

1 Introduction

What does a person who is religious in the Western sense of the word, who believes in the traditional doctrines of a Western religion, believe? What is the content of their worldview? Of course, the answer varies for different religions – Judaism, Christianity, or Islam – and also for different denominations within those religions, but there will be some common themes. One such theme is the idea that God is personal, so that it is possible for human persons to have a relationship with God. Indeed, in many religious traditions, the quality of a person's relationship with God is a matter of great importance. It directly affects the flourishing, or otherwise, of every aspect of a human being's life. Another recurring theme is the idea that God is the creator of the universe.

This is an intriguing combination of ideas. What would a divine person who is the creator of the universe, and with whom many believers strive to cultivate a good relationship, be like? After all, God cannot be a physical being the way that human persons are. One way to narrow the investigation down a bit is to focus on God's relationship to time. Time is a ubiquitous aspect of our lives. After all, we are physical beings, whose lives are made up of events in time. We act in time, we age in time, and we try to show up to meetings on time. It is hard to think of a single aspect of our lives that is not deeply affected by the fact that we are temporal beings, whose life spans are temporally limited. God is not like that. True, according to believers, God is a person who often acts in time, who responds to petitionary prayers, and who affects world history. According to some traditions, God even has emotional reactions to things that happen in time. But God is also radically removed, and radically different, from us, and God's relationship to time is likely to reflect this. God is the creator of the universe, and the universe includes space and time. Does that mean God created space and time? And if so, does that in turn mean that God is somehow outside of time? And if God is outside of time, then how can God be (in some sense) present in our lives?

These questions, like many others in philosophy of religion, are of potential interest to both the believer and the nonbeliever. For the believer, they can be of existential significance. After all, they are, for the believer, about getting to know and trying to understand better the divine person with whom they take themselves to be in a relationship. Of course, there is no reason to expect to be able to fully understand the nature of God. But some questions about God's nature make a difference in how one feels able to relate to that divine being. Is God in the room with me now? Is God simultaneously in all other rooms? Does God know what it is like to anticipate, to wait, to change, or to think about the past? In what ways do we human beings experience these things differently?

Does God know what I'm going through right at this moment? Has God always known?

To the nonbeliever, questions about God and time may matter for different reasons. God's relation to time is a defining element of any conception of God, one that has repercussions throughout one's theology and wider worldview. Time is a central aspect of the natural world. How one conceives of God's relation to aspects of the natural world directly affects whether and to what extent there can be (dis)confirmation of God's existence on the basis of historical or empirical findings. Do science and religion have any bearing on one another, and if so, are they in tension? Do the historical and scientific bodies of evidence support a favorable or an unfavorable stance on whether God exists? One need not be undecided on these questions in order to be interested in how best to defend one's answers to them. Entering into reasoned dialogue about religion, science, and history can require pursuing topics that might previously have seemed of interest only to the believer. God's relation to time is one of these topics.

Supposing one has decided to consider the question of God's relationship to time, how can one hope to make progress with it? What methodology can be fruitfully employed here? There is a lot to be said about this, because many different disciplines are involved to some degree, including philosophy of religion, philosophy of time, and philosophical theology. Moreover, there are various approaches to each of these. Here it will suffice to say a bit about the methodology employed in this Element. The aim of the Element is to introduce the reader to the current state of art of philosophical thinking about God and time, without presupposing much more than a basic curiosity about the topic. So the focus is on the contemporary philosophical discussion. Of course, there is a long and fascinating history of thought about the topic. And it is not always useful or even possible to neatly separate that history from the ways philosophers and theologians are approaching the topic nowadays. The approach taken here will be to look at the history through contemporary lenses, whenever this is helpful for understanding or evaluating current thinking about the topic. Naturally, there has to be a certain selection of views. This is done largely on the basis of how prominent a role these views have played in the philosophical literature, but also with a view to presenting a balanced and wide-ranging introduction to the philosophical landscape.

