

ETERNAL CREATION¹

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Summary

The lecture provides a partial defence of the idea of the timelessly eternal creation of the universe, once commonplace among Christian theologians, but now widely disputed. On such a view God has ontological but not temporal priority over his creation. It is better to stress the negative aspects of divine timelessness than to think of it on analogy with temporal duration. Recent objections to the idea of causation being necessarily temporal are considered and rebutted. Some objections to the idea of God being in time are proposed. Finally, it is argued that the timeless eternity of God fits better with the Nicene doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son.

I. Introduction

The idea of the timelessly eternal creation of the universe, once commonplace among Christian theologians, currently faces an array of misunderstandings and objections, some more formidable than others. In this lecture I intend to explore and to defend the cogency of the idea of timeless divine creation. In what follows the chief focus will be on the timeless creation of the universe, though I shall not endeavour to prove from any source that God has created the universe thus. Nor will I be concerned to separately defend the idea of *creatio ex nihilo*. If you have difficulties with that idea, then I expect that by the end of this lecture those difficulties will remain, though they are not, of course, difficulties that are peculiar to timelessly eternal creation.

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I shall first offer a preliminary characterisation of the idea of timelessly eternal creation, then look at some objections to it, and conclude the lecture with more exploration.

II. God, Timelessness and Creation

First, the idea of timelessness. There seem to be two logical possibilities; either that God's relation to the universe is that of temporal cause, with himself being in time and the universe being created at a time; or that God is its timelessly eternal cause. If God is the timelessly eternal cause of the universe then it can make no sense to ask at what time God created the universe. On this view it would be necessary to provide different analyses of such expressions as 'before' in 'God existed before the universe did' and of 'beginning' in 'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.' For an eternal God cannot have existed before the universe in the same sense in which breakfast is before lunch, nor can the beginning of the universe be an event in time like the beginning of the Grand National.

Following Boethius, Augustine of Hippo, and a host of others I understand timelessness as being a condition to which, necessarily, temporal predicates such as dates and various temporal indexical expressions do not apply. As with numbers, so with a timeless God there is no before and after. It makes no sense to ask when the number seven came into existence, nor for how long it has existed; not because the number seven has existed for a very long time, but because it exists timelessly. And similarly, for Boethius and the others, with God.

Unlike a number, a timelessly eternal God has a life, but a life remarkably unlike human life such as yours and mine. For he has no memory nor expectation, no hope or fear of what is to come. Nor is a part of his life spent, irretrievably over, with a part yet to be. His career cannot be divided into temporal segments any more than his essence can be said to have spatial parts.

So much, for the moment, about timeless eternity. What about creation? It would seem to follow that when Scripture refers to the 'beginning' (Gn. 1:1) or to states of affairs 'before' all things (*e.g.*,

Col. 1:17) such language is consistent with timelessness, though he would be a bold exegete who claimed that the writers intended to imply the timelessness of God's existence. It is important to see that there are different senses of 'before'. We speak of breakfast being before lunch or the Battle of Waterloo being before the Battle of El Alamein. But we also say that duty is before pleasure, age before beauty and that the Queen is before the Prime Minister. When Sir Francis Drake finished his game of bowls before setting sail to defeat the Spanish Armada, though pleasure came before duty in time, duty still carried precedence; that's the point of the story. When we say that the Queen is before the Prime Minister we do not mean that the Queen is older than the Prime Minister. A young Queen will be younger than an old Prime Minister, but will still be before him. Why? Because she is - in constitutional terms - his superior. She takes precedence. He is a Prime Minister because she has appointed him, and she alone. No Prime Minister could appoint a Queen.

According to Colossians 1:17, Christ is before all things. And I suggest that such an expression could be taken to mean not that Christ is before all things in time, but in the nature of his being. He does not depend upon the universe, but the universe, time and space and all that time and space contain, depend upon him, for he willed the whole order into existence. Christ is independent of the creation, being eternally begotten of the Father. The universe is dependent, a created, changing thing, having its being from Christ. Without him was not anything made that was made. By him all things consist.

