STEVEN B. COWAN

A REDUCTIO AD ABSURDUM OF DIVINE TEMPORALITY

I. INTRODUCTION

Theists believe that God is eternal, but they differ as to just what God's eternality *means*. The traditional, historic view of most Christian philosophers is that eternality means that God is timeless. He is 'outside' of time and not subject to any kind of temporal change. Indeed, God is the creator of time. Lets call this view *divine timelessness*.

However, despite being the traditional view for the last two thousand years, the doctrine of divine timelessness has come to be rejected by most contemporary philosophers. They hold instead the view known as *divine temporality*. On this view, God is eternal in the sense that he is everlasting. He has always existed and will forever continue to exist, but he is 'in' time and subject to temporal becoming. The notion that God is 'outside' of time is thought by these philosophers to be incoherent.[1] Brian Leftow laments this situation by writing,

The claim that God is timeless is widely considered to be at best needless and outmoded metaphysical baggage, and at worse incompatible with such central theistic claims as that God is omniscient, that God is an agent or a person, and that God can act in the world. Recent philosophers and theologians tend to think that anything that could count as *God*...must be in time.[2]

What is quite ironic about this whole affair, as Leftow himself notes, is that philosophers of old – being well aware of the very same problems raised by contemporary opponents of timelessness – reached quite the opposite conclusion, holding that no being subject to the vicissitudes of time was worthy of the title 'God'. If space permitted, it would be helpful to show that the objections to timelessness (though serious) are not so serious as to warrant the sacrifice that placing God in time demands: the forfeiture of God's omniscience, immutability and aseity.[3] However, space does not so permit. What I would like to do in this paper is offer a formulation of a much neglected argument not *for* divine timelessness nor in response to an objection

---

[1] For a good presentation of the typical anti-timelessness arguments see Stephen T. Davis, 'Temporal Eternity', in *Philosophy of Religion: An Anthology*, 2nd ed (ed. Louis Pojman), (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1994), pp. 223–30. Another important and influential treatment is Nelson Pike, *God and Timelessness*. (New York: Schocken, 1970).

[2] Brian Leftow, *Time and Eternity* (Cornell University Press, 1991), 3.

[3] For a brief but helpful discussion of these unacceptable implications of divine temporality, see Hugh J. McCann, 'The God Beyond Time', in *Philosophy of Religion* (ed. Pojman), 231–245.

to divine timelessness, but an argument *against* divine temporality. More specifically, I intend to show that divine temporality is incoherent by offering a reductio ad absurdum argument.

The argument I will present will not itself be very original. It is very much like arguments one finds in discussions of the Kalam Cosmological Argument.[4] Nevertheless, I trust the *application* of this argument to the issue of divine temporality will have some significance. The first premise of the Kalam argument is that the universe had a beginning. One way this premise is usually defended is by arguing that an infinite series of past events is impossible because of the impossibility of traversing such a series to reach the present. I will present a similar argument to show that God, if he is temporal, cannot be eternal in the sense meant by defenders of divine temporality.

II. THE REDUCTIO ARGUMENT

The Reductio proceeds as follows:

1. God has always existed. (temporalist assumption)
2. If God has always existed, then, necessarily, God has traversed an actually infinite series of moments in order to reach the present moment. (definition of 1)
3. Necessarily, God has traversed an actually infinite series of moments in order to reach the present moment. (1,2 MP)
4. Necessarily, nothing can traverse an actually infinite series of moments. (by definition)
5. Necessarily, God has not traversed an actually infinite series of moments in order to reach the present moment. (4, UI)
6. God has not always existed. (3,5 Reductio)

The argument is at least prima facie valid. All of the premises of this argument, rightly understood, are true. Let us look at them in order. Premise (1) is to be understood as a logical corollary of divine temporality. The temporalist says that God exists everlastingly. That is, he has existed forever in the past and will go on existing without end. More to the point for our purposes, God has existed throughout the past without beginning. He has a past history that is infinitely long. So what the temporalist is committed to, and what she means by 'God has always existed', is that God has existed for an infinite amount of time. The set of temporal events or moments through which God has existed prior to the present moment is a set with an infinite number of members.

