

God's Time

Infinite Temporality and the Ultimate Reality of Becoming

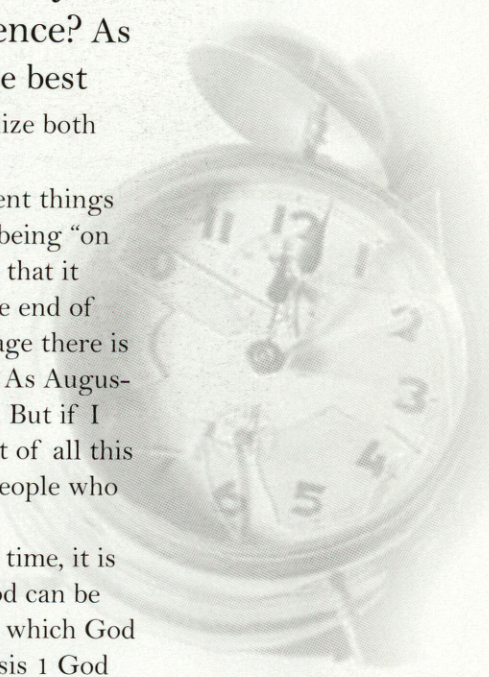
by Fritz Guy

Is time an essential feature of all reality? To be more specific, is time a characteristic even of ultimate reality—that is, God's infinite reality—as well as the finite reality of the created cosmos and our own human existence? As in the case of many other fundamental questions, the best answer here is “Yes, but. . . .” And it is important to recognize both the basic affirmative and the modifying adversative.

First, some clarification. The word “time” means quite different things in different settings. We talk about “saving” and “losing” time, of being “on time” and “out of time.” We say that time “flies” and “stands still,” that it “waits for no one,” and that it “heals all wounds.” We speak of “the end of time” and “the time of the end.” In addition to the diversity of usage there is also the difficulty of definition. Time has long been a conundrum. As Augustine famously said, “Provided no one asks me, I know what time is. But if I want to explain it to someone who asks, I don't know.”¹ The result of all this is that there are almost as many meanings of “time” as there are people who think and talk about it.

In spite of our common, metaphorical ways of talking about time, it is not some sort of container that someone or something or even God can be “in” or “outside of.” Time is not an entity that God creates or with which God has to deal. It is interesting (and, I think, significant) that in Genesis 1 God does not say, “Let there be time.” And time is not a force or a limitation; it doesn't “do” anything; it doesn't make anything happen or keep anything from happening. Time is simply a relationship of events that occur. In this discussion, the word “time” will refer primarily to the temporal succession and relation of events—that is, to “after-each-other-ness.”²

But, as usual, things are not quite so simple. So, at the risk of seeming



pedantic but in the interest of being as clear as possible, I will often use the word “temporality” along with or instead of “time.” Whereas “time” may be easily misunderstood as referring to some sort of substance or entity, “temporality” has the advantage of suggesting a characteristic of something. The word “temporality” here points specifically to temporal succession and relation, as well as duration. That is, it includes what is sometimes called “temporal passage” or better, “temporal becoming.” This is the idea that “events are first future, then become present, and finally become past,” which in turn means that “future events do not yet exist, present events exist, and past events no longer exist.”³

Time, Nature, and God

Everyone agrees that for us human beings, the past, the present, and the future are *experientially* very different from each other. This is just the way we encounter reality. We remember the past but not the future, we plan for the future but not the past, and we act in the present but not in the past or the future. The disputed issue is whether these temporal “phases” (as I will call them) are also *ontologically* different—whether “our undeniably real experience” of temporality gives us any valid reason to suppose that temporality is an aspect of reality as such.⁴ In other words, is time—that is, temporality—more than an artifact of human experience, a mental construction based on our perceptions of things and events?