So when we talk of such a timeless God *creating*, the verb must be understood in a timeless or tense-indifferent manner, in the same manner in which we say that the number two *succeeds* the number one, or that the hypotenuse of a right-angled triangle *lies opposite* that angle. God timelessly creates with time, not in time; and, as Augustine put it, he eternally wills changes without changing his will.

What are the theological attractions of timelessness as applied to God? There are a number. To many, the idea that God is subject to the vicissitudes of temporal passage, with a part of his life irretrievably over and done with, is incompatible with divine

sovereignty, perfection and with that fullness of being that is essential to God. More specifically, by timelessness it is possible to articulate the distinction between the creator and the creature and to make clear that divine creation is one metaphysical action, the bringing into being of the whole created, temporal order, not the creation of the universe by one who is already subject to time. God creates everything distinct from himself. Finally, for Christians, the affirmation of God's timeless eternity has appeared to be necessary in order to provide the conceptual materials for affirming the eternal begetting of the Son by the Father. For if God is in time then any of his actions, such as the act of begetting, is in time, and thus it appears to follow that, if God the Father begets the Son, there was a time when the Son was not. More, in what follows, on all these points.

III. 'Timeless Duration'?

I said that the idea of divine timeless eternity, and the associated idea of timeless creation, has faced numerous objections in the 20th century. I cannot hope to look at them all, but I wish to say something about alleged *metaphysical* difficulties with the idea.

The first difficulty that I wish to consider arises from some of the things that recent defenders of the idea of divine timelessness say in its defence.

Some atemporalists or eternalists, as they have come to be called, have claimed that not only does God exist timelessly, but that his existence has timeless *duration*; indeed, the main tradition may be said to affirm that God has atemporal duration. Thus Boethius says

that which embraces and possesses simultaneously the whole fullness of everlasting life, which lacks nothing of the future and has lost nothing of the past, that is what may properly be said to be eternal. Of necessity it will always be present to itself, controlling

itself, and have present the infinity of fleeting time.²

Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann, in commenting on Boethius' view that divine timeless eternity embraces 'illimitable life', say that

The natural understanding of such a claim is that the existence in question is infinite duration, unlimited in either 'direction'.³

The eternal, pastless, futureless present is not instantaneous but extended, because eternity entails duration⁴ and they reject the alternative interpretation, for which there is some textual support in Boethius, that illimitable life is durationless.⁵

For them, the thought that timeless eternity has at least some of the significant features of temporal duration seems to be necessary in order to introduce their idea of ET-simultaneity. Since on their view the eternal divine life can be simultaneous with phases of temporal life it must be possible to construct an account of simultaneity, ET-simultaneity, to cater for this, an account of simultaneity which takes into account the respective standpoints of eternal and temporal observers.

But to suppose that the timelessly eternal divine life has duration, even timeless duration, seems to me to be going too far, as I have indicated elsewhere,⁶ and to raise unnecessary difficulties. For either the duration in question has time-like features or it has not. Either we can ask 'How long'? questions of this eternal duration, or we can not. If we can, we seem to be sliding inexorably back into temporalism. If we cannot, then what is gained by referring to timeless eternity as a timeless *duration*? So in my account of God's timeless existence I wish to emphasise the negative aspect of the word 'timeless' and to stress our agnosticism of any further details of the character of the divine life. I agree with Richard Swinburne that

²*The Consolation of Philosophy* trans. V.E. Watts, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969) 164.

³'Eternity' in T.V. Morris (ed.), *The Concept of God* (Oxford: OUP, 1987) 222.

⁴Stump and Kretzmann, 'Eternity', 225.

⁵*Ibid.*, 223.

⁶*Eternal God* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988) 100.

