

"Could God be Temporal?" A Devil's Advocacy

JOHN KING-FARLOW
 University of California
 At Santa Barbara

1. *Prolegomena: Omniscience*

How can the *omniscience* of God be reconciled with human freedom? If God has foreknowledge of what I will do tomorrow, then how can I be said to have any choice about my doings? There is an elegant classical answer to this sort of question; it is an answer offered by Boethius at *De Consolatione*, Book V and endorsed by Aquinas at *Summa Contra Gentiles* Book III, Chapter 61. The answer consists in saying that the bogey of divine *foreknowledge* is the product of a confusion between the atemporal world-view of God in His eternity and the knowings or not-knowings of man in time "which has its being in a sort of succession." Only if God were in time and so knew *today* what I would do tomorrow, could His omniscience endanger my freedom. *Foreknowledge* is thus an anthropomorphic misnomer. The solution is, I cannot but repeat, classically admirable in its elegance; it carries a price, of course, that of placing God in the curious domain of the atemporal. Yet this is a price which Aquinas, with his admiration for Aristotle, would be especially happy to pay: it seems to clarify the Aristotelian view that God, to be perfect, must be purely *in act*; totally *without potency*. (Compare SGG, I, 16)

There is an alternative solution to the problem of harmonizing Divine omniscience and human freedom. This solution, offered by Professor Richard Taylor, accepts God as a temporal being and locates the source of our trouble in *omniscience* rather

than in *foreknowledge*. At any given time a certain sum of knowledge represents *all* there is to know. Included in that sum for an omniscient temporal knower will be all that is future that is totally determined by present causal factors. If some future events (like certain human choices) are not so determined, then, in respect of these events there just is nothing now to know: "if the future is partially undetermined . . . an omniscient being would have to comprehend it just that way."¹ This solution also has an attractive elegance, but it does seem to require at least the following addendum if temporal omniscience is to measure up to Divine standards. Insofar as a temporal, omniscient being is also a purposer, omnipotent and the source of all other beings with power, His *foreknowledge* of the (wholly or partially) determined future of what is distinct from Himself is to be construed not so much on the model of our knowledge of what is distinct from ourselves *as on the model of our "knowledge" of our own intentions*. God's *foreknowledge* of tomorrow's sunrise is illuminated by a report of intention like "I know very well what I'll do with my next pay raise." Even with this addendum, however, we have to recognize that Taylor's solution carries a severe price. For it involves placing God among temporal individuals. And this seems to be at least as curious as placing him among the atemporal ones. (Compare numbers, geometrical theorems, etc.) I suggest that Aquinas' reply to any temporal analysis of God's

omniscience would include the following challenge: "even if there is some plausibility to a temporal account of omniscience, it must be shown that other attributes of God, no less essential to the concept of a *Divinity*, can be dealt with temporally. Otherwise the temporal analysis of omniscience, left standing on its own, becomes totally pointless. It is *theologically irrelevant*."

For my own part, I must confess myself torn between Boethius' and Thomas' atemporal thesis and Taylor's temporal thesis. In what follows I shall adopt the role of a sort of temporalist Devil's Advocate against the Angelic Doctor. If my words provoke some staunchly atemporal theist to refute the arguments, so much the better. The dispute may perhaps serve to bring the Divine attributes into clearer focus for modern eyes.

2. *A Piece for the Devil's Advocate*

Why should we fight shy of an atemporal God? Initially, there are certain psychological and political considerations: the Judaeo-Christian tradition of belief in an atemporal God is sometimes linked with attitudes akin to fascism. John Stuart Mill's classic *Essay on Liberty* was above all else a passionate defense of men's right to differ. Horace Kallen's *A Study of Liberty*, published exactly a century later,² is above all else a lyrical exposition of the rightness of change and flux. The right to differ is thus offered by Kallen a basis in the rightness of change — a basis which not a few metaphysically minded moderns may consider profounder, more "necessary" in structure than Mill's appeal to contingent matters of human psychology and proneness to error. For Kallen "actual freedom is alteration, innovation unforeseeably going on . . . ex-

