
THE EVERLASTING GOD

MARK T. COPPENGER

Mark T. Coppenger is the Professor of Christian Philosophy and Ethics at
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky.

I had not given the subject of time much thought until, as a fairly new professor at Wheaton, I picked up a 1975 Eerdmans *Festschrift* for a long-time Calvin professor — *God and the Good: Essays in Honor of Henry Stob*. One of the chapters was “God Everlasting” by Nicholas Wolterstorff, a piece that has been anthologized frequently in the philosophy of religion. Therein, he argued it was unnecessary and puzzling to say God existed outside of time, and that he was “atemporal.” Besides, the Bible did not require or even suggest that we must talk this way.

I was fresh from a doctoral program where I was most impressed with the empiricist and pragmatist philosophers, and impatient with the way in which metaphysicians spun all sorts of fantastical schemes from their dubious presuppositions and postulates, generating systems of thought which were untestable and unaccountable to common sense. Their schemes, floating in air, if you will, were, to use a technical expression, “very cool,” but it was not clear how you might adjudicate among them, for each had its own internal logic and conceptual splendor. And though we did not have the notion of “post-modernism” at hand in that day, these metaphysicians, with their rival, unverifiable conceits, were setting us up for the day when we would throw up our hands and deny that there could be any valid metanarrative. You had your truth, I had mine. This worked for you, and that for me. Of course, the metaphysicians did not mean it that way, for each was sure that his overarching account was correct. But the futility of validating one as over against the other tended to give metanarratives a bad odor.

My first-semester course in German Idealism at Vanderbilt showed me how much fun the spawning of rival systems could be, but how hopeless it could be to declare one the winner. We began with Kant, who argued for a “Copernican Revolution” against the empiricists, such as Locke, Berkeley, and Hume. These were the Brits who more or less bought into the notion that the mind was, at first, a passive receptor of sense impressions (a *tabula rasa*, or “blank slate,” to used Locke’s terms), and that it then had the task of sorting what it had received into a workable system of thought. Kant tried to blow up this thinking, saying the mind was comprehensively aggressive in pre-sorting whatever was out there, so once it reached our consciousness, it was bundled into discrete, countable entities, embedded in causal series, located in space, varying in magnitudes, and so on. He gave us a double-decker world, with readily grasped *phenomena* at hand, backed up by more-or-less inscrutable *noumena*, realities as they really were.

Once, Kant gave the mind such organizing power, the Germans were off to the races. Fichte argued that it was his mind rather than each and every other mind that ran things—a kind of solipsism (though he did wax eloquent over the splendor of the German *people*). The professor (an energetic, demonstrative, Hungarian refugee who repeatedly won the Chancellor’s Cup for excellence in teaching) gave us a particularly dramatic lecture on Fichte’s *The Science of Knowledge (Wissenschaftslehre)*, one in which he stacked up an imaginary wall of blocks, only to knock it down with relish (something we kids used to do in the church nursery, as I recall). The point was that the mind constructed a challenging world for itself, one in which it could grow by overcoming self-imposed difficulties.

And then came Hegel, who said that, no, it was not our minds or my mind in charge, but The Mind, the *Weltgeist*, the Absolute Spirit, which ran the whole show. History itself was its “thinking” as worked through developmental challenges (“antitheses”), whose conflict with current notions and events (“theses”) generated brand new things (“syntheses”), which, in turn, became theses, against which rose antitheses, and so on.

Other Germans riffed on this theme of the marching, powerful mind. (You can almost hear the rhythmic tramp of Reich battalion boots, accompanied by *Deutschland, Deutschland, über Alles.*) Marx (along with Engels and Lenin) espoused a “dialectical materialism” (a dialogue of matter) to supplant Hegel’s “dialectical idealism” (a conversation of concepts), thus

giving us the naturalistic base for Communistic atheism. Schopenhauer, in *The World as Will and Representation* (*Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*) got depressed over the pervasive grind of willful struggle that is human living, and he waxed rhapsodic over the arts, which he called a sort of Sabbath, a place of relief from the dog-eat-dog workings of our circumstances and natures. (Ricky Stark recently received his Ph.D. from The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary after defending a dissertation on the similarities and dissimilarities between the Lord's Day and Schopenhauer's Sabbath.) Not surprisingly, Schopenhauer was taken with Eastern thought, since Buddhism advanced a regimen of deliverance from the strivings and worries of desire.

