sin that He “finds” there.¹⁸¹

(transmitted through the world about them and their own moral constitution) in the very fact of their being thrown into existence (following Paul of Tarsus, not Martin Heidegger). See *Inst.* I.3.3. It is likely that Calvin and Kant would each be inclined to accuse the other of question-begging on this matter.

¹⁷⁹ It seems to me that something along these lines is done by Schleiermacher, who nominalistically consolidates divine attributes such as holiness under divine causality (which itself is presented under the colors of Love and Wisdom) and explains the latter in terms of the consciousness of absolute dependence that humans have. “Sin,” John Cooper explains, gets a rather *metaphysical treatment*, being “the failure of humans to value and take part in the communion of All in One.” See Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, eds. H.R. MacKintosh and J.S. Stewart (New York, NY: T & T Clark, 1999), 341-58. Also, for the source of the quote above, see Cooper, *Panentheism: The Other God of the Philosophers*, 87.

¹⁸⁰ I am thinking of those in Calvin’s day who were moving in a Socinian direction, along with proponents of what is today called Open Theism.

¹⁸¹ For a more recent commentator who displays a mindset to which Calvin objects, see Terence E. Fretheim, *The Suffering of God: An Old Testament Perspective* (Philadelphia, PA:

Calvin's insistence, however, that we can apprehend truths about God, thanks to His own self-disclosures, regularly finds itself humbled by his equal insistence on the divine incomprehensibility. No matter how deeply we may seek to penetrate with our minds into the divine mysteries, our minds will always come up against a divinely imposed barrier. It is worth remembering in this regard that the most cited Scripture passage in the *Institutes* is Deuteronomy 29:29, where Moses declares that "the secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law." Calvin formalizes this partitioning of what is available for humans to know (on a "lower register") about God's state of affairs (that take a "downward trajectory" from an "upper register") by maintaining a medieval distinction between God *in se* and God *quoad nos*. To speak of God *in se* is to speak about God *as He is in Himself*. To speak of God *quoad nos* is to speak about God *as He is to us*.

The specific way that Calvin maintains this distinction consists in his marking off God's *essence* from God's *nature*.¹⁸² God's essence is the life of God as it is known only by God Himself. God's nature is a faithful representation of that essence to which creatures are, revelationally, made privy. It might be helpful to think of the boundary between the divine essence and the divine nature as a screen that is stretched horizontally over our heads. The screen is pierced from above by

Fortress Press, 1984), 3. There does not seem to be good excuse for failing, as Richard Bauckham does, to include Calvin among those who "take the Old Testament's anthropomorphic language about God seriously as revelatory of God, instead of dismissing as *mere* anthropomorphism not to be taken seriously, whatever does not accord with the traditional metaphysical concept of God." See Richard Bauckham, "In Defence of *The Crucified God*," in *The Power and Weakness of God*, ed. M. de S. Cameron (Edinburgh: Rutherford House, 1990), 115.

¹⁸² For an extensive discussion of this topic in Calvin, see the opening chapter in Helm, *John Calvin's Ideas*.

the light of God's qualities but from below one can only peer through it faintly by drawing near; the world's inhabitants cannot poke or perforate it in order to attain an "unbounded" glimpse of what is above.¹⁸³ This distinction, Muller argues, runs closely parallel to a similar one honored by John Duns Scotus:

Scotus's identification of God *qua Deus* (God considered as God) as the "object of theology" was intended to contrast with his identification of God *qua Ens* (God considered as Being) as the object of metaphysics – and, therefore, to indicate a distinction between theological inquiry and philosophical speculation.¹⁸⁴

As *qua Deus/qua Ens* seems to have done for Scotus, so, for Calvin, *in se/quoad nos* not only differentiates the respective ontologies of Creator and creature but also fastens a normative restraint on our metaphysical curiosities about God. While being assured that the screen *cannot* be penetrated from below, we are also counseled to be *content* (relating to the so-called "ethics of belief") with what appears on our side of the screen and *confident* (relating to epistemology and ontology) that the light reaching us suitably witnesses to the Source, of which we would think and speak.¹⁸⁵

Specifically, with respect to the timelessly eternal God's meetings with creatures, the propriety of the *in se/quoad nos* distinction precludes a one-to-one

¹⁸³ *Inst.* I.5.1.

¹⁸⁴ Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin*, 48.

¹⁸⁵ In illustrating these points from the Beveridge translation, Helm shows where Calvin makes the distinction explicit in comments he makes about the descent of YHWH to Mt. Sinai to reveal His Law, quoting him: "Here we may observe, *first*, that his eternity and self-existence are declared by his magnificent name twice repeated; and, *secondly*, that in the enumeration of his perfections, he is described not as he is in himself, but in relation to us, in order that acknowledgement of him may be more a vivid actual impression than empty visionary speculation. Moreover, the perfections thus enumerated are just those which we saw shining in the heavens, and on the earth – compassion, goodness, mercy, justice, judgment and truth." *Inst.* I.10.2, trans. Henry Beveridge (Edinburgh, 1845, reprinted London, James Clarke & Co., 1949), cited in Paul Helm, *Calvin: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: T&T Clark, 2008), 39.

correspondence between the “providential projection” of God’s life and God’s life *in se*. In the providential projection, God’s life is “spread out” within the temporal order. In the LORD’s initial “intrusion” into the life of Moses, for example, Moses *first* sees the burning bush and *later* is summoned by the voice to remove his footwear. Both events are ordered as manifestations of the presence of God. But if God orders temporal events from an event-less standpoint, then those events exist on par with each other.¹⁸⁶ Were a critic to bring this to Calvin’s attention, noting that it

¹⁸⁶ It is hard to see how this attempt to characterize God’s eternal standpoint does not pretend to move beyond the screen that separates God-concealed and God-revealed. And I must concede that I am, in this dissertation, engaging in some speculation about God’s being, the nature of time, and so forth. It is for this reason that space was given in the Introductory Chapter to stress that the timeless God thesis should not be viewed as a necessary fixture in Christian belief. (I will not try to guess what Calvin would think of this concession seeing that his eternalism was not forced to deal with the onslaught of criticisms that eternalism has faced in the past half-century from biblical scholars and philosophers alike. It is enough here to reiterate my belief that God’s duration-less nature is at least consistent with the biblical data, if underdetermined by it.) Acknowledging these caveats, we can turn our attention to the fact that the distinction being made here between the ordering of events from an event-less standpoint and their being providentially “spread out” would be taken up in the distinction that Calvin himself makes between the divine decree and the *execution* of that decree. For more on this distinction and its role in the doctrines of predestination and Christology as understood by Calvin, see Richard A. Muller, *Christ and the Decree: Christology and Predestination in Reformed Theology from Calvin to Perkins* (Durham, NC: The Labyrinth Press, 1986), 17-38. In line with this latter distinction, the reference to God’s projection of His eternal life *through* providence leads us, intriguingly, to see an asymmetry that J.M.E. McTaggart finds between what can be *thought* about time and what can be *perceived* about time: “It might be the case that the distinction of positions in time into past, present, and future is only a constant illusion of our minds, and that the real nature of time contains only the distinctions of the *B* series – the distinctions of earlier and later. In that case we should not perceive time as it really is, though we might be able to *think* of it as it really is.” Or, as Robin Le Poidevin says, *A*-theorists could have as their slogan “There is only one now” – a sentiment that doubtless would have resonated with Moses at Sinai (though perhaps less so upon reflection at other times) – whereas *B*-theorists encourage us to construe time in a fashion that is indifferent to any particular position within the temporal matrix. One might say that we *perceive* instances of the *executed* decree in ways consistent with a tensed (or *A*-theoretic) characterization of event perception but, wishing to be mildly speculative Calvinians, we would also say that those events, with reference to the decree itself, can, at best, be objects of thought. See J.M.E. McTaggart, “The Unreality of Time,” from *The Nature of Existence*, ii (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1927), reprinted in *The Philosophy of Time*, eds. Robin Le Poidevin and Murray MacBeath (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1993), 25. Also, see Robin Le Poidevin, *Travels in Four Dimensions: The Enigmas of Space and Time* (New York, NY: Oxford, 2003), 144.

seems God is deceiving us about time, it is not difficult to imagine him being reminded of the difference between Lord and servant; their lives differ *in kind*.

Going along with the humbling tenor of this imagined response is Calvin's *practical* orientation epistemologically. In order to gauge correctly the role the *in se/quoad nos* distinction plays for Calvin, one must appreciate that he wishes generally to ruin our appetites for speculative inquiries into the divine essence. In a helpful word study, Helm observes that Calvin is more of a Franciscan than a Dominican when he favors *sapientia* (wisdom) over *scientia* (theoretical knowledge) and would find himself more easily aligned with John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* than with Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae* in his terminological preference for *religio* (the binding of the self to God) over *theologia* (with its Aristotelian origins).¹⁸⁷ For Geneva's Pastor, speculation into the life of God, to the extent that it is ever conducive to Christian edification, must be closely monitored.

Calvin's reasons for keeping such tight reins upon the theological imaginations of those who would submit to his tutelage have to do with a recognized fundamental difference between Creator and creatures, true enough. They also have to do, however, with a profound propensity he finds in humans for mentally manufacturing idols to suit their own mischievous desires. This latter theme in his writings jumps from the page in the following passage, where Calvin earns the description "theologian of suspicion":

[A]s Scripture, having regard for men's rude and stupid wit, customarily speaks in the manner of the common folk, where it would distinguish the true

¹⁸⁷ Helm, *Calvin: A Guide for the Perplexed*, 22.

God from the false it particularly contrasts him with idols. It does this, not to approve what is more subtly and elegantly taught by the philosophers, but the better to expose the world's folly, nay, madness, in searching for God when all the while each one clings to his own speculations. Therefore, that exclusive definition, encountered everywhere, annihilates all the divinity that men fashion themselves out of their own opinion: for God himself is the sole and proper witness of himself.¹⁸⁸

When it is taken into account that Calvin begins with such a principled, Pauline ethical critique of potential divinity students – and of the various sinful delusions that often drive their intellects toward a distortion of the truth about God, the world, and themselves – it makes sense that for him theology cannot be done well if it is done in the absence of a genuine, pious commitment to the teachings of Scripture. His severe commitment to Christian Scripture, furthermore, accounts for the fact that he takes no interest in constructing an *ad hoc* or piecemeal theology. While he does, as noted, inherit certain portraits of God as well as formal distinctions from the Fathers and later Scholastics, he is concerned to be biblically concrete from the start. And an important consequence of this biblical starting point is that he does not promote a monolithic, generic theism but, rather, *declares* a full-blooded doctrine of the Trinity.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁸ *Inst.* I.11.1. One can hardly resist a rhetorical comparison here with Nietzsche's likening of philosophers to lawyers (*Advokaten*) who "all pose as if they had discovered and reached their real opinions through the self-development of a cold, pure, divinely unconcerned dialectic...; while at bottom is an assumption, a hunch, indeed, a kind of 'inspiration'...that they defend with reasons they have sought after the fact." Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1966), 12.

¹⁸⁹ For a brief introduction to Calvin's doctrine of the Trinity, see Douglas F. Kelly, "The True and Triune God: Calvin's Doctrine of the Holy Trinity," in *A Theological Guide to Calvin's Institutes: Essays and Analysis*, eds. David W. Hall and Peter A. Lillback (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing, 2008), 65-89.

II. Mediating God and World: The Economic Trinity and the “Extra Calvinisticum”

In light of Calvin’s devout (if somewhat qualified) biblicism, inquiries (like those of the previous chapter) into what Trinitarian life is like without a (sin-besmirched) world pose as potential distractions from what the Lord is actually about in His works of creation and redemption. From such distractions there tend to be produced idols. And idols fail to feed the needy hearts of their devisers. Calvin feels the urgency to press upon those who will listen the Creator’s holy expectations, and to press upon those hearers, now reckoned as sinners, the gratuitous charity shown to them by the Redeemer. It is precisely his belief that utter gratitude is owed to the Lord who is both giver of life (in creation) and giver of abundant life (in redemption) that draws Calvin to a theology in which the rich sovereignty and freedom of God reign supreme.

But does Calvin’s renowned attention to the Triune Lord’s gracious exploits in establishing history and redeeming some humans who live there clash with his belief that those exploits issue from a divine grace that is, perhaps, best described in the language of *intrusion* and *intervention*?¹⁹⁰ For such talk seems to assume a sort

¹⁹⁰ The relevance of this question for articulating the presence of eternal God is demonstrated by Brian Davies when he disparages doctrines of providence in which *intervention* forms an essential part of the definition of a miracle: “For something can only intervene by entering into a situation from which it is first of all absent, while God, as I am conceiving of him, cannot be thought to be absent from anything he creates.” Brian Davies, *The Reality of God and the Problem of Evil* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2006), 75. Unfortunately, I will not be able to address directly the implications for an “intrusion” of salvific grace in a person’s life alongside of my own attempt to talk more generally of the sense in which it is “in Him” that we “live and move and have our being.” I will say, however, that in the case, for example, of the “miracle” of a sinner being regenerated by the Holy Spirit, I would be likely to think of this “intrusion” of the Spirit along the lines of a re-orientated *relationship* a person comes to have, leaving to the side efforts to explain ontologically *how* the Spirit alters one’s dispositions and endows them with faith that

of baseline separation which must be overcome if God is to be Immanuel. Or are there proper senses in which the present, revealed God is, in important respects, also kept hidden?

Answering to the *in se/quoad nos* and decree/execution-of-decree distinctions in Calvin is that which marks off the immanent Trinity from the economic Trinity. And because Calvin's Trinitarian characterization of God's involvement with the world figures so centrally in this chapter, a simple statement on the nature of the distinction will serve the following discussion. Generally, the immanent-economic distinction has enabled theologians to distinguish the life of the Triune Persons in their own united self-sufficiency (ontologically, or immanently) from the particular agent roles adopted and relations maintained (with each other and with creaturely others) in the works of Creation and Redemption (economically). The value of the distinction is, arguably, realized in the way that it allows one to attribute activities to God, such as possessing and caring for the world, without implying that God's essence specifies those exact activities *simpliciter*. In other words, the Triune God *is* more than He *does*. The trick has been to affirm the distinction without pulling apart the divine essence from divine activities in a way

unifies them with Christ. Some help thinking along these lines is available in Canlis, *Calvin's Ladder: A Spiritual Theology of Ascent and Ascension*, though her rich treatment doubtless will leave the metaphysical itches of a good many philosophers of religion unscratched. Also of help could be some critical remarks made by Peter Leithart in dealing with the fundamental diastasis between time and eternity exhibited in the encounter with Jesus Christ that one finds in Barth: "[T]he problem...is Barth's doctrine of creation. Despite his hostility to natural revelation, and implicitly to an idea of nature having an autonomy, this is precisely what he ends up with. If humanity or human nature is always already grace and gift, then the whole problem dissolves. Insofar as Barth failed to posit creation as grace, he actually grants considerable autonomy to nature, such that "nature" does not always already possess its reality only in and *as* encounter with God." See Leithart, "Barth's Actualism Again," <http://www.leithart.com/archives/000072.php>.

that renders the latter arbitrary or devalued. Theologians have also been wary of undermining the assumption that the purported works of God reflect how things are for Him apart from those works. For example, in what sense, if any, does the Son's submission to the Father through His birth in a stable and eventual, expiating death on a cross correspond to the non-historical realities of the Godhead?

Needless to say, although the economic Trinity takes center stage in Calvin's body of writings, that stage features the arrival of a Grace furnished *backstage* by the show's uncompelled Triune Council. In creation, humans

have within themselves a workshop graced with God's unnumbered works and, at the same time, a storehouse overflowing with inestimable riches.¹⁹¹

And in redemption

we have...already seen that the secret plan of God, which lay hidden, is brought to light, provided you understand by this language merely that what was unknown is now verified – sealed, as it were, with a seal. But it is false to say that election takes effect only after we have embraced the gospel and takes its validity from this. We should indeed seek assurance of it from this; for if we try to penetrate to God's eternal ordination, that deep abyss will swallow us up. But when God has made plain his ordination to us, we must climb higher, lest the effect overwhelm the cause.¹⁹²

The sovereign decree to create, to preserve, to atone, to regenerate – the decree to *be present* in these ways – is freely enacted. While the Creator-Redeemer only earns a reputation *within* the drama, it is quite clear that Calvin believes one must indicate what goes *beyond* and, in a sense, *before*, the drama in order to do justice *to* the

¹⁹¹ *Inst.* I.5.4.

¹⁹² *Inst.* III.24.3. Also, with respect to his belief that the Incarnation decreed by “our most merciful Father” is, from that vantage point, necessary (without being deemed such “simply” or “absolutely”), see *Inst.* II.12.1.

drama.¹⁹³ To wit, one is *told* in the opening and closing credits of a film about the production team and *shown* in the film the production itself.

In our modern theological atmosphere, however, a student of divinity willing to take Calvin's stance would, in some quarters, be faulted for violating what is known as "Rahner's rule." Karl Rahner, the twentieth-century Roman Catholic theologian, is remembered for his insistence that "the 'economic' Trinity is the 'immanent' Trinity and the 'immanent' Trinity is the 'economic' Trinity."¹⁹⁴ Rahner's loyalties to Hegelian dialecticism via Martin Heidegger's existential ontology predisposed him against the theological correlate of cathedral-building – approaches to doctrine that risk forfeiting the immediate Triune presence with humans to the flying buttresses of airy, abstract theology.

Rahner, instead, would guide us to express the Triune presence in terms of a Grace that is specified exactly by the concept of God. As such, the divine generosity more easily fits within a framework in which God's works *emanate* from Him than within a framework in which God's works are *chosen*:

Because in God's self-communication to his creation through grace and Incarnation God really gives himself, and really appears as he is in himself, then with regard to that aspect of the Trinity in the economy of salvation which is given in the history of God's self-revelation in the Old and New Testaments we can say: in both the collective and individual history of salvation there appears in immediacy to us not some numinous powers or

¹⁹³ He moderates his willingness to "climb higher" by the distinction between the decree and its execution, as seen here: "And if it is the will of God that those whom he has elected shall be saved, and if in this manner he ratifies and executes (*exsequitur*) his eternal decree (*aeternum suum decretum*), whoever he be that is not satisfied with Christ, but indulges in curious inquiries about eternal predestination, such a person, as far as lies in his power, desires to be saved contrary to the purposes of God. The election of God is in itself hidden and secret; the Lord manifests it *by calling*, that is, when he bestows on us this blessing *of calling us*."

¹⁹⁴ Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*, trans. Joseph Donceel (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), 21-22; quoted in Cooper, *Panentheism*, 225.

other which represent God, but there appears and is truly present the one God himself.¹⁹⁵

God is nothing apart from His own self-communication woven into humanity's life. And the *inevitable* climax of God's self-communication in humanity is the enfleshing of God in Jesus Christ. To study arguments that tip-toe around the *essential* character of God's embodiment will, therefore, only procure a divine presence that is, in the end, not the genuine article. Consequently, this fundamental, "world-ward" perfection would leave no room for God's Son to enjoy an unwavering, non-historical existence.¹⁹⁶

But given these parameters, Calvin's Christology would certainly be reckoned guilty of dividing God from His generosity by means of some "numinous power." This is especially evident in the way that he utilizes the concepts of *Logos asarkos* (Word-without-flesh) and *Logos ensarkos* (Word-in-flesh). Whereas Rahner can be understood as flatly denying a *Logos asarkos*, Calvin not only affirms it but also advances arguments in support of it. Namely, it is his conviction that even in joining to Himself a true human nature the Word enjoys a standpoint, in virtue of the divine nature, that is not restricted to the localized body of Jesus Christ.

Calvin's statements on this topic emerged most prevalently from within the context of an extended dispute he carried on with the Lutheran pastor Joachim Westphal over Christ's presence in the Eucharist. And it was in response to the former's admission of a powerful, presiding presence that the Son of God sustains

¹⁹⁵ Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity* (New York: The Crossroads Publishing Co., 1998), 136

¹⁹⁶ Cooper, *Panentheism*, 224-26.

with the world, distinct from His assumed human nature, that later references were made to the “Calvinistic outside” or *extra Calvinisticum*. Yet it was not a subject from which Calvin shied away, as seen here in a section of the *Catechism of the Church of Geneva*, which he penned:

M: But did Christ in taking himself to heaven withdraw from us, so that now he has ceased to be with us?

C: Not at all. On the contrary, he has undertaken to be with us even to the end of the world (Matt. 28:20).

M: But when he is said to dwell with us, does this mean that he is bodily present?

C: No. There is on the one hand the body received up into heaven (Luke 24:51; Acts 1:9); and there is on the other hand his virtue, which is diffused everywhere.¹⁹⁷

Although the sense of this “diffusion” of “his virtue” would benefit from some elaboration given his commitments to classical immutability and a “lively providence,” Calvin’s defense of the so-called *extra* focused on upholding the principle of *finitum non capax infinitum* – the finite cannot contain the infinite.¹⁹⁸

He, apparently, did not find the principle to be at odds with Paul’s statement in Colossians 2 that in Jesus dwells all the fullness of the deity bodily.¹⁹⁹ But neither is this indwelling one in which His deity simply “lays prone” to creaturely mischief:

¹⁹⁷ J.K.S. Reid, *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, LCC XXII, 101; cited in David G. Peters, “The ‘Extra Calvinisticum’ and Calvin’s Eucharistic Theology” (Unpublished paper).

¹⁹⁸ For a vivid application of this principle to the “true presence” of Christ in the Lord’s Supper, see *Inst.* IV.17.31.

¹⁹⁹ See Calvin, *Comm. on Colossians* 2:9: “For God has often manifested himself to men, but it has been only in part. In Christ, on the other hand, he communicates himself to us wholly.” The contrast here suffices to show that Calvin found the *extra* to be consistent with a faithful representation of the Trinity in the Incarnate Son. On the other hand, it might be objected that his reference to this God known apart from Christ occurring only “in part” fails to square with divine simplicity. Notice, however, his use of ‘manifested’ here. The “in part” appears to have a strictly epistemological reference. This allows for the *whole* Creator to be present at any and every spatio-temporal location without implying that the hearts and minds of creatures located there have been *unveiled* to know Him and the broad scope of His plan. One could say the same thing, admittedly, in reference to Christ, i.e., that His “visit” on earth did not mean a universal “unveiling” – in the sense

Surely God does not have blood, does not suffer, cannot be touched with hands. But since Christ who was true God and also true man, was crucified and shed his blood for us, the things that he carried out in his human nature are transferred improperly, although not without reason, to his divinity.²⁰⁰

There is, therefore, a capacity that the infinite *Logos* has for assuming a finite human nature without sacrificing the integrity of His divine nature.²⁰¹

If these considerations are gathered together, Calvin's Christology can credibly serve as a model for how we go about thinking a more "general" presence that God maintains with the whole of creation. For his own part, Calvin would certainly not side with Barth's protest against a "God in general," if one means by this that God sustains a metaphysical ground for or "point of contact" with all mankind, irrespective of human dispositions toward His offered Son. To begin with, even as the *Institutes* open with an epistemological discussion, the discussion is not abstracted from God's ontology or nature, as seen in the earlier discussion of the *in se/quoad nos* distinction.

Important loci in his epistemology also include the *imago dei* doctrine, which, for Calvin, has a twofold sense. In one sense, the image of God in man can be lost and subsequently restored; on a spiritual level, the image is restored when sinners are forensically and personally reconciled to the Lord through a Spirit-wrought

of salvation – for all with whom He came into contact. See *Inst.* II.12.1., where we read: "[O]ur iniquities, like a cloud cast between us and him...estranged us from the Kingdom of Heaven." But the Incarnation *is* an unveiling in the sense that the Father declares in recorded history the embodied *Alpha* and *Omega* and definitively displays the fundamental character of His ways in creation, redemption, and judgment.

²⁰⁰ *Inst.* II.14.2.

²⁰¹ Calvin, *Comm. on John 1:14*; "In short, the Son of God began to be man in such a manner that he still continues to be that eternal *Speech* who had no beginning of time."

union with Christ.²⁰² In another sense, Calvin finds the image remaining even in those reckoned as God's enemies (those "unregenerated" by the Spirit), witnessing *against* them and *to* God's righteous dominion. This understanding goes hand-in-hand with another crucial locus in Calvin's religious epistemology, the display of the divine "light" in the works of creation and providence. Readers gain a hearty appreciation for this aspect of Calvin's thought in remarks he makes about the contemptuous Roman emperor, Gaius Caligula, who, he says, "trembled...miserably when any sign of God's wrath manifested itself." To be sure, it is not some sort of benign, monolithic presence that Calvin has in mind when he goes on to claim that

He who is the boldest despiser of God is of all men the most startled at the rustle of a falling leaf [cf. Lev. 26:36]...Indeed, they seek out every subterfuge to hide themselves from the Lord's presence, and to efface it again from their minds.²⁰³

But what are we to make of Calvin's belief in a providence whereby God, the Incarnation notwithstanding, "has...manifested himself to men, but...only in part," as this is stated in the commentary on Colossians?²⁰⁴ For this would appear to confirm Barth's concern that a failure to concentrate entirely the revelation of God in the Person of Jesus Christ is a failure to reveal faithfully God's whole self.²⁰⁵

²⁰² *Inst.* I.15.4. "[E]ven though we grant that God's image was not totally annihilated and destroyed in him [Adam, when he fell – P.O.], yet it was so corrupted that whatever remains is frightful deformity." For further reading on the themes of Union with Christ (*Unio Christi*) and the Twofold Grace (*Duplex Gratia*) of justification and sanctification, see Mark A. Garcia, *Life in Christ: Union with Christ and Twofold Grace in Calvin's Theology*, Studies in Christian History and Thought (Colorado Springs: Paternoster, 2008).

²⁰³ *Inst.* I.3.2.

²⁰⁴ Calvin, *Comm. on Col.* 2:9.

²⁰⁵ This Barthian viewpoint finds an erudite voice in Bruce L. McCormack, "Grace and Being: The Role of God's Gracious Election in Karl Barth's Theological Ontology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, ed. J. Webster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

One way to handle this objection from within Calvin's theology would be to emphasize that his is a "no-risk" understanding of divine providence.²⁰⁶ When held together with Calvin's rebuff of those who charge him with abstracting the will of God from (or pitting it against) the divine goodness, the unity and exhaustiveness of the providential decree makes it possible to see how revelations "in part" are not properly construed if they are removed from the greater eschatological scope of God's purposes.²⁰⁷ Another important, and related, theme is the idea that God's long-suffering mercy is "stretched out" in God's providence. For Calvin, when the "extending" of the divine attitudes in creation and redemption is taken as embracing the whole of God's works, those works can be found to "sync up" with and, indeed, find their fulfillment in the vindication of the Trinity's grace and judgment singularly expressed in the Incarnation.²⁰⁸ As we shall see below, the unity of divine

²⁰⁶ I am not flying over Calvin's separation of his treatments of predestination and providence in the final edition of the *Institutes*. Readers often read too much into this, setting up a "wall" between God's "spiritual" and "natural" works. Helm's guess at the basis for the particular editorial choice in question suggests another possibility: "[F]or Calvin predestination and providence are not easily separable, as if predestination has to do with God's grace, providence with 'nature', and as if a doctrine of providence is a piece of natural theology. Predestination is an aspect of divine providence. (The fact that Calvin treats providence and predestination in different places in the 1559 edition of *Institutes* ought not to mislead us. Providence as he treats it in the *Institutes* is intertwined with the destiny of the church. I believe that he separated them, bringing providence forward to Book I, to minimize the potential for confusing free will as human choice, which is involved with providence, and free will as a well-motivated choice of the good, which is the result of predestination)." Helm, *Calvin: A Guide for the Perplexed*, 86.

²⁰⁷ See *Inst.* I.17.1.

²⁰⁸ *Inst.* II.15.3. While this resort to a correlation of means and ends to achieve God's ultimately good purposes and to an important sense in which Calvin appears to deny contingency in the world at least partly addresses Barth's concern (though it is not assumed here that Barth was or would be pleased with such "solutions"), a significant aspect of his criticism of "a God elsewhere" is hereby left unaddressed. There remains the charge expressive of Barth's "actualism" – the idea that God's being is a being-in-act – and against the idea that God could be "about" anything other than what He chooses to be "for us" in Jesus Christ. Without interacting with Barth *per se*, this issue will receive at least some attention in what remains of this chapter's discussion of Christology, the Trinity, and the "storying" of God's life. For a more direct addressing of Barth's critique of the "hidden" Calvinian God, see Paul Helm, "Karl Barth and the Visibility of God," in *Engaging with*

purpose that connects Creation to Incarnation shows itself even more pervasively in Calvin's thought when the narrow trappings of Christology give way to a broader Triune action within the world. Rivaling his disinterest in depictions of the divine presence in terms of a bland monotheism is his disdain for a doctrine that keeps Father, Son, and Holy Spirit tucked away in their own immanent, eternal relations.

Concerning the Person of Christ and, indeed, the Trinitarian Persons at-large, two "conceptual strands" turn up in the New Testament regarding the relations between the Persons of the Godhead. These are, in no particular order, first, an important *equality* between the Son, the Father, and the Holy Spirit and, second, a significant sense in which the Son is *subordinated* to the Father, with the Spirit being subject to the Father and the Son. A long history of debate has swirled around questions about what can be inferred about the nature of the immanent or ontological Trinitarian relations based on the Person-specific activities and relations particularly evidenced in the procurement, accomplishment, and application of redemption. Unsurprisingly, the debate has featured two schools of thought, *subordinationism*, on one hand, and *equalitarianism*, on the other. The subordinationists (e.g., Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa, and John of Damascus) generally have held that the Son and the Spirit derive their divine essence from the Father by way of an ontic *emanation* or in virtue of a type of *causal* priority the Father has to the Son and Spirit. The equalitarians (e.g., Gregory of Nazianzus, Cyril of Alexandria, and

Barth: Contemporary Evangelical Critiques, eds. David Gibson and Daniel Strange (Nottingham: Apollos, 2008), 273-99; also, see Helm, "John Calvin and the Hiddenness of God," in *Engaging the Doctrine of God*, ed. Bruce McCormack (Grand Rapids, MI and Edinburgh: Baker Academic and Rutherford House, 2007), chapter 4.

Epiphanius) have rejected this ontological prioritizing of the Father and instead asserted the divine essence to consist in the *community* of the Persons.

The main challenge facing the subordinationists has been to preserve the unmitigated divine status of the Son and the Spirit, arguably the two members of the Godhead most aptly described as “agents of historical action.” The main challenge for the equalitarians has been to avoid introducing (as, for instance, Sabellius did) a *radical disconnect* between what God is in His essence and the contingent (and, in some respects, hierarchical) roles adopted by the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the works of creation and redemption. It is central to the present thesis to articulate a presence of the Triune *God*, giving no short shrift ontologically to any member of the Godhead. It is just as central, however, that the Trinity’s presence with those in time be truly reflective of the order of Trinitarian life in its most basic structure; the particular roles assumed vis-à-vis creation and redemption must figure as proper expressions of how things are in the Godhead. I will, therefore, say some things about where Calvin stands within this historic debate.

Insofar as Calvin’s resistance to speculative ventures allows him to speak of the “hidden Trinity,” his views fall within the equalitarian, as opposed to the subordinationist, wing of the tradition. Following Cyril, he does not think that in order to avoid tritheism one must causally trace the divinity of the Son and Spirit to the Father.²⁰⁹ He distinguishes what he calls an “order” in the arrangement of the

²⁰⁹ For Calvin’s references to Cyril on this point, see B.B. Warfield, “The Doctrine of the Trinity,” in *Calvin and Augustine* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing, 1956), 283; cited in Douglas F. Kelly, “The True and Triune God: Calvin’s Doctrine of the Holy Trinity,” in *A Theological Guide to Calvin’s ‘Institutes’*, 85.

Persons, one in which the Father “is rightly deemed the beginning and fountainhead of the whole of divinity.”²¹⁰ But he finds no explicit exegetical basis for reserving the appellation ‘God’ for the Father exclusively. And he appears nowhere in the vicinity of those who would “affirm the consequent” by thinking that because the Son’s submission to the Father in the order of *redemption* may be consistent with the Son’s derivation from the Father in the order of *being* warrants inferring the latter from the former.²¹¹ He thus “pushes the plurality envelope” in designating the Son and Spirit each as *autotheos* – God in Himself – in the sense that they, respectively, do not occupy a secondary or tertiary place with respect to the divine essence.²¹²

Calvin’s cautious approach to the Triune *being* corresponds to a stress he places on the Triune *doing* in the details of salvation as well as nature. In Colin Gunton’s impressive study, *The Triune God*, he argues that Calvin (along, in fact, with Luther) made important strides in presenting the God-world relation by moving to the fore a discourse about the *personal* relation of God to the world at the expense of “the medieval causal conception.”²¹³ Yet Gunton opines that “there is in Calvin’s account of the relation of God and the world little substantive part played by Christ and the Holy Spirit.” He is troubled at having found “only one statement of the

²¹⁰ *Inst.* I.13.25.

²¹¹ There smacks not a hint of this, for example, in his brief comments about the “commandment” Jesus claims to have received from His Father that He should lay down His life, only to take it up again; see Calvin, *Comm. on John 10:18*.

²¹² *Inst.* I.13.20. T.F. Torrance’s claim that “Calvin’s account of the manifold of interpenetrating personal relations or subsistence’s within the one indivisible Godhead...is in many respects his most significant contribution to the doctrine of the Trinity of God.” In light of this claim, there would be value in examining what kind of *emphasis* Calvin places on ‘autotheos’ as a designator of Triune Persons and how this emphasis fits with the tilt in his Trinity doctrine toward perichoresis. See T.F. Torrance, “Calvin’s Doctrine of the Trinity,” in *Trinitarian Perspectives: Toward Doctrinal Agreement* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1994), 54.

²¹³ Gunton, *The Triune Creator*, 147.

Christological mediation of divine action in creation.” Likewise, it bothers him that something on the order of Calvin’s “splendid characterization of the Spirit’s universal and life-giving work” found in the chapter on the Trinity fails to show up in the sections on providence in the *Institutes*.²¹⁴ This raises a number of interesting questions about the sense(s) in which Calvin conceives of mediation between God and the world and also between the would-be Savior and sinners.

Before moving to address some of these, however, consider the “backstage” aspect of Calvin’s conception of divine sovereignty and his view that a subordination of the Son and Spirit in the *economy* of redemption does not, at least not without important qualifications, translate to a comparable state of affairs in the *ontology* of the Trinity. These features of Calvin’s doctrine that insert at least a narrow conceptual “wedge” between divine being and divine action, indeed, only seem to add consternation to the question of whether his timelessly eternal God can be present with temporally located creatures. Gunton’s allusion to Calvin’s “splendid characterization” of what we can call the “secular” or “earthy” work of the Spirit in creation and providence provides a good initial test case. The point here, however, is not to see if Calvin provides a compelling depiction of the Creator who is Immanuel but to see if that depiction stays within the strict constraints of classical eternalism. Particularly, does Calvin’s understanding of divine immanence and

²¹⁴ Ibid., 152.

activity honor what William Hasker calls “Anselm’s barrier,” acknowledging with St. Anselm that “God neither exists, nor acts, nor knows in time”?²¹⁵

For instance, the characterization of the Spirit that Gunton is thinking of is one that speaks of Him “who, everywhere diffused, sustains all things, causes them to grow, and quickens them in heaven and in earth.”²¹⁶ The term ‘diffused’ fairly easily conveys the notion of a “spatial spreading.” And, though extension or location *in time* may not entail *spatial* extension or location, contemporary philosophers of time and philosophers of religion arguably have less difficulty in agreeing that being spatial entails being temporal. Therefore, the use of ‘diffuse’ here potentially threatens Calvin’s eternalism through (by analogy) the temporal “spreading” of the Spirit. If one consults the surrounding context of this statement Calvin makes, however, one will see that he is pretty careful to honor a profound Creator-creature difference. For he immediately goes on to say:

Because he is circumscribed by no limits, he is excepted from the category of creatures; but in transfusing into all things his energy, and breathing into them essence, life, and movement, he is indeed plainly divine.²¹⁷

Though he is wont to avoid having God as a remote “First Cause,” Calvin’s commitment to an Augustinian God-concept and his desire to stay tethered to the

²¹⁵ William Hasker, “The Absence of a Timeless God,” in *God and Time: Essays on the Divine Nature*, 183. I agree with Hasker that this Anselmian barrier should be definitive for the conception of timeless eternity, though I would have more to say about eternal God’s “storying” of Himself in creation and in Incarnation. Particularly in light of the union of the divine and human natures in Jesus Christ, I hold that there is propriety in carefully specified attributions of temporal existence, action, and knowledge to God the Second Person. At least conceptually, one must make “space” in God for the “newness” of the Incarnation, of the sufferings of Christ, and in eternal God’s “assumption” of adopted sons and daughters (and creation with them) into the glory shared by the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

²¹⁶ *Inst.* I.13.14.

²¹⁷ *Inst.*, I.13.14.

text of Scripture prevent him from “injecting” the Spirit into creation any more than seems to him warranted by the (at least partly metaphorical) language of Scripture.²¹⁸

Corroborating evidence in favor of the thesis that Calvin is at least not a blatant violator of Anselm’s barrier is available in his maintenance of the previously discussed *extra Calvinisticum*. In parallel with his desire to see the vitality of the divine Spirit is his desire not to neglect the Son as the Father’s “right hand” who makes creation their shared “labor of love.” But a comparison of his use of ‘diffused’ to portray the active presence of the Spirit with his use of the same term to portray the active presence of *Logos asarkos* points to a difference between the divine and the human which, for Calvin, is not merely one of degrees but of *kind*.²¹⁹ Indeed, it is the way that Calvin pinpoints and applies this difference in his Christology that tends to invite the charge of promoting Nestorianism – of, in fact, *separating* the natures and, thereby, shattering the unity of Christ’s Person.²²⁰ Some further reflection on the relationship between the two natures, however, could not

²¹⁸ Note that in his *Comm. on Genesis 1:2*, regarding the “moving” of the Spirit “upon the face of the waters,” Calvin shows restraint in speaking of the “secret efficacy” of the Spirit in rendering stable the “confused” “mass” of creation and again later of the “secret inspiration” that “chaos required...to prevent its speedy dissolution.”

²¹⁹ *Inst.* II.16.14. “As his body was raised up above all the heavens, so his power and energy were diffused and spread beyond all the bounds of heaven and earth.”

²²⁰ If Edward David Willis is correct, moreover, Calvin is not the only Churchman who would be dealt this charge. Willis shows that Calvin represents a broader Catholic tradition in his “*extra*” exposition of Chalcedonian Christology. For this reason, Helm has suggested that a more appropriate epithet for the set of Christological distinctives in question might be *extra Catholicum*. See Willis’s reworking of his doctoral dissertation in *Calvin’s Catholic Christology: The Function of the so-called Extra Calvinisticum in Calvin’s Theology*, Studies in Medieval Thought, Vol. II (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1966).

only vindicate the orthodoxy of Calvin's Christology but also suggest more broadly how we ought to think about the Creator's relation to the creation.

To begin with, one can admit that a Creator-creature difference sufficient to respect Anselm's barrier certainly appears *consistent with* a Nestorian separation of Christ's divine and human natures – a separation that would, *per impossible*, give us two Persons of Christ. I propose, however, that a relationship in which the divine and human natures differ in kind is neither sufficient nor even necessary to produce the sort of unbridgeable dualism one sees in Nestorian Christologies. It seems easy enough to imagine, that is, the being of God differing from humanity in such a way that no true union could be formed from their convergence. If nothing more, it is surely difficult to conceptualize a "divine whole" joining to Himself a "human whole," thus securing a single, "personal" whole.

But, again, it seems reasonable to claim that the fact that an unbridgeable dualism is conceivable does not imply that even a profound difference in kind is sufficient or even necessary to produce an unbridgeable dualism between the *relata*. In fact, a Nestorian separation might just as easily result from a *failure* to mark the Creator-creature difference adequately. The more the divine and human natures have in common, after all, the more will the difficulty increase of maintaining a sense in which Christ's Person consists of *two* natures. One tendency will be to embrace, with many in the Lutheran tradition, the *communicatio idiomatum*, an unqualified communication of Christ's divine attributes "straight across" to His human nature and *vice versa*. The problem with this is that, whatever psychological

resistance there might be to such a conclusion, the logical force of the *communicatio* does lead to the ascription of a single, dialectical nature to Christ – a version of monophysitism. Yet, another tendency will be to oppose the two (similar) natures so that they are not *positively* related as two wholes but are *negatively* related as two parts, presumably of a *greater* whole.

The key, then, would be to relate or connect positively somehow the Son's divine and human natures as distinct wholes. It is my contention that this mysterious relation of wholes to wholes is what is required to affirm orthodox Christology. It is also a contention of this dissertation that there is an important analogy between God the Son's union with a human nature and the Triune God's union with the world as a whole.

At least four points of comparison make for a potentially fruitful analogy between the Incarnation and the God-world relation. One, both Creation and Incarnation are consistent but contingent (i.e., unnecessary) expressions of God's character. Two, both of these doctrines are best construed, or so I will argue, as involving the wedding of two wholes in order to make a genuine union. Without disturbing the distinctiveness of the Son's divine and human natures respectively, God condescends to unite them forever in the Person of Jesus. Likewise, the difference between the Triune Creator and His creation is not compromised by the union established between them by the enactment of Creation or New Creation. In both the case of Creation and Incarnation, the union of the Lord with His Creation must not be understood as an identification of the two. For an identification of them

would, in fact, displace a fundamental difference between them – which is a necessary presupposition of their union. Three, given the understanding promoted in this dissertation that being temporal in some respect is sufficient to either mark one *as* the creation or, more accurately, as a part or member of it, both the whole of Christ’s human nature and the totality of creation with respect to its parts share in common that they both can and do undergo changes. Four, while each is temporal, each is also in a particular respect timeless, either in virtue of a union with the timeless divine nature in the case of Christ’s Person or, in the case of the world, in virtue of being timeless as a whole due to the timeless character of the eternal God’s creative act.