Certainly many ancient and modern theorists have thought of time as a strictly a human phenomenon. At the beginning of the fifth century Augustine concluded that time is an “extension [literally, a “distention”] of the mind.”⁵ And Albert Einstein is quoted as saying at the beginning of the twentieth century that space and time are “modes by which we think, not conditions under which we live.”⁶ So the question remains: Is there such a reality as “objective” or “external” time, or is this merely “a manner of speaking” that has no literal meaning?⁷

This question has been described as “the profoundest issue in the philosophy of time,” but it is fortunately not intractable.⁸ Contemporary philosophy has addressed the issue by means of two related sets of questions about the temporal order:

- Are the successive events of the past, present, and future equally real, or is the present in some way “more real” than the past and the future? Are things that happen “now” real in ways that things that happen “then” (either “back then” or “not until then”) aren’t?
- In order to describe events fully, is it necessary to employ the temporal *properties* of pastness, presentness, and futurity, or can we simply use the temporal *relationships* of earlier, simultaneous, and later? Again, does the fact that an event is “now” make an objectively real (as distinct from a humanly perceived) difference?

Those who regard the past, present, and future as equally real, and believe that the only real temporal differences are matters of “earlier,” “at the same time,” and “later,” are proponents of what are called “tenseless” or “stasis” theories of time. Those who regard the present as uniquely real

in comparison with the past and the future, and who insist on the ontological importance of grammatical tenses are proponents of “tensed” or “dynamic” theories.⁹

The differences between these two kinds of theories are particularly interesting—and particularly challenging—at the ends of the spectrum of reality. And it turns out that the answers to the questions about temporality at these opposite ends are logically related to each other.

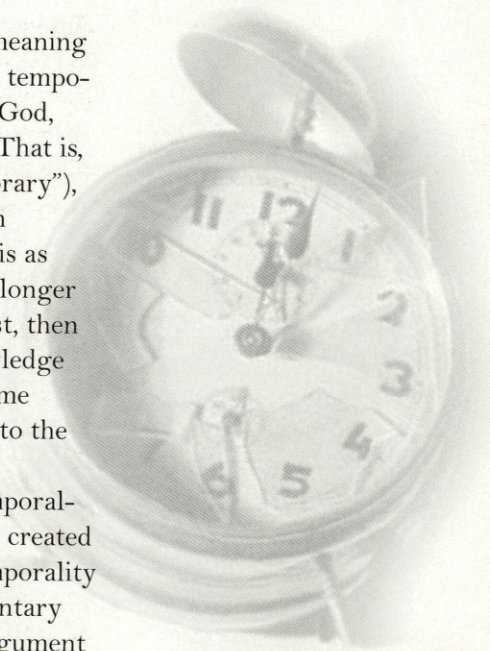
On the one hand, if the temporal phases of “past,” “present,” and “future” have no fundamental meaning in the natural world, then nature is essentially “nontemporal” or “timeless.” So it would be entirely reasonable (though not logically necessary) to suppose that God, too, is “timeless.” That is, the phases of time would have no essential relation to God’s being, and God would know the past, present, and future of the world (and of

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our human lives) all at once and all in an eternal, “timeless” now, since finite reality itself is timeless.

On the other hand, if the temporal phases do have essential meaning in relation to fundamental natural processes, so that nature is truly temporal, it would be appropriate, and perhaps even necessary, to regard God, too, as in some important sense “temporal” rather than “timeless.” That is, God’s own reality would be temporal (though certainly not “temporary”), and God would know (and relate to) the past, present, and future in sequence and in fundamentally different ways. The reasoning here is as follows: If some reality is essentially temporal, with a past that no longer exists, a present that now exists, and a future that does not yet exist, then knowledge of that reality is also (necessarily) temporal. This knowledge “becomes” as the known reality “becomes.” If the knowledge of some reality is thus temporal, the knower must also be temporal at least to the extent that the knowledge “becomes.”

So our thinking about God’s time—that is, about God’s temporality—logically presupposes an understanding of the temporality of created reality. Although there is no “slam-dunk” argument in favor of temporality as an essential feature of the natural world down to its most elementary particles (like quarks and bosons), even less is there any decisive argument against it. It is entirely plausible to understand nature as essentially temporal, and this view has the advantage of being supported by universal human experience. So I will proceed here on the basis that time—temporality and temporal becoming—is not just a human experience but is indeed “an essential feature of the universe.”¹⁰



God "Outside of Time"

Until the twentieth century, Christian theologians and philosophers strongly favored the idea that God is essentially timeless. "God," they said in effect, "is outside of time." Three factors help to account for this consensus.

