

# DIVINE TEMPORALITY AND CREATION *EX NIHILLO*

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In his paper "Hartshorne and Aquinas: A Via Media," William P. Alston argues that one who rejects the doctrine of divine timelessness should also reject the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* and hold that the world and God are 'equally basic metaphysically.' At the heart of Alston's argument is the claim that a temporally everlasting deity would be irrational in creating at any given moment since there could never be a sufficient reason for creating then. In "Divine Temporality and Creation *Ex Nihilo*," I argue that Alston's argument is not compelling, and that the defender of divine temporality can plausibly maintain that God can rationally create at a time even if He lacks a sufficient reason for acting at that moment.

## *Introduction*

In an essay in his recently published book of papers, *Divine Nature and Human Language* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), William P. Alston argues that the theist who rejects divine timelessness cannot reasonably hold the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*. Alston writes:

If God is temporal we have to think of Him as infinitely extended in time. If He began to exist some finite period of time ago, that would call for some explanation outside Himself; He would not be a fundamentally underived being. His ceasing to exist is impossible for the same reason. And if the fact that there is a physical universe is due to an act of divine will, that act, if God is temporal, would have to take place at some time. But then at whatever time it takes place God would have already existed for an infinite period of time; and we would be faced with the Augustinian question of why God chose to create the universe at that time rather than at some other. Thus if we think of God as temporal the most reasonable picture is the Hartshornean one of God and the world confronting each other throughout time as equally basic metaphysically, with God's creative activity confined to bringing it about, so far as possible, that the world is in accordance with His aims. And conversely, if we are to defend the classical doctrine of creation we must think of God as nontemporal (from "Hartshorne and Aquinas: A Via Media", in Alston *op. cit.*, pages 132-133).

So on Alston's view the doctrines of divine timelessness and creation *ex nihilo* stand or fall together. In this paper, I shall show that Professor Alston is mistaken in this regard.



*Section I: A Closer Look at the Argument*

Since the argument goes so very quickly in Alston's article, we will need to get clear on just what it is and why he thinks that the timelessness advocate (hereafter the 'atemporalist') doesn't have the same problem.

The question that raises the difficulty for one who rejects timelessness (hereafter the 'temporalist') is this: Why did God create the world when He did? According to standard temporalism, there was a time at which God alone existed, after which God created the universe. But what could make God choose one time rather than another as the moment to begin to create? For as long as the universe isn't infinitely old (i.e., as long as it has a beginning in time), there was an infinite amount of time during which God alone existed. Now the traditional theist will claim that God doesn't change His mind; so it can't be that at some time  $t_1$ , God intends to never create and then at a later time  $t_2$ , God begins to intend to create. So if God intends to create, He always does; and given that the difference between one moment and another is simply that they are at different places on the time-line, it looks as though God could have no reason to create at  $t_2$  as opposed to any other time. So since (i) God is a perfectly rational being, (ii) there is a sufficient reason for any action of a perfectly rational being, and (iii) there can be no sufficient reason for creating at any given moment over another, it follows that there is no time at which God begins to create the universe.

So, concludes Alston, the temporalist shall have to choose: either the existence of the world is metaphysically fundamental or else God lacks perfect rationality. But of course no theist of any stripe will choose the second disjunct; hence she must conclude that the existence of the world is independent of God's creative activity.

How does the atemporalist avoid this problem? With great ease. In order for the argument to get off the ground, one must suppose that there was a time at which God and God alone exists. But the atemporalist will not accept this premise. Before creation, there wasn't any time at all, since time is of the created order. So God didn't have to choose a moment to create since before creation there wasn't any time.

I should now like to add a complication. A few paragraphs back I made reference to 'standard temporalism.' This view sees time as essentially infinite in both directions, and God as existing at all times. So standard temporalism is the dual thesis that (i) God has the property of existing at all times and (ii) His existence is always at a time. And standard temporalism suggests, although it does not entail, that God's temporality is independent of His creative activity. So before creation, God and God alone existed through time.

It is standard temporalism that Alston needs to get his argument going. However, it isn't the only temporalist possibility. Here is another variety of temporalism (call it 'accidental temporalism') that completely avoids the

difficulty Alston discusses.<sup>1</sup> Suppose that time is a part of the created order. In that case, time is not infinite in both directions and need not be infinite even in one. What makes this position a type of temporalism is that it insists that for any time, God exists at that time. Thus, it accepts the first conjunct of standard temporalism, but rejects the second; God exists timelessly if there is no creation. This perspective would seem to have three quite attractive features. First, in claiming that time is an aspect of the created order, it comports well with contemporary physical theory. Second, it makes the existence of time clearly dependent on the will of God. Standard temporalism encourages us to view time as something that God is 'passing through' even in worlds at which He never creates. Thus, the doctrine of divine aseity is better preserved with this alternative. Finally, and more importantly for our purposes, accidental temporalism allows one to make the Augustinian reply to Alston's problem; for she can say that the question "What was God doing before He created?" is unintelligible since there was no time before creation. So the temporalist needn't either be committed to the temporal eternity of creation or have an answer to the questions "Why would God wait?" and "Why would God choose to create just when He did?"

