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# Can God Know what Time it is? A Working Paper

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# Can God Know What Time it is? A Working Paper

Caleb Brown

In *Four Views: God and Time*, three of the four contributors argue God's atemporality is inconsistent with the dynamic view of time. If God is atemporal, time is not dynamic, and if time is dynamic, God is not atemporal. The fourth contributor, Nicholas Wolterstorff, holds that these two positions are not *inherently* inconsistent but are inconsistent with the *typical view* of God's knowledge and action in the world.<sup>1</sup> In this paper, I use the survey of views presented in *Four Views: God and Time* as the jumping-off point for an argument that the following propositions consistent:

1. The dynamic theory of time (McTaggart's "A-theory") is correct
2. God is atemporal
3. God knows tensed facts
4. Free human actions are possible
5. God interacts responsively with humans

I do not try to demonstrate that these propositions are true, but rather that accepting all of them together is logically possible. I first consider each proposition

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<sup>1</sup> Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Response to Alan G. Padgett," in *God and Time*, ed. Gregory Ganssle (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 120-121.

individually, explaining its meaning and why it is significant to the discussion of God and time. Then I demonstrate consistency, starting with the first two propositions and gradually incorporating the others. Throughout this paper I assume a Judeo-Christian conception of God.

### **The Five Propositions are Significant**

1. The dynamic theory of time (McTaggart's "A-theory") is correct

While there is certainly an element of psychological reality in our experience of time (for instance, when time seems to slow down) the dynamic theory of time states that the notion of "present" has objective reference. Under the static theory of time (McTaggart's "B-theory"), it is just as objectively correct to say that seven days ago is present, as it is to say that the moment I am currently experiencing is present, as it is to say seven days in the future is present. These times are distinguished solely by their earlier and later than relationships, not by their relationship to an objective present.<sup>2</sup> Contrasting the dynamic and static conceptions, Gregory Ganssle writes, "What is the Now? The A-theorist says that the Now exists in a way that the past and future do not. The Now is a privileged temporal location. The B-theorist holds that the Now is dependent on the psychological states of knowing minds."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> E. J. Lowe, *A Survey of Metaphysics*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 310.

<sup>3</sup> Gregory Ganssle, in the introduction to *God and Time*, ed. Gregory Ganssle (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 14.

If the A-theory of time is abandoned in favor of the B-theory, the notion of salvation history is vitiated.<sup>4</sup> If time does not progress, if it is static and there is no objective present, then God sees it as such. Thus, from His perspective, and it seems His perspective is the most important, God achieves no final victory over evil. As Christ returns in glory to judge the living and the dead, it is equally true from God's perspective that He is hanging on the cross condemned for sinners. The notion of God's redemptive plan for humanity, a clear element of the biblical narrative, has little meaning if the A-theory of time is not true. If evil is to be conquered, God, the author of reality, must see that evil has been conquered. Thus, the A-theory is significant to our discussion.

## 2. God is atemporal

The historically dominant position on God and time is that God is atemporal—he has no temporal location or extension.<sup>5</sup> Boethius writes: “It is the common judgement, then, of all creatures that live by reason that God is eternal . . . Eternity,

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<sup>4</sup> William Craig, “Response to Paul Helm,” in *God and Time*, ed. Gregory Ganssle (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 66-67.

<sup>5</sup> Dr. Martin of Liberty University described atemporality in these terms in PHIL 430 in the spring of 2017. God's lack of temporal location means He is not specially related to any temporal point. God's lack of temporal extension means He not involved in the transition from one moment to the subsequent moment.

then, is the complete, simultaneous and perfect possession of everlasting life; this will be clear from a comparison with creatures that exist in time.”<sup>6</sup>

Divine atemporality is the historic position of Christian thinkers because having life “all at once” is viewed as a perfection. Even some who deny God’s atemporality recognize the strength of this argument. Craig writes: “One of the most important arguments in favor of divine timelessness rests on the claim that the fleeting nature of temporal life is incompatible with the life of a most perfect being such as God is.”<sup>7</sup> A God who is caught up in the current of time and is unable to transcend it is limited. Taking a minority position, Nicholas Wolterstorff thinks there is something inherently better about being able to experience progression, as opposed to the all-encompassing presentness of atemporality.<sup>8</sup> He thus rejects the view that atemporality is a perfection, but his argument only holds if God’s atemporality means He cannot know tensed facts and so cannot track the development of salvation history. God’s knowledge of tensed facts is addressed by the third proposition.