Stump and Kretzmann's account looks to have an extremely *ad hoc* character to it.⁷ That is, it appears to have no other general philosophical merit or rationale than to provide some account of the simultaneity of timeless eternity and events in time. As Swinburne says, the account offered appears to lay down this simultaneity by a kind of fiat.⁸

IV. Eternal Causation

Having glanced briefly at an unnecessary problem raised by the friends of divine timelessness, I turn to consider some recent objections to the idea raised by someone who is less friendly to it. In the article already referred to Richard Swinburne argues that the doctrine of God's timeless eternity, and particularly the idea of a timelessly eternal cause, flouts two metaphysical principles about causation. The first (Swinburne's Principle 1) is that everything that happens in time does so over a period of time. Swinburne maintains that instants are not short periods of time, but conceptual boundaries between periods of time. The second relevant principle about causation (Swinburne's Principle 3), asserts that

the past is that realm of the logically contingent which it is not logically possible that any agent can now affect, and the future is

⁷As I argued in *Eternal God*, ch. 2, and as Richard Swinburne has argued more recently in 'God and Time' in Eleonore Stump (ed.), *Reasoned Faith* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1993) 217f.

⁸In 'Eternity Has No Duration' (*Religious Studies* 30 [1994] 1-16) Katherin A. Rogers argues that, on balance, the infinite duration view is not to be found in Boethius. More importantly, she points out that 'timeless duration' is a puzzling notion which, in her view, in the hands of Stump and Kretzmann in the article cited, and Brian Leftow in *Time and Eternity* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1991) is not used to help solve a single theological problem. She succeeds in showing that Stump and Kretzmann's clarifying metaphors do not clarify. For example, the metaphor of time and eternity as parallel lines 'is no use at all in mitigating the paradox of a timeless duration, and, at worst, conjures up the image of a sort of piecemeal eternity' (9).

that realm of the logically contingent which it is logically possible than an agent can affect.⁹

By this principle both backward and circular causation are ruled out. One can agree with Swinburne that both backward and circular causation are impossible. But he claims the same for simultaneous causation. Can we follow him here?

If simultaneous causation were possible - if A caused B simultaneously, and B caused C simultaneously - then, by Hume's principle cited earlier, it would be logically possible that B could have had, instead of its normal effect, not-A. That logically impossible conjunction of causal sequences is, given Hume's principle, only rendered impossible if we suppose simultaneous causation itself to be impossible.¹⁰

Hume's principle is that 'anything can produce anything'. Suppose we accept that principle; could it be applied to the divine intention? Are divine intentions cases of Humean causation? Even if they are, is there a possible world in which God wills anything that he knows is impossible? I hardly think so. So it is not clear how Hume's principle, that 'anything can produce anything', even if we accept it as a true principle about event-causation, may be thought to be relevant here. Anything may produce anything, but it does not follow that God may attempt to produce anything.

But let us leave the questions of simultaneous causation and of the causal character of intention to one side. For what the eternalist is arguing is that God, the eternally timeless cause, produces effects in time; indeed, produces time along with the effects in time. He is not arguing, or need not be arguing, that God's timelessly eternal cause is temporally simultaneous with some event or events in time. While, as we have seen, certain accounts of timeless eternity, *e.g.*, that of Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann, may require an account of simultaneity, not all accounts do. So the Swinburne-Hume principle about causation, even if applicable to what God decrees, is relevant to

⁹Swinburne, 'God and Time', 211.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 214.

some accounts of timeless eternity, but not to all.

But Swinburne's third principle might be understood rather differently, as claiming not merely that simultaneous causation is impossible, nor that causation is essentially temporal, but that temporal notions are parasitic upon causal notions. It would follow from this that for any case of 'A causes B', A and B must each be events in time.

The trouble with saying that there is nothing more to time than what is involved in the possibilities of causation is that such a position assumes that there is one clear concept of 'cause'. But to assume this is, in effect, to beg the question against the eternalist who argues that there are senses of causation which can be explicated in non-temporal terms, that God can (and has) eternally brought about certain events. Understood in this way, the concept of causation would rule out the idea of causation by a timelessly eternal being such as God on *a priori* grounds.

So if this claim is a thesis about the meaning of 'cause', it looks implausible. For what the eternalist account of creation is maintaining is that the universe depends on God in that it has a relation of asymmetrical existential dependence upon the will of God. To be strictly accurate, what the view maintains is that the universe, considered as a whole, exists at no time, but is dependent on the eternal will of God. By contrast, certain events that occur in the course of the history of the universe, notably miracles, are said on this account to have an eternal cause and a temporal effect. It is not obvious that in either case this is using 'cause' in a stretched or otherwise illegitimate sense.