If both of the two above contentions are correct – that Christology involves a whole-to-whole relation and that an important analogy obtains between Christ’s Person and the God-world relationship – then those who embrace orthodox Christology in a way that meets this stipulated criterion will have a reason for embracing God’s union with the world as a whole.²²¹ Apart from finding some other sound theological motivation for rejecting the latter, those affirming this whole-to-whole Christology will need to show an important dis-analogy between the Person of Christ and the God-world union in order to object to its use in this dissertation’s defense and commendation of the timeless, impassible God.

²²¹ This matter of relating the two natures appears to be logically distinct from the matter of uniting the *timeless* Logos to a human nature or the *timeless* Trinity to creation. But I do want to suggest that it looks to be a small step from uniting, for example, the whole of the Son’s divinity with a whole human nature to such a union in which the Son’s divinity is understood to be duration-less and His humanity to be durational.

Furthermore, Calvin appears to favor this “top-down,” “assumptionist” sort of Christological mediation. As mentioned, this understanding requires the joining of two wholes; it does not consist of a permanent adhesion of parts. Clearly, then, the divine whole would need to be understood as, in some sense, prior to the human whole and could even be understood to *transcend* the human whole despite being in genuine union with it.

It is crucial, however, to see that for Calvin the so-called “*extra*” aspect of his Christology functions as more than merely a sign of his desire to anchor the Person of the God-man in the Son’s divine nature. It *does* function in that way, lest humans fail to be confronted by *God* in the flesh. But the *extra*, espoused as it is in the context of the Eucharist, also functions as a sign of Calvin’s desire to assure Christians that, as Douglas Farrow puts it, “finite creaturely being can be the recipient of eternal life.”²²² In a similar vein, Julie Canlis perceives that “much of Calvin’s Eucharistic theology turns on his prior realization that a truly human participation in God must happen in a truly human way.”²²³

From this viewpoint on the matter, one can see that, for Calvin, God the Son cannot be *essentially Logos asarkos*. On one hand, if the Son’s “flesh-lessness” is essential to the Son being the divine Word, then the so-called Incarnation would entail something like a radical version of the *kenosis* theory, in which the Son is divested of at least one of the attributes that are essential to His divinity. But

²²² Douglas Farrow, “Between the Rock and a Hard Place: In Support of (something like) a Reformed View of the Eucharist,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 3 (2001): 178; cited in Canlis, *Calvin’s Ladder*, 161.

²²³ Canlis, *Calvin’s Ladder*, 160.

attributes that are essential to the Son's divinity are just that; to relinquish any one of them would be to relinquish divinity. Consequently, the loss of one essential attribute is enough to change the Son into something else or, in some other way, to preclude His existence. On the other hand, if the Son cannot change, at least in the sense of ceasing to be divine due to the loss of an essential attribute, then His being essentially *asarkos* precludes the Incarnation of the *divine* Son. *What* then? How are we to characterize *Deus manifestatus in carne* – Christ as God manifest in the flesh? I suggest that an understanding such as Calvin's would characterize the ontology of the divine Son as *primarily Logos asarkos* and *secondarily* as *Logos ensarkos*.²²⁴ This is an important ontological and theological thing to say. But it is not the only thing to say. With respect to the *Person* called *Logos ensarkos*, He is forever the Word made flesh, given the Son's timeless descent *from* the Father, His enfleshed ascent *to* the Father, and His session as God-man *with* the Father.²²⁵ Although in virtue of the Son's dual nature it is appropriate to distinguish primary and secondary predicates in reference to *what* He is (regarding His twofold

²²⁴ See *Inst.* II.14.4, where Calvin prefaces a reprobation of Nestorian separation and Eutychian confusion with the following statement: "We therefore hold that Christ, as he is God and man, consisting of two natures united but not mingled, is our Lord and the true Son of God even *according to, but not by reason of*, his humanity. [Italics added.]"

²²⁵ Richard Muller recalls for us the wider Triune scope of the work of Christ: "The predestinarian principle establishes causally the center of the system as the work of God in Christ. This means that there can be no *Deus nudus absconditus*, no God abstractly considered apart from his work, in Calvin's system: we remember that all references to God 'without particularization' refer to the entire Trinity." See Muller, *Christ and the Decree*, 18.

ontology), in virtue of the unity of the Son's Person it is inappropriate to ascribe these primary and secondary predicates to *who* He is.²²⁶

But can there be something else responsibly said about the *what* of the Son's divine nature, the anchor of His Person, that elucidates the "transition" from *asarkos* to *ensarkos*? Although Calvin is not disposed to favor a discourse about *stuff* over *personal relations*, his thoughts do range quite deeply on the subject. If faced with this specific question, he would likely make the same point and then proceed to avail himself of the doctrine of Christ as Mediator. And it is important to see that he would not have us think of the Mediator as akin to a sort of "uniform" the *Logos* dons in executing His terrestrial duties. The Mediator not only *ascends*, having purchased redemption; He is one who *descends*. The Mediator is not a cobbling together of the divine and human. The Mediator indwells the decree to redeem. Moreover, the Son's "prior" rule as Mediator is not limited to redeeming. In Book II, Chapter 12 of the *Institutes*, Calvin thunders against the German Lutheran Osiander for asserting that "except in so far as he is man Christ possesses no primacy over the angels":

As if the Kingdom of God could not stand had the eternal Son of God – though not endued with human flesh – gathered together angels and men into the fellowship of his heavenly glory and life, and himself held the primacy over all!²²⁷

²²⁶ Canlis puts it nicely when she says, "What is rarely seen is that Calvin's genius is not in his separation of divine and human but in the way he distinguishes them in order to relate them properly." Canlis, *Calvin's Ladder*, 62.

²²⁷ *Inst.* II.12.7.

Canlis traces the contours of this theme and spot-lights the “cosmic significance” of Christ’s mediation and the “fundamental participation of all reality in and through him”:

Desiring to invest creation with stability and glory, Calvin does so not by giving it a chronological priority over the Jesus-of-history, but by texturing it with the mediation of the eternal Word.²²⁸

It is thus quite clear that Calvin cannot be dismissed as one who sees the works of creation and providence as exhibiting a bare volition on God’s part. They, in fact, have their root in the divine generosity.²²⁹ And, as a matter of course, he does not isolate the Son from the Father and the Spirit in the work of producing and preserving a dwelling for the creaturely community.²³⁰ Standing back, then, one can justifiably say that the all-encompassing Triune decree itself “extends” the voice of God beyond the “eternal conversation” of the divine Persons and graciously welcomes the world.

But we may read this and still wish to inquire about what accounts for the “extension” of the Trinity’s voice. Specifically, *what* in *Logos asarkos* “moves” Him to assume human flesh? As Helm reads him, Calvin takes “these distinctions” between the *Logos* in the *execution* of the decree, *in* the decree, and, yes, *prior* to the decree to “imply...that it is not necessary...that there should be grace and mercy for sinners.”:

²²⁸ Canlis, *Calvin’s Ladder*, 82.

²²⁹ See *Comm. on Genesis 28:12*.

²³⁰ See *Comm. on John 5:17*, focusing on the fact that the Scripture passage under discussion is that in which Jesus says, “My Father is working until now, and I am working [ESV]” and that in Calvin’s comments he uses the broader designator ‘God’ to denote the locus of agency.

For Calvin, to deny divine freedom in Incarnation would be at odds with the freeness of God's grace, which is so central to his evangelical theology. Freeness not only in the sense that there was nothing in fallen creation that necessitated that God act graciously, and because such grace is (according to God's unfathomable election) freely bestowed on some human beings and not on others. God could have justly withheld his mercy, and he could justly be merciful to Smith rather than Jones. And he could justly have redeemed everyone. The assertion, 'I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy (Rom. 9:15) is foundational for him...'.²³¹

The essence of divine grace consists, at least partly, in its utter non-necessity. And when the grace discussed above, whereby the Trinity creates, preserves, and redeems, is taken into account, the non-necessity of the world's existence and preservation from the standpoint *prior to* the decree follows quite naturally. Furthermore, Calvin's proclivity for dwelling on the close-knit nature of the Triune Persons only accentuates the Godhead's self-sufficiency and richness *sans* creation and redemption.

We then return to the challenge of the previous chapter, that of affirming the contingency of creation while affirming an Augustinian brand of timelessness and immutability. We have already seen here that Calvin's theology is comfortable with the latter affirmation and also seeks to accommodate the works of creation and redemption. Following right alongside the contingency of Incarnation is that of Creation.

The question then becomes: If one's theology says that being the Creator is not essential to God being God, then how does the reality of creation not stand in

²³¹ Quoted from a pre-publication draft (found at <http://paulhelmsdeep.blogspot.com/>) of Paul Helm, "John Calvin and the Hiddenness of God," in *Engaging the Doctrine of God*, ed. Bruce McCormack (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic and Rutherford House, 2007).

tension with God's eternal essence? From a paper of his focused on the more local level of Christology, some remarks made by Helm offer good guidance to our thoughts here. He is attempting to counter Bruce McCormack's Barthian claim that the "logical 'space'" Calvin reserves for the *Logos* to refrain from assuming human flesh amounts to mere "role-playing" when he writes:

The idea is that X could just as easily have assumed a different role. But this is a pretty extreme claim. If you ask John Cleese to impersonate Winston Churchill as a war leader, then for a while he 'assumes the role' of the great man, though being totally unfitted for the task. But what of Churchill himself? Churchill wasn't essentially a war leader, but he became one. Did he for this reason merely 'play the role' of a war leader, as John Cleese may play the role of Churchill when he attempts to impersonate him? Clearly not. When war was declared events proved that he was eminently fitted to be a war leader. There was a naturalness, a fittingness, between Churchill's character and temperament, together with his past political record before he became Prime Minister, and his decision to become Prime Minister in a time of war. In similar fashion may not what is naturally implied by the pre-Barthian Reformed (and Catholic) doctrine of the Incarnation be that in freely willing to become incarnate in Jesus Christ the *logos asarkos* did something which was a fit or consistent or appropriate expression of his character, not only of his omnipotence and omnipresence and his being Lord and Creator, but of what we may call his moral character?²³²

This seems a sound reply to those who think that a "backstage grace" as exhibited in Calvin's *extra* is conducive to either a deistic God-concept or a modalist doctrine in which the Son "tries on" human flesh like one would a costume, or some combination thereof. What is more, when the Gospel of John's *Logos* prologue, patterned as it is after the Genesis creation account, is taken together with the statement of Jesus in chapter 14 of the same book that "He who has seen me has seen the Father," a wider implication for the doctrine of God becomes clear.

²³² Helm, "John Calvin and the Hiddenness of God," in *Engaging the Doctrine of God*.

Essentially, a Christian theology strongly committed to the divine self-sufficiency, in order to do justice to the “breakout” of God’s creative and redemptive action, will need to affirm a “Trinitarian ontology” in which the *non-necessity* of God being Immanuel is coupled with His *aptness* for being so.

To say this, of course, is to set forth something of an elucidation of a certain concept of God. Much mystery still remains. And this fact ought not bother us if we take seriously Calvin’s belief that God is of such a “depth” that He cannot be comprehended by us. Predicates such as ‘eternal,’ therefore, while not entirely devoid of positive content, stand as markers useful for keeping our thoughts about God within bounds. And by honoring those boundary markers, as the Dominican philosopher Herbert McCabe tells us, we hope to keep ourselves from idols.

In seeking to ensure that we have our doctrinal boundary markers correctly in place, McCabe is emphatic that God’s eternality blocks the idea of Him being or having a “life story” *as such*. All the same, he proceeds to argue that, given the intimately shared purpose of the Persons of the Godhead, the Incarnation is the exclusive “storying” of God’s life.²³³ I would differ slightly with McCabe on this, citing the aforementioned parallels between Incarnation and Creation and the smooth connection Calvin recognizes between Creation and Providence in favor of a broader storying of intra-Trinitarian love and fulfillment. There is a sense in which all of God’s works *ad extra* (toward the outside) can be understood as a storying; one might think of the full execution of the hidden decree as forming the widescreen

²³³ McCabe, “The involvement of God,” in *God Matters*, 48-51.

upon which the life of God is more narrowly projected in the incarnational humiliation and exaltation of Jesus. I would also stop short of McCabe's somewhat exaggerated contention that there is no such thing as the "pre-incarnate" Christ. Although he does an admirable job of spelling out the atemporal character of the Son's "descent," I believe that the *concept* (assuming that a cogent concept of non-temporal priority is available) of the pre-incarnate Christ or, more properly, *Logos asarkos*, is warranted from the standpoint of Christ's own testimony about a life He enjoyed with His Father, His status as "I am" vis-à-vis Abraham, and so forth.

Reflection upon this argument of McCabe's, however, succeeds in opening up a line of thought that will propel us into the next chapter. For there is at least one significant dis-analogy between the *Creational* "storying" and *Incarnational* "storying" of the divine life. Or is there? What we are really thinking about here relates both to the nature of time and to the knowledge or experience that God has of time, perhaps in sharp contrast to human knowledge or experience of time. More particularly, the issue I am raising here relates to the status of "temporal indexicals" (e.g., "I'm graduating tomorrow" or "Four score and seven years ago...") and how their place in our language and thought may or may not "link up" with a fundamental "temporal becoming." Theologically, this issue has great bearing on God's relation to the creation, His presence with those in time, *what* He knows vis-à-vis temporal indexicals, the nature of that knowledge, the nature of divine action, and the like. If, on the one hand, God's timelessness means that creation's temporality is best illuminated by a "tenseless" (or *B-theoretic*) idea of time, then

God's more general, providential storying of His life would, *prima facie*, not include the "capture" of indexicals from a temporal standpoint; to wit, His decree could account for tenseless facts (a temporal ordering in terms of the relations of *beforeness, afterness, and simultaneity*) and the non-intrinsically tensed (i.e., merely "indexing") beliefs and statements of temporally located individuals. If, on the other hand, somehow, God's timelessness squares with a "tensed" (or A-theoretic) idea of time, then His omniscience would guarantee the "capture" of indexicals from a temporal standpoint.

Now we can clearly agree that the Incarnate Word has an experience of *tenses* with respect to His *human* nature. There is an important sense in which Jesus' action in calming the storm on the Sea of Galilee, for example, came on the heels of a nap He'd been enjoying a few minutes before – i.e., in His past. A crucial question, however, in the whole debate over God and time, concerns whether there is a sort of metaphysical objectivity about pastness, presentness, and futurity. Or should temporal tenses rather be construed as merely fixing an individual's location within an ordered series of events? A distinct but equally crucial question in the philosophy of religion concerns, for instance, the nature of the Incarnate Word's knowledge of temporal reality with respect to His *divine* nature. Or, more broadly, does God's knowledge of temporal reality include intrinsically tensed propositions or facts?

So, is there a conception of time that best fits with the concept of a duration-less, event-less eternity? And if so, which one? This covers one area of thought,

that pertaining to the coherence or consistency of the God-concept affirmed and articulated in these pages with particular conceptions of time. But what about when we have settled on answers to these questions? There still will remain questions in our minds about the cogency of the God-concept we have chosen to endorse, not to mention the time-concept we have chosen to pair with it. In the next chapter, I offer a broad-stroked defense of a particular conception of time. This defense will prepare the way for Chapter 5, in which I will attempt to overcome a possible objection to the pairing of divine eternity with the conception of time defended. This objection is primarily based on the suspicion that this pairing undermines God's presence with "temporal others" and the intrinsically temporal reality in which they live and move.

CHAPTER 4

TOWARD A TENSELESS CONCEPTION OF TIME

Among philosophers, there are two prominent schools of thought on the nature of time. There are, firstly, those who believe that the present is distinguished from other times by being officially NOW. The official NOW does not merely pick out a date or a relative position at which an agent perceives things, participates in an event, or performs an action. For proponents of this view, there is only one present, that mobile bit of reality wedged between the equally official “already” and “not yet.” There are also among philosophers, however, those who believe that the present is distinguished from other times not by being officially NOW but by being *when* these events rather than those other events take place, *when* these actions rather than those other actions are taken. For proponents of this view, saying that a given time is present amounts to nothing more than picking out events, perceptions, and actions that are future relative to an earlier time and past relative to a later time. On this view, all times, one might say, are officially present, and so none of them are.

I. Opening Remarks on Time and Time’s God

These beliefs about time sketched above point to some fundamental options available to those interested in addressing the question of whether God is temporal or atemporal. Temporalists, on the one hand, however they may differ among themselves over the ontological status of the “future” and the “past” and God’s

knowledge (or ignorance) of these, agree that there is an official present in God's knowledge. God can only know the facts or propositions He knows about the present *in* the present, i.e., when a moment or event is officially NOW. Thus, some philosophers of religion understand God the Creator to be perpetually acquiring and shedding infallible beliefs about, for example, what events are presently occurring (e.g., my writing of Chapter 4). Indubitably, if some of God's beliefs about the details of history are tensed, they are not all present tensed (what would it mean for *history* if they were?). Atemporalists, on the other hand, conceive of God not as "tracking" a lone present but as transcendently "ranging over" all times. A complication here consists in the fact that not all defenders of classical eternalism concede that the timeless God lacks knowledge of an official present. That is, they attempt to combine divine timelessness with a conception of time that entails an official present, something I doubt can be done without producing logical contradictions. I will not, however, endeavor in this dissertation to critique directly the efforts of those such as Eleonore Stump who try to combine eternalism with a tensed (or *A*-theoretic) account of time.

Instead, I will assume that if timeless eternalism is to be defensible and commendable it should be explicated in terms of a tenseless (or *B*-theoretic) account of time. This assessment, as earlier noted, gains the approval of William Lane Craig and yet Craig demurs from classical, timeless eternalism, *inter alia*, because he thinks that tenseless theories of time fail ontologically to account for change and fail phenomenologically to account for our experience of change. I find Craig to be

mistaken on both counts. The *B* theory should not be construed as a stumbling block on the way to eternalism, and the present chapter is set forth with the intention of leading one to that conclusion.

We should grant, of course, that, apart from a quite ambitious theistic argument, considerations weighing in favor of the *B* theory fail to establish the existence of a timeless, divine standpoint. Yet there are considerations that succeed, I believe, in showing that a commitment to the doctrine of divine timelessness is best served by a tenseless account of time, thus critiquing at least indirectly the views of eternalists such as Stump who would affirm a tensed account. All the same, a minimal goal of this dissertation is to commend and defend classical Christian eternalism and strong immutability (drawing out the latter's implications for impassibility). Therefore, because these intimately bound viewpoints are arguably underdetermined by any tenseless account of time, the motivation for assimilating beliefs in divine timeless eternity and strong immutability into one's web of beliefs should not wholly originate from a tenseless account of time. The motivation should, at least in part, come from another quarter – that of theological belief.

I do not, however, intend to provide here a thoroughgoing theological exposition and defense of these doctrines. The preceding three chapters, for one, while focusing on particular aspects of and difficulties facing the eternalism-impassibilism thesis, aimed to secure for the thesis some *prima facie* plausibility. To those can be added the work of Paul Helm, who gives a *reductio ad absurdum* to

the effect that it is no more legitimate to attribute temporality than spatiality to the Lord.²³⁴ One could also confer with Michael Dodds, who stresses that God’s “dynamic stillness” (immutability) is located in a stable richness of Trinitarian love whose generous reach extends out to encompass creatures.²³⁵

What I intend here, firstly, is to make more explicit the plausible claim that if God is timeless and knows all there is to know, then His experience of time is not tensed, and, therefore, time is not tensed. God’s omniscience precludes the “coming to know” that characterizes the epistemic lives of temporal agents and this appears to entail tenseless time.²³⁶ Secondly, in this chapter I intend to show that there are

²³⁴ Paul Helm, “Indexicals and Spacelessness,” in *Eternal God*, 41-55.

²³⁵ Michael J. Dodds, O.P., “The Motion of the Motionless God,” in *The Unchanging God of Love: Thomas Aquinas & Contemporary Theology on Divine Immutability* 2nd ed. (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2008), 161-203.

²³⁶ I acknowledge that some will dispute this claim, perhaps preferring to pair an omniscient deity who possesses exhaustive foreknowledge with what will later be described as “the moving spotlight” view of time. This is the view that all objects and events of the past and future are as real as present events and that what times are denoted by ‘past,’ ‘present,’ and ‘future’ depends upon *when* the absolute NOW is. I argue that this picture of time cannot be described in a logically consistent fashion. Aside from that, however, a (temporal) god who knows at t_1 that “E will take place at t_2 ” lacks at t_1 a knowledge that he will have at t_2 , namely, that “E is presently taking place.” It would be consistent with his position for the temporalist to answer that the second proposition isn’t strictly true at t_1 but is only true at t_2 . Given a tensed theory of time, therefore, God’s omniscience appears to remain intact. Nevertheless, what does seem to follow is that a god whose knowledge is tensed cannot know some propositions that a timeless god could know. A timeless god’s knowledge that “E is presently taking place” treats ‘presently’ as an indexical that could pick out any time simultaneous with the belief or utterance that “E is presently taking place.” Admittedly, this will only figure as a telling rebuttal if a cogent account of tenseless time is available, which I have yet to show.

Nonetheless, it might be further objected that if God is to be understood as timeless then the demands of omniscience require that He be able cognitively to capture so-called tensed facts. I remain unconvinced of this. As others have suggested, if God’s omniscience is believed to include tensed facts (as are allegedly implied in statements such as “Our victory is *soon to take place*.”), then so should it be thought to include the capture of first-person pronouns (whose referents will vary depending on who the speaker is) as these crop up in the thoughts or utterances of individuals (e.g. “God saved *me*.”). After all, a *temporal* god presumably can know tensed facts because he operates within a temporal continuum. But such a god cannot, for example, capture the first-person ‘me’ spoken or thought by a creature, for the simple reason that *he is not a creature*. God may know that “I have a sore throat” is known by Jones but He cannot know the proposition that Jones knows without actually *being* Jones. He will require a proposition featuring third-person surrogates for the first-person pronouns. If this response, however, is available to temporalists, then they will need to

good, independent reasons for holding to a tenseless account of time and that the absence (or non-intrinsic character) of “tensed facts” is compatible with the tensed language and beliefs of temporal agents. Thirdly, in Chapter 5, I intend to overcome the claim that tenseless time precludes God’s presence with those who, being in time, think and speak in terms of temporal indexicals to make sense of their experience.

For some, such as Craig, the assertion of *B*-theoretic eternalists that time is un-tensed provides grounds for a seemingly easy dismissal of timeless eternalism.²³⁷ But quick dismissals are out of order here. One reason for this is that tenseless accounts of time are, as a rule, much simpler than tensed accounts, calling for a slimmed down ontology in contrast to the latter. Tenseless theorists ontologically require only *before*, *simultaneous with*, and *after*, whereas, tensed theorists require these, plus the idea that *past*, *present*, and *future* function within a metaphysic of “dynamic becoming,” not merely indexing a particular standpoint or location within the temporal matrix. It stands to reason that this fact alone relieves “de-tensers” of some of the epistemic burdens shouldered by their “tensing” counterparts. In making this observation I am not attempting to minimize the task at hand – that of tenselessly accounting for time’s direction and our temporal experience. I am simply noting that tensed accounts of time have more to explain than accounts that

show a relevant disanalogy between the tenses and personal pronouns, demonstrating why omniscience must include a knowledge of tensed facts but not be required to capture the sense (and not merely pick out the referent) of true statements containing first-person pronouns. Otherwise, those temporalists insisting that divine omniscience entails knowledge of tensed facts should also insist that omniscience likely entails some form of pantheism or panpsychism.

²³⁷ See William Lane Craig, “Tensed Time and Our Differential Experience of the Past and Future,” *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 37, no. 4 (1999): 515-37.

treat the tenseless relations (or perhaps their causal or entropic preconditions) as ontologically basic, swearing off the official, moving NOW.²³⁸ This much bears mentioning at the outset in order to clarify and justify initially the standards by which the present chapter should be evaluated.

In particular, an adequate philosophical account of time should meet the following standards: (1) give an explanation of the *direction* essential to time that is free of internal contradiction; (2) give an explanation of the *sense* of direction that humans have (i.e., account for our temporal experience) in a way consistent with the account of time's direction. If this apparent reduction of standards to a more manageable *B*-theoretic level effectively marginalizes the present thesis for some, then that cannot be altogether helped. Let it be emphasized, however, that these standards are set forth here as at least partially the *result* of a careful examination of various options in the metaphysics of time; they are not set forth in order to prejudice the outcome of the current study.

Let it also be reiterated that although there are theological influences motivating the present defense of tenseless time, this dissertation does not treat timeless eternalism as an essential plank within orthodox Christian belief. A safe distance, therefore, stands between normative Christian belief and eternalism should no sound tenseless account of time ever surface or, more specifically, should the defense of tenseless time undertaken in the following pages be found wanting logically, phenomenologically, or theologically. This is not to suggest that the

²³⁸ A possible exception to this would be some forms of Presentism. I will contend, however, that Presentist ontologies are too thin, failing to account for change and our experience of it.

absence of what might be considered indefeasible arguments in its favor should be reckoned as a mark against eternalism's truth. Plausibly, proponents and opponents of eternalism alike could have a sort of epistemic warrant for their respective positions, depending on what other beliefs or commitments they have. The point here is that whatever epistemic basis there might be for embracing or rejecting eternalism, considerations in the philosophy of time have a legitimate and significant, if not exclusive, role to play in forming that basis.

I should also point out that this distinction between time's direction and a human *sense* of temporal direction deliberately conveys the point that what might be "common sense" intuitions about time should not be assumed to be metaphysically informative, one way or the other. For example, we should avoid making it a matter of principle that an accurate accounting of tensed belief and tensed language – taking tense seriously – will entail a metaphysics that includes those "bits of reality" (to use Robin Le Poidevin's phrase) known as tensed facts. To do so would amount to a begging of the question about what constitutes temporal reality. Indeed, in this chapter I will defend a "revisionary" ontology – a conception in which the line-up of temporal items is characterized in a way that does not rely on references to the tensed character of human belief, human language, or human action. If eternalism is defensible, then its defense will need to take this revisionary form, or so I maintain.

Some critics, nonetheless, charge that eternalism's ontology is not expansive enough. On one hand, eternalism stresses the analogy between time and space, picturing all events – past, present, and future – as constitutive of an ordered

temporal matrix. This outlook encourages at least the self-conscious philosopher of time to take a perspective that is indifferent to any particular date (analogous to the indifference one would have to any particular point in space). Temporal indexicals such as ‘now’ are compared to spatial indexicals such as ‘here’ and are said to pick out no privileged position in addition to the fact that certain events occur ‘now’ (or ‘here’) and not elsewhen (or elsewhere). A serious challenge for eternalists, therefore, is to show that the endorsed analogy between time and space does not force one to trade *change* (which is essential to time’s “timeness” on the view being defended) for mere *difference* (as one finds between things or events in space). On the other hand, eternalism must account for the human *sense* of direction that is often taken as evidence that time “flows.” Many critics argue that an adequate account of our experience of time will welcome at least some metaphysically informative temporal indexicals. That is, they dispute the claim that these merely serve the purpose of locating a given agent’s memories, perceptions, plans, and actions within the temporal matrix.

Put into simple philosophical jargon, we here must confront a variant of the ancient philosophical problem of permanence and change. How does one acknowledge change while defending the thesis that all changes fall within a single matrix of changeless relations between earlier and later events? Philosophically, the *B*-theorist must make sense of time’s intrinsic direction (i.e., secure a crucial disanalogy between time and space) without, I assert, succumbing to the proposition that a privileged present or “moving NOW” is necessary to do so. Theologically,

the eternalist must somehow avoid conceptually undermining the reality of history – of providence and progressive revelation – in following through with the implications of a divine decree that is timeless.

This chapter, however, will not take the approach of simply starting with a tenseless account of time and defending it against critical attacks. Rather, I wish to proceed by focusing on the problem (or, more properly, problems) of change (or temporal direction) and on some of the ways that recent philosophers of time have addressed them. In this vein, I shall begin with a famous argument given by a philosopher who would have us conclude that time is unreal.

II. McTaggart's Untimely Argument

A look at the current literature in the philosophy of time reveals that a large portion of it is focused upon ongoing debates between advocates of what are known as the *A* and *B* theories of time. When one reflects upon the fact that the distinction between the *A* series and *B* series was introduced by a single philosopher, J.M.E. McTaggart, around a century ago, this figures as a somewhat strange state of affairs. Yet it should hardly appear strange that the majority of those inheriting McTaggart's distinction have not concluded with him that nothing exists in time. Implicit in this assortment of facts seems to be a consensus that McTaggart came close to the mark in describing the options available to philosophers of time but went seriously awry somewhere in his evaluation of one of those options. This chapter will not principally question the legitimacy of the choice between the *A* and *B* theories but

will examine them before commending one over the other. I will begin by attending to the specific premises defended and inferences drawn by McTaggart in support of his “untimely” conclusion.²³⁹

McTaggart’s basic strategy consists in a simple three-step procedure. First, call into question a proposition that very few would even pretend to doubt, that change is real. Second, contend that change is essential to time. Third, attempt to show through a process of reasoning that there is no change and, therefore, no time, given that one of the two available theories of change is materially inadequate (unless built upon the other) and the other is logically contradictory.

In his 1933 book *The Nature of Existence*, McTaggart holds that there are two theories or “ways” in terms of which one can think about positions in time. In one way, each temporal position comes before or after other positions:

To constitute such a series there is required a transitive asymmetrical relation, and a collection of terms such that, of any two of them, either the first is in this relation to the second, or the second is in this relation to the first.²⁴⁰

Here he is describing, as should be clear by now, what he goes on to call the *B* series, a fixed order of events or moments. Each position within the series is either earlier or later than every other position. All of the ordered positions are held to stand in a temporal sequence but no “spotlight” temporarily skates over any one

²³⁹ The source from which I draw McTaggart’s argument is a reprinting of chapter 33 of his book *The Nature of Existence*, ii (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1927), whose title has been changed by the editors of the reprint from simply “Time” to “The Unreality of Time.” The reason for the title change, as the editors say, is because the chapter is a restatement of arguments advanced in an earlier article published under the latter title.

²⁴⁰ J.M.E. McTaggart, “The Unreality of Time,” in *Philosophy of Time*, eds. Robin Le Poidevin and Murray MacBeath (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 24.

position. No facts testify as to what events or moments are past, present, or future. These are, rather, terms that stand in relation to an “unofficial now,” fixing a given temporal agent’s memories, perceptions, expectations, etc., at a particular time.

In the other way, known as the *A* series, each temporal position would find its place in line based upon where the “spotlight” of the Present falls. Integral to this series is the distinction of Past, Present, and Future. These distinctions, McTaggart insists, are incompatible with each other (a premise that is fundamental to his argument that change and, therefore time, is impossible) and are “attached” to time; i.e., they are what they are independent of human experience. If an event is NOW present, it cannot also be future or past. So, if 2011 is now present, then it is the case that 2011 *was* future and that 2011 *will be* past.

According to McTaggart, if we are to account for change and, therefore, time, then we must hold that either the *A* or the *B* series is a more basic characterization of time than the other. He does not, however, mean by this that we could ever, in fact, have one series without the other. Firstly, there can be no *B* series without an *A* series, he argues, because the simple *B* series on its own is not sufficient to constitute a *temporal* series. This comes out in how he deals with the view of Bertrand Russell, an advocate of a tenseless account of time:

It will be noticed that Mr. Russell looks for change, not in the events in the time-series, but in the entity to which those events happen, or of which they are states.²⁴¹

²⁴¹ Ibid., 27.

For Russell, as for many tenseless theorists, the distinction between *things* and *events* is a crucial one with respect to one's account of change. On the Russellian view, the event of a poker being hot on a particular Monday at Cambridge and never hot before or since is an unchanging, tenseless fact. Yet the poker itself does change, seeing as there are times when the poker is hot and times when it is not hot. But McTaggart finds this line of reasoning unconvincing:

[T]his makes no change in the qualities of the poker. It is always a quality of that poker that it is one which is hot on that particular Monday. And it is always a quality of that poker that it is one which is not hot at any other time. But these qualities are true of it at any time – the time when it is hot and the time when it is cold. And therefore it seems to be erroneous to say that there is any change in the poker. The fact that it is hot at one point in a series and cold at other points cannot give change, if neither of these facts change – and neither of them does. Nor does any other fact about the poker change, unless its presentness, pastness, or futurity change.²⁴²

Because, on this view, the *B* series cannot account for change (and thus time), the *B* series cannot stand on its own. And to leave it on its own would provide, at best, an account of *differences* but differences that are, in a sense, permanent.

On the flipside, neither can the *A* series stand on its own, according to McTaggart. The reason for this, to build on the previous thoughts, is because any series in which positions are *temporally* ordered in terms of the earlier-later relation derive their standing in that order from where they are situated vis-à-vis an objective Past, Present, and Future:

Since distinctions of the first [*B* series] class are permanent, it might be thought that they were more objective, and more essential to the nature of time, than those of the second [*A* series] class. I believe, however, that this would be a mistake, and that the distinction of past, present, and future is as

²⁴² Ibid., 28.

essential to time as the distinction of earlier and later, while in a certain sense it may...be regarded as more *fundamental* than the distinction of earlier and later.²⁴³

The *B* series is thus understood to be parasitic on the *A* series, which is essential for time. Theoretically, according to McTaggart, if anything exists in time, then it exists in the *A* series and only derivatively in the *B* series. For him, the *B* series cannot exist ontologically on par with *A* series relations. No primitive *B* series relations exist, and *B* series truths (e.g., “The year 1999 comes [tenseless] *after* the year 1998.”) only obtain if *A* series relations (or qualities, or properties) obtain (e.g., “The year 1998 is finally over.”).

But there is a deeper sense, he says, in which the *A* series cannot stand, having to do with what he believes is a logical contradiction at its heart. And on that basis he finds it necessary to conclude that time is unreal.

Philosophers must bear in mind two facts about McTaggart’s argument for the impossibility of an existent *A* series. If borne in mind, these two facts will, I believe, both shed light on the basic thrust of his argument and render it quite compelling. The first of these relates to why McTaggart affirms that the *A* series is essential for time. The main reason is that he wants to account for our experience of change but finds the *B* series insufficiently outfitted to do so. Most crucially, the *B* series leaves out of its framework the ontological furniture necessary to accommodate “temporal becoming” or a moving NOW. The existence of an official NOW is, for McTaggart, indispensable to the reality of change; furthermore, he

²⁴³ Ibid., 24.

believes that there is a home for the NOW in the A series. The second fact that philosophers must bear in mind concerns a premise of McTaggart's argument itself. The premise, as stated above, asserts that 'past,' 'present,' and 'future' are not simply indexical terms. They represent ontological determinations that are "incompatible" with each other. As he puts it, "Every event must be one or the other, but no event can be more than one." Indeed, the incompatibility between A-determinations is "essential to change, and therefore to time."²⁴⁴

It appears evident to McTaggart, however, that if terms positioned in a series are each assigned an exclusive A-determination (e.g., "Event Q is future") then there can be no change. "For the only change we can get," he says, "is from future to present, and from present to past."²⁴⁵ If there is to be change, then a position must first have an A series determination and then lose it. Otherwise, there seems no point to invoking the A series in order to account for change. At this stage, one can more clearly see the pivotal role played by the official, moving NOW for champions of an A-theoretic account of time. But McTaggart concedes no comfort to the advocates of an A series who conceive of past-present-future as shifting from one event or moment to the next.

The heart of what is known as McTaggart's paradox results from the following combination of ideas: To give us change (i.e., time), the ordered positions must have incompatible A series relations (or qualities, or properties). But a temporal position does not permanently possess only a single A series relation. For

²⁴⁴ Ibid., 32.

²⁴⁵ Ibid., 32.

example, the proposition “The 1986 World Series happened last year” was only true in 1987 and has not been true in any year since. Thus, the *A* theorist adds a further condition for achieving change, namely, the march of the NOW or, as McTaggart envisions, a sort of conveyer-belt shift of events from the remote future, to soon-to-be, to present, to the recent past, to way back when. But this creates a perplexing picture in which all temporal positions possess more than one (and in all but two possible cases – namely, the hypothetical first and last terms of a temporal series – all three) of the supposedly incompatible *A* series determinations:

If *M* is past, it has been present and future. If it is future, it will be present and past. If it is present, it has been future and will be past. Thus all the three characteristics belong to each event.²⁴⁶

He wonders how this is consistent with the premise that the *A* series characteristics are mutually exclusive. Even worse, however, is the fact that the flow of a moving NOW through the terms of the series, the very feature thought necessary to salvage time, appears to preclude change. For if all the terms of the series have all three relations to the hypothesized official present, then no event or moment in fact *changes*, say, from being future to being less future, or from being future to being present, or from being past to being deeper in the past. In a defense of McTaggart’s paradox, L. Nathan Oaklander claims that this attribution of incompatible *A*-determinations to terms in a series leaves the *A*-theorist without an “account for the direction of time and change.”²⁴⁷ Moreover, he reiterates that “the...claim that every event/thing/moment has all three *A*-determinations *is not assumed but is*

²⁴⁶ Ibid., 32.

²⁴⁷ L. Nathan Oaklander, “McTaggart’s Paradox Defended,” in *The Ontology of Time*, series ed. Quentin Smith (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 2004), 54.

implied by the view – endorsed by A-theorists – that change requires temporal becoming.”²⁴⁸

A-theorists have often replied to this conundrum by admitting that positions in the temporal series possess incompatible characteristics; they assert that this presents no problem. The possession of mutually exclusive attributes *would be* a problem if the A-determinations were said to apply to a given temporal item simultaneously. But they do not apply simultaneously. They only apply successively. A recent A-theorist, Steven Savitt, takes this line in his article “A Limited Defense of Passage,” where he claims:

No A-theorist ever intended to assert that any event is (in the ordinary, tensed sense of the copula) currently present and past and future. No reason has been given to suppose that the A-theory is willy-nilly committed to holding that some event *e* is (again in the ordinary, tensed sense of the copula) future, present, and past. But if the A-theory is not committed to (6) [the symbolic statement representing what Savitt is denying, namely ‘Pe & Ne & Fe’ – P.O.], ...McTaggart’s argument fails at its *first* step.”²⁴⁹

Oaklander objects and says that Savitt’s response is guilty of overlooking McTaggart’s first step, the denial of ontologically primitive (*B* series) temporal relations. But Savitt reads the latter as claiming that A-properties exist “in addition to the *B* series and its unchanging relations.”²⁵⁰ He does not recognize that, for McTaggart, *B* series truths are parasitic on *A* series facts. This misreading, Oaklander holds, prevents Savitt from seeing that the attempt to solve McTaggart’s “incompatibilities problem” through an appeal to succession leaves him arguing in a

²⁴⁸ Ibid., 54 (emphasis mine).

²⁴⁹ Steven F. Savitt, “A Limited Defense of Passage,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 38, no. 3 (July 2001): 263; quoted in Oaklander, *The Ontology of Time*.

²⁵⁰ Ibid., 261.

vicious circle. In a similar article on the topic, Oaklander explains the nature of that circle:

McTaggart's account of change involves the claim that every event in [an] apple's history changes with respect to the properties of pastness, presentness, and futurity. However, A-changes in events can account for time and avoid the incompatibilities problem only if events gain and lose A-properties *successively*. Unfortunately, given McTaggart's positive conception of time that can only mean that *first* the apple's being green is present and the apple's being red is future, and *then* the apple's being green is past and the apple's being red is present, or more simply, that the green apple is present *before* the red apple is present. As the italicized words indicate, however, time, or, more specifically, the temporal relation of *earlier than*, must be assumed in order to account for A-changes in events, that is, for events having incompatible A-characteristics. But as McTaggart says, 'we have already seen that the A-series has to be assumed in order to account for time' [...].²⁵¹

The way out of this dilemma for A-theorists, clearly, would be to account for the succession of events depicted in the *B* series without resorting to a *B* series ontology in the account. More specifically, the succession of events must be explained in some fundamental way in terms of something like an official NOW. But the cogency of such an explanation most certainly would require one to distinguish epistemologically an official NOW (if it exists) from the *B* theorist's more pedestrian present, in which the tensed thoughts and utterances of a temporal agent are indexed to a position within a tenseless series of earlier and later events. And it remains to be seen whether this can be done.

The philosopher Nicholas J.J. Smith stands by McTaggart's contention that the *A* theory involves a contradiction and, therefore, is incorrect. According to Smith's classification scheme, McTaggart's *A* series would fall under the rubric of

²⁵¹ Oaklander, "McTaggart's Paradox and Smith's Tensed Theory of Time," in *The Ontology of Time*, 159.

the “moving spotlight view: eternalism + A-theory.” Eternalism, he explains, takes the objects and events of the past and future to be “just as real as the present time and present events and objects”:

Eternalism may be compared with the common-sense view about places. Consider some objects in your immediate vicinity and some distant objects, and ask yourself: are the objects around you more real than the distant objects? The common-sense answer is No. Although one cannot see or touch distant objects in the way one can nearby ones, this just means that nearby objects are *epistemically* privileged – they are easier to know about – not that they are *metaphysically* privileged. Distant objects are just as real as nearby ones; not only the objects around here exist – distant objects exist too.²⁵²

Proponents of the “moving spotlight view” demur, however, from what Smith and others call “the block universe view” in holding that “there *is* an objective now, and an objective flow of time...”.²⁵³ That is, they believe there is a profound dis-analogy between ‘now’ and ‘here.’²⁵⁴ Namely, the former, whenever uttered or thought, marks a metaphysically privileged present whereas the latter is only used to pick out a particular spatial location (‘here’) as opposed to others (‘over there’). By combining eternalism and a privileged NOW, those holding to the moving spotlight view would seek to preserve permanence (procured by the equally real times) and accommodate change (procured by the objective NOW).

But Smith claims that this combination is inherently contradictory. The existence of a privileged NOW implies that it is not the case that all times are

²⁵² Nicholas J.J. Smith, “Inconsistency in the A-Theory,” in *PhilPapers*, <http://www-personal.usyd.edu.au/~njjsmith/papers/SmithInconsistencyAtheory.pdf>, 2.

²⁵³ Ibid., 5.