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<sup>6</sup> Qtd. in Paul Helm, “Divine Timeless Eternity,” in *God and Time*, ed. Gregory Ganssle (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 34.

<sup>7</sup> William Craig, “Timelessness & Omnitemporality” in *God and Time*, ed. Gregory Ganssle (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 132.

<sup>8</sup> Nicholas Wolterstorff, “Response to Paul Helm,” in *God and Time*, ed. Gregory Ganssle (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 73.

### 3. God knows tensed facts

This proposition answers “yes” to the question, does God know what time it is? Thus, God can distinguish between past, present, and future, and knows whether tensed propositions like “Today it is raining,” and time-stamped propositions like “It is raining in Lynchburg, Virginia at 4:39 on March 28<sup>th</sup>, 2017” are true. As Craig points out, this is important because, “A person who has maximum cognitive excellence as God does cannot plausibly be ignorant of what is presently going on in the universe. Thus, if time is dynamic, God must know tensed facts, however these are construed.”<sup>9</sup>

### 4. Free human choices are possible

In *God, Evil, and Free Will*, Alvin Plantinga describes free choices: “If a person is free with respect to a given action, then he is free to perform that action and free to refrain from performing it.”<sup>10</sup> While less strict conceptions of freedom may be viable, in this paper I assume that, to be free, a choice must not be sufficiently caused apart from the volition of the agent (the agent’s appropriate volition is a necessary condition of the choice being made), and that volition itself must not be causally determined by anything external to the agent. Free human choice is

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<sup>9</sup> Craig, “Response to Paul Helm,” 65.

<sup>10</sup> Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1977), 29. While I am not convinced that Eleonore Stump’s criterion for free actions, that their ultimate cause does not lie outside the agent, is unfounded, I think that the stronger form Plantinga gives here can still be proven consistent with the other propositions, and this conclusion is more fruitful.

essential to moral responsibility. Because the Bible teaches moral responsibility, maintaining moral responsibility and free choice is significant for our view of God and time.

#### 5. God interacts responsively with humans

If humans make free choices, and some of those choices are necessary conditions for choices God makes, then God interacts responsively with humans. I do not mean that, to be responsive, God must decide to respond *temporally* after the request is given. Maintaining God's responsiveness is significant because His responsiveness cannot be sacrificed without theological vitiation. The concept of God redeeming humanity, for instance, is inherently responsive.

### **The Five Propositions are Consistent**

In this section I demonstrate that the five significant propositions considered above are not inconsistent. Consider the first two propositions together:

1. The dynamic theory of time (McTaggart's "A-theory") is correct
2. God is atemporal

Most of the authors in *Four Views: God and Time* write that these two propositions are inconsistent.<sup>11</sup> As Paul Helm, an atemporalist, states: "If God had created the temporal order as an A-series [dynamic] from his standpoint, then God would himself be in time. So, it makes better sense for the eternalist to suppose that God

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<sup>11</sup> William Craig, "Response to the Critics," in *God and Time*, ed. Gregory Ganssle (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 179; Alan Padgett, "Eternity as Relative Timelessness," in *God and Time*, ed. Gregory Ganssle (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 95.

created the temporal order as a B-series.”<sup>12</sup> However, as Nicholas Wolterstorff points out, the logical inconsistency between these two propositions is not evident as they are stated above.<sup>13</sup> The inconsistency arises because these two propositions seem to entail inconsistent positions on topics such as God’s knowledge of tensed facts, human free will, and God’s responsiveness. So, the first discussion of consistency will evaluate the first three propositions together:

1. The dynamic theory of time (McTaggart’s “A-theory”) is correct
2. God is atemporal
3. God knows tensed facts

If God does not experience temporal succession, then how does He know what time it is? How does God know it is true if I say I am typing, and know it is no longer true that I am eating breakfast? Under a traditional conception of God’s omniscience, He knows all events that will happen, past, present, and future. Humans, denied this knowledge, and caught up on the crest of the flow of time, can experientially differentiate between the past, present, and future—they know the present because it is all they can know directly—but God, if atemporal, is not so limited, and this (so the argument goes) impedes His ability to discern the present.

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<sup>12</sup> Helm, 58.

<sup>13</sup> Wolterstorff, “Response to Alan G. Padgett,” 120-121.



