Introduction

Perhaps more than any other phenomenon, time fundamentally shapes our experience of embodied existence. It frames our understanding of continuous personal identity; it structures our hopes for the future and memories of the past; it is the measure by which we plan our lives. It is no exaggeration to say that human beings encounter the world in an inescapably temporal way. So much so that it is almost impossible to imagine a life, or any other kind of psychological existence, not occurring within the bounds of time. Indeed, the nature of temporal reality has been a bedfellow of philosophy since the Ancient Greeks, and yet debates over even the most foundational temporal questions rage on in both metaphysics and physics. As Huw Price rightly notes, the metaphysics of time 'is unusual even by philosophical standards for the durability of some of its main concerns' (Price 1996, 12). This fascinating and complex phenomenon seems to evade explanation, making it both an alluring and a frustrating object of philosophical enquiry.

Despite its elusive nature, time is an integral component of some of the most important questions sitting at the foundations of philosophy and theology. It is therefore imperative that temporal considerations receive appropriate reflection in theology, the philosophy of religion, and science and religion. In my view, the interdisciplinary conversations between science and religion have not yet recognised how transformative a proper understanding of temporal reality might be for many areas of theology. To answer the most pressing theological questions, the nature of time must enter the equation in more ways than it has until now. Not only does time fundamentally shape the lives of human beings, but the relation of

God to temporal reality is, implicitly or explicitly, embedded in almost every theological question. If the finite universe is temporal, then the nature of time is an issue that permeates all questions regarding creation and its relation to a creator.

Though philosophers have long examined the relationship between the nature of time and the nature of God, the discourse has been dominated by the question of whether God is temporal or atemporal.[1] These debates orbit around the relation of creator to creation, and although they ask important questions, many other equally valuable areas have been neglected. What about the other trinitarian persons and their relation to time? What about specific theological doctrine, or particular philosophical ideas? Need we take spacetime, rather than time, as the more significant subject in these discussions? Although some excellent work has been published on space, time, and the incarnation, this important topic has not received the amount of attention one might expect (Torrance 1969) (Senor 1990) (Leftow 2002). It is time to turn our sights to the relationship between spatiotemporal reality and specific doctrines, especially those relating to trinitarian persons other than God the Father.

In this work, I wish to do just that. Specifically, I aim to bring time and soteriology together constructively, with the aim of producing a dialogue that is both creative and novel. This book centres on a very specific set of concerns that arise from the block universe model of spatiotemporal reality. The block universe view holds that all moments, entities, and events exist *simpliciter*, as there is no objective tense or temporal passage to afford any of them ontological priority. Each event is as real as the others. In other words, every spatiotemporal location, each moment of your life, and the beginning and end of the universe itself already exist somewhere 'out there' in distant regions of the universe. Together, these events form a four-

[1] For arguments in favour of divine temporality, see (Swinburne 1993) (Craig 2001a) (DeWeese 2004)
On the side of divine atemporality, see (Leftow 1991, 2018).

dimensional 'block' that is static and tenseless – temporal passage is an illusion and nothing new can enter reality nor can anything old pass out of existence.

The problem this poses is as follows. The block universe (which, as we shall see in the chapters to come, receives compelling support from metaphysics, physics, and phenomenology) forces us to re-examine our intuitive understanding of change. Change is typically understood as occurring when some object or entity possesses incompatible properties at different times – perhaps I have blonde hair on Monday and choose to dye it brown on Tuesday. When the date (and thus the time) changes from Monday to Tuesday, and the event of my dying my hair takes place, my hair changes from blonde to brown. In other words, there *was* an absolute fact of the matter about my hair colour (viz. that it *was* blonde) and now there *is* a different, absolute fact of the matter about my hair colour (viz. that it *is* brown). So, there has been a robust change in my hair colour substantiated by the passage of time.

Without the passage of time, or the possibility of genuine newness entering reality, our ordinary understanding of such change is problematised. In the block universe, Monday and Tuesday are equally real. I have both blonde and brown hair, and there is no objective or observer-independent way to say whether my hair is *actually* blonde or brown, because each exists tenselessly at different points in the four-dimensional extension of myself. One way to understand this is that I have temporal parts: one of which has blonde hair and exists on Monday, and one of which has brown hair and exists on Tuesday. It is not the case, on this view, that my brown hair existed as mere potentiality until it came into the world, becoming existent or real when before it was neither. What this means for salvation is as follows. If all the temporal parts of me exist, then it must be the case that (presuming salvation can occur, and presuming I might be saved) I have both fallen temporal parts and saved temporal parts. If both are equally real, how can we ever really say an individual has been transformed from being fallen to being saved? The fallen parts are

not really gone, making the idea of personal salvation as a total transformation hard to recover.

The problem can be set out as an argument in the following way:

P1. Salvation requires robust, ontological change.
P2. Robust, ontological change requires an A-theory of time.
P3. The A-theory of time is false.
C. Salvation is impossible.