Are there problems with accidental temporalism? If not, given its clear advantages, perhaps the temporally-inclined theist would be better off adopting it over the standard view. Unfortunately, accidental temporalism does bring with it some apparent difficulties. First, it is committed to the intelligibility of atemporal agency or personhood.<sup>2</sup> Surely we must think of God as somehow active even in worlds in which He doesn't create; perhaps the doctrine of the Trinity can be useful in explaining how this is possible. At a very minimum, the accidental temporalist must allow for the possibility of an atemporal person. But a primary motivation for adopting temporalism in the first place is the suspicion that there can't be atemporal persons. So one advantage of standard temporalism is not also had by its accidental cousin. A second problem for accidental temporalism concerns the parallels between space and time. Surely the motivations that lead one to accidental temporalism had better not equally support 'accidental spatialism.' That is, the accidental temporalist wants to say that both space and time are products of divine creative activity; now, if creating time brings it about that God is temporal, shouldn't creating space bring it about that God is spatial? But that is not something to which the traditional theist wants to be committed.

The accidental temporalist might attempt to dodge this charge by claiming that creating time (and space) is only necessary and not sufficient for God's being temporal (and spatial).<sup>3</sup> If there is time, then God can choose whether or not to be temporal. And the same goes with space. The accidental temporalist could then maintain that God has chosen temporality but not spatiality. But what would be the explanation of this? Is it because God is not able

to bring about temporal events without thereby being temporal? That isn't an explanation that the accidental temporalist can offer because she is committed to saying that an atemporal being brings about the first temporal event. And why would God choose to join creation in temporality? Perhaps the accidental temporalist can avoid these questions altogether by showing that there is an important disanalogy between space and time.

It is not my purpose to offer a complete evaluation of accidental temporalism. I believe that this limited discussion does permit us to draw two somewhat tentative conclusions: first, accidental temporalism is *prima facie* coherent, and second, it is neither clearly superior to nor inferior to standard temporalism. As I pointed out above, the accidental temporalist has available to her precisely the same response to Alston's argument that the atemporalist has. So Alston will have to be understood as arguing against what I have called 'standard temporalism.'<sup>4</sup> Hereafter, it is this position that I intend to designate by the simple term 'temporalism.'

Now it is sometimes claimed that a temporal God could create from eternity, in which case the universe is infinitely old, and there is no time at which God begins to create the universe. Alston blocks this move, however, with the argument that creation requires an act of will and any act of will of a temporal being must take place at some time; hence at any time that God wills to create, there will have already been an infinite amount of time. So if God is temporal, the universe must not be infinitely old.

This does not strike me as a good argument. From the fact that, for a temporal divine being, every act of will must take place at some time, it doesn't follow that for every act of that being's will there is a time at which that act *began*. And this entailment is precisely what is required for Alston's argument to go through. And furthermore it is hard to see why the temporalist should agree that all of God's acts of will must have a temporal beginning. That is, what prevents the temporalist from claiming that a temporal God could have willed from eternity that a universe exist *now*, with 'now' picking out the present moment? If God has this will eternally, then the universe is infinitely old.

In fact, it is sometimes thought that the problem that Alston raises about God not having sufficient reason to create at any particular moment suggests not that God and the world are 'equally basic metaphysically' but rather that God has created the world from eternity.<sup>5</sup> And surely if the theist is presented with a choice between the world's being created from eternity and its being 'equally basic metaphysically' with God, the theist will reasonably choose the former. Nevertheless, the traditional understanding of the doctrine of creation is that the created world is finite, i.e., it had a beginning in time. Why would God have waited to create? God only knows. Perhaps it would somehow be inappropriate if creation were eternal; perhaps that would foster

the false view that the world is metaphysically independent of God. And God might naturally be supposed to not want to give this impression. However this might be, in what follows, I will assume that it isn't unreasonable for the theist to suppose that there is some sufficient reason for God's waiting to create; that is, let's suppose with Alston that the theist must choose between these theses: (a) there is a time at which God begins to create the world *ex nihilo*; and (b) the world and God are equally basic metaphysically.