### **Analysis of what A-theory Knowledge of Tensed Facts Entails**

Consider the A-theory of time: the future is not, while the present, and perhaps the past, are.<sup>14</sup> From whence does the next moment into the future emerge? Is it *ex nihilo*? What brings it forth? Under A-theory, it seems reasonable to assume God imbues His creation with the ability to project the present to create the future. The universe has a temporal inertia which brings being out of non-being.

This creation of the future from the present is analogous to the expansion of the universe. The universe is expanding, but from what? Into what? By what causality? By the causality of what is. The universe has a spatial inertia which creates space out of nothing. God transcends the universe; He is not specially related to any point in space and does not experience spatial extension, but it is not problematic to say that He knows what is. Even so, it is legitimate to posit that an atemporal God can discern the difference between what is, rather than what is not, and knows the present as the ever-advancing edge of what is.

It can be objected that, because the universe is continuously changing in size, God only knows what spatially is if He knows what time it is. The above analogy *assumes* God's knowledge of tensed facts, so it cannot be used as analogous evidence for God's knowledge of tensed facts.<sup>15</sup> This objection misses the point.

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<sup>14</sup> Lowe, 328.

<sup>15</sup> My thanks to Julia Dandurand, instructor at California State University Northridge, and Zane Richer for pointing out this potential objection.

The relevant question regarding the expansion of the universe is whether, if granted temporal knowledge, God knows what is spatially actual and what is not.<sup>16</sup> It is clear He can. *His knowledge of what will be does not obscure His understanding of what is.* Saying God has knowledge of tensed facts does not go substantially beyond the uncontroversial idea that God knows how big the universe is at a given point in time. Both cases of knowledge are simply cases of God knowing what *is* as distinguished from what *is not*.

### **God Can Know What Time it is Without Possessing Temporal Location**

Consider the following analogy: Temporal reality as God views it is a dry river bed with debris scattered on it. God enjoys no special relationship with any point in the river bed—conceive of Him as at an indeterminate point above the river bed. The debris represent moments. Importantly, God does not have any special relationship with any of these moments. Now conceive of a flood coursing down the river bed. The crest of the flood is the present. It is ever advancing. As it floats a piece of debris, that moment becomes. God knows what the present will be before it is (debris are in the same relationship to Him whether floating or not), but this does not stop Him from knowing what is (actually present). God can track the progression of existence, and thus knows tensed facts, without being specially related to any point in time.

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<sup>16</sup> The presence of time in the question of the expansion of the universe is legitimate because the question of spatial change cannot be evaluated apart from time; time is a necessary condition of spatial change.

This analysis may seem to imply a progression in what God knows exists (temporally), and progression is only coherent if God is temporal. If God knows moment  $m_1$  is, and then knows moment  $m_2$  is, and then  $m_3$ , and so on, there seems to be progression in His mental state.

**God Can Have Real Knowledge of Progression Without Possessing Temporal Extension**

In fact, the analysis above implies no such progression. Consider God's knowledge: God knows not only each moment and its existence, He also knows His knowledge. He does not *come to know* that He knows moment  $m_1$  is, and then that He knows moment  $m_2$  is, and then that He knows  $m_3$  is. Rather, each knowing is directly known by Him via second-order knowledge. Even as He has knowledge of His knowledge of  $m_1$  as existing, He has knowledge of His knowledge of  $m_2$  as existing, and so on and vice-versa. So, there is *no overall change in His mental state*. Importantly, this (second order) knowledge, to be knowledge worthy of God, must include all information about His first-order knowings, including which knowings are of what in actuality is (present), and which are of what is not (future and past). This seems to reintroduce progression in God's mental state, but only if He *comes to know* these facts about His knowings. So, there must be direct third-order knowledge of the second-order knowings. Now an infinite regress is apparent. While normally problematic, an infinite regress is not problematic for an infinite mind. In fact, if we deny God knowledge of this type of sequence, we must deny

God the fullest knowledge of Himself.<sup>17</sup> Lacking fullest knowledge of Himself would be an imperfection, so we can be confident that God can have knowledge of the sequence I have outlined above.

We have found: 1) The question of God's knowledge of tensed facts boils down to a question of God's knowledge of what *is*. 2) God can track what temporally is without being specially related to any point in time (no temporal location). 3) God can track change without this involving change in His mental state (no temporal extension). Thus, time can be dynamic, God can be atemporal, and yet God can still know tensed facts.

