

On the Relation of God and Time: A Temporalist Rebuttal of an Atemporalist View of Divine Immutability

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introduction

In the ongoing debate of whether or not God is in time or out of time, one of the most fascinating arguments that has emerged in favor of divine atemporality is that the doctrine of divine immutability necessitates divine timeless eternity. As Thomas Morris puts it succinctly when describing the atemporalist proponents,

Some atemporalists have argued that in order to be perfect... God must be utterly changeless, and absolutely incapable of undergoing any sort of change whatsoever. But without change of any kind there is no time. Thus, God's existence cannot be enmeshed in the temporal web.[1]

Examples of these theologians are Thomas Aquinas who said, "The notion of eternity follows immutability, as the notion of time follows movement..." [2] Paul Helm also makes a similar point when he said, "[T]here is a conceptual connection between divine immutability and divine eternity in that an individual who is immutable in the strong sense must be [timelessly] eternal, and vice versa." [3]

The argument for divine atemporality from the doctrine of divine immutability is, indeed, an ingenious one. The logic goes as follows: Since the Bible teaches that God is immutable, it stands to reason that the only way that this idea of an unchangeable God can be maintained with any consistency is to view Him as timeless. For only a timeless being can be spared of the change that occurs from existing at one moment in time to another.

To further elucidate the point made above, John Feinberg gives the following clarifying word of explanation on the atemporalist argument from divine immutability:

[E]ven if God always existed but did so in successive stages so that what God was or what God knew differed from one point in his existence to another point in his existence, God would not be immutable. One could speak of God's being at point t and then at point $t + 1$ and so on. That seems to involve change. At $t + 1$ God would exist in a different state of affairs, that is, the state of affairs of existing at $t + 1$ rather than existing at t , even though everything else about God would remain unchanged.

It should be clear, from the perspective of atemporal eternity, that the kinds of change envisioned are changes that rule out immutability. Moreover, the kind of succession envisioned must be temporal succession. Otherwise it is hard to see the difference between state of affairs t and $t + 1$. But if succession in God rules out immutability, and if the only kind of succession in the imagined case that makes sense is temporal succession, then an immutable God must also be timeless. [4] In short, for the atemporalist who holds to a strong sense of divine immutability, any change is seen as temporal succession which, in turn, is viewed as a compromise of the doctrine of divine immutability. Thus, God cannot experience any change no matter how insignificant. To do so, He would be in time and would lose His immutability.

As one can quickly see, if the logical entailment from the doctrine of divine immutability to divine atemporality is correct, then, such an argument would be fatal to the temporalist view of God's existence. It is no wonder, therefore, that theologians and philosophers who hold to divine atemporality have argued vigorously for the logical entailment of the doctrine of divine immutability and divine timeless eternity. For it is an argument that could potentially win the day for them.

Given the argument from divine immutability, the temporalist is clearly put on the defensive. In order to rebut the atemporalist's argument, the temporalist must show that there is no logical entailment from the doctrine of divine immutability to divine atemporality. But how can this feat be accomplished?

There are at least two ways that the logical tie between divine atemporality and divine immutability can be broken. First, the tie can be broken if it can be shown that the biblical doctrine of divine immutability does not demand that God does not change in any way whatsoever. In fact, in certain instances, the biblical doctrine of divine immutability demands that God be able to change in His relationship toward His creatures, if He is a morally perfect being. And second, the tie can be broken if it can be shown that proponents of the strong sense of divine immutability such as Anselm, Thomas Aquinas, and Paul Helm would also agree to a modified, less stringent understanding of divine immutability.

In this paper, as a temporalist, I will attempt to "break the tie that binds" the doctrine of divine immutability and the view of divine atemporality as delineated above. After showing that the alleged logical entailment can be broken, I will then assess how a modified and less stringent doctrine of divine immutability might possibly affect the current atemporality-temporality debate.

argument from biblical theology and sound logic for God's ability to change relations

That God is immutable is affirmed by all orthodox, evangelical Christians since the Bible clearly teaches this truth. The issue at hand, however, is to what extent is God immutable. The starting point of this paper, therefore, will be a brief discussion of the biblical teaching on God's immutability. Then, it will proceed to show that biblical theology as well as sound logic require that God, being morally perfect, must be able to change His relationship with His creatures. Biblical Teaching on Divine Immutability