In the first place, the universal human experience of temporality was (as it still is) an experience of radical transience and insecurity. For us, to be temporal is to be temporary, subject to disease and decay, dissolution and death; and none of this applies to God.

Our experience of temporality, furthermore, results in the pervasive human desire for a locus of permanence, security, and meaning. Such a locus must transcend our ordinary temporal experience; in some sense it must be "timeless." In one way or another, we all sing and pray,

Swift to its close ebbs out life's little day;
Earth's joys grow dim, its glories pass away.
Change and decay in all around I see
O Thou who changest not, abide with me."¹¹

A changeless, timeless God meets our profound emotional and spiritual need for a sense of ultimate stability.

Such an understanding of God, furthermore, seems to have scriptural support. The prophet quotes the divine word: "I the LORD do not change" (Mal. 3:6). The psalmist prays, "You are the same, and your years have no end" (Ps. 102:27). The apostle describes God as "the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change" (Jas. 1:17).

In the second place, classical thought offered to early Christianity just such a sense of permanence by way of the idea of "timeless" being. The Greek philosopher Parmenides of Elea (ca. 515-450 B.C.E.) had been convinced that "Being has no coming-into-being and no destruction, for it is whole of limb, without motion, and without end. And it never *was*, nor *will be*, because it *is* now, a *whole* all together, a continuous *unity*."¹² A century later Plato (ca. 428-348 B.C.E.), perhaps the most influential figure in the history of Western thought, had made a radical distinction between created temporality and uncreated timelessness:

The nature of the ideal being was eternal, but it was impossible to confer this characteristic in its fullness upon something generated. So [the Creator] resolved to have a moving image of eternity, which we call time. . . . The past and future are created species of time, which we unconsciously but wrongly transfer to eternal being. For we say that it "was," or "is," or "will be," but the truth is that "is" alone is properly attributed to it, and that "was" and "will be" are only to be spoken of becoming in time.¹³

Six centuries after that the Neoplatonist philosopher Plotinus (C.E. 204-70) further elaborated the idea of timeless eternity:

We know it as a Life changelessly motionless and ever holding the universal content in actual presence—not now this and now that other, but always all; not existing now in one mode and now in another, but a consummation without part or interval. All its content is in immediate concentration as at one point; nothing in it ever knows development; all remains identical within itself, knowing nothing of change, forever in a “now,” since nothing of it has passed away or will come into being. But what it is now, that it is ever. . . . Thus we come to the definition: the Life—instantaneously entire, complete, at no point broken into period or part—which belongs to the authentic Existent by its very existence, . . . this is Eternity.¹⁴

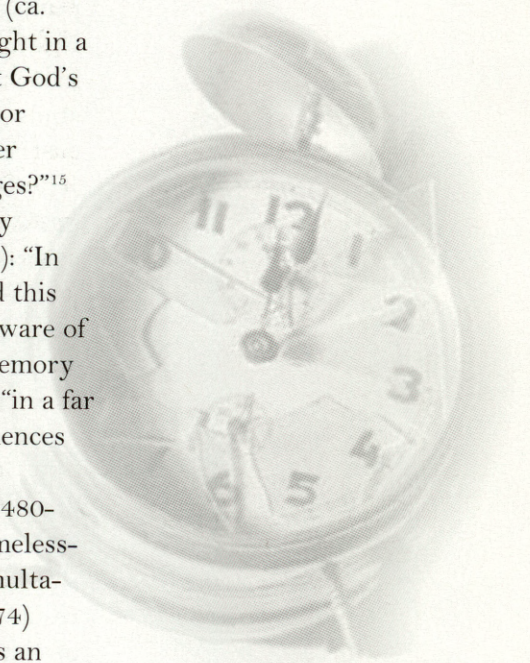
“On the other hand, if the temporal phases do have essential meaning in relation to fundamental natural processes, so that nature is truly temporal, it would be appropriate, and perhaps even necessary, to regard God, too, as in some important sense ‘temporal’ rather than ‘timeless.’”

