

Hermeneutische Blätter  
1/2 · 2008

# ZWISCHEN DEN ZEICHEN

Ingolf U. Dalferth zum 60. Geburtstag

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# Philosophical Theology

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Ingolf Dalferth and I first met decades ago at meetings of Cambridge University's «D» Society, its Divinity Faculty's Philosophy of Religion Seminar, then run by Donald MacKinnon, the Norris-Hulse Professor of Divinity, at whose home it met. Ingolf was investigating the then fashionable view of some British linguistic philosophers that theistic doctrines are not, as they seem to be, true or false assertions about a supernatural subject matter, but have a quite different role in religious «language games». Though I had never thought this view plausible, it was Ingolf who convinced me of its falsity; and while he may not be solely responsible for the view's subsequent decline, his demonstrations, e.g. in his *Theology and Philosophy* (1988), of how to combine historical and analytic accounts of religious doctrines have long been an object lesson to many analytic philosophers of religion.

Ingolf has facilitated mutually beneficial interactions between theology and analytic philosophy in other ways too, for example through his presidency of the European Society for Philosophy of Religion. He has also encouraged thinkers in each discipline to publish relevant work in the other's journals, something I can best illustrate with a personal example. In the 1980s I became aware of some unobvious theological implications of the theories of time that I and other analytic metaphysicians were developing and defending. These theories were new versions of the so-called «tenseless» view of time, the view that nothing in time is ever past, present or future in itself, and that to be past/present/future at any time is just to be earlier/simultaneous/later than that time. On this view, time does not flow, i.e. nothing in reality moves from the future to the past via the present, so that nothing either comes to exist by becoming present or ceases to exist by becoming past. What I did not realise, until Ingolf told me, was that many theologians ignore this view's implications, perhaps because they misunderstand them or because they fail to take the view seriously. That realisation prompted me to publish a paper, «History Without the Flow of Time», in the *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie*<sup>1</sup>, a paper that but for Ingolf would not have been written, and an updated gist

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<sup>1</sup> Vgl. NZSTh 28, 1986, 68–76.

of which I would therefore like to offer here as a tribute to Ingolf, its original begetter.

All the so-called ‹tensed› theories of time that I and other ‹tenseless› theorists reject take the *present* time to be fundamental. So-called ‹presentist› theories do so by taking the present to be the only time at which anything exists (note that ‹exists› here must be read tenselessly, i.e. not as ‹exists at present›, if presentism is not to be a mere tautology). But even tensed theorists who think that the past or the future also exist still rely on present facts to provide their past and future facts they need, by defining the past, if it exists, as whatever *was* present and the future, if it exists, as whatever *will* be present. More precisely, all parties agree that whatever (tenseless) properties anything has at any past or future time are those that it had or will have when that time was or will be present. (Thus whatever I am doing or thinking when a given date, say 9 July 2008, is present is what I must also have been doing or thinking on that date when it is past; and similarly, if the future exists, when it is future.) How anything is at any past or future time is how it was or will be when that time was or will be present.

But now, since everything must appear to an omniscient God as it is in reality, the fact that at any time everything is as it is when that time is, was or will be present, implies that, to God, everything *is* present. So as everything can only be present if nothing is past or future, the only tensed view of time that lets everything in reality be present to an omniscient God is presentism. And this raises a well-known problem for the familiar view that a God who creates everything else, including time, must be eternal, i.e. outside time. For as our world keeps changing, so too does what is present and hence, for presentists, what exists. To track these changes in present reality, an omniscient God's knowledge of it must also keep changing, i.e. be different at different times. But to be different in any way at different times, God would have to be *at* those times, which a God who is outside time, i.e. has no temporal location, cannot be. That is why an eternal God, who cannot change, in this or any other way, cannot also be omniscient if time is tensed.

Tenseless time offers an escape from this dilemma. For if time is tenseless, then since nothing is ever past, present or future in itself, nothing ever changes in those respects. A tenseless world can of course *contain* changes, where changing is simply having a property at one time and not having it at another, as when a hot thing cools, i.e. when it is hot at some time and not at later times. The whole world can change too, of course, as indeed it does by always expan-

ding, i.e. by being larger at any time than at any earlier time. But on a tenseless view of time, if it is *ever* a fact that a thing has a property at one tenseless time that it lacks at another, then that is *always* a fact. In other words, tenseless facts about how and when things change, like all other tenseless facts, do not themselves change, which is why an unchanging God can know them all. That is how a tenseless view of time enables God to be both omniscient and eternal.

The best tenseless answer to other conceptual questions raised by the idea of an eternal God is less clear. Take the question of when the world was created, which raises the prior question of how an act of creation that includes the creation of time itself can take place *at* one of those times. A common answer to that question – that the world, including time, was created at its first moment – will not do, even though one tenseless time can easily be earlier than all others. For the creation of a first moment and its contents could only be the creation of our whole temporally extended world if it entailed everything that happens later. Yet no one now thinks it does that, for reasons ranging from the indeterminism of modern physics and the contingency of even deterministic laws of nature to the possibility of free will. And a temporally extended world that cannot be wholly created at the first moment of its time can hardly be created at any other. This suggests that there is *no* time at which the world was created, a view that is certainly consistent with the world being created by an omniscient God who is outside time.

Yet what does *‘God is outside time’* mean? It can hardly mean that time is a container that God cannot get into; and even if space or spacetime is thought of as a container, it still makes no sense to credit the *whole* of it with a spatial or spatiotemporal outside to provide a location for God. But if *‘God is outside time (and space)’* cannot be read literally, then I think it can only mean that God is indeed omniscient, unchanging and independent of time (and space), since I cannot see what more it can mean. In other words, it is simply a concise expression of these supposed facts, not an explanation of them. If so, then these facts still await explanation, which a tenseless view of time lets us provide, as follows.