In this work, I develop this problem and, using the theology of Paul Tillich, construct a solution that shows P1 to be false.

Thus, the aim of this book is both ambitious and simple: to reinterpret Paul Tillich's doctrine of personal salvation in light of what metaphysics and physics indicate about the nature of time. In short, I ask how *time* shapes our understanding of *salvation.* The form of salvation under consideration here is personal salvation with an emphasis on realised eschatology – in other words, the type of salvation that happens to an individual person in their spatiotemporal lifetime. An understanding of time's fundamental structure is deeply relevant when considering this form of salvation, as this is the part of the salvific process that happens within (as opposed to after or outside of) spatiotemporal reality. Moreover, both time and salvation appear to require change. If the prevailing metaphysical or physical theory of time seems to invite us to reconceptualise our common-sense understanding of change, then soteriology is called to enter into a dialogue with physics and metaphysics. Though Paul Tillich is the interlocutor for the theological portions of the book, the conclusions drawn can, and should, extend to a variety of other interpretations of the doctrine of salvation.

I do not intend to offer an interpretation of Tillich that steps outside the boundaries he set in *Systematic Theology (ST)* or present a formulation of his soteriology that contradicts the core of his wider theological system. Rather, I offer a reinterpretation of Tillich in light of developments in our understanding of time that is both new and

true to the spirit of the old. Moreover, I hope to offer insights that will be valuable to those who do not subscribe to the specifics of Tillich's theology. In many ways, the problem of personal salvation in the block universe is one that affects any soteriology that affirms some process of temporal transformation. So, I hope my reconstruction of Tillich's ideas holds water outside the boundaries of his thought. Nonetheless, I remain cognizant of the fact that Tillich is rather unorthodox and that many Christians will be left unconvinced by the finer details of Tillichian theology. If the reader takes nothing else from the portions of this work that focus on Tillich, I hope to demonstrate that his method of correlation, which we shall come to shortly, is an invaluable tool in the arsenal of any philosopher or theologian who engages in 'science and religion'.

Why do I focus on personal salvation instead of the type of eschatological transformation Christians believe will occur after or outside of time? Well, to the extent that eschatology is realised, and salvation is understood as a process that at the very least begins in an individual's life, the problem I identify requires addressing. This is acknowledged by prominent science and religion scholar Robert John Russell in a chapter surveying the literature on the relationship between cosmology and eschatology. He writes:

> [20th century] Eschatologies such as [Barth's, Tillich's, Pannenberg's, and Moltmann's] view the new creation not as a replacement of the present creation – i.e., not as a second *ex nihilo* – *nor* as the mere working out of the natural processes of the world. Instead eschatology involves the complete transformation of the world by a radically new act of God beginning at Easter and continuing into the future. For [some contemporary] scholars … the transformation of the world happens not only synchronically at the end of time but also diachronically throughout the entire course of world history.
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> *(Russell 2007, 564–565).*

Russell is right in noting the significance of the parts of the soteriological process that occur diachronically within the course of world

history, and it is to these issues that this present work is devoted. Paul himself writes in 2 Corinthians 5:17 that 'Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold the new has come.' As far back as the Pauline literature, the part of the soteriological process in which an individual changes in their lifetime, that is *becomes* a new creation, has been understood as a highly significant feature of the Christian theological landscape. How can an individual *become* a new creation in a block universe that does not include temporal becoming? This book is intended as a thought experiment examining this question, and in it I consider what temporal metaphysics might mean for an individual's salvation. My hope for this book is that it opens up new avenues of discussion concerning these fascinating matters. In fact, it can be read in part as a response to Russell's own call for this kind of work to be done (Russell 2007, 574–575).

That the block universe is the best metaphysical model of spatiotemporal reality on offer will be argued for at some length in Part I. I must note at the outset that when making these arguments, I will at times use language that suggests that the block universe has been shown to be true. This is important for legitimising the project – the problem raised by a block universe is worth considering, as there is a good chance that it is the right way to understand spatiotemporal reality – but the cautious reader need not baulk at the boldness of this approach. Though I find the block universe the most compelling temporal metaphysic for both scientific and philosophical reasons, these pages can equally be read as a thought experiment that seeks to reinterpret Tillich within a particular hypothetical framework. Robert Russell calls this the 'if x, then y' approach.[2] Essentially, *if* the block universe turns out to be broadly right in the way it depicts spacetime, *then* here are some philosophical and theological implications.

By following a thought-experiment style approach to this project, some sacrifices must be made. The block universe's main rival,

[2] Russell used this phrase to describe such an approach in an email correspondence, and I find it a very helpful way of characterising the approach of the present project.

namely the A-theory in which time objectively passes and there is a universal and objective *now*, is set aside relatively early on. This may be frustrating to readers who wish to read a parallel analysis of salvation in the context of the A-theory or see all the arguments in favour of the A-theory discussed in detail. On this point, I say the following: the A-theory is the intuitive, common-sense, phenomenologically compelling description of temporal reality. We experience time as though it passes; as though the past is gone, the future is yet to exist, and the present is uniquely real. On this experience hangs the most compelling argument in favour of the A-theory. In this sense, most soteriology can be read as an examination of salvation in the context of an A-theory. The A-theory has intuitive resonance with salvation traditionally conceived; therefore comparatively little needs to be done in order to imagine salvation in an A-theoretic context.