Nietzsche followed with his *Will to Power* (*Der Wille zur Macht*) and "Superman" (*Übermensch*), who should lord it over the wimpy Judeo-Christians, who had replaced original, intimidating nobility with pathetic values such as "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, and self-control," the only personality features that losers could manage. And, this sort of thinking trickled down to France, where existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre said that we create our own values. (Our "existence precedes our essence," so that we are not at all answerable to such silly things as pre-existing human nature or universal ethical norms.) On and on it went in this triumphal mode, thanks, in large measure to Kant's anointing of the mind as the world-shaper.

By the turn of the 20th century, a Germanic idealism had made its way into the British heartland of empiricism, thanks to F.H. Bradley, who was quite the rage in his day. Indeed, the English were capable of spinning out their own metaphysical tales, as in the case of Alfred North Whitehead (later of Harvard), whose "Process Philosophy" gave us the neologisms *appetition, concrescence, comformal, formaliter, ingression, prehension, regnant society, and superject*.

But then came the revolt in both the UK and America (with some major help from Vienna). A group calling themselves "logical positivists" insisted that enough was enough, and hereafter, the only legitimate propositions were those which entailed scientifically-testable results. No more of these gaseous speculations which could neither be confirmed nor disconfirmed. And in the U.S., men like Charles S. Peirce and William James said you had to be able to find "cash value" in a claim—cash in terms of actionable intelligence and real-live eventualities—for it to be meaningful. While A.J. Ayer said a proposition should be "verifiable," Karl Popper said it should be "falsifiable,"

but they agreed on the need for testability. So you can have your fun with Fichte, Hegel, and Schopenhauer all you want, but your ratiocinations and fulminations come to naught in the light of a cognitively-responsible day.

Unfortunately, the positivists cleared out more than the weeds of groundless speculation. They also wiped out ethics, aesthetics, and religion, saying these matters came to no more than personal emoting, just a matter of booing or cheering. But, to the contrary, most people understood that “God exists” and “Slaughtering and eating babies is wrong” and “Rembrandt is a better artist than my grandchild, whose work I put on my refrigerator door” are more than mere subjectivities, relativities, and proclivities. Indeed, it became clear to most that the pendulum had swung too far back in the other direction, the direction in which Hume took empiricism when he discounted religion, undermined causality, and deconstructed the notion of the human soul. A sign of this discontent was the establishment of *The Review of Metaphysics* in 1947, edited by Jewish philosopher Paul Weiss and sponsored primarily by The Catholic University of America.

Observing this back-and-forth through the years, I have turned to the biblical image of Jacob’s Ladder, upon which the angels were descending to earth and ascending to heaven (Gen 28:10-19). In my estimation, the German metaphysicians were comfortable at the top of the ladder, offering a “God’s eye” view of the universe (albeit a false one), but they were not at all adept at producing testable entailments that might show their theories to be either sound or bogus. (The same goes for the pantheistic, Amsterdam Jewish philosopher, Spinoza, but that is another story.) On the other end of the ladder, the positivists were good at earthly tests (e.g., water boiling at 100 degrees centigrade; the economic impact of mercantilism; the psychological effects of opioids), but they were indifferent, indeed, contemptuous, toward the important things going on at the top of the ladder e.g., intelligent design in the universe.

This is not to say that all the empiricists were stuck at the bottom end. John Locke and George Berkeley were confessing and argumentative believers, as was twentieth century Anglican bishop, Ian Ramsey, who rebuked the positivists with the simple observation that “God exists” is indeed testable—at least eschatologically—for it is logically possible that one day (when “every knee shall bow and every tongue confess”) that even A.J. Ayer would have to admit that Yahweh is real.

Unfortunately, self-professed Christians sometimes cling to the upper levels with little regard for the lower rungs. George Berkeley called out the Roman Catholics for this very thing when he dismissed “transubstantiation,” wherein the elements of the mass supposedly become the body of Christ. While the wine continues to look, smell, taste, feel, and sound like wine throughout the observance, it actually flips from wine substance to blood-of-Christ substance, or so the story goes. Berkeley, a good Protestant bishop, asked, rhetorically, what sort of thing substance might be. Could they describe it? Could they cash it in experientially? His answer was no, and thus he declared the sacrament delusional, literally nonsense.