But let us suppose that it is. Swinburne or a Swinburnian may say at this point that it is better, wherever possible, to use language about God literally, and to eschew metaphorical or stretched senses of words. One could not agree more; but given that it is appropriate to use stretched language about God on some occasions, the only relevant question is when, and the answer to this question cannot, I think, be provided *a priori* but only by reference to the relevant facts of the case. So let us give further thought to a defence

of the idea of eternal causation, using 'cause' in a stretched or analogical sense.

The first point to note is that even if 'cause' is being used analogically or in a stretched sense, we can state coherently what that stretched sense is. God eternally causes the existence of the universe, or some event within the universe when for that event E (a) If God had not willed E, E would not have occurred, (b) God's willing E ensures that E occurs; and (c) E does not occur at the same time as God's willing it.

No doubt such an account is using 'cause' in a somewhat unusual sense. But it is hard to see that this sense is meaningless. 'Cause' may be defined in terms of time; but why need it be? Why may it not be defined in terms of the bringing about of effects? Lacking position in time, the eternal God cannot, by an act of will in time, bring about an event in time. For this reason it may be said that in a sentence such as 'God caused the universe to come into existence' or 'God caused the bush to burn', 'caused' is being used with an element of equivocation; its meaning is being stretched. But there is nothing here to prevent us asserting that God could not have eternally brought about the universe.

So even if, because of some general thesis about meaning, we deny that in 'God caused the universe to exist', 'caused' is being used univocally with 'caused' in 'The IRA caused the explosion', it may still follow that the idea of a timelessly eternal God causing the universe is an intelligible idea. And intelligibility is all that we need.

So a first response to Swinburne would be to argue that timelessly eternal causation makes sense if 'causation' is being used in an analogical or stretched sense, a sense which nonetheless can be spelled out in terms of asymmetrical existential dependence, and which falls well within the boundaries of what Swinburne himself regards as an acceptable use of language for theological purposes.¹¹

¹¹See Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1977) chs. 4 and 5.

But may we not give an account of eternal causation using ‘cause’ in a sense univocal with that used in cases of temporal causation?

Suppose that ‘cause’ does mean ‘to bring about, in time, some temporally later event’. If this is so, then we cannot say that the timelessly eternal God caused the universe. But we can simply modify this sense of cause to, say cause (1) which we may stipulate as meaning: ‘to bring about’. In this sense of ‘cause’ both the IRA caused (1) the explosion and the timeless God caused (1) the universe. It is difficult to see that this sense of cause is either logically incoherent or unintelligible in some other way.¹²

V. Eternal Existence

So much for the idea of eternal causation. Let us now turn our attention to whether the idea of God’s eternal existence, the idea of which lies behind the idea of eternal creation, makes sense. Swinburne in effect presents the eternalist with a dilemma. Either God’s eternal existence is instantaneous or it has duration over a period. If it is instantaneous, then, since an instant is a temporal boundary taking up no time, God does not exist eternally, since nothing exists merely instantaneously. Alternatively, God’s eternal existence has duration; but then if it has duration it cannot be timeless. For if God exists over a period of time, an ‘eternal duration’, then, according to Swinburne, any such God who creates and intervenes in the universe must do so in a way that is temporally prior to these effects. And if God is temporally prior to anything it follows that he is in time.¹³

Let us think about this a little. On the timeless eternity account, does God cause the beginning of the world? Clearly, on this account, the beginning of the world is not an event in time. Were it, then it would make sense to ask what might have come before the

¹²On this point, see William Alston ‘How To Think About Divine Action’ in Brian Hebblethwaite and Edward Henderson (eds.), *Divine Action* (Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 1990).

¹³Swinburne, ‘God and Time’, 216.

beginning of the world. But of course on the eternity account it does not make sense to suppose that God begins the world at a time. Nor does he cause the continuing existence of the world in the sense of providing, one by one, a series of impulses of power that keep the world, once created, in existence. For a series of impulses of power must be a temporal series, and God is not in time.