So, what are philosophy of religion, philosophy of time, and philosophical theology, and what can each of these contribute? Philosophy of religion, unsurprisingly, is the part of philosophy that asks philosophical questions about religion. That includes, among other things, the evaluation of a variety of arguments for and against the existence of God, or for and against the (in)

coherence of various religious ideas. The present topic is a part of philosophy of religion. Philosophy of time is the part of philosophy concerned with the nature of time, our experience of time, and the relation between the two. Philosophy of time is a field to which many different scientific disciplines, including both physics and cognitive science, are relevant in different ways; and it is increasingly being conducted in a way that draws these fields together. However, there is also a part of the philosophy of time – called the metaphysics of time – that is a bit more traditional. Since it is this part of the philosophy of time that has played the greatest role in the God and time discussion to date, much of the next section is devoted to it. Briefly, in metaphysics one asks questions about the most general and/or most basic features of reality. Therefore, in the metaphysics of time, one asks questions about the most general and/or most basic features of *temporal* reality. What is the nature of time? How much like space is it? Does it pass or flow – that is, does it have a dynamic aspect that space lacks? If so, what does this passing consist in? These questions are dealt with in the metaphysics of time. Finally, by “philosophical theology” I mean an approach to theological questions that aims for conceptual clarity and that values thinking about the merits of arguments for and against claims.

As our topic is the God of Western religion, there are methodological constraints arising from relevant passages in Western Scripture.¹ Partly for historical reasons, much of the contemporary discussion is focused on the Judeo-Christian, especially the Christian, tradition. The Bible contains many relevant passages (Leftow 2005). For example, there are passages telling us that God’s “years have no end” (Ps. 102:27, all quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version) and that God exists “from everlasting to everlasting” (Pss. 90:2, 103:17). God says, “let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night, and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years” (Gen. 1:14), and “I am the first and I am the last” (Isa. 44:6). Moreover, we are told that God promised us eternal life “before the ages began” (Titus 1:2), and that “He himself is before all things” (Col. 1:17). Making sense of these passages requires philosophical work.

There are two key terms that will reoccur throughout the Element. First, “theism” refers to the view that there is a personal God who is omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent, who created the world, and who is still actively involved in the world. This is intended to capture a core view at the heart of all three Western religions (Judaism, Islam, Christianity). The topic of

¹ The rest of this section, as well as parts of Sections 3 and 4, contain developments of many ideas that first appeared in the SEP article “Eternity in Christian Thought” (Deng 2018b).

this Element is the relation between time and the God of Western theism. However, as mentioned, much of the contemporary discussion focuses on the Judeo-Christian, especially the Christian, tradition. (But note that we will not discuss specific Christian doctrines such as the doctrine of the Trinity or the Incarnation.)

The second key term is “eternity” (and “God’s eternality”). In philosophical discussions about God and time, the term “eternity” has been used in different ways. On one usage, which will be followed here, “eternity” stands for the relationship to time that God has, whatever it is. When used in that way, the term is neutral between different ways of spelling out what God’s relationship to time is. Theists agree that God is eternal; the task is to formulate and assess conceptions of what this eternality might amount to.

Broadly speaking, there have been two rival views of God’s eternality. These will be explained in much more detail in the coming sections; the following is just intended to provide the reader with a rough overview. In the first of the two views, God is timeless or outside of time (divine timelessness). In the second, God is not outside of time, but rather in time (divine temporality). Sometimes the term “eternity” is used to denote divine timelessness, but we will here use it as neutral between the timeless and temporal views. The term “everlasting” (or “sempiternal”) on the other hand, is strongly associated with the temporal view. On the temporal view, God is in time and exists at every time; there is no time at which God does not exist.

This twofold opposition is a good rough guide to the landscape. However, here is the first complication. So far, I’ve talked as if there are two broad rival positions on a single issue, namely of how God relates to time. But there are actually at least two orthogonal issues regarding God’s relationship to time: (1) whether God is located in our spacetime – the spacetime investigated by modern physics; and (2) whether God is timeless or temporal, in the sense of either having or not having a life that is “marked by temporal succession.” God could be timeless in the sense of having a life that is not “marked by temporal succession” while being located at every spacetime point. Conversely, God could be temporal in the sense of having a life “marked by temporal succession” while not being located in physical spacetime at all (Rea and Murray 2008, ch. 2).

At first glance, this distinction can seem somewhat mysterious: If the issue is not being located in our physical spacetime, then what is it? What can the second issue be? What can it mean to say that an entity is temporal if that does not commit one to a view on whether that entity is located in spacetime? Aren’t times somehow to be understood in terms of spacetime, ultimately?