Locke made a similar move when, in *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, he picked up on the free-will dispute. He said he understood what will was, for he was familiar with exercising it regularly, as in choosing to pick up a pen and then doing so, with accompanying decisional and kinesthetic experiences. But what, he asked, was the extra experience that signaled that this was a “free” act? Was this to distinguish it from an unconscious act, like sleep walking, or an involuntary act, like plunging into a ravine when a foot-bridge collapses, or maybe a non-human eventuation, like the rusting of an iron gate? Well, yes, certainly. But beyond this, what sense could be attached to the question of whether taking up the pen was free? He concluded it was an empty question since the term ‘free’ was undefined. And thus he helped open the door to the widely-accepted notion of compatibilism (popular with many Christians), whereby the sovereignty of God coheres with human freedom: We are free in that we do what we want to do, but we are not free in the sense that we do not choose our wantings. The latter are a function of our nature, whether in bondage to sin or born again, a new creation, indwelt by the Holy Spirit—all a matter of God’s pleasure.

Which brings us to our original conundrum: Is God atemporal or “merely” everlasting? What in the world would it mean for one to be “inside” or “outside” of time? What, exactly, is time?

I am perfectly aware that it is piously fashionable to say God is not in time. Indeed, I work with a website whose video series about the biblical story begins with the words, “Before there was space, before there was time, there was God.” But following Wolterstorff (and, in his way, Swinburne), I am not there yet. For one thing, I cannot see that the Bible demands it (or allows it, for that matter). Some point to Genesis 1:1 to suggest God existed

before the beginning (of time), but the beginning of earthly time does not rule out previous activity on God's part, activity that took time. They also might point to the ESV translation of Jude 25: "to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen." But the NIV sticks closer to the Greek with "before all ages," and, indeed, the ESV offers the footnote, "or before any age." For one thing, the word in question is *aionon*, not *chronos*. And, of course, Jesus existed before historical ages (whether Bronze, Middle, and Machine).

Besides, the Bible is full of accounts of God doing things, actions spread out through time. Over the centuries, he has brought down some rulers and exalted others (Luke 1:52); prompted Balaam's donkey to rebuke the prophet on his back (Num 22:21-23); sent a great fish to swallow the fleeing, disobedient Jonah (Jonah 1:17); providentially gobsmacked Saul on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:3-6), and thousands of other things reported in the Bible. Each involved a before, during, and after, to which God was a party.

So what might time be? I think Aristotle was in the ball park when, in *Physics* (Book IV, 11), he tied it to movement and succession. It is a matter of change, of one state of affairs' giving way to another. And it is not just physically external, as in the rotation or circumnavigation of planets, for it can be extended to thought, as when one idea succeeds another. And these successions are not *in* some sort of atmosphere or solution or locale we might call time; rather, they constitute time itself. So, on this understanding, there was no such thing as "before time" as long as the Trinitarian God was doing something, whether thinking or otherwise acting, including deeds of loving fellowship among the persons of the Trinity.

Recall, if you will, the story of *Sleeping Beauty*, where a spell is cast upon the whole kingdom so that everyone falls asleep and stays that way until she awakens. Extend that big freeze to not only their bodies, but to their dreams, the growth of vegetation, the scurrying of insects and other animals, sunrise and sunset. Everything. And imagine there is no supernatural observer, conflagration on the sun, race of asteroids, incidents of aging. No change in composition or place anywhere. Then, all of a sudden, it all cranks up again. People are talking. The moon is running through its cycles. The crickets are chirping. So then the question arises: How long was everything stopped? The answer is that the question makes no sense. For it is only with

reference to something moving, e.g., the sweep of a second hand, a shift in mood, radioactive decay, that we can speak meaningfully of the passage of time. A river needs a bank to be a river, or perhaps it is better to say a riverbank needs a river to be a riverbank. But, of course, there has been no such time stoppage, for God has always been doing things, “from everlasting to everlasting” (Psalm 90:2).

But I can hear the philosophers asking, rhetorically, “How can you say there was a succession of thoughts and actions in the Godhead when ratiocination and rumination require some sort of lack, a chain of reasoning as yet incomplete, a goal not yet achieved?” Surely God does not have to sort things out. He knows immediately. And if you are suggesting that in the Trinity’s internal love relationship, there were needs to be fulfilled, instances of deprivation needing amelioration, then you slight either God the Father, God the Son, or God the Holy Spirit, or any combination thereof.