Some theologians have argued that Scripture teaches that God is immutable in two respects. He is immutable ontologically [5] (that is, He cannot change in His essence, being or intrinsic nature), and He is immutable ethically [6] (that is, He cannot change in His moral character which is usually expressed in what He has promised or committed Himself to). These two senses of His immutability are not exclusive but interrelated. Almost always when one speaks of God's immutability in one aspect, the other aspect cannot help but be involved. As Bruce Ware said,

The divine ethical immutability is secondary and derivative in nature in that it presupposes (a) God's ontological changelessness, (b) the existence of a contingent and temporal moral order, and (c) the free decision of God to pledge himself to his creatures in certain ways that accord with his intrinsic nature. [7]

Some of the key Scriptural passages showing God's ontological and ethical immutability are to Psalm 102:26-27 [8], Malachi 3:6, and James 1:17.

There are some theologians such as Nicholas Wolterstorff [9], however, who would dispute the Scriptural support for this distinction in God's immutability. But, regardless, even these theologians would certainly agree with Feinberg that "orthodox Christianity has maintained that God had better not change, at least in being (including attributes), purposes and will." [10] To do so would be inconsistent with who and what He has revealed Himself to be in the overall tenor of Scripture. Thus, it is probably safe to assume that both the atemporalist and temporalist would agree that the Bible teaches that God is immutable in the sense that He cannot change in His being, purposes or will.

God's Ability to Change Relations: The Teaching of Biblical Theology and the Mandate of Sound Logic

God can change His relationship. This fact seems self evident when one peruses through the pages of Scripture from beginning to end. The Bible reflects a God who changes His relationship toward His creatures, especially toward mankind, depending on how they respond to His commandments precepts, and will (e.g. Ps. 78, Rom. 1:17, Rom. 5;1, Rom. 8:1, I Jn. 1:9). The burden of proof lies on those who would deny that the God of the Bible can change His relationship with mankind. Such a burden, however, seems very difficult to overcome given the mountain of Scriptural evidence to the contrary.

On God's relational mutability, Ware brings up three helpful and clarifying comments which this paper heartily endorses. First, "these changes of relationship neither entail nor involve incidentally changes in God's intrinsic nature...Though God changes in his relations to his creatures, God remains precisely who he was, is and shall be." [11] In short, God's immutability in His being, purposes or will are not compromised simply because His relationships change.

Second, as a corollary to the first comment, God's ability to change His relationships "actually express rather than deny his immutable nature and word." [12] Ware continues his exposition of this point by saying,

[B]ecause God's intrinsic moral nature is unchangeable it must always and without fail express itself in ways appropriate to the moral state of any given human situation. Thus when the human moral state changes (e.g. from rebellion to repentance) the immutable divine nature must now reflect itself in ways that are appropriate to this new situation. Hence changes in God's attitudes and actions are naturally brought about as God consistently applies the standards and requirements of his constant moral nature in ways that correspond to the moral changes continually undergone by his creatures. [13]

Ware's excellent point seems difficult to dispute, especially for those who see God as the epitome of moral perfection. One can almost say that God must have the ability to change His relations toward mankind if He is to remain immutable in His revealed attributes. Both clear biblical theology and sound logic require this conclusion. Third, "God is made neither better or worse by his relational changes. He neither increases nor decreases in excellence since he is, as already stated, the fullness of all excellence. Indeed God cannot change for the better or for worst, but he can change in some sense nonetheless." [14] Ware made this comment in response to those theologians who insist that any change in God must be either for better or for worse. In support of Ware's point, Morris makes the following comment,

[I]t has been claimed by numerous theists that God cannot change, because all change is either change for the better or change for the worse...But why think that all possible changes are changes in value? Can't there be value-neutral changes?...And if there are value- neutral changes, it will not follow from the fact that God cannot change for the better or for the worse that God cannot change at all. So his perfection does not clearly motivate a doctrine of absolute immutability after all. [15]

Interestingly, as will be shown later, even the staunchest advocates of absolute immutability seem to agree with Ware and Morris on their point. Not all changes in God make Him better or worse. There are value-neutral changes. And this seems to be the more biblical perspective on the doctrine of divine immutability since it makes possible for God's immutable attributes can be demonstrated.