An A-theory easily accommodates change by providing an objective distinction between two moments in time. If an entity possesses two properties at two objectively distinct moments in time, then as time passes from one moment to another, that entity can straightforwardly be said to have undergone a change. I am interested in the theory of time that seems to prohibit (or at least problematise) such change. Space restrictions prohibit saying much more on this, but it must be noted at this early point that if the A-theory were true then relatively little of the doctrine of salvation, presented by Paul Tillich or otherwise, requires re-examination.

I must also note that I will almost exclusively engage with literature from the twentieth century onwards. My focus is on our understanding of the metaphysics and physics of time following Einstein's relativity theories, so any philosophy or theology that predates relativity is not directly relevant and must be set aside.

METHOD AND STRUCTURE

The structure of this work echoes Tillich's distinctive methodology. Because one aim of this book is to offer a reinterpretation of Tillich's doctrine of salvation, in the hope that it can function as a 'test case' for

how one might go about reinterpreting other soteriologies in the context of the block universe, it makes sense to structure it in a way akin to Tillich's structuring of *ST*. *ST* is carried out in accordance with Tillich's 'method of correlation' that presents theological reflections as a direct response to the prevailing cultural and philosophical questions of the period in which that theology is written. For Tillich, these questions were existential in nature, and woven throughout his theological system are existentialist themes and concerns. As Langdon Gilkey explains, Tillich is consistently concerned with analysing the structures of being (philosophy) and uncovering their meaning for our being and non-being (theology) (Gilkey 1985, 344). Ours is a culture dominated by science, and so the philosophical questions raised here will be shaped by scientific insights. I have chosen to consider questions raised by the physics and metaphysics of time, as these are highly important phenomena. Following the method of correlation, I reinterpret Tillich's theology in light of the answers to those questions.

In Part I, I set out the philosophical question, and in Part II I give the theological answer. The former raises metaphysical questions about the nature of time and our relation to it, with a particular focus on the notion of change. These are then used, in dialogue with Tillich, to shape theological answers. Specifically, I reinterpret Tillich's doctrine of salvation, understood as the transformation from Old Being to New Being, in a way consistent with the physics and metaphysics of time. Though my focus is on Tillich, the problems I raise for salvation transcend the boundaries of *ST*. Any doctrine of salvation that requires a transformation in time will be vulnerable to the problems presented here. The block universe, supported by the most compelling metaphysical interpretation of Einstein's relativity theories, seems hostile to the type of change salvation requires. Using the method of correlation, I identify these problems and present an innovative solution, the relevance of which extends beyond the remit of Tillichian scholarship.

Both Tillich's methodology and my own project are unequivocally interdisciplinary. The method of correlation encourages dialogue between philosophy and theology, suggesting that theological insights

are found when the theologian addresses questions raised by philosophy and culture more widely. Arguments from physics, philosophy, and theology are presented here, and I use conceptual tools from each in my final reconstruction of Tillich's doctrine of salvation. The reader will find a breadth of content in the pages to come, as well as a range of styles of academic discourse. This is necessary for a holistic treatment of time and salvation. As Mary Midgely astutely remarks, reality is highly complex. Only by having multiple descriptions drawing upon the insights of a multiplicity of disciplines can reality, in all its beautiful complexity, be adequately represented (Midgley 2003, chapter 4).

Although I reshape some of Tillich's soteriology, I am confident that this is a project with which he would have been deeply sympathetic. He continuously committed himself to outward-facing theology that is sensitive to the concerns of the culture into which it is to be received. Stagnant, esoteric theology loses relevance for the people it is intended to serve. For this reason, theologians have a duty to engage in continuous reinterpretation, translating theology into the symbols of our ever-evolving cultural languages. In the preface to the third volume of *ST,* Tillich writes that 'a system should be not only a point of arrival but a point of departure as well. It should be like a station at which preliminary truth is crystallised on the endless road toward truth' (Tillich 1964, vii). *ST* is Tillich's point of arrival, the culmination of his life's work as a systematic theologian. Despite this, he humbly acknowledges that he has not provided all the answers, nor could he. Rather, he encourages others to engage with his work as a point of departure for developing their own thought. Tillich's existentialist reformulation of the Christian message was for the twentieth century, and since then developments in physics and metaphysics have opened up a wealth of new ideas with which *ST* can fruitfully interact. To use his metaphor, I take Tillich's theological system as my point of departure. From here, I hope to advance towards the next station in the endless journey towards deeper understanding.

PART I The Block Universe