alting the eternal into the temporal." (p. 109) Ranged against him he finds the spokesmen of a "perennial philosophy." These seek security in a changeless, atemporal reality behind appearances, in order to appease their dread of diversification and uncertainty. Too often linked with the perennial philosophy are what Kallen calls "compensatory ideals." As opposed to the pragmatic ideals of dynamic societies, these are invoked against any correction of the status quo: "the limits of visions with such functions are denoted by words like 'immortal,' 'e t e r n a l,' 'universal,' 'one,'" (p. 130). For all that, he remarks, the hardy perennialist likes to speak of his changeless One, or God, or Absolute, not only as being the foundation of our freedom but also as being Itself free. By this Kallen, a Pragmatist, is provoked to some thing like Wittgensteinian analysis; he examines several senses of 'free' and tries to show that in the case of a changeless individual they simply *lack application*.³ He concludes that "to predicate freedom of the absolute is, in fact, to predicate change of the changeless, relations of the unrelatable . . . the time is still future when theological mystery can make philosophical sense." (pp. 88-89)

If Kallen is correct in finding a *psychological* link between belief in a *timeless* God and adherence to authoritarian politics, this would hardly be a *logically* compelling reason for a philosophical supporter of open societies to abandon that belief. Nevertheless, supposing Kallen to be correct, at least we would have a reasonable ground for *trying* to construe the Divine attributes in a temporal manner. For, should this project succeed, we achieve a powerful antidote to the pragmatist criticism

of Judaeo-Christian theology on its own pragmatic terms. For we thus show that there is no necessary connection between theology and what might be even psychologically pernicious in the respect Kallen cites. Let us then tackle some crucial descriptions that have traditionally been ascribed to God.

God as Supreme Purposer: Some years ago the Personalist theologian, E. S. Brightman, criticized those who shared his belief in a purposive God directing the universe, yet insisted that His eternity was utterly different from time. Brightman considered such talk unhelpful for his "empirical" approach to religion, which found evidence for faith in experience. If God's purposes bore no intelligible relation to our temporal human purposes, how could experience point to such a timeless purposer? Very recently George Boas, in his Paul Carus lectures, has developed Brightman's empirical point into a more fundamental query as to the very meaning of teleology; he concludes in terms very generous to the opposition, that "teleology *had best* be used where it can be used literally;" when theology is extended into cosmic planning, he holds, the planner or planners *had better* be modeled on the personal, historical God of Scripture rather than on a timeless metaphysical abstraction, (a Fundamental Ground, for example, or a Principle of Concretion).⁴

There are reasons, I suggest as Devil's Advocate, for going beyond Boas' "had best" and trying to replace his chivalrous understatement with a hard logical "must." A teleological explanation is naturally construed in Western theologians' talk as purpose-referential and intention-referential explanation. This is not

to say that a *telos* for Aristotle in his account of causes has to be so treated. The Greek word may be construed as "finish," "peak," "consummation," "direction," "completion" and by other words less wedded to intention than the English "purpose." But Aristotle's God is not a Creator concerned with his creatures. Aristotelian teleology, unlike the Judaeo-Christian type, need not mesh with talk of judgment and eschatology, the Divine plan unfolding in history, salvation through Divine intervention, the Good Shepherd, and so on. If this is so, then in sharp contrast with Aristotle, Judaeo-Christian teleology is far more deeply committed to God as intending efficient cause than as truly impassible final cause. In other words, to speak of God as Supreme Purposer is for religious purposes of our tradition to exalt Him as supreme among intending agents. Now it seems fundamental to the logic of *intention* that the intending agent be directed to, or engaged in, or considering an activity which is not yet complete for him. Certainly I can display intention in my directedness to what I am *now* doing but that is because what I can here be spoken of as "doing" involves a temporal succession of states, each preceding another later state. "Am" cannot be the timeless present of orthodox theology in such an intentional context. It is a fair objection that God could intelligibly be said to be changing our *present* state of affairs intentionally without His own action (as opposed to its effects) being dated with the "now" of our Earthly time scheme. But this would be intelligible only on the following sort of model: Heaven is like a far off star whence God within His own time scheme acts upon our world in-

tentionally. The time of our being acted upon is not the time of His action. But if one goes on to insist that Heaven itself has no time scheme at all, then one has no more suitable context for speaking of intentions in that region than in the realm of positive integers. Intention presupposes *some* time scheme of "before" and "after." This holds good whether we construe intention behavioural-ly, or as the drama of a purely private stage, or partly as a matter of public appraisal. These points about intention are but corollaries to more general and obvious ones about persons and personal acts.⁴ Our concepts of person, personal purpose, personal consideration of what is best, personal decision and so on cannot, it seems, be uprooted from a context of conscious, temporal individuals; they belong in a setting of intentions and acts, the description of which must be characterized by relations like *earlier than* and *later than*.