First, we note that Creation need not be atemporal in order not to occur all at once: the world as it is at any moment could be created at that very moment. Second, since an omnipotent Creator can create anything *immediately*, i.e. needs no means to that end, the existence of everything in spacetime is always an immediate effect of its creation. Third, I assume that anything within spacetime that has *immediate* effects is as close as the structure of spacetime permits

to when and where they are. In other words, there is no immediate action at a spacetime distance, which to my mind is the grain of truth in the maxim  $\langle$ No action at a distance $\rangle$ : all action at a distance has causal intermediaries, such as the successive positions of the photons by whose means distant objects act on my eyes when I see them. And as for these objects' effects on my senses so, I assume, for God's creation of the objects, their effects on me and the photons that mediate those effects: God, as the immediate Creator of them, as of everything else in spacetime, is wherever and whenever they are. And as for the contents of spacetime, so for spacetime itself. God need not depend on spacetime to create its contents: on the contrary, spacetime depends on God, who creates all spacetime points and regions along with their contents and, by doing so immediately, thereby creates spacetime locations for Himself.

These reasons for taking an omnipotent God to create the world's contents successively are of course not those that might lead those who think that time flows to do so: for example, that because things do not come into existence until they become present, they cannot be created before then. In tenseless time that is not so: it's being true at all tenseless times that everything that is anywhere in time *exists*, in the tenseless sense of  $\langle$ exists $\rangle$  noted earlier, does not imply that everything is *located* at all times: the tenseless existence of Caesar and Napoleon does not make them contemporaries. All a tenseless world's contents can exist and still be, as they are, as spread out in time as they are in space. It is the world's being spread across the whole of spacetime, not the flow of time, that makes me take an omnipotent and therefore immediate Creator of our world to be located at all spacetime points and regions.

Yet how, it may be asked, can an indivisible God be spread out across the whole of space, let alone of spacetime? After all, no ordinary objects which, like us, occupy finite regions of space at any one time, are ever wholly located at every part of those regions. I, for example, am not wholly located at each of the different regions of space occupied by my head, my heart, my feet, etc.: only parts of me are. Yet a God who is indivisible and so presumably lacks spatial parts, cannot be simultaneously located in different parts of space, as we are, by having different parts there. How then can such a God be wholly located not just in whole of spacetime but in every spatiotemporal point and region of it?

The answer to that question is very simple, and to see it we need only note that we, like many other objects, need no temporal parts in order to be as extended in time as we are in space. In other

words, while we can indeed not be wholly located in every spatial part of ourselves, we can be, and I say are, wholly located at every tenseless time in our lives. And as for us and the short stretches of time we occupy, so for God and the whole of spacetime: by being as indivisible in space as we are in time, God can be, and I say is, wholly located everywhere.

Another advantage of this view is that a God who is located at all moments of tenseless time can know even more than one who, being outside time, is located at none of them. We have already seen how an eternal God can be omniscient in the sense of knowing all tenseless facts, which if time is tenseless are all the facts there are. But even if a tenseless world contains no tensed *facts*, it does contain tensed *truths* that are true at some times and not others, such as  $\langle$ Napoleon is alive $\rangle$ , which is only true between 15 August 1769 and 5 May 1821. Truths like this, since they are not always true, can only be known at times when they are true, can obviously not be known by a God who is outside time. But they can be known by a God who is located at every time.

But does not crediting an omnipresent God with knowledge of these temporally localised truths make Him changeable again? No; though it would if God's knowledge of tensed truths was not immediate and infallible, as ours of course is not, since all our knowledge of the world comes to us through the fallible causal mediation of our senses. Things cause us to see them by sending light into our eyes, to hear them by sending sound into our ears, etc. That is why, since causes generally and perhaps always precede their effects, the knowledge our senses give us grows through time, as more things become perceptible to us, and diminishes as we forget things we once knew. That is why our knowledge even of tenseless facts, let alone tensed ones, is not only fallible but constantly changing, and as such cannot be entailed by the unchanging totality of tenseless facts.

However, this unchanging totality can entail all God's knowledge, including His localised knowledge of tensed truths, since God needs no fallible causal mechanisms to acquire knowledge of anything. All His knowledge of tenseless facts follows immediately from His complete and unchanging knowledge of how He distributes His creation across a tenseless spacetime – and so does His temporally variable knowledge of all tensed truths. Because God's knowing at all times between 15 August 1769 and 5 May 1821 that Napoleon is alive is a trivial logical consequence of His unchanging knowledge of all tenseless facts, plus the unchanging tenseless fact that He is located at all those times, it entails no substantial change in God at all.

That is how, if time is tenseless, an unchanging God who is wholly located everywhere in spacetime can know not only every tenseless fact but also, at every moment of tenseless time, all the tensed truths that those changeless facts make true at that time.

I originally acceded to Ingolf's request to publish an account of these theological benefits of a tenseless view of time because the view was, and may still be, mistakenly thought to be inimical to theism. Then, as now, I wanted to diminish resistance to the view by correcting that mistake and also by showing how it can be used to dispel some venerable but specious mysteries. Mysteries, it has been said, are all too easily created by raising an intellectual dust and then remarking awe-struck that we cannot see. The tempting but false idea that time flows has raised a lot of dust over the centuries. Laying it lets us see more clearly what the real mysteries, if any, of God's temporal creation are.

— Dr. D. Hugh Mellor war bis zu seiner Emeritierung Professor für Philosophie an der Universität Cambridge.

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## Impressum

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ISSN 1660-5403

Redaktion und Gestaltung:

Andrea Anker / Andreas Hunziker / Hartmut von Sass / Arnd Brandl

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