This leads us naturally to premise (2). If God has an infinitely long past,

---

[4] The most thorough contemporary presentation of the Kalam argument can be found in William Lane Craig, *The Kalam Cosmological Argument* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1979). Another more recent defence is J. P. Moreland, *Scaling the Secular City: A Defence of Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), ch. 1.

a past with literally no beginning, then that means that God has traversed an actually infinite series of moments. That is, God has 'lived through', crossed successively (one at a time) an infinite number of temporal events. This is a necessary, definitional truth, given that God is in time as the temporalists suggest. Indeed, the consequent of (2) is logically equivalent to the antecedent. To have existed in time without beginning is simply to have crossed an infinite number of moments, and vice-versa. And this means that

3. Necessarily, God has traversed an actually infinite series of moments in order to reach the present moment

clearly follows by Modus Ponens. But what about (4), the claim that it is impossible for anything to traverse an actually infinite series of moments? This premise is the crucial premise of the argument, so it is incumbent upon me to show that (4) is true. Out the outset, however, let us note what (4) is *not* asserting, so as to clear up any possible confusions. Premise (4) is not asserting that there cannot be such a thing as an infinite set or even an infinite series.[5] What (4) is claiming is that such a series cannot be *traversed*. That is, an actually infinite series cannot be formed by successive addition.

Here it may be helpful to distinguish between an *actual* infinite and a *potential* infinite. The latter is a series that is actually finite, but can be added to successively forever. As J. P. Moreland puts it, a potential infinite has three important properties: (1) it increases its number by adding new members to the series, (2) it is always finite, and (3) no proper subset will ever be equal to the finite set which comprises the series.[6] Imagine a person who begins counting at the number one and continues counting forever. As long as he counts, he will never have counted an infinite number of numbers. Try as he might, at any point, he will only have counted some finite number. The series he is forming by the process of counting is only potentially infinite.

An actual infinite, on the other hand, has the exact opposite properties. It cannot increase in number by successive addition. Infinity plus one is still infinity. Further, it is possible to put any proper subset into one-to-one correspondence with the original set. For example, take the set of whole numbers, which is, of course, an infinite set. It is possible to take a proper subset, say, the set of even numbers, and pair them up with the members of the set of whole numbers. In other words, the subset of even numbers is just as infinitely long as the set of whole numbers.

It should be clear that the doctrine of divine temporality requires, as mentioned earlier, that there exist an actually infinite – and not merely potentially infinite – series of past moments between the present moment and God's beginningless past. If God's past were only potentially infinite, then his past would be only finitely long and we could retrace his past to a

---

[5] There are, however, some good reasons to doubt that there can actually be infinite sets of concrete entities. For which see Moreland, *Scaling*, 22–28.   [6] Ibid., 22.

beginning point some finite time ago. If we take seriously the idea that a temporal God literally had no beginning to his existence, then it simply must be the case that the set of past moments that comprise God's history constitutes an actual infinite.

Now it is not that hard to see that an actual infinite cannot be traversed. Given the properties that infinite sets have, it ought to be enough to simply say that a series that can be traversed is necessarily finite. If I can complete counting a series of numbers, for instance, then the series must be a finite series. Traversing an infinite series of anything is analogous to counting the set of whole numbers. It simply cannot be done. No matter how long one counts, one will never complete the task. This applies equally well to an infinite series of past moments. Moving across the series successively, one-by-one, it would be impossible for anything, even God, to complete the movement from the past to the present. Indeed, as Moreland says, trying to traverse the past to get to the present would be like trying to jump out of a bottomless pit.[7] To illustrate, imagine going back in time 100 years. If the past is infinite, then there is *no less time* between 100 years ago and infinity past than between now and infinity past. Go back 1000 years. How much time was crossed to get to A.D. 995? An infinite. Go back a million years. How much time had elapsed before then? An infinite. What about 10×10^{100} years ago? An infinite! It is evident that 'one could get no foothold in the series to even get started, for to get to any point, one already has to have crossed infinity'.[8]