In the meantime, the Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria (ca. B.C.E. 25–45 C.E.) provided a synthesis of biblical and classical thought in a treatise titled *On the Unchangeableness of God*. Here he insisted that God’s life is “not a time but eternity, . . . and in eternity there is no past nor future, but only present existence.” And, Philo asked, “What greater impiety could there be than to suppose that the Unchanging changes?”¹⁵

Philo’s example of Biblical-classical synthesis was followed by influential Christian thinkers, most notably by Augustine (354–430): “In the Eternal nothing passes away, but . . . the whole is present.” And this presence of the whole is not like the human experience of being aware of a whole psalm while singing one part of it, which is a matter of memory and expectation and a kind of expansion of the mind. By contrast “in a far more wonderful and far more mysterious way” God actually experiences the whole content of time at once, without succession.¹⁶

A century later, a Christian civil servant named Boëthius (ca. 480–524) formulated what came to be the classic definition of divine timelessness: “the complete possession of an endless life enjoyed as one simultaneous whole.”¹⁷ In the thirteenth century, Thomas Aquinas (1225–74) defined eternity with typical succinctness: “Eternity itself exists as an *instantaneous whole* lacking successiveness.”¹⁸

In the third place, the idea of divine timelessness offered a way of resolving the vexing logical problem contained in the idea of God’s foreknowledge of future free choices. The problem was (and is) this: if God knows infallibly today what I am going to choose freely to do tomorrow, am I actually free to choose not to do it, and thus falsify God’s fore-



knowledge?¹⁹ If, however, God's knowledge is timeless, it is not, strictly speaking, *foreknowledge* at all, but simply an eternal observation and awareness of all that has ever happened, all that is happening now, and all that will happen in the future (including free choices). This resolution of the problem on the basis of divine timelessness is still regarded by many as the best one available,²⁰ sometimes with an appeal to the logical possibility of additional dimensions of reality.²¹

Some modern philosophers have attempted to combine affirmations of both divine temporality and infinite foreknowledge (in contrast to *timeless* knowledge). It has been claimed, for example, that God's knowledge of an event is not, strictly speaking, *caused by*, but is rather *contingent on*, that event, and that "earlier events or states of affairs can be logically contingent upon later ones."²² But it is not at all clear that the temporal logic of a *contingency* relationship is decisively different from that of a *causal* relationship.

Again, it has been argued that the theoretical possibility of tachyons (particles traveling faster than light, which are not known to exist but have not been proved not to exist)²³ suggests the further possibility of a kind of time reversal that would enable God actually to know an event before its occurrence.²⁴ But even if tachyons do exist and appear to "travel backward" in relativistic time, the application to divine foreknowledge seems to be an implausible extrapolation of relativity theory.

The source of an idea does not, of course, determine its validity. So the philosophical ancestry of the idea of divine timelessness does not in any way count against its truthfulness. But this ancestry does raise the question whether the idea appears in the biblical documents, which are the primary source of Christian belief. A careful reading of the materials cited in favor of God's timeless eternity (such as those mentioned above) indicates that they refer to God's *character*, not God's *being*. And a further study of the biblical materials related to eternity shows that they refer to everlasting time rather than timelessness.²⁵

Yet it is easy to see why the idea of divine timelessness remains attractive and widespread in popular Christianity. It offers a sense of spiritual assurance in a world of change and decay; it has an impressive philosophical pedigree; and it provides an explanation of divine foreknowledge. Its slogan is short and simple: "God is outside of time."

God's Temporality

During the twentieth century, however, the idea of divine timelessness—which is properly defined as the absence of temporal succession, relationships, and duration—has "fallen on hard times."²⁶ This development is a result of doubts not only about the conceptual coherence and intelligibility of the idea of divine timelessness, but also about its biblical, theological, and practical adequacy.²⁷ For example:

- A truly timeless God could not properly be said to act or exist "now," or "at" any other particular time—before the foundation of the world, in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, or at the end of the present age. This would result in a logically odd situation for Christian belief, to say the least.

