Rel. Stud. **34**, pp. 25–32. Printed in the United Kingdom © 1998 Cambridge University Press

Interpretations of God's eternity

Nicholas Everitt

School of Economic and Social Studies, University of East Anglia, Norwich NR4 7TJ

... even from everlasting to everlasting, thou art God (Psalms 90.2)

Abstract. A number of authors, including contributors to this journal, have argued that the only consistent interpretation of God's eternal existence attributes to God an atemporal existence. Their argument seeks to show that it would be self-contradictory to adopt the opposing interpretation that God exists in time, and has indeed existed for an infinite past time. This paper argues that their objections to infinite past existence all turn on a misunderstanding of what that concept involves. The theist is therefore not compelled to adopt the atemporal interpretation, but can instead adopt the more intuitively intelligible thesis that God is in time.

I

Christianity has conventionally accepted that God is eternal. But as is well known, this claim has been interpreted in two ways. On one interpretation (let us call it temporalism), God's eternity consists in the fact that he has an existence which persists through an infinite time. As one recent defender of this interpretation puts it:

> He [God] exists now, he has existed at each period of past time, he will exist at each period of future time.[1]

On the rival view (which we can call atemporalism), God's eternity consists in the fact that he is in some sense 'outside' time, either because he has a purely non-temporal existence, or because all times are in some way simultaneously present to him (because he has, as Boethius says, the 'complete possession all at once of illimitable life').

There is no doubt that atemporalism can seem to have a number of attractions for the theist. If God is outside time, it is easier to make sense of his immutability; the idea that he has *necessary* existence looks more defensible; and the thought that he creates *everything*, including space and time, seems more promising. Some thinkers have found the apparent attractions of atemporalism sufficiently compelling for them to want to reject temporalism, without going so far as to say that temporalism is somehow incoherent or inconsistent.[2] But other theists have tried to show that the

[1] Richard Swinburne, *The Christian God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), p. 136.

[2] See, for example, Brian Davies, *Thinking About God* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1985); Brian Leftow, *Time and Eternity* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1991); Gerard J. Hughes, *The Nature of God* (London: Routledge, 1995).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412597004198 Published online by Cambridge University Press

attractions of atemporalism are not only *available* for theism, they are mandatory. For they have argued that the temporalist conception of God's eternity is logically untenable, that the theist is thus forced to adopt atemporalism, and that she must hence willy-nilly embrace whatever advantages atemporalism brings.

My own view is that this is exactly the wrong way round, and the supposed attractions of atemporalism turn out to be illusory. But what I will argue for here is a more limited thesis. I will argue that the standard atemporalist lines of attack on temporalism all fail, and hence that there is no good reason for the theist to embrace atemporalism. A convenient point of departure for my argument will be a recent article by Steven Cowan, published in this journal.[3] I shall argue that Cowan's attack on temporalism is vitiated by a number of non-sequiturs; and then I will show that these are errors endemic in the position of theists before him who have claimed that temporalism is somehow logically flawed.

II

Cowan's argument against temporalism is concise enough to be quoted in full:

1. God has always existed (temporalist assumption)
2. If God has always existed, then, necessarily, God has traversed an actually infinite series of moments in order to reach the present moment (definition of 1)
3. Necessarily, God has traversed an actually infinite series of moments in order to reach the present moment (1,2 MP)
4. Necessarily, nothing can traverse an actually infinite series of moments (by definition)
5. Necessarily, God has not traversed an actually infinite series of moments in order to reach the present moment (4, UI)
6. God has not always existed (3, 5 Reductio) (*op. cit.* p. 372)

Although Cowan says that the argument is 'at least prima facie valid', we can note in passing that the argument is formally blemished by a misplaced modal operator in steps 2, 3, 4 and 5. 'Necessarily, if p, then q' does not imply 'If p, then necessarily q', as step 2 seems to suppose. But this is an insignificant slip, which can be easily remedied by deleting the term 'necessarily' throughout. I will hence treat the argument as having this amended form. So interpreted, it is certainly a valid argument. But are its premises true?

Cowan rightly realizes that the really controversial assumption here is in step 4 and he therefore makes a number of remarks in defence of 4. But his

[3] Steven B. Cowan, 'A Reductio Ad Absurdum of Divine Temporality', *Religious Studies* **32** (1996), pp. 371–8.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412597004198 Published online by Cambridge University Press

remarks betray a misunderstanding of what the temporalist must mean by 4. I shall take them one by one to show why they fail to establish the truth of 4.