It is at this juncture that some traditionalists would interrupt us on behalf of the Analogy of Being, saying we have overlooked an important possibility. Maybe, they would say, we can achieve a very dim understanding by analogy of the purposeful workings of an atemporal, non-human mind. Two questions arise about this suggestion: (a) Would such an analogy get us off our conceptual ground to any effect? (b) Why should we resort to it, when, if it did work, it would provide such an extraordinarily dim understanding anyway? As for (a): it is certainly true that we can speak by analogy or sense-extension of the purposes of non-human, non-conscious, temporal individuals like machines and missiles by presupposing purposeful men who make them. But

the analogy for our purposes is a *cul de sac*. We do not want God to be like a machine that performs an alien purpose and cannot tell whether the successful completion of its routine achieves a purpose. Again, by a related analogy, we can talk of the purposes of atemporal, non-conscious things like axioms, definitions and concepts. ("The purpose of Axiom 3 is to exclude type confusions.") But neither analogy offers any flicker of intelligibility to the apparent contradiction involved in positing a purposing and self-consciously purpose achieving but non-temporal individual. Here the analogist's Way of Remotion seems simply to remove the Unmoved Mover. At least it seems so, if He is anything more than an Aristotelian final cause.

More important for those who want an intelligible account of theology is question (b). Why should we be so eager to press this unpromising analogy simply to keep God atemporal? The God of most Old Testament writers and the Heavenly Father of Christ's reported words sound temporal enough — whatever the drift of later Hellenised comments like the introduction to St. John's Gospel. Certainly God is an *eternal* purposer in the Scriptures. But there the Divine attribute of eternity is quite naturally and venerably intelligible in the following temporal sense: God has always existed and always will exist through unending time and depends on nothing else for His existence. No other individual could trespass on the uniqueness of this *independent* temporal eternity: making God temporally eternal in this sense does not reduce Him to the status of His everlasting but ever-dependent creatures.

Plato in *Republic* Book II gives an excellent illustration of the initial thinking which leads some metaphysicians to prefer a desperate analogy to a Divine temporality. "Look at the wicked lives of the Olympian supreme beings," he says in effect, "they are so like people. Homer's Zeus and Hera are as fickle and untrustworthy as any humans. A supreme being worthy of imitation must surely be immutable, unchanging and ever reliable." The simplest way, as we later see in *Republic* Book VI, to conceive of an individual as immutable, unchanging and ever reliable is to remove that individual from the spatio-temporal setting of persons and bodies and construe the individual after the model of timeless figures, concepts and numbers: The Idea of the Good, The One and so on. 'Geometrical figure' has been suggested as a root meaning of EIDOS which greatly influenced Plato. The aura of reliable necessity, which attends his Ideas, is particularly understandable in the case of one for whom the axioms and definitions governing the individuals of arithmetic and geometry have an absolute, necessary status. From this Platonic 'Leap' arises Augustine's atemporal God Who makes the world *cum tempore*. But an obstacle remains if, having depersonalized his supreme being, the metaphysician persists in supreme teleological talk. Following P. F. Strawson's acute discussion of atemporal Monads in Leibniz we may ask: how is it possible to treat a timeless individual, conceived after the model of concepts, "on analogy with individual consciousness?"⁶ Worse yet for the theist, how can such an impersonal timeless being be fruitfully called worthy of imitation, when the analogy between the

nature of that being and the nature of people is so obscure?

At any rate there is a perfectly good sense in which a Divine temporal being could be immutable, unchanging, reliable and thus worthy of imitation. The Divine temporal being must be utterly *unfaltering* in love, mercy, justice, sympathy, wisdom and so on despite the passage of time. It is unfaltering exemplification of such virtues as these through time everlasting which gives us the desiderated and imitable sense of the Divine immutability. We do not need the sense or non-sense which both denies temporal succession to God's acts of love, mercy and wrath, yet asserts the agency and *intervention* of His love, mercy and wrath at different points in history.