- A truly timeless God could not hear either praise or petition as they actually occur. Such a God would certainly know what musical notes follow others in a song or a symphony (as they exist, for example, in a musical score or a compact disc), but could not actually hear either melody or rhythm, for these phenomena are by their very natural temporal realities.

- A truly timeless God could not make a particular response to particular events as they occur, and hence could hardly be regarded as “personal” in any meaningful sense.

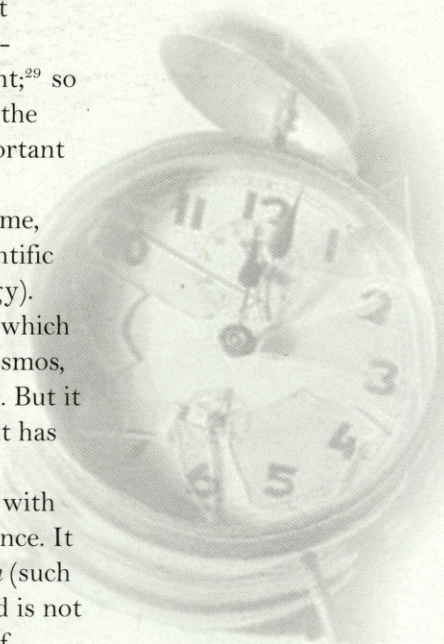
In contrast to this predicament, according to the idea of divine temporality a personal God knows and experiences the events of the created world as they happen, responds to them, and takes the risks inherent in the actualization of future free choices. This is often called

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“the open view of God,” which in Adventist thought has been most clearly articulated by Richard Rice.²⁸ Here the divine eternity is regarded not as the negation of time but as its totality and fulfillment;²⁹ so it might well be called “infinite temporality” to distinguish it from the “finite temporality” of human and natural existence.³⁰ In this important sense, God is *more, not less temporal* than nature and humanity.

We can conceptualize a first event, the beginning of cosmic time, before which no other event occurred (such as the “big bang” in scientific cosmology, or the initial creative act of God in theological cosmology). And we can conceptualize a last event, the end of cosmic time, after which no other event will occur (such as the possible “heat death” of the cosmos, which has no parallel in the biblical picture of an everlasting future). But it is not clear that the idea of a completely nontemporal, timeless event has any meaning at all.

God’s temporality is required by the idea of divine interaction with the world—that is, with the created universe and with human existence. It is, of course, quite possible to think of a nontemporal, timeless *truth* (such as the mathematical truth that $2 + 3 = 5$) that does not “become” and is not part of a sequence of events. It is even possible to think of a kind of nontemporal, timeless *existence* (such as Plato’s ideal “forms” that were supposed to be the eternal, celestial realities of which earthly, temporal entities are imperfect actualizations). But it is impossible to think coherently of a nontemporal, timeless *interaction*. For an interaction is necessarily an event with temporal relationships, an event in relation to which other events are necessarily earlier, simultaneous, or later.



The Christian understanding of God as personal entails interactions—actions in relation to other actions or events (which may be divine, human, or natural). However nonliterally anyone interprets the creation story of Genesis 1:1-2:3, it describes divine actions in a temporal sequence—at the very least, creating and resting. The same is true of other “mighty acts of God”—in the liberation of the people of Israel from Egypt, for example, and in their later Exile and Restoration. All of these events are described as divine-human interactions: God acts in relation and response to human acts (good or bad).

Again, whatever was involved in the incarnation of God in and as Jesus of Nazareth, it was a temporal event that was once future, then present, then past. Of course it has continuing consequences and is in this limited (and metaphorical) sense “timeless”; but the whole of Christian faith is based on the conviction that something *happened*, and that the very reality of God was truly and directly involved. God was certainly more than a timeless observer, a spectator “outside of time.”

But God’s temporality is unique. Although it is true temporality (in that it entails temporal succession, relation and duration), it is infinite temporality and therefore radically different from any and all the finite temporalities of the cosmos and of humanity.