²⁵⁴ Tenseless theorists also believe that there is a profound dis-analogy between ‘now’ and ‘here.’ But the difference is not that there is an official NOW as opposed to an official HERE. Rather, the fundamental difference for the tenseless theorist is that ‘now’ picks out a point in time – whose items form an ordered series with an intrinsic direction – as opposed to ‘here,’ which picks out a point in space – whose items can be ordered in a series but one that lacks an intrinsic direction.

equally real (because the NOW confers a *metaphysical* privilege). And thus A-theoretic change cannot be described free of contradiction.

To clarify why it is that McTaggart's A series cannot be consistently described, Smith calls on us to represent the A-theorist's position in a drawn space-time diagram:

Our spacetime diagram is to show everything that has happened, is happening and will happen, everywhere in the universe [sic]. Now because it is a picture of the A-theorist's view, we have to show where the objective *now* is. Well, the now has to be in [the year] 1800 – to represent the fact that as of 1800, 1800 was present (remember, the diagram shows everything that ever was, is, or will be). It also has to be in 1900 – to represent the fact that as of 1900, 1900 was present. It also has to be in 3000 – to represent the fact that as of 3000, 3000 will be present. And so on: the now has to be everywhen. What about the objective property of pastness? Well, 1800 has to be shown as having this property – to represent the fact that as of 1900, 1800 was past. So already we have 1800 having the property *present*, and the property of *past*. That's already a contradiction, given that these are A-properties. (There is of course no contradiction if the multiple properties which 1800 is shown as having are just the B-properties of being simultaneous with 1800, being before 1900, and so on – but then the A-theory collapses to the B-theory.) By the same reasoning we can multiply the contradictions: *every* time must be shown as having *all three* of the incompatible A-properties *past*, *present*, and *future*.²⁵⁵

²⁵⁵ Ibid., 10. Heather Dyke is another recent defender of McTaggart's paradox. Lamenting that the obscurity of McTaggart's paradox has "tended to blunt its force," Dyke holds that a tensed theory of time must feature (1) the distinction between incompatible properties of past, present, future and (2) the acquiring and shedding of temporal properties. She argues that these two features cannot both be combined into a single, coherent theory, giving attention to a number of different accounts of tensed time to show that this is the case. See Heather Dyke, "The Pervasive Paradox of Tense," *Grazer Philosophische Studien* 62 (2001): 103-124. Also, see William Hasker, "The Absence of a Timeless God," in *God and Time: Essays in the Divine Nature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 191-92. Hasker has a great deal of sympathy with the conclusion of this McTaggartian paradox. He rehearses a "theistic reconstruction" of it set forth by Gregory Ganssle from which the latter wishes to conclude that a temporal god can be immediately aware only of present facts. The gist of the argument is that if God has an immediate awareness of all times then nothing is distinguished in His knowledge as having a special NOW property. Hasker believes, however, that God's knowledge need not *entirely* consist of immediate awareness. He thinks that if one stipulates that God *judges* at, say, t_2 , that t_2 is now present, then t_2 is indeed thus distinguished. Though he acknowledges that at t_1 and t_3 God also makes "is present" judgments, Hasker thinks that this plurality of judgments can be overcome by further stipulating that, at t_2 , God *actually judges* that it is t_2 and "he does *not* make this judgment at t_2 about t_1 or t_3 ." But this misses the point, I think. For, would

Smith appears to succeed here, at the least, in showing that if one insists on an ontological equality of all times, as McTaggart does, then one cannot account for the succession of events by identifying an official, moving NOW. For the effort to depict in a single diagram Smith's "spotlight" version of space-time results in the attribution of incompatible A-properties to events, events that are, *ex hypothesi*, non-simultaneous. Simply put, McTaggart's A series does appear to end in paradox, unable to describe consistently the exchange of one A-property (or A-relation) for another.

If we are willing to treat the official NOW, however, as being sufficient to distinguish the A theory from other theories, then it does not follow from McTaggart's paradox that there could not be constructed an A series that is free of internal contradiction. Even if McTaggart and Smith have succeeded in refuting a *particular version* of the A series, they have not thereby refuted any possible version of it. This being the case, we can ask: Could the A series be made more viable if certain of its features were to be excised?

Among those who would answer this question in the affirmative would be E.J. Lowe. Specifically, Lowe faults McTaggart's version of the A series for

not God also *actually judge* at t_1 that t_1 is present (and not make this judgment at t_1 about t_2 and t_3) and at t_3 that t_3 is present (and not make this judgment at t_3 about t_1 and t_2)? To insist all the same that, no, one of the times is NOW and that the others are not NOW appears to beg the question. Hasker nonetheless concludes that "by God's making this judgment [at t_2]... t_2 is distinguished from t_1 and t_3 , and in making it God knows which moment is present." But one needs to go no further than the B-theory in order to distinguish one time from another. On the other hand, if Hasker is able to spotlight an official present, then it not clear that his view does not lead one into a Presentist theory of time and the many problems (to be discussed shortly) attending such a theory. At the least, I find that he falls short of successfully rebutting Ganssle's argument that a temporal god can only be *immediately* aware of present facts.

depicting change as the shift of existing future events (in *B* series terms, those events located in the epistemically remote hereafter) toward the present and past (these latter being, all could agree, more epistemically accessible to temporal agents, through perception and memory).²⁵⁶ Given the indubitable epistemic asymmetry with respect to “the heretofore” and “the hereafter,” Lowe seems to be justified in doubting the legitimacy of treating McTaggart’s version of the *A* theory as that theory’s poster child. And it would be fair to say also that the majority of contemporary *A*-theorists would track with Lowe on this matter. They would hold that events coming *later than* the official NOW – regardless of the ontological status one may assign to or withhold from them – are not fixed in the way that events *simultaneous with* or *earlier than* the NOW are fixed. There has thus been a strong trend among post-McTaggartian *A*-theorists to choose between the “Growing Block” thesis, the idea that only the present and the past exist (with the present leading the way), and Presentism, the idea that only the present exists. The fact that philosophers have sought such alternatives to McTaggart’s version of the *A* series actually tends to confirm the power of McTaggart’s argument against his version, despite the persistence of claims that the argument is logically flawed. The trend also tends to confirm, on independent grounds, that there are, at least *prima facie*,

²⁵⁶ In a critical interaction with Robin Le Poidevin on the subject of McTaggart’s paradox, Lowe writes: “Defending the reality of the A-series and developing an account of passage in A-series terms are two quite different projects. McTaggart’s own account of passage deploys the notion of future events ‘becoming present’ and then ‘receding into the past’ – a notion which I rejected...as incoherent, [sic] and which my own attempt to explain our talk of time as ‘flowing’ was designed to avoid. As I made clear there, it is the *A-series* that I seek to defend against McTaggart’s attack on it, not the account of passage in A-series terms which he proposes, and whose demonstrable incoherence McTaggart illegitimately (in my view) projects on to the A-series itself.” See E.J. Lowe, “Comment on Le Poidevin,” in *Mind* 102 (January, 1993): 172.

more attractive ways in which one might conceive of “dynamic” or A-theoretic time.

III. Tooley’s A/B Hybrid Theory and Its Critics

The desire to retain a metaphysically privileged present without resorting to McTaggart’s ever-approaching future existents finds an impressive voice in Michael Tooley’s recent *Time, Tense, and Causation*. The viewpoint represented in the book has the virtue of trying to do justice to our common sense that a significant asymmetry corresponds to and, in some way, goes beyond time’s earlier-later relation. And, while unfortunately from the standpoint of B-theorists he thinks that an official NOW is necessary to account for that asymmetry, it is to his credit that Tooley sees the need for a more expansive ontology in the account of time than one limited to present tensed facts.²⁵⁷

Consistent with a crucial aspect of McTaggart’s A series, Tooley affirms what he calls a “dynamic” conception of time. In this conception, the existence of an official NOW is necessary but not sufficient to account for change; there exists a fixed, actual past as well. He affirms as much, however, while arguing that there are no intrinsically (or primitively) tensed properties attaching to events successively.²⁵⁸ One’s initial response to such a proposal might be to think that a tenseless (or what Tooley calls a “static”) theory of time has been smuggled in through the back door under the banner of dynamism. But he firmly denies that change is real just in case the world (or any of its particular constituents) has different properties at different

²⁵⁷ This places him at odds with the tenets of Presentism, which we will consider shortly.

²⁵⁸ Michael Tooley, *Time, Tense, and Causation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 231ff.

times (as found in the Russellian conception of change described earlier). A dynamic conception of time, he holds, requires us to think that there is only change in case “the totality of temporal facts...is different at different times.”²⁵⁹ What makes his viewpoint both extraordinary and odd is that he attempts, by way of a sophisticated account of causation, to blend this dynamic conception of change with the belief that tensed facts supervene upon tenseless facts, the latter being more basic.

According to Tooley, the world features a causal asymmetry that cannot be captured by a simple tenseless account of time. He thus utilizes the notion of “actual at a time” to reference the accretion of temporal facts. But he also, as mentioned, believes that tenseless facts are more ontologically basic than tensed facts. So it turns out that the temporal facts added to the ever-expanding block of past and present existents are *tenseless* in character. And thus he also relies on a notion of actual *simpliciter* to account for states of affairs to be added to what “will ultimately exist, in a tenseless sense.”²⁶⁰

But what does it mean to say that a state of affairs will be added to what (tenselessly) exists? Oaklander asks a similar question en route to challenging the cogency of Tooley’s distinction between actual at a time and actual *simpliciter*:

For something to exist tenselessly does not mean that it did, does, or will exist, since Tooley takes the existential quantifier to be tenseless. Thus, if an event *E* or state of affairs exists *tenselessly*, then it exists *simpliciter*, but if it is future, then on Tooley’s view, it does not exist as of the present moment. It seems to me that either this view reduces to the tenseless theory, or it involves a contradiction. ...[T]he crucial question is: How can Tooley

²⁵⁹ Ibid., 14.

²⁶⁰ Ibid., 11.

believe *both* that there is a totality of tenseless states of affairs, that neither did, do, or will exist but exist *simpliciter*, and that tenseless facts that are not actual as of one time can become actual as of a later time? Although Tooley does offer an analysis of ordinary tensed sentences, he never really avoids this basic dilemma.²⁶¹

The tenseless theorist, Heather Dyke, expresses similar concerns in her own review of Tooley's "elegantly constructed" thesis, focusing on the way that he unpacks the concepts of actuality *simpliciter* and a "dynamic world":

Tooley retains and, in places depends upon, the notion of actuality *simpliciter*, insisting that both kinds of actuality are primitive and unanalysable concepts. He draws a distinction between the concept of a total, dynamic world and the history of a dynamic world up to some point in time. ...[But] is there anything genuinely dynamic about the concept of a total dynamic world? A total dynamic world would be a world which is actual *simpliciter*, and in which, for every moment, what is actual as of that moment consists only of those tenseless facts that are present and past at that moment. I have to admit to being simply perplexed as to how this describes a dynamic world.²⁶²

Dyke goes on to claim that the concept of actual at a time is better understood as being *parasitic on* the concept of actual *simpliciter*. Such an approach would allow one to take a statement such as 'E is actual as of time t' and understand it as 'E is actual (*simpliciter*) and E occurs at t'. This *B*-theoretic analysis capitalizes on an ambiguity in Tooley's picture of the totality of temporal facts. He claims that "all that is required" for the world to be dynamic is "that the facts that are actual as of one time differ from the facts that are actual as of some other time."²⁶³ But, as Oaklander points out, this statement does not exclusively mandate the picture of an ever-expanding totality of temporal facts (which includes, in *A*-theoretic terms, past

²⁶¹ Oaklander, "Tooley's Time, Tense, and Causation," *The Ontology of Time*, 137-38.

²⁶² Heather Dyke, "Review of Tooley's *Time, Tense, and Causation*," in *International Philosophical Quarterly* 39: 101.

²⁶³ Tooley, *Time, Tense, and Causation*, 19.

and present, but not future, states of affairs). A picture in which the totality of (tenseless) temporal facts does not change but in which the facts (e.g., events) exist at different times from each other is consistent with the statement as well. These conceptual difficulties, therefore, raise doubts as to whether Tooley can welcome primitive tenseless facts into his ontology without excising from it the dynamism called for by his “no-future” account of causation.

Tooley’s theory of time, however, faces another objection, what Craig Bourne calls “the Present Problem.” In a 2002 article, Bourne opens by asserting that we all know that we are in the present (generically speaking) and that a theory of time failing to guarantee that item of knowledge is unacceptable. He then argues that there are only two theories that can guarantee the knowledge that one is present: Presentism and Eternalism. Presentism guarantees knowledge of the present by holding that the present is official and that only the present exists. Eternalism guarantees knowledge of the present by holding that the present is unofficial but nonetheless indubitable, being indexed to one’s awareness of things and events at a particular time. But, according to Bourne, those who are pluralists about time – that is, those who believe that there is more than one real time – and who also wish to say that there is a privileged present will face the Present Problem. Simply put, they will be unable to guarantee our knowledge that we are in the privileged present. He thus holds that Tooley’s theory cannot escape the Present Problem because it affirms that there is more than one real time. The totality of states of affairs that are actual at a time, says Tooley, includes both past and present states of affairs.

To reiterate, Tooley attempts to weld together an official present with the tenseless theory's idea that a person's tensed beliefs can be accounted for in terms of tenseless facts. Additionally, he would have us distinguish a receding past from that time (i.e., the present) after which there is supposed to be no future. The problem that Tooley thereby creates for himself, says Bourne, is that a traditional tenseless account (not to belabor the point) does not feature an official present. If Tooley, therefore, would guarantee knowledge that one is officially present at any given time, then he will need an epistemic clue that goes beyond the traditional tenseless theory's phenomenological account(s) in order to do so. But there are, in fact, no such epistemic clues, Bourne insists, that will allow Tooley to distinguish the official present from an unofficial present.²⁶⁴ If that is true, however, then it would seem that Tooley lacks the epistemological resources for distinguishing the official present from the official past, since he conceives of both as actual (tenseless) facts or states of affairs. For example, the theory appears to provide no justification for Mallory's belief that she is getting married NOW, as opposed to *perceiving* that she is marrying NOW though she is actually marrying BACK THEN. Using asterisks

²⁶⁴ Along similar lines, even a tense theorist, Hestevold, has argued that *being present* is not a phenomenal property. See H. Scott Hestevold, "Passage and the Presence of Experience," in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 50.3 (1990): 537-552. Understanding a phenomenal property to be a property that distinguishes some experiences from others, Hestevold holds that presentness does not serve to distinguish some of an individual's experiences from the rest (542-544). *Being bright*, for example, distinguishes some parts of one's visual field from other (dimmer) parts. But every experience is present and thus the property of being present does not distinguish one experience from another. Skepticism about this claim is expressed in William Lane Craig, "Our Experience of Tense," in *The Tensed Theory of Time: A Critical Examination*, Synthese Library, Vol. 193 (Dordrecht, the Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2000), 141ff. For a brief rejoinder to W.L. Craig on this point, see Craig Callender, "The Common Now," in *Philosophical Issues* 18.1 (2008): 341, 42.

and single-quotes to distinguish *official* (A-theoretic) times from ‘unofficial’ (B-theoretic) times, Bourne pinpoints the difficulty:

[I]f...a tense theorist and I and all the other present people really have an immediate acquaintance with the *present*, didn’t Plato have it too? So there he is, off at some other time in the *past* getting fooled by the very same evidence that is supposed to be giving me my knowledge of being *present*. ...For what is it to experience *presentness* over and above what it is to experience ‘presentness’? On the other hand, if there is something that it is like to experience *presentness*, then for want of a characterization of it, we can never be sure that we are presently manifesting it.²⁶⁵

This line of thinking would seem to leave the unofficial present that is defended by tenseless theorists in decent shape. But there is still a bit more to say.

In particular, if the above reasoning is sound, then Tooley’s supposition that there exists no future seems to lack epistemic warrant. For that supposition rests upon the account of causation provided. As Bourne notes, however, there appears to be no qualitative difference between the causal experiences of *past* and *present* agents. In 365 B.C., Plato’s causal beliefs and causal interactions with his environment indicate that he is in the present. But the same could be said about the beliefs and interactions of John Dewey in 1920. As it turns out, the current paragraph is being typed in September of 2011 and the beliefs and interactions of both Plato and Dewey are safely ensconced in the Tooleyan theorist’s official past. Unfortunately, Tooley’s causal account lacks the ontological means necessary for identifying one’s own time as the official present.

How do we, for instance, who are in September of 2011, know that we are in the official present and that John Dewey, who is in 1920, is not? Even if Dewey *is*

²⁶⁵ Craig Bourne, “When Am I? A Tense Time for Some Tense Theorists?” in *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 80.3 (September 2002): 360, 61.

so located, his experience of the present is no different than ours. That is, he lacks sufficient warrant for the belief that he is in the official present, even if he, in fact, is. Without such warrant available to Plato or to Dewey or to ourselves, then, *pace* Tooley, we cannot know that there exists no future any more than we can know that we are not “presently” in the future. Though it is mistaken to think so on Tooley’s theory, for all Plato knows, he could be philosophizing at a time over two millenia in the future, given the “present-making” causal interactions of those who are building Egyptian pyramids circa 2600 B.C. Nor can we know that our current experiences are not in the official past. For all I know, my typing of this paragraph in September of 2011 is seven years in the past and a group of editors (employed by a highly reputable publisher of academic works) are NOW, in 2018, preparing the entire manuscript for a second edition printing.

Without special pleading in its favor, Tooley’s theory appears incapable of putting to rest these skeptical doubts, doubts to which the theory itself gives rise. This is not to say, of course, that defenders of a Growing Block theory like Tooley’s have not tried to overcome such doubts. In reply to a paper in which David Braddon-Mitchell sets forth essentially the same thesis as Bourne against the Growing Block Theory (GBT), Peter Forrest argues that advocates of the GBT can overcome the Present Problem by supplementing their theory with what he calls the “Dead Past Hypothesis” (DPH). According to DPH, though the past belongs to the totality of temporal facts, only those people at the “leading edge” of time have life

and consciousness. Thus, only those who are living and conscious can be warranted in the belief that they are in the official present.

Christopher Heathwood claims that this strategy fails because it forfeits what could otherwise be touted as a distinguishing feature of a theory like Tooley's:

The Dead Past Hypothesis undercuts the main reason for preferring the Growing Block Theory over its chief 'genuine passage' or A-theory, rival – a rival which itself is immune to scepticism about the present. The A-theory rival is Presentism, the doctrine that only present objects exist. The main advantage of the Growing Block Theory over Presentism is supposed to be that the Growing Block Theory provides truthmakers for statements about the past.²⁶⁶

The thesis that truth supervenes on being is highly plausible. As proof of this, Presentists have often found themselves hard-pressed to explain how it is that true statements involving individuals in the past (e.g., "I admire St. Augustine.") do not require one to posit some sort of existence of past entities or events. Whereas, Growing Block theorists have facilitated references to non-present individuals by adopting an ontology in which past entities and events have properties and stand in relations to present entities and events. Yet, as Heathwood argues, what the GBT would give with one hand the DPH would take away with the other:

For surely the following statements are true:
(CC) Caesar was conscious when he crossed the Rubicon.
(SA) Socrates was alive when he was sentenced to death.
And one would have thought that (CC) and (SA) are made true in just the way the following are made true:
(CW) Caesar was wet when he crossed the Rubicon.
(SF) Socrates was fat when he was sentenced to death.

²⁶⁶ Christopher Heathwood, "The real price of the dead past: a reply to Forrest and to Braddon-Mitchell," in *Analysis* 65.3 (July 2005): 250.

But the Dead Past defence of the Growing Block Theory makes this impossible. Either the first two sentences are false, or if they can be shown to be true, they are not made true in the way the final two are made true.²⁶⁷

It would be absurd, however, to assert that the first two statements above are false. Therefore, if DPH is to vindicate the GBT, then it will only succeed in that mission after its proposers have engaged in “some of the semantic and metaphysical gymnastics Presentists train for but Growing Block theorists thought they could avoid.”²⁶⁸ And recall that a main reason why philosophers will prefer a theory like Tooley’s is because it appears better equipped than Presentism to account for time’s asymmetry and for truths about the past. Based on the above considerations, then, we should agree with Bourne that one can either guarantee one’s location in an official present or one can affirm, with Tooley, that more than one time exists. But one cannot do both.

Moreover, it is certainly necessary that an account of our sense of temporal direction be able to guarantee the knowledge that we are present. Whether that present should be understood as an official or unofficial one still remains to be seen. But because Tooley’s affirmation of the existence of more than one time (namely, both the past and the present) undermines his (I will later argue, misguided) endorsement of an official present, his theory should be rejected.

²⁶⁷ Ibid., 250.

²⁶⁸ Ibid., 251.

IV. Presentism and the Need for Change

As Tooley surely seeks to appreciate in his proposed “dynamic” theory of time, our lives play out within a persisting but altering frame of sensations, intentions, emotions, and thoughts. We may move from place to place but the frame affixes us in an inescapable time – the present. We are never *anywhen* else than we are, are we? Even if a girl – let’s call her Paige – could travel five years into the future, her arrival time would not *then* be still yet to come. That is, it would not be future when she arrived. She would have somehow united distinct “presents” or seamlessly transferred from one to the other. So, on the one hand, we have an experience of permanence or persistence. We are when we are and we appear able to move in only one direction – “forward” – at a “rate” not under our control.²⁶⁹ On the other hand, the fact that we are stationed in the present does not mean that we pass our days in a state of indifference to either the facts of history or curiosities about the future. To speak of an experience of persistence, after all, implies that things change, and we cannot help but take account of some changes. Lurking within one’s “persistent present” are traces of and thoughts about times, people, things, and occurrences beyond that present. Augustine captures the sense of a

²⁶⁹ Some philosophers find questions about the rate of time’s so-called passage to be fertile ground for discussions about the nature of time. See J.J. Smart, “The River of Time” in *Mind* 58 (1949): 483–494. For recent critical discussion of this issue, see Eric T. Olson, “The Rate of Time’s Passage,” in *Analysis* 69.1 (2009): 3–9; Peter Van Inwagen, “Chapter 4 – Temporality,” in *Metaphysics*, Second Edition (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2002); Brad Skow, “On the Meaning of the Question ‘How Fast Does Time Pass’” in *Philosophical Studies* 155.3 (2011): 325–344.

familiar present and the seeming absence of what goes before and after it in his

Confessions:

Permit me, Lord, to seek further. O my hope, let not my purpose be confounded. For if times past and to come be, I would know where they be. Which yet if I cannot, yet I know, wherever they be, they are not there as future, or past, but present. For if there also they be future, they are not yet there; if there also they be past, they are no longer there. Wheresoever then is whatsoever is, it is only as present.²⁷⁰

Implicit in this passage is the idea that time has a direction. Indeed, to account for the facts undergirding said direction would be, arguably, to account for what we call ‘time’. Time, someone has said, is God’s way of making sure that everything doesn’t happen all at once.

Yet when this insight is combined with the undeniable epistemic priority that the present has for temporal agents there emerges a common feeling that the future and, likely also, the past enjoy a significantly lesser ontological status than the “living present.” The ‘future’ is not yet and the ‘past’ is over and done with by now. A general sense of these terms is thus exhibited, one would suppose. But then, what are we doing when we think or speak about the past and future? Are we succeeding in thinking or speaking *about* anything? For example, are there any actual entities or events picked out when we recall fondly our first day of kindergarten? Or when we accurately predict the winner of next year’s NCAA basketball tournament? What sort of existence, if any, do those recalled and predicted entities and events have, as such? Is there a feature of temporal reality that somehow transcends the present and corresponds to any true statements we might make about the past or even the future?

²⁷⁰ *Confessions*, 242.

Or does it even make sense to say that propositions purported to be about future (or even past) events are either true or false, rather than indeterminate, if all that exists is that to which we have immediate temporal access – the present?

Presentists, of course, defend the hypothetical premise of this last question. That is, they say that not only does the world have an official time (or NOW), but also that whatever entities or events existing at that time comprise what exists *in toto*. Presentists sometimes disagree over how the above questions ought to be answered. But they always agree that a proper accounting of ‘the present’ will go far beyond references to the unique epistemic window that temporal agents have to times within an earlier-later sequence. Additionally, they wish to loose us from the somewhat spooky “shadow existence” enjoyed by the past and future (as in the case of McTaggart) or at least the past (as in the case of Tooley) in various non-Presentist theories of time that involve “temporal becoming.” As seen in the previous paragraph, however, the kinds of questions that initially whet one’s appetite for Presentism also threaten to displace the common notion that time is an ordered sequence with a fixed direction. This observation should caution us against conflating the doctrine of Presentism with the somewhat trivial fact that all of our perceptions, utterances, and actions occur in ‘the present.’ For the former doctrine must deal with some conceptual and ontological objections to which not all accounts of ‘the present’ are subject.

a. The “Triviality” Objection to Presentism

Before proceeding to criticize it as a metaphysical thesis, however, we should consider whether Presentism offers a substantial metaphysical thesis in the first place. Not everyone thinks that it does. Ulrich Meyer, for instance, examines the following claim:

P: Nothing *exists* that is not present.²⁷¹

In this claim, the word ‘exists’ is ambiguous and so its sense must be clarified. But Meyer contends that once it has been clarified the claim turns out to be either trivially true or non-trivial but blatantly false.

For starters, if one interprets ‘exists’ as an ordinary present tense of the verb *to exist*, then one gets:

P1: Nothing *exists now* that is not present.²⁷²

While true, this sentence is trivial, equivalent to asserting that everything that exists now is now. One cannot grasp the claim and disagree with it. Tenselessly construed, for instance, ‘the present’ is understood as an indexical, picking out those things or events that are contemporaneous with a thought or utterance. Clearly, then, Presentists mean something different, but what?

If a trivial interpretation is to be avoided, then the definition of existence must not analytically entail presence. To that end, Meyer reasonably supposes that

²⁷¹ Ulrich Meyer, “The Presentist’s Dilemma.” *Philosophical Studies* Vol. 122 (2005): 213.

²⁷² *Ibid.*, 214.

“an object exists *temporally* if and only if it either has existed, does exist now, or will exist.”²⁷³ On this broader reading of ‘exists’ the Presentist claim becomes:

P2: Nothing *exists temporally* that is not present.²⁷⁴

But, given the expanded definition, this non-trivial claim appears plainly false. Take a counterexample:

JK: President Kennedy was murdered in November, 1963.

Kennedy can only have been murdered if he existed. And if he did exist then he does exist temporally. But Kennedy does not exist now. Therefore, an individual (Kennedy) exists temporally without being present. Following this line of reasoning, Meyer concludes that P2 is false.

He does look at one other interpretation, the idea that ‘exists’ should be regarded as *tenseless* and that Presentists intend to claim:

P3: Nothing *exists simpliciter* that is not present.²⁷⁵

Meyer, however, ultimately finds this interpretation unworkable because it ends up being redundant. To summarize briefly, he argues that to speak of an object *a* as actual (and not merely possible) and as existing at some time (and not timelessly) is to speak of an object that has existed, does exist, or will exist. On this analysis, the *simpliciter* existence of a temporal entity implies the existence of that entity *at a*

²⁷³ Ulrich Meyer, “The Triviality of Presentism.” To appear in Roberto Ciuni, Kristie Miller, and Giuliano Torrenzo, eds., *New Papers on the Present*. Philosophia Verlag, München, 2. Available at: http://web.me.com/ulrich/pdf/Presentism_Triviality.pdf (29 December 2011).

²⁷⁴ Meyer, “The Presentist’s Dilemma,” 214.

²⁷⁵ Ibid., 214.

time, specifically a time not limited to the present.²⁷⁶ Thus an interpretation along the lines of the *temporal existence* claimed in P2 is not easily avoided. It appears, therefore, that there is no viable, non-trivial Presentist alternative to the demonstrably false claim that nothing exists temporally that is not present.

For argument's sake, however, let us assume that this "trivial" objection can somehow be overcome. Even if that can be achieved, Presentism still faces severe difficulties.

b. Presentism, Cross-Temporal Relations, the Truthmaker Problem, and God

Perhaps foremost among the objections that A-theorists have voiced against the tenseless (or *B*) theory of time (in its various versions) has been the charge that by denying an official, moving present the latter offers an insufficient ontology. Yet, indisputably, the temporal relations between *earlier* and *later* positions housed in McTaggart's *B* series are not only integral to the Hebrew-Christian idea of history but are also essential conditions of intelligible human experience. Consider first the admission of recent tenseless theorists that the use of temporal indexicals, whose truth-values *change* over time (e.g., "My dog died *last year*." or "The 1st wedding anniversary of Thomas and Lindsay is *still future*."), is a *tensed* activity that is

²⁷⁶ Oaklander notes: "It seems...that the presentist is committed to [a] distinction between what is *actual simpliciter* and what is *actual as of a time*. For if what exists *simpliciter* is all that exists, and if only the present moment exists *simpliciter*, then [David] Lewis is right and we have no past or future." This observation only seems to strengthen Meyer's argument that an actual, temporal entity existing *simpliciter* is an entity that either did exist, does exist, or will exist. See Oaklander, "Presentism, Ontology, and Temporal Experience," in *The Ontology of Time*, 96.

indispensable to the operations of temporally located agents.²⁷⁷ Would it not follow, *a fortiori*, that tenseless statements, whose truth-values *do not change* over time (e.g., A news headline stating: “October, 2004 – Red Sox win the World Series!” or “The Sox 2004 win follows the devastating Series loss of 1986.”), are *necessary* in an account of time? On the other hand, if the (tenseless) temporal relations of *earlier* and *later* are dispensable, then McTaggart’s conclusion that nothing exists in time awaits. Hence, Presentists, having exiled the past and future from the realm of being, must give a reductive account in which the earlier-later relation is explained by reference to present tensed facts only. But can such an account be given?

A contemporary critic of Presentism, L. Nathan Oaklander, doubts whether it can, and the reason is simple. In any genuine relation between two non-simultaneous temporal items, one of those items is earlier and the other is later. Therefore, two *relata* must exist in order for the relation to obtain. So by denying the existence of past and future events/things/times Presentists would appear to undermine the possibility of accounting for any earlier or later *relatum*, even if they are allowed to suppose that the relation itself exists timelessly.²⁷⁸ Their explanations are, in principle, restricted to the present. Thus, Presentists, he says, cannot credibly explain change or temporal direction. Joseph Diekemper makes a similar criticism.

²⁷⁷ The key caveat for proponents of the “New” tenseless theory is that although statements containing temporal indexicals cannot all be *translated* into tenseless statements they can all be *accounted for* in terms of tenseless facts.

²⁷⁸ Oaklander, “Presentism, Ontology, and Temporal Experience,” in *The Ontology of Time*, 84. Find comparable arguments pertaining to the problems that cross-temporal *causal* relations pose to Presentism in Robin Le Poidevin, “Does Time Pass?” in *Travels in Four Dimensions: The Enigmas of Space and Time* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 138-40. Also see Alexander Pruss, “The A-theory of time and induction,” in *Philosophical Studies* 152.3 (February, 2011): 335-45.

He notes that Presentists, along with the advocates of any *A* theory of time, are motivated by the intuition that the past is fixed and that the future is not. But because of their commitment to an ontological *symmetry* (i.e., to there being no past and no future), Presentists cannot consistently maintain the *asymmetry* of fixity (that the past is established and the future is not) so integral to their theory.²⁷⁹

Additionally, if McTaggart is correct and *B* series relations are parasitic on *A* series facts (whatever the exact nature of the latter), then a failure to underwrite ontologically the asymmetry of fixity would erase the earlier-later relation essential to an account of time.

When one throws into this mix the supposition that truth supervenes on being, the truth-maker problem emerges. Those posing the truth-maker problem ask: Given the claim that the present has a monopoly on temporal reality, if true statements about past or future events/things/times can be made, what makes them true?

William Lane Craig takes this problem seriously and believes that his own brand of Presentism is metaphysically up to the task of meeting the truth-maker challenge. To begin with, Craig denies that there are temporal properties (such as ‘is past’, ‘is present’, ‘is future’) attaching to different times. Statements, therefore, asserting “X is past” or “Y is future” should, he says, “be parsed as asserting that the

²⁷⁹ Joseph Diekemper, “Presentism and Ontological Symmetry,” in *The Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 83.2 (2005): 223-40.

entity in question did or will exist.”²⁸⁰ Tenseless theorists could respond by pointing out that Craig’s ‘did’ and ‘will’ can be indexed to the thoughts or utterances of a temporal agent if one accepts the analysis offered by Dyke that says of any event E, “E is actual (*simpliciter*) and E occurs at T.” But Craig does not accept the view that tensed assertions, while perhaps not translatable into tenseless ones, can be given tenseless truth-conditions. He is thereby committed to the non-relational present, to the possibility of true past- and future-tense statements, and to providing a metaphysical underpinning for these.

This is a tall order indeed. Putting the problem another way, Oaklander asks, “What is the basis, in the metaphysics of presentism, for p being first future and then present and then past rather the other way around?” Craig thinks that he has a viable answer and that Presentism has the metaphysical resources to give objects and events not only an *order* but a *direction* as well. He writes:

Ultimately what makes statements true is that reality *was* or *will be* as the statements describe; when the time comes, for example, a sea battle is going on, and therefore the statement made the day before, “There will be a sea battle tomorrow,” was true. There are tensed facts corresponding to what tensed statements assert, but past- and future-tense facts exist because of the present-tense fact that *did* or *will* exist.²⁸¹

But what makes the statement “There will be a sea battle tomorrow” both determinate and true if the time at which that statement is uttered (or thought) is not linked by a *B*-relation to a later, existing (in some sense) time? What anchors its truth *at the time that it is made* if there is not “already” (or “still” in the case of past-

²⁸⁰ William Lane Craig, *The Tensed Theory of Time*, 190, quoted in L. Nathan Oaklander, “Presentism: A Critique” in *The Ontology of Time*, 102.

²⁸¹ Craig, *The Tensed Theory of Time*, 213-14, quoted in L. Nathan Oaklander, “Presentism: A Critique” in *The Ontology of Time*, 104.

tense statements) some corresponding state of affairs?²⁸² It seems that Craig has run himself out of resources in terms of which to give a credible answer. He professes to reject the ascription of temporal properties to times because he believes this leads to McTaggart's paradox.²⁸³ He also professes to reject *A/B* hybrid theories like Tooley's as unworkable. As Oaklander convincingly shows, however, Craig's attempts to account for past- and future- tense truths and parasitic *B* series relations in terms of a Presentist ontology fail, unless he is allowed to include in the account itself an analysis requiring either *B* series relations, the ascription of tensed properties to events/things/times, or both.²⁸⁴ And these options Craig considers out of bounds. His Presentism, therefore, appears ill-positioned to elude McTaggart's timeless conclusion.

Another contemporary Presentist, Alan Rhoda, would likely sympathize with the verdict of this all-too-brief evaluation of Craig's Presentism. In fact, he examines and rejects as inadequate several other comparable responses in which Presentists seek to surmount the truth-maker objection.²⁸⁵ Commendably, Rhoda has a clear sense of the difficulty that this objection creates for Presentism. To begin with, he recognizes the radical nature of the doctrine he espouses, accepting that at

²⁸² I, in fact, hold that temporal relations are tenseless facts and that, although the *relata* (things, events) exist in time, the relations (tenseless facts) themselves exist timelessly. They are contingently decreed, timeless truths about temporal states of affairs.

²⁸³ See William Lane Craig, "McTaggart's Paradox and the Problem of Temporary Intrinsic," *Analysis* 58 (1998): 122-27.

²⁸⁴ Oaklander, "Presentism: A Critique" in *The Ontology of Time*, 101-115. Cf. Richard M. Gale, *The Language of Time* (New York: Humanities Press, 1968), 90-91.

²⁸⁵ Alan R. Rhoda, "Presentism, Truthmakers, and God," in *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 90.1 (2009): 41-62.

least all “*contingent, positive existential*” truths have their ontological ground in present facts.²⁸⁶

Consider the truth that Caesar was assassinated. What fact makes that true? Most non-presentists would say that what makes it true is the *past fact* or event it represents, namely, Caesar’s being assassinated. But the presentist can’t say that. For her, past facts don’t exist.²⁸⁷

He admits that Presentists must confront a dilemma here. On one side, “it looks like all present facts pertaining to Caesar (ancient documents, monuments, etc.) may collectively *underdetermine* the truth that Caesar was assassinated.”²⁸⁸ But on the other side

it also seems clear that whatever makes it true that, say, Caesar was assassinated, needs to be somehow tied to the past event of Caesar’s being assassinated, for had that event not occurred it simply wouldn’t be true that Caesar was assassinated.²⁸⁹

What Presentists need, he says, are “present surrogates” for past facts of this kind.²⁹⁰

The severe constraints, however, that a Presentist account of past-tense truths must meet, he believes, “greatly limit” Presentist options in this regard. And with this in mind Rhoda proceeds to add theological intrigue to the debate over time when he decides to “reintroduce a suggestion by [Charles] Hartshorne that has been overlooked in the current discussion, namely, that God’s memories are truth-makers for truths about the past.”²⁹¹

²⁸⁶ Ibid., 43.

²⁸⁷ Ibid., 41, 42.

²⁸⁸ Ibid., 42.

²⁸⁹ Ibid., 43.

²⁹⁰ Ibid., 42.

²⁹¹ Ibid., 42. Hartshorne is well known for developing the process philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead into process theology.

Rhoda launches into an articulation of this thesis by first drawing a distinction between the *historical ground* of a truth about the past and a past-tense truth's *metaphysical ground*. The former refers to past facts or events and the latter to the present facts that serve as the truth-makers of those past facts or events. The crucial thing, he says, is that the present facts have the character they do because the past facts had the character they did.

From there, Rhoda goes into detailed discussion about five constraints that he believes an adequate Presentist theory of truth-makers must meet. These are: *Trace*, *Contingence*, *Persistence*, *Discrimination*, and *Explanatory*. Summarizing, *Trace* specifies that a truth-maker must trace to past facts or events.²⁹² *Contingence* precludes a truth-maker from obtaining in all possible worlds, for this would make it *necessary* and thereby undermine the contingency of the past; “the past,” he notes, “could have been very different.”²⁹³ *Persistence* says that truths about the past do not change in truth-value.²⁹⁴ *Discrimination* requires T (all possible truth-makers) of P (“the conjunction of all contingent and positive existential truths about the past as of time t_0 ”) to pick out the *actual* past from all other *possible* pasts.²⁹⁵ And *Explanatory*, finally, says that a truth-maker account of past-tense truths should give an “informative characterization of how reality is different from what it would have been if what is true about the past had not been true.”²⁹⁶

²⁹² Ibid., 43, 44.

²⁹³ Ibid., 44, 45.

²⁹⁴ Ibid., 45.

²⁹⁵ Ibid., 45, 46.

²⁹⁶ Ibid., 47.

The bottom line for Rhoda is that he thinks no Presentist theory to date has met these constraints. He, therefore, commends what he calls “Theistic Presentism” (TP), a viewpoint that calls for a *temporal* God. God, along with the universe, occupies an official present. Consequently, God has *tensed beliefs*, including *memories* that preserve a perfect record of God’s *experiences*. Moreover, God is said to *anticipate* what is yet to come, giving time an A-theoretic asymmetry. As the necessary, omniscient, infallible one who experiences all of reality, God has memory-beliefs that serve as present surrogates for past facts. He knows all the truths about reality (i.e., what *has happened* and what *is happening*) because He enjoys an omni-competent experience of the facts (restrained only by His own will) and infallible memory-beliefs. His current memory-beliefs, which link God’s present (*the present*) to actual, contingent past facts in virtue of His perspicuous experience(s) of those facts, along with their preservation in His necessarily persistent memory, guarantee the truth of those past-tense statements that are true.

Prima facie, TP should strike theists and, more specifically, those drawn to discussions about God and time as having at least two main attractions. First, if cogent, it would establish the fixity of the past, giving time its direction and undergirding our common sense that time “flows.” Second, it would guarantee God’s presence (undergirding the Immanuel principle of God-with-us) in a privileged NOW.²⁹⁷ In my judgment, however, philosophers and theologians should collectively resist embracing TP, and my reasons are twofold.

²⁹⁷ I do not see, though, that Rhoda shows that we creatures in the ‘present’ are in the NOW that God is experiencing, rather than in His memories.

My first reason relates to Rhoda's combining of two ideas, one, that the past is contingent ("could have been very different") and, two, that there are propositions about the past with definite truth-values and that God stores all the true ones in His memory-beliefs. God's present beliefs about the past, he says, suffice to explain the truth of the believed propositions, being tied to His experiences of past states of affairs when they were present. But if this is so, then how can Rhoda's theism escape Le Poidevin's claim that Presentists must "assume that only one past is compatible with the present state of the world: only one course of history could possibly have led up to this point"?²⁹⁸ Turned around, if numerous possible pasts are causally compatible with God's present memory-beliefs, then are there any determinate, true propositions about the past available for God to believe?

In other words, the *Contingence* and *Discrimination* constraints appear to be mutually exclusive. To honor one means undercutting the other. It seems, for example, that even God's remembered experience of baby Cora's birth in 2011 is, by Rhoda's lights, insufficient to guarantee the truth of a statement *made in 2012* that "Baby Cora was born in 2011." For if any number of possible pasts are causally compatible with the present, then God knows this. And if God knows this, then God is not in an epistemic position to answer adequately a slightly altered form of Bertrand Russell's famous question: How does *God* know that God didn't make the world five minutes ago with its current appearance, endowing us with false memory-beliefs? Granted, Russell's "five minute hypothesis" is a brain teaser for most any

²⁹⁸ Le Poidevin, *Travels in Four Dimensions*, 139.

theologian. And, to his credit, Rhoda gives a valiant effort to deal with the problem. However, TP seems especially susceptible to Russell's skeptical query, in light of both the narrow epistemic window it cedes to God and its supposition that many possible pasts are compatible with the present state of the world. I, therefore, have doubts as to whether TP can consistently respect all of the constraints that Rhoda places upon it.