What I am proposing, therefore, is that the biblical view of divine immutability is that God cannot change in His being, purposes or will. However, He can change in His relationship toward His creatures. In fact, the biblical doctrine of divine immutability would require that He be able to change His relationships. For it is the only way that His immutable attributes and qualities can be upheld. Granted that this notion of divine immutability is not as strong and comprehensive as the one advocated by some atemporalists, nonetheless, it is the more biblical view and the view most consistent with the logic of Scripture.

I have, thus far, presented a biblical and logical argument for a modified, less stringent view of the immutability of God without diminishing the immutability of His being, purposes or will. I believe that the arguments presented are sufficient to break the alleged logical entailment of divine immutability and divine atemporality. However, if they are not quite convincing to the atemporalists, then I now turn to the next argument.

argument from admission statements of atemporalists and advocates of the strong sense of divine immutability

While the arguments from the Bible and from sound logic for the necessity of God to change relationally seem compelling, one can never be sure how an atemporalist who holds to a strong sense of divine immutability would receive them. However, there are evidences that they would find the arguments receptive (at least, they should) since their leading advocates have made statements that are similar to the arguments in favor of God's relational mutability.

The significance of their contradictory statements is not just merely historical. They are significant in the present debate because they show that even those who hold to a strong sense of divine immutability cannot maintain their position and have to resort to a modified view of divine immutability in order to properly explain the God of the Bible. Their concession, therefore, is the basis for legitimizing the modified view of divine immutability and, consequently, for arguing that the logical entailment argument has been severed.

Three of the staunchest proponents of the strong sense of divine immutability are Anselm, Thomas Aquinas, and Paul Helm. It is interesting, however, that they have made statements that contradicted their own position on God's immutability in the strong sense. For they are willing to admit that God can change relationally without changing His essence.

In *Monologium*, Anselm argues that God is immutable but is, at times, changeable because of "accident," that is, changes that occur external to Him without affecting His essence. He said,

Hence, although the supreme Nature in its simplicity has never undergone such accidents as cause mutation, yet it does not disdain occasional expression in terms of those accidents which are in no wise inconsistent with supreme immutability; and yet there is no accident respecting its essence, whence it would be conceived of, as itself variable. [16]

He gives the following example to illustrate his point:

For it is true that I am neither taller nor shorter than, equal nor similar to, a man who will be born after the present year. But after he is born, I will surely be able to have and to lose all of these relations to him---according as he will grow or change in various of his qualities---without any change in myself. [17]

For Anselm, therefore, God is able to change His relations so long as His essence does not change.

Paul Helm said a similar thing and is even more clear on God's ability to change relationally in the following:

Not every kind of change is ruled out by immutability or impassibility; suppose, on thinking of him, a person comes to fear or rejoice in God. Something is true of God now that was not true of him before, namely that God is now feared by that person. So, in a sense, God has changed from not being feared to being feared. But, as one quickly realises, the change is not "in" God but "in" one of his creatures who has now come to fear God. This distinction between a "real" change and one that is a mere relational change is hard to make precise, but there is such a distinction is obvious. [18]

Helm's statement of admission that God can change relationally so long as His essence does not change is noteworthy, since it flies in the face of his own definition of God's immutability, that is, "God is immutable if nothing about him could change." [19]

Aside from Anselm and Helm, even Thomas Aquinas had to make room for relational change in God, despite holding to a strong sense divine immutability. Ronald Nash sheds the following light on Thomistic metaphysics,

Thomistic metaphysics contains a distinction between two kinds of relations: relations in the real order of a being and relations in the intentional order of a being. So long as changes occur only in God's intentional order (that is, in God's consciousness), His immutability is not compromised. Changes in God's intentional being do not require corresponding changes in God's real being. [20]

Regardless of whether one agrees with the Thomistic distinction or not, it is clear that in Aquinas' metaphysics there are certain relational changes in God that are considered to be neutral since they do not change His essence as God. Thus, God can change relationally without changing His being, purposes or will.

What Anselm, Helm and Aquinas show in their respective statements on God's relational mutability is that there is no difference between their view of immutability and what I am proposing. Based on their own statements, they would be forced to capitulate to the view of immutability that I am suggesting and give up their strong sense of divine immutability.