The answer is that the first question is about whether God is located in spacetime (and relatedly, whether God exists in time, i.e., at times); while the second is about (for want of a better phrase) the nature of God's experience. Whether or not a subject experiences succession, and more generally, what the (a)temporal features of its experience are, is an issue distinct from whether or not that subject is located in spacetime. It is true that normally there are connections between these issues. For us, for example, these facts are related. It is partly because we are located in spacetime that we experience one thing after the other, and there are interesting questions about the details of this connection. But the issues are conceptually distinct. And the same distinction can in principle be made regarding God.

These two issues are not always separated in some of the existing literature. The result is that divine timelessness views and divine temporality views often involve claims both about whether God is located in time/spacetime and about (a)temporal features of God's experience. Specifically, divine timelessness views may involve both the claim that God is not located in time/spacetime, and the claim that God does not experience succession. Similarly, divine temporality views may involve both the claim that God is in time/spacetime and that God experiences succession.

One final point of methodology may already have occurred to the reader. Should theological commitments be allowed to determine one's views about the metaphysics, or even the physics of time? A salient alternative would be to do the opposite, for example by taking as one's starting point the metaphysical view of time suggested by our best physical theories and then drawing out any theological implications. A third approach might involve giving equal weight to both poles and seeking to come to a coherent and adequate conception of both time and God as part of the same endeavor. There probably exist a variety of stances on this question within both philosophy and theology. (For explicit reflection on related methodological questions see, e.g., Rea and Murray 2008, 47; Mullins 2016, ch. 1.)

Let us start by taking a closer look at the metaphysics of time and persistence. Both of these form part of the metaphysical background that we will draw on in later sections.

2 Time and Persistence

To understand God's relationship to time, one has to have an idea of what time is like, and of how things exist in time. The metaphysics of time provides us with some options for how to think about what temporal reality might be like. In later sections, we will see that metaphysical distinctions in the philosophy of

time have often been taken to have a more direct impact on the God and time discussion than they really have. But this still means it is important to start out with a clear understanding of those metaphysical distinctions. Similarly, the metaphysics of persistence provides us with some options for how to think of the relation between time and things in time. We will consider these in turn, going into just enough detail as needed to provide the reader with the necessary metaphysical background.²

The contemporary landscape in the metaphysics of time is characterized by a debate between A-theorists and B-theorists. Of the A-theory there are many different versions, while the B-theory is more uniform. Roughly speaking, these two theories are divided over the question of whether time really passes (or flows) – whether it has a dynamic aspect that space lacks. A-theorists think it does, while B-theorists think it does not. To see what is involved in this, consider a few different versions of the A-theory (the following is by no means an exhaustive survey). Presentists think that only the present exists, and that time’s passing consists in new times’ coming into and other times’ going out of existence. Growing block theorists think that the past and present both exist, but the future does not. According to them, time’s passing consists in new times’ coming into existence. Reality is an ever growing block whose edge is the present time. Yet another version of the A-theory, the moving spotlight view, says that all times exist (this is known as eternalism), but that only one of them is ever absolutely present. By this, moving spotlights mean that only one time ever is present in a sense that goes beyond the merely relative sense, in which every time is present relative to itself. Times gain and shed absolute presentness, and that is what time’s passing consists in. There are lots of other versions of the A-theory. (Moreover, it should be noted that this survey is simplified in other ways; for example, not everyone agrees that all versions of presentism are in fact versions of the A-theory [Tallant 2012].)

B-theorists also are eternalists – they too think that all times exist. However, they disagree with moving spotlights on the key question of whether any one time is ever present in an absolute sense. B-theorists deny this. According to them, each time is present relative to itself, and that is all. This reflects their commitment to treating time as similar to space in important respects. All spatial locations exist, and each of them is “here” relative to itself; but none of them is here in an absolute sense. It is the same with time, according to B-theorists. More generally, no time is metaphysically privileged in any way. This rules out ontological privilege, such as being the only or the latest time that

² Some of the ideas covered in the first half of this section also appear in “Time, metaphysics of” (Deng, forthcoming in the REP).

exists, as well as other metaphysical privileges, such as being absolutely present. All times are metaphysically on a par.

