

# Doing Hard Time: Is God the Prisoner of the Oldest Dimension?

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**Abstract:** In this paper I shall consider an objection to divine temporality called “The Prisoner of Time” objection. I shall begin by distinguishing divine timelessness from divine temporality in order to clear up common misunderstandings and caricatures of divine temporality. From there I shall examine the prisoner of time objection and explain why the prisoner of time objection fails to be a problem for the Christian divine temporalist.

During the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, various Christian philosophers and theologians have rejected divine timelessness. This is not an entirely new phenomena; one can find philosophers and theologians from the Reformation on rejecting divine timelessness. Thinkers like Pierre Gassendi, Isaac Newton, Samuel Clarke, and John Tillotson all rejected the doctrine of divine timelessness long ago for philosophical, theological, scientific, and biblical reasons.<sup>1</sup> For these thinkers, time is a necessary concomitant of God’s eternal nature. Despite the efforts of these thinkers, the doctrine of divine timelessness continued to play a central role in Christian theology until the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. During the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, and the beginning of this century, one can find a more wide spread rejection of divine timelessness amongst Christian philosophers and systematic theologians. Some of these rejections have been quite rigorous, while others have been misguided.

The more recent widespread rejection of the atemporal God has led many into the loving arms of the temporal God. However, divine temporality is not without its critics. Divine atemporality refuses to lay down and die. Various criticisms against divine temporality have been offered to the effect that it destroys Christian doctrine and practice. Replies to these critiques have been put forth, yet some objections do not seem to be so easy to bury. One objection in particular seems to keep coming up giving the impression that divine temporalists have not offered a thorough reply. This objection is known as The Prisoner of Time objection. Before examining and refuting this objection it will be helpful to get clear on what the differences are between divine timelessness and divine temporality. It is important to get clear on these differences because many contemporary critics offer

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<sup>1</sup> (Charleton 1654) (Alexander 1956) (Clarke 1998, 122-3) (Tillotson 1700, 355-60) The Socinians seem to have rejected divine timelessness as well. The Racovian Catechism says that God’s eternity consists only in existing without beginning and without end. (Socinus, et al. 1652, 16) (Gorham 2009, 861-70).

caricatures of divine temporality instead of explicating the actual position. Far too often Christian theologians do not seem to grasp the details of the doctrine of divine timelessness that they seek to defend, nor appreciate the nuances of the divine temporalism that they wish to reject. An overwhelming majority of the versions of the prisoner of time objection are mere passing assertions by atemporalists based upon these caricatures of divine temporality.

In this paper I shall first offer a proper understanding of divine timelessness and divine temporality. With a proper understanding of these doctrines, the Christian theologian can avoid the caricatures that plague much of the contemporary discussion. It will also allow the Christian theologian to examine the most thorough and rigorous version of the prisoner of time objection offered by Paul Helm. As we shall see, Helm argues that divine temporality deprives God of the sovereignty and a fullness of life that are appropriate for a perfect being. After unpacking Helm's argument, I shall offer a refutation. In particular, I shall argue that divine temporality does not deprive God of sovereignty, nor fullness of life. Helm, like so many others, equates divine timelessness with the sovereignty and fullness of life that is appropriate for a perfect being. I shall argue that divine timelessness is not a possible perfection, so it cannot establish sovereignty or fullness of life.

## What is Divine Timelessness?

In order to properly understand what is at stake in the prisoner of time objection, one must understand the classical doctrine of God. When Christian theists offer the prisoner of time objection, they are attempting to draw people back to the classical doctrine of God. This is an understanding of God as timeless, strongly immutable, and simple. Even further, these attributes are taken to be mutually entailing.<sup>2</sup> Elsewhere I have given a thorough articulation of divine timelessness and its systematic connections with divine immutability and simplicity, as well as the historical details of the development of this doctrine.<sup>3</sup> As such, here I shall be brief. For classical theists, to say that God is timeless is to say that God necessarily exists i) without beginning, ii) without end, iii) without succession, iv) without temporal location, and v) without temporal extension.<sup>4</sup> Conditions (i)-(ii) seem obvious as conditions for an eternal being, but conditions (iii)-(v) often need a bit more explication.

In order to properly understand condition (iii), one must be aware of some metaphysical and theological commitments amongst traditional, as opposed to contemporary, classical theists. Classical theists traditionally have held to a

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<sup>2</sup> (McCann 2012, 12-4).

<sup>3</sup> (Mullins, *Simply Impossible: A Case Against Divine Simplicity* 2013) (Mullins, *Divine Perfection and Creation* Forthcoming).

<sup>4</sup> (Pseudo-Dionysius 1987, *The Divine Names*, 10.2) (Davies and Evans, *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works* 2008)(Davies and Evans, *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works* 2008)(Philoponus 2006, 65) (Oresme 1968, 163-5) (Stock 1641, 91) (Turretin 1992, 202) (Pictet 1834, Book II.viii) (Strong 1907, 275).

relational theory of time where time just is change. If there is change or succession, there is time. As Rory Fox notes, succession and change served as the fundamental basis in the Middle Ages for determining whether or not something is temporal or non-temporal.<sup>5</sup> According to classical theism, God is atemporal, and as such must exist without succession. Further, for classical theism, God is strongly immutable such that He does not and cannot suffer any intrinsic or extrinsic change.<sup>6</sup> Contrary to many contemporary discussions, this also entails that God cannot even undergo mere Cambridge changes since even mere Cambridge changes would entail that God has new moments in His life.<sup>7</sup> Classical thinkers like Augustine, Boethius, Peter Lombard, Thomas Aquinas, as well as protestant theologians like James Arminius held to divine simplicity. A simple God has no properties at all, not even accidental Cambridge properties like *being referred to as Creator, Redeemer, Lord, or Judge of All Men*.<sup>8</sup>

Another set of metaphysical commitments held by classical theists are a presentist ontology of time and an endurantist account of persistence through time.<sup>9</sup> On presentism only the present moment of time exists. The past no longer exists, and the future does not yet exist. On endurantism, an object persists through time by existing as a whole, or all at once, at all times at which it exists. Since the present is the only time that exists, the object exists as a whole at the present.

Knowing this commitment to presentism and endurantism will help one understand various classical statements about the atemporal God. When classical theists speak of the atemporal God, they often speak of God existing as a whole in a timeless present that lacks a before and after.<sup>10</sup> It was common practice in the Ancient and Medieval world to speak of God as existing in the present, but to give this 'present' a non-temporal reading. This is why God's eternal present exists without a before and after on their understanding. It was also common to say that one could, if one wished to speak in the vulgar, speak of God in past, present, and future tenses. But the proper way to speak of God, they would say, is to speak of God in the present tense. Instead of saying, 'God was,' or 'God will', one should say 'God is.' Here the 'is' is given a non-temporal meaning.<sup>11</sup> As an interesting side note, the author of the book of Revelation refuses to speak this way. Instead of using the well-established timeless 'is' like others in his day, the author of the book of Revelation

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<sup>5</sup> (Fox 2006, 226-7).

<sup>6</sup> (Lombard 2007, Book I, Distinction VIII) (Augustine, *City of God* 1958, XII) (Augustine, *The Trinity* 1991, IV and V.2).