(i) Given the properties that infinite sets have, it ought to be enough to simply say that a series that can be traversed is necessarily finite (p. 374) ... I claim that an infinite set cannot be traversed *by definition* (p. 376, Cowan's emphasis)

An infinite set is standardly defined as one which is equivalent to a proper subset of itself.[4] The concept of 'traversing' a set is simply not mentioned in any standard definition of 'infinite', so Cowan is plain wrong to say that his claim is true 'by definition'. Does being an infinite set then *imply* being a non-traversable set? Cowan has so far given us no reason to think so, because he has so far given no explanation of what he means by 'traversing' a set. But perhaps his next sentence is meant to give us this understanding. He says:

(ii) If I can complete counting a series of numbers, for instance, then the series must be a finite series. Traversing an infinite series of anything is analogous to counting the whole set of whole numbers. It simply cannot be done. No matter how long one counts, one will never complete the task (p. 374)

This tells us that 'traversing' an infinite set is 'analogous' to counting the set of whole numbers. If by 'counting', Cowan means a physical process like saying or writing the numerals '1', '2', '3', etc. one after the other, no doubt we cannot count to infinity. Counting is a temporally extended process, and how far we can count depends in part on how fast we count and in part on how long (in time) we count. Given that we are beings whose lives last only a finite time, and who can count at only a finite speed, it follows that we cannot count to infinity. In that sense, Cowan is right to say that 'if I can complete counting a series of numbers, then the series must be a finite series'. But how does this show that a non-finite being could not have lasted for an infinite past time?

Cowan elaborates as follows:

This [claim that one cannot count an infinite series] applies equally well to an infinite series of past moments. Moving across the series successively, one-by-one, it would be impossible for anything, even God to complete the movement from the past to the present (*ibid*)

Cowan does not explain what he means by 'completing the movement from the past to the present'. So how should we understand the phrase? One

[4] Abraham A. Fraenkel, *Abstract Set Theory* (Amsterdam: North-Holland Publishing Company, 1961), p. 29.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412597004198 Published online by Cambridge University Press

natural thought would be that it means having existed in the past and surviving into the present. But on this interpretation it is certainly possible to 'complete the movement'. If the movement from past to present was of infinite duration, what follows is not that the movement has no completion, but that the movement had no beginning. And that is precisely what the temporalist believes: for *every* time, there is an earlier time at which God existed. In other words, there was no *first* time at which God began to exist: the 'movement' which consists of God's persisting through time had no beginning.

It is only if we give a quite different sense to 'completing the movement from past to present' that any absurdity emerges. If what the phrase requires is that God should *begin* existing at a point infinitely distant in the past, and then continue in existence from that point to the present, there would indeed be an absurdity. But of course no temporalist need be committed to this impossibility. An elementary implication of saying that God has existed for an *infinite* past time is that God did not *begin* to exist at any point of time, not even an infinitely remote one. (Cf. To say that there are infinitely many negative whole numbers in the series $\ldots -5, -4, -3, -2, -1, 0$, does not imply that there is a first negative whole number located infinitely far back along the series. On the contrary, it is to imply that there is *no* first negative whole number. Just as the positive whole numbers can have a first member without having a last, the negative whole numbers can have a last member without having a first.) So on the first interpretation of 'completing the movement from past to present', i.e. having existed from an infinite time past through to the present, Cowan is right that the temporalist thinks that God *does* complete the movement, but wrong to think that there is any impossibility in this. On the second interpretation, where infinite past existence is construed as having started to exist at a point infinitely far into the past, Cowan is right to think that it is impossible to 'complete the movement', but wrong to think that the temporalist must say that it is possible.

I suspect that what has misled Cowan here is a misunderstanding of his analogy between counting and the passing of time. Perhaps what prompted him is the thought that if past time is infinite, it can be divided into units and the units will be pairable one/one with the total infinite sequence of natural numbers. He then assumes that this pairing has to proceed by pairing the earliest time with 1, the second earlier with 2, the third with 3 and so on. But this way of imagining infinite past existence has already made two mistakes. First, if we are to think of the infinity of past times being paired with the sequence of natural numbers, it is clearly self-contradictory to think that the earliest time is paired with 1, the second with 2, and so on. For if the series of past times is infinite, *there is no earliest time* to be paired with 1. So *that* way of establishing a one/one correlation between past times and the sequence of natural numbers is ruled out ex hypothesi. The pairing of times with the

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412597004198 Published online by Cambridge University Press

natural numbers must proceed by pairing the present with 0, the previous moment with 1 (or −1), the moment before that with 2 (or −2), and so on backwards. And just as there is no contradiction in saying that there is no highest natural number (or no first member of the series of negative numbers), so there will be no contradiction in saying that there is no earliest time.