I said that A-theorists and B-theorists differ over whether time passes. More carefully, we might say (following Skow 2015, 2) that they differ over whether time passes, in a metaphysically robust sense: they differ over whether times gain and shed some metaphysical privilege in turn. That is, the debate is about time's passing in a very specific, somewhat technical sense. How this technical sense relates to what ordinary people have in mind when they talk about time's passing is to some extent an open (empirical) question. Certainly B-theorists need not disagree with one who says, for example, "A lot of time has passed since the dawn of the Internet," or "Time is passing: it is now 8 PM, and it was 7.35 PM a little while ago." It is just that for the B-theorist, what this comes to is, in the first case, that there is a long temporal interval between the dawn of the Internet and the speaker's utterance, and in the second case, that there is a short temporal interval between 7.35 PM and the speaker's utterance. What the B-theorist denies is that there is more to time's passing than this – more than there being different times that succeed one another, and between which there lie temporal intervals of various lengths. What the B-theorist denies is that time passes in a metaphysically robust sense in which temporal passage would involve one time's gaining and shedding metaphysical privilege, like being absolutely present, or being the only time that exists, or being the latest time that exists. Robust temporal passage is also sometimes referred to as "temporal becoming" or "flow."

The A- and the B-theories are also sometimes known as the dynamic and the static theories of time, or as the tensed and the tenseless theories of time, respectively. The latter labels are linguistic in origin, and they reflect a long-standing interest by philosophers of time in how temporal language works. The B-theory, or tenseless theory, can be thought of as the combination of eternalism with the claim that there is a completely tenseless description of temporal reality. A tenseless description of temporal reality is one that stays accurate over time. It mentions only tenseless facts concerning when events happen and how they are temporally related to one another. An example of a tenseless fact is that my writing this sentence occurs (tenselessly) on a Monday. The B-theorist thinks there is a complete description of temporal reality that is entirely tenseless. Another interesting question is how one should understand the notion of "completeness" in play here; most likely it is best understood by reference to such notions as which descriptions are more fundamental than others, or which notions carve nature at its joints. So the B-theory can also be taken to be the combination of eternalism with the claim that there is a tenseless description of reality that is more fundamental than any tensed description.

A-theorists deny this. For them, some tensed description of temporal reality will be more fundamental than any tenseless one. A tensed description of temporal reality is a description that mentions tensed facts, such as that it is Monday today. These facts change, so the description does not stay accurate over time. In fact, their changing is what the robust passage of time amounts to. First it is a tensed fact that it is Monday, then it is a tensed fact that it is Tuesday and that it was Monday one day ago. But according to the A-theorist, if one leaves out the tensed fact that it is Monday, then one leaves out something essential, and the resulting description of temporal reality will be radically incomplete.

The B-theorist thinks of time as being much like space in this respect. Not many people would think that in a complete description of spatial reality, one has to include such (“spatially tensed”) facts as that this room is well air conditioned, or that it is hilly around here. Rather, one only has to include such (“spatially tenseless”) facts as which objects are located where at which spatial locations, and how those objects and spatial locations are spatially related to one another. The reason the A-theorist disagrees is connected to their conviction that time has a dynamic aspect that space lacks, that time passes in a metaphysically robust sense. In John Norton’s words, “Time passes. Nothing fancy is meant by that. It is just the mundane fact known to us all that future events will become present and then drift off into the past” (Norton 2010, 24). If one takes this metaphysical statement seriously, one needs to posit fundamental tensed facts: first the facts that t_1 is present, t_0 was, and t_2 will be, then the tensed facts that t_2 is present, t_1 was, and t_3 will be, and so on.

In a way, something like the A- versus B-distinction goes back to Heraclitus and Parmenides, and many historical thinkers can be read as implicitly or explicitly defending one of these two theories. But the particular form of the contemporary debate has its origin in the work of the British idealist J. M. E. McTaggart. McTaggart recognized that there are two different ways of lining up the events of world history: in an A-series, or in a B-series (McTaggart 1908). The A-series runs from the past through the present and into the future, while the B-series runs from earlier to later. The difference between these two ways of thinking becomes clear if one notices that while, for example, it is always true to say that World War I happened before World War II, it is not now true to say that World War II is in the future. McTaggart recognized that in ordinary life, we need both of these ways of thinking of time. But he posed the further question of which of these series is more fundamental than the other. And according to McTaggart, the answer is that the A-series is more fundamental.