God as Omnipotent Purposer. Judaeo - Christian theologians like Thomas and Maimonides, who claimed to find God's atemporal hand in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, link the Divine omnipotence with atemporality by holding that God to be omnipotent must be totally in act and not at all in potency. There must, for instance, be no temporal lag, no gap of any kind between His willing and His will being done.' Any such lag or gap would detract from the Divine omnipotence and perfection. Perhaps the best counter to this way of thinking would be to consider Boas' antitheistic attack on the whole notion of an omnipotent purposer. "In what sense of the word could an omnipotent being have any purposes whatsoever? We make plans not merely because the future is largely unknown but also because we know that it is a natural obstacle to the fulfillment of our desires. A stone does not need plans since there is only one thing it can do . . . A

human being has to make plans . . . But an omnipotent being is like an impotent being; his actions flow out of his nature."⁸ Now there is something suspicious about an argument from which Thomas and Maimonides, on the one hand, can conclude that God the omnipotent chooser must be atemporal and Boas, on the other hand, can conclude that there are *logically* no omnipotent choosers.

Let us get the premises into an analogous form for disgorging their fallacy. It makes fair sense, if poor verisimilitude outside Gaulliste circles, to say that DeGaulle can carry out any (logically significant) policy he chooses to adopt. If DeGaulle really could implement with success any global policy he preferred and do so in as short or long a time as he saw fit, then he would be in a clear sense an all powerful global chooser and purposer. Substituting 'cosmic' for 'global' in protasis and apodosis, we would get the conclusion that he was an all powerful cosmic chooser. But we do not want omnipotent God to be just a cosmic DeGaulle and the temptation here is to make atemporality His *differentia* in omnipotence. Resisting this temptation we must stipulate as the criterion of Divine omnipotence that not only can God bring about unaided any policy of His choice, but also that no agent other than God has choice or power of action but for God's freely chosen dispensation. This, not atemporality, is the needed *differentia* of Divine omnipotence.

Aquinas and Maimonides would object that if God is omnipotent chooser there cannot be a time lag between His choice and its fulfillment: God has to be atemporal. This line of thought may rest at least partly

on a confusion of what Peter Geach has called logically attributive and logically predicative adjectives.⁹ If a flea is red and a van is red then they are, roughly speaking, of the same colour. But a big flea and a big van are not, even roughly speaking of the same size. When *omnipotent* qualifies a chooser, it is akin to one of Geach's logically attributive adjectives (good, big) in that we should not suggest criteria for power inappropriate to *choosers*. Perhaps a great deal of spurious mystification results from theologians talking about the Divine omnipotence in a wildly abstract way and forgetting that *omnipotent* is, in its theological context, an adjective qualifying a personal individual. To argue like Boas that because God is an omnipotent chooser, therefore he cannot really be a chooser at all, is like arguing that because Fido is a big miniature poodle he is not really a miniature poodle at all. To argue like Thomas and Maimonides that because God is an omnipotent chooser, therefore He is atemporal, is, since choosers are intenders and intenders are naturally understood as temporal individuals, rather too like arguing that because Fido is truly a good dog he cannot be canine, because true goodness transcends caninity. The omnipotence of a non-temporal person is about as intellectually promising as the goodness of a non-canine dog.

Finally let us consider *God as Necessary Purposer*. In his book *Religious Beliefs* Mr. C. B. Martin offers the following requirements as an intelligible account of an *ens necessarium*: (1) a being for whose existence nothing else need exist; (2) a being that has always existed; (3) a being upon whom everything else

depends for its existence. These requirements seem an excellent start to a temporal analysis of God as necessary purposer.¹⁰ Yet Martin, a neo-Wittgensteinian sceptic, goes on to conclude that any God-concept clear of confusion is "not sufficiently beyond our understanding to be worthy of religious awe." Just so a similarly minded sceptic, Professor J. N. Findlay, claims that (a) if God deserved the full religious reverence of LATREIA — not mere DOULEIA — His existence and possession of His perfections would have to be logically necessary; yet (b) it is logically impossible that non-trivial statements about God's existence and properties be logically necessary or be inescapable for thought. Therefore, he holds, there can be no worthy object of religious awe.¹¹