Perhaps, formally, Rhoda can rebut this criticism on the basis of (1) an event E happening and (2) God's unfailing memory-belief that E happened.²⁹⁹ I am tentatively prepared to concede this. Even if one concedes, however, that TP is necessary to secure the Presentist thesis, Rhoda does not give adequate grounds,

²⁹⁹ Rhoda appeals to these aspects of TP to counter similar objections as well. In a co-authored paper, Ben Caplan and David Sanson criticize his claim that God's memories explain the truth of propositions about the past. They assert that the contrary is in fact the case, that those propositions are true in virtue of the states of affairs that they are about: "[O]n his account, the norms of explanation require that we have something informative to say about memories in the mind of God. But the norms of explanation also require that our explanations point to the right things. And, when it comes to explaining the truth of the proposition that Plato had a beard, Rhoda's account points to the wrong thing: his account points to a memory in the mind of God, but a memory in the mind of God doesn't explain why the proposition that Plato had a beard is true. God remembers that Plato had a beard for the same reason that the proposition that Plato had a beard is true: because Plato had a beard. But it is not because God remembers that Plato had a beard that the proposition that Plato had a beard is true." See Ben Caplan and David Sanson, "Presentism and Truthmaking," in *Philosophy Compass* 6/3 (2011): 202. This is consistent with Diekemper's argument that the Presentist belief in an *ontological symmetry* (the idea that neither past nor future times or events exist) fails to square with a commitment, common among "tensors," to an *asymmetry of fixity* (the idea that the past is established and the future is not). Rhoda believes that such a criticism can be overcome, underscoring that God's memories are causally traced to the objects and events of His original experiences. See his response to such criticism under "Presentism, Truthmakers, and God's Memories: Reply to an Objection," at http://www.alanrhoda.net/blog/2006_07_01_archive.html; Internet; 26 September 2011. But it seems that the explanatory weight placed upon God's memories would require that TP's God, whose knowledge depends upon a multitude of piecemeal experiences, possess knowledge of genuine cross-temporal, causal relations. Only if He can do so, it seems, would Rhoda's *trace* constraint not collapse under David Hume's skepticism about our knowledge of genuine causal relations. And it is not clear that Rhoda's account of a temporal God can make such a guarantee. At the least, Rhoda *assumes* (without argument in the paper being considered) a controversial commitment to the *simultaneous* existence of both ends of a causal relation when he affirms that an event (cause) and an experience or "quasi-memory" in God (effect) both occur at T₀. See again, Rhoda, "Presentism, Truthmakers, and God", 55.

independent of that fact, for accepting either Presentism or its would-be philosophical savior, TP. Indeed, I am not convinced that such grounds could be given. Thus, my second reason for resisting TP relates to a circularity in Rhoda's argument for it and to the individual weaknesses of Presentism and the version of theism (call it Temporalist Open Theism, or TOT) to which he would join it.

On one hand, Rhoda's argument for TP hinges on a prior inclination to embrace Presentism. On the other hand, he contends that one must embrace TP in order to overcome Presentism's truthmaker problem. When this latter contention is taken together with the challenges to Presentism previously discussed in this chapter, there appears little, if any, reason, independent of TP, to favor Presentism. From this standpoint, then, commitment to TP would be a necessary condition for an epistemically responsible commitment to Presentism. But are there any reasons, apart from the benefits paid to Presentism, for committing oneself to TP? More specifically, are there reasons why we should accept the particular variety of theism (TOT) (of which there are, undoubtedly, sub-varieties) that Rhoda believes exclusively comports with TP? I reply to these questions in the negative and conclude that TP (and, by extension, Presentism itself) should be rejected, for lack of sufficient motivation.

At the base of this negative evaluation of TP rests the premise that a viable theology must ably accommodate Acts 2:23: "[T]his Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men." Minimally, this statement made by the Apostle Peter (as quoted by

Luke) mandates that one's theology must have an expansive enough ontology to ground the truth of the following statement: "Christ will be crucified." Observe that this statement, though framed in the future-tense, has all the marks of Rhoda's "contingent, positive existential" truths and hence needs a present truthmaker (if one is a Presentist who believes that truth supervenes on being).

As already mentioned, time has its asymmetry of fixity, according to Rhoda, in virtue of God's accruing *memories* of past things and events, *experiences* of the present, and *anticipation* of what has yet to occur.³⁰⁰ But, because He has not experienced what has yet to occur, any beliefs about the future that Rhoda's temporalist God could be said to have would not guarantee the truth of the propositions believed. And TP requires that the positive truth-value of non-present-tense statements is explained not by the existence of past or future states of affairs but by present facts, namely, God's beliefs. Therefore, it is doubtful whether, on this conception, God can even be said to have any beliefs about the future, since His omniscience entails that all of His beliefs are true.³⁰¹ And if it is doubtful whether

³⁰⁰ I suggest that Rhoda's commitment to Presentism results, at least in part, from his failure to appreciate the strength of the phenomenology of time offered by those such as St. Augustine and contemporary *B*-theorists in their efforts to account for our human experience of the "flow" of time. Ironically, his proposed solution to the truth-maker problem projects that phenomenology (which makes reference to human memories, experiences, and anticipation) onto God. Not only does this move produce tensions in his concepts of divine cognition and action (see the subsequent footnote), it also unwittingly plays into Feuerbach's idea that theology is no more than anthropology writ large.

³⁰¹ Then again, Rhoda appears to contradict this inference on page 57 when he says that on his "full theistic conception, it is metaphysically impossible for any contingent event to happen apart from God's knowingly permitting it..." One can persuasively argue that the knowing permission of an event *Y* involves a knowledge of event *Y* simultaneous to *Y*'s occurrence at *T*₀. But one can just as persuasively argue that the knowing permission of *Y* at *T*₀ entails that, at *T*₁, "*Y* is going to occur" is true and that God knows it is true. Otherwise, by the time of *Y*'s occurrence at *T*₀ it is too late for God to *permit* it to happen, for it *is* happening, whether permitted or not. This line of reasoning would jeopardize the asymmetry of fixity for which Rhoda contends and, if we agree with Diekemper, the "no-future" ontology that Presentism sets forth.

God's anticipation of what has yet to occur is consistent with Him having any beliefs about the future, then it is a mystery as to how, for Rhoda, there could be any determinate, positive truth-value of any (contingent, positive existential) future-tense propositions.³⁰² *A fortiori*, TP cannot accommodate the "plan and foreknowledge" that Peter ascribes to God in Acts 2:23. It stands to reason, therefore, that TP is not viable and that its would-be philosophic dependent, Presentism, is without a reliable theological savior.

V. Commending Tenseless Time

At the outset of this chapter, I stated that an adequate philosophical account of time should (1) give an explanation of time's *direction* free of internal contradictions and (2) give an explanation of our human *sense* of direction in a way

³⁰² At the least, Rhoda's doctrine registers a low score vis-à-vis Christian eschatology's "promise-fulfillment" motif. The problems, unfortunately, do not end there. If it's admitted that God, not having experienced the future (*ex hypothesi*), nonetheless holds beliefs about the future (e.g., "Christ will be crucified."), then God's believing those propositions does not guarantee their truth. But this does not imply that there are false propositions about future contingents either, for that would assume that that type of proposition has a determinate truth-value as such. Yet it is not plain that in taking such a route Rhoda would be able to retain the doctrine of divine omniscience. On one hand, if he is committed to denying that the Principle of Bivalence (which says that for any p, p is either true or false) holds for future contingent propositions, then he can say that God's failure to hold true beliefs about the future does not mean that He lacks knowledge of some true propositions or believes false ones. Thus, by a technicality, a doctrine of divine omniscience could be salvaged. As W.L. Craig has shown, however, this does not escape the problem. The doctrine of divine omniscience, again, includes the idea that God holds no false beliefs. But if God believes the proposition "Christ will be crucified," then He believes that the proposition is *true* prior to the event(s) it represents. Assuming, however, that the Bivalence Principle does not hold for future contingent propositions, then the proposition "(It is true that) Christ will be crucified" is *false* when God believes it. For, were this proposition to be uttered prophetically, there would be no truth of the matter. Therefore, if there are no future contingent propositions with determinate truth values, then God's believing any such propositions (thereby asserting their truth) would constitute false belief. To believe a proposition (i.e., at some time) is to believe that it is true *at* that time. See William Lane Craig, "A Middle Knowledge Response [to the open theism of Gregory Boyd]" in *Divine Foreknowledge: Four Views* eds. James K. Beilby and Paul R. Eddy (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 56.

that accords with the former. Up to this point, I have defended a tenseless conception of time by trying to eliminate A-theoretic alternatives to it. I have shown reasonably well, in my opinion, that the foregoing theories face numerous difficulties. They either suffer from logical contradictions (McTaggart's *A* series), require special pleading to ensure that we are in the present and not the past (Tooley's *A/B* hybrid), promote a trivial thesis (as Meyer says Presentists are guilty of doing), explain Presentism's ontology in a way that requires an implicit (and illicit) commitment to either *A* series properties (past-present-future) or *B* series relations (earlier-later) (Craig), appeal to a sub-biblical theology to support their favored theory (as in Rhoda's theistic Presentism), or combine these errors in some way. Thus, I do not hesitate to note my agreement with Le Poidevin, who defends the view that

the fact that time has a direction is neither more nor less than the fact that events form a B-series: that is, that they are ordered by the asymmetric earlier than [sic] relation.³⁰³

On this view, direction is the difference between *e* preceding *e** and *e** preceding *e*; change marks the difference between the properties possessed by the world or its constituents at different times. And time is what it is because the differences it houses are ordered in a set direction, one event *and then* another. Moreover the term 'now,' rather than ever picking out an official present, indexes a point in time. What distinguishes time from space (and 'now' from 'here' as distinct indexical types), ultimately, is not "temporal becoming" but the fact that the temporal order has (and

³⁰³ Le Poidevin, *Travels in Four Dimensions*, 244.

the spatial order, as such, lacks) an intrinsic direction. The *B* series, therefore, does not owe its direction to a temporal reality more fundamental than itself.³⁰⁴

Now, suppose that one grants that time is summed up in the earlier-later relation and that there is no absolute fact of the matter as to what events are past, present, and future. Many find this tenseless conception of time objectionable, even for want of a viable tensed alternative, because they think that it falters before the bar of our temporal experience. In an effort to capture some of the central concerns of this sort of objection, I will list under the rubric of “temporal experience” two features or aspects of our experience – described in a way that would be agreeable to a broad cross-section of those favoring a non-*B*-theoretic conception of time:

1. The *present* has a privileged, inexorable quality that would seem to warrant the supposition that the universe features an absolute, metaphysical present.
2. There is a sense that time has its own distinctive *movement* and that, additionally, the past is “closed” and the future is “open” to our plans and actions.

³⁰⁴ For the purposes of the present dissertation, to characterize time as having a *B*-theoretic character suffices as an ontological description. This is not to ignore, however, debates between “detensers” over whether the earlier-later relation is un-analyzable or analyzable in terms of a more basic ontology. For, while time may not owe its direction to a more basic *temporal* reality, one should not infer from this that time does not owe its direction to a more basic *non-temporal* reality. D.H. Mellor, for one, argues that time’s arrow has the direction it does because the *causal* arrow has the direction that *it* does. See D.H. Mellor, *Real Time*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 140-59. Oaklander takes issue with Mellor, arguing that since “the causal order between perceptions is not necessary for the perception of succession...it is conceivable that the perceptions of *e* and *e** are temporally, but not causally, related.” See Oaklander, “*Mellor’s Real Time*,” in *The Ontology of Time*, 180. While Oaklander finds reason to conclude that the temporal order is more fundamental than the causal order, I would more conservatively conclude that there are reasons to doubt that the causal order is more fundamental. The fact that the causal arrow (causes to effects), the psychological arrow (experiences to memories), and the entropic arrow (order to disorder) all strongly correlate with time’s arrow does not, it seems to me, provide reason enough to subordinate the latter to any of the former ontologically. Regardless, no significant premises or conclusions of the present thesis rest upon resolving such a dispute in any particular way.

There are, of course, other areas of philosophical resistance to tenseless time.³⁰⁵

Naturally, not all of these can be explored here. Nevertheless, I believe that a perspicuous characterization of our temporal experience – represented by the two features above – does not justify the inference that a metaphysically privileged NOW or official present best explains that experience.

Philosophers such as A.N. Prior and Richard Gale have held that the irreducibly tensed nature of human beliefs and language only makes sense if time comprises a corresponding array of tensed facts. Formally, the reasoning of those following this line takes the form of an inference to the best explanation:

P1 – If tensed facts exist (TF), then our temporal experience will have the following features: X, Y, Z.

P2 – Our temporal experience has the following features: X, Y, Z.

C – Therefore, our temporal experience (X, Y, Z) is best explained by the existence of tensed facts (TF).

The above syllogism utilizes a mode of argumentation – commonly known as Inference to the Best Explanation (or IBE) – which is, arguably, not without its merits.³⁰⁶ Opponents of the *B* theory, however, tend to remove tentativeness from the inference. Hence, they stumble into committing the logical fallacy of affirming

³⁰⁵ Among them, probably the most vexing one addresses questions about whether (or to what extent) an individual *endures* (as wholly present at all times) or *perdures* (as temporal parts) throughout its/his/her historical pilgrimage.

³⁰⁶ See C.S. Peirce, *Pragmatism as a Principle and Method of Right Thinking: The 1903 Harvard Lectures on Pragmatism*, ed. Patricia Ann Turrissi (New York: SUNY Press, 1997). Nevertheless, there continues to be philosophical controversy over the epistemic credibility and proper role(s) of IBE (or what Peirce called “abduction,” distinguishing it from induction and deduction). An impressive attack on IBE as a “rationally required rule,” for instance, appears as part of an overall critique of scientific realism in Part II of Bas C. van Fraassen, *Laws and Symmetry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989). Yet highly nuanced defenses of IBE’s normative status have been set forth as well, as in Peter Lipton, *Inference to the Best Explanation*, Second Edition (New York: Routledge, 2004).

the consequent (stated in P2) in order to vindicate the hypothetical clause of P1.

They make the mistake of inferring tensed facts from our temporal experience when an equally good explanation is at hand – tenseless facts (TLF).

For the sake of argument, let it be assumed in what follows that both of the premises in the above argument are true.³⁰⁷ The problem thus resides not so much in the premises but in the argument's concluding step. To counter the conclusion, therefore, we must show that the phenomena of our temporal experience can be "captured" without conceding to tensed facts an essential explanatory role.

First, with respect to the claim that our experience of 'the present' warrants belief in an absolute present, the basic thrust of the *B*-theorist's response was conveyed earlier in Bourne's "Present Problem" critique of Tooley's Growing Block theory. Suppose that two times are "real" (e.g., T_{-1} and T_0) but that only one time is NOW (say, T_0); Bourne claims that nothing in our experience allows us to discern which of the two is NOW. We should conclude, therefore, if Bourne is correct, that an experience of the official present, if the official present exists, involves nothing more than an awareness that coincides with particular objects and events at a given time. No other features stand out from the objects and events to distinguish the

³⁰⁷ Although we will assume the truth of P1 here, not everyone agrees that the "tensed fact" hypothesis "predicts" our temporal experience just as it is. Alexander Pruss, for one, thinks that our temporal experience is missing a feature that one would expect it to have if indexical terms sometimes correspond to tensed facts: "[T]he less personally concerned we are in something, the less it seems to matter whether it is in the past or the future. If there were deep ontological differences between past, present, and future, then, rationally speaking, there should surely also be a corresponding difference in my attitudes toward someone else's future and past pains. The lack of such a difference strongly suggests that the particularly anisotropic attitudes are grounded in a difference in the relation of future and past events to *me-now*, rather than in some deep ontological difference between future and past events." This would be akin to tacking a 'W' onto the series of features predicted by TF in P1. See Pruss's essay "B-Theory, Language and Ethics," at <http://www9.georgetown.edu/faculty/ap85/papers/BTheory.html> (p. 6); Internet; 28 September 2011.

official present from times experienced before or after it. It stands to reason, then, that one can erase at least *our knowledge* of an official present and preserve the privileged character of ‘the present.’ The question is not whether the present is privileged but whether it is *metaphysically* privileged. As a Presentist, Bourne believes in a metaphysically privileged present but he does not make the mistake that many do of inferring that conclusion from the premise that ‘the present’ is *epistemically* privileged. If one would conclude in favor of a metaphysically privileged present, therefore, more rigorous arguments will be necessary.

To these considerations we can add a related observation made by D.H. Mellor. And that is simply that an epistemically privileged, inexorable present is what we would expect once the stipulation is made that *B*-theoretic time is where temporal agents live their lives. Without the convening of one’s past and future (as opposed to an *official* past and future) to form ‘the present’ one could not communicate or perform actions.³⁰⁸ Indeed, Mellor argues that tensed beliefs are indispensable to human communication (e.g., “He just asked me my name.”) and action (e.g., “It is now 1 o’clock, time for our meeting.”). But he considers “gratuitous and idle” the idea that an agent’s tensed belief commits her to the existence of a tensed fact or that reference must be made to a tensed fact in order to account for her tensed belief.³⁰⁹

³⁰⁸ Mellor writes: “Temporal presence seems to be an essential aspect of all experience. By ‘essential’ I mean essential to its being experience. If I only gave the dates of my experiences, without saying which was happening to me *now*, I should on the face of it leave out precisely what makes them experiences.” Mellor, *Real Time*, 49.

³⁰⁹ Ibid., 87.

The second feature or aspect of temporal experience that we consider here concerns the sense that time has a “flow” or “towardness” from a finished past to an unmade future. This sense, say the enemies of tenseless time, is undermined by the idea that all (*B* series) events are ontologically on par with one another. In reply to this, the *B*-theorist is well advised to admit that a particular *interpretation* of our sense of time’s asymmetry is undermined by the *B* theory but not the sense itself. We gain our sense of temporal direction from an accumulated *community of memories* and from the *expectation* that actions and events taking place at a given time are responsible for bringing about states of affairs located at a later time.

The idea that tenseless time cannot accommodate our experiences of change finds its root in a misunderstanding of the theory. The misunderstanding consists in a failure to grasp that temporal agents (in particular, humans) do not operate from a standpoint that is indifferent to any particular temporal location. While a timeless God might take such a standpoint, humans find themselves “thrown” (in virtue of the fixity of their memories) into a juncture from which they look toward an “open” future (in virtue of the fact that they anticipate and do not remember what is yet to come). Consequently, Hestevold errs when he saddles the tenseless theorist with the absurd conclusion that “it is as appropriate to feel relief that Wednesday follows Tuesday before or during [a painful tooth] extraction as it is to feel such relief on Wednesday.”³¹⁰ Oaklander explains why this is wrongheaded:

Hestevold’s point is that since the fact *Wednesday* is *later than Tuesday* is one that exists before Wednesday, if *that* fact is what explains relief, then it

³¹⁰ Hestevold, “Passage and the Presence of Experience,” 544-45.

is just as sensible to feel relief on Monday or Tuesday for a painful experience that is taking place on Tuesday as it is to feel relief on Wednesday for the same painful experience. The mistake in this argument is the assumption that the tenseless fact that renders relief appropriate exists before, during, and after the extraction. On the tenseless view, the fact in question does not exist before, after, or during the extraction. The pain exists before the relief, and the experience of the relief exists after the cessation of pain, but the fact that *the pain occurs before Wednesday* (or that *the relief occurs after the pain*) does not exist in time at all.³¹¹

The feeling of relief that follows the pain of the extraction can be explained by the tenseless facts that a person *senses* no pain at T_0 , *remembers* at T_0 the pain from T_{-1} , and *believes* that the cessation of the remembered pain is the cause of his relief, felt at T_0 .³¹² This is just one example. But it shows a way in which temporal, causal, and psychological asymmetries may converge to form an account of temporal experience without the philosopher resorting to tensed facts or to a metaphysically privileged present. And because explanations in terms of tenseless facts (TLF) plausibly capture the phenomena of temporal experience within a slimmer ontology than those offered by the proponents of tensed facts (TF), the law of parsimony should convince us that the former is at least as good as, if not superior to, the latter.

VI. Classical Christian Theism's Problem of Timeless Presence

Perhaps some will agree that a good case can be made for accepting the *B* theory of time on the basis of philosophical arguments. Even so, one's preference

³¹¹ Oaklander, 231.

³¹² For further reading on this topic, see Heather Dyke and James Maclaurin, "Thank Goodness That's Over: The Evolutionary Story," *Ratio* 15.3 (2002): 276-92; Murray MacBeath, "Mellor's Emeritus Headache" and Clifford Williams, "The Phenomenology of B-Time," in *The New Theory of Time*, eds. L. Nathan Oaklander and Quentin Smith (London: Yale University Press, 1994).

for a philosophical theory rarely, if ever, stems from a dispassionate study, divorced from other commitments and motives. The present dissertation constitutes no exception to this rule. In this chapter, I have defended the *B* theory because (1) I find it to have better arguments in its favor than the known alternatives and (2) because I find that it comports (at least more easily than those alternatives) with the belief that the Triune Creator is, quite literally, a timeless mystery.

In the previous three chapters we have looked to theologians who share this belief. Each bows before the eternal, immutable Triune life. The present study, however, has focused upon how each of them attempts to locate “space” within the divine transcendence so as to account for a contingent creation. God upholds the world and its masses as “others” but in the ideal picture the Triune Creator-Redeemer holds those others close to Himself. His greatness transcends His creatures but without, in any sense, annihilating or alienating them (at least in the absence of sin). As witnessed in the writings of Augustine, Aquinas, and Calvin, theologians have long wrestled with this apparent tension. And it is with this apparent tension between the absolute Creator and His fiat creation that contemporary adherents of the timeless and strongly immutable Trinity must also wrestle.

But why adhere to the timeless, strongly immutable Trinity if it requires one to wrestle so? A good many theologians and philosophers of religion now believe that these classical doctrines need to be seriously modified (as would say Nicholas Wolterstorff) if not radically revised (as would say David Ray Griffin). While

differing over the extent of the changes called for, both the modifiers and the revisers agree that the assumed risks in endorsing unmodified classical Christian theism outweigh its supposed benefits. Sharing this outlook is William Hasker, an Open theist straddling the line between modifiers and revisers, who, of late, has spoken forcefully against timeless eternalism in particular. He contends, among other things, that if the Creator is timeless, then He is unqualifiedly absent from our places and times. Eternalists, therefore, are wont to articulate a sense in which the timeless God could be present with us in our times and places.

I believe that there are good independent grounds for affirming both divine timeless eternity and the *B*-theoretic conception of time with which it appears to square best. For this reason, I will argue in the next chapter that the “Timelessly Present Problem” is not insurmountable given the resources bestowed by Christian theology. Hasker must thus be deemed as having failed to deliver a damning blow to the classical construction of God’s eternal nature.

We come, then, formally, to set up the next chapter. To start out, if creation exists contingently – unnecessitated by the divine essence as such but by a purposeful decree of the timeless Trinity – then the Persons of the Trinity have a way of being present together in the world’s absence. But the Trinity, unhindered and sovereign, timelessly produces a world and its various occupants, these having an essentially temporal character. The picture this gives is one in which the Triune Persons are timelessly present together and also *with a world* whose temporality is tenseless (*B*-theoretic). Question: If the timeless Creator operates from a

metaphysical and epistemic standpoint of indifference to any particular time or set of individuals and events, then can God be with us? And if so, how can the presence of this timeless deity with the world and its members be expressed or articulated in the absence of an official present? Could it be that the Creator is able to communicate His presence to those in time without Himself being, in an important sense, restricted to the official present? To such questions we now turn.

CHAPTER 5

ADDRESSING CLASSICAL CHRISTIAN THEISM'S "PRESENT" PROBLEM

In the previous chapter, I assumed that the tenseless theory of time is consistent with the timeless Creator thesis.³¹³ As stated more than once by now, this should not suggest that the tenseless theory logically entails the truth of the timeless Creator thesis. Nor should it suggest that an acceptance of the former is sufficient to motivate a belief in the latter, at least from the standpoint of unbelief.³¹⁴ Could, then, tenseless time be logically paired with a *temporal* god? I do not believe so. If, say, time is an aspect of God's nature and God predestines all of history prior to creating, then at any given point after the first moment there is a segment of history that is absolutely future and a segment that is absolutely past (these being relative to what is NOW for God). In that case, the tenseless fact that event Z is later than event V (located in God's past) could be explained by reference to the tensed fact that event Z is in the present. But tenseless theorists deny this; the B-relations stand on their own, not deriving from a more ultimate *temporal* reality (including the reality of a temporal deity). So it does seem that if time is tenseless then logically consistent theists will believe that God exists timelessly. However, in view of the

³¹³ This further assumes, of course, that variants of the B-theory share with each other a common core of ontological commitments.

³¹⁴ The epistemic situation is more complicated than I initially indicate here but for the sake of both economy and relevance to the topic at hand no more can be discussed in the body of the text. I will claim, minimally, that a person could derive considerable rational motivation for holding to the timeless Creator thesis if his belief in tenseless time were, at some point, to combine with the belief that the intelligibility of our temporal experience (which is indubitable) is best explained transcendentally by way of a theistic reference and with the belief that tenseless time best comports with a "timeless" theism.

fact that tenseless time on its own fails to entail the timeless Creator thesis, are there any reasons why a Christian should hesitate to affirm either one?

William Hasker believes that there are. In particular, he thinks that God's unique presence with those in time turns out to be a chimera if the Lord is forced to bow before "Anselm's Barrier," the idea that it is improper to assign any temporal location or extension to God as such. Conversely put, he thinks that the admission of a divine presence with temporal entities and events rings the death knell of divine timelessness. Hasker argues to this effect in the passage below, following a private correspondence with William Alston over the question of whether God has beliefs or intuitive knowledge:

Assume that there is a timeless God who has immediate awareness of all objects and events in time. Now take an event, E, and a time at which E occurs, say our old friend t_2 , and ask yourself this question: given that God is immediately aware of E, *when* does this immediate awareness of E occur? The only possible answer is that it occurs at t_2 . (Recall Alston's remark that the relational fact "'stretches over' both relata.") One might be tempted to say that the act of awareness occurs in eternity, and it is only its *object*, E, that exists at t_2 . But this is ruled out by Alston's insistence that the relational fact is basic and unanalyzable, an insistence that is incompatible with the notion that the fact can be divided into parts, one existing at one time and another at another. What we must say, rather, is that the relation exists *both* in eternity and at t_2 ; it stretches over the ontological space between them. But this conclusion is a momentous one. We have now been forced to assign to one of God's cognitive acts a location on the temporal continuum: Anselm's Barrier has been breached.³¹⁵

I believe that Hasker is begging the question here by introducing a "when" in reference to the awareness of a timeless deity. But set that aside for a moment. The primary focus of the argument appears to be the *immediacy* of the knowledge (of E

³¹⁵ Hasker, "The Absence of a Timeless God," in *God and Time*, ed. Ganssle, 194.

at t_2) that a timeless deity would enjoy and that this seems to entail locating the divine awareness at the times of which He is aware.

One weakness of this argument is its artificiality. Hasker appears to treat E at t_2 in isolation from other events and times, but for the advocate of divine timelessness who is also a tenseless theorist God's knowledge of any given event located at any given time is woven into a single decree that includes all times and events. The creation, as a spatio-temporal complex, *depends upon* the creative Word of God. But neither the creation nor its parts originate at a time subsequent or prior to moments or events in God's life.

Also, Hasker evidently assumes that both parties to a relation (say, God and event E) must both be located temporally if either of them is. Yet, to supplement the previous paragraph's point, it should not be considered obvious that a relation between a timeless knower of events at t_2 would itself exist both in eternity and at t_2 . Indeed, we have seen in the previous chapter that it is plausible to suppose that the relation between two *temporal* items does not exist at any time.³¹⁶ All the more, therefore, should a non-temporal relation seem plausible (even if mystifying) with respect to the necessarily existing Trinity and a contingently existing world.

Whether or not these criticisms hit their mark, Hasker undoubtedly would forego assigning an official, temporal presence to God's awareness were he, a theist, to be convinced that de-tensors are correct, say, in believing that no official present exists or that no coherent account of tensed time is possible. If no official present

³¹⁶ See again Oaklander, "The Experience of Tenseless Time," in *The Ontology of Time*, 231; cited toward the end of Chapter 4 in the present work.

exists, then no one, not even God, can know what time it is NOW. But what about the more mundane, ubiquitous, unofficial present(s) discussed by tenseless theorists? Assume that God is not essentially a temporal agent and that time is tenseless.³¹⁷ Can there be any sense in which He is *with* those whose lives play out on the stage of tenseless time? Is there a way for the timeless Triune God to inhabit a cosmic complex designed to house temporal agents? More pointedly, how are we to think and talk about the Triune Creator's *presence* with those in space and time given His spatio-temporal *absence* from their places and times? In this chapter, I will address these questions and try to show that from within Christian theology even the *timeless* God communicates His presence with times and those in time.

I do not, however, assume that those adhering to the timeless Creator doctrine must provide a speculative account of "atemporal causation" in order to be epistemically within their rights as religious believers. Although he does not explicitly demand such an account from atemporalists, Stephen Davis, a proponent of *temporal* eternalism, does encourage skepticism about the notion of a timeless action having temporal effects, citing that "we have on hand no acceptable concept of atemporal causation, i.e., of what it is for a timeless cause to produce a temporal

³¹⁷ I use the word 'essentially' here quite deliberately. On my understanding, the Son is essentially timeless and not essentially temporal. The Son is contingently (and, therefore, genuinely) temporal with respect to His human nature. An essential attribute, as I am using the term, would include the idea that timeless eternity is a *modal* attribute determining or "coloring" the character of *non-modal* attributes such as goodness or wisdom. Apparently unlike W.L. Craig, I do not believe that the modal attribute of timelessness can, in any respect, be added to or subtracted from the Triune God. Craig holds that God's timelessness is a contingent modal attribute, accounting for God's being timelessly eternal *without* creation and temporally eternal *with* creation.

effect.”³¹⁸ Reconstructing Davis’s remarks on this matter, we get the following syllogism:

P1- In all cases of causation with which we are familiar, a temporal relationship obtains between an action and its effects.

P2- We are in no position to deny that a temporal relationship *always* obtains between an action and its effects unless we are armed with a usable concept of atemporal causation.

P3- We are not armed with a usable concept of atemporal causation.

C- Therefore, we are in no position to deny that a temporal relationship *always* obtains between an action and its effects.

Beginning at the top, P1 appears to beg the question against those (such as Aquinas) who are “familiar” with a concept in which the divine cause brings about temporal effects. Suppose, however, that we grant Davis P1, perhaps even assuming that Aquinas’s thoughts on the subject lack cogency or completeness in some way. Even so, it seems that the above syllogism would prove too much even as far as he is concerned.

Davis, after all, is a Christian theologian who affirms that the world was at one time created. This requires one to think of creation both as an action (of God) and as an effect (the universe), respectively. As David Hume contends against Paley’s teleological argument in the *Dialogues*, however, there is a profound disanalogy between, on one hand, human artifice and the effects generated within the universe and, on the other, a divine act which itself is responsible for the

³¹⁸ Stephen T. Davis, “Temporal Eternity,” in *Philosophy of Religion: An Anthology*, Third Edition, ed. Louis P. Pojman (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1998), 238.

existence of that universe.³¹⁹ In the case of divine creation, we humans have no experience of “two species of objects” that are constantly conjoined and on the basis of which we would draw an inductive inference. Acknowledging this, one can form a parallel argument against Davis’s belief that God wields a causal power beyond those cause-effect relationships *within* the universe:

R1- In all cases of causation with which we are familiar, both an action and its effects take place within an existing world (i.e., are instances of intra-cosmic causation).

R2- We are in no position to deny that both an action and its effects are *always* instances of intra-cosmic causation unless we are armed with a usable concept of extra-cosmic causation.

R3- We are not armed with a usable concept of extra-cosmic causation.

C- Therefore, we are in no position to deny that both an action and its effects are *always* instances of intra-cosmic causation.

Those taking Davis’s viewpoint cannot elude this rather immanentistic conclusion by resorting to early Genesis or other passages that indicate a divine sustaining of the world. That would only beg the question in favor of extra-cosmic causation and against its atemporal character. Some burden, therefore, falls upon Davis to explain why the lack of a “usable concept” of atemporal causation *should* count against divine atemporality and why such a lack in the case of extra-cosmic causation should *not* count against a temporal deity’s creation of the world *ex nihilo*.

This response to Davis is clearly an *ad hominem* one. I am claiming that we have no better epistemic warrant for attributing an extra-cosmic causal power to a temporal Creator than we do for attributing such a power to an atemporal Creator. I

³¹⁹ David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Fifth Edition, ed. Norman Kemp Smith (Indianapolis, IN: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1947), 141-150

am not presently concerned, however, with establishing the truth of Christian theism (of which extra-cosmic causation certainly constitutes a necessary component). Furthermore, I am resolved not merely to counter charges of inconsistency or incoherence aimed at the timeless Creator thesis but to articulate a version of Christian theism in which God is understood to be timelessly present.³²⁰ Therefore, until temporalists such as Davis call for a satisfactory account of extra-cosmic causation (as a precondition of affirming the doctrines of creation and providence) I will not assume that an articulation of the timeless presence of the Triune Creator requires a comparable account of atemporal causation.³²¹ This chapter will thus feature no attempts to “prove” atemporalism. Instead, I will try to show that divine timelessness finds a comfortable (albeit mysterious) place within Christian theology. Is God’s timelessness (if He is timeless), after all, any more objectionable (or less discussable) than the doctrines of creation *ex nihilo*, the Trinity, or the Incarnation? For, as seen above, temporalists themselves must swallow a significant dose of mystery if they would espouse even the least perplexing of these tenets.³²²

In the first portion of what follows, I will propose that a principle of “difference-without-separation” is exhibited among the Persons of the Trinity, between the Second Person’s divine and human natures, and between the Triune

³²⁰ I find that many of the well-known claims asserting that timeless eternalism affirms contradictory propositions are countered reasonably well in Helm, *Eternal God*.

³²¹ It stands to reason that temporalists have no better choice, in the absence of unverifiable speculations, than to conceive of divine causation in terms of the Word of John 1:3, through whom “all things were made.” And this is a choice equally available to atemporalists.

³²² For an excellent treatment in which a Reformed apologist argues that a person may have good epistemic warrant for believing doctrines (such as the Trinity and the Incarnation) that are paradoxical (i.e., *apparently* logically contradictory), see James Anderson, *Paradox in Christian Theology: An Analysis of Its Presence, Character, and Epistemic Status* (Colorado Springs: Paternoster, 2008).

God and the world. All three involve a unique and inextricable union of “others.” But there appears to be a difficulty (akin to a similar one in the case of the Incarnation) in conceiving of how the timeless Trinity’s presence could be communicated to the world’s temporally indexed parts and temporally located individuals. Before exploring the difficulty, however, I will shift gears and spend some time observing that God’s presence depicted in the New Testament is often a “presence-in-absence.” While apt to produce some further ontological worries (regarding, for example, the “mechanics” of the application of Christ’s benefits to the elect by the Holy Spirit), the presence-in-absence theme lends credibility to the idea that God can impart His presence to creation even though He is also, in some important senses, absent from it. He is the Creator and, as such, is not to be confused with His creation. If we wonder how this can be, I contend that the problem of the timeless God’s presence can be conditionally resolved. Upon condition that one accepts a no-risk view of divine providence, God’s timeless presence can be vindicated. I further contend that there are good reasons for affirming a no-risk view of divine providence and that the best way to do so is in terms of a “Calvinian decree” and a compatibilist understanding of human freedom. In this chapter’s final portion, I will address two possible objections – first, to the notion of a timeless deity creating an historical world and, second, to this chapter’s proposed Reformed resolution of the “timely presence problem.”

I. Unity-in-Difference: Trinity, Incarnation, and the God-World Relationship

Whatever view one takes of God's relationship to time, there are essential Christian doctrines in which profound *difference* meets profound *intimacy* and *unity*. That this is so should, at the least, discourage some initial prejudices entertained against the notion of a timeless divine presence. In the Trinity, we see the Persons assuming different roles. The Father "delivers up" the Son for the sinners (Rom. 8:32) and the Holy Spirit is distinguished as the Church's comforter, confronter, and counselor (John 14:16; Acts 5:9; 15:28). The Trinitarian Persons are therefore distinct, though certainly not thereby separated or isolated from each other. Indeed, they equally share in the divine essence, enjoying a sublime communion and working with a unified purpose (John 5:17; 17:20-26).

It is noteworthy, however, that in the Scriptures (as is evident in each of the texts just cited) the Triune God is only revealed insofar as He is the active Lord of creation. Assuming the legitimacy of the distinction, we only become acquainted with the immanent Trinity *through* the economic Trinity.³²³ Witnessing to this fact is the manifestation of God the Son as Immanuel in the Person of Jesus Messiah. In John 1:11, the *Logos* comes to His own, though they do not receive Him. He is the "visiting Host" who, says Paul in Philippians 2:6, though being "in the form of God," was "found in human form" for the purpose of providing a vicarious sacrifice. I believe we should interpret these phrases not along the lines of an Arian subordination of Christ to the Father's deity or the Docetic (or Apollinarian) denial

³²³ I am thinking of the economic Trinity here not just in reference to the economy of redemption but more broadly in reference to all of the works included in the eternal decree (creation, governance, etc.).

of Christ's full humanity. Rather, an orthodox Christology will reckon Christ as fully divine and fully human, a divine Person who takes to Himself a whole human nature. But if Christ the Son is divine and God is timeless, then Christ the Son is timeless. This much seems clear. How then does this fit with Christ's full humanity and the implication that He was (and plausibly still is, world without end) a temporal agent in virtue of that humanity?

Following some insights gathered late in the chapter on Calvin, I hold that the Son or *Logos* is not *essentially asarkos* (without flesh). He is *primarily asarkos* because He is God the Second Person; this reality accounts for the unity of His Person both without and with the Incarnation. He is *secondarily ensarkos* (in flesh) in that He *assumes* a human nature in the Person of Jesus Christ. The Son, however, is *essentially* timeless (again, *if* God is timeless). For it appears contradictory to assert that a timeless being could *become* temporal. Because a timeless deity is (strongly) immutable, the Incarnation cannot possibly be a *transformation* of the Son into a human. Instead, some sort of conceptual or metaphysical "space" would need to be made available for a non-temporal addition of a (temporally located) human nature to the divine Son. The en-fleshing of the timeless divine Son thus brings together in one Person a timeless nature and a temporal nature. He is, *inter alia*, the Trinity's *re-affirmation* and *exaltation* of the work of Creation.

Expanding on this, it stands to reason that the Incarnate Son has only a tenseless knowledge of events with respect to His divine nature (e.g. "With the Father and the Spirit, I decree that the resurrection of my body follows my death.").

He has knowledge of an intrinsically directional order of things and events. And though He may be said to adopt a full human agency within the spatio-temporal complex as the divine Son in the Incarnation, He does this without confining the divine nature to a particular space-time locale.³²⁴ Additionally, it is consistent with His divine nature and with the tenseless account of time that the Son should also, with respect to His human nature, hold tensed beliefs and have a mastery of temporal indexicals (e.g. “Truly, I say to you, *this generation* will not pass away until all these things take place,” Matt. 24:34). His divine standpoint does not cancel or render “subjective” the fact of His being temporally located, having memories, experiencing dread, and so on. These witness to a secondary (but nonetheless real) nature comprising the Son’s Person. Moreover, it is not a mark against divine timelessness that one might experience slightly less vexation in trying to imagine the incarnation of a temporal divine Son than an atemporal one. If imaginability is a sufficient test, one could arguably do just as well or better to bypass an orthodox doctrine of the Incarnation (whether of the temporal or atemporal variety) at the outset. And this is not an acceptable option for Christians. Moving on, then, we

³²⁴ I here would hearken back to Calvin’s preferred phrase, *finitum non capax infinitum* – the finite cannot contain the infinite. However God the Son joins to Himself a human nature, it is not a foregone conclusion that the union could only be secured through a sort of physical deposit of the divine nature “into” a human body in ancient Palestine. There seems to be no obvious way in which such a deposit would not result in a confusion that compromises the integrity of the divine and human natures. The doctrine of the Incarnation, to be sure, implies not a mixing of the divine and human; it implies their *sui generis* union. But I do not see how this understanding can conceptually hold up if the Son’s divine nature, as such, is construed as having physical parts. If the divine and human natures are unmixed and yet both exist physically then what accounts for their union? A feasible account, I propose, would require at least a two-fold sense of ‘physical’ – on one hand, a broad enough sense to encompass the Triune Persons, sufficiently preserving the contrast between an unincarnated and incarnated Son, and, on the other, a narrower sense employed in reference to creatures with bodies. But the difference between the two senses would be profound enough to prefer different *terms*.

may ask: in what sense is the Incarnate Son present in history with respect to His divine nature? While we will not address this question in depth here, it does at least by analogy bear on the subject at hand.

In particular, when we model the God-world relation on this “Whole + whole = Whole” conception of Christ’s Person, questions surface as to how God “localizes” His attendance to the world. If we follow Calvin’s language of “diffusion” of the divine virtues, then what we have are partial revelations of God. But if we affirm that God, as such, lacks proper parts, the partiality will need to be understood as strictly qualifying the *revealing* of God and not God Himself. God is *revealed* in part but revealed as the one whose entire essence transcends and informs His contingent decree. Yet, if God, who is not extended or located spatio-temporally, is “diffused” everywhere and everywhen, are we left to be agnostic about how this is so? Or can something more be “metaphysically” said from within Christian theology? I shall return to this question a little later.