<sup>7</sup> Paul Helm, however, does appreciate this point. (Helm 2010, 19).

<sup>8</sup> (Augustine, *The Trinity* 1991, V.17) (Boethius, *Trinity is One God Not Three Gods*, IV) (Lombard 2007, Book I Dist. XXX.1) (Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* II.12.) (Arminius 1986, Disputation IV.XIV).

<sup>9</sup> (Augustine, *City of God* 1958, XI.21) (Augustine, *The Confessions* 2001, XI.20) (Davies and Evans, *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works* 2008, *Monologion* 21, 22, and 24. Also, *Proslogion* 13, 19, and 22.) (Aquinas, *Quaestiones Disputatae De Veritate* QII.) John Marenbon in (Poidevin, et al. 2009) (Visser and Williams 2008, chapter 6) (Staley 2006) (Pasnau 2011, chapter 18).

<sup>10</sup> (Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I.Q10).

<sup>11</sup> (Fox 2006, chapter 1).

continually speaks of God as the one who “was, is, and is to come.”<sup>12</sup> I shall leave it up to the reader to decide if the author of Revelation is speaking in the vulgar, or if the author simply does not believe in divine timelessness.

Understanding presentism and endurantism will also help one grasp (iii)-(v), as well as some of the classical arguments for divine atemporality. It was common for classical theists to compare and contrast the temporal present of creatures with the timeless present of God, as well as compare and contrast the temporal endurance of creatures with the atemporal endurance of God. For instance, the 14<sup>th</sup> Century philosopher Nicole Oresme notes that there are different kinds of duration. One kind of duration is appropriate to things that endure through the successions of time. Another kind of “duration is not successive, but refers to the continuity of everything together and to the things which cannot be altered; it is called eternity.” Further, “of necessity, [this] type is without beginning or end and without succession, but is at once complete as a whole; and this is the duration of God.” This eternal duration of God’s is “without past or future, completely in the present: Because neither any moment of past time is lost nor any anticipation of the future. And this is called the moment of eternity.”<sup>13</sup>

One might wonder, however, how the classical theist can justify such a comparison. This is important to note, as it shall come up again below in the midst of the prisoner of time objection. How does the classical theist move from presentism and endurantism to an enduring God who exists in a timeless present? The move seems to go like this. The method of perfect being theology starts with a perfection found in creatures, and then seeks to remove any of the creaturely imperfections perceived to be associated with it.<sup>14</sup> From there, one will have a pure perfection that can be predicated of God. For theologians like Anselm, the perfection found in creatures is the perfection of existing as a whole, or all at once.<sup>15</sup> In other words, the perfection is endurance.

To get a better handle on this it will be helpful to understand a distinction often made in the Middle Ages. During the Middle Ages it was common to distinguish between an enduring object and the life of the object. Classical theists, like Oresme and Anselm, say that an object endures through time and can be properly said to exist as a whole, or all at once, in the present. The present is the only moment that exists, so an enduring object does not have parts lying about at other times. It exists wholly and entirely in the present. Yet, classical theists say that we can draw a conceptual distinction such that the enduring object has a before and after in its life. In other words, the life of the enduring object can be conceptually divided up into temporal parts because the enduring object has temporal location

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<sup>12</sup> David E. Aune in (Das and Matera 2002, 230-2).

<sup>13</sup> (Oresme 1968, 163-5).

<sup>14</sup> (Leftow 2011) (Augustine, *The Trinity* 1991, V.1) (Aquinas *Quaestiones Disputatae de Veritate* QII.1.4.) (Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I.Q13.2.) (Scotus 1975, Q5-Q6) (Davies and Leftow, *The Cambridge Companion to Anselm* 2004).

<sup>15</sup> For this sort of move in Anselm see *Monologion* 21-22, and 24. Also, *Proslogion* 13, 19, and 22. Robert Pasnau in (Tapp and Runggaldier 2011).

and extension.<sup>16</sup> Conceptual distinctions are perfectly appropriate to predicate of creatures, but not so for a simple and timeless God. Conceptual distinctions are repugnant to divine simplicity, and as such must be removed in order to arrive at the pure perfection of existing all at once. As Anselm explains, “what either actually or conceptually has parts can be divided into parts, and this is altogether foreign to God.”<sup>17</sup> James Arminius concurs. “Simplicity is a pre-eminent mode of the Essence of God, by which he is void of all composition, and of component parts whether they belong to the senses or to the *understanding*.”<sup>18</sup> When classical theologians deny that God has temporal parts, they are denying that God has the sorts of conceptual distinctions that apply to the lives of enduring temporal creatures. They are asserting that God has no before and after in His life because He has no distinct moments in His life at all. He is not spread out through time like temporal creatures are. God lacks temporal location and extension.

## What is Divine Temporality?

Now that one has an understanding of divine timelessness, one can begin to understand divine temporality. Again, this will help one understand the prisoner of time objection considered below, as well as help one avoid the common caricatures of divine temporality that are often associated with the prisoner of time objection. Much of what I say here shall dispel the common caricatures that plague the typical versions of the prisoner of time objection.

Most divine temporalists agree with classical theism about presentism and endurantism. The divine temporalist will also agree with conditions (i)-(ii) with regards to God’s eternal nature, but will reject (iii)-(v) at some point. The qualifier “at some point” may seem a bit odd, and rightfully so. What must be understood is that divine temporalism comes in several forms. All divine temporalists will say that God has succession in His life at some point. What does this “at some point” mean? All divine temporalists hold that God has succession in His life subsequent to the act of creation, but some differences arise with regard to God’s life prior to creation.<sup>19</sup> The disagreements amongst divine temporalists usually arise over various issues with regard to God’s life prior to creation, and with the measurement of God’s life after creation.<sup>20</sup> Here, I shall limit myself to one dominant school of thought on divine temporalism called the Oxford school of divine temporality.

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<sup>16</sup> (Pasnau 2011, chapter 18) (Cross 2005, 122).

<sup>17</sup> (Anselm, *Incarnation of the Word*, VII.) Avicenna agrees that even conceptual distinctions are foreign to the simple God. Cf. Jon McGinnis, “Avicenna (Ibn Sina),” in (Oppy and Trakakis 2009, 64).

<sup>18</sup> Emphasis mine. (Arminius 1986, 115).

<sup>19</sup> For instance, William Lane Craig holds that God is timeless *sans* creation, but temporal with creation. Craig agrees that at the moment of creation God takes on succession in His life. (Craig, *Time and Eternity: Exploring God’s Relationship to Time* 2001) (Craig, *God, Time, and Eternity* 2001).

<sup>20</sup> For more on the agreements and disagreements amongst divine temporalists see (Mullins, *Time and the Everlasting God* 2012).

The so-called Oxford school of divine temporality is comprised of thinkers like J.R. Lucas, Richard Swinburne, Alan Padgett, Dean Zimmerman, and Garrett DeWeese.<sup>21</sup> The Oxford school of divine temporality rejects a relational theory of time. Instead, it holds to an absolute theory of time. There are several ways to articulate an absolute theory of time, but one of the main underlying beliefs on the Oxford school is that time can exist without change. Time is the dimension of possible change. Time exists if and only if an enduring substance exists that could possibly change. The Oxford school holds that God is a necessary being who exists as a whole, or all at once. Further, God is not strongly immutable as classical theists say, but weakly immutable. God is immutable in that His essential divine nature cannot change, but He can undergo non-essential intrinsic and extrinsic changes like becoming the *Creator, Redeemer, and Lord* of humanity. Since God exists necessarily and is capable of undergoing change, time exists necessarily.<sup>22</sup> Time exists because a personal God exists. It is a necessary concomitant of His being.