Another way to illustrate the difficulty in traversing an actual infinite is to bring up what is known as the Tristram Shandy Paradox. Russell once proposed the following example in order to show that an infinite series can be traversed.[9] Imagine a man named Tristram Shandy who is writing his own biography at the rate of one day per year of writing. If he were to live an infinite number of days he could apparently finish his chore because the years of writing could be placed in one-to-one correspondence with the days of his life. Craig, however, has effectively argued that a quite different conclusion should be reached about Tristram Shandy. Far from him being able to complete his autobiography, he would by now be infinitely far behind with no hope of ever finishing. For the example to make sense, the days and years must be arranged such that every day of Tristram's life is succeeded by a year of writing. Hence, if Tristram has been writing for a year, 'the most recent day he could have recorded is one year ago'.[10] But here is where things get strange. As Craig continues,

But if he has been writing two years, then that same day [the day he recorded after one year of writing] could not have been recorded by him. For since his intention

---

[7] Ibid., 31.   [8] Ibid.
[9] Cited in Ibid. 23; and Craig, 'Time and Infinity', *International Philosophical Quarterly*, XXXI (1991), 396-8.   [10] Craig, 'Time and Infinity', 397.

is to record *consecutive* days of his life, the most recent day he could have recorded is the day immediately after a day at least two years ago. This is because it takes a year to record a day, so that to record two days he must have two years... In other words, the longer he has written the further behind he has fallen... But what happens if Tristram Shandy has, *ex hypothesi*, been writing for an infinite number of years? The first day of his autobiography recedes to infinity, that is to say, to a day infinitely distant from the present. Nowhere in the past at a finite distance from the present can we find a recorded day, for by now Tristram Shandy is infinitely far behind.[11]

So Russell's Tristram Shandy example does nothing to make traversing an infinite series intelligible. An infinite series of moments cannot be crossed.

It needs to also be pointed out that the problem I have been raising about an infinite past has nothing to do with the direction of movement in time. Some might be inclined to say that the apparent puzzle arises because the above example asks one to retrace the past backwards from the present. But this is not the case. The problem arises from the nature of an actual infinity. The direction of movement is irrelevant. Moreland explains that

counting to infinity through the series 1, 2, 3,...involves the same number of steps as does counting down *from* infinity to zero through the series..., $-5, -4, -3, -2,$ $-1, 0$. In fact this second series may even be more difficult to traverse than the first. Apart from the fact that both series have the same number of members to be traversed, the second series cannot even get started. This is because it has no first member![12]

So, I conclude that premise (4) is true. Necessarily, nothing can traverse an actually infinite series of moments. If so, then God cannot have done so in order to reach the present as premise (2) would have us believe. Hence, (5) is true as well. Since (5) is the contradictory of (3), it seems we have deduced a contradiction from the doctrine of divine temporality. Therefore, the temporalist assumption that God has always existed is false. However, before we rest secure in this conclusion, we need to address a few possible rejoinders that the temporalist might make to this argument.

III. OBJECTIONS AND ANSWERS

One problem that may be raised to the line of reasoning connected with premise (4) is that it seems to be the same kind of reasoning that lay behind Zeno's Paradoxes. Zeno argued, for example, that we cannot move from any point A to any point B because between any two points there is an infinite number of points, and we cannot traverse an infinite number of points. Of course, we all know that Zeno was wrong, because we can move from one point to another. So is it possible to cross an infinite series after all? The answer is no. I do not deny that the reasoning employed above is the same kind of reasoning that Zeno used. Zeno was right in his claim that an infinite number of points cannot be traversed. Where Zeno went wrong was in his

---

[11] Ibid.   [12] Moreland, *Scaling*, 29.

claim that there is necessarily an actually infinite number of points between points A and B. As far back as Aristotle, the standard reply to Zeno has been that there is only a *potentially* infinite number of points between A and B. More recently, William Craig has argued that '[p]otential infinite divisibility (the property of being susceptible of division without end) does not entail actual infinite divisibility (the property of being composed of an infinite number of points where divisions can be made) '.[13] The claim that it does, he says, makes an invalid modal shift from

(1)	Possibly, there is some point at which line *x* is divided

to

(2)	There is some point at which line *x* is divided.