Thus atheist follows traditionalist in the view that trying to analyze God's attributes in intelligibly temporal terms must frustrate our religious aspirations. Surely, they say, we have abandoned the full venerability of God, if with an intelligible analysis, like Martin's of Necessary Divinity, we make it a contingent affair, a matter of happen-stance, that God exists and is what He is. The emotive force of such arguments depends on a crude play on two ambiguous words. *Contingent* can mean, among other things, 'non-tautologous' and also 'dependent on something else;' *happen* can mean, among other things, 'be the case as a matter of fact not mere definition,' (kings don't just happen to be royalty), and also can mean any number of demeaning things like 'occur randomly contrary to all rational expectation,' 'occur randomly at an irritating time' (there just happened to be thirteen of us at dinner). But,

if by our concept God has always existed and never needed anything else to exist and always exhibits the same perfections in virtue, then these ambiguous, demeaning suggestions of dependence and haphazardness carried in some contexts by 'contingent' and 'happen' simply do not apply in the context of our describing the Divine existence or the Divine attributes. Construing a Necessary God on the model of a temporal person, as in Martin's requirements, and refusing the misconceived sort of necessity that metaphysicians have attributed to timeless definitions and axioms, (a necessity appropriate to an absolute view of geometry), may carry a certain price. Maybe our temporal, personal *ens necessarium* will ill fit the Ontological Argument or other theistic proofs of rationalistic inspiration.¹² If so, it is a price worth paying for higher intelligibility. For speaking of God and man we find, unsurprisingly enough, that the temporal character of human consciousness offers the most intelligible model for a Divine mind. The trouble with the timeless interpretation of every predicate here considered is not that it yields a mystery largely beyond human understanding. Rather the trouble seems to be that, when understood, the interpretation involves us in unpromising and otherwise avoidable contradictions.

3. *A Concluding Challenge*

As I admitted before, I am personally torn between the atemporal view of Boethius and Aquinas and the temporal analysis of Divine attributes. These suggestions offered by my Devil's Advocate do seem to make God's nature more intelligible in some respects but I am left with the uneasy suspicion that the baby

may be floating away with the bathwater. Thus I put forward such arguments in the hope that someone more traditional in view will reply in an illuminating manner. Divine temporality may be too high a penalty to pay for greater theological intelligibility. At any rate, as Socra-

tes replied to Thrasymachus, the just penalty for the ignorant to pay is to learn from one who *does* know. (*Republic* I, 337 D). Without any Socratic irony, I submit these thoughts to others who are also puzzled about the traditional attributes of a personal God.

¹Richard Taylor 'The Problem of Future Contingencies,' *Philosophical Review*, 1957. Taylor is enlarging upon a suggestion by Paul Weiss.

²Antioch, 1959.

³Cf. Spinoza *Ethics* I, where God is 'free' only in an extraordinary sense.

⁴*The Enquiring Mind* (La Salle, Illinois, 1959). P. 159. My italics.

⁵Cf. P. F. Strawson's *Individuals*, Ch. III and Stuart Hampshire's *Thought and Action* Ch. I. I agree with G.E.M. Anscombe at *Intention*, p. 1 that "an action can be intentional without being concerned with the future in any way." But this does not license an atemporal setting for intentions since the required intentional actions still require a temporal setting in which activity and intentionality are to be displayed. Note that 'the action of the negation sign on the truth value of a formula' designates an atemporal but not an intentional action.

⁶*Individuals*, Ch. IV.

⁷Aquinas S.C.G. I, Chs. XIV ff; Maimonides, *Guide to the Perplexed* Part I, Ch. IV.

⁸Boas *op. cit.*, p. 139.

⁹P.T. Geach 'Good and Evil,' *Analysis*, 1956.

¹⁰New York, 1959. See Chs. VI and IX ff.

¹¹'Can God's Existence be Disproved?' *Mind*, 1948.

¹²Norman Malcolm attaches great importance to the atemporal concept of God in his attempted vindication of Anselm. See 'Anselm's Ontological Arguments,' *Philosophical Review*, 1960.