At this point, it would be good to note the importance of this feature of the Oxford school. Many of the versions of the prisoner of time objection seek to show that divine temporality is internally incoherent. **These versions start with the assumption that time is part of the created order. These versions of the argument seek to establish that a temporal understanding of God confuses God with creation, or somehow make God enslaved to creation.** The way Thomas G. Weinandy and D. Stephen Long set up the prisoner of time objection is paradigmatic. For Weinandy, if God is in time, then there is nothing to distinguish God from the created order.<sup>23</sup> For Long, if God is temporal, then God is really related to creation. "If God were really related to the created order, then God would be affected by it and thus on the same plane of being. God would be a creature, a mythological being."<sup>24</sup> It is hard to see how Weinandy and Long's characterization of divine temporality fits with the actual model of God that divine temporalists espouse.

While it would be unfair to say that Weinandy and Long offer no argumentation for these claims, it is quite difficult to figure out what the argument is, and where the force of the argument lies given their caricature of divine temporalism and their quick leaps of logic. Both seem to express a common and widespread assumption amongst atemporalists that time is created by God; it is a part of the created order. If God is temporal, then God is a part of the created order. The Oxford school of divine temporality is not subject to these versions of the prisoner of time objection because the Oxford school denies that time is part of the created order. As such, there is no internal incoherence for the Oxford temporalist.

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<sup>21</sup> (Lucas, *The Future: An Essay on God, Temporality and Truth* 1989) (Swinburne 1994) (Padgett, *God, Eternity and the Nature of Time* 1992) Dean Zimmerman, 'God Inside Time and Before Creation', in (Ganssle and Woodruff, *God and Time: Essays on the Divine Nature* 2002). (DeWeese 2004).

<sup>22</sup> Alan Padgett "Response to William Lane Craig," in (Ganssle, *God and Time: Four Views* 2001, 168-9). Also, Padgett, "The Difference Creation Makes: Relative Timelessness Reconsidered," in (Tapp and Runggaldier 2011).

<sup>23</sup> Thomas G. Weinandy, "Suffering and the Sovereign Love of God: A Conclusion to God's Sovereignty and Evangelical Theology," in (Long and Kalantzis 2009, 143-45).

<sup>24</sup> Long, "Aquinas and God's Sovereignty," in (Long and Kalantzis 2009, 54).

If theologians like Weinandy and Long wish to push their objection through, they will need to argue, not assert, that time is a part of the created order. Instead of arguing that divine temporality suffers from internal incoherence, they should argue that divine temporality is incoherent with the fact that time is part of the created order. Yet, such a fact is quite contentious. Appeals to scripture will not help for scripture does not teach that time began to exist with creation. As Gershom Brin points out, “The earliest time mentioned [in scripture] is that of the reality prior to the Creation.”<sup>25</sup> What biblical texts, like Genesis 1, teach is that a pre-existent God gave time a function or a purpose. Genesis teaches that time began to have a specific purpose, but it does not teach that time began simpliciter.<sup>26</sup> Instead of appealing to scripture, I suggest that theologians like Weinandy and Long seek to refute the arguments offered by the Oxford temporalists that time has no beginning.<sup>27</sup>

The Oxford school also avoids another common version of the prisoner of time objection that seeks to show that divine temporality is internally incoherent. Hugh McCann has recently argued that if there is an absolute, uncreated time that exists independent of God, then a temporal God would be enslaved to this absolute time. The temporal God would be limited in some way by this absolute time.<sup>28</sup> The Oxford school avoids this version of the prisoner of time objection because the Oxford school does not think that time exists independently of God. Again, time is a necessary concomitant of God’s being. This version of the prisoner of time objection is also based upon a misunderstanding of divine temporality. In order to establish an internal incoherence, McCann must argue that the temporalist is committed to an absolute, uncreated time that is independent of God. No such argument seems to be forthcoming. With these misunderstandings cleared up, I shall go further into various issues of the Oxford school that will be relevant to Paul Helm’s version of the prisoner of time objection.

The Oxford school holds to a type of conventionalism with regard to the metric of time. Time cannot be measured unless there are laws of nature that provide a uniform periodic process by which one can develop a metric. In the absence of laws of nature time can have a topology—events can be earlier and later than each other—but time will lack an intrinsic metric. As such there is no truth to statements about the length of temporal intervals in the absence of laws of nature.<sup>29</sup> In light of this, divine temporalists of the Oxford school will say that God exists in unmetrified time prior to His free act of creating the universe. God exists in a temporal vacuum, or a “dead time” where there is no intrinsic change.<sup>30</sup> God can

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<sup>25</sup> (Brin 2001, 179) (Waltke and Fredricks 2001, 58).

<sup>26</sup> (Padgett, *Science and the Study of God: A Mutuality Model for Theology and Science* 2003, 129) (Walton 2007, 180-90 and 222).

<sup>27</sup> One possible move would be to offer a Kalam argument to the beginning of time. However, Garrett DeWeese as already offered a refutation of this move. (DeWeese 2004, 269ff).

<sup>28</sup> (McCann 2012, 61).

<sup>29</sup> Richard Swinburne, “God and Time,” in (Stump 1993, 208-9) (Lucas, *A Treatise on Time and Space* 1973, 311).

<sup>30</sup> Dean Zimmerman, “God Inside Time and Before Creation,” in (Ganssle and Woodruff, *God and Time: Essays on the Divine Nature* 2002, 82-4).

freely choose to create the universe if He wants and enter into covenantal relations with His creatures if He so desires. Upon creating the universe He brings about intrinsic and extrinsic change in His life. His present life then consists of a one-to-one correspondence with the cosmic present of the universe. His eternal present sets the boundary for the universe's cosmic present. After creation, God's life contains a before and after just like every other enduring being. Further, in creating a world with uniform laws of nature God creates a world with a temporal metric. For Richard Swinburne, this means that "we can date God's acts by the time at which they occur on the universe's clock. And we can even say that they last as long as those events in the universe with which they coincide."<sup>31</sup> In other words, once God creates a universe with uniform laws of nature, God creates a clock by which we can measure His life. However, not all in the Oxford school agree about the ability to measure God's life subsequent to creation. Padgett and DeWeese agree that in creating, God takes on succession and change in His life, and that God's present is in a one-to-one correspondence with the universe's present. What they deny is that the metrics based upon the laws of nature in our universe can be used to measure the life of God. What is important for the discussion of this paper is the agreement that God's life prior to creation involves a state of affairs that lacks a metric and intrinsic change.