II. God’s Presence as a Presence-in-Absence

For Christian theologians and philosophers who may be skeptical about the timeless Creator thesis, it will pay to consider that when the divine presence is depicted in the New Testament it is not typically characterized in an undifferentiated or unqualified way. More specifically, further progress may be made toward thinking of the timeless God as Immanuel if we will reflect upon some ways in which the Triune Persons maintain a presence-in-absence within the economy of

redemption. Not a lot of textual digging or elaborate exegesis is required in order to notice this reality either. To repeat from earlier, the Father *sends* the Son and therefore the Son bears witness to the works of the Father, whose “form you have never seen” (John 5:17, 19-21, 36). Further along in John’s Gospel, Jesus proclaims Himself the preeminent revelation of the Father:

Philip said to him, “Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us.” Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? *Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.* How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority, but the Father who dwells in me does his works.”³²⁵

Because the difference between the Father and the Son does not extinguish their unity, even given the latter’s incarnation, the Father is present when and where the Son is present. Yet the Father is not the Son. The Father is rightly reckoned, therefore, as missing from the Son’s places and times, though not altogether. He makes His presence known by being “missing-in-action” through the Son’s life and activities.³²⁶

Similarly, the Son’s bodily departure from the earth fails to signal His and His Father’s absolute absence. Having been assured by Jesus that He would “give...another Helper,” Judas (not Iscariot) follows Philip’s question with a quite specific query of his own:

³²⁵ John 14:8-10 (italics added).

³²⁶ For more on the revealed, incomprehensible God, see Colin Gunton, “Attribute and Action” in *Act and Being* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003). Including a line out of Barth, Gunton, on page 111, writes: “God is incomprehensible in not being graspable; but not incomprehensible in the sense of being entirely beyond our understanding. He can and does give himself to be conceived by us. ‘In His essence, as it is turned to us in His activity, He is so constituted that He can be known by us.’”

“[...] Lord, how is it that you will manifest yourself to us, and not to the world?” Jesus answered him, “If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. Whoever does not love me does not keep my words. And the word that you hear is not mine but the Father’s who sent me. These things I have spoken to you while I am still with you. But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.”³²⁷

Jesus immediately gives attention to the fruits of faithfulness and love produced in those who are His. Those animated by love for the Son will enjoy His and His Father’s company. The Spirit will *instruct* his disciples about “all things” and *remind* them of His words, these themselves being the authorized works of the Father. From these brief reflections, it is evident that God “has it in Him” to bring those who are “far off” near to Himself (cf. Acts 2:39).

And it doesn’t stop there. The Triune God sees fit to commune with and govern His covenant-elect people in tangible ways. Enacted by the Holy Spirit, the “New Creation” of individual sinners (given life by the Second Adam) echoes in a new key the “Old Creation” (that suffered with the condemnation of the First Adam).³²⁸ The assembly of believers, an international community of New Creatures (Gal. 3:28), receives under-shepherds. The *episkopoi* (overseers; see Acts 20:17, Titus 1:5), with the aid of the Spirit, extend the dominion of the Chief Shepherd, communicating grace through sounds, sights, and smells. The *words* spoken by the preacher shed light on the message of Christ’s liberation of sinners from sin and its painful pollution. The *sight* and reception of baptismal washing informs and reminds covenant members of their need for spiritual scouring, setting them apart for

³²⁷ John 14:22-26.

³²⁸ See Romans 5:12-21.

service in Christ's kingdom. The *smell* and *taste* of the Eucharistic elements enable vessels of the Holy Spirit to appropriate the Lamb's atoning work on their behalf, convey His ongoing spiritual provision for them, ratify a genuine fellowship that the Trinity enjoys with the saints, and lead them to anticipate the wholeness and purity of Christ's resurrected body, the Church. These tangible works of the Trinity amidst the Church are significant for the present thesis because they temporally manifest God's embrace of those who sought to divorce Him through their infidelity.

With historic Reformed theology, however, I believe that God maintains a presence with all of creation, revealing Himself non-redemptively and indiscriminately to all humankind (i.e., distinct from the ways in which He draws near to those who are being saved).³²⁹ What I hope to underscore here is that, on a defensible reading of the Hebrew-Christian Scriptures, God's providential presence does not entail His having an awareness of an official and relentlessly shifting NOW.³³⁰ Along *B*-theoretic lines, God's "diffusing" of Himself can be understood to utilize the tangible means of ordered objects and events in tenseless time, including among them temporal agents who have experiences, register them in memories, and anticipate how things will be at later times. A willingness to concede that divine timelessness is scripturally underdetermined should not tempt one to infer from the biblical God's historical involvements that time is a sort of uncreated,

³²⁹ An example would be Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: God and Creation*, vol. 2, trans. John Vriend, ed. John Bolt (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004); see chpt. 14, "Providence."

³³⁰ It does, however, entail His being aware of a unidirectional order of events and, for example, all the beliefs of all the agents located within that order concerning which events have already occurred (e.g. the storming of the Bastille) and which have not (e.g. Jerry Lewis's 90th birthday) as of certain times.

absolute “becoming.” Furthermore, if the divine Creator is incomprehensible, then His essence is more “exotic” (and, therefore, the scriptural discourse about Him will be more *accommodated* to our capacities) than should be expected from any entities in the creaturely domain, even those granted their own types of “exotic” discourse (such as one finds, say, in the philosophy of mind or theoretical physics).

As the point has already been made, even those who believe that God is in some sense temporal suffer significant limitations in their efforts to characterize the God-world relationship. When we read, for instance, in Genesis 6 that God spoke to Noah about His intention to wipe out earth’s inhabitants, instructing him to build an ark, proponents of temporal eternalism need not insist that God took the form of an embodied individual in order to communicate. Surely, there is no textual indication that He did. Of course, there are some theologians who are willing to say that God is in some sense spatial. But the supposition that God exists in a sort of hyper-space-time is no less speculative than the idea of divine timelessness. It has no direct scriptural support that I can see. The point here is that even those who say that God is spatio-temporal in His essence, when called upon to characterize ontologically God’s historic-redemptive speech acts, would have to drop several features customarily associated with human-to-human speech and conversation. For example, there appears to be no way, in principle, to quantify the “distance” separating a hyper-spatio-temporal God’s act of speaking and a targeted human who hears Him. On any credible account of human-to-human communication, no comparable state of affairs exists. Thus the claim that human speech may serve as a

model for thinking about divine speech must be strongly qualified. And because speech arguably constitutes an important way in which people are present with each other (along with physical contiguity, etc.), temporal eternalists seem to be faced with their own version of the “present problem.” Even if God, an infinite being, enjoys an immediate presence in the NOW, there are ways that finite temporal agents may be present with others (through physical contiguity, speaking, hearing, snail mail, email, etc.) that are not available to Him.³³¹ This is not to say that such a deity would necessarily lack a perspicuous awareness of all actual states of affairs.³³² I say this, rather, to draw attention to the fact that a transcendent Creator, however understood, is one whose presence is bound to be, in important respects, a presence-in-absence.

These caveats should allow us more easily to forsake the idea that God experiences history’s individuals and events in a piecemeal fashion. If we follow Augustine’s idea that divine foreknowledge is better thought of as vertical-hierarchical than as horizontal-diachronic in character, then we will not seek to pin God down to a particular temporal patch at any given time. If the notion that God has a temporally located cognitive part (corresponding, for example, to an intrinsically tensed property of presentness) comes to be viewed as no less superfluous than that to which it is thought to correspond, then we will not look beyond “the appearances” of historical events and entities to find the Trinity lurking

³³¹ Should the temporal Trinity’s Second Person take on a human nature, of course, He could be present in those ways in virtue of His being embodied.

³³² Though, as I tried to show in the previous chapter, when the Growing Block theorists are not threatening our knowledge that we are in the present, the Presentists are struggling to affirm and account for true past- and future- tense statements.

in, with, or among us. Rather, we will reckon that the timeless God communicates Himself *in absentia* in and through the details of history.

To be present is to be present *with* something or someone. The picture so far drawn is of a domain ordered from earlier to later in which individuals experience one thing after another, retain memories of their experiences, and act on various emotions and plans. Time has *direction* and temporal agents have a *sense* of direction. For defenders of divine atemporalism, God is responsible for correlating causal, entropic, and psychological asymmetries with time's arrow (if not grounding the latter in one or more of those asymmetries). That is, He establishes nature's regularities, building into the world various potential metrics by which to measure change. He also establishes humans who, being made in His image, are meant to govern the creation as His vicegerents. To repeat, they have senses through which to *experience* others, desires to *plan* and *act*, and an ability to *store* what they have learned.

Now, look again at God's informative instructions to Noah and the latter's subsequent experiences (recorded in Genesis chapters 6-9) as a case study of the timeless Creator's presence-in-absence. Firstly, keep in mind from earlier that even if it were a *temporally* eternal deity with whom Noah had to do, the "speech acts" of God would differ profoundly from those of any finite, creaturely agent. The difference between the speaking of a temporal god and the speaking of a human is still a difference in kind. As such, without denying that actual divine communications are recorded in these chapters, reports that "God said to Noah..."

function for *temporal* eternalists as divine accommodations to our present (at least) cognitive condition as recipients of the scriptural revelation. It can be appropriate and correct to attribute the act of “saying something” to God and still be an error to imply that God’s “saying” is just like any creaturely “sayings.” Whichever way one slices it then God’s “verbal presence” with Noah is a presence-in-absence.

Recognizing this, readers who believe that God is the ultimate non-temporal reality responsible for temporal reality will focus on the scripturally reported “phenomena” as accommodative divine tokens. Consider the first reported words spoken by God to Noah in Genesis 6:13:

And God said to Noah, “I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence through them. Behold, I will destroy them with the earth.”

Neither the “metaphysical mechanics” nor even a very precise story of *how* the voice of God came to Noah is of concern here. The condition(s) deemed worth reporting and under which Noah hears from God amount to a relevant fact about the state of the world at the time. “And the earth was corrupt in God’s sight...filled with violence” (vs. 11). Some will be tempted to think that God’s determination to scour the earth with water, eliminating the bulk of its inhabitants, fits rather well with His being a “provokable responder” – that is, with His being temporal. Whether or not this temporalist conception is held to be consistent with an exhaustive foreknowledge of human history, the conception tends to characterize God as a passible participant, facing challenges and choosing how best to meet them.

Needless to say, I believe that this conveys a faulty portrait of earth's judge. Two features from chapter six alone should convince that Noah's Commissioner enjoys a greater "transcendent advantage" over earth and its dwellers than does a deity in danger of suffering emotional setbacks due to (formerly foreseen?) human actions. For one, God's displeasure with the rampant evil of Noah's day takes the form not of a fitful reaction but of a "poetic Justice of the peace" administering poetic justice. Note that He makes His presence known to those He is judging and before the eyes of Noah by way of watery tokens from above and below – "for *the earth* is filled with violence through them...I will destroy them *with the earth* [emphasis mine]" (vs. 13). This is the action of a sovereign judge with a flair for irony, not a vengeful reactionary who occasionally "intervenes" when He sees fit. He is not lashing out but, by way of deluge, is granting the human race a much-needed catharsis (to say the least). Analogous to the Trinity's attendance at one's baptism, and for both good and ill, the floodwaters say that the absent Lord presides.

A second feature cutting against the "provokable responder" portrait relates to the specific design instructions God gives Noah for the ark (6:14-16), to an explicitly stated purpose ("to destroy all flesh" – vs. 17), and to a "cool" indication of what is coming (7:4):

For in seven days I will send rain on the earth forty days and forty nights, and every living thing that I have made I will blot out from the face of the ground.

We should readily grant that this prophetic prediction appears formally consistent with a temporally located Lord. To be sure, God speaks in the manner of a temporal

agent, utilizing tensed language to inform Noah – “I *will send* rain...every living thing that I *have made* I *will blot out*...[emphasis mine]” (7:4). Having observed, however, that even a temporal god would need to be accommodated to our understanding in some measure, we should not assume that God’s life has an intrinsically tensed character, even when in certain less explicitly didactic contexts such may appear to be the case.³³³ To wit, although God does intend for Noah to take action – to build a boat and gather animals – and thus communicates accordingly, He speaks as if forthcoming events are uniquely contingent upon His own purposeful action – “I *will send*...I *will blot out*...[emphasis mine]” (7:4). If one assumes that these future-tense statements had a positive truth-value (for which tenseless truth-conditions could be given, argue tenseless theorists), this would imply the existence of one who actively governs and maintains a perspicuous epistemic access to vast portions of creation as a causal-temporal order. At the least, there are great differences between how the Creator and creatures relate to events in time, both volitionally and cognitively. Nonetheless, if those who are skeptical about the present thesis will acknowledge it to be consistent with such passages, then I will concede that the latter do not logically entail it.

³³³ Furthermore, if Helm is correct and “it is a logically necessary condition of God’s dialogue with his creatures that the divine dialogue partner must recognize that such creatures must act and react in time” (p. 79), then one would not rightly infer from the use of tensed statements in dialogue with creatures that God is thereby attempting to unroll the whole “scroll” of His secret decree. To avoid begging the question in drawing the inference, one would need to know on some other basis that God is not atemporal. See Paul Helm, “Response to Critics” in *God and Time*, ed. Gregory E. Ganssle (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2001), 79-91. See especially the opening section where Helm goes to the Lord’s dealings with Hezekiah in Isaiah 38, arguing for a distinction between God in dialogue with creatures (tensed and conditioned by historical events) and God’s knowledge of His decree as an unchanging whole (tenseless and unconditioned by historical events).

III. The Timely Presence of the Timeless God

In this section I will hold that if one is to preserve the timeless character of God's life and action then a no-risk view of divine providence is necessary to guarantee the Triune presence with all times, places, and individuals. In the short term, however, I will merely argue that in order for the *temporal* God to know (and not merely successfully predict) that a great rainstorm will occur by which all but Noah (and his family and livestock) will be killed, He would need to know that all the events that *could* causally prevent it *will not occur*. To know that X will occur (X = Noah & Company surviving a worldwide flood), God would need to know that no events (N₁) will occur which, *were* they to occur, would causally prevent X from occurring. But in order to know that N₁ will not occur, God would need to know that N₁ will not be *caused* to occur. To know this, however, God would need to know that no *other* events (N₂), which, were they to occur, would cause N₁ to occur, *will* occur. And so on down the line.³³⁴ Moreover, among the events precluded by God's foreknowledge would, plausibly, be some human choices, so long as one accepts the premise that humans are capable of causally affecting (sometimes to a great extent) their surrounding physical environment(s).

This view leads most naturally, I believe, to the idea that a deity who temporally foreknows that X will occur has that knowledge because he is responsible for bringing it about that X will occur. Indeed, how could God know

³³⁴ For similar reasoning critical of Simple Foreknowledge, see William Hasker, "Simple Foreknowledge," in his *God, Time, and Knowledge*, 61-63.

that N₂ or its most spatio-temporally remote causal precursors will not occur without His having (at the least) established the initial conditions of the world and secured all the causal linkages between the initial state(s) of affairs and the events to follow, thereby guaranteeing certain outcomes? For the moment, however, we can settle for the weaker claim that for God to provide Noah with the knowledge that certain events (X) will occur He would need to know about of a vast network of which those events form just a small sub-section.

Of course, this dissertation takes the view that there are in God's essence no earlier and later intervals, much less any experiences of temporal passage. For B-theorists, there exists no temporal passage to be experienced. There are only events and experiences that are past relative to some time and future relative to some other time. Several of the above considerations encourage us to view God as an *ironical judge* as opposed to a *temperamental reactionary* and as one who is *actively working* to coordinate means and ends, not *learning* as He goes. These "transcendent advantages" help to advance toward a sense in which God could maintain a presence-in-absence with creation's times, places, and individuals. I assert, however, that in order to communicate His *timeless* presence to any and all locations in tenseless time, the Lord should be understood as strongly actualizing all entities and events. Here it will serve to distinguish between the timely *voice* of God and the timely *presence* of God's timeless voice, with the latter accounting for the former on the basis of its own universal character.

The timely *voice* of God, on one hand, is the voice that gave Noah instructions. To this voice it was possible to respond positively or negatively. The ante-diluvian Noah is only recorded as having responded positively (Gen. 6:22; 7:5). Not all of those made privy to the timely instructions of God respond in like manner. The story of Israel's exodus from Egypt, for instance, records the persistent spurning of YHWH's commands by the Pharaoh. In this case, the redemptive purpose and presence of YHWH in the midst of Pharaoh's Egypt is conveyed by the words and works of the chosen prophet, Moses (Ex. 7:1, 2). Similar to a lost child hearing her father's voice over a loud-speaker, Pharaoh was given the Lord's instructions, audibly received by Moses (Ex. 6:10-13), but over a period persistently refused to comply. By means of His timely voice, therefore, the Lord meets with certain individuals, informs them about what He is accomplishing in and through history, perhaps questions or tests them, and issues various instructions.

The timely *presence* of God with all points of creation, on the other hand, is expressed, we might say, by a *deeper* voice. And readers of Psalm 29 learn of such a voice. The voice is the Lord's and, as such, is both *other than* and *actively animating* the creation. If any scriptural depiction ever suggested that God enjoys a unique position vis-à-vis creation's entire temporal and causal order, the following would figure as a strong candidate:

The voice of the LORD is over the waters...[t]he voice of the LORD breaks the cedars...[t]he voice of the LORD flashes forth flames of fire. The voice of the LORD shakes the wilderness of Kadesh. The voice of the LORD makes the deer give birth and strips the forests bare, and in his temple all cry,

“Glory!” The LORD sits enthroned over the flood; the LORD sits enthroned as king forever.³³⁵

There appear to be no good reasons for treating these declarations as less than “realistic” statements about the Lord’s governance of the cosmos, though they are certainly more than that.³³⁶ Most crucially, they are *at least* that. And yet the psalmist would doubtless resist as a matter of principle any speculation that one could “hear” this voice of the Lord in any way other than the actual bits and pieces of nature and history; creation is the arena of divine activity.³³⁷ Similarly, an implication of the timeless Triune presence can be felt in the realm of epistemological ethics. Metaphysical quests after some ultimate “stuff” that one supposes to be God should not be countenanced. In the nature of the case, creatures know God *as* the Creator, as Lord of *this* world. Indeed, Paul of Tarsus teaches that

³³⁵ Psalm 29:3-10. The author of Hebrews declares that Jesus, the Son, is seated in divine majesty (Heb. 1:13), a subject Calvin expounds upon in the dedication of his *Commentary on Jeremiah*: “But Christ, it is said, sits at the Father’s right hand, which is to be taken as meaning everywhere, confined within no limits. I indeed allow that God’s right hand is unlimited, and that wherever it is there is the kingdom of Christ; which is metaphorically represented in Scripture by the terms sitting: for whatever is declared of God is beyond controversy to be now ascribed to Christ; and therefore to sit, which means to govern the world, is what Christ has in common with the Father; and still more, as the Father by Him sustains the world, rules all things by His power, and especially manifests the presence of His grace in governing His Church, He may be said, strictly speaking, to reign in His own person. It hence follows, that He in a manner is everywhere; for He can be limited to no place who sustains and protects all parts of heaven and earth, and rules and regulates by His power all things above and below.” John Calvin, *Commentary on Jeremiah*. Credit goes to another for uncovering this gem. See Paul Helm, “Cross, Calvin and Causal Presence,” at <http://paulhelmsdeep.blogspot.com/2008/12/cross-calvin-and-causal-presence.html>; Internet; 31 October 2011.

³³⁶ One especially appreciates the emotional power of this psalm when singing it from the psalter published by the Reformed Presbyterian Church, North America. But its emotional power should not be assumed to derive from some ineffable religious sense, independent of the belief that God in fact relates to the world in this way. Yet this “realistic” reading does not imply that the Creator has a chair from which He never moves. All the same, an important truth about God’s relationship to His world is expressed adequately enough to exhort those who *think about* the Lord to *worship and honor* Him.

³³⁷ For some amusing and unflinching meditations on the Creator’s productive voice, see N.D. Wilson, *Notes from the Tilt-a-Whirl: Wide-Eyed Wonder in God’s Spoken World* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 2009).

the Creator successfully expresses truths about Himself to humans through their own awareness of the “stuff” of creation:

For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, *in the things that have been made*.³³⁸

Even as he demonstrates the propriety of a temporal agent employing tensed language in reference to the Triune God’s work of creation (e.g. “...in the things that *have been made*.”), the apostle shows that creation bears the unmistakable impress of its Lord.³³⁹

The voice of Psalm 29 also contrasts with the messages Noah received in that the former has a more deeply “causal” character than the latter. His “deeper voice” is the fundamental vehicle by which God upholds things and orchestrates events. If one grants that a timeless God may only “diffuse” Himself to creation’s parts by strongly actualizing all things and events, then the very patterns of history (e.g. season following season, Gen. 8:22) and details of human life (see Acts 17:24-27) are products of divine speech, expressive of the Triune Lord’s intentions. There is no room in this outlook for a god whose stealthy presence might otherwise be mistaken for inactivity or personal indifference to the intimate details of cosmic history or human life. Nonetheless, to speak of the work done by God’s deeper voice is to reference a divine communiqué to which there are no responses. Viewed another way, *all things* – all the members of and occurrences within creation – serve

³³⁸ Romans 1:20 (emphasis mine).

³³⁹ Whether creatures will, under any conditions or in all ways, acknowledge this to be the case is another issue.

as responses to the divine communiqué in doing what they do and being what they are.

To echo Herbert McCabe, we here have a conception in which “God makes no difference to the universe.”³⁴⁰ He makes no difference because, for such to be the case, one would need to assume that the world is in some respect other than what God’s deeper voice says it is. Thus, I would initially conclude that the Triune God communicates His timeless presence to the different temporal parts and members of the world by “vocally” making those parts and members exactly what they are. Mysteriously, he orders means and ends within a causal-temporal order in a way that expresses who He is and thus (unnecessarily but truly) glorifies Himself through creation (Eph. 1:11).³⁴¹

Undoubtedly, however, many philosophers and theologians will find this effort to defend and commend the “timely” presence of the timeless God

³⁴⁰ See McCabe, *God Matters*, 6, where he writes: “I mean by this that we do not appeal specifically to God to explain why the universe is this way rather than that, for this we need only appeal to explanations within the universe. ...[This] may seem to make God both remote and irrelevant. He is not part of the universe and he makes no difference to it. It is therefore necessary to stress that God must be in everything that happens and everything that exists in the universe. ...Every action in the world is an action of God; not because it is not an action of a creature but because it is by God’s action that the creature is *itself* and has its *own* activity.”

³⁴¹ For a detailed look at Calvin’s theology of nature within the framework of his doctrine of providence, see Susan E. Schreiner, *The Theater of His Glory: Nature & the Natural Order in the Thought of John Calvin* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1995). Schreiner agrees with Josef Bahatec that divine providence is for Calvin a *Stammlehre* or “root doctrine” – what she also calls the “proscenium arch” – “because in it one finds the presuppositions of predestination, Law, the work of Christ, and the means of grace.” As indicated by the title, however, Schreiner examines providence specifically in terms of the created order, the theater of God’s glory. Also, those theologians apt to criticize the “ego-centric” idea that God’s own glory is His chief end should not dismiss Carson’s thinking on the subject: “The picture the Bible presents of God’s love is one in which His love, even in eternity past, even before the creation of anything, is other-oriented. This cannot be said (for instance) of Allah. Yet because the God of the Bible is one, this plurality-in-unity does not destroy His entirely appropriate self-focus as God. Because He is God, He is therefore rightly jealous. To concede He is something other than the center of all, and rightly to be worshiped and adored, would debase His very Godhood. He is the God who, entirely rightly, does not give His glory to another (Isa. 42:8).” See D.A. Carson, “The Love of God,” *Tabletalk*, February 2012, 6.

unsatisfactory. Apart from considerations in the metaphysics of time akin to those discussed in the previous chapter, some will resist the no-risk providence resolution because it seems to fly in the face of what is taken to be an unassailable philosophical doctrine – libertarian freedom. A person has libertarian freedom in those cases in which he or she makes choices that are free from the determination or constraints of human nature and free from any prior ordination by God.

As an Open theist, William Hasker affirms libertarian human freedom and feels free to add to his critique of divine timelessness (briefly touched upon earlier in this chapter) that the latter appears not to allow for the former. In particular, he examines and finds wanting Anselm's idea that the whole of time is contained "in" an eternal (i.e., non-temporal) present and that, therefore, all human actions can be said to exist both in time and in eternity. This idea, he claims, cannot be squared with the supposition that there is no sense in which humans are not free to choose other than what they actually choose:

Previously I pointed out that divine timelessness can be reconciled with libertarian freedom only if the following proposition is true: *there are things that God timelessly believes which are such that it is in my power, now, to bring it about that God does not timelessly believe those things*. Given Anselm's Solution, we may add another necessary condition: *there are future actions of my own which timelessly exist in the divine eternity which are such that it is in my power, now, to bring about that those actions do not exist in eternity*. Does anyone seriously believe that these requirements are satisfied?³⁴²

With Hasker, I am not convinced that these requirements are satisfied. Despite the fact that Anselm, like Boethius, viewed divine timelessness as a means of preserving

³⁴² Hasker, "The Absence of a Timeless God," in *God and Time*, 198.

libertarian freedom, within this picture human choices appear to be, in some way, necessitated by God's knowledge (or by a decree accounting for that knowledge). Thus, Hasker may be correct when he judges that timeless eternity and libertarian freedom are mutually exclusive, forcing one to choose between the two if either one is to be accepted.

Furthermore, contemporary evangelicals commonly believe that libertarian freedom is a necessary condition of moral responsibility. W.L. Craig takes this position and uses it against the view that God's foreknowledge rests upon God's foreordination:

The Augustinian-Calvinist perspective interprets the above passages [which make reference to God's knowledge and plans] to mean that foreknowledge is based upon foreordination: God knows what will happen because he makes it happen. Aware of the intentions of his will and his almighty power, God knows that all his purpose shall be accomplished. But this interpretation inevitably makes God the author of sin, since it is he who moved Judas, for example, to betray Christ, a sin that merits the hapless Judas everlasting perdition. But how can a holy God move people to commit moral evil and, moreover, how can these people then be held morally responsible for acts over which they had no control?³⁴³

No doubt Craig means for the question at the end to be taken rhetorically, implying that people cannot perform evil acts (thereby exercising some control over their actions) and assume some moral responsibility for those acts if God, in some sense, moves them to commit those acts. That is, he rejects as a conceptual and theological absurdity what is known as compatibilist freedom, the notion that free actions can be causally constrained or determined by one's nature or strongly actualized

³⁴³ William Lane Craig, "The Middle-Knowledge View," in *Divine Foreknowledge: Four Views*, eds. James K. Beilby and Paul R. Eddy (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 135.

(necessitated) by God.³⁴⁴ And if one upholds this conceptual and theological indictment of compatibilist freedom, then those accepting Hasker's disjunct above (between atemporalism and libertarian freedom) would indeed have a reason for rejecting the timelessness doctrine.

Whether or not one is forced to choose between timeless eternity and libertarian freedom, however, at least as many Scripture texts give *prima facie* reasons for doubting libertarian freedom as give *prima facie* reasons for doubting divine timelessness. Taking just the example of Judas Iscariot's betrayal of Christ raised by Craig, consider some brief remarks made by D.A. Carson in his extensive treatment of John's Gospel in which he addresses this topic:

Judas is responsible for his treason (cf. 12.4-6; 18.2f., 5), and in this sense 'acted freely'; but it is contrary to the theology of the fourth Gospel to conclude from this that God 'merely used his evil act to bring about his purpose.' Such a formulation makes God the one who *a posteriori* merely deflects Judas's sin, or manipulates it, to achieve his own ends; but the teleological nature of the fulfillment-motif renders such a formulation too easy. ...[D]ivine ultimacy operates in some mysterious way so that human responsibility is in no way mitigated, while the divine being is in no way tarnished. In particular, Judas is responsible even when Satan is using him; but over both stands the sovereignty of God. The mysterious ultimacy in this divine sovereignty conclusively limits johannine dualism and makes John savour more of the Old Testament than of Gnosticism. Already it is clear that 'the doctrine of predestination is apparent at every point in the Fourth

³⁴⁴ In his fine exegetical treatment of the so-called tension between divine sovereignty and human responsibility, Carson distinguishes the concept of 'predestination' from 'determinism': "'Predestination' in this book refers to the fore-ordination of events by God. ...Because predestination, by this definition, has God as the one who predestines, it is to be distinguished from 'determinism', which supposes that all is in principle completely predictable according to the universal laws of nature, but which does not trace such fixedness to God." See D.A. Carson, *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility: Biblical Perspectives in Tension*, second edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1994), 2-3. I find this distinction to be a sound one, though it should not prevent us from using the term 'determines' in reference to God's foreordaining work, distinguishing its sense from those that it has in other contexts.

Gospel, every incident being viewed *sub specie aeternitatis* as predestined in the mind of God.³⁴⁵

At minimum, one should admit that the competing views of libertarian and compatibilist freedom are no less scripturally underdetermined than are temporalism and atemporalism. This having been admitted, parties to the dispute will more carefully resist inferring from the fact that theories have been set forth to explain the biblical data that the biblical writers would have welcomed such efforts to explain, much less unambiguously favored one theory over the other. Mystery surrounds the relationship between, on one hand, the divine will and foreknowledge and, on the other hand, these and human freedom as much as it surrounds the question of whether the causal relationship God maintains with creation is in some sense temporal or whether it is an atemporal one. Likewise, I judge that, as in the case of the latter, efforts to *explain* the mystery of foreordination and freedom should not enjoy the same normative epistemic status for Christians as the fact that the mystery is in fact *revealed*. As tempting as it might be to claim that on occasion the biblical writers appear to reserve an explanatory role for statements (e.g. “This Jesus, delivered up according to the deliberate plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men” – Acts 2:23), the better part of epistemic humility will keep us from drawing more than the minimal metaphysical conclusions from them. And this policy of humility will arguably trump any alleged scriptural endorsements of full-fledged libertarian or compatibilist freedom.

³⁴⁵ Carson, *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility*, 132.

That being stated, in what follows I will offer some critical remarks against one theory commonly set forth in an effort to capture or explain the relationship between divine foreknowledge and libertarianly free human choices. The theory is called Simple Foreknowledge. I find that this theory, which typically takes God to be temporally located (i.e., having tensed knowledge), fails to surmount an agnosticism regarding how God knows future libertarianly free human actions. But this failure does not prevent people from affirming both that humans make libertarianly free choices and that God has future-tensed knowledge of the choices they make. Therefore, I conclude that an inability to explain *how* a holy god determines free human actions (some of which are sinful) should not dispose one against the timely presence of the timeless God merely out of deference to libertarian human freedom. For, why not then be disposed against Simple Foreknowledge merely out of deference to compatibilist freedom?

The Simple Foreknowledge theory says that God knows all that there is to know and that this includes human choices that are causally undetermined (i.e., libertarianly free). Although one (say, a Thomist) could conceivably pair this idea with a conception in which God is *timeless* (and in which time is tensed), Simple Foreknowledge seems to comport best with a conception in which God is *temporal*. In more specific regard to the idea of time it endorses, Simple Foreknowledge comfortably couples with what was known in the previous chapter as the Moving Spotlight view.

By way of review, the Moving Spotlight view attempts to combine *A*-theoretic time with the idea that all times – those in our past, present, and future – are equally real. Like events and things in space, events and things in our past and future, in spite of their distance from us, are no less real than those in our present. An analogy some give for this view compares the events in time to an ordered row of houses. For *B*-theorists this analogy is somewhat helpful but is also a hindrance in that one can walk in either direction along a row of houses. Unlike events arranged within the framework of *B* theory time, a row of houses features no earlier or simultaneous houses. As its name makes clear, the Moving Spotlight view attempts to impose a set direction on the order of events by combining this eternalist picture with the *A* theory. This minimally amounts to the claim that, contrary to the *B* theory, there is an official present. In the analogy given, a spotlight hits upon one house and then another, moving successively along the row in one direction. Similarly, positions in time are more or less future or more or less past depending on the distance separating them from the official present.³⁴⁶

As additional stage-setting, let us say that t_0 stands for the official present, whatever date one wishes to assign to it. Let us also stipulate that the Simple Foreknowledge theorist accepts the Moving Spotlight view, affirming that God is temporally present at t_0 and only at t_0 . Now, suppose that a libertarianly free choice (LFC) occurs at t_{+1} (i.e., at some time in the future). The Simple Foreknowledge

³⁴⁶ For the sake of argument, I will assume that this idea of time is conceptually unproblematic, though I have earlier tried to show that it is not.

theorist holds that God knows that LFC will occur and also holds that LFC at t_{+1} is no less real than some other event located at t_0 .

Having set this up, I believe that Simple Foreknowledge theorists must shoulder some burden for (1) showing that on this scheme God's omnipresence (particularly His "timely" presence) can be consistently affirmed and (2) showing how on this scheme God can know at t_0 that LFC *will occur* at t_{+1} . Some, it can be anticipated, will at least object to the second of these requirements, saying that we ought to be satisfied with the claim *that* God knows which actions libertarianly free creatures will take. No need to have the claim *that* God knows, after all, held hostage to calls for an explanation of *how* He knows such things. Two considerations, however, should ruffle these feathers a bit more. First, Simple Foreknowledge theorists arguably already lean in an anthropocentric and rationalistic direction by, at best, subordinating a providential volition to a more passive divine cognition. This *modus operandi* strikes me as having roots in a general intellectual prejudice against any form of "theological determinism" and not in biblical exegesis.³⁴⁷ Second, and on a related note, these same theorists often join other advocates of libertarian human freedom in disparaging an Augustinian-Calvinist viewpoint for the failure of its proponents to explain *how* God can control the actions of people and still hold them morally responsible for at least some of those actions. So long as this behavior continues, there is no reason why

³⁴⁷ Ephesians 1:11 does *not*, for instance, read: "In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been *pre-cognized* according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his *knowledge*. [italics are mine]" Those inheriting salvation, rather, are *pre-destined* by one who works all things according to the counsel of his *will*.

Augustinian-Calvinists should not hold their critics to the same standard, calling for an explanation of how God knows what humans will choose to do in the future without Himself strongly actualizing those choices.³⁴⁸ Failure to provide such an explanation (i.e., a credible one) would at least show that one version of temporalist theism fails to underwrite the rejection of “atemporal compatibilism” based on the latter’s rejection of libertarian freedom.

And so, again, assume that God is present at t_0 and that LFC occurs at t_{+1} . Simple Foreknowledge says that at t_0 God knows that LFC *will occur* at t_{+1} . But how does God know this? Firstly, He does not “know” it by making a well-educated guess based on His knowledge of all true past- and present-tensed propositions (assuming that any causally relevant truths could be explained within a tensed account of time). A case of guessing (i.e., believing without being “maximally justified”) is not a case of knowing, at least for God. Indeed, although fallible knowers may sometimes be warranted in holding false beliefs (maybe due to improperly functioning cognitive faculties or other environmental factors), an *infallible* knower cannot hold false or unwarranted beliefs. If there are true future-tensed propositions, then God has the divine equivalent of justified true beliefs (effectively barring any Gettier counter-examples) about them. Unless perhaps one is an Open theist, God does not guess. Even so, an account in which God fallibly

³⁴⁸ These *ad hominem* considerations aside, Augustinian-Calvinists should generally be satisfied to argue that in many places the language of the biblical writers bursts the wine skins of those categories available to Simple Foreknowledge theorists. I refer the reader again to D.A. Carson’s *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility*.

anticipates what humans will choose based upon His knowledge of prior conditions is, in fact, consistent with a deterministic conception of human agency.

Secondly, God does not know that LFC will occur by being present at t_{+1} . His knowledge of LFC is supposed to be a *bona fide* case of temporal foreknowledge. On a reasonable understanding, this means that God only *directly experiences* things and events at t_0 . He does not directly experience things and events at t_{-1} or t_{+1} , etc. So, on one hand, Simple Foreknowledge departs from paradigm cases of human knowledge by positing a pre-cognitive deity and, on the other hand, acknowledges that said deity is quite like humans in that He only directly experiences the official present (speaking, of course, in *A-theoretic* terms).

There are at least two problems with this. The first relates to a prominent goal of this dissertation, which is to vindicate the timely presence of the timeless God. The second relates to the attempt in this chapter to do so in terms of a doctrine of divine providence in which humans are compatibilistically free.

The first problem stems from the fact that on the Simple Foreknowledge view the occurrence of LFC at t_{+1} is no less real than occurrences at t_0 . That is, if things and events at t_0 exist, then things and events at t_{-1} and t_{+1} exist. But if things and events exist at t_{-1} and t_{+1} , then God is not present with some existent things and events, since God is not present at t_{-1} and t_{+1} . But if God is not present with some existent things and events, then God is not omnipresent. This assumes what seems to be a quite plausible understanding of what it means for the Creator to be omnipresent, that there exist no times or places at which God is not, in some sense,

present. However, assuming that they find these terms agreeable, Simple Foreknowledge temporalists cannot unequivocally affirm that proposition. Therefore, a credible version of Simple Foreknowledge appears to contradict an indispensable tenet of Christian theism.

One way out of this would be to agree with the *B*-theorists. The latter subtract the “spotlight” of the official present, arguing that it is superfluous to time’s “sense” or direction. Another way out would be to agree with the Presentists. They subtract the eternalist doctrine, leaving only the “spotlight” to order uni-directional events. Otherwise, one is left with a formal denial of divine omnipresence. To restate the claim, it amounts to this: if there exists a time at which the temporalist’s God is not present, then the temporalist’s God is not present at all times or with the things (e.g. people) and events (e.g. actions people take) located at all times.³⁴⁹

The second problem, I argue, consists in there being no basis for granting that God foreknows which future human choices will be made without also granting that God foreordains those choices. The would-be proponent of Simple Foreknowledge finds himself on the horns of a dilemma. He must *either* assume that all free human choices are of the libertarian variety, affirming that God knows

³⁴⁹ I suppose that another possible response to this line of reasoning would be to appropriate something like the *A*-theorist Quentin Smith’s “degree Presentism,” which asserts that the past and future exist but in lesser degrees than the present. See his “Times and Degrees of Existence: A Theory of ‘Degree Presentism,’” in *Time, Reality and Experience*, ed. Craig Callender (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 119-136. While the concept of “degrees of existence” might allow one to escape the unequivocal conclusion that God is absent from past and future existents, it would bring with it the (counterintuitive) concept of “degrees of truth” (in reference to past and future states of affairs) and a correspondingly weakened doctrine of divine omniscience vis-à-vis past- and future-tense propositions. For a critical engagement with Smith’s view, see L. Nathan Oaklander, “Time and Existence: A Critique of ‘Degree Presentism,’” in *States of Affairs*, ed. Maria Elisabeth Reicher (New Brunswick, Frankfurt, Lancaster, Paris: Ontos verlag, 2009), 151-165.

which choices will be made but remaining agnostic about how this is so, *or* admit that God's knowledge that a free choice (FC) will occur implies that it is necessary that FC will occur. And to say that it is necessary that FC will occur is to say that FC is not a libertarianly free choice. These appear to be the only two available options.

Although Simple Foreknowledge theorists are often disposed to embrace it, the first horn of the dilemma is not very attractive for at least two reasons.³⁵⁰ First, when one combines what would be, at best, a scriptural agnosticism about how God could foreknow future LFCs with both the fact that libertarian freedom cannot be deduced (as the Westminster Confession puts it, "by good and necessary consequence") from Scripture and the fact that some scriptural statements seem to accord with compatibilism, the *assumption* that humans are libertarianly free smacks of question begging. Second, to the extent that Simple Foreknowledge theorists discount an effectual predestination for lack of a convincing account of how compatibilist freedom squares with human moral responsibility their own failures to explain how God could be justified in believing that an LFC will occur undercut the presumption that human choices are indeed of the libertarian kind. Granting, however, that Scripture precisely dictates neither libertarian nor compatibilistic freedom, those seeking to use libertarianism against the compatibilistic defense of a timeless presence minimally need to show that God's knowledge that FC will occur does not imply that FC will occur *necessarily*.

³⁵⁰ In defending Simple Foreknowledge, David Hunt prefers this "agnostic" approach. See Hunt, "The Simple Foreknowledge View," in *Divine Foreknowledge: Four Views*, 67.

But I would judge that this cannot be done. With Anthony Kenny, I believe that the eighteenth-century American Calvinist theologian Jonathan Edwards soundly argued that “certain foreknowledge...is not, in fact, consistent with a genuine lack of necessity in future events.”³⁵¹ In section twelve of *The Freedom of the Will*, Edwards lays out his argument, which I will summarize here:

P1 – The past is necessary; i.e., nothing can change it. [Assumption; Sect. XII.I.1]³⁵²

P2 – God’s foreknowledge of events is past in relation to those events. [Assumption; Sect. XII.I.2]

Thus,

P3 – God’s foreknowledge is necessary in relation to the events He foreknows (P1 & P2).

P4 – Necessarily, if God knows that an event will occur, it will occur (God is essentially omniscient). [Sect. XII.I.4]

P5 – What is necessarily implied by a necessary fact, is itself necessary. [Assumption; Sect. XII.I.3]

Therefore,

C – What God foreknows occurs necessarily (P3, P4, and P5).

As a Christian, Edwards believes that God has prophetically predicted some human choices. Furthermore, leading up to the argument above, he contends that in order to have a justified belief that any future free action will take place would require an exhaustive foreknowledge that encompasses all human choices prior to that action.³⁵³ According to him then it follows that there is an important sense in which humans cannot choose other what they choose.

If one accepts the Simple Foreknowledge view with its conception of a temporal deity, the argument looks infeasible. On the assumed Moving Spotlight

³⁵¹ Anthony Kenny, *The God of the Philosophers* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 82.

³⁵² Jonathan Edwards, *Works*, Vol. 1, eds. Sereno E. Dwight and Edward Hickman (London: Billing & Sons Ltd., 1834), including *The Freedom of the Will* (1754).

³⁵³ Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*, XI.Arg.II.

theory, not only are there unchanging truths about the past (e.g. “Augustine died in A.D. 430.”), the things and events of the past *exist*. P1 is thus secure.³⁵⁴ And, supposing that God’s temporal presence is criteriological, any foreknowledge He has is past in relation to the events foreknown. P2 is secure as well. P3 draws together P1 and P2 and seems to be uncontroversial. It reiterates that God is omniscient – He necessarily knows that X will occur if X will occur. P4 is a substantive theological premise that Edwards supports with Scripture and with which I agree. God’s knowledge (that X) implies that not-X is impossible. And we have no basis (though I doubt that it is even possible) to doubt P5. Therefore, it does seem to follow that what God foreknows occurs necessarily. Hence, those willing to admit that God foreknows which choices humans will make should admit that those choices occur necessarily.