Rather what, according to the eternity account, God does is to timelessly cause the existence of the entire universe considered as a spatio-temporal unity. The creation and sustaining of that universe is one timeless creative act. So, consistently with this position, one might frame a reply to the arguments that Swinburne presents along the following lines:

It is simply a *petitio principii* to argue that causation is an essentially temporal notion. Swinburne's principle is plausible for intra-mundane causation, but not for extra-mundane causation. This is not to say that in the case of extra-mundane causation such a cause could *follow* its effect, or that there could be cases of circular causal sequences, suppositions which Swinburne rightly rules out. Such suppositions can in any case only be discussed in relation to intra-mundane situations, situations in which there is a temporal sequence of events. So extra-mundane causation differs in significant respects from intra-mundane causation.

And what about God's awareness of events in the world? There is, of course, a division of opinion among Christian philosophical theologians about whether or not God's knowledge is causal, whether or not *scientia dei causa rerum*, as Aquinas put it. I am inclined to think that Aquinas is correct in this view, and that such a view would obviously be consistent with atemporalism. But let us suppose for the sake of this argument that Aquinas is not correct, and that God's knowledge is caused by what he has knowledge of. Swinburne says that any such knowledge of events must be later in time than those events.¹⁴

In the case of intramundane awareness, this looks plausible. Light takes time to travel to the retina of the eye, and my awareness of

¹⁴*Ibid.*

the moving branches of the tree some distance away occurs some time after the branches actually move. But quite apart from the fact that God's awareness is not strictly comparable to my visual awareness of my environment, since God is omnipresent in the universe - a point common both to temporalists and eternalists - his eternal awareness of the universe is not conditioned by space and time. No doubt we should whenever possible take our language about God literally, but it is surely excessive to suppose that the eternal God's awareness of the universe is in all relevant respects like my awareness of a tree.

So God's awareness of the universe may be logically dependent upon the state of universe; but it does not follow from this that it is temporally dependent, that the awareness of some state of the universe comes later in time than the occurrence of that state. How could it, if God is timelessly eternal?

VI. A Temporalist View of God?

So far we have tried to defend an account of divine timeless creation by offering counter-arguments to Richard Swinburne's case against the idea of divine timelessness. A third response is to develop a positive account as, for example Alan Padgett has done. Padgett argues that it does not follow as a matter of logical necessity that any temporal effect must be brought about by a temporal cause. God may changelessly cause changes; as Augustine put it long ago, to will a change is not equivalent to changing a will.¹⁵

Even such a positive account must, it seems to me, contain elements of negative theology about it. To show this, I revert to Swinburne's claim that a positive account of timeless eternity must be in terms either of eternity as an instant, or eternity as a duration. The trouble, as Swinburne implies, is that both instants and durations are temporal notions, and it seems a little odd to explicate timeless

¹⁵Alan Padgett, *God, Time and Eternity* (London: Macmillan, 1992) ch. 4. See also Helm, *Eternal God*, ch. 4.

eternity in terms of concepts which are essentially temporal or temporally-related. When Brian Leftow, echoing Stump and Kretzmann, claims that 'eternity is logically a time'¹⁶ one wants to ask why. The unsatisfactoriness of this should lead us, I suggested earlier, to cultivate a proper agnosticism about God's timeless eternity. We may properly stress that God's timeless eternity is neither a case of an eternal instant, nor of an eternal duration, but that it is *timelessness*. God acts, but there is no moment at which he acts. If he is timelessly eternal, how could there be such a moment?

Swinburne adverts to this view briefly, in a footnote,¹⁷ and claims that it also is ruled out by his principle that the past is what is logically contingent but not affectable, the future is the logically contingent which is.¹⁸ Since God is timeless, he cannot be temporally before anything, and so cannot cause anything. But I do not see how this view is in any worse case than either of the alternatives that an eternalist might favour which are discussed by Swinburne; and it has the advantage of making it quite clear that God's action cannot be temporally prior to any temporal effect. The price to be paid for developing such a view in a positive way is a modicum of agnosticism and a commitment, as a consequence, to an analogical sense of 'cause'. Such agnosticism ought not to surprise or embarrass the eternalist, for it is surely to be expected that in dealing with matters for which there exists no exact parallel in human experience we should have an element of agnosticism forced upon us.