A quick stress of emphasis is in order before delving into Helm's version of prisoner of time objection. On the Oxford school, God is temporal prior to creation. However, God's life is unchanging and unmetricated. God undergoes an intrinsic change in the act of creating the universe. The enduring God takes on succession in His life. **This means that God will lose moments of His life as they slip into the non-existent past, and God must wait for anticipated future moments to become present before He can live them.**

## The Prisoner of Time Objection Initially Stated

As noted before, most versions of the prisoner of time objection are quick passing comments based upon misunderstandings of divine temporality. It is quite difficult to find a thorough and rigorous version of the argument. Paul Helm as offered the fullest exposition of the argument that I have been able to find, but it too has several holes. I shall attempt to fill in these holes below, and seek to strengthen and clarify Helm's argument before refuting it. Helm's version of the prisoner of time objection can be initially stated as follows. **God, prior to the act of creation, exists in an unmetricated time. God's life is one conscious mental event without any intrinsic change. However, when God chooses to create He breaks this changeless event and becomes—gasp—a prisoner of time! He can no longer go back to the prior state because He is now enmeshed in the relentless flow of time where His life is stretched out with segments of it lost in the irretrievable past.** Helm concedes that this is not incoherent, but goes on to argue that this diminishes God's sovereignty

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<sup>31</sup> Swinburne, "God and Time," in (Stump 1993, 221).

and is incompatible with the fullness of God's life.<sup>32</sup> As I understand Helm's argument there are two issues to deal with: (1) God's sovereignty and (2) the fullness of God's life. Helm's arguments on these two issues will be elaborated below. I shall take each in turn and argue that divine temporalism does not diminish God's sovereignty and that it is not incompatible with the fullness of life that God is said to enjoy.

## What is God's Sovereignty?

Before getting deeper into the prisoner of time objection, it must be made clear what it means to say that God is *sovereign*. Unfortunately, Helm does not offer a working definition of divine sovereignty. This lack of a definition is a widespread problem for the various versions of the prisoner of time objection. If the prisoner of time objection is to have any force, a definition of divine sovereignty must be offered. Of course, a problem naturally arises at this point. The nature of divine sovereignty is a common theological prolegomenon, and various theological traditions seem to understand God's sovereignty in different ways. As a Calvinist, Helm may put more stress on God's sovereignty than Christians in other traditions, but I believe that Helm's argument can be made to have *prima facie* force for any Christian.<sup>33</sup> The God of the Bible is a sovereign God, but Christians may disagree over how God's sovereignty is to be understood. In this section I shall examine some different understandings of divine sovereignty in order to find the underlying agreement amongst them. This is important for at least two reasons.

First, some contemporary theologians speak of sovereignty in coarse-grain ways such that God can only be sovereign if He is the only one to have any causal say-so in creation.<sup>34</sup> This sort of thinking is an all or nothing approach to God's sovereignty that fails to capture the nuances of different models of the God-world relationship, and fails to offer a fine-grained understanding of God's sovereignty that lies beneath all the varying accounts of sovereignty. When such coarse-grained concepts are at play, the force of the prisoner of time objection will be significantly diminished. All the divine temporalist has to do is reject her opponent's doctrine of divine sovereignty because it is not a part of her understanding of the God-world relation. If it can be established that there is an underlying notion of divine sovereignty shared by various theological traditions, Helm's argument will be significantly strengthened. The temporalist will not be able to quickly dismiss her opponent's doctrine of sovereignty since the fine-grained account of sovereignty will also be a part of her understanding of the God-world relationship. With a more fine-grained account of sovereignty in play, the prisoner of time objection will have force for various models of the God-world relation.

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<sup>32</sup> Paul Helm, "Is God Bound by Time?" in (Huffman and Johnson 2002, 121-3).

<sup>33</sup> For a recent statement from Helm on God's sovereignty, see his "Classical Calvinist Doctrine of God," in (Ware 2008).

<sup>34</sup> Gregory A. Boyd accuses Paul Kjos Helseth of this in, "Response to Paul Kjos Helseth," in (Jowers 2011, 71-2).

Second, it is important to get a more fine-grained account of God's sovereignty in play because various forms of the prisoner of time objection lack any nuance, make large leaps of logic, and often offer crass caricatures of divine temporality. This is due, in large part, to the fact that discussions of God's sovereignty often quickly and uncritically equate God's sovereignty with God's timelessness, simplicity, strong immutability, or impassibility. As such, for some theologians, to deny a classical understanding of God just is to deny that God is sovereign. It would be easy for a divine temporalist to dismiss their arguments as straw men. If the prisoner of time objection is to be taken seriously, one will need to offer a more fine-grained doctrine of divine sovereignty that divine temporalists can understand and accept. I believe that this is possible, and that this will significantly strengthen Helm's argument.

What does a more fine-grained doctrine of divine sovereignty look like? The Arminian theologian Thomas McCall says that any doctrine of God's sovereignty must be able to affirm that God is omnipotent, exists *a se*, and providentially governs the world without being threatened by it in anyway.<sup>35</sup> The Calvinist, and divine temporalist, John Feinberg explains that God is sovereign in that He performs actions that are in accordance with His own nature and purposes. With creatures, their free actions are determined by their own nature and purposes, but their actions are often decisively influenced by things that are outside of their control. God, says Feinberg, is not quite like that because God's own nature and purposes are what decisively determine His free actions. God is never decisively influenced by factors that are outside of His control since God foreknows all things, and has providentially arranged all things before freely choosing to actualize a world. The types of worlds that are possible for God to create are ultimately dependent upon God's nature and will.<sup>36</sup> For Arminians like McCall, persons, both human and divine, have libertarian free will. For Calvinists like Feinberg, human and divine persons have compatibilistic freedom. These differences shape the way they understand how God's sovereignty is played out, but notice that there is a significant overlap in the concept of God's sovereignty. Both agree that God is omnipotent in that God can actualize any states of affairs that are logically and metaphysically possible, as well as metaphysically compossible with God's nature, desires, and plan for creation. Both agree that God exists *a se* in that God's existence does not depend upon anything outside of Himself. God is a necessary being. Both also believe that God foreknows all possible worlds, and uses this foreknowledge to freely actualize and providentially govern a particular world such that He is not ultimately threatened by it.

The same is true with Open theism. Open theists concur that God is omnipotent and exists *a se*. Interestingly, the basics of their doctrine of divine sovereignty are not too far off from the basics of the Arminian and Calvinist doctrine discussed above. The Open theist, Alan Rhoda, claims that

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<sup>35</sup> (McCall 2008, 205).

<sup>36</sup> (Feinberg 2001, chapters 13-16).

Open theism is a theory of divine providence according to which God has sovereignly chosen to create a world in which his creatures have significant freedom [libertarian freedom] to determine the direction of events. As a consequence of God's decision, there is no such thing as a completely settled future for God (or anyone) to know. That is to say, there is no complete and unique sequence of events subsequent to the present that is or that is going to be *the* actual future. Instead, there is a branching array of possible futures. Events that occur on all possible futures are settled and are known by God as such. Events that occur on some but not all possible futures are open and they too are known by God as such.<sup>37</sup>

For Open theists like Rhoda, God's nature and will determine the possible worlds that God could actualize. All possibilities are ultimately grounded in God's nature and will. Given God's perfect self-knowledge, God knows all possible worlds and all possible futures.<sup>38</sup> A Calvinist like Fienberg will be in perfect agreement on this point, whereas Arminians like McCall will disagree somewhat. For Arminians like McCall, God has middle knowledge. This middle knowledge pertains to propositions about what creatures would do with libertarian freedom in any possible state of affairs that they might be placed in. Such propositions are not grounded in God's nature or will. Calvinists and Open theists deny that God has middle knowledge for various reasons, but they are in agreement that God's nature and will ultimately determines the modal shape of reality.