I do not intend the foregoing as a refutation of libertarian freedom. I do believe, however, that Edwards argues persuasively for the thesis that an essentially omniscient God cannot foreknow which choices humans will make if humans are

³⁵⁴ If one chooses to reject the Moving Spotlight view of time (and there are good reasons to do so, I believe), then there seem to be only two viable remaining options left from which to choose: Presentism and some “pure” (unmixed with A-theoretic “becoming”) form of eternalism. As earlier documented, if Presentism indeed amounts to a substantive metaphysical thesis it faces severe difficulties in accounting for the determinate truth-values of past- and future-tensed propositions on the basis of present-tensed facts alone. And if Alan Rhoda’s theistic Presentism is able to overcome Craig Bourne’s “Present Problem” from earlier this does not help the defender of Simple Foreknowledge. As an open theist, Rhoda believes that God’s *memories* (certainty) of past things and events and *anticipation* (lack of certainty) vis-à-vis the future correspond to an A-theoretic temporal asymmetry. However, suppose one admits that there are future-tensed propositions, which have determinate truth-values, about libertarianly free actions? Even if this were so, Hasker maintains that God could not know such propositions because they are logically impossible to know (somewhat akin to knowing that square circles exist). See Hasker, “A Philosophical Perspective,” in *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God*, ed. Clark Pinnock et al. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 136. Theologians committed to a robust divine foreknowledge, therefore, should be especially motivated to deal with the present dissertation’s arguments.

free in the libertarian sense. I have yet to detect any fault in the argument. If the allegedly foreknown choices can *fail* to occur, then an essentially omniscient deity cannot *know* that they *will* occur. Can we avoid this conclusion? Turning it around, if God knows at t_0 that FC will occur at t_{+1} , then God has sufficient evidential grounds at t_0 for the claim (were He to make it) that FC will occur at t_{+1} .³⁵⁵ The evidential grounds, whatever they are, tie God's claim (that FC will occur) to conditions guaranteeing that outcome, if they are not themselves the conditions sufficient to guarantee that outcome. Thus there appears to be no *possible* way for God to know, for example, that agent Q *will* choose X in situation S if sufficient conditions for Q choosing X in S are not fixed prior to S. It would seem, therefore, that one must either abandon the belief in libertarian freedom or abandon the belief that God's essential omniscience includes His having knowledge of what libertarianly free creatures will choose. In contemporary discussions this comes down to a choice between Open theism and some kind of predetermination.³⁵⁶

³⁵⁵ Some might think to invoke retro-causation to explain God's knowledge. But appealing to an idea as exotic as retro-causation to explain the exotic concept of foreknowledge is a rather desperate move. Besides, if God has an unmitigated knowledge of the future, then presumably the proponent of retro-causation would say that temporal things and events have as their effect(s) (along with, presumably, many intermediary effects which themselves cause) God's knowledge that they will occur. And wouldn't acknowledging this, to some extent anyway, undermine our *belief* that time is intrinsically uni-directional? Moreover, if the things and events already have effect(s) on God's past knowledge then how can they be conceived of as not having yet occurred? If anything, wouldn't it be more plausible (though, understandably, still quite odd) to think of God's knowledge as a transcendent *cause* rather than *effect* of future events? This is all assuming, of course, a thesis I deny – that some temporalist version of theism is otherwise preferable to some atemporalist version.

³⁵⁶ I am not ignoring another prominent view held by some contemporary evangelical theists, that of Molinism. This is the idea that God, independent of His decree to actualize the world in which creatures *will* make particular choices, knows what libertarianly free creatures *would* choose if faced with certain situations. This view is defended in William Lane Craig, "The Middle-Knowledge View," in *Divine Foreknowledge: Four Views*, 119-159. For treatments that are more critical of Molinism, see Scott A. Davison, "Craig on the Grounding Objection to Middle Knowledge," *Faith and Philosophy* 21.3 (July 2004): 365-369; William Hasker, "Middle

I have found reasons, however, to hold that God maintains a non-temporal relationship to the spatio-temporal complex that is Creation. Moreover, I contend that in order to guarantee the timely presence of the timeless God it appears necessary to affirm a no-risk view of providence in which humans are compatibilistically, and not libertarianly, free.

Those Christian theists who see fit to reject the *B* theory of time (despite the problems accompanying *A*-theoretic time, discussed in Chapter 4) will not be terribly bothered that eternalists face a difficulty in articulating the timely presence of the timeless God. Nor should they feel especially pressured to abandon libertarian freedom merely to aid in the articulation of the timeless God's timely presence. Indeed, the present chapter is likely to strike those strongly opposed both to atemporalist eternalism and compatibilistic freedom as proposing an unacceptable solution to an unnecessary problem. A careful examination of the arguments in favor of *B*-theoretic time on the part of evangelical theists, therefore, threatens to be philosophically jarring and theologically momentous in its consequences. Were the task undertaken, one might conclude that the classic eternalism of Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas, and Calvin is rationally defensible. Furthermore, having reached

Knowledge," in *God, Time, and Knowledge*, 18-52; Paul Helm, "Providence: Risky or Risk-Free?" in *The Providence of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 55-61; David M. Cioocchi, "Reconciling Divine Sovereignty and Human Freedom," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 37.3 (September 1994): 395-412; also, see the critique of Craig's Molinism by an unnamed author entitled "William Lane Craig's 'Middle Knowledge, Truth-makers, and the 'Grounding Objection'" – A Reformed Critique," <http://turretinfan.blogspot.com/2007/09/william-lane-craigs-middle-knowledge.html> (accessed November 18, 2011). Though I will not argue the point here, I believe that Molinism also fails to square God's foreknowledge with libertarian freedom. In the end, the Molinist must either implicitly deny God's ability to *know* that a particular libertarianly free choice will occur or implicitly affirm that all human choices unavoidably follow from pre-arranged conditions.

that milestone, one might also conclude that an articulation of the timeless God's presence becomes feasible if one will affirm a compatibilistic conception of human freedom. Regardless, I have come to embrace both of these propositions.

Similar to the way in which God is Immanuel by joining a whole human nature to the Son's divine nature, the Triune God's decree accounts for the spatio-temporal complex (the world) as a whole. God maintains a presence with Creation's parts by providentially governing things and events and this does not seem to require that God's "deeper voice" be spread out in time or space. The greater difficulty faced here has concerned *how* we go about thinking of the Triune God's presence with Creation's parts. I have argued that if God is understood as not only coordinating temporal, causal, entropic, and psychological asymmetries (without insisting that temporal asymmetry is unanalyzable) but also as *decretally causing* the world to be what it is in detail then His doing so guarantees His presence-in-absence with times and temporal agents.

I do not, however, endeavor to account more precisely for the operations of this atemporal causation, which is, *ex hypothesi*, beyond our ken. Taking one step further, if the difference between the Creator and humans is indeed so great as to feature a contrast between a timeless Trinity (who can be said to act *through* time) and temporal agents crafted in the divine image (who act *in* time), then we temporal agents should not be surprised if we lack a detailed account of how the Creator controls agents who are responsible for their actions. And to expect those who

believe that the Creator-creature difference is so great to produce such an account appears gratuitously rationalistic.

IV. Two Objections Considered (Regarding History and Human Freedom)

In addition to questions about the viability of the tenseless account of time with which it is most easily paired, divine timelessness has sometimes come under a more general kind of scrutiny – the charge that it promotes an understanding in which the trials and tests of history enjoy only a pseudo-existence in contrast to the unchanging One. Hasker, for example, expresses these sentiments when he asks, “Why...would a timeless god have created a world that is so deeply historical?”³⁵⁷

First off, Hasker is begging the question here by asking why a timeless God would create a “so deeply” historical world. If I understand him correctly, the “so deeply” suggests that time is of the “absolute becoming” sort, which comes across in his favoring of the term ‘process.’³⁵⁸ But I would reiterate that divine timelessness proponents, at their best, do not accommodate an official present or NOW, an essential hallmark of A-theoretic becoming or process. What appears to Hasker as a matter of course in his “Openness” worldview should figure for atemporalists as an instance of the fallacy of complex question. If the “so deeply” is meant to denote an A-theoretic conception of time, then a sound reply is to point out that his question assumes something that I have been careful to deny. Divine timelessness performs best when tag-teaming with a tenseless account of time.

³⁵⁷ Hasker, “The Absence of a Timeless God,” in *God and Time*, 202.

³⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 202.

But why does Hasker not simply ask: “Why would the timeless God create a world that is...*historical* [emphasis mine]?”? I suspect the reason why not is at least partly due to the fact that he is more concerned to promote his own conception of time at this point than be bothered with what would seem to be a plausible response. Granted, temporalists like Hasker find *B*-theoretic time unsatisfying. Yet I find quite plausible the claim that the timeless God would create a *historical* world because God enjoys a world in which temporal agents dwell. On the assumption, for argument’s sake, that God can create numbers, if God were *only* to create numbers, this would not suffice to procure a world. Numbers, whatever they are, are not events. And at minimum a world is a context in which things and events exist, in which some events occur later than other events. This is not out of step with ordinary uses of the term ‘world.’ Conceivably, God could maintain a context full of things and tenselessly ordered events without making temporal agents (such as angels and humans), but the world’s historical character would be open to question even if its temporal character were not. *History* is arguably *human* history, seeing as it features not only “the course of human events” but also recorded, formalized, and interpreted memories of those events. Certainly, therefore, the Christian doctrine that God is (distinct from the Incarnation) Immanuel, which the present thesis has attempted to articulate in case the Triune Creator is timeless, requires that the world is historical and not just temporal. God is present-in-absence with times and also with agents living and moving at those times.

But here we hit upon a rebuttal from the defenders of libertarian freedom. If the timely presence of the timeless God requires a conception of the divine decree that entails compatibilistic freedom, then history is determined by the timeless *forming* (distinguished from the *execution*) of the decree. And this, say libertarians, would render would-be agents the passive instruments of Fate.

Firstly, by way of reply, God's knowledge of an event Y occurring (e.g. a particular candidate winning the U.S. presidential election in the year 2084) is coordinated with other knowledge God possesses (e.g. that the electoral college exists in that year, that its members vote in a certain way, etc.). If God is able to know for certain the various conditions that are jointly necessary and sufficient to bring about event Y in 2084, then it is not obvious that the Three-in-One who *brings about* event Y in 2084 must utilize any other means to do so than He would in order to *know* of the event. As we have seen, unfortunately, this is a point of contention. Simple Foreknowledge theorists portray divine foreknowledge as a passive perception of, *inter alia*, human choices yet to be made, whereas atemporal compatibilists portray divine foreknowledge as telling history's story from above; God is active and stable, not being caught up in a process whose initial conditions He "winded up." In some way, He orchestrates the whole shooting match.

Secondly, at any given time, it is true that God knows the things and events that precede and survive those found at that time. If *B*-theorists are correct and tensed expressions can be tenselessly accounted for, then it is true in 2011 that God knows that seventy-three years from now so-and-so will be elected president (due to

the electoral college's existence, votes, etc.). Moreover, despite what Boethius thought, the timelessness thesis has at least no perceivable advantage over divine temporality with respect to the vindication of libertarian freedom.

Thus, God's knowledge of any given future does not constitute a temporal fact that brings about event Y. Nor is a true future-tense sentence true necessarily in virtue of states of affairs dated to the time of the sentence's utterance. Temporally located states of affairs that are causally relevant to Y's occurrence may be dated later than God's "timely" indication (as in cases of prophetic prediction) that Y will occur. Furthermore, God effectually ordains that certain human choices (A, B, C) will help, along with myriad other causes, to bring about event Y. But this means that human choices are instrumental in bringing about some events located in a person's future. Therefore, humans are not passive instruments of Fate but are both passive and active instruments of divine Providence.

Their high-functioning nature, in fact, distinguishes humans, whether they are God's enemies or friends, as being made in His image. An important quality of human *activity*, however, differentiates it from divine activity. In particular, through their many choices, humans, even presumably those who will be free and yet guaranteed not to sin in the post-resurrection state, can develop and mature – experiencing improvements in themselves. And this is not something, I contend, that is true of the Triune God.

A timeless God's experience of earlier and later intervals is limited to His experience of creation and creation's constituents. In His essence there are no

earlier or later events. This means that He does not undergo change. Therefore, God cannot be causally affected by creation. God is thus impassible – a conceptual, and, for some, highly distasteful, result of strong divine immutability. Divine impassibility says that, as such, God cannot be causally affected or infected by His creation in any way. In particular, those who hold this doctrine insist that apart from the Incarnation God ought not be construed as a fellow “sufferer.”

Please observe, however, that while strong immutability entails impassibility the reverse does not seem to be true. That is, a deity could undergo changes, even tremendous emotional surges or downturns, without those changes being caused by things or events in creation. Arguably, the changes in God could be, as it were, cordoned off from God’s experience of the world. On the other hand, there are good reasons to think that any view of providence featuring compatibilistic human freedom is one in which God will be causally unaffected by creational miscellany. This is because the portrait emerging from such a view is one in which God decrees all of history absolutely. Also, if I am correct in thinking (with due respect to the advocates of Simple Foreknowledge and Molinism) that God’s possession of foreknowledge of Y is best accounted for on the basis of God’s being the strong actualizer of Y, then being aware of any *bona fide* case of divine foreknowledge would constitute a reason for believing that God is impassible. Hence, lest someone be unmotivated to embrace the understanding of God’s relationship to time defended in this and the previous chapter, the compatibilist doctrine of human freedom brought in to shore it up, being only contingently related to atemporalism, would

appear to deliver an impassible deity. That is, an impassible deity need not, again, be a deity altogether devoid of changes.

Nonetheless, divine timelessness, along with its “strongly immutable” implication, without being an essential ingredient to divine impassibility, is sufficient to entail divine impassibility. Because of this entailment and because the doctrine of impassibility is often conceived as being at odds with a god who positively tends to the creation and graciously provides for creation’s constituents, Chapter 6 will try to counteract some of these misconceptions.

CHAPTER 6

IN DEFENSE OF AN IMPASSIBLE DIVINE COMPASSION

In Chapter 5 I concluded that the Triune God communicates a timely presence with the events and entities of creation without being temporally present in His essence. I proposed that this becomes conceptually feasible once a no-risk view of providence has been affirmed, arguing that God guarantees a distributed or diffused presence by executing a timeless decree. Along with being the unique possessor and evaluator of the whole space-time complex and its constituents, God *expresses* Himself in and through the things and events of the world and *impresses* Himself upon those things and events (regardless of the extent to which the things and events are experienced by their fellow members of creation).³⁵⁹ Broadly, Chapters 4 and 5 featured my own attempts to fend off some of the more immediate objections to the timeless Creator thesis and to articulate how the Triune God betokens His presence-in-absence by strongly actualizing all eventuation. This mainly involved seeking to vindicate a tenseless conception of time (which appears to follow from a God whose eternity is duration-less) and a compatibilistic conception of human freedom (which appears essential to a no-risk view of divine providence).

³⁵⁹ See again, Schreiner, *The Theater of His Glory*.

I. The Timeless Trinity is Impassible

Suppose, however, that all of this coherently hangs together. It does not follow that therefore theologians and philosophers of religion ought to embrace an unmodified version of classical Christian theism. Beyond matters of formal adequacy or coherence, questions remain regarding the nature of the God-world relationship that comes into relief here. Presently, the spotlight falls upon what is clearly an implication of the divine timelessness doctrine, the impassibility of God. A deity who is essentially immutable is one who, *inter alia*, cannot be improved upon or suffer setbacks due to creational miscellany. However, many adherents as well as critics of Christian theism have found this a hard, if not impossible, pill to swallow. A common thrust of their objections has been that a deity so impervious to vicissitudes is modeled after a Greek Spirit-matter opposition and thus promotes a dualistic separation of God and world. For argument's sake, let us assume that God's full actuality *sans* creation is logically consistent with contingent predicates (such as "is the Creator") being applied to Him. That being granted, the impassibility doctrine appears, firstly, to conflict with the claim that God is positively disposed toward the creation as a whole and, secondly, with the claim that God has compassion for His, in many ways, troubled creatures. How can an agent lovingly engage with others, after all, without himself being personally impacted by those engagements? Wouldn't God's inability to be "touched" by the plight of His creatures signal an indifference to their cares and concerns?

In this chapter, I will address these questions. The chapter's first two sections will examine two arguments, each of which features a premise endorsed in this dissertation and each of which concludes that God is lacking in compassion toward others. I will try to show that these conclusions can be averted without implicitly denying the endorsed premises. The first argument, in light of the idea that the Triune God has an infinitely fulfilling life independent of creation, works from the premise that there is a sense in which the creation is of little consequence to God. The second argument, strictly observing the implications of the divine atemporalism doctrine, works from the premise that God cannot respond to individuals or the situations in which they find themselves, at least not in any "ordinary" sense. I claim that these premises – creation being "of little consequence" and the timeless God being, again, in one sense, unable to respond – are consistent with the Lord's having a gracious disposition toward the world and with His compassionate engagement with the world's residents.

To vindicate this claim would in itself figure as a significant achievement. Yet, however satisfying such a vindication might prove, the fact is that some of the modern distaste for the God-concept(s) of Augustine, Aquinas, and Calvin has to do not only with formal propositions but also with its overall way of *picturing* God. Particularly, classical Christian theism has tended to come across to a variety of modern theologians as promoting a portrait of God and the world that resembles little more than a sophisticated deism. Similar to a person who, facing foreclosure, "walks away" from her property, the classical deity is construed as adopting a

detached, *laissez faire* stance vis-à-vis the creation. Modern theology's counterpoise to this "transcendent aloofness" has been to focus on divine *immanence*, opposing what Sally McFague has termed the "monarchical" theological model honored by a long train of Medieval and Post-Reformation theologians.

What might be called the Modern turn toward "immanence theology" traces at least to the work of Friedrich Schleiermacher. Schleiermacher formed an outlook, utilizing the framework of a Neo-Platonic metaphysical scheme, in which the world of finite entities, a "never-ending play of opposing forces," emanates from an all-embracing One.³⁶⁰ As John Cooper documents, however, Schleiermacher's version of immanence theology remains *classical* in the sense that although God and the world are considered "ontologically co-inherent" the causal relationship obtaining between them is strictly one-way.³⁶¹ God causally sustains the world from the top down, mysteriously uniting the All into the One of Himself. *Modern* immanence theologies, on the other hand (if we follow Cooper's taxonomy), have asserted that the causal relationship is two-way, that God and the world, to the extent that they are distinguishable, reciprocate with each other within a shared causal nexus, being mutually impacted in various ways. Twentieth-century scholars espousing viewpoints consistent with this have included the Process theologians (Whitehead, Hartshorne, Cobb, Griffin), the "existential panentheist" Paul Tillich, and the Protestant scholar Jürgen Moltmann. Moltmann is especially worth mentioning here

³⁶⁰ Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: speeches to its cultured despisers*, trans. John Oman (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1958), 3. For further discussion of Schleiermacher's theological worldview, see Philip R. Olsson, "Grace or Morals: What Ultimately Determines Our Destinies?" In *Testamentum Imperium* Vol. 2 (2009) at <http://www.preciousheart.net/ti>, 1-31.

³⁶¹ Cooper, *Panentheism: The Other God of the Philosopher*, 88.

for his having developed the idea that humanity's suffering and renewal are drawn up into the life of the Triune God.

Studying the steps of these predecessors and also advocating for a distinctively modern theology of immanence is the contemporary theologian Philip Clayton. Clayton takes exception to the notion that God is timeless and impassible and in several publications defends what he construes as a more interactive and relatable Creator. Specifically, he builds upon the work of Hegel, Schelling, and the more recent Pannenberg in setting forth a *panentheistic* thesis – the idea that God includes the world in God's own self.

In this chapter's third major section, I will look at Clayton's appropriation of what Hegel called the "true Infinite" and to the former's case for a non-dualistic conception of the God-world relationship. Although I shall conclude that Clayton goes wrong in his application of it, I believe that the "Infinite insight" with which he works has merit. After taking issue with a feature of Clayton's theological methodology that is relevant to this chapter, I will review W.L. Craig's argumentative attempt to show that Clayton does not successfully negotiate a middle route between "monistic pantheism" and "dualistic theism." On the whole, I find Craig's reasoning largely compelling. Nevertheless, with Clayton, I believe that the divine reality's infinite nature should be understood to incorporate the conception of an *absolutely unlimited* God. Clayton and I differ not over whether God can be said to encompass the world but over the precise sense in which this is true.

In the fourth and final section, I will hold that our “living, moving, and having our being” *in* God is better understood as *the infinite Triune Lord’s personal commitment to a freely decreed creation and its inhabitants* than as a sort of literal placement of the world within the deity’s being. This “encompassing decree,” furthermore, exhibits the Trinity’s grace in creation and redemption. I conclude, therefore, that the impassible Lord suffers no disadvantage (to some passible deity) when it comes to having or expressing compassion for His creatures.

II. The Triune Creator is Committed to a Creation “of Little Consequence”

In Chapter 2, I discussed Thomas Aquinas’s belief that God’s essence and existence are identical. This strict identification of God’s essence with the life He lives, I contended, leaves insufficient room for attributing secondary or contingent properties or predicates to God. I further contended, however, that the assigning of contingent predicates to God is logically consistent with the Trinity being strongly immutable and, therefore, a commitment to the latter does not require more than a strong correlation of God’s essence and existence.³⁶² If this is correct, then God maintains a relation to the creation as its Creator. But He does not *become* the Creator if by ‘becoming’ one means that an earlier, “creation-less” interval of His life connects by way of an “and then” relation to a later “with-creation” interval. A timeless, present deity would exercise “hospitality” toward creation because He is hospitable. He has “room” for Others but He should also be thought of as *making*

³⁶² That is, that strong immutability is consistent with there being “conceptual space” for assigning non-essential attributes (e.g., Creator, Judge, Advocate, Savior) to God.

room, in the sense that creation is not necessitated by the divine essence but by the Triune God's decretal action.

Although this idea of an eternal Creator has a somewhat speculative and admittedly mysterious character, it also has a convenient ally, or so I have claimed, in the doctrine that God exists as a Triunity. Roman Catholic as well as Evangelical scholars have held that the deep interior dynamics of unity and diversity among the Trinitarian Persons pave a timeless runway for the profound contrast between the necessary, changeless Lord and the contingent, changeful world.³⁶³ The main idea here has been that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit share an absolute intra-Personal dynamism of "loving difference." As such, they stand in no need of company but are essentially complete and self-sufficient in the love they share.³⁶⁴ From this standpoint, the Triune act of creation expresses the unity-in-difference of the Trinity by graciously making room for Others. But if this is what God is like, then there is a sense in which the creation is of little consequence to God. For God's life is fulfilling whether or not there is a creation.

Some find this idea – that the Trinity has a complete, fulfilling communion without the world – difficult to reconcile with the existence of a world, much less a

³⁶³ Dodds, *The Unchanging God of Love*; Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*; Royce Gordon Gruenler, *The Inexhaustible God: Biblical Faith and the Challenge of Process Theism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1983).

³⁶⁴ It must be conceded, on one hand, that this intra-Trinitarian dynamism is not, at least not obviously, a *sufficient* condition of God's being timeless and impassible. In other words, it seems possible that a deity who is temporal and perhaps even passible could enjoy a rich inner dynamism. I do believe, on the other hand, that such dynamism is a *necessary* component of these classical doctrines if we restrict ourselves to a Trinitarian theology. The intra-Personal love seems essential to the Triune God's strong immutability and the equality of these unified divine others accounts for the "outgoing" nature of the Creator. The Persons "welcome" each other respectively and together they "welcome" the world.

positive or affirming disposition God sustains toward the work of creation at-large.

We can imagine those skeptical of the strong immutability doctrine arguing the following:

P1 – If creation is, in some sense, of little consequence to God, then God cannot be graciously disposed to His creation.

P2 – Creation's existence is, in one sense, of little consequence to a strongly immutable God.

P3 – God is strongly immutable. [Supposition]

P4 – Therefore, the strongly immutable God is not graciously disposed to His creation.

But,

P5 – God is graciously disposed to His creation. [Supposition]

C – Therefore, God is not strongly immutable.

The inferences drawn in this argument are clearly valid and I have just argued, to boot, that P2 is true. Thus, it might appear to some that P3 must be rejected if P5 is to survive. I am unconvinced of this, however, for even if P2 is true there are solid reasons to doubt P1.

The reasoning that should lead us to conclude that creation is of little consequence to God does not even directly address God's attitude or disposition toward the creation. Of central concern is a conception of what constitutes divine *greatness*. The inexhaustible depth and greatness of classical Christian theism's deity places creation in the proverbial divine shadow (Psalm 8:34). But one could certainly just as well argue that divine greatness is consistent with a deity whose essence is love (I John 4:8) and who works purposely with and through the creation (Eph. 1:3-11). One could say, therefore, that an aspect of the strongly immutable God's greatness implies that creation is of little consequence when set in contrast to

the divine immensity but another aspect implies that the Triune Persons sustain a patient, unencumbered commitment to creation's story.

III. An Unresponsive Lord Who Demonstrates Compassion?

What has been said above may do justice to a generally gracious disposition God has toward the creation. But leaving things there would be too quick and easy. What about God's relationship as judge and savior to specific, historical individuals and their actions? In particular, is there not some conceptual tension between God's compassionate engagement with individuals and the timeless deity's apparent inability to respond?

More fundamentally, the unresponsive deity is apt to be thought of as not merely uncompassionate but also *impersonal*. One who is timeless, to be sure, does not *become* disappointed with angels or humans after particular sinful actions are taken. In this sense, *wrathful* responses would be equally absent from the life of the timeless God as much as *loving* responses are. It is not evident then that if God can be affected by creaturely actions that He is thereby better equipped than the impassible deity to engage compassionately with oft-troubled creatures. For, even if an impassible deity is absolutely indifferent to creaturely cares and concerns, a passible Lord might yet carry the burden of responding – perhaps persistently – with anger and disgust toward the creatures.

Of course, both impassibilists and passibilists can agree that there is surely theological propriety in attributing wrath to God as a secondary or contingent

predicate (see Rom. 1:18), however else this proposition might be interpreted or nuanced. But God is *essentially* a loving God and, presumably, not essentially wrathful. That is, God can fail to be wrathful and not forfeit his divine status.³⁶⁵ The same cannot be said, however, of love. If God is not love, then God does not exist, at least not the Christian God (e.g. one would reasonably suppose that *sans* creation, the Persons of the Trinity are united in *love*, not *wrath*). The present concern to see how or if divine compassion squares with the unresponsiveness of a timeless deity, therefore, figures as an attempt to *emphasize* the essentially loving character, overtures, and action(s) of the Christian God, juxtaposing these to what seem to be clear implications of the idea that God exists timelessly.

But not all apologists of divine timelessness would agree that God is unable to respond (to temporal events).³⁶⁶ Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann are among those who believe that a timeless deity can properly be said to respond.³⁶⁷ They argue that responses *qua* responses need not temporally follow the phenomena to which a purported responder is responding. A gesture or some other action taken by an agent, they say, can suffice as a response to an event if the specified agent *takes that event into account* in her action, even if the event in question occurs *after* her “response.” Stump and Kretzmann more narrowly apply this expanded conception of response within the context of petitionary prayer, in which it is

³⁶⁵ It remains a question, however, whether or not God would be faithful to His essential holiness were He to fail to be wrathful in the presence of sinners. Divine wrath, after all, seems to be best thought of as an *expression* of divine holiness in the presence of sin. Again, whether it is *the* expression or in some way *necessary* I will here leave unaddressed.

³⁶⁶ I mean by “unable to respond” not merely that in the actual world a timeless deity cannot respond but that in no possible world can the timeless deity respond.

³⁶⁷ Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann, “Eternity,” *Journal of Philosophy* 78.8 (1981): 429-458.

assumed that God attends to and answers submitted petitions as He sees fit. They reject the proposition that

(34) Something is done because of a prayer only if it is done later than the praying of the prayer.

In its place, they offer the following:

(33) Something constitutes an answer to a prayer only if it is done because of the prayer.

In support of this broader notion of what constitutes an answer to prayer, they have us imagine a mother who prepares a snack for her son, whom she expects to arrive home soon and request one. It is reasonable, they say, to describe the mother's action as a response, even though it occurs earlier than the request, so long as she prepares the snack *because of* the expected request. In parallel fashion, God can be said to answer prayers yet to be uttered from a particular temporal point, so long as His prepared "answers" take the petitions into account.³⁶⁸

Edward Wierenga finds this line of reasoning to be weak. He inclines toward the more narrow sense of 'response' expressed in (34), noting that the mother may well *anticipate* her son's request but that her action falls short of being a *response*, seeing as she has *decided how to act* (and indeed, I would add, *acted*) prior to his request.³⁶⁹ In parallel fashion, he counsels atemporalists to admit that God's answers to prayers are not strictly responsive, judging this to be a quite plausible position for Christians to take.

³⁶⁸ Ibid., 450.

³⁶⁹ Edward R. Wierenga, *The Nature of God: An Inquiry into the Divine Attributes* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 201.

Moving a step further, Wierenga asserts that being unable to respond is not a sufficient condition for God being timeless. “For if God is in time,” we are told, “he knows in advance what prayers will be made, and his plans take them into account.”³⁷⁰ Although in today’s climate he might also be expected to address the view of the Open theists who believe that God is temporal and lacks certain knowledge of an official future, Wierenga nevertheless makes a good point. An essentially omniscient, temporal deity who knows which choices humans will freely make also knows what His responses to their actions will be. To wit, His *anticipation* would be devoid of any ignorance about the matter, such that, in an important sense, He cannot choose anything other than what he does choose *after* the occurrence of whatever it is to which He “responds.” It does seem that there is a sense in which this is so. Thus, in accordance with Edwards’s argument (stated in Chapter 5) that an essential foreknowledge is incompatible with libertarian freedom, Wierenga, in the least, claims that even for somewhat modified versions of Christian theism any sense in which God can be said to respond will stretch that concept beyond its common, human sense. If the mother (whose anticipatory preparation of the snack is not coupled with an infallible knowledge of what her son will want) does not qualify as a responder, then, *a fortiori*, God (whose anticipation *is* so coupled) is not responding when giving an answer known well in advance. This would certainly seem to follow, unless we embrace an “accommodative” form of predication in the case of God. Of course, given the assumption that God’s mode of

³⁷⁰ Ibid., 201.

existence differs profoundly from any creaturely mode of existence, such a move would seem warranted in order properly to mark the divine uniqueness.

But are there scriptural exemplars in which responsive action is attributed to God in a way that omits features intrinsic to temporal *human* agency? I believe that there are in fact. For starters, if God is temporal and is also capable of predictively prophesying events (owing to an exhaustive foreknowledge), then He, like an ordinary temporal agent, must still *wait* for the prophesied event to take place (being free, admittedly, to meet conditions at least *necessary* to bring it about). Be that as it may, such a deity does not need to wait to *see* or *experience* the prophesied event, X, in order to take X into account. To cite an example, the judgments enacted against Egypt alongside YHWH's deliverance of Israel take into account the Pharaoh's obstinacy but the latter was referenced *beforehand* in the Lord's commissioning of Moses (Ex. 3:16-22). Temporalists would rightly insist, though, that this example, however odd, at least formally allows for a conception in which God waits to *respond*, in spite of having known for certain in advance what His response(s) will be.

But are there texts indicating that the Lord can or does take "response-like" action in which the action does not temporally follow that which the Lord addresses? I believe that there are and that these supply us scriptural grounds for doubting that Israel's Lord is the wait-and-respond "type" of deity. In Isaiah 65, for instance, the LORD announces plans to redeem and renew Jerusalem. The envisioned state may be described as a time of refreshment, in which the LORD will "rejoice in Jerusalem

and be glad in [His] people.”³⁷¹ What is curious for our purposes is that the LORD, in speaking of this “new” work of redemption, says that “[b]efore they call I will answer; while they are still speaking I will hear” (v. 24). Although one should not easily draw metaphysical conclusions from such a passage, its “temporal oddity” should cast at least as much doubt on a relatively unaccommodated temporalist reading as upon any easy atemporalist constructions. Indeed, for many who are skeptical of the accommodationist approach of Calvin, the passage would be apt to receive a quite literal reading, in which case one would almost be forced to acknowledge that even the temporal God’s answers (a.k.a. responses), in order to be such, need only *take into account* the prayers of the penitent. The LORD’s answers need not be issued subsequent to the “call” of His people. Additionally, the LORD’s “hearing” in verse 24 has an equally odd quality. The verse’s second part, in which the LORD hears “while they are still speaking,” while perhaps appearing to be a trivial truism to us, naturally follows the first part. We should take it not as a glaring juxtaposition to the verse’s first part but as a complementary restatement. Moreover, the overall passage undoubtedly focuses upon divine “attitudes.” But insofar as real attitudes or dispositions are attributed to God here, the text’s interpreters cannot, to any greater degree, be barred from concluding that the Lord of the covenant operates from an epistemic and volitional standpoint vis-à-vis the spatio-temporal complex that is unavailable to creaturely temporal agents.

³⁷¹ Isaiah 65:19.

As is evident, the question of whether a “timeless theological grammar” can or should be thought to include divine responses to creaturely actions is not a simple one to answer. On one hand, if ‘response’ is defined as an action that must be performed *after* something else, then a timeless deity, as such, cannot respond. To perform an action at a time (distinct from an action with *effects* at a time), one would need to be *located* at a time. And an agent who assumes a temporal location is not timeless (though we must mark as an exception to this the Second Person of the Trinity, who, *ex hypothesi*, contingently – and unreservedly – assumes a temporal nature in the Incarnation). On the other hand, an unaccommodated reading of Isaiah 65:24 makes room for speaking of a divine answer that temporally precedes the prayer to which it is “attached.” Furthermore, one could keep within the parameters set forth in this dissertation and be justified in giving either of these replies, depending on occasion and context. If one wishes to mark in thick lines the Creator-creature distinction, then it is appropriate to say that God does not respond. Yet it also may serve to say that God is an extra-ordinary responder (“the Responder”), if one wishes to express that the Lord cares to address creaturely needs and succeeds in doing so.

In light of this distinction, we can terminologically differentiate between *response+0*, an action performed subsequent to X that takes X into account, and *response+1*, an action that takes X into account without being performed subsequent to X. Having done so, we can finally consider the following argument:

P1 – In order to demonstrate compassion toward His creatures, God must be able to respond to their needs in some way.

P2 – If God is timeless then God cannot respond to the needs of His creatures.

P3 – God is timeless. [Supposition]

C – Therefore, God cannot demonstrate compassion toward His creatures by responding to their needs in some way.

The strength of this argument especially depends upon the sense of ‘respond’ in P2.

As conceded, if God is timeless and ‘respond’ in P2 is taken as the type of action denoted by *response+0*, then P2 is true. But we have seen at least some scriptural evidence suggesting that P2 is false if ‘respond’ is taken as the type of action denoted by *response+1*. If that were the case, then the truth of P2 on the former interpretation would not imply the truth of P2 on the latter interpretation. Thus, God could be unable to respond in one sense and able to respond in another sense. And if this is so, then a timeless deity is not necessarily precluded from meeting what is undoubtedly an essential condition of demonstrating compassion toward His creatures.

Again, none of this suffices to prove that time is fashioned *ex nihilo* with creation. And it may in fact be true that a timeless deity is absolutely incapable of responding even in the broader sense specified above. But this latter proposition, as with the former, will need to be argued for and not simply assumed to be the case.

Along with these caveats, further scriptural data indicate a “divine otherness” vis-à-vis the temporal-causal order that resists a God-world portrait patterned after the all-too-human “wait-and-respond” model of relational engagement. Not entirely unrelated to the Isaiah 65 prophecy discussed above and also central to Christian doctrine more generally stands the Christian’s faith and that faith’s origin in an

electing grace. The Apostle Paul opens his letter to the Ephesians with the following proclamation:

³Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, ⁴even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love ⁵he predestined us for adoption through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, ⁶to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved.³⁷²

This passage presents interpretive challenges to the advocates of atemporalism in its mention of that which comes “before” the foundation of the world. Similarly, the phrase “predestined...according to the purpose of his will” will likely discomfit some who are eager to subsidize a passive divine foreknowledge at the expense of an active divine volition. But these matters will not occupy us here. I would rather draw attention to the fact that Paul does not speak in the abstract with regard to those who are chosen in Christ. Indeed, could it be more evident that they are chosen *as sinners* in Christ and not merely under some more abstract or general category? If one should care to doubt this, consider that the elect are “predestined...for adoption...to the praise of his glorious grace” (vss. 5, 6). Theologically, adoption implies a fractured relationship that requires mending. And the job of mending it falls strictly into the lap of the parental figure, the Lord. Further consider that Paul expounds upon these lines with “[i]n him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses...” (vs. 7).

Quite plainly, the divine electing of individuals to salvation *takes into account* the fact that those individuals elected need the grace of divine forgiveness.

³⁷² Ephesians 1:3-6.

Just as plain, however, regardless of how one interprets “before the foundation of the world,” is the fact that both this accounting for human sins and the predestinating “fix” of particular sinners, at minimum, *temporally precedes* their forgivable activities. It ultimately remains questionable whether the Apostle had occasion to affirm, in line with Helm, that “before” should be understood in a hierarchical or “logical” rather than a temporal sense. What should not be questioned, however, is that he follows (and maybe goes beyond) the prophet Isaiah in clearly placing the cart of electing grace *before* the horse of sinful human actions (i.e., those actions that *need to be forgiven*). Unless we are willing to deny that the Pauline doctrine of election functions to address redemptively the historic Fall of Adam (which is not a viable Christian option), there is reason to think that God engages in a “decretal, redemptive pursuit” of creatures without waiting for them to take flight (much less return of their own accord).³⁷³ I believe, therefore, that it is wrong to infer from a timeless deity’s strict inability to offer temporal responses that the timeless God, however willing, is completely unable to “respond” graciously to intrinsically temporal human actions. For if the Creator is timeless then surely He is able, in the face of actions His creatures take in time, to select as He sees fit expressions of His character that appropriately address those actions.

³⁷³ In the well-known pericope of Luke 15, Jesus describes the prodigal son’s return to his father’s house: “And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ But the father said to his servants, ‘Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.’ And they began to celebrate” (vv. 20-24).

IV. The Divine Encompassing: Critical Interaction with a Panentheistic Worldview

Up to this point, the present chapter has mainly dealt with “detail skirmishes” waged on the battlefield of classical theism. Criticisms made by those desiring to modify classical constructions (for example, opting for temporal rather than atemporal eternity) and disputes among those who would resist the urge to modify (for example, as was just seen in the discussion over whether a timeless deity can respond) cast a critical (if not altogether discouraging) light upon the project undertaken in these pages. As if this were not enough, there are also modern and contemporary philosophical theologians who have sought to remove some of the broader conceptual supports assumed by those working within a classical framework. Especially for scholars who have learned from the post-Kantian German idealists (among them, Fichte, Hegel and Schelling), the theses set forth in this dissertation, however well intended, constitute futile attempts to prop up a dead man. If he could make it to his feet, the deceased would stand for a conception in which both God and the world figure as static opposites, incapable of a real, positive relationship. This at least is how a good many “immanence theologians” of the post-Enlightenment West have come to think of the God-concept(s) promoted by Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas, and Calvin – as a corpse long overdue for burial.

Being a recent operative within the “immanence” tradition, Philip Clayton believes that the sort of classical theism defended in these pages stands in need of significant revising. In his judgment, some fundamental methodological approaches and metaphysical theses typifying classical Christian theism must give way to a

different kind of theology. On one hand, as would be expected from a metaphysician, Clayton is not content to work within the unrelenting grip of a post-Kantian agnosticism about matters metaphysical and theological. In fact, in the fifth chapter of his book *The Problem of God in Modern Thought* he provides reasons for thinking that Kant (with his phenomena-noumena distinction) has been too readily exploited by thinkers in the empiricist tradition (such as the Logical Positivists) in their efforts to say that metaphysical and theological statements lack cognitive content. For instance, he discerns a “deep ambivalence” in Kant’s concept of experience, marking the irony that “despite the empirical limits on knowledge” formally imposed by his philosophy “Kant held a rather unempirical understanding of experience.”³⁷⁴ And, indeed, Clayton’s willingness to attend deftly to “non- or transempirical questions” that interested Kant ought to be appreciated.³⁷⁵

On the other hand, I do not see Clayton definitively rejecting what I find to be a central and sub-biblical feature of Kant’s “post-classical” intellectual project. To whatever extent he may have recognized that he was doing a sort of “metaphysics of experience,” an overall thrust of Kant’s project was to render the experiencing subject, as such, a secular, autonomous agent. Kant chooses not to place humans immediately before the face of God, with it being “made plain” to them in their very constitutions that God exists and has certain attributes. And Clayton voices no objection to this choice. He does not, as I would, look to exchange Kant’s picture of an autonomous subject for one, such as Calvin’s, in

³⁷⁴ Philip Clayton, *The Problem of God in Modern Thought* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 270.

³⁷⁵ Ibid., 269.

which humans have an *immediate* knowledge of God simply in virtue of being in the world and experiencing it.

Be that as it may, neither does Clayton allow what I would call Kant's "institutionalization" of the subjectivism and skepticism generated by David Hume (about God, causality, and the external world) to serve as an excuse or warrant for embracing atheism or an unqualified agnosticism. Nor should Kant's restriction of reason to the phenomena, in Clayton's judgment, trigger the reduction of theological dogma to some variety of religious phenomenology or anti-realism. Instead, armed with a high esteem for the epistemic credentials of evolutionary cosmology, he advances models for those wishing to construct a metaphysical theism "from below." More specifically, he attempts to draw an intuition about human finitude (and what are held to be its plausible implications for a concept of *infinitude*) together with what he sees as instances of "emergence" (in which "nested hierarchies" within nature give rise to higher levels of complexity that have their own irreducible qualities and "downward influence"). That having been done, he looks to move toward a scientifically respectable theistic conclusion.