So far we have concentrated our efforts on making atemporalism plausible in the light of certain objections posed by the temporalist. But how does temporalism itself fare? In particular, what of Swinburne's temporalism, and his effort to avoid what he believes to be a difficulty of temporalism, that it makes God the prisoner of time?¹⁹

Swinburne says that God is not the prisoner of time, and that the reason for this is that there is no cosmic clock which ticks away

¹⁶Brian Leftow, *Time and Eternity*, 51.

¹⁷Swinburne, 'God and Time', 216.

¹⁸*Ibid.*

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 205.

independently of God and so 'imprisons' him.²⁰ In Swinburne's words, God calls the shots. Let us enquire how, on his view, God escapes from the prison of time.

Swinburne invites us to imagine the following situation; God, a temporal being, exists by himself, not having yet created the universe in which there are laws of nature. So the time in which God exists would be unmetrified. If we suppose that God has just one mental event, 'a conscious act without qualitatively distinguishable temporal parts'²¹ then, while this event has to take some time or other, there would be no identifiable difference between such a divine act of self-awareness which lasted for a millisecond and one that lasted a million years.

Let us accept this. Taking Swinburne's view of God's relation to time, it is, at best, only a contingent truth that God's mental life prior to the creation consists of only one mental event. So there is a possible world in which God, in time, before the creation of the universe in time, has a multiplicity of thoughts, a thought-sequence. These thoughts will be in temporal sequence, and it is possible that some of the thoughts last longer in time than others. So that temporal distinctions will exist, though not temporal metrication, because there are no regularities of nature in terms of which metrication can become established.

Swinburne goes on to claim that God need not leave things like that. In a state of successionless temporality, as we might express it.

God may choose to have a succession of qualitatively distinct mental acts, and in that case temporal order (though not a temporal metric) will have been introduced into the divine life.²²

But if God may choose to have such a succession, then the succession has already begun in the choice. For in choosing to have such a succession the successionless temporality is broken; the event of the

²⁰*Ibid.*, 218.

²¹*Ibid.*

²²*Ibid.*, 221.

choosing is the breaking of the successionlessness. So were God to have a succession of thoughts then he would thereby have a temporal life, and be housed in the prison of time. To this Swinburne may retort that the choosing need not be a further event; the choice could *be* the one act that is qualitatively identical, a qualitatively identical choice to have a succession of qualitatively distinct mental acts.

The supposition to which Swinburne's argument drives us is somewhat bizarre. It seems that the only way in which God can fail, in his words, to be the prisoner of time, is for God to have a successionless intention to have a succession of intentions. There are only two other alternatives. One is that God remains in successionlessness enjoying (we might say) all the advantages of timeless eternity; the other is that he is the prisoner of time.

Let us now leave these difficulties to one side and consider Swinburne's temporalism as a contribution in its own right to Christian philosophical theology. Considered in this light, the view that God is in time is not without further problems of its own.

VII. The Eternity of the Son

Swinburne's view is that God is not 'time's prisoner; except by his voluntary choice, his voluntary choice to create the universe. Considered in himself the aspects of time which seem to threaten his sovereignty would not hold. There would be no cosmic clock ticking away, for there would be no laws of nature. The past would not be getting lengthier by any measurable amount.²³

But of course the picture of God's relation to himself and to the physical universe he has created that has been bequeathed to us by the Christian church is more complex than this picture of an undisturbed deity existing in an unmetricated duration. Without committing Swinburne to the Nicene doctrine of the eternal begetting of the Son by the Father (a matter on which he has not, as far as I am

²³*Ibid.*, 220.

aware, expressed a view) we can say that it is extremely hard to see how anyone can hold this doctrine in its classical form, and also hold the view that God is in time. For it appears to follow from the view that God is in time that whatever God causes to be has a beginning in time. This is true of the creation of the physical universe, and it also appears to be true of the begetting of the Son by the Father. The Nicene Creed ends as follows:

And those that say there was once when he [the Son] was not, and before he was begotten he was not, and that he came into being out of nothing... the Catholic Church anathematises.²⁴

The view that God is in time appears to be incompatible with this for the following reasons:

On this view there was *time* when the Son was not. That is, it is difficult to see how a temporalist could hold to the classical Nicene position²⁵ that the Son came into existence before time; that there was no time when he was not.