A second way that the temporalist might try to refute premise (4) is to claim that my argument for that premise assumes an infinitely distant beginning. But, according to the temporalist, God does not have a beginning at all, not even one infinitely far away.[14] But this objection is patently false. The argument I presented does not assume a beginning infinitely far away. On the contrary, it is only because one assumes there is no beginning that the puzzle of crossing an infinite past arises. It is the temporalist in this case who is not taking seriously the notion that God's history has no beginning. For the thesis that God's history had no beginning entails that the temporal events of God's past comprise an infinite set. And I claim that an infinite set cannot be traversed *by definition*. It is precisely because the temporalist assumes that God's history had *no beginning* – that God's past is completely unbounded – that we are led to an absurd conclusion. For no matter how long God has been 'travelling' toward the present, he still has an infinite time to go in order to get here. To say that God has traversed an infinite series of moments to reach the present (which the temporalist *must* say) is to claim that an infinite series has been completed, and such a claim is contradictory.

A third way is to argue that an infinite series can be traversed if one has an infinite amount of time in which to do it.[15] But, this objection simply will not do as a response to my argument for (4), and this for two reasons. First, suppose that the infinite series we are concerned to traverse is a series of *events*. The proposed move amounts to nothing more than placing one untraversable infinite (the infinite amount of time) alongside another (the infinite series of events) and claiming that the former explains the latter. All this move accomplishes is to push the argument back a step. However,

[13] William Lane Craig, 'Time and Infinity', 391.

[14] William Wainwright raises this objection in his review of Craig's *Kalam Cosmological Argument*, in *Nous* xvi (May 1982): 328–34. In connection with divine temporality, T. V. Morris makes this point in his *Our Idea of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1991), 126.

[15] For a discussion of this objection and its rebuttal see Moreland, *Scaling*, 30–31.

secondly, this move cannot even get started as a rebuttal of my premise (4), because that premise is itself a claim about an infinite amount of *time*. There is no time beyond time that one could place alongside an infinite series of moments in order to traverse it.

The strongest objection that may be raised to my reductio is to point out, and rightly so, that all I have shown is that God cannot always have been temporal, and that his existence in time began a finite time ago when the changing, temporal creation came into being. What I have called divine temporality might better be called *absolute* divine temporality, which is the view that God is necessarily and everlastingly temporal. On this view time necessarily exists. Time has never been non-existent. My reductio, if it is sound, only shows that absolute divine temporality is false. But there is another view that we can call *relative* divine temporality. The latter holds that 'prior' to creation God was timelessly eternal, but that when he created the temporal universe, he necessarily entered into time.[16]

Responding adequately to this objection would take me far beyond the scope of this paper into a positive defence of divine timelessness. Let me simply note here that proponents of timelessness have done a good job of showing (at the very least) that none of the arguments against divine timelessness are conclusive.[17] If timelessness can thus be shown to be coherent (or at least to not be clearly incoherent), and timelessness better supports belief in God's omniscience, immutability, and aseity, then the motivation for holding on to any version of divine temporality, including relative temporality, is removed.

IV. CONCLUSION

This paper has shown that what I have called absolute divine temporality is incoherent. Since an actually infinite series of moments cannot be traversed, God cannot have had an infinitely long past prior to the present moment. Strictly speaking, of course, the conclusion of my reductio might be construed not merely as a reductio on divine temporality, but on the existence of God as well. For, as temporalists argue, timelessness is absurd. If so, then what my argument shows is that God has existed for a finite amount of time. Of course, a non-eternal God is no God at all.

No theist will want to accept this conclusion. There are only two other options available, however. One can decide that divine timelessness is not so bad after all and try to demonstrate its coherence. Or one can opt for relative divine temporality. I have suggested, though, that the first option is very

[16] Craig is one philosopher who seems to advocate such a view. See his 'God, Time, and Eternity', in *Religious Studies*, XIV (1978), 497–503.

[17] See, e.g., the excellent defence of timelessness given by Edward R. Wierenga, *The Nature of God: An Inquiry into Divine Attributes* (Cornell University, 1989), 166–201. See also McCann, 'The God Beyond Time', Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann, 'Eternity, awareness, and action', *Faith and Philosophy* IX: 4 (October 1992), 463–82; and Brian Leftow, *Time and Eternity*.

likely possible (and if possible, preferable), and thus the second option would be unwarranted. The proper course of action, then, for every theistic philosopher of religion would be to devote more energy to showing the coherence of divine timelessness.

1775 Janice Avenue
Fayetteville, Arkansas 72703