On Arminianism and Calvinism, God knows all possible futures like the Open theist says, but they say that God also knows which future will actually take place because the propositions about the future have a determinate truth-value of true or false. **On Open theism, God knows all possible futures, but He does not know exhaustively which future states of affairs will in fact obtain since most future propositions do not have a determinate truth-value of true or false.**<sup>39</sup> Open theists will say that some propositions about the future have a determinate truth-value, and as such God knows them. For instance, Open theists will say that God can know those parts of the future that He has unilaterally determined to take place like the defeat of evil. If necessary, God will override the freedom of creatures to bring about His own purposes.<sup>40</sup> However, in general, God does not operate this way because He desires to work in cooperation with His creatures. God knows all possible futures and has an exhaustive contingency plan for any possible way the future might unfold. Like a master chess player, God has an exhaustive contingency plan for every possible scenario such that He can ensure that His will and ultimate purposes shall be done without being threatened by creation.

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<sup>37</sup> Alan R. Rhoda, "Beyond the Chess Master Analogy: Game Theory and Divine Providence," in (Oord 2009, 151).

<sup>38</sup> Rhoda, "Beyond the Chess Master Analogy," 159.

<sup>39</sup> Alan R. Rhoda, "The Fivefold Openness of the Future," in (Hasker, Oord and Zimmerman 2011).

<sup>40</sup> Dean Zimmerman, "The A-Theory of Time, Presentism, and Open Theism," in (Stewart 2010, 792).

There are several nuances and subtleties in each account that I have overlooked, but what I wish to stress here is that **there is enough of an overlap in these accounts of divine sovereignty to make Helm's objection intelligible**. Despite the differences between Calvinists, Arminians, and Open theists, each has an underlying concept of divine sovereignty such that they can understand, and feel the force of, Helm's objection. Each claims that God is *a se*, omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly free. Each also claims that God is sovereign in that He providentially governs the world that He has freely chosen to create. God is sovereign in that His ultimate purposes for creation will ultimately be achieved.

Perhaps the reason that the prisoner of time objection lingers is due to a confusion over God's sovereignty. A standard prolegomenon in systematic theology is the classification of the divine attributes. There are different ways of cutting up the divine attributes. For instance, one way would be to speak of God's essential and relative attributes. The essential attributes of God are attributes that God would possess even if He had not created the universe. They are attributes that God has in all possible worlds. **The relative attributes, however, are attributes that only obtain in some worlds—worlds where God creates a universe**. Relative attributes arise out of the exercise of God's essential attributes. For instance, Christian theologians typically say that omnipotence is an essential attribute of God's, whereas *Creator* is a relative attribute. God would be omnipotent even in worlds where He does not create anything, but God would certainly not be the creator in such worlds. God is only the creator in worlds where He exercises His omnipotence and creates something.

Where does sovereignty belong? Some Calvinist and Catholic theologians might wish to put it in the category of essential attributes, but I suggest that it must be in the category of relative attributes. Imagine a world where God exists alone and does not create anything at all. Is this God sovereign? It is not clear that God would be sovereign for there is nothing for God to be sovereign over. Sovereignty implies that one is sovereign over something. One is sovereign relative to something else. As such, it seems that sovereignty cannot be an essential attribute of God, but instead is derivative from God using His essential properties to create and govern a universe. As the Princetonian divine Charles Hodge explains, "Sovereignty is not a property of the divine nature, but a prerogative arising out of the perfections of the Supreme Being. If God be a Spirit, and therefore a person, infinite, eternal, and immutable in his being and perfections, the Creator and Preserver of the universe, He is of right its absolute sovereign."<sup>41</sup> Note how Hodge, like some of the theologians discussed above, links God's sovereignty to His providential governing of creation. Given God's nature and what He has created, God is sovereign. Without creation, God is not sovereign. God is only sovereign when He exercises His power and creates something that He can sustain and providentially govern.

With this more fine-grained understanding of sovereignty, one can begin to delve deeper into Helm's version of the prisoner of time objection. However, if God's sovereignty is a relative attribute that arises from His essential nature and the exercise of His essential nature in creation, it is hard to see how the temporalist can

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<sup>41</sup> (Hodge 1986, Vol. 1, 5.15).

be accused of diminishing God's sovereignty. God is not sovereign unless He creates a universe. As I shall argue below, the temporalist thinks that it is metaphysically impossible for God to exercise His power in the act of creation without taking on succession. **The divine temporalist can say that exercising divine freedom and power in the act of creation cannot be incompatible with God's sovereignty since it is the very thing that makes God sovereign.** As such, God creating a universe and taking on succession in His life cannot possibly diminish His sovereignty. Instead, they are the conditions for God to be sovereign.

## The Prisoner of Time Objection and Divine Sovereignty

Christians may disagree over how much sovereignty God enjoys, or over the details of the scope of God's sovereignty, but all agree that God is sovereign in that His ultimate purposes for creation will be achieved. So what exactly is the problem for divine sovereignty from divine temporality? Is the temporal God really a prisoner of time? The word "prisoner" certainly suggests that God is not actually sovereign, but it does not seem to be an apt word to use. The Oxford temporalist has already happily admitted that God is temporal prior to creation. God exists in a temporal vacuum—a state of affairs without intrinsic change. She holds that time is a necessary concomitant of God's existence. Time exists because God exists. In a rather tongue and cheek fashion, she can say there never was a time when God was not temporal. Time simply is a part of God's eternal essence. **To say that God is a prisoner of time is sort of like saying God is a prisoner of His own essence.**

Ron Highfield and Hugh McCann will complain that God cannot be sovereign if He is the prisoner of His own essence.<sup>42</sup> God, they complain, cannot be sovereign unless He can control His essence. Despite their protests, however, being a prisoner of one's own essence is not a problem. First, it is not clear why this is a special problem for the temporalist as Highfield suggests. God being a prisoner of His own essence would seem to be a problem for a timeless, simple, and immutable God as well. If God is simple, God is identical to His essence. He has no control over this fact. If God is timeless and strongly immutable, God cannot change in anyway. So it would be impossible for such a God's essence to be different than what it in fact is. He is timelessly and immutably identical to His essence. A timeless, simple, and strongly immutable God cannot have control over His essence, for there is no other way such a God could be. There is no possible world in which such a God's essence could be any different.<sup>43</sup> **So if being a prisoner of one's essence is a problem for divine sovereignty, it is not a special problem for divine temporality.**

However, the divine temporalist can respond by saying that being a prisoner of one's own essence is not a problem for divine sovereignty because the complaint is incoherent. It is incoherent because it presupposes that God has an essence. In

<sup>42</sup> Ron Highfield claims that if God is not simple, timeless, and immutable, then God is the prisoner of His own essence. See his, "Response to William Lane Craig," and "Response to Gregory A. Boyd," in (Jowers 2011) Cf. (McCann 2012, chapter 11).