In this connection, I am reminded of a question a trustee asked me when I was interviewing for a position at Midwestern Seminary. He wondered if I believed God was impassible, untouched by and incapable of emotion. After all, since he was not subject to surprises, disappointment, dread, bio-rhythms, and such, he could not be subject to the roller-coaster of mood swings that we humans suffer. He must surely sail serenely above the tumult.

Okay, I see the argument, but, as I told him/them, I was first of all a biblicalist, and whatever philosophical march I chose to follow, I must answer to the drumbeat of the text. And it seemed clear to me that the text said God was capable of emotion, as when his *wrath* toward sin was appeased by Christ on the cross (propitiation), when the Holy Spirit was *grieved*, and when he was *pleased* with righteous worship.

When I read in Genesis 1:26 that he/they said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness . . .” it seems to me to say, on the face of it, the Trinity came to the point of initiating our species, and they did not have to go slumming into some temporary Timeland, situated after “Before There Was Time” and before “Time Will Be No More” in order to implement this choice. No, it is perfectly reasonable to say God set his mind upon making us prior to the first day of creation. And the initiating act of the whole earthly shebang followed an eternity of Trinitarian activity, an endless succession of godly initiatives and responses, characteristic of a loving relationship within the Trinity, so often stipulated in Christian meta-ethics as the source and

template for our own congregational mutuality. And where there is succession of thought and deed, whether earthly or pre-earthly, there is time.

As I read it, the Kalam version of the cosmological argument claims there cannot be an infinite number of prior events culminating in the current moment, for it is impossible to traverse an infinity, so we would have never arrived at the present. Therefore, there had to be a beginning in time. Therefore, we had to have an initiator of time, viz. God. The problem is, we do, in fact, have an infinity of preceding events, namely the pre-Creation activities of an eternal God. And I am disinclined to say we have a firm enough grasp on infinity-theory to insist otherwise.

Of course, I understand why one might want to say that God is outside time. For one thing, the *pre* in *predestination* is less troublesome. An atemporal God would not really lock in your choices before you made them since he does not work in the realm of before and after. Also, time seems to be a form of bondage, and we do not want God to suffer restraints, he being omnipotent. But just because I grasp the motives, it does not follow that I have to accept the conclusions. For instance, I understand the impetus for practicing infant baptism. The child is not able to choose Christ on his own, so you want to give him some sort of coverage in case he dies before he can muster a decision. In this vein, the Roman Catholics invented Limbo to give unbaptized babies who die in infancy a better fate than Purgatory or Hell. Similarly, the Presbyterians drew on Old Testament circumcision to analogize the family-of-God advantages that came from the sprinkling of water. But I cannot see good intentions and earnest aspirations suffice. The Bible just will not support the conceit of *paedobaptism*. (And, I would argue, great harm has ensued since there are millions of church attendees who assume, incorrectly, that something of spiritual significance happened to them because of a hold-over ceremony from pre-Reformation days—a case where the theological apple did not roll far enough from the tree).

But what about God's ability (or inability) to see the future? If time is a succession of events and some events have not yet happened, then what is there to see? But does not the Bible say he looks into the future, as in Romans 8:29-30?

For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren.

Moreover whom he did predestinate, them he also called: and whom he called, them he also justified: and whom he justified, them he also glorified.

How can you foreknow something that does not exist? Would it not be more sensible to appropriate Boethius's image of God gazing down upon the road of time from a hilltop outside of time, whereby, to one side, he looks directly at 1517, and then, to the other side, he looks directly at 1994, without being temporally tainted by either? But I have two big problems with that. First, the biblical passage does not make good sense if we read it in a libertarian fashion, where God is able to see what choice this or that person will make and then act accordingly, bringing blessings to bear on those whom he sees will choose him. If that is the reading, why would he have to do any predestinating at all? He sees that the fellow has picked up on salvation, so he can just say Amen! and wait for the happy eventuality.

Would not I think it would be better to read it, "For whom he did set his mind upon, he also did predestinate . . ."? His sovereign choice results in the good things that follow—predestination, calling, justification, and glorification. So how might he know the deliverances of the future? He knows since he is Lord of all that happens, and the future will unfold exactly as he pleases and insures by whatever means he chooses.