In regard to his metaphysics, Clayton believes that our best thoughts require us to move from a "dualistic" picture of the God-world relationship toward a more "monistic" one. The conception he defends, however, is one that seeks to overcome the perceived shortcomings of Spinoza's assertion that only one substance exists (as opposed to physical and non-physical substances) – namely, God. By acknowledging a transcendent principle of *activity* or personal *agency* within the

world that also fundamentally accounts for the world, he would stave off the proposition that God and the world are coextensive. What emerges is an attempted hybrid of dualism and monism known as “panentheism,” a conception in which the divine reality is distinguished from non-divine reality but also in which the former ontologically encompasses and, in some ways, is influenced by the latter.³⁷⁶ This constitutes for Clayton a compelling idea, with significant consequences for how human beings relate to each other, to God, and to others populating the broader landscape of nature.

It will come as no surprise that as a proponent of the timeless presence and compassionate impassibility of God I view Clayton’s panentheism skeptically. The evaluation that follows shall include two phases. In the first phase I will briefly criticize some aspects of the methodology whereby Clayton attempts to launch into the panentheistic stratosphere. Specifically, I will hold that there are insufficient grounds for inclining toward a panentheistic (rather than a non-panentheistic) conclusion on the basis of the insight that infinite (limit-less) reality in some sense “includes” all finite reality. Clayton, of course, does not draw the panentheistic inference merely on the basis of this “infinite intuition.” Importantly, he enlists the further epistemic help of what he calls “the panentheistic analogy,” attempting to think the God-world relationship in line with an “emergentist” resolution of the mind-body problem that has, for centuries, occupied philosophers and, in recent decades, brain scientists. I think that there are good reasons for refusing to join

³⁷⁶ Philip Clayton, *God and Contemporary Science*, 93-96.

Clayton in the effort to wed the logic of emergence to a Trinitarian theology.

Though I will touch on these briefly, the present critical interaction has as its central goal examining Clayton's metaphysical panentheism (and finding it wanting) as a proposed alternative to the classical theism thus far defended.

In the evaluation's second phase, focusing more specifically on panentheistic metaphysics, I will consider W.L. Craig's argument that Clayton's appropriation of Hegel's "infinite insight" fails to procure a middle way between dualistic theism and pantheism and that his panentheism finally reduces to pantheism. As mentioned earlier, I find Craig's case to be fairly persuasive. But even if it should turn out that a logically consistent alternative to the pantheism-theism disjunction is available, I see no clear reasons for preferring a panentheistic conception of God and the world to a classical theistic one.

In the final sub-section of this chapter, I will argue that a Calvinian theism, in which the Trinity sustains a real relation with creation by means of a timeless but contingent decree, best capitalizes on what is genuinely insightful about the "infinite insight." On one hand, I doubt the success of Clayton's effort to combine *ex nihilo* creation with emergentist cosmology.³⁷⁷ On the other hand, I believe that justice is done to the idea of the Infinite's "inclusion" of the finite if one holds that God

³⁷⁷ The "bottom-up" trajectory of Clayton's evolutionary emergentism seems to be consistent with the "radically emergent panentheism" of Samuel Alexander in which God emerges from the developing world's complexities (as mind emerges from the brain) and inconsistent with the "top-down panentheism" to which Clayton adheres. With Nathan Jacobs, I would like to hear Clayton explain how his decidedly non-Alexandrian view is in proper keeping with emergentism. Jacobs writes: "To whatever extent the emergentist analogy is meant to be a model for panentheism, it should point toward either the implicit-explicit movement of idealism or the radically emergent panentheism of Alexander. Yet, Clayton foregoes both paths to the detriment of the analogy." See Nathan Jacobs, "Contra Clayton: Toward An Augustinian Model of Organism," in *Faith and Philosophy* 25, No. 4 (October 2008): 376-393.

encompasses the world by way of an all-inclusive *decree*, expressive of His self-sufficient, infinite nature. This conception of a “true Calvinian infinite” supplements the earlier attempts to show that the Creator is graciously united *with* the creation but not reduced to taking a spatio-temporal position *within* the creation.³⁷⁸

a. Clayton’s “Theology from Below”

In the earlier chapters on Aquinas and Calvin, I engaged in a sort of balancing act between the self-sufficient, strongly immutable deity and a creation-providential action purportedly consistent with that reality. More extensively, in the chapter on Calvin, I discussed how the economic Trinity (God with us) is a *consistent* but *contingent* (free) expression of the immanent Trinity (God without us).³⁷⁹ I maintain, indeed, that the best reflections on divine transcendence and immanence will resort to the implications and presuppositions of the scripturally revealed Trinity. To gain an adequate sense of God’s “hidden” side, we must allow

³⁷⁸ This reference to the Creator’s gracious commitment to creation reminds me of statements Ayn Rand made in her famous interview with CBS’s Mike Wallace. In defense of her anti-Collectivistic “ethic of selfishness,” Rand asserts that were a man to marry a woman “strictly for her own good,” as if he didn’t stand to benefit significantly from the arrangement, we would (or at least *should*) view this as offensively egotistical and arrogant. Likewise, a virtuous woman will marry not as a purely selfless act of mercy toward her man but because she derives some pleasure from being with him, admires him for the values he affirms (insofar as they reasonably resemble her own), etc. The disanalogy between the God-world relationship and the husband-wife relationship, I believe, at least partly consists in the fact that the husband’s derivation of pleasure from being married to his wife lacks the profoundly gracious component of the Creator’s attitude in wedding Himself to the Creation. To view the interview, see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7ukJiBZ8_4k (accessed December 3 2011).

³⁷⁹ I agree with Richards when he writes: “Claiming that creation is contingent while denying that God had any choice in creating it empties the word ‘contingent’ of all determinate logical and theological sense.” See Jay Richards, “Divine Simplicity: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly” in *For Faith and Clarity: Philosophical Contributions to Christian Theology*, ed. J.K. Beilby (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 176.

the signposts of Scripture to inform and direct our perceptions of the world and conceptions about God's relationship to it. For his own part, Clayton evades this intellectual runway when it most counts. Instead, he asserts that "success in specifying the transcendent divine nature is not best guaranteed by an immanent Trinity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, understood as the mirror image of the economic Trinity, though now extrapolated into God's essence apart from any interaction with the world."³⁸⁰ By way of correction, he proposes that "[t]he most effective entrée and guideline for conceiving this otherness of God is...the finite-infinite distinction."³⁸¹

In his more recent *Adventures in the Spirit*, Clayton shows his "critical rationalist" credentials by broaching the concept of finitude through the mediation of Descartes. Specifically, he quotes from Meditation 3, where Descartes writes, "I understand that I am a thing which is incomplete and dependent on another and which aspires without a limit to ever greater and better things" (VII, 51).³⁸² In this thought, we learn of the "Cartesian original intuition: I am finite." "The intuition of finitude is," Clayton says, "the first and the basis for all subsequent reflection on God and on ourselves."³⁸³ Yet, if the finite is that which is limited and dependent and humans are aware of their finitude, then their self-awareness seems to carry with

³⁸⁰ Philip Clayton, *Adventures in the Spirit: God, World, Divine Action* ed. Zachary Simpson (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2008), 161. To clarify, I think that Clayton's metaphor of the "mirror image" is a helpful one. However, I would think it more appropriate to conceive of the *economic* Trinity as the mirror image. The image reflected in the economy of the Trinity is a faithful display of the life of the immanent Trinity, who gratuitously expresses Himself by creating and redeeming the world. The mirror does not exhaustively reveal God but it does truly reveal Him.

³⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 161.

³⁸² Cited in *Adventures in the Spirit*, 161.

³⁸³ *Ibid.*, 161.

it the implicit idea of that which is thereby negated – the infinite. He daringly adds that the infinite can be construed not merely as the negation of the finite but more positively as an *independent, limit-less* reality that “precedes and grounds all finite things.”³⁸⁴ This notion of an immediate sense of the infinite accessed via the portal of finitude falls within a sophisticated case Clayton makes for thinking that the Christian God includes all finite miscellany within God-self. Citing in various places in his writings thinkers such as Plotinus, Nicholas of Cusa, Giordano Bruno, Spinoza, Fichte, and Hegel as previous spokesmen for the idea, he maintains that “a truly infinite (unlimited) being would have no place outside itself; the creation would have to be in some sense within it.”³⁸⁵

Shortly, I will attend to the metaphysics of this panentheistic idea. In the meantime, I must criticize Clayton’s approach to the theological task, touching first on a matter that appears to occupy space at the core of his religious worldview. In particular, I believe that he adopts a sub-biblical epistemic attitude when he describes the stance taken by those scaling the ladder from an intuition of finitude to the idea of “the unlimited” as being “neutral...on the question of the existence of a divine being or beings.”³⁸⁶ At best, Clayton here represents a standpoint that has been capably controverted and so he should at least alert his readers to that fact. Perhaps most notably, the twentieth-century philosopher-theologian Cornelius Van Til argued in an array of publications that if the Triune God of Scripture is (as he

³⁸⁴ Clayton, *The Problem of God in Modern Thought*, 177.

³⁸⁵ Ibid., 168. Also, see Clayton, “Panentheism in Metaphysical and Scientific Perspective,” in *In Whom We Live and Move and Have Our Being*, 81.

³⁸⁶ Clayton, *Adventures in the Spirit*, 162.

contends) the transcendental precondition of intelligibility then it is impossible for an individual human to remain neutral on the subject of the Creator's existence.³⁸⁷ Doing his best to rework Humean and Kantian insights within a Calvinism received from Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck, Van Til holds that human predication and action are only intelligible when taken within the matrix of a Trinitarian ontology.³⁸⁸ An important aspect of his thinking on this subject involves the claim that all those graced with intelligible experience (including but not necessarily limited to causal, logical, and moral experience) are, as such, "smitten" with an original, inescapable knowledge of God.³⁸⁹ Thus, even those espousing agnosticism or atheism are theists in spite of themselves.³⁹⁰ Van Til's point, of course, is not to deny the obvious fact that some people self-consciously *profess* to be agnostic about God and tend to *pursue a life* of practical atheism. His point is that they are not, *in fact*, agnostic about God if, indeed, God has "inflicted" them with a knowledge of Himself, rendering them "without apologetic" for their ungodliness and ingratitude (see Rom. 1:19, 20).

As a correlate, the "intellectual discord" between creatures and their Creator does not primarily relate to issues of evidence or argument but traces to a perversion

³⁸⁷ Cornelius Van Til, *Christian Apologetics* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1976), 57, 58.

³⁸⁸ Wesley A. Roberts, "Cornelius Van Til," in *Reformed Theology in America: A History of Its Modern Development*, ed. David F. Wells (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1997), 174.

³⁸⁹ Cornelius Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Theological Seminary, 1949, 1952 [syllabus]), 93-95.

³⁹⁰ Cornelius Van Til, *Common Grace* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1947), 53-55, 88-89. Earlier defenders of an innate pre-understanding of God or *sensus divinitatis* (as Calvin termed it) have included the "Old Princeton" scholar, Hodge. See Charles Hodge, "Chapter I – Origin of the Idea of God," in *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 1 (New York: Scribner, Armstrong, and Co., 1873; reprint, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1999).

of human affections. Here Van Til is right on track with Calvin, locating humankind's intellectual *problematica* – especially concerning the Creator – in a “fallen” pre-disposition that humans have for idolatry.³⁹¹ If nothing else, the boldness of these claims should encourage metaphysical adventurers to deal with Van Til's charge against a “presuppositionally neutral” apologetic for theism.³⁹²

Observe also that, while he is open to considering specifics of the scripturally revealed Trinity, Clayton makes abstract ruminations on the possible implications of our self-awareness as finite entities more theologically determinative. In keeping with my hard-hitting opener, a legitimate initial objection to this move will question its scriptural propriety, especially in light of the Pauline idea that a “post-lapsarian” inclination to prefer conveniently anthropomorphized deities crowds out a “pre-lapsarian” desire to know one's Lord (see Rom. 1:23). A second objection, however, has more to do with the “rationalistic minimalism” of Clayton's finite-to-infinite groundwork. Plainly put, his method of beginning with a meditation on the Infinite (by way of the finite) is, in my judgment, too abstract and ambiguous to fuel the journey toward a definite panentheistic destination. I claim that the idea that the God-world relationship is panentheistic in nature is only contingently related to the idea that an Infinite reality in some sense comprehends or encompasses all finite

³⁹¹ Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 3rd edition (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1967), 259, 260, 308. Another of Van Til's Calvinian predecessors at Princeton, Alexander, recognized that the human soul “is not depraved or holy by departments; the disease affects it, as a soul... .” Along with the will and affections, understanding suffers corruption from sin. See Archibald Alexander, *Thoughts on Religious Experience* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1989; 1844), 63.

³⁹² Cornelius Van Til, *A Survey of Christian Epistemology in Defense of the Faith*, vol. 2 (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1969), 18-22.

reality. Even if they are both true, I see no reason to think that there is a necessary relationship between these propositions.

Again, toward the end of this chapter I will propose that a scripturally defensible and conceptually feasible case can be made for the Infinite's "inclusion" of the finite by combining a classical Creator-creature distinction with a timeless, "Calvinian" decree that accounts for all non-divine existents. If this thesis is judged to be plausible, then I believe we have reason to restrict use of the "infinite insight" to an already established theology and not use it in order to establish one. This claim, while certainly finding a detractor in Clayton, suffers no blow from his admission that the "intuition of the infinite" fails to function as more than "a source of *prima facie* evidence as we consider signs of 'God with us' that point in the direction of an infinite being."³⁹³ In the end, I find that Hegel's notion of the "true infinite," when properly appropriated, offers more promise to those working *within* sacred Christian theology than to those looking to *build* a Christian theology by means of what Van Til calls a "blockhouse" methodology.³⁹⁴

Consistent with his rejection of St. Anselm's Ontological Argument, Clayton recognizes that the idea of a limit-less reality preceding and grounding finite reality does not entail the existence of an infinite being. "However rich the notion of the infinite may be as an intuition," he says, "it will underdetermine philosophical

³⁹³ Clayton, *Adventures in the Spirit*, 162.

³⁹⁴ Van Til uses the term "blockhouse methodology" to refer to attempts to establish the credibility of a theism that is not specifically Christian before proceeding to adorn it with Christian accoutrements. See his *Defense of the Faith*, Chapter VI, "Christian Apologetics (The Problem of Method)".

debate.”³⁹⁵ This being the case, it is understandable that he looks to the anthropological theory of emergent monism as a way of commending the idea that God identifies with the world (as a person does her body) but also transcends it (as a person also exercises mental, “top-down” causation on her body).³⁹⁶ As strongly as Clayton believes this analogy is appropriate, however, I just as strongly believe it is inappropriate.³⁹⁷ Although I do not mean for this stated conviction to serve in the place of argument, it helps to explain why I lack Clayton’s motivations for seeing some form of panentheism vindicated. And I should note the specific nature of my disagreement on this point. My rejection of Clayton’s panentheistic analogy does not necessarily hinge on a disavowal of his resolution of the mind-body problem in terms of emergent monism. I would find this latter idea theologically admissible (so long as it allows for posthumously conscious individuals within the theologically ineliminable “intermediate state” of Christian eschatology), though I am unconvinced that it should be preferred. But even if it is correct, this fact has no evident bearing on questions about God’s existence or about the relationship God maintains with the world. *Prima facie*, both atheistic naturalism and the idea of a

³⁹⁵ Clayton, *Adventures in the Spirit*, 162.

³⁹⁶ Clayton, “Panentheism in Metaphysical and Scientific Perspective,” in *In Whom We Live and Move and Have Our Being*, 83.

³⁹⁷ I concur with John Cooper when he writes: “Even Scripture’s rare birth metaphors for creation imply that the offspring is distinct from its parent, not part of its body. References to God’s body metaphorically represent his powers to act in the world, not the world as his body. Thus the part-whole and soul/mind-person-body models do not represent this otherness as Scripture does. Their canonical source is Plato’s *Timaeus*.” Cooper, *Panentheism: The Other God of the Philosophers*, 323. Along with this, consider the more “internal” criticism and claim of Jacobs: “In fact, if one affirms, as Clayton does, that God exists and possesses actuality prior to the existence of the world, the mind-body analogy is more appropriately utilized by a through-going dualist than by an emergentist.” Jacobs, “Contra Clayton,” 383.

“classically dualistic” Creator appear to be consistent with certain types of mind-body monism.³⁹⁸

For these reasons, along with my belief that panentheism is at best underdetermined by Scripture, I have not been tempted to embrace it. Nevertheless, as with the atemporalist theism espoused in this dissertation, some form of panentheism may be true irrespective of both Clayton’s arguments in its favor as well as its scripturally underdetermined status. Those engaging with Claytonian panentheism as an alternative to classical theism’s timeless, impassible deity will therefore do well to attend to its specifics as a metaphysical thesis about the God-world relationship.

b. Craig’s Case Against Clayton’s Panentheistic Metaphysics

In *God and Contemporary Science*, Clayton writes:

We have found that both biblical and theological lines of argument point toward the infinite/finite contrast as a crucial conceptual means for drawing the distinction between God and his creation. Yet it turns out to be impossible to conceive of God as fully infinite if he is limited by something outside of himself. The infinite may without contradiction include within itself things that are by nature finite, but it may not stand *outside of* the finite. For if something finite exists, and if the infinite is ‘excluded’ by the finite, then it is not truly infinite or without limit. To put it differently, there is simply no place for finite things to ‘be’ outside of that which is *absolutely unlimited*. Hence an infinite God must encompass the finite world that he

³⁹⁸ Also, it is not clear, according to Jacobs, that panentheism “naturally accommodate[s] the current scientific picture of organic development.” Indeed, Jacobs argues that “panentheism, with its notion of divine emanation, is most naturally conducive to a top-down picture of emergence – as opposed to the bottom-up emergence of modern science.” Contrariwise, he seeks to “demonstrate that St. Augustine of Hippo’s theistic modifications to Plotinian (panentheistic) NeoPlatonism offer a strong foundation for constructing a theologically robust and scientifically satisfying philosophy of organism.” Jacobs, “Contra Clayton,” 376.

has created, making it in some sense ‘within’ himself. This is the conclusion that we call panentheism.³⁹⁹

As an initial response, I think that Clayton commits a *non sequitur* in this passage. Assuming that he is correct when he claims that a “fully infinite” God will include within himself all finite things, does it follow that God “may not,” in any sense, “stand *outside of* the finite”? If God is not identical with but personally transcends the world, is there not some propriety in using the concept of “the outside” to distinguish divine being and action from that which it non-reductively includes or envelops? To the latter, I would reply in the affirmative.⁴⁰⁰ Furthermore, I find unconvincing the premise that an entity existing “outside of” something else would necessarily constitute that something else as a “limitation” and thus render the “external” entity finite.

W.L. Craig, however, appears considerably less inclined than I am to follow Clayton in holding that freedom from limitation should function as an important (if not the primary) component of the concept of divine infinity. As a consequence, he is also less inclined than I am to propose a “classical inclusion” alternative to the panentheistic inclusion of all finite things in God as a way of acknowledging the

³⁹⁹ Clayton, *God and Contemporary Science*, 99.

⁴⁰⁰ As Leithart says, “To say that God is ‘outside’ is to deny that He is dependent on creation, even as He moves and exists ‘inside’ it; to say that God is ‘inside’ means that God is to some extent dependent upon creation.” See Leithart, “Trinity, Time, and Open Theism,” in *Bound Only Once: The Failure of Open Theism*, ed. Douglas Wilson (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2001), 133. I do believe that God is dependent on or “needs” the creation in a sense to be spelled out shortly. Needless to say, I do not find that this admission requires one to deny divine impassibility. For further discussion of the “outside” and the classical affirmation that creation is wholly dependent for its existence on God, see Rowan Williams, “On being a Creature,” in *On Christian Theology*, Challenges in Contemporary Theology (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 63-78.

divine infinity's absolutely unlimited nature.⁴⁰¹ Craig's published criticisms of Clayton's panentheism are thus more one-sidedly negative in character than my own tend to be.⁴⁰² Along with claiming that it fails to establish a *via media* between dualistic theism and pantheism, he more strongly argues that Claytonian panentheism, in spite of its architect's efforts, logically reduces to pantheism.

Craig begins his critical treatment of Claytonian panentheism by quoting the passage cited above and moves to fill out Clayton's conception of the infinite by reference to the following from *The Problem of God in Modern Thought*:

Being limited or bounded (*begrenzt*) intuitively implies the idea of something that is *un* bounded or infinite. To think of something is to think at the same time the border that makes it this something rather than another. Beginning with finite things, our mind stretches toward the indefinite, whether it is indefinite in number, size, or quality. But to (try to) think the totality of things that are bordered leads to the idea of something that is beyond all borders, which Hegel calls the "truly infinite."⁴⁰³

One gets the mental picture here of an enormous thought bubble expanding out indefinitely from a finite point and surrounding all that exists. But when Craig takes the denial of an "outside" infinite together with the concept of a "totality of things...beyond all borders" he sees in this the undoing of a *bona fide* distinction between the infinite and the finite. Moreover, he does not formally assume that an appropriation of Hegel's argument for the "true infinite" presupposes a "finitized" deity. Rather, in positing a fully infinite deity he concludes that such a one "must

⁴⁰¹ I will later elaborate on what I mean when I state that the infinite Triune God is unlimited and how my understanding appears to differ with Clayton's.

⁴⁰² William Lane Craig, "Pantheists in Spite of Themselves: God and Infinity in Contemporary Theology" in *For Faith and Clarity*, 135–156.

⁴⁰³ Clayton, *The Problem of God in Modern Thought*, 125.

have no borders to its existence: nothing other than it can exist.” He attempts to encapsulate Clayton’s reasoning for panentheism in the following conditional proof:

1. God is infinite.
2. If something is infinite, it is absolutely unlimited.
3. If something is absolutely unlimited, it has no bounds.
4. If something is distinct from another thing, then that other thing bounds it.
5. If something is bounded by another thing, then it has bounds.
6. God is distinct from the world. (Premiss for Conditional Proof)
7. Therefore, the world bounds God. (4, 6)
8. Therefore, God has bounds. (5, 7)
9. Therefore, God is not absolutely unlimited. (3, 8)
10. Therefore, God is not infinite. (2, 9)
11. Therefore, if God is distinct from the world, God is not infinite. (6-10, Conditional Proof)
12. Therefore, God is not distinct from the world.

I find Craig’s logic here to be flawless. If this is correct, then his conclusion in proposition 12 that Clayton’s panentheism reduces to pantheism can only be avoided if one has good reason to think that Clayton rejects one or more of the argument’s premises.

In a published reply to Craig’s argument, William Rowe, having directly verified matters with Clayton, confirms that the latter finds the initial three premises acceptable.⁴⁰⁴ From my own examination of some of Clayton’s writings, premises 2 and 3 are probably the least difficult to attribute to him. With a finger firmly affixed to the pulse of German objective idealism, Clayton conveys his support for a version of dialectical monism in passages such as those already cited. However, as already mentioned, he somewhat unexpectedly recoils from Hegel’s notion that God is finite in the world’s absence. Likewise, he reins in his praise for Schelling when treating

⁴⁰⁴ William Rowe, “Does panentheism reduce to pantheism? A response to Craig” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 61.2 (2007): 65-67.

the latter's notion that a fundamental rift exists in God between the Yes of Being and the No of Non-Being. He ultimately decides to reject the irrationalism and Gnosticism exhibited in the Schellingian idea that God faces the primordial "choice" of whether or not to exist, instead opting for the more traditional divine choice of whether or not to create.⁴⁰⁵ As Craig cites from Clayton's earlier *God and Contemporary Science*, this leaves him explicitly affirming "that the world is ontologically distinct from God, having been created *ex nihilo* at a point in the finite past and subsequently conserved in being by God."⁴⁰⁶ Minimally, then, Clayton is engaged in the awkward task of stitching together something like a dialectical monism and the "classical" doctrine of an infinite deity who unnecessarily creates the space-time complex.

Rowe pays little mind to these scruples over premise 1 in his article. Instead, he goes after Craig's premise 4, the claim that if something is distinct from another thing, then that other thing bounds it.⁴⁰⁷ Rowe thinks that Craig has failed to take Clayton at his word here in his haste to spin the panentheistic thesis into a pantheistic ditch. On the contrary, he describes Clayton's "principal idea" in the

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid., 483-485. Jacobs expresses doubts about the wisdom of this move for one who wishes to appropriate the best that objective idealism has to offer: "In *The Problem of God in Modern Thought*, Schelling is the hero of the story, as it were. Yet, Clayton is not a pure Schellingian. Schelling stands out as the hero for Clayton because Schelling undoes (what appears to be) the deterministic/necessitarian implication of Hegel's system, restoring both divine and human freedom to objective idealism's panentheistic framework. But Clayton parts ways with Schelling in a key area, namely, Schelling's speculation into the inner being of God. What I find problematic about this maneuver on Clayton's part is that, if I understand Schelling correctly, such speculation is the very thing that allows him to retain freedom within an idealist framework." See Jacobs, "Contra Clayton," 380ff. If Jacobs is mistaken in either his reading of Clayton or Schelling on this matter, I have not been able to discern how.

⁴⁰⁶ Craig, "Pantheists in Spite of Themselves," in *For Faith and Clarity*, 148ff.

⁴⁰⁷ In line with Rowe's suggestions, Clayton confirms via private correspondence that he denies Craig's premise 4.

following way: “If the infinite does not include the finite within itself there is a ‘border that makes it this something rather than another.’” He appears to doubt that Craig means sincerely “to suggest that Clayton’s claim commits him to a view that Clayton explicitly denies”:

[A]dopting Clayton’s use of the term ‘infinite,’ it seems that any being that is truly infinite in Clayton’s sense must have no borders to its existence. And that clearly implies that if something finite exists, like, say, the planet earth, then the planet earth must somehow be included in the true infinite. For there is nowhere else for the planet earth to exist. And thus we can see, I suppose, why Clayton is what he is: a panentheist.⁴⁰⁸

It is not obvious, however, that Craig has given Clayton an incredible reading. First, he charitably grants that Clayton affirms a pre-creation actuality of God robust enough for creation *ex nihilo* without inferring that this makes him a conflicted classical dualist. Second, Craig goes to the source, rooting his case in a reading of Clayton’s statement that “to think of something is to think at the same time the border that makes it this something rather than another.”⁴⁰⁹ Rowe says Craig “seems exactly right” when he concludes that according to Clayton “a truly infinite being must have no borders to its existence.”⁴¹⁰ But if a ‘being’ is a ‘something,’ then it becomes questionable whether we can defensibly diverge from Craig’s critical path. For when Clayton’s stated rejection of classical dualism converges with the idea of a borderless entity the necessary conditions would seem to be removed for thinking that God is a distinct “something rather than another.”

⁴⁰⁸ Rowe, “Does panentheism reduce to pantheism? A response to Craig,” 65.

⁴⁰⁹ Clayton, *The Problem of God in Modern Thought*, 125.

⁴¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 65.

In order to avoid dualism, Clayton needs an “ontic packaging” of Creator and creation. But to avoid pantheism (i.e., the coextensiveness of God and creation) he needs an ontological distinction between the Infinite and the finite. Unfortunately, my own reading of Clayton leaves me unclear as to whether the “borderless something” that is the Infinite is a coherent concept. If thinking of something entails thinking a border between it and something else, then a “borderless something” is unthinkable.

Of course, Clayton holds that only borderless *finite* entities are unthinkable. God, as the Infinite, exists without the limitation of borders but is still distinguished from the finite world. God is an exception. One difficulty with this is ontological. Clayton appears to be interested in dispensing with dualism and any notion that God attends to the world from “the outside” in affirming God’s inclusion of the world. But if there is, in fact, *no* sense in which God exists or operates in a way external to the world, then in what sense would there be any “divine remainder” to act in (or precede) the world? Here we would likely be encouraged to think not only of the world as existing *in* God but also of God as existing *in* the world. But if God acts on or in the world only from “the inside” is there any “place” for the divine “Insider” to be, assuming that God is not co-extensive with the world and all its parts? Another difficulty with this notion of the divine Insider is epistemological. If we are to proceed from the finite toward the Infinite in our reasoning about God and yet are unable to “pry” God away from concrete, finite entities and events in a way that warrants conceiving of Him as a transcendent “Outsider” (dualism), then do we have

sufficient reason (without “outside help” *via* divine revelation) to believe that there is an infinite deity that accounts for the world’s existence?

It would not necessarily follow from these critical questions that panentheism is false. Clayton’s doctrine might be true, I maintain, even if it has core conceptual components that are, to us, unthinkable. But if the concept is indeed incoherent then the claim that the Creator non-dualistically “includes” the world but is distinct from the world should not appear very credible to those who are even mildly inclined toward a theological rationalism such as Clayton’s.

Then again, we ought to wonder whether Craig has not hastily minimized his assumed task by restricting his talk of distinctions to the language of “borders” or “bounds.” In private conversation, Clayton expresses dissatisfaction with the way Craig zeroes in on the reference to his “borderless” distinction between the Infinite and the finite world that is “included” within the Infinite. He says that there are other ways to distinguish things other than by borders, citing as examples numbers, which are distinguished by being of greater or lesser quantity, and qualities, such as the love of a husband for his wife. Such quantitative and qualitative realities appear less susceptible to the concept of *border* in being distinguished from other existents. Perhaps all bounded things are finite but not all finite things are distinguished from other entities by boundaries.

Indeed, maybe these realities Clayton names do qualify as “finite precedents” for our being able to think of God as the borderless Infinite. But if he wishes to cite

these as relevantly similar to God with respect to their being borderless, then he would seem to be committed to either one of the following propositions:

(1) Some realities (e.g. love, number) are borderless, finite entities and, as such, are unthinkable.⁴¹¹

or

(2) The borderless realities denoted by ‘love’ and ‘number’ are thinkable and, therefore, either not finite, not entities, or both (not finite and not entities).

Choosing (1) would obviously undermine Clayton’s effort to support his case by reference to borderless existents other than the, presumably, borderless Infinite. The assertion, however, that those realities picked out by ‘love’ or ‘number’ are either not finite or not entities (or both), while resistant to falsification, would hardly be uncontroversial. Questions about the ontological status of such qualitative and quantitative realities continue to perplex and divide philosophers (even those not committed to theism). Thus, it is doubtful whether citing these “borderless finites” will help us make much headway in *thinking* about a postulated Infinite that non-dualistically accounts for finite existents (be they bordered or borderless).

Along these lines, Clayton is obliged to maintain that the Infinite would include or comprehend these borderless, finite realities he mentions. He thus faces the challenge of clarifying just what it would mean for God, the boundless, to “include” these realities in Godself without cancelling their ontological integrity. For my part, I believe that the ontological integrity of finite miscellany fares just as well on a less literal interpretation of the Infinite’s “inclusion” than Clayton prefers.

⁴¹¹This would appear to follow from the claim that to think of a finite thing involves thinking the border between that thing and something else. See Clayton, *The Problem of God*, 125.

All the same, he insists that as a Christian he distinguishes, *inter alia*, the Infinite from the finite, the Creator (who exists necessarily) from creatures (which exist contingently), and the wholly good Lord from fallen, sinful humans.

Owing to its author's non-pantheistic intentions and to the "mixed" status of his theology (an attempted blending of classical theism and modern panentheism, as I perceive it), I hesitate to consign Claytonian panentheism to a pantheistic ditch. Nevertheless, whether or not Craig is correct in his stronger claim, he and I both judge that Clayton has not satisfactorily carved out a credible middle path between classical theism and pantheism. Together with some earlier noted objections, I fail to imagine how one can consistently affirm that a "true infinite" will, in some (literal?) way, ontically include all finite realities within itself while also affirming that God was truly infinite prior to creating the world from nothing.⁴¹² Of course, my failure to imagine how this could be does not amount to a refutation of the idea.

On the other hand, if Clayton is correct in holding that God was truly infinite prior to creation, then I equally fail to imagine how this should not raise doubts about his rejection of an anthropological mind/person-body dualism in favor of emergent monism which, in turn, is supposed to serve as a (to be sure, limited) model for the God-world relationship. For it seems in no way obvious that if God is able to exist without the world (and yet, consistent with His essence, creates and sustains one) that He cannot also make "dualistic" creatures in His image; nor is it

⁴¹² On the whole, I am sympathetic with the biblical, theological, and philosophical problems that Cooper has with panentheism in the last chapter of his significant work on the subject. See Cooper, "Why I Am Not a Panentheist," in *Panentheism: The Other God of the Philosophers*, 319-346.

obvious that He has not in fact done so.⁴¹³ Moreover, if some version of mind/person-body dualism is correct, then a modeling of the God-world relationship on the mind/person-body relationship would lead us to conceive of the God-world relationship dualistically. Thus, I suggest that at least one of the main postulates Clayton uses to support panentheism is open to reasonable doubt.⁴¹⁴ Furthermore, if one believes, as I do, that the Hebrew-Christian Scriptures (being the final authority for all Christian faith and practice) provide no basis for “projecting” the mind/person-body relationship into the heavens, then Claytonian panentheism appears even less appealing.

V. Moving Toward an “Absolutely Unlimited” Classical Theism

In wrapping up the article that includes his critique of Claytonian panentheism, Craig approbates Wolfhart Pannenberg’s insight that divine infinity has concrete manifestations. This, he says, is “key” to understanding the place of infinity among the divine attributes:

There really is no separate divine attribute denoted by “infinity.” Rather “infinity” serves as an umbrella-term for capturing all those properties which

⁴¹³ Beyond these minimal claims, I do not wish to set forth here a more controversial dualistic theory, though dualism seems to be the view most consistent with those teachings of Scripture relating to issues of post-humous existence and eschatology. See John W. Cooper, *Body, Soul, and Life Everlasting: Biblical Anthropology and the Monism-Dualism Debate* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000). See C. Stephen Evans, “Separable Souls: A Defense of ‘Minimal Dualism,’” *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 19.3 (Fall, 1981): 313-331. Multiple philosophers, some of whom advocate for one form or another of anthropological dualism, contribute to Robert C. Koons and George Bealer, eds., *The Waning of Materialism* (Oxford: University Press, 2010).

⁴¹⁴ For the most full-orbed defense of his emergentist anthropology to date, see Philip Clayton, *Mind and Emergence: From Quantum to Consciousness* (Oxford: University Press, 2006). For a critical discussion of this viewpoint, see J.P. Moreland, “Philip Clayton and pluralistic emergent monism” in his *Consciousness and the Existence of God: A Theistic Argument* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 135-155.

serve to make God the greatest conceivable being. In saying that God is infinite, we mean that God is necessary, self-existent, omnipotent, omniscient, holy, eternal, omnipresent, and so forth. Were we to abstract these properties from the concept of God, there would not remain some further, undefined property *infinity*. Rather God's infinity is constituted precisely by these great-making properties.

This seems right. Theological and mathematical conceptions of infinity, as Ludwig Wittgenstein might put it, would share some formal "family resemblances." But they should each be carefully distinguished and not, like a pair of unequal siblings, face the burden of "being more like" the other. In theology, the term 'infinity' has sense only when a fairly concrete conception of God's character is in place. For this reason, Stephen Davis refers to "infinity" as a *meta-property*.⁴¹⁵

Along with this insight and specifically due to the way in which he takes issue with Clayton's theology, Craig steers away from characterizing divine infinity in terms of an absolutely unlimited being. In concluding this dissertation, however, I propose that within the concrete context of Reformed theology the concept of divine infinity can quite well accommodate the notion of an absolutely unlimited deity. Unmistakably, there is an important sense in which God is held to be absolutely unlimited within the framework of classical Reformed theism. And Craig appears to leave formal space open for some such a proposal when he says, "[T]he notion of an absolutely unlimited being, *in the curious sense in which 'limit' is being employed* [by Clayton], is self-referentially incoherent."⁴¹⁶ My Reformed proposal says that the absolutely unlimited God is one who suffers no *non-self-imposed limits* and that God's "inclusion" of all non-divine realities need not be interpreted

⁴¹⁵ Private correspondence.

⁴¹⁶ Ibid., 154ff. Italics added.

“literally” as one finds in panentheistic metaphysics. That is, I believe a qualified sense of ‘limit’ is compatible with the notion of an absolutely unlimited being within the parameters of classical, non-panentheistic theism. God can be “constrained” by His own “is-ness” and even by His contingent decree to actualize (strongly) creation without being limited in any objectionable sense. Whether I am correct about this and about God’s “comprehension” of the world by way of a timeless decree, the reader will need to judge.

To begin with, if it is appropriate to express divine infinity in terms of the absence of limits then clearly the notion of *limit* must itself, in this context, have a refined, definite sense. The absence of limits, for example, cannot unequivocally imply, as seems to be the case in Craig’s reading of Clayton, that God is the only existent. If God is ontologically distinct from other existents then the sense in which he is absolutely unlimited must be consistent with that reality, for it is *God* who is infinite in Christian theology, not some greater composition of which God and another thing (or collection of things) are fellow constituents. This is simply to reiterate the claim that the “dualistic” God-world distinction of classical Christian theism is consistent with a conception of infinitude involving an important sense in which God operates free of limitations.

Clearly, however, if Craig is correct and the conception of divine infinitude functions as a surrogate or catch-all for a group of great-making attributes then the former will be shaped by how one specifically conceives of those latter attributes. Starting at a basic level and following others within contemporary philosophy of

religion, I believe that a precondition of rational theological discourse goes unmet if we affirm a conception of divine omnipotence in which God is free to violate logical norms. Thus, formally, one could say that God is limited to performing tasks that, if at all describable, can only be described free of logical contradiction. But if Swinburne is correct and illogical tasks are pseudo- or non-tasks, then God's inability to violate logical norms does not mean that there is some task that He could want to accomplish but be unable to perform. Moreover, assuming that something like Platonic dualism is inconsistent with Christian theism, it is plausible that logical norms are in some way intrinsic to the divine essence. From that standpoint, God's inability to perform illogical deeds would be a necessary feature of His identity. No possible world could be created that operates free of whatever logical norms exist "in" God, for God can only act in ways consistent with His essential, non-contingent attributes. What might appear then to be a set of purely formal abstractions (i.e., logical norms) would be necessary expressions of the Creator's specific character.

Indeed, a sound Christian theology will "constrain" God by recognizing that He is bound to act consistently with all of His essential attributes. If God were not, for instance, just and benevolent under all conditions, then Christian worship of Him would be unjustifiable.⁴¹⁷ A person who behaves virtuously even most of the time but has character traits consistent with the commission of evil deeds might well be admired (assuming, of course, there is some agreement on what constitutes virtuous

⁴¹⁷ For a discussion that moves from essential divine attributes such as goodness to divine *trustworthiness*, "a relational power or property of God," see Paul Helm, "The Perfect Trustworthiness of God" in *The Trustworthiness of God: Perspectives on the Nature of Scripture*, eds. Paul Helm and Carl Trueman (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 237-252.

behavior). But that person would not thereby be deemed worthy of worship. Also, God's goodness, if expressed (i.e., by way of creation, etc.), comes to expression teleologically. As taught by Christian dogma, God's creative action brings good effects, though the "comedic" resolution of His redemptive drama in the glorious eschaton has a "dark side," featuring tragic components (namely, the damnation of some creatures). Nonetheless, the good effects that are realized trace to God's imperturbable goodness, a goodness for which no other entity or principle *ultimately* deserves credit.

In the last couple of paragraphs I have thought about the limitations "imposed" by God's essential attributes. But what should we say about contingent states of affairs, i.e., realities that are not specified by the divine essence? Can these be said to constitute limits on divine action? For example, does the fact of creation limit God? And if so, in what sense or to what extent does it do so? In the non-panentheistic wing of Christian tradition, creation has not been treated as logically following from the divine essence but as being consistent with it. Thus, God is unlimited by creation in the sense that, without creation, He can *do* without creation. When we go to say something beyond this "classical" agreement, however, and ask whether or to what extent God *with* creation is limited by the world or its creatures, Christian philosophers and theologians find less room to agree.

At a general level, Christian theologians view God as purposeful and not capricious. So the fact of creation signals some sort of commitment on God's part to maintaining a presence with and over the drama. It can thus be admitted that the

contingent state of affairs called ‘creation’ limits God in a sense. Minimally, the fact of creation implies that God is the Creator, though being the Creator is not essential to God’s being God. As such, no action that God might otherwise take can fail to square with His “Creatorhood.” This feature of Christian theology is at odds with the idea that God, having made the world, is free to dispense willy-nilly with the “creation project.” He is thus limited by something other than Himself, but it is worth lingering over the fact that “the other’s” existence is, in an important sense, *due to* His own purposeful action. From this perspective, it need not be taken as an embrace of contradiction if a Christian theologian affirms that God is absolutely unlimited despite being limited in some ways. The key is in understanding that when we say that God is absolutely unlimited we should mean that God suffers no limitations originating apart from His own essential attributes (e.g. goodness, love, etc.) and action (which is consistent with those attributes). To this I would add the clarification that the infinite God imposes limits on Himself in determining to bring about effects through His action. The effects of His action are, as it were, forever. They cannot be remitted. Thus, upon their being actualized, the effects of divine action condition how things will proceed from any given spatio-temporal juncture.

Perhaps it can be agreed that divine infinity is consistent with some set of classical, self-imposed limits. The fact is, however, that not all classical theists agree about what are acceptable limits vis-à-vis the omniscience, omnipotence, and, more generally, sovereignty of God. Not all agree about what limits or kinds of limits should populate the set of acceptable constraints on divine knowledge or

action. One should, therefore, expect that a view judged to be inadequate in its conception of God's knowledge or power (or both) is also apt to be judged as setting forth an inadequate conception of God's infinity. If Craig is correct and infinity is not an abstract property but a more general "umbrella-term for [great-making] properties," then perceived failures to characterize properly God's great-making properties may also be characterized as failures to characterize properly God's infinitude or, worse, as entailing its negation.

It thus stands to reason that if, as Edwards argued, omniscience (being a great-making quality of God) includes exhaustive foreknowledge and cannot cogently accommodate libertarian freedom, then a theology that welcomes libertarian freedom might, as a result, be judged guilty of mischaracterizing or even, by implication, denying God's infinity. This assumes, of course, that an omniscient God infallibly takes into account all agents and all their actions, whether from a temporal or atemporal standpoint – even actions that have yet to be taken. More to the point, by definition libertarian agents bring about effects of which God is not the cause, effects which, as such, condition or limit God's subsequent course of action. But only in a very stretched sense do effects caused by libertarianly free creatures constitute *self-imposed* limits on God. They are self-imposed in the sense that they are brought about by creatures that God is responsible for making. But they are *other-imposed* in the sense that libertarian choices and other phenomena caused by them are, *ex hypothesi*, not necessitated by any action of God. They are not, properly speaking, effects of divine action.