- Infinite temporality is universally and temporally inclusive: it is omnitemporality. God coexists with every time and all time.
- Infinite temporality has no sense of recency, of having come into existence relatively late, after much natural and human history has already occurred. God is prior to all other reality.
- Infinite temporality perfectly retains the positive meaning and consequences of all events in all time. God makes the past present in ever new ways, so that nothing good is ever lost.
- Infinite temporality has none of the transience and insecurity that come from natural entropy and biological mortality, but is the eternal source of creativity. God is the proper ground of stability and hope.

Because of this radical uniqueness, God’s temporality has been called “relative timelessness.”³¹ This terminology is certainly plausible and arguably appropriate, because the words “time,” “temporal,” and “temporality” are so colored by our finite, human, and often negative experience of time that we may unconsciously project this coloration onto God’s very different temporality.

Nevertheless I prefer the term “infinite temporality,” which calls attention to an important truth that the term “relative timelessness” tends to disguise. This is the truth that God’s reality is truly temporal. It includes the knowledge and experience of futurity, presentness, and pastness, because it involves interaction with natural and human events as they happen, and because, therefore, it includes temporal becoming.

The Reality of Becoming

So we should regard time—temporal becoming—as an essential feature of God’s reality, but we should regard it as infinite temporality.

Whether we recognize all reality, including nature and God, as truly temporal depends partly on our attitude toward human experience as a

valid indication of the character of reality. Although we can always exclude the phenomena of human experience as undependable and potentially illusory, we can just as plausibly hold that such an exclusion would be arbitrary and unwarranted. There is no compelling reason to suppose that human experience is irrelevant to an understanding of all reality, including its temporality, "as it really is."

If we do recognize temporal becoming as an essential feature of all reality, then the proper illustration of time is not a line along which human consciousness travels (like following a fence across a field), but a line that continually extends itself forward (like a trail being blazed in a forest) as natural, human, and divine events and actions occur. We—along with God and nature—are not following a path into the future; we are all

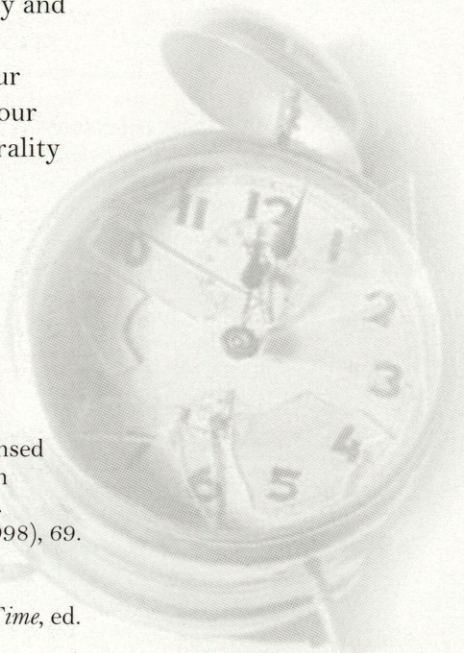
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blazing a trail. Like human existence, nature too has a history, and also a future that is not entirely predictable. Even ultimate reality is best understood as essentially temporal—but infinitely temporal. Like humanity and nature, God too has both a history and a future.

To be sure, temporal becoming has a different significance in our understanding of God's reality than it has in our understanding of our own and natural reality. But it is just as essential. For infinite temporality is the ultimate reality of becoming.

Notes and References

1. Augustine, *Confessions*, 11.14.
2. In German, *nacheinanderheit*.
3. Quentin Smith, "General Introduction: The Implications of the Tensed and Tenseless Theories of Time," in *The New Theory of Time*, ed. L. Nathan Oaklander and Quentin Smith (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 1.
4. See, for example, D. H. Mellor, *Real Time II* (London: Routledge, 1998), 69.
5. Augustine, *Confessions*, 11. 26. Augustine evidently coined the term *distentio* here. It is usually translated "extension."
6. David A. Park, "Time in Modern Physics," in *The Encyclopedia of Time*, ed. Samuel L. Macey (New York: Garland, 1994), 465.
7. Eva Brann, *What, Then, Is Time?* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999), 201.
8. George Schlesinger, *Aspects of Time* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1980), 23.
9. Philosophers often identify the two contrasting theories of time by the designations coined by J. M. E. McTaggart: the A-theory (the "tensed" or "dynamic" theory) and the B-theory (the "tenseless" or "stasis" theory). These designations are admirably nonprejudicial, but unfortunately uninformative.
10. G. J. Whitrow, *The Natural Philosophy of Time*, 2d ed. (New York: Oxford



University Press, 1980), 375.