I believe that sufficient biblical evidences and sound arguments have been presented to show that there is no logical entailment between the doctrine of divine immutability and divine atemporality. The main reason is that a strong sense of divine immutability cannot be sustained by Scripture, by sound logic, and by advocates of the view themselves. And without a strong sense of divine immutability, divine atemporality cannot be its logical entailment. The tie that binds, therefore, has been broken.

effects of a modified, less stringent view of divine immutability on the atemporal-temporal debate

If the proper view of divine immutability is that God can change relationally but not in His being, purposes or will, one issue remains. How will such a view of divine immutability affect the atemporal-temporal debate? The following is a brief analysis of what the effects of a modified, less stringent view of divine immutability will have on both the atemporal and temporal positions. Effects on the Atemporal Position

The immediate effect of a modified, less stringent view of divine immutability on the atemporal position is that the atemporalist must abandon the logical entailment argument. It is clear that if God can change His relationship with human beings without becoming mutable in His being, purposes or will, then there is no reason to think that having an ability to change His relationship with time (that is, to go from time t to time $t+1$, $t+2$, $t+3$ and so on) would somehow compromise the immutability of His being, purposes or will. As in the case of God's relational mutability toward human beings, it is really the other party that changes which causes God to change accordingly. In this case, instead of human beings, the party that changes is time. So nothing about God's intrinsic nature and being are changed at all, only His relationship toward His creatures.

It is conceivable, though, that some atemporalists might decide not to abandon the logical entailment argument and continue to assert that God is atemporal based on the rationale that an immutable being in the strong sense has to be timeless. Such an approach, however, can be dangerous and can backfire on them. Since it can be established that God is relationally mutable, the temporalist can turn the reasoning around and argue that God must be in time because He is not immutable in the strong sense. Thus, the best approach for the atemporalist is to abandon the logical entailment argument completely.

By abandoning the logical entailment argument and the strong sense of immutability, the atemporalist is not necessarily conceding defeat. Just because God is relationally mutable does not automatically mean that He is in time. Moreover, there are still other features of atemporality that people might find appealing and that temporalist must successfully challenge in order for the atemporalist position to be put to rest. In fact, by adopting a modified, less stringent view of immutability, the atemporalist might actually help his position make better sense. Effects on the Temporal Position

The immediate effect of a modified, less stringent view of divine immutability is that it relieves the temporal position of the threat of a strong atemporal argument. The temporalist does not have to be concerned that his position is somehow unbiblical or is not consistent with biblical inferences about God. The temporalist can maintain the respectability of his position both philosophically and theologically.

While it is true that proving that God is relationally mutable does not mean that the temporal position is correct, one has to say that such a concept of God's mutability would slightly favor the temporalist view since change implies that a being is time-bound. At least, intuitively, one would have to say that if a being can change--even relationally--he would have to be in time. Although this intuitive reasoning is not enough to settle the atemporal-temporal debate, it is a powerful argument for the temporalist and must be explored by them. For until the atemporalist can provide a cogent argument of how a God who is relationally changeable can be out of time, the intuitive edge would seem to be in favor of the temporalist. (Arguably, the atemporalist might say that philosophers such as Stump and Kretzmann have presented a compelling explanation through ET Simultaneity. While this writer is not convinced, the reader must decide for himself or herself whether Stump and Kretzmann's theory is compelling enough. Until then, however, the burden lies with the atemporalist to come up with a cogent explanation and the intuitive edge remains in favor of the temporalist, at least, on this specific matter.) Thus, the modified, less stringent view of divine immutability did not simply provide an escape for the temporalist against the atemporalist's logical entailment argument, it actually provides the temporalist with a slight intuitive edge in the atemporal-temporal debate.

conclusion

Can the logical tie that binds the doctrine of divine immutability in the strong sense and the atemporal view of God be broken? This paper has answered that question in the affirmative. It has shown that the alleged logical entailment argument cannot be supported by Scripture, sound logic based on biblical theology, and advocates of the view themselves. In fact, the proper biblical view of the doctrine of divine immutability is that God cannot change in His being, purposes or will. But He can and must be able to change relationally if His immutability attributes and qualities are to be preserved.