The second error in this way of thinking lies in interpreting the infinity of past times in terms of empirical processes. Cowan uses such verbs as *traversing*, *counting*, *moving across*, *completing a task*; and in trying to make sense of his use of these phrases, I have interpreted him by using such terms as *pairing* and *correlating*. But these terms can themselves be taken in an empirical or a non-empirical way. If we think of pairing and correlating as activities, then Cowan's points will apply to them. Just as we can count only finite sequences of numbers, so we can pair or correlate only finitely many items. The reason for the limitation is the same in both cases. But what this shows is that the empirical interpretation of 'pairing' and 'correlating' is out of place when we are considering infinite sets. If we are going to use such locutions at all, we must think of them not in terms of time-filling activities which we finite beings can engage in, but in terms of an abstract relationship between different sets of times. The infinity of the set of past times consists in the fact that there is an equivalence (in set theoretical terms) between the set of past times, and a proper subset of those times. This abstract relationship is not to be explicated in terms of what we can count, or complete, or traverse, nor in terms of what we can pair or correlate, when these terms are interpreted empirically.

This diagnosis of Cowan's error is supported by the fact that he says later

> To say that God has traversed an infinite series of moments to reach the present … is to claim that an infinite series has been completed, and such a claim is contradictory (*loc. cit.* p. 376)

The short answer to this is that an infinite series *can* have a final member, and in that sense be 'completed', *as long as it has no first member*; just as it can have a first member, as long as it has no final member.

Further confirmation that Cowan is confused about infinity comes when he says

> … imagine going back in time 100 years. If the past is infinite, then there is *no less time* between 100 years ago and infinity past than between now and infinity past (*loc. cit.* p. 374)

This seems to be noting some elementary truths about infinity (that infinity + 100 = infinity, or perhaps that infinity − 100 = infinity) as if they were paradoxical. But there is no paradox in them at all. Displaying this truth is precisely one of the achievements of mathematicians like Cantor. (We can note in passing that if Cowan is puzzled about infinite past time, he ought

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412597004198 Published online by Cambridge University Press

to be equally puzzled about infinite future time: 'Imagine going forward in time 100 years. If the future is infinite, then there would no less time between 100 years hence and infinity future, than between now and infinity future'.)

III

We have seen above how Cowan fails to locate any logical problems in temporalism. I will now show how similar misunderstandings are to be found in the writings of other theists who, like Cowan, have tried to convict temporalism of contradictions.

In his book *Scaling the Secular City*, J. P. Moreland discusses the issue of whether God's eternity can be understood as infinite duration, and decides that such an interpretation is impossible.[5] Like Cowan, in arriving at this conclusion Moreland relies on the unexplained metaphor of 'traversing' an infinite series. He claims that in relation to the set of positive and negative whole numbers that

> ... this second series [i.e. the negative numbers] may even be more difficult to traverse than the first (*op. cit.* p. 29)

We saw above that this metaphor of 'traversing' is faced with a dilemma: on one horn, the temporalist is committed to the possibility of traversing, but there is no difficulty in seeing that this possibility does exist. On the other horn, traversing does indeed turn out to be logically impossible, but the temporalist does not need to claim that it is possible.

Like Cowan, Moreland too is confused about what is implied in the idea of an infinite series of past times. Making the assumption that past times will be paired with the negative numbers, he imagines that in the pairing of times and numbers, the earlier times will be paired with the higher negative numbers and the lower negative numbers with the more recent times, with 0 representing the present. And then, as if to explain why 'traversing' this infinite set is impossible, he adds

> [this] series cannot even get started. This is because it has no first member!

The implication is that a series which cannot 'get started' and which has 'no first member' is not one which can terminate in the present. But this is impotent as an objection to temporalism. The temporalist can simply point out that one obvious implication of the idea that an infinite series of past times terminates in the present is that the series did not *start* at all. Of course it does not have 'a first member' (if 'first' means 'earliest') – if it did, it would clearly be only a finite series of time. Some of the elementary implications of saying that the past series of times is infinite are that the series did not begin, that it did not have an earliest member, that for every member in the series there is an earlier member, that however early a time you refer to there were

[5] J. P. Moreland, *Scaling the Secular City: A Defence of Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412597004198 Published online by Cambridge University Press

still infinitely many times before that, and so on. The atemporalist cannot hope to establish his claims merely by pointing out these elementary implications – he has to show what is supposed to be wrong with these claims.