11. Henry F. Lyte, "Abide With Me" (1847), in *Seventh-day Adventist Hymnal* (Washington: Review and Herald, 1985), no. 50.

12. Parmenides, "Way of Truth," 7-8.

13. Plato, *Timaeus*, 37d-38a.

14. Plotinus, *Enneads*, 3.5.

15. Philo, *On the Unchangeableness of God*, 32, quoted by John Sanders, "Historical Considerations," in Clark Pinnock et al., *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1994), 70.

16. See Augustine, *Confessions*, 11.11, 31.

17. Boëthius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, 5.6: "interminibilis vitae tota simul et perfecta possessio."

18. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1.10.1.

19. For brief, complementary surveys of this issue in the history of Christian thought, see William Hasker, *God, Time, and Knowledge* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1989), 1-29; Alan C. Padgett, *God, Eternity, and the Nature of Time* (New York: St. Martin's, 1992), 38-55; and Sanders, "Historical Considerations," 59-100. For a sampling of comparative recent literature, see *God, Foreknowledge, and Freedom*, ed. John Martin Fischer (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1989).

20. See, for example, Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann, "Eternity," *Journal of Philosophy* 78 (1981): 429-58; Paul Helm, *Eternal God: A Study of God Without Time* (New York: Oxford, 1988); Brian Leftow, *Time and Eternity* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991).

21. See Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski, *The Dilemma of Freedom and Foreknowledge* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 172-79. But this assumes that the future already exists; see L. Nathan Oaklander, "Time and Foreknowledge: A Critique of Zagzebski," *Religious Studies* 31 (1995): 101-3.

22. Stephen T. Davis, *Logic and the Nature of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 64.

23. Paul Davies, *About Time: Einstein's Unfinished Revolution* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), 280.

24. William Lane Craig, "Tachyons, Time Travel, and Divine Omniscience," *Journal of Philosophy* 85, (1988): 135-50.

25. The classic study is Oscar Cullmann, "Time and Eternity," in *Christ and Time: The Primitive Christian Conception of Time and History* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1950).

26. Hasker, *God, Time, and Knowledge*, 144.

27. In addition to the classic critique by Nelson Pike, *God and Timelessness* (London: Routledge, 1970), and the analyses by Hasker and Padgett (see note 19 above), see, among many other sources, Richard Rice, *The Openness of God: The Relationship of Divine Foreknowledge and Human Free Will* (Nashville: Review and Herald, 1980); reprinted as *God's Foreknowledge and Man's Free Will* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1985); Richard Swinburne, "Eternal and Immutable," in *The Coherence of Theism*, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 217-38; Clark Pinnock et al., *Openness of God*; David Basinger, *The Case for Freewill Theism: A Philosophical Assessment* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1996); Keith Ward, "God and Time," in *Religion and Creation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 256-84; John Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1998); Gregory A. Boyd, *The God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2000).

A very recent introduction to the discussion is Nicholas Wolterstorff et al., "God and Time," *Philosophia Christi* 2/1 (2000): 5-59.

28. Rice, *Openness of God*. This title, coined by Rice and later utilized by Pinnock et al., has yielded the term "the open view of God" as a designation for the related movement in evangelical theology. See, for example, Boyd, *God of the Possible*.

29. The idea of eternity as the totality and fulfillment of time is shared with the process philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead and his followers, but is not dependent on it. See Hasker, "A Philosophical Perspective," in Pinnock et al., *Openness of God*, 138-41.

30. The term "infinite temporality" comes from Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 499 n. 13. See also Schubert Ogden, "The Temporality of God," in *The Reality of God and Other Essays* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), 145.

31. See Padgett, *God, Eternity, and the Nature of Time*, 122-46; see also Padgett, "God the Lord of Time: A Third Model of Eternity as Relative Timelessness," in Wolterstorff et al., "God and Time," 17-20.

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