I have another problem with the hilltop analogy. I cannot imagine what it would be like to experience all of history simultaneously. It cannot just be a matter of God's sitting in a studio with a massive bank of TV screens, one showing Noah at work on the ark, another what is going on in the Final Four in Phoenix, and yet another covering what President Trump's press secretary is saying in a briefing three months from now. No, to make this work, you need to have a separate screen for each one thousandth of an inch (for starters) of the trajectory of each shot taken in each game, etc. And, on this model, God would not be able to scan the bank of screens to get a summary of the sequence or a composite, for that would take time, which, so the story goes, God does not do. You would get some sort of Edward Muybridge freeze-frame chronicle of the instants of a horse in motion. But that would not be to see the event, but rather a dissection of it, where the living action is cut up and pinned down on a tar-filled tray. Or, to put it otherwise, it would be like listening to Ravel's *Bolero* instantaneously, with its tens of thousands of notes, all up and down and across the score, each assigned to a particular

instrumentalist to play and hold. You would have white noise, not melody; chaos, not symphony. It would make more sense to say God observed the collapse of Jericho's walls in "real time," and that he was not simultaneously viewing Luther's defense of himself at Worms. That would come later. Would that really do theological damage?

But wait, what about the bondage of time? Surely you would not want to put God in such a straitjacket, whereby he is limited by time, unable to travel and act freely outside the limits of temporality? But what sort of limit would that be? Certainly, it makes sense to speak of our time limitations. We work with time constraints, with a writing assignment due Tuesday. We miss our plane because we did not leave the house soon enough. We want to get a project completed, but we worry that in our 91st year, we will not be around to see it through. But none of that is a problem for God. He does whatever he pleases, within the bounds of logic. (He cannot make a square simultaneously a circle or preserve the bachelorhood of a married man. Those are simply contradictions, another kind of nonsense.)

But am I saying he cannot return to the day of Moses on Sinai? Well, yes, of course. The past has passed. But, if he so pleased, he could instantly recreate the scene, replete with drowned Egyptians in the rear, deluded Golden Calfers in the flatlands, and a Moses up the hill, with a mind as yet unaware of what would be inscribed on the tablets. But that would be the work of replication in the present. I cannot imagine why the Lord would want to do that, but he could without a hitch. So again, where is the bondage?

Ah, but what about the different time frames mentioned in 2 Peter 3:8, where we read that, "With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day" (NIV). Well, a couple of things come to mind. First, God is not a clock watcher, anxious as the hours tick away. He does not see his opportunities or energy or prospects slipping away as the shadows lengthen. So he can relax and take the long view, where we operate in an antsy frame of mind. Second, we are all familiar with phenomenological time, where a thirty minute sermon can seem to take an hour, and a two-hour sermon can seem to run forty-five minutes. And judging from my experience in a batting cage, the same seventy-five mile per hour pitch that seems like a blur to me would have seemed languorous to Ted Williams, who could read the rotation of the stitching as it made its way to the plate.

But you see, Coppenger, you are ignoring anthropomorphisms and insisting that God fit into your experiential straightjacket. Your empiricism is legislative and parochial.

No, it is confessional. I just do not know what you are talking about when you say God is “outside of time.” When I say it is nonsense, I am not doing so contemptuously, as I would be if you told me Billy Graham was a closet atheist. Not at all. I am simply pleading, “Please do not push me in this direction. It makes no sense to me.” And, besides, I do not see that the Bible asks me to head that way at all.

The other evening at the Schermerhorn Symphony Center in Nashville (there for an evening of Debussy and Ravel), I saw a poster on sale in the gift shop, one published for the January 2011 reopening after the hall after the damage from the 2010 flood had been repaired. It featured a quote from the composer, Aaron Copland, one that read, “To stop the flow of music would be like the stopping of time itself, incredible and inconceivable.” I would amend it to say, “To stop the flow of absolutely everything would be like the stopping of time itself, incredible and inconceivable,” and that has never happened. For the Trinity has been doing things forever.

Look, there is so much more to say. So many interlocutors to engage, whether McTaggart, Einstein, Stump, Craig, or Helm. But time is up, and I hope that I have at least shown where I am coming from in this conversation, with a measure of warrant.