<sup>43</sup> (Rogers, *The Anselmian Approach to God and Creation* 1997, 46-7).

order for God to be sovereign He must have an essence that includes attributes like omniscience, omnipotence, and freedom. In order for God to be sovereign, God must already have power to exercise freely, and a mind capable of wielding such power in a rational way. The temporalist can say that it is hard to conceive of God being sovereign without God being omnipotent and omniscient. But if God is omnipotent and omniscient, God has an essence. **So God cannot be sovereign unless He has an essence. Being sovereign over one's essence is simply incoherent, and as such not something that God can do.**

**An incoherent objection of this sort should not be the heart of the prisoner of time objection.** The problem for God's sovereignty that Helm seems to be pointing to is not that God is temporal *simpliciter*, or that God would be a prisoner of His own essence. (Though, at times, it seems like he is arguing this. More on this below.) Instead, the problem is that God has succession and change in His life subsequent to creation. As he puts it, "if God is in time, then he is not sovereign over time but is bound by it in precisely the same way as we are bound by it. The ever-rolling stream of time not only carries us along with it, it carries God along with it as well. This is surely a most unwelcome thought."<sup>44</sup> Is this really a problem for divine temporality? Is it a problem for God to have succession in His life? Does having succession diminish God's sovereignty?

I should think not. An omniscient God would know what He is getting into by creating a physical universe and bringing succession into His life. A God who is perfectly free and omnipotent could decide to actualize a state of affairs like that if He wants. **As Richard Swinburne points out, the unwelcome features of time come by God's own free invitation.**<sup>45</sup> **But the temporalist need not say that these features are unwelcome. It is not like time is an agent that forces itself upon God. Time is not God's mom, it cannot tell Him what to do. Again, the divine temporalist believes that time is a necessary concomitant of God's existence and essence. What is new for God on the Oxford school is that God takes on a continual, measurable change, and succession in His life by creating a physical universe with uniform laws of nature that can be used to develop a clock.** God is completely in control of the physical time associated with creation, and He can begin it or end it whenever He desires. True, **He cannot undo the succession that He freely brought upon Himself, nor can He retrieve His lost moments, but so what? He cannot do anything that is logically and metaphysically impossible, and He is no less sovereign for all that.** What is needed for God to be sovereign is for God to be able to achieve His ultimate purposes for creation, and the temporalist holds that God cannot create a temporal universe without undergoing succession.

Part of God's ultimate purposes for creation is that He be related to a temporal universe. The temporalist holds that it is metaphysically impossible for God to create and sustain a temporal universe without undergoing change and succession.<sup>46</sup> Another reason that temporalists think it is metaphysically impossible for a timeless God to create and sustain a temporal universe is because there can be

<sup>44</sup> Helm, "Is God Bound by Time," in (Huffman and Johnson 2002, 122).

<sup>45</sup> (Swinburne 1994, 143).

<sup>46</sup> (Mullins, Divine Perfection and Creation Forthcoming).

no timeless causes with temporal effects.<sup>47</sup> The complaint of divine temporalists from Pierre Gassendi to the present day is that there are no coherent models on offer of timeless acts with temporal effects. As such, it seems to the temporalist that it is metaphysically impossible for God to begin to do anything and lack succession in His life. Gassendi goes so far as to say that it is a manifest impossibility that a God who lacks succession could coexist with, and be omnipresent to, successive things. Atemporalists, he says, will continue to fail to explain how this is possible until the return of the Messiah.<sup>48</sup> Contemporary temporalists need not have the same rhetorical flair as Gassendi, but they can continue to insist that the burden of proof is on the atemporalist to provide us with a transparent and coherent model of divine timeless actions with temporal effects.<sup>49</sup>

In the meantime, the temporalist insists that the God of the Bible began to create *ex nihilo*. God was not eternally creating the universe, but instead freely began to create the universe at some point in the past.<sup>50</sup> The temporalist says that God cannot begin to perform an action without bringing about change and succession in His life. This is because causes are always temporally prior to their effects.<sup>51</sup> Change and succession do not threaten God's sovereignty, nor are they antithetical to His essence as the temporalist understands it. God does not become any less divine by freely creating the world.<sup>52</sup> In the act of creation God goes from having the potential to create, and then begins to exercise, or actualize, that potential.<sup>53</sup> Having succession is a necessary consequence of God freely exercising His omnipotence in the gracious act of creation. Freely exercising divine power cannot be incompatible with God's sovereignty since God cannot be sovereign

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<sup>47</sup> (Swinburne 1994, chapters 4 and 6).

<sup>48</sup> (Charleton 1654, 80-1).

<sup>49</sup> Stump and Kretzmann once offered the ET-Simultaneity model in a series of papers published during the 1980's and early 90's, but it has no serious defenders today. Every divine temporalist noted above, plus many others, have taken their turn refuting it. The atemporalists Brian Leftow and Helm have rejected it in several writings as well. The main complaint from all sides is that ET-Simultaneity is obscure. It does not tell us how timeless things can be simultaneous with temporal things, which is precisely what ET-Simultaneity is meant to do. Katherin Rogers, T.J. Mawson, and Don Lodzinski all hold to atemporalism and four-dimensional eternalism. As such, they see no need for ET-Simultaneity, and never make an appeal to it in their writings on God and timelessness. Rogers' work will be discussed below. In a recent paper, Thomas Schartle asserts in a footnote that ET-Simultaneity works because relative identity works. The problem with this is that relative identity does not work since it depends upon absolute identity. Further, Schartle neither articulates ET-Simultaneity nor explains how it could possibly work. See his, "Why We Need God's Eternity: Some Remarks to Support a Classic Notion," in (Tapp and Runggaldier 2011, 47). Thomas Greenlee also briefly asserts ET-Simultaneity without any argument or articulation. He holds to four-dimensional eternalism and seems to be unaware of the fact that he does not need this obscure doctrine. Thomas Greenlee, "Relativity, God, and Time," (Stewart 2010, 91).

<sup>50</sup> (Craig, God, Time, and Eternity 2001, 255).

<sup>51</sup> (Swinburne 1994, 81-90).

<sup>52</sup> (Torrance 1996, 208).

<sup>53</sup> (Mullins, Divine Perfection and Creation Forthcoming).

without exercising His divine power in creating a universe over which God can be sovereign.

In order to fully understand what is wrong with the prisoner of time objection with regard to God's sovereignty, consider a similar type of argument that purports to show the incompatibility between God's actions and God's sovereignty. I call it the prisoner of the covenant objection, and it goes a little something like this. The Christian God is perfectly good and sovereign. Further, the God of the Bible is a covenantal God. He is a God who freely enters into covenantal relations with His creatures, and makes promises to those creatures to redeem them. Focus on the covenantal relation between God and Israel. In the covenants with Abraham, Moses, and the promised new covenant to Jeremiah, God makes promises to Israel to bless them and to bless all nations through them. God promises to be faithful to His covenant even if Israel is not faithful. Before God enters into any covenantal relations with Israel there are certain moral obligations that God does not have to Israel. For instance, God has not made a promise to bless all nations through Abraham, and stands under no obligation to do so. Once God enters into a covenantal relation with Israel He takes on certain moral obligations that He can no longer take back because He is perfectly good; after all, a perfectly good God keeps His promises. God thus becomes a prisoner of the covenant! God has performed an action that entails certain consequences, and God can no longer undo what He has done. He is now a prisoner of His own promises to Israel. How can such a God be sovereign?