Therefore, to the extent that divine infinity depends upon an adequate conception of divine omniscience and to the extent that divine omniscience fails to accommodate libertarian freedom, to that extent the case *for* libertarian freedom in one's theology would amount to a case *against* divine infinity. Naturally, insofar as they wish to endorse Craig's treatment of infinity as an "umbrella-term," theologians rejecting Calvinian compatibilism will seek to avoid the above conclusion by saying that their preferred version of omniscience does not fail to accommodate libertarian freedom. Open theists, for example, have often insisted that, in view of what they find to be a logical tension between libertarian freedom and essential foreknowledge, divine omniscience must not be defined as entailing pre-cognition of future human actions. Advocates of Simple Foreknowledge and Molinism, on the other hand, believe that God is able to take cognitive account of future libertarianly free actions. This latter twofold group of theologians is arguably better positioned to affirm divine infinity with respect to their formal claims about the nature and scope of divine omniscience.

Yet, I maintain that any theology welcoming libertarian freedom unduly limits God by acknowledging that some of His actions are conditioned by phenomena for which He is not, in any relevant sense, causally responsible for bringing about. On one hand, given the parameters set thus far, if we admit with Open theists that the future choices of libertarianly free agents are unknown variables then it becomes reasonable to doubt divine infinitude. At the least, the doctrine of divine omniscience traditionally asserts that God suffers no other-

imposed (i.e., creature-imposed) epistemic limits due to human choices. To this we may add the caveat, following Craig's use of *infinity* as an umbrella term, that this is part of what it means to say that God is infinite. But the Openness view either requires one to deny divine omniscience as defined in this way or redefine it in a way consistent with the claim that God suffers *some* other-imposed epistemic limits due to human choices. Either way then Open theism appears to be at odds with the "true infinite."

On the other hand, let us assume that at t1 God creates a libertarianly free agent (LFA) and somehow knows exactly what choices that agent will make at all times after t1. God thus provides a necessary condition of libertarianly free choices made by LFA by creating LFA. Let us further assume that at t3 LFA commits a heinous act (HA) to which God ethically objects. Bear in mind that God already knows at t1 that HA is going to occur at t3. But if God already knows at t1 that HA will occur at t3 then HA is certain to occur. It cannot be prevented, given the conditions of God's knowledge. Thus, LFA, a creature, is going to commit HA at t3 and God is powerless to prevent HA from occurring.

Now, perhaps the notion that God is powerless to prevent HA, an action performed by a libertarianly free agent, from occurring in the future warrants no more objection than would be warranted by the claim that God is powerless to change, in some way, libertarian choices already made in the past. It seems to me, however, that for this to be the case one would need to affirm an ontological symmetry in one's conception of temporal reality, such that future events that *will*

occur are *actual* prior to their occurrence, just as past events that *have* occurred are actual. But if this is true, then the advocate of Simple Foreknowledge seems again to face the dilemma of either (a) denying the doctrine of divine omnipresence by saying that there are actual events located at t_2 with which God, being located at t_1 , is not present or (b) denying, with *B*-theorists, an ontologically unique or “official” present, something they would rather not do.

Regardless, I assert that what makes this state of affairs theologically objectionable is not that God is unable to prevent HA from being committed. If HA were performed by a compatibilistically free agent (CFA) then God’s decree that HA be committed would keep even God from preventing HA. The decree would constitute a self-imposed limitation. In this sense, compatibilistically free choices would be “covered” by God’s decree. God brings them about. But a libertarianly free choice enjoys no such covering. God establishes the conditions under which He knows HA will occur and He also ethically objects to HA’s occurrence. But if God knows in advance that person Q will commit HA if placed in a particular situation S, would there be any way for God to prevent libertarianly free Q from committing HA apart from refraining to place Q in situation S? Perhaps so, but I do not see how.

As it stands, I judge that doctrines of providence seeking to incorporate libertarian freedom fail to secure conceptions of omniscience, omnipresence, and omnipotence that are worthy of Christian theology. More particularly, I do not believe that a compelling conception of divine omnipotence will require God to forego creating particular situations in order to ensure that one (let alone a

multitude) of His creatures not commit some heinous act in those situations. When coupled with the idea that an essential divine foreknowledge of future human choices fits better with a divine “causing” of those choices than the absence of such, the above considerations undermine a “true” divine infinitude from the direction of omnipotence (for those rejecting Calvinian compatibilism).

In terms of conceptual consistency, I find that the Open theist’s rejection of an essential foreknowledge in deference to libertarian freedom is the right move for those unwilling to relinquish the latter conception of human freedom. As a hybrid of Classical and Process theism, and in a way similar to Clayton’s doctrine, Open theism sets forth a picture of the Lord who creates *ex nihilo* but is passible, if not finite. God has plans and desires to see things go certain ways in the world but is sometimes frustrated by how things go there. And certain of His formal features (the lack of “compatibilist” omnipotence, the lack of certainty about how things will turn out for libertarianly free creatures, etc.) provide less than maximum confidence that His good purposes will ultimately prevail, or so I argue.

The Closed theism defenders of libertarian freedom, on the other hand, have the weight of Scripture on their side with respect to an unhindered divine cognition. Though they ascribe to performed human choices an originality that more Calvinian theologians will deny, defenders of Simple Foreknowledge and Molinism believe that God’s exhaustive knowledge of even future actualities prevents those actualities from figuring as finite limits – or at least limits that would “exclude” a fully infinite Lord. In agreement with these thinkers, I believe Closed theism need not be

discarded for theological reasons. But because I believe that their “anti-Process, free will” systems fail to accommodate cogently the conception of libertarian freedom they support, I judge the “libertarianly limited infinitude” of Simple Foreknowledge and Molinism to be philosophically inadequate. In short, I believe that they both undermine divine infinity by placing objectionable limits on divine power.

Moreover, because there is no prescribed, *a priori* set of necessary and sufficient conditions for what constitutes divine infinity, I feel justified in concluding on the basis of these objections to “pro-libertarian” theologies that they fail to realize consistently the “true infinite.” On the negative side, this ought to clarify the sense in which I simultaneously differ with Clayton’s panentheistic interpretation of the claim that “an infinite God must encompass the finite world” and formally sympathize with his remark that “there is simply no place for finite things to ‘be’ outside of that which is *absolutely unlimited*.”⁴¹⁸

VI. “Reforming” the Infinite

As I have argued in the preceding chapters, the timely presence of the timeless God becomes conceptually feasible if one is willing to affirm a Calvinian decree that incorporates all entities and events. In this chapter, I have endeavored to show that the “impassible implication” of this doctrine does not warrant revising or even significantly modifying classical Christian theism. There are scripturally and conceptually defensible motivations for refusing to tinker with the timelessness

⁴¹⁸ Clayton, *God and Contemporary Science*, 99.

doctrine and the teaching that God actively governs creation in a meticulous, risk-free fashion. For my last effort along these lines, I will sketch a “classical” alternative to Philip Clayton’s metaphysical “inclusion” of the finite world within Godself. I believe that this alternative has the advantage, moreover, of helping to articulate the sense in which the impassible God exercises creative-redemptive compassion toward the world and her inhabitants.

My alternative rejects panentheism and thus requires principles of both *difference* and *unity* that compare favorably to those Clayton offers. Contrary to Clayton’s portrait, the Creator and creation are to be differentiated “dualistically” with no hint of dialectical monism. I contend that rather than setting up an insurmountable metaphysical tension, a profound God-world contrast allows for the “creation community” (both in the Old Creation and in the New Creation) to be known as an “Other” in knowing the committed embrace of the Triune God.

Consistent with this concept of a divine embracing of the Other, I again must demur from Clayton’s “panentheistic analogy” and the way that it combines God (thought of as a mind or person) and the world (thought of as God’s self-same body).⁴¹⁹ I think that Cooper is correct when he biblically takes this notion to task:

No biblical text suggests or implies that the world is part of God, either of his eternal nature or of his actual existence. It is true that Scripture, mainly the Old Testament, sometimes refers to God in bodily terms – his mouth, eyes, face, heart, breath, his right hand, and holy arm. But no such text represents the world as God’s body or any creature as a divine body part. In fact, these anthropomorphisms accentuate the otherness of God and the world by representing him as one bodily being relating to other beings, not parts of

⁴¹⁹ To begin with, I do not see how the combination of such a picture with the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* allows for God to be a “whole” personal agent without creation or imply a fundamental dualism.

himself. His mighty arm makes, upholds, governs, punishes, and saves the things he has made – artifacts other than himself. Even Scripture’s rare birth metaphors for creation imply that the offspring is distinct from its parent, not part of its body. References to God’s body metaphorically represent his powers to act in the world, not the world as his body.⁴²⁰

A model that better fits with the “intimate dualism” Cooper finds in Scripture and which at least follows the trajectory of some distinct, scriptural themes is that of the husband-wife relationship. The importance of this model consists both in the Lord’s relating to humankind by way of covenant and in the fact that humankind stands as the appointed representative of creation (first in the person of Adam, second in the person of Jesus; see Rom. 5:12-21, I Cor. 15:20-23).

That the Creator and the creation are better metaphorically depicted as a husband-wife duo than as a mind/person-body complex finds early confirmation in the covenant-establishing words spoken to Adam, importantly including the instruction that he care for the real estate entrusted to him.⁴²¹ Though on occasion Scripture speaks of Adam as being God’s “son” and humans (along with angels) as being God’s offspring (both in reference to creation and redemptive adoption), Adam is also God’s appointed “helper” (not that the Lord absolutely needs one), designated to exercise thoughtful lordship over the earth. This points out a

⁴²⁰ Cooper, “Why I Am Not a Panentheist,” in *Panentheism—The Other God of the Philosophers*, 323.

⁴²¹ The Hebrew word for ‘covenant’ is *berith*. Though the word does not appear until Genesis 6:18, the fundamental elements of a divine covenant are present in the opening chapters. As Spykman shows, these include “(a) the preamble with its prologue, introducing the Sovereign in his relationship to the second party, (b) the promises and obligations which define the community established by the covenantal pact, and (c) the blessing-and-curse formula, with its stated condition for fidelity and its stated penalty for infidelity.” See Gordon J. Spykman, *Reformational Theology: A New Paradigm for Doing Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992), 260. Also, the prophet Hosea leaves little doubt about this matter when he says in reference to Israel, “But like Adam they transgressed the covenant...they dealt faithlessly with me” (Hosea 6:7).

“husband-wife difference” between God and world that clearly does not equate to an original rift between the spouses. It is reasonable to assume that by Genesis 3:8, Adam and Eve know the sound of “the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day.” But it was only after their act of infidelity that they perceived the LORD God’s presence as a threat to their livelihood. Only then, as it were, did a fissure open up in the Creator-creation relationship. This highlights that the Creator-creation relationship is not intrinsically strained. Therefore, the disruption of Edenic tranquility, though conforming to the Trinity’s secret decree, should not otherwise be thought of as a metaphysically necessary state of affairs. Creation, in other words, does not figure as a sort of Gnostic tragedy. It is, instead, the good “wedding” of Creator and creation, a union, which Adam, in time, all but succeeded in annulling. Again, the relationship between God and humankind, being covenantal in nature, better fits with the picture of two distinct agents in relationship than it does with the picture of a single agent who relates to the parts of his or her body.

And although the covenant bond established by God pertained specifically to Adam and his posterity, it is crucial to recognize that the Adamic covenant has a cosmic aspect. Humankind (and, more particularly, Adam) represents the whole of creation and its relationship to the Lord. One could say that in Genesis the rest of creation is carried on Adam’s coattails. Following the latter’s betrayal in the garden, the Lord tells him:

Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, ‘You shall not eat of it,’ cursed is the

ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you... .⁴²²

This stymieing of earth's productivity also significantly parallels the statement to Eve that "in pain [she] shall bring forth children," suffering also from a desire (which, due to an imposed antithesis, goes unfulfilled) to dominate her husband (see Gen. 3:16).⁴²³ The compromising of the divine-human relationship thus has tangible repercussions in the creation. In fact, the Apostle Paul may be purposely blending the "curse concepts" found here in Romans 8:20-23, where he writes:

For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of child birth until now. And not only creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.⁴²⁴

Tying in with this Pauline eschatology, arguably, are concrete illustrations from within Scripture's narrative that would encourage us to think of the rectification of God's relationship with humankind (and hence with creation) along the lines of the husband-wife relationship. The story of Ruth, for instance, tells of a woman of pagan background who marries into the covenant only then to be widowed. But instead of returning to her people and life as a stranger to the covenant, she cleaves to her mother-in-law, Naomi. Eventually, she finds grace in

⁴²² Genesis 3:17, 18.

⁴²³ As support for this reading, check the parallel phrasing in 4:7, a chapter later, where the LORD urges Cain: "[I]f you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. *Its desire is for you, but you must rule over it.*". As an abstract noun, the Hebrew equivalent of 'sin' is better understood here as indicating a *threat* to Cain's position than as a sort of *affectionate longing* for him.

⁴²⁴ Romans 8:20-23.

the eyes of Naomi's near relative, Boaz, who becomes her "kinsman redeemer" and takes her as his wife.

In this connection, we turn to Jesus of Nazareth, a descendant of Ruth and Boaz through the line of David. As the Christ, Jesus takes to Himself the Church, His body. To be sure, some theologians, such as the Roman Catholic panentheist Teilhard de Chardin, have read passages referring to Christ as "the head over everything for the church, which is his body" (Eph. 1:22-23) as teaching that the world is God's body and Christ, being God, is its head.⁴²⁵ For parts of this sort of reading I find no biblical warrant, but without a doubt the New Testament does give some basis for thinking of the Church as Christ's self-same body in some sense. Particularly, one sees this in Messiah's distribution of the "one loaf" to his disciples and Paul's command to the Corinthians (in I Cor. 11:29) that they must "discern the body" when partaking of the communion meal. The "body" to be discerned in this latter text I take to be a reference to Church members that collectively constitute Christ's spiritual body.

Without competing with these references to Christ's body, however, the New Testament also features the idea that God's appointed Savior is the groom and that the Church is His bride.⁴²⁶ The implications of this reality for the Creator-creation relationship become evident when the "mystical union" that the members of Christ's bride have with Him is fused with the groom's resurrection. When it is added that Christ is the "forerunner" of the Church in His resurrection and thereby also the

⁴²⁵ See Cooper, "Teilhard de Chardin's Christocentric Panentheism," in *Panentheism – The Other God of the Philosophers*, 148-164.

⁴²⁶ II Corinthians 11:2; Revelation 21:2-3.

“first-fruits” of all creation, God’s commitment to creation as a “whole other” comes to the forefront.

Although the metaphor begins to break down when applied to the self-sufficient God and a contingent world, Paul’s teaching that spouses “have authority” over each other’s bodies can also help one to appreciate the Creator-creation distinction I am trying to depict here. Her body is his and his body is hers; their mutual “ownership” indeed presupposes that they are different. Certainly, it is proper to say that Christ, the kinsman-redeemer, owns His bride, the redeemed. But He is not, therefore, the bride Himself; nor is she “part” of His person.

Furthermore, if the parts of the cosmos are, by way of eschatological mystery, tied to Christ’s bride, the Church, then the Creator-creation *distinction* also bespeaks a *union*, which, having suffered compromise (through infidelity) gives way to a “home improvement” (through the husband’s grace). These thoughts endow references to the *sustaining* (Ps. 148:5-6) and *healing* (John 11:43-44) brought by the divine voice with an enhanced significance. At least in a “providential” sense, the parts of the cosmos are “all ears” in response to God’s voice. As would be found in any respectable marriage, the Creator and creation engage in a wholly unique “conversation.” Here, granted, it would surely profit to supplement the husband-wife model with something like the “director-choir” model. For the individual members of the choir each have their own distinctive voice, analogous to those “joyous strains” echoed back by the parts of creation in response to the Lord’s animating guidance.

Acknowledging the limitations of this husband-wife metaphor, I set forth the above thoughts in support of treating the husband-wife relationship as a prominent model for the Creator-creation relationship.⁴²⁷ Thus far I have commended the idea by focusing on *difference*, the sense in which marriage involves complementary *others*. Of course, in the nature of the case, drawing the Creator-creation distinction in terms of the marriage union concept involves making some references to “spousal togetherness.” I now wish to conclude this chapter by more deliberately drawing some connections between God and the world via the husband-wife metaphor. I want to show how the idea that the Creator and creation are “married” suggests an attractive way to think about God’s infinite encompassing of the finite world. Plainly put, I hold that the infinite God decretally includes or “covers” the finite world under His care. I believe that this view, more adequately than panentheism, refuses to compromise creation’s identity as an Other and, more adequately than competing forms of classical Christian theism, refuses to place any sort of objectionable “limit” on the divine infinitude.

Consonant with the “*B*-theoretic eternalism” defended in Chapters 4 and 5, I have held that the world considered as a “decreed whole” is timeless. Perhaps the greatest challenge posed by this idea has to do with its seeming incongruity with the belief that creation is a spatio-temporal complex – populated by various kinds and individuals – whose existence and precise details are unspecified by the divine

⁴²⁷ It cannot be strongly enough stated that should this husband-wife model, however illuminating, has its limits. Some will understandably worry about its implications in the other direction. Namely, the concern is that acceptance of this metaphor might lead to an overly patriarchal picture of marriage. I am sensitive to this concern and pay mind to it by exercising care and moderation in my use of the husband-wife model in what follows.

essence. Putting it differently, Christian theology needs to say in some substantial way that the universe maintains its ontological distinctiveness and integrity if it is to be conceived as God's "significant other." As we have seen, however, Clayton argues that a fully infinite God is one who will include the world in Godself. Contrariwise, I have claimed that an "absolutely unlimited" deity need not be construed panentheistically. How then are we to think of the infinite God's inclusion of the world, if panentheistic immanence provides unsatisfactory theological and conceptual resources for doing so? How can classical Christian theism make good on the notion of an "unlimited Infinite" upon the latter's removal from its panentheistic context? I seek to address these questions in the brief space remaining.

Essentially, I propose that within Reformed theism, reckoned as a species of classical theism, it makes sense to speak of the Infinite Trinity "including" the finite world. Instead of a literal placement of the world within God, the Infinite "includes" or comprehends the world by freely issuing a decree that actualizes all entities and events. Yet, as seen in Craig's argument discussed earlier, among the criticisms of panentheism stands the claim that the doctrine does not sufficiently guard the distinct identities of God and the world. Whether this is correct or not as a criticism of panentheism, the "Reformed inclusion" idea risks exposure to a similar criticism, namely, that by imagining that God imposes a precise plan on history Reformed theologians smother the particulars in a de-personalizing determinism. The real trick, then, is to set forth a credible "principle of inclusion," one that encompasses

creation within the divine purpose without rendering it a proverbial “divine doormat.” Toward that end, how shall we think about the infinite God’s inclusion of the finite world?

Formally, one might do well enough to speak of the Triune decree that accounts for all being and eventuation within a meticulous providence. But I believe that there is a particular feature of biblical marriage that should further help to expound upon the sense in which the Infinite embraces the finite. Specifically, assuming we acknowledge that there is at least *some* scriptural basis for thinking of the Creator and the creation as analogous to a husband and wife, I would draw attention to the biblical sense in which a husband “covers” his wife.

The “covering” motif subtly surfaces in the earlier-mentioned story of Ruth and Boaz when she requests of him: “Spread your wings over your servant, for you are a redeemer.” It also later arises in a more didactic context – I Corinthians 11 – where the Apostle recognizes an economic authority a husband has over his wife. A wife’s husband is her “head.”⁴²⁸ He thus does not shy away from instructing that in the public worship “a wife ought to have a symbol of authority on her head.”⁴²⁹ The husband, as it were, takes his wife under his wing. He covenants to provide for her well-being and security, standing as her advocate and supporter.

⁴²⁸ Incidentally, I do not take this authority of the husband over the wife to imply that he is the unqualified “head of the household.” The husband and wife each have authority, for example, over the children, as Paul instructs in Ephesians 6:1: “Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right.”² “Honor your father and mother” (this is the first commandment with a promise),³ “that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land.” However, though she has genuine authority (as elders do in the Church), and excluding cases in which her husband instructs her to commit sin, the post-lapsarian wife is commanded by Paul to relate to her husband in the same way elders do when they submit the Church (as Bride) to Christ (as Groom).

⁴²⁹ I Corinthians 11:10.

Yet, this subordination of a wife to her husband is (as already indicated in the previous page's footnotes) qualified. Rather than denoting an ontological inequality, the subordination is *functional* or *economic* in nature. For Paul goes on to write:

Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man nor man of woman; for as woman was made from man, so man is now born of woman. And all things are from God.⁴³⁰

There are surely reasons to recognize a disanalogy between God and the more generic "man" to which Paul shifts his thought here. God is not, after all, born of the cosmos. To say so would be to affirm something akin to Samuel Alexander's radically emergent panentheism, which even the panentheist Clayton refuses to do.

To the extent, however, that the analogy holds still within this context, God's "covering" of His creation should not be construed as a monolithic cancellation or neglect of the world's intricate and complicated life. Even similar to a good husband's ongoing "pursuit" of his wife when he patiently studies her many moods and proclivities, God attends to the individuals populating His world. As the Apostle also, in Ephesians 5, calls husbands to "love their wives as their own bodies," God in Christ wills to "present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing...".⁴³¹ The Triune God is a diligent husband to the Church and, by extension, the cosmos, in refusing to operate "at arm's length." Though sinners resist and protest, the Trinity upholds and embraces the world with His creational-providential voice.

⁴³⁰ I Corinthians 11:11.

⁴³¹ Ephesians 5:27.

Any sense, therefore, in which it is appropriate to say that the world is God's body will need to honor the sense in which the world comes with the Church under her husband-coverer, Christ. When this is done, one will be less likely to hit the "panentheistic default" button upon reading a text like Acts 17:28, where Paul, likely borrowing a phrase from Epimenides of Crete, tells the Athenians: "In [God] we live and move and have our being." Additionally, a reading of the immediate context in which this quotation is found certainly ought not predispose theologians against depicting the God-world relationship in predestinarian terms. For Paul leads into the above phrase with the following:

The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place...⁴³²

Whatever God's relationship to time, the allusion to God's predetermining activity shows that an important facet of the "Reformed infinite" thesis compares favorably, with respect to Scripture, to non-deterministic theologies.

Alongside the pointers to a doctrine of no-risk providence, this Apostolic sound bite more generally accentuates the otherness of God. Firstly, Paul's god is "Lord of heaven and earth," one who doesn't bow to the "manufactured immanence" of humanly devised religion, with its temples. Secondly, the deity of which Paul speaks appears refreshingly competent. The Lord is free to wield agents for His purposes but He is not "served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since

⁴³² Acts 17:24-26.

he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.” Surely, this “Lord” proclaimed by Paul before his pluralistic Athenian hearers resembles in some clear ways the self-sufficient richness and independence classically attributed to God. He gives out of His own depth, even in establishing humankind on the earth. Together, these attributes and activities – transcendence, needlessness, gracious creation, and a fairly meticulous providence – plausibly push one toward a God-concept in which the Lord is impassible.

Here, however, even more strongly, the husband-wife model seems to give way to a director-choir model. As a leader guides the singers, the Lord orchestrates the parts, even as they act individually. Especially pertinent to His impassibility, the Lord is able to direct the world precisely because He enjoys a standpoint “outside” the medley of instruments. He is not led along or directed by the voices of His underlings. Rather, He expresses Himself through their singing – through the parts and through the whole.

I suggest, therefore, that those looking for ways to model the compassionately impassible Lord alternate between these two concepts of director and husband (without forgetting an important parallel between Incarnation and Creation and the Whole-to-whole construction of the former doctrine espoused in Chapter 3). As director, the Lord makes creation the vehicle of His own self-expression. As husband, He condescends to join creation to Himself (i.e., creation “marries up”). Following the trajectory of this latter metaphor, there is a sense in which the Creator, given His faithful character, can be said to “need” the cosmos.

Even as Christ has bound Himself to “lifting up” His bride the Church, He is bound to employ the totality – heaven and earth – for that purpose. As such, the world’s presence figures as no threat to the truly infinite character of the eternal God.

CONCLUSION

The chief question motivating this dissertation is whether a timeless and impassible God could also be Immanuel. In addressing it, I have affirmed a largely unmodified “classical” understanding of Christian theism, attempting to display the sense and significance of two divine attributes that have been extensively discussed and, often, heavily criticized in recent academic literature. As a general task, I have sought to re-articulate the doctrines of timeless eternity and impassibility in a way that does justice both to a robust divine transcendence and self-sufficiency and to the notion that the strongly immutable God is pleased to attend to all of creation’s times and individuals. More particularly, I have accepted the twofold challenge of (1) thinking of the timeless God’s presence with “timely others” and (2) thinking of the impassible God as gracious in creation.

I. Summary

In the first three chapters, I examined and assessed some of the ways in which these challenges arose for Augustine, Aquinas, and Calvin (or at least arise for those studying their writings). I also explored ways in which some of the challenges have been (or might be) addressed, using theological and conceptual resources conveyed by these thinkers (and others operating within their tradition(s)). The historico-theological chapters served to claim some *prima facie* plausibility for divine timelessness and impassibility. But they also indicated some of the

conceptual difficulties that would be discussed in the later, more argumentative chapters.

The opening treatment of St. Augustine accomplished at least three things. First, I provided an historical introduction to classical eternalism, calling attention to the texture and trajectory of some of Augustine's thinking on the subject. For example, it was held that, for Augustine, the intimate acquaintance the Lord maintains with creation involves His being *present* with all of creation's times, even times that are *past* or *future* to those who are temporally located, such as humans. Second, I acknowledged that Augustine's thoughts about temporal reality do not always seem to fit neatly together while, nonetheless, seeking to provide a coherent interpretation of those thoughts and to approximate their location on the map of contemporary philosophical discussions about the nature of time. Here it was concluded that he is best thought of as holding to a *tenseless* conception of time and that some of the things he says appearing to favor a *tensed* conception are better understood as attempts to describe the human experience of change and novelty in a way consistent with the tenseless view. Third, the chapter indicated some residual Gnostic elements in Augustine's ideas about God and nature and looked to prevent – with the help of St. Basil and Irenaeus of Lyons – this intellectual debris from proving a stumbling block to an unhindered divine presence with creation's places and times.

Having reckoned, to some extent, with what it means to say that the Lord fashions and governs time *with* creation, I examined in Chapter 2 the concepts of

strong divine immutability and a contingently existing creation taught in Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae*. I argued that Thomas's theology, while commendably wrestling with problems related to permanence and change in classical theism, suffers from a programmatic deficiency. In sum, Thomas fails to reserve "space" in God sufficient to account for both His supposed inability to change and His non-temporal acquisition of secondary or contingent predicates (e.g. "Creator," "Judge," and "Savior"). This coupling of what appear to be incompatible ideas doubtless qualifies as a candidate for the most vexing issue associated with the timeless Creator. With Thomas Weinandy, however, I do not treat it as a "problem" to be "solved" in order to make an unmodified classical theism palatable; nor do I see it as a reason to modify (or revise) classical theism. To take either route, it seems to me, would be tantamount to requiring explanations in which all shades of mystery or paradox have been expunged as a prerequisite to assenting to doctrines such as the Trinity or the Incarnation. I demur from a rationalism of this kind. Nonetheless, I do end the chapter by looking to the community of the Persons (Others) in the Triune Godhead to estimate the difference between the self-sufficient God-without-us (i.e., *sans* creation) and the self-sufficient God-with-us. The Trinitarian Persons enjoy an eminently fulfilling life of infinite glory together, a life that is consistent with gratuitous Triune action and the existence of others. At the least, I do not believe that the critics of the strongly immutable God have shown this proposition to be false.

On a not entirely different note, it is fairly common to highlight a non-speculative streak running through Pastor John Calvin's many tomes of Christian instruction and biblical exposition. And this theme was certainly not neglected or denied in Chapter 3. One would err, however, in placing an absolute watershed between the more warm-blooded, humanistic style of the *Institutes* and a "theology from above" commonly associated with medieval scholastic theologians. Recent studies show that Calvin was not unqualifiedly averse to (at least what would now be recognized as) certain mild speculations reminiscent of the "scholasticisms" that came both before and after him. As evidence of this, Geneva's resident scholar transmitted to his far-flung students an unaltered, "classically transcendent" deity – including the idea that "we must not seek...a before or an after" in God's life.

In light of this, much of the Chapter 3 focused on the *distinction* between God's incomprehensible, eternal essence, which is hidden, and God's nature, which is revealed, and on the important *compatibility* of and *connection* between the former ("depth") and the latter ("activity"). On this point, especially indicative of his adherence to a *bona fide* distinction between the immanent and the economic Trinity is Calvin's espousal of what has been gratuitously termed the *extra Calvinisticum*, the idea (not invented by Calvin, to be sure) that the Trinity's Second Person assumes a human nature without off-loading divine properties, such as omnipresence, that are un-attributable to Christ's human nature. Later in the chapter, based on both the premise that Calvin promotes a Whole-to-whole (not a Part-to-part) Christology as well as on a noteworthy parallel between Incarnation

and Creation, I suggested that this “duality of wholes” united in Christ’s Person can function as a helpful model for thinking of how the Triune God, without ontological confusion, takes to Himself a world. I then transitioned to the dissertation’s second half by raising specific questions about the nature of time if creation is thought of as a “whole” and how the Lord might acquaint Himself with the *parts* of that whole.

As with the first three chapters, the latter three operated on the twofold assumption that the ideas that God is timelessly eternal and that timeless eternity is best understood as *duration-less* are neither proven nor refuted by Christian Scripture. If this is accurate, then there appears to be no reason to exclude philosophical debates, say, over the nature of time from influencing one’s God concept. That is, there is at least some space available for a field such as philosophical theology.⁴³³ From that starting point, I worked in Chapter 4 to show that not only is the timeless God best paired with a *tenseless* (or *B-theoretic*) conception of time but also that this latter conception should be favored over its *tensed* (or *A-theoretic*) competitors based on its own merits.

My case in favor of a *B-theoretic* conception of time mainly aimed to expose some of the weaknesses of various *A-theoretic* (a.k.a. “dynamic”) alternatives. For openers, I considered J.M.E. McTaggart’s well-known “paradox,” in which he

⁴³³ As noted in the Introduction, however, this fact does not imply that theological propositions supported by philosophical arguments ought to occupy positions at the central core of Christian belief. For instance, whereas the doctrine that God is eternal should have a place at the core of Christian commitment, differences over the sense of “divine eternity” that cannot be scripturally resolved (granted, there is not always agreement about what can and cannot be scripturally resolved) should occupy a more peripheral, non-essential place in Christian commitment. Neither does this amount to deeming some propositions “important” and others “unimportant.” Rather, I propose a gradational approach that moves between “more important” and “less important” or “more determinative” and “less determinative” propositions and policies.

concludes that the attribution of incompatible temporal properties (“is past,” “is present,” “is future”) to all events or moments implies that there can be no change. Defenders of this classic “temporal properties A-theory” have held that the incompatible properties belong to temporal items at *different times*, thus avoiding logical contradiction. I am more convinced, however, by McTaggart, who argues that to depict change within what he calls the A series one must attribute incompatible properties to a particular temporal position (without specifying different times of attribution, as the defenders of a McTaggartian A series have done). But this attribution of “is past,” “is present,” and “is future” (not to mention the more complex tenses discussed by D.H. Mellor) to a temporal position itself implies that there can be no change because no position would ever shed a property or acquire a new one. Thus, because he maintains that a true temporal series must include the A series – a series comprising temporal properties and a metaphysically privileged present – and believes that the A series suffers from insurmountable dialectical tensions, McTaggart concludes that time does not exist.

But it should come as no surprise that even when philosophers have found this argument (against the existence of a McTaggartian A series) cogent or fairly convincing, many have failed to see it as a reason to deny the reality of time or as a reason to think that what McTaggart calls the B series (in which items are either earlier than, later than, or simultaneous with each other) is sufficient to constitute a *temporal* series. Rather, they have often seen it as a reason to account for “temporal becoming” without resorting to temporal properties. Two attempts to give such an

account – the Growing Block Theory and Presentism – received attention in Chapter 4.

The Growing Block Theory (GBT), on one hand, offers the advantage (over Presentism) of more easily accounting for the truth of past tense statements. Yet, I concluded that the GBT (at least as presented by Michael Tooley) undermines our knowledge that we are in the present by (1) affirming, contrary to the *B*-theory, that there is an official, dynamic present and (2) asserting the actuality of the past. Presentism, on the other hand, if its advocates can overcome Ulrich Meyer’s charge that they assert, at best, a nugatory thesis (“Nothing exists that is not present.”), appears ill-equipped to account for the temporal relations (*before*, *after*, *simultaneous with*) that are said to be parasitic upon “temporal becoming” and for the determinate truth-value of non-present-tense statements. In short, both alternatives to McTaggart’s *A* series seem to come up short in trying to account “dynamically” for change or temporal direction.

From there, I briefly defended against the claim that traditional tenseless theories fail to provide a compelling account of the human experience of change. As L. Nathan Oaklander has persuasively argued, in setting forth what he calls the “New Tenseless Theory of Time,” one can admit that human temporal experience is intrinsically tensed without presupposing or inferring that there exist “tensed facts” that correspond to and account for that experience. Convinced of this thesis, I pointed toward phenomenological accounts of temporal experience that make reference to temporal, causal, and psychological asymmetries, as opposed to

accounts that insist on resorting to temporal properties, tensed facts, or a moving NOW, in order to explain metaphysically our temporal experience.

Having made what I think is a fairly compelling case against varieties of the *A*-theory and promoted a *B*-theoretic phenomenology of time, I raised a conundrum at the end of Chapter 4 for those, such as myself, who pair timeless eternity with tenseless time. Namely, tenseless theories deny a metaphysically privileged or “official” present, allowing for no “temporal localization” of the supposedly omnipresent and immanent Lord who would dwell with and attend to the parts of creation. Unconvinced that this fact defeats tenseless time and, perhaps with it, the claim that timelessness is a non-contingent, modal attribute of God, I asked whether or in what sense the duration-less God can be deemed present with times and temporal agents (i.e., creatures).

In Chapter 5, I contended that if the Lord governs from a spaceless, timeless standpoint, then the presence of the timeless Trinity ought to be thought of as a presence-in-absence. Indeed, it stands to reason that any version of Christian theism (and maybe any version of theism, period) will require the concept of presence-in-absence, given that, plausibly, God’s nature would preclude God from, say, being present (with something or someone) in all the ways in which created agents can be present with others. I then proceeded to argue that the timeless God’s “present problem” finds a resolution in theologies featuring a risk-free providence. More narrowly, I specified that the problem is most cogently resolved in terms of the

Reformed doctrine of a singular divine decree that strongly actualizes all non-divine entities and events.

But how does this “Calvinian compatibilism” resolution not place creatures under a manipulative overlord or undermine the believer’s sense that God responds to her (and, more generally, the world’s) needs, both great and small? In Chapter 6, I set out to show that, although in *some* ways a timeless, impassible deity cannot be properly construed as one who chooses to respond to creaturely actions and situations, this does not imply that there are *no* ways in which He may be so construed. In the chapter’s latter half, I then ventured beyond “detail skirmishes” within the field of classical theism and engaged critically with the panentheistic program of Philip Clayton. Proposing a “classical” alternative to Claytonian panentheism’s overly literal inclusion of the world in God’s being, I tried to elucidate a sense in which the timeless, impassible God of Reformed theology, as Husband-Director, sovereignly engages the world in a *sui generis* conversation. The world features an endless display of variety, complexity, vitality and motion, but its Creative Lord does not thereby suffer any other-imposed (i.e., creature-imposed) limits on His infinite life.

II. Commending the Thesis

In this dissertation, I have joined or sparked discussions in a handful of academic fields or sub-fields. For exegetical starters, Chapters 1 through 3 featured sustained examinations and interpretations of religious texts produced by diverse

writers living in diverse eras – the fourth-century Bishop of Hippo, the thirteenth-century Dominican monk, and the sixteenth-century Genevan reformer. In Chapter 4, I took a definite position within contemporary philosophical disputes about the nature of temporal reality, forming a cumulative case against a tensed or *A*-theoretic view of time and in favor of a tenseless or *B*-theoretic view. Finally, in Chapters 5 and 6 I critically engaged live issues within the domains of philosophical theology and philosophy of religion, again, staking out definite, and sometimes quite controversial, positions and reasoning on their behalf. This combination of breadth and depth alone tends to highlight the present work as a multi-textured contribution within the areas of philosophy of religion and theology.

More than merely demonstrating scholarship in these ways, however, I have thought through in a thorough manner what may or may not be involved in saying that the Triune God is exalted over time and suffering. In so doing, I think that I have respectably re-articulated the idea that the Lord is timeless and impassible. More particularly, on multiple levels and from different directions, I have especially sought to (1) think of the timeless God's presence with "timely others" and (2) think of the impassible God as gracious in creation. With all that said, of course, readers are left to judge regarding the extent to which this twofold challenge was successfully met, regarding the viability of propositions affirmed along the way, and regarding the cogency of the reasoning found throughout the work.

Methodologically, in addition to taking an interdisciplinary approach, I have tried to straddle the line between rationalism and dialecticism. On one hand, I do

not see the presence of just any apparent contradiction or hint of paradox as a reason to abandon the theological ship one has boarded or tinker with its fundamental architecture. To appreciate this, consider the tenacity it requires to admit that divine timelessness is at odds with tensed time's official present, to study and expound arguments for tenseless time, to concede that this seems to create a problem for God's presence in time, and then to propose Calvinian compatibilism – a set of doctrines thought by many to be highly distasteful – as a way of understanding in what sense the Trinity can be absent from and yet present with all of creation's temporal parts. On the other hand, neither do I wish to give aid and comfort to dialectical tensions that it might be possible to temper, if not eliminate, by constructing doctrine(s) in a different way. Illustrative of this proclivity for logical consistency is my dissatisfaction with Aquinas's construal of divine immutability in a way that identifies God's essence and existence. Although it might be possible to square such an identity relation with God's possession of non-essential (or contingent) predicates, I do not see how this can be done. Hence, I see reasons to think that conceptual or metaphysical "space" is to be reserved in the Trinity for the non-temporal assumption of contingent predicates, even if the price is at least *some* agnosticism about *how* this is done. If one is able to countenance the mystery of three Persons constituting one God at the core of Christian theological commitment, then I do not see why one should not be able to countenance a timeless creation slightly removed from that core.

More substantially, I believe that I have, in what precedes, given those who are skeptical about whether the timeless, impassible Lord could also be Immanuel reason for pause. Firstly, in the opening chapters I have, in some detail, presented the timeless, impassible Creator of classical theism and, especially in the first two chapters, exposed what I believe are weaknesses in some of the doctrine's historic formulations. For the most part, this has meant uncovering some negative consequences of Neo-Platonism's influence on classical constructions. In the case of Augustine, Neo-Platonism can be found projecting a "heavenly hierarchy," the higher parts of which effectively figure as *ramparts*, depriving Creator and creation of an intimate interface. In the case of Aquinas, I have found that Neo-Platonism's idea of an emergence of the many from the One either prevents the unchangeable God from creating a world or implies the non-contingency of the world, either way failing to distinguish properly (I contend) Creator from creation in order then positively to relate them. To those who would shore up these various weaknesses, I have commended the creation theology of St. Basil, some incarnational and eschatological insights of Irenaeus, and the work of John Calvin in all of these areas, coupled with a focus on the latter's impact on developments in Trinitarian theology, his concentration on Christ as mediator, and the importance he places on the Godhead's secret decree for creation and providence.

Secondly, being convinced that classical eternalism is best conceived as non-durational in character and best paired with a tenseless conception of time, I have tried to show that a theist could be legitimately motivated to affirm timeless eternity

based strictly on considerations within the philosophy of time. There are numerous conceptual difficulties and critical questions plaguing *A*-theoretic alternatives to a tenseless or *B*-theoretic temporal series. Minimally, I believe that the problems raised against tensed or dynamic accounts in Chapter 4 are significant enough to prevent considerations within the philosophy of time from blocking the route to timeless divinity, at least as much as the supposed virtues of such accounts might incline someone to look for an alternative characterization of the divine eternal nature.

Thirdly, I have acknowledged that *B*-theoretic eternalism leaves no temporal “openings” in which the Lord may operate. In looking to deal with this conundrum, I maintained that even a temporal God would be absent from creation in some ways if one accepts the assumption that God is not creation or a part of it. I then proceeded to argue that the timeless God could guarantee His presence with events and temporal agents by strongly actualizing all the details of history.

Fourthly, I have further acknowledged that a deity who strongly actualizes history, not to mention one who is strongly immutable, is one who is impassible. His life is not causally directed by finite (i.e., creaturely) miscellany. But this idea even more so invites the criticism that an impassible Lord is not personally involved in the details of creation or fit to act as a responsive provider, providentially or redemptively. In response to such objections, I admitted that the atemporal God is not, as such, a temporal agent and so cannot respond *in time*. But I also insisted that because He governs the creation the Lord is able to orchestrate “responses” to X

without having to wait for X. Lastly, between the Calvin chapter and the final chapter on impassibility, I opposed the *separation* of God and creation (as seen in Nestorian Christologies) as well as a sort of *fusion* of God and creation as appears to be done in Claytonian panentheism. I have chosen not to dissolve the union of the Triune Creator and the world, nor to model their union on a monistic philosophical anthropology. Instead, I have suggested that the God-world relationship would be better pictured if alternatively modeled on (1) an Incarnation doctrine that carefully distinguishes (without separating) Christ's two natures, (2) the husband-wife relationship (insofar as scriptural language and exemplars warrant and permit), and (3) the animated, conversational interface enjoyed by a Director and His Choir.

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