Granted, on the temporalist view of the begetting of the Son the time when the Son was not was unmetricated time, though I suppose that once a metric for time is established there is nothing in principle to stop that metrication proceeding indefinitely backwards. But the fact of metrication is only a contingent matter, though an important one. What this temporalist view requires is that there was a time in God the Father's biography, whether that time was metricated or not, when the Son had yet to be begotten. And if there was such a time, and the Son was begotten at a time, then this would seem to strongly favour, if not actually entail, some form of Arianism.

'Begotten' looks to be a verb with a causal meaning. If A begets B then A causes B to exist, or to come into existence. All Swinburne's points about causality would appear to apply equally to 'beget'; that is, in order to beget the Son the Father must exist in time, his act of begetting must be an act in time, or times, when the Son was not, but only the Father was. That is, it is an implication of

²⁴Quoted from J. Bethune-Baker, *An Introduction to the Early History of Christian Doctrine* (London: Methuen, 8th ed., 1949) 170.

²⁵As reported by Bethune-Baker, *Ibid.*, 159.

Swinburne's temporalism that there is a possible world in which only the Father exists.

It is interesting to note that theologians such as Gregory of Nyssa, who were among the first to wrestle with these questions, appear to have been eternalists. In his *Contra Eunomium* Gregory insists that 'temporally prior' can be applied only to express the relationship between creatures, but not that between the Father and the Son. The Son is co-eternal with the Father, even though he is always from him. It is noteworthy that Gregory encounters an objection to this view, that Creation also has a beginning in time, to which he replies that there is no temporal interval before Creation. That is, his reply is to maintain a consistent position between the eternal generation of the Son and eternal creation; also that though both the Father and the Son are eternal the Son is generated but without temporal beginning, a case of non-temporal causation. Though in order to be consistent Gregory must distinguish between the fact that the existence of the Son is ontologically necessary, the Son being part of the godhead, while the existence of the universe, though eternal, is logically contingent. Presumably this is one reason for distinguishing between the eternal *begetting* of the Son and the eternal *creation* of the universe.²⁶

A temporalist such as Swinburne may reply that God may at each period of his existence cause the Son to exist during a subsequent period. The problem with this suggestion is that if 'cause' in 'God everlastingly causes his Son to exist' is being used in the Humean sense according to which anything can cause anything, then it is surely logically possible that God the Father not cause God the Son to exist. Perhaps there is no time before which the Son was caused to exist by the Father. Nevertheless, if the causal relation is contingent, then there is a possible world in which God the Father exists and God the Son does not exist.

²⁶For this information I am indebted to David L. Balas, 'Eternity and Time in Gregory of Nyssa's *Contra Eunomium*' in H. Dorrie, M. Altenburger and U. Schramm (eds.), *Gregory Von Nyssa Und Die Philosophie* (Leiden: Brill, 1976) 128-155; the reference to Balas I owe to my colleague Dr Graham Gould.

A temporalist may at this point take refuge in an analogical or stretched sense of 'begotten'. Maybe the Son was not begotten, only 'begotten'. It is certainly open to a temporalist to take this line. But then it is obvious that it weakens any case he may have against an eternalist treating 'create' in a non-literal or stretched fashion, a case such as that discussed earlier.

As a final remark, let me touch upon another metaphysical difficulty. Those of an anti-predestinarian cast of mind may fear that eternal creation entails predestination, a static universe deeply frozen by the chill hand of its eternal Creator; for we have noted that from the Creator's standpoint the universe comes about by one eternal act. But an eternal creation does not rule out change within the creation. The fallacy of arguing that the eternity of creation entails the eternity of what is created has often been pointed out. But if eternal creation does not rule out change within the creation it is hard to see that it rules out change due to causal indeterminacy, if such changes are logically possible and in fact occur. What eternal creation does rule out is real change in the Creator, and thus it rules out any act or event within the creation which requires any such change in the Creator.²⁷

²⁷I am grateful to Professor Swinburne and Dr Graham Gould for their comments on an earlier draft of this lecture.