

Article 3

The B Theory of Time and the Immutability of God

The book of Revelations proclaims that God is He “who is and who was and who is to come” (Revelations 1:4, NRSV). The past, the present and the future. God lives in all of time. But in what way are we to understand time? For centuries, scholars have debated over what time is to God: how He might perceive time; if he transcends it or flows through it with us. But philosophical developments in the field of time demand that we now ask what time is at all. In this paper, I look to explore an increasingly popular theory known as the ‘B-theory’ of time and how this affects the immutability of God. The so-called ‘A-theory’ of time is the common-sense approach to time. However, in this essay I will look to show how the ‘B-theory’ of time might actually help to defend the claim that God is immutable. I shall presume for the sake of this paper that the ‘B-theory’ is true, in order to show how it affects the doctrine of divine immutability, but theory is of course contested. I therefore propose that if God is immutable, then the ‘B-theory’ offers a more convincing account of time, given that the ‘A’-theory forms a flimsy edifice to build upon arguments for the immutability of God. The ‘B-theory’ therefore helps to defend the doctrine of divine immutability and furthermore propounds a more personal God.

We live in an ever-changing world, in a constant state of flux. We see the clock tick, the kettle boil, the sun set. We constantly observe the world in a changing and evolving state. It is only natural then for us to presume that there is a dynamic flux which is the passage of time. This is known as the ‘A-theory’ of time.²³ It is a more intuitive conception of how time works. Since we feel that the phenomenon of time passing, a change from one moment to the next, we suppose that there is a flow of time and that the present really does exist.

One popular formulation of the ‘A’ theory which I will focus on in this paper is known as ‘presentism’. This theory holds that reality consists only of the present and the passage of time is a constant changing of the temporally unextended reality.²⁴ This would mean that there is no expansion of reality that exists outside of right now. The ‘A’ theory finds most of its plausibility in our experience of the passage of time, and it is thus the most common-sense view. Presentism in particular seems rather appealing as it is able to account for why the present feels special in comparison to other times as it claims that experience is always of the present because this is all that reality consists of.²⁵

However, there is a crucial difficulty for the ‘A-theory’ with regards to the doctrine of divine immutability. Under this way of thinking about time, we are constantly experiencing change.

²³ J. Ellis McTaggart. “The Unreality of Time.” *Mind*, New Series, 17, no. 68 (1908): 457-74.

²⁴ M. Joshua Mezerky. “Presentism” *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Time*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). 122-123

²⁵ Simon Prosser. “Introduction: The Metaphysics of time” *Experiencing Time*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2026). 7

When action x takes place, we are in a state where we don't experience x, then change to experiencing x, and then we will no longer experience x. For example, if I pray to God then I am originally in a state of non-prayer, then when I pray I change to being in a state of prayer, and finally when I am finished, then I change back to being in a state of non-prayer.

Surely then we could say the same of God. If God is in a state of not doing an action to then doing that action then this would constitute a change. Under the 'a' theory, then God must inevitably change since reality would change from God not doing x to doing x. This is especially true when we consider that God entered into our world, and was truly acting and changing.

The 'b' theory by contrast is not an intuitive response to the nature of time, but its growing popularity therefore demands its attention. The theory holds that although times are ordered, there is no metaphysical asymmetry between the present and any other time. This means that there is no objective 'now' from which time emanates. As such there is also no 'past' or 'future' since the present would have to exist to create a relationship with some other time. It would be possible to say that x precedes y, for in this, the two points are not understood in relation to some present time. Additionally, crucial for the question of God which I am concerned with here, there is no passage of time in the 'b' theory. Since there is no present, there is no movement from one point which we call 'now' to another and as such, we cannot say that there is a passage of time.

One way of understanding this theory is through a comparison with space. When considering space, we say that there is spatial extension and we know that there are different points in space. However, it seems that there is no one point from which space 'extends', certainly not from an objective point of view. We can also see that there is no 'passage' of space in which space moves from one point to another. Similarly then, the 'b' theorist claims that time is extended along some timeline but there is not some 'now' from which time extends and passes from one point to another.²⁶

Genuine change requires that time can be represented in 'A-series'. It follows then that if the 'B-theory' is true then there is no change since all moments already exist; we are not experiencing these moments in time sequentially, and moreover we do not flow through them. As such, it is not possible to say that change occurs since there is no transition from one state into another in which things are different. Therefore, under the 'B-theory' neither us nor God undergo any kind of change.

As such, time is the same for us and God. God does not transcend to some higher plane of time that is constructed different to that of our own. Although we might experience the illusion of time passing, it is entirely plausible that time operates in the same way for us as it does for God. To me, this is also able to support the account of a personal God. When we consider a God that is outside of our time, he seems distant. Yet throughout scripture, we can see that God interacts with his people. Famously, with Adam, and Abraham, and Moses. He is not wholly distinct from us. To think of time in this way, is to see God as a part of our world.

If it is the case that time does function according to the 'B-series' then the doctrine of divine immutability would be safeguarded. Similarly, if we are to assume that God must be immutable then this would support the claim that the 'B-theory' is correct. It is the contention of this writer,

²⁶ Prosser. "Introduction: The Metaphysics of time" 10-11

therefore, that a 'B-theory' of time is a reasonable way to think of time, and in fact is in accordance with much of our beliefs about God, in particular, the doctrine of divine immutability.

Historically, we have seen the study of what time is for God, and what time is for us, as two distinct fields of study. God's time and our time were separate. However, given the rise of the 'B-theory' of time in philosophical discussion, they need no longer be so separate. It is entirely plausible to posit that time operates within the same field for us and for God. As such, he becomes more personal; not a being transcending our world but living as part of it, and sustaining it. In this paper, I have offered arguments to suppose that if God is immutable, then the 'B-theory' offers a more convincing account of time. In particular, that if the 'A-theory' is true then God is liable to change. The 'B-theory' therefore helps to defend the doctrine of divine immutability and furthermore propounds a more personal God.

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