Since the modified, less stringent view of divine immutability is the biblical understanding of God, one can conclude that the logical tie between divine immutability and divine atemporality has been broken. Without a strong sense of divine immutability, there is no logical necessity for God to be atemporal. In concluding that the logical entailment has been rebutted, this paper does not claim to have resolved the atemporal-temporal debate. It merely claims that the temporal position has attained the intuitive edge on the debate since a being that can change relationally is best understood as time-bound.

by Adam Co, December 8, 1998

endnotes

[1] Thomas Morris, *Our Idea of God: An Introduction to Philosophical Theology* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1991), 127.

[2] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica Question 10 Article II* Translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province, (New York: Benziger Brothers, Inc.: 1946), 41.

[3] Paul Helm, *Eternal God: A Study of God without Time* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988) 94. Similarly in a related topic, Helm puts it this way: "An understanding of [the concept of divine impassibility] is, in my view, best approached through an understanding of divine immutability in the strong sense of the term that (I shall argue) is required in the case of God. And immutability in that strong sense is in turn entailed by divine timeless eternity. So a simple way to establish divine impassibility would be to argue:

- a. God is timelessly eternal.
- b. Whatever is timelessly eternal is unchangeable.
- c. Whatever is unchangeable is impassible.
- d. Therefore, God is impassible."

Paul Helm, "The Impossibility of Divine Passibility" in *The Power and Weakness of God*, ed. Nigel M. De S. Cameron (Edinburgh: Rutherford House Books, 1990), 119.

[4] John S. Feinberg, "New Dimensions in the Doctrine of God" in *New Dimensions in Evangelical Thought: Essays In Honor of Millard Erickson*, ed. David S. Dockery (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1998) 251.

[5] Holding on to this aspect of divine immutability is the best safeguard against going down the road to process theism. See Bruce Ware, "An Exposition and Critique of the Process Doctrines of Divine Immutability and Mutability," *Westminster Theological Journal* 47 (1985), 175-196.

[6] For an excellent and classic discussion on God's ethical immutability, see Isaak A. Dorner, *Divine Immutability: A Critical Reconstruction* Translated by Robert R. Williams and Claude Welch (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994). But note Bruce Ware's critique of Dorner's failure to wed God's ontological and ethical immutability in "An Evangelical Reformulation of the Doctrine of the Immutability of God," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 29 (December 1986) 437: "The problem with Dorner's view, however, is that he bases the ethical consistency or faithfulness of God strictly on God's unchanging ethical nature (e.g. that God is always loving, holy, just) rather than on a more complete sense of the fullness and supreme excellence of God's immutable being. While it is true that Scripture grounds the faithfulness of God's word in his own ethical character, the fulfillment of his word may depend on more than God's changeless ethical nature. It may depend as well on God's immutable power, or knowledge, or wisdom--i.e. facets of the nature of God that are not part of his moral nature, properly speaking. Especially when one observes the magnitude of what God has promised, one sees that God's faithfulness to his word requires that he be ontologically immutable in the full sense described above and not only ethically consistent."

[7] Ware, 436.

[8] Wayne Grudem makes this interesting comment. "It is significant that this passage is quoted in Heb. 1:11-12 and applied to Jesus Christ. Heb. 13:8 also applies the attribute of unchangeableness to Christ: 'Jesus Christ I the same yesterday and today and for ever.' Thus, God the Son shares fully in this divine attribute." Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994), 163.

[9] Nicholas Wolterstorff, "God Everlasting" in *God and the Good*, ed. Clifton Orlebe and Lewis Semedes (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975) 201-202.

[10] Feinberg, 259.

[11] Ware, 340.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Morris, 127.

[16] Anselm, Basic Writings: Proslogium, Monologium, Gaunilon's: On Behalf of the Fool, Cur Deus Homo Trans. S.N. Deane (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court Publishing Company, 1962) 85.

[17] Anselm, Monologium, in Anselm of Canterbury (ed. J. Hopkins and H. Richardson; London:SCM, 1974) 1, ch. 25.

[18] Helm, "The Impossibility of Divine Impassibility," 120.

[19] Helm, Eternal God, 86-87.

[20] Ronald Nash, The Concept of God (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1983) 102.

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