I find it doubtful that any serious Christian theologian would find the prisoner of the covenant objection to be a major difficulty for Christian doctrine. God's choice to freely and graciously enter into covenantal relations with His creatures does not diminish His sovereignty. A God who is perfect in power and wisdom understands all that is entailed in entering into a covenant. The consequences of entering into this covenant are freely accepted by God and in no way contrary to His sovereignty. In a similar way it seems to me that the prisoner of time objection is not a real difficulty to God's sovereignty either. A perfectly free, omniscient, and omnipotent God can enter into a covenantal relation and create a temporal universe if He so chooses.

## **The Prisoner of Time and God's Fullness of Life**

What about the notion that temporality deprives God of fullness of life? In order to understand this part of Helm's objection we must get clear on what he means by "fullness of life." What Helm has in mind is the notion of timeless eternity as expressed by Augustine, Boethius, and Anselm.<sup>54</sup> It appears as if Helm's argument is that divine temporalism is incompatible with divine timelessness: a temporal God

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<sup>54</sup> Helm, "Is God Bound by Time?" in (Huffman and Johnson 2002, 123-4).

cannot enjoy a timeless existence.<sup>55</sup> Nothing interesting follows from this. We already know that a temporal God cannot enjoy timeless existence. That is not a problem for divine temporalism. If anything, the temporalist sees this as a benefit.

Perhaps Helm's argument is intended to say something else. As I understand it, Helm is trying to say that there is a perfect mode of existence that God could enjoy whereby God enjoys His whole life all at once. Perhaps the argument is that the divine temporalist is denying this perfect mode of existence of God, so God cannot be perfect unless He in fact enjoys this perfect mode of existence. Further, the argument seems to be that God can only enjoy this perfect mode of existence if He is timeless. To get a better grasp on this alleged perfection we should look at Boethius's definition of timeless eternity that Helm appeals to for his argument.

Eternity is the simultaneous and complete possession of infinite life. This will appear more clearly if we compare it with temporal things. All that lives under the conditions of time moves through the present from the past to the future; there is nothing set in time which can at one moment grasp the whole space of its lifetime. It cannot yet comprehend to-morrow; yesterday it has already lost. And in this life of to-day your life is no more than a changing, passing moment...What we should rightly call eternal is that which grasps and possesses wholly and simultaneously the fullness of unending life, which lacks naught of the future, and has lost naught of the fleeting past; and such an existence must be ever present in itself to control and aid itself, and also must keep present with itself the infinity of changing time.<sup>56</sup>

What is the temporalist to make of this? The first thing the temporalist can do is argue that the perfection that Helm appeals to is not in fact a possible perfection. It should be noted that Boethius' definition of divine timelessness depends upon presentism.<sup>57</sup> The move in Boethius is to contrast the temporal present with God's timeless present where God enjoys all of His life at once. The temporalist, as well as many contemporary atemporalists like Helm, hold that presentism is not compatible with timelessness. The temporalist argues that, given presentism, divine timelessness is not a possible perfection.<sup>58</sup> This is because God is

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<sup>55</sup> This is certainly the way that Ron Highfield sets up the prisoner of time objection. A temporal God, he complains, cannot be eternal in the way that Boethius described. Highfield, "Response to Gregory A. Boyd," in (Jowers 2011, 232-33).

<sup>56</sup> Boethius, *Consolation of Philosophy*, V.

<sup>57</sup> Many contemporary philosophers of religion have misunderstood Boethius. Typically, philosophers say that Boethius must be a four-dimensional eternalist because Boethius says that God sees all of time. This is a misunderstanding since the 'seeing' that Boethius attributes to God is not a literal perception of time. Boethius, following Augustine, believes that God's knowledge in no way depends upon the temporal world. Instead, God has a perfect knowledge of Himself and thus knows all true propositions. For more on this see John Marenbon, "Boethius," in (Oppy and Trakakis 2009).

<sup>58</sup> One reviewer complains that there might be something problematic with this type of reasoning. 'On theory T, P is impossible. So P is not a possible perfection.' I maintain that this is part of the historical method of perfect being theology. Here is one example. 'If God is perfectly good, then God

constantly changing as He sustains each present moment of time in existence when that moment is present. If presentism is true, God is in a constant process of sustaining new moments of time as they become present, and ceasing to sustain moments of time as they slough off into the non-existent past. The process of sustaining creation in existence creates a before and after in God's life. Presentism is incompatible with a timeless God who suffers no change or succession and lacks a before and after in His life. This alleged perfect mode of existence that Helm appeals to is not in fact a possible perfection on presentism. As such, there is no difficulty for the temporalist in saying that God does not enjoy a metaphysically impossible mode of existence. God does exist as a whole, or all at once, on temporalism since God is an enduring being. But the temporal God does not enjoy His life all at once since this is metaphysically impossible. So much for that objection against divine temporality.

## Is Timelessness a Possible Perfection?

The move from the divine temporalist in the last section is dependent upon presentism being the correct ontology of time. The atemporalist might have a rejoinder to this move. She might be able to say that this alleged perfect mode of existence is in fact a metaphysical possibility. Katherin Rogers says that unless divine timelessness "entails some logical or metaphysical impossibility" Christians ought to hold to this doctrine since it expresses "the most ontologically perfect way to exist."<sup>59</sup> Rogers grants that atemporality—God enjoying His life all at once—is not compatible with presentism, but holds that it is compatible with four-dimensional eternalism.<sup>60</sup> She says that presentism is not the only metaphysically possible temporal ontology. Four-dimensional eternalism is also metaphysically possible. On four-dimensional eternalism all moments of time have an equal ontological existence. To put it roughly, the past, present, and future all exist. Strictly speaking the distinctions between past, present, and future are subjective. On four-dimensionalism objects do not endure through time. Instead they either *perdure* or *exdure* through time by having temporal parts at each instant at which they exist. This is not the conceptual temporal parts that we saw above. These are literal temporal parts. An atemporalist, like Rogers, will argue that this ontology of time is compatible with divine timelessness and as such the perfection of existing as a whole, or enjoying life all at once, is a metaphysical possibility for God. The

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sinning is impossible. As such, the ability to sin is not a possible perfection.' Further, we do something similar all the time in philosophy. Consider a common objection to presentism in the philosophy of time. 'On the Special Theory of Relativity, presentism is impossible.' I maintain that the type of reasoning employed here is not faulty, but instead must be used carefully. Each theory must be thoroughly tested on a case by case basis. The entailments of each theory need to be brought out to see what is compatible or not with each theory.

<sup>59</sup> (Rogers, *Anselmian Eternalism: The Presence of a Timeless God* 2007, 11-2).

<sup>60</sup> Helm makes this move, as does Katherin Rogers. (Rogers, *Back to Eternalism: A Response to Leftow's 'Anselmian Presentism'* 2009) (Rogers, *Anselm on Eternity as the Fifth Dimension* 2006) (Rogers, *Anselmian Eternalism: The Presence of a Timeless God* 2007).

atemporalist thinks that this is a metaphysical possibility because the four-dimensional universe is co-eternal with God. There is no state of affairs where God exists without creation, and God is not involved in a process of beginning to sustain and ceasing to sustain various moments in existence. Instead, God is eternally sustaining the universe in existence.<sup>61</sup>

The temporalist can respond to this rejoinder in one of two ways. First, she can argue that four-dimensional eternalism is false. This is the move taken by Zimmerman, Padgett, Craig, and DeWeese. Elsewhere, I have argued that four-dimensional eternalism is not compatible with Christian belief.<sup>62</sup> Since these issues have been discussed at length elsewhere, I shall focus my attention on the second possible rejoinder—the temporalist can argue that four-dimensionalism can make no sense of the perfection of existing all at once.