Now let us add the fourth proposition:

1. The dynamic theory of time (McTaggart's "A-theory") is correct
2. God is atemporal
3. God knows tensed facts
4. Free human actions are possible

### **An Atemporal God's Knowledge Still Poses a Threat to Human Freedom**

While it has often been argued that God's atemporality allows for divine "foreknowledge" and human freedom to be compatible, this has been contested, and for good reason. A properly phrased proposition can convey time-stamped truth atemporally. A proposition of the form X chooses Y at time T is true or false

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<sup>17</sup> For instance, a human can: know that  $2 + 2 = 4$ , know that he knows  $2 + 2 = 4$ , know that he knows that he knows  $2 + 2 = 4$ . Although a finite human mind cannot traverse it, this sequence goes so on to infinity. To perfectly know Himself, God must know all there is to know about His knowledge, and so He must know this infinite sequence.

atemporally.<sup>18</sup> If God can know propositions of this type, and if His knowledge cannot be mistaken, then His atemporal knowledge has the potential to constrain temporal free choices.<sup>19</sup> So work must still be done to demonstrate (4) is consistent with the other propositions.

### **A Model for Neutralizing the Omniscience Threat to Free Will**

Consider the movie *Back to the Future*: when Marty McFly returns to the near-present (about 10 minutes before he left) he knows that the Libyan terrorists will attempt to shoot Dr. Brown, but his foreknowledge does not impinge their free choice. Marty's foreknowledge is simply that the Libyans will freely do what they freely do, a tautology with no power to restrict their free will. The objection will be, but if the outcome of the free choice is known before-hand, then it cannot be otherwise, so it is not free. But, to overcome this objection, we must note not only that it cannot be otherwise, but *why* it cannot be otherwise. It is clear in the case of the Libyan terrorists that it is not *logically possible* for them to do otherwise, but this is because of their own free choice and has nothing to do with Marty's knowledge.<sup>20</sup> The situation we are left with is that their own free choice determines

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<sup>18</sup> Dr. Martin of Liberty University laid this concept out in several classes I attended.

<sup>19</sup> I do not have the time to address the idea that future tense propositions about the outcome of free will events do not have truth values. But if I am successful in demonstrating 4. is consistent with the other propositions, much of the motivation for Open Theism will evaporate.

<sup>20</sup> It is never *logically possible* for anything to be otherwise than it is. The Principle of Alternate Possibilities must not be interpreted in a manner which defies the Laws of Non-Contradiction and Excluded Middle.

what they do, which is nothing but to say that what they do, they do freely. This discussion shows that, if a free choice X of agent A is logically and causally prior to foreknowledge of X, then this foreknowledge does not infringe upon the freedom of A with respect to X.

### **Free Will and Possible Worlds**

Since God knows all that is, nothing can be other than what He knows it to be. A problem arises with God's foreknowledge (as opposed to accurate human foreknowledge) because God sovereignly authors reality. Initially, this makes it look like nothing can be causally prior to His atemporal foreknowledge. The traditional view is that the world is a product of God's mental conception, rather than the other way around. While the problem of free will and God's knowledge has led people to deny God's knowledge of the outcome of future free will events, I seek to uphold the traditional view of omniscience. The question is, Is there a way for God's knowledge of the outcome of future free will events to meet the criteria outlined above (logically posterior, and causally dependent on free action), even though God sovereignly authors reality? I believe there is.

*Free will decisions, both in their existence and in their outcome, define possible worlds because they exclude their complimentary worlds. A world where choice X by agent A is free is a different possible world than one where choice X by agent A is not free. Moreover, a world where choice X by agent A is free and results in outcome Y is a different possible world than one where choice X by agent A is free*

and results in outcome Z (by outcome I mean what the agent, in a free-will event, chooses). It follows that every free choice made in the actual world defines the actual world in two ways: 1) that the choice is free, and 2) what is chosen.<sup>21</sup>

Under the traditional conception of divine omniscience, God knows all details of all possible worlds. Because free choices define possible worlds, they are known by God. Thus, God, when surveying all possible worlds, sees which choices are free and the outcomes of those choices.<sup>22</sup> God then chooses which possible world to actualize.<sup>23</sup>

Note that the two criteria for the type of God's knowledge which allows for free will are satisfied: logically, God knows the outcomes of free will events *because* agents freely choose, and God's knowledge is *caused by* their choice. However, per the conception I have just laid out, absolutely nothing occurs apart from God's will. God chooses the choices people make. But this does not infringe upon the freedom

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<sup>21</sup> While I have not found these concepts explicitly articulated anywhere, Plantinga's discussion on pages 40-44 of *God, Evil, and Free Will*, seem to assume what I argue for here. I owe thanks to Dr. Beck of Liberty University for his feedback on these concepts.