Similar misunderstandings can be found in some comments by G. J. Whitrow.[6] Whitrow criticizes a defence by Bell of the possibility of infinite past times, and in his criticism he writes:

> An essential feature of *any* past sequence of events is that it has actually occurred and been *completed*, so that it could, in principle, have been experienced *in toto*, or 'lived through'. Hence if an infinite sequence of past events were possible, it must be a completed infinity, which means that events must have occurred in it that were separated from the present by an infinite number of intermediate events. (*op. cit.* p. 409)

Here we see at work the same assumption which vitiated the remarks by Cowan. Cowan spoke of 'completing the movement from past to present' and alleged that it was impossible. Whitrow says that an infinite series of past times cannot be 'completed' in the present, that it cannot be 'lived through' from an infinite past to the present. Whitrow's error here is the same as Cowan's: the infinite series of past times *can* be 'completed' in the present, provided that it does not *begin* at some time in the past.

A comparable confusion occurs in Helm's discussion of God's eternity.[7] Helm writes:

> ... the idea that God exists in an infinitely backward extending time runs up against the idea of an actual infinite. For such a prospect requires that an infinite number of events must have elapsed before the present moment could arrive. And since it is impossible for an infinite number of events to have elapsed, and yet the present moment has arrived, the series of events cannot be infinite. Therefore either there was a time when God began to exist, which is impossible, or God exists timelessly. Therefore, God exists timelessly (*op. cit.* pp. 37–8).

It is difficult to be sure *what* goes wrong here, since Helm gives no reason for saying that it is impossible for an infinite number of events to have elapsed. But the implication seems to be that if the present is to 'arrive' at all, it cannot arrive at the end of an infinite series. If this is Helm's thinking, we can see from what has been said above where it goes wrong. The infinite series can *terminate* in the present, provided that it does not *begin* in the past. And it can *occur* in the past without ever having *begun* in the past, provided that it is infinite, i.e. there is an equivalence relation between the members of the series, and the natural numbers. What Helm needs to show if he is to reach his conclusion is that something which occurs in the past and persists through to the present, must have *begun* in the past. But nothing that he says supports this conclusion, so his claim that God's eternity *must* be construed as timelessness is left unsupported.

[6] G. J. Whitrow, review of W. L. Craig, 'The Kalam Cosmological Argument', *The British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* **31** (1981), 408–11.

[7] Paul Helm, *Eternal God: A Study of God Without Time* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412597004198 Published online by Cambridge University Press

IV

We have seen how Cowan is no more successful than were earlier atemporalists in showing that the consistent theist is compelled to reject temporalism. His arguments, like theirs, betray a misunderstanding of what is involved in something's having survived for an infinite past time. The central error is an insistence on interpreting talk of infinity in terms of empirical concepts such as those of traversing, or completing a movement. The correct understanding avoids such concepts, and recognises that the infinity of a set of past times or past events consists in a relationship between the set and a proper subset of itself, or more loosely between the set and the set of natural numbers. This is not a relationship which we have to create by counting, traversing, moving, etc. So the fact that neither we nor God can count to infinity has no role to play in the explication of the proposition that an infinite past time has already occurred. It may well be that temporalism will present the theist with other problems, for example in explaining God's creative-causative role in relation to time itself, or perhaps even from the fact that our best current cosmological theories tell us that past time is not infinite. But at least she is under no threat from the charge that it would be impossible for God to have existed for an infinite past time.[8]

[8] John Taylor's 'Kalam: A Swift Argument from Origins of First Cause', *Religious Studies* **33** (1997), 167–79 offers further criticisms of the claim that it is an a priori truth that the universe had a beginning. Taylor's main target in his discussion of infinity is W. L. Craig, especially Craig's use of the distinction between the actual and potential infinite (see Q. Smith and W. L. Craig, *Theism, Atheism and Big Bang Cosmology*, Oxford: OUP, 1993). Although I have reservations about Taylor's treatment of atheistic responses to the Kalam argument, his critique of Craig seems to me correct and conclusive. See especially Taylor, pp. 168–72.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412597004198 Published online by Cambridge University Press