A central tenet of perfect being theology is that the perfections of God must be found in creatures in some lesser way. As Augustine says, “What, therefore, we do not find in that which is our own best, we ought not to seek in Him who is far better than that best of ours; that so we may understand God.”<sup>63</sup> **The temporalist can argue that endurance—existing all at once—is a perfection found in creatures on presentism. However, it is not a perfection found in creatures on four-dimensional eternalism. On four-dimensionalism no creature exists as a whole, or all at once. Creatures do not endure through time; they perdure or exdure through time. As such, there is no perfection of existing all at once on four-dimensional eternalism.** Timeless endurance is not a possible perfection on this theory of time. As noted above, the classical theologians moved from presentism and endurantism to the claim that God exists in a timeless present all at once. A four-dimensionalist like Rogers cannot make the same move. She must argue from a perfection found in perdurant or exdurant creatures to timeless existence. What would such a perfection be? If the move is analogous to the perfection of endurance, it will be perdurance or exdurance. As such the perfection would be having temporal parts. I should think it quite obvious that having temporal parts is not compatible with timeless existence. Instead, this would be divine temporalism as understood on four-dimensional eternalism. It seems to me that four-dimensional eternalism will be of no help in refuting divine temporality in respect to the objection under consideration. In adopting four-dimensional eternalism, Rogers has taken on a view that prevents her from articulating divine timelessness. That is not an ideal situation to say the least.

Perhaps the atemporalist will complain that I have been too quick. Why is it the case that endurance cannot be a possible perfection on four-dimensional eternalism? Contemporary metaphysicians argue that endurance is not compatible

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<sup>61</sup> (Helm 2010, chapter 14). Also, Helm, “Divine Timeless Eternity,” in (Ganssle, *God and Time: Four Views* 2001, 47-51). (Rogers, *Anselm on Eternity as the Fifth Dimension* 2006, 3).

<sup>62</sup> (Mullins, *Four-Dimensionalism, Evil, and Christian Belief* Forthcoming).

<sup>63</sup> (Augustine, *The Trinity* 1991, V.1).

with eternalism because of the problem of temporary intrinsics.<sup>64</sup> If an object exists as a whole at all times at which it exists, and if all times exist, then the object will exist as a whole at multiple times. But such an object will have contradictory properties. Consider an enduring object like Socrates. At time  $t_1$  Socrates is sitting, but at a later time  $t_2$  Socrates is standing. Since Socrates exists wholly at both times he will have both of the intrinsic properties *sitting* and *standing*. Those are contradictory properties since someone who is sitting is not standing, and someone who is standing is not sitting.

There are two main ways that contemporary metaphysicians avoid the contradictory properties. First, one can reject eternalism and adopt presentism. On presentism Socrates no longer has the property *sitting* since that moment no longer exists. He only has the properties that he exemplifies at the present moment. However, as already discussed above, presentism is not compatible with divine timelessness. So the atemporalist cannot make this move. The second way to avoid the contradictory properties is to reject enduringism and adopt perdurantism or exdurantism. Only the temporal part of Socrates that exists at  $t_1$  has the property *sitting*, and only the temporal part of Socrates that exists at  $t_2$  has the property *standing*. These temporal parts are not numerically identical, and the properties of one temporal part do not automatically transfer to other temporal parts. Instead, there are a bunch of temporal counterparts that are somehow appropriately related such that they count as a perduring object.

If this is the case, the atemporalist is in trouble. The perfection of existing all at once is not possible on a four-dimensionalist ontology. As such, she cannot say that the divine temporalist is denying of God a more perfect mode of existence because there is no such mode of existence on four-dimensional eternalism. Perhaps the atemporalist could again say that this is too quick. Isn't it the case that each temporal part exists as a whole?<sup>65</sup>

On exdurance, or stage theory, objects persist by having temporal counterparts like on perdurance. However, the proper name does not belong to the entire perdurant object, but instead belongs to the instantaneous stage. On standard perdurance theory, there is the spacetime worm called Socrates that has temporal parts spread out through time. On stage theory, there is the Socrates that exists at time  $t_1$  and the Socrates that exists at some later time  $t_2$ , and they are appropriately related such that each Socrates is a temporal counterpart. Again, this is not numerical identity through time, but the stage theorist insists that it is an account of persistence through time.<sup>66</sup>

It is certainly the case that temporal parts, or stages, exist as a whole. They exist entirely at the instants at which they exist, and do not exist at any other instants. This is not a perfection though. A temporal part exists for only an instant, and it cannot exist at any other instant. That does not seem to be a possible

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<sup>64</sup> See Thomas M. Crisp, "Presentism," in (Loux and Zimmerman 2003, 220). (Sider 2001, chapter 4). (Hawley, Why Temporary Properties are not Relations between Physical Objects and Times 1998, 211-16).

<sup>65</sup> Thanks to Katherine Hawley for bringing this to my attention in conversation.

<sup>66</sup> For a defense of stage theory, see (Hawley, How Things Persist 2001).

perfection that one would wish to predicate of God. Even the atemporalist says that God exists *at* all instants of time, though she will be quick to say that God does not exist *in* time. I don't find the at-in distinction to be meaningful because it relies on a disanalogous spatial metaphor, but ignore that. What matters is that the atemporalist wishes to say that God exists at all times, and existing for only an instant does not get one there. A perdurant God could exist at all times by having temporal parts, or stages, at each instant, but that is divine temporalism and not divine timelessness.

It is not clear to me how the divine atemporalist can get to the claim that God exists all at once if she adopts four-dimensional eternalism. Nor is it clear to me how she could establish that a timeless endurance is compatible with a four-dimensional ontology. As it stands, it does not appear that divine timelessness is a possible perfection on four-dimensional eternalism. As such, the divine temporalist need not worry that she is denying of God some more perfect mode of existence since there is no more perfect mode of existence.<sup>67</sup> **On four-dimensional eternalism, the perfect mode of existence would be having temporal parts at all times, and that would be divine temporality as understood on four-dimensional eternalism.**

## Conclusion

In this paper I have sought to defend divine temporalism against the prisoner of time objection. I have argued that divine temporality does not diminish God's sovereignty. I have also argued that divine temporality does not deprive God of a more perfect mode of existence because there is no more perfect mode of existence on presentism or four-dimensional eternalism.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> One reviewer worries that there is something wrong with the type of argument that I employ here. The complaint is against the following type of argument: 'If property A is metaphysically impossible, God cannot have property A.' I fail to see what is wrong with the form of this argument. What Christian theist wishes to say that God has metaphysically impossible properties? This is the sort of thing that Christian theists wish to avoid saying. For instance, typical definitions of omnipotence will maintain that God cannot do that which is logically and metaphysically impossible.

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