Ultimately, McTaggart argued for the conclusion that time is not real. He did this in several steps. First, he argued for the claim that there is time only if there can be change. Then he argued that there can be change only if events are part of an A-series, so that they have what he called A-properties, such as pastness, presentness, or futurity. The reason McTaggart gives for this is that B-properties – such as being simultaneous with or being earlier than – are properties that events never gain or shed. Once you have a B-property, you keep it. From this McTaggart inferred that in order for there to be the possibility of change, the A-series has to be real. So, in order for time to exist, the A-series has to be real. However, and this is the final part of his argument, the A-series is contradictory, and therefore it is not real. Why is it contradictory, according to McTaggart? There are many different reconstructions of this step, and opinions in the philosophy of time have been sharply divided over the question of whether there is anything right about this step. But according to McTaggart, the reason the A-series is contradictory is that if an event has any A-property, then it has all of them – after all, the present is something that *moves on*. If any event is ever (absolutely) present, then it is also (absolutely) past and (absolutely) future. But these are incompatible properties. So no event can have them all. Therefore, no event has any A-property.

McTaggart anticipates the objection that each event only ever has one of these A-properties at a time. His reply is that the objection relies on what had to be shown: the reply involves the notion of an event's having a property *at a time*, when the whole task was to show how temporality emerges from an A-series. He says that by “at a time,” the objector must mean that a present event was future and will be past, where that in turn means that it is future at a past time and past at a future time. But that means that in order to explain how an event can have A-properties, the objector has to rely on its having further (higher-order) A-properties. In order to show that there is nothing contradictory about the A-series in the first place, the objector has to assume that there are further (non-contradictory) A-series, which means the objector has not come to grips with the threat of contradiction.

As mentioned, opinions divide sharply over the merits of this argument. There are those who think it contains an important insight (e.g., Dummett 1960; Horwich 1987; Mellor 1998; Fine 2006) and those who think it is a glorified mistake (e.g., Broad 1938, 316; Sider 2001; Zimmerman 2005). Those in the latter group may feel forced to conclude that McTaggart's decision not to put forward a similar argument about space was a mere oversight. Those in the former group are likely to think that on the contrary, McTaggart had good reason to say what he said about time in particular (cf. Deng 2013a).

The overall shape of the A versus B dialectic is that the A-theory is often seen as capturing the way we ordinarily think about and experience time, while the B-theory is seen as being closer to the results of modern physics. Both of these aspects of the A versus B debate play a role in the discussion about God and time. So let us look at each of them, starting with the relation between physics and the A-theory.

The A-theory faces a formidable challenge arising from Einstein's theory of relativity. Recall that the A-theory makes central use of the idea that the present is metaphysically privileged in some way. A reason one might worry about this idea has to do with the idea of "metaphysical privilege." But another, physics-based reason to worry about it is that in relativity theory, it is not clear what can count as "the present."

Most likely, what we mean by "the present" is something like reality as it is everywhere right now, i.e., a global now. But it is an important lesson of relativity theory that there is no such thing as a global now. Which spatially distant events are simultaneous with a given event is something that varies with one's state of motion (something that is different in different frames of reference). Distant simultaneity no longer exists. As a result, the idea of a global now that has metaphysical significance becomes hard to sustain.

There have been a number of different reactions to this problem. Some amount to either a modification or an augmentation of special relativity. (The above problem is one that arises in Einstein's special theory of relativity; but the situation is not much helped by moving to the general theory.) In the "neo-Lorentzian interpretation" of special relativity, an example of the modification strategy, one maintains that simultaneity is absolute, rather than relative to a frame of reference (e.g., Tooley 1997; Craig 2001). There is a privileged frame of reference, namely the one at rest with respect to absolute space, and real simultaneity is simultaneity in this privileged frame of reference. However, which frame this is, is in principle undetectable by any empirical means. The relativistic effects of length contraction and time dilation conspire to hide the frame from us. That matter exhibits these effects – that it is effectively governed by laws that are Lorentz invariant – is an unexplained fact. That fact is not explainable in terms of the symmetries of spacetime.

A different response to the challenge seeks to augment special relativity, in the following sense. Suppose that, unlike on the neo-Lorentzian interpretation, one acknowledges that the background spacetime of special relativity is Minkowski spacetime. One can still maintain that the contents of spacetime privilege one way of "slicing up" (foliating) spacetime into slices of simultaneous events (e.g., Zimmerman 2011, 215). The distribution of matter happens to privilege one such foliation, and one frame of reference.