### Section II: The Solution

Of course, other things being equal, the theist will gladly opt for (a). However, according to the argument above, one can't choose (a) without claiming that God is not perfectly rational. For God could have no good reason for creating at  $t_1$  rather than at  $t_2$ ; and since a perfectly rational agent would not act without a sufficient reason, if (a) is true, then God is not perfectly rational.

I believe, contra Alston, that the temporalist can very reasonably accept creation *ex nihilo*. The reason for this is that the argument from (a) to the irrationality of God is defective. For the argument depends on the following principle of rationality (which I glossed in the preceding section):

P1: A perfectly rational agent will do action A only if she has sufficient reason to do A.

I understand sufficiency of reason here in such a way that S's having a sufficient reason for doing A entails that S is rationally obligated to do A. The problem for the temporalist is then formed by combining (P1) with the claim that there can't be a sufficient reason to create at any particular time, and concluding that God can't be perfectly rational and create the universe at any particular moment.

Now it is clear that there are plenty of cases in which (P1) is violated. Consider a Buridan's Ass-type case. Robinson is on a deserted island, and desperately in need of water. He finds a map that tells him that there are two wells of fresh water on the island, each being exactly 12 miles from where he is now; one of the wells is directly east and the other is due west. Now he knows that he can't possibly go to both at the same time, and the terrain looks to be equally rugged in both directions. He knows of no good reason to prefer going to one well over the other. Now if he suddenly chooses to go to the well to the east, for no particular reason, we think that he has not made an irrational choice. The irrational thing to do would be to die from indecision.

However, (P1) does not agree with our assessment. Since he doesn't have a rationally obligating reason to prefer the one well over the other, Robinson is deemed 'irrational.' So much the worse for (P1). Surely the following rule of rationality is on more solid footing:

(P2): If S has an all-things-considered desire D, and S rationally believes that action A will be at least as likely to lead to the satisfaction of D as any other action that she has available, then S's doing A is rationally permissible.

(An 'all-things-considered desire' is a desire that is stronger than all of its competitors.) (P2) endorses our judgment of Robinson's decision. Now let's consider the situation God would be in if He had delayed creation, but had a desire to create the universe. God would know that there would be no reason to prefer any particular time over any other, and that His action of beginning to create would have to take place at some particular moment. So He has no reason to prefer any moment over any other; but He also knows that whenever He creates He will guarantee the satisfaction of His desire to create a universe. So for any moment that God creates the universe, God will have acted in accordance with (P2).

Finally, there is another rule of rationality that seems relevant here and that God also satisfies in the above scenario. When considering the Robinson case, I said that he would behave irrationally if he were to die of thirst because he couldn't decide on either of two equally attractive wells. It seems that I was appealing to a principle such as:

(P3): If S has an all-things-considered desire D, and actions A, B, and C available to her that are all equally and highly likely to lead to the satisfaction of D, and there is no other action available to S that is at least as likely to lead to the satisfaction of D as A, B, and C are, then S is rationally obligated to perform A or B or C.

This tells us that in the above scenario, it would not only be rationally acceptable for God to create at an arbitrary time, but that He couldn't be perfectly rational unless he did (since no person who violates rational duties is perfectly rational).

Therefore, the fact that God has no reason to prefer to create at one moment as opposed to any other does not mean that His creating at a particular time is not perfectly rational. One can get the contrary conclusion only by employing a false principle of rationality. And so the temporalist can very reasonably accept (a), i.e., the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*. Or at least Alston's argument has done nothing to show that she can't.<sup>6</sup>

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## NOTES

1. Thanks to Phil Quinn for bringing this possibility to my attention.
2. It should be pointed out, in fairness to the accidental temporalist, that while he does have to accept the possibility of an atemporal person, he needn't embrace the possibility

of a Boethian eternal person, that is, a person whose mode of existence is “the complete possession all at once of illimitable life” (see Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann’s paper “Eternity” (*Journal of Philosophy*, Volume LXXVIII, Number 8 (August 1981) for an enlightening discussion of this account of eternity).

3. This will require a change in the accidental temporalist’s view. As I have defined the position, it requires that if there is time, God is temporal.

4. Indeed, in the quotation on the first page of this paper, Alston says “If God is temporal we have to think of Him as infinitely extended in time.” This strongly suggests that he has in mind the standard variety of temporalism.

5. For example, cf. Augustine, *Confessions*, Book XI, Chapter 10.

6. Thanks to Brian Leftow who got me thinking about Augustine’s argument and to Phil Quinn for helpful suggestions.