<sup>22</sup> Plantinga, 34-44. Plantinga articulates important restrictions on what constitutes a possible world God could have actualized. I do not think that his analysis in any way invalidates my analysis. Further, I am using anthropomorphic terms. The fact that God knows all possible worlds and chooses one of them need not involve any process, deliberation, or indecision.

I am not arguing that all human choices are free. Rather, I am only arguing that *God's foreknowledge* need not eliminate free choice. Nothing I have said argues against mechanistic causal determinism.

<sup>23</sup> This does not render God's knowledge dependent on human choice because, while it is proximately caused by human choice, it is ultimately caused by His actualization of the world. His knowledge is not caused by anything other than Himself. His aseity is unimpaired.

of the choice, for the freedom of the choice defines the possible world. God does not *cause* the choice; He merely *actualizes* it. God's willing is not a sufficient cause of a choice, but is a necessary condition. This is the true meaning of the saying "nothing happens *apart* from the will of God." Thus, God's omniscience, sovereignty, and free human choice can all be maintained.

**This Approach is Neither Molinist nor Renders God Unjust and Allows for  
Prophecy**

This portrayal is distinct from Molinism. Under Molinism, God is pictured as manipulating circumstances to ensure a given outcome. He orchestrates circumstances to deliver a *sufficient cause* of a given outcome of a choice and so guarantee His desired outcome. His relevant knowledge regarding free human choice is of what a person *would* choose. Under my conception, God's knowledge is of simply what a person *does* choose, circumstances being whatever they may be. He does not orchestrate circumstances; He actualizes the world defined by a person's free choice. Molinism does not satisfy the Principle of Alternate Possibility, but my conception does—while Molinism places causally deterministic constraints on choice, my conception constrains choice only by the laws of the Excluded Middle and Non-Contradiction—the only restriction is that a proposition articulating the outcome of a free will event must be either true or false, not both or something in the middle. But these laws do not constrain the truth value of such propositions; only a *free choice determines their truth value*.



Another possible objection is that God is unjust in holding humans accountable for their choices if He chooses those choices. This is misguided. Humans are justly accountable for the choices which they make freely, and, if you accept the argument above, we have already established that freedom of choice can be maintained. Moreover, the idea that Charley, in another possible world, would have done differently is irrelevant. In the actual world, Charley, as agent, chooses freely, and he would have done differently if he had chosen to do so. The Charley who freely chooses rightly or wrongly and is morally accountable for his choice is the only actual Charley, and so the only Charley God must act justly towards. Charley in counterfactual situations is not actual, and thus cannot be wronged. God is not accountable to not-things.<sup>24</sup>

Finally, note that this conception of God's foreknowledge and free human action is compatible with foreknowledge within time (although I maintain God's atemporality). Recall that our starting illustration was of Marty McFly's foreknowledge within time. Thus, God's revelation to humans (prophecy), which results in foreknowledge within time, need not conflict with human free will.

Now we add in the fifth proposition:

1. The dynamic theory of time (McTaggart's "A-theory") is correct
2. God is atemporal
3. God knows tensed facts
4. Free human actions are possible

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<sup>24</sup> The question of God's goodness and why He chooses to actualize *this* world is a separate question and, while worthwhile, it is beyond the scope of this paper.

5. God interacts responsively with humans

Nicholas Wolterstorff writes: “Traditional theologians had a number of reasons for holding that there is nothing in God that is a response, chief among them their conviction that responsiveness on God’s part would compromise God’s aseity, God’s unconditionedness . . . Responsiveness would require tensed knowledge on God’s part.”<sup>25</sup>

The discussion above allows for God’s responsiveness without compromising His primacy. If God has knowledge of tensed facts, He can know when a request is made and, because of this knowledge, act at a particular time in a way which He would not otherwise have acted. Thus, the criterion for responsive interactions given at the beginning of this paper is satisfied. Moreover, because God chooses which world to actualize, and knows the requests that will be freely made, He can respond to these requests from eternity, with no change entailed. Finally, any notion of God being a puppet who must respond to our requests is eliminated because these very requests are chosen by Him, even as they are made freely by us.

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<sup>25</sup> Nicholas Wolterstorff, “Unqualified Divine Temporality,” in *God and Time*, ed. Gregory Ganssle (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 206.

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