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When Is God and What Is Time?

Honors Thesis

By:

Zack Tomlinson

What is time? How does time exist? Do the past and future exist, or does only the present exist? How does God relate to time? Most people would never think to ask these questions. This

is a mistake, though, because the answers to these questions shape how we view God and the world as a whole. For the Christian, these questions about time are foundational for the discussion on free will, predestination, and divine foreknowledge. These questions are difficult, indeed, but the benefits of going through this discussion make it worthwhile. In this paper I will describe the two major views on time: eternalism and presentism. Eternalism is the view that the past, present, and future all exist. Presentism is the view that only the present moment exists. After describing these views in more detail I will then offer arguments in favor of presentism, focusing on its appeal to common sense, and then respond to such arguments. Then I will present an argument for eternalism and answer several objections. Finally, I will discuss the theological reasons for holding to the eternalist viewpoint. I will discuss the historical view of the early church and then discuss the topic of foreknowledge and free will. Thus this paper will be arguing that one not only is justified in holding to the eternalist viewpoint, but that one has many good reasons for holding to it instead of presentism.

Common Sense

Before getting into definitions of the two major views of time, it is important to discuss a definition of common sense. Since this idea will be used various times throughout much of the paper it must be determined how the term is being used. The everyday use of this word just appeals to things that make sense at a very basic level, such as: raising minimum wage decreases poverty and wearing a mask decreases the spread of viruses. The definition for common sense in philosophy, however, is much narrower. For philosophers common sense is used to describe views such as: other people have a mind, conscious experience, and the world was not created five minutes ago. The difference is that the common definition allows things that are easier to

prove wrong than the philosophical definition. It is much harder to prove the external world was not created less than five minutes ago than it is to prove the benefits of raising minimum wage. The difficulty of showing something to meet the philosophical definition is hard, but it doesn't stop philosophers from showing contradictions and issues that arise from things held as common sense. Philosophers are great at showing things which seem obviously true to be false. When they do so the arguments are called paradoxes.¹ The point of these paradoxes is not to follow them to their conclusion, but to show that somewhere along the way common sense has led us astray. What we learn from paradoxes is that common sense can be followed, but when given enough evidence we must realize that common sense has led us astray and so should be abandoned.

Two Views on Time-- Eternalism and Presentism

Eternalism is the view that the past, present, and future all exist in the same way at all the same moments. Instead of having a "privileged now" this view holds that no point in time is preferred over another and that all points are equally as real as every other point in time. This view allows for subjective experiences of time. These subjective experiences determine what we understand to be past, present, and future. This view is less likely to be held by the average person, but it is quite common among philosophers and physicists.

Presentism is the view that everything that exists must exist "now" in the present moment and so the past and future do not exist in any way. According to this view the present is "privileged," in that everyone must be at the same present moment; everyone is viewing the

¹ There are a few famous paradoxes, namely: Zeno's paradoxes of motion and the Ship of Theseus.

same events in the same way and in the same order. If one were to ask the average person how they viewed time they would probably give a definition or idea similar to this view.²

In Favor of Presentism

There are two main arguments in favor of presentism, both of which appeal to common sense. The first argument focuses on the use of tensed language that distinguishes between past, present, and future. The difference between “Abraham Lincoln WAS assassinated” and “Abraham Lincoln WILL BE assassinated” is obvious to English speakers. These statements are making radically different claims about reality. The presentists argue that one of these is true and the other is false, because of their tense values. Only one of these sentences corresponds to reality.

This argument makes two faulty assumptions, the first being that tense is a universal and necessary feature of language when, in fact, it is not. So our understanding of time seems to be based more on the language and culture that we are in. The issue is that English only shows that we are ingrained in a tensed culture and so our understanding of the universe is tensed. The second faulty assumption is that it presupposes that since our language is tensed, time must be as well. All that our language shows is that our subjective feeling about time is tensed, but this is not necessarily true for the universe itself.

The second argument in presentism’s favor is that of our common sense experience of time. The present moment just feels obvious to us, much in the same way as the material world

² There is a third, less common view called growing-block theory which is similar to presentism in that it holds to a “now” that is happening at the current time. This view allows for the past to exist in a lesser way. The issue is that this lesser way of existence is hard to explain. Since this is such a minority view it is being left out of the discussion, and because many of the same arguments that are used against presentism will work against growing-block as well. This is because both agree that there is a privileged now.

around us seems obvious. Just as I can touch my desk or computer or a tree outside, so too do I experience the present moment. This feeling is specifically for the present moment and not the past or future. We remember the past, experience the present, and anticipate the future. The things being remembered or anticipated seem to be less real than the things being experienced in the present. These feelings are so strong that we take them for granted and don't even think to check if they are correct. That is what makes this argument so strong, it's founded upon an appeal to our common sense of experience. Remember in the discussion above, though, that common sense does not have the final word in any argument, but there needs to be a significant amount of evidence and arguments to show why we should go against such a strong view of common sense. In the next section some of the arguments against common sense will be weighed.

Against Presentism

Truthmaker Theory - One of the main issues against the presentist view is the difficulty of finding the foundations of any of our truth claims about the past. Before we get into this issue, perhaps a "truth claim" about the present might help. Take the sentence "Joe Biden is the President of the United States." What makes this sentence true? The sentence seems to be true simply because Joe Biden is, in fact, the President. In other words the sentence is true because it corresponds to something in reality.

Truthmaker theory is the common sense assertion that for every true sentence there is something that makes it true. More specifically, the truth of any statement is grounded in its relationship to reality. For example, "snow is white" is true because snow is (in reality) white. "Hydrogen's atomic number is 1" because, in reality, Hydrogen has one proton in its nucleus.

There are some who will then ask about truths that do not correspond to physical reality, for example “ $2+2=4$.” There are a couple possible responses to this statement, the first being that numbers actually do exist, even though they are not material objects. The other option is that the laws of logic and mathematics are true by definition, and thus the rules of English grammar and semantics make these statements true.

So the truthmaker theory’s purpose is to help one discover why something is true. The problem is that, under the presentist view, one cannot use the truthmaker theory to explain facts about the future or (more importantly) the past. Since neither the past nor the future exist in any way under the presentist view, then neither are part of reality. If the past and future are not a part of reality, then there is nothing for a truth claim about the past or future to correspond to.

Therefore, under presentism, we cannot make true claims about the past or future.

This intuition is easy to illustrate with the future since many people view it to be open and unwritten. For example, consider “it’s going to rain on June 14, 2055 in Arkadelphia, Arkansas.” It is natural to think that this sentence is neither true nor false, simply because there is no future fact or reality to correspond to. This is fair, the future does have an intuitive appeal to be unwritten, at least from our perspective. So also, the combination of truthmaker and presentism really causes a problem for those who appreciate history. Without a grounding for truth, we cannot really make any meaningful statement about the past, which means history is either false or it is meaningless to talk about. Few want to accept either of those as true, though, because history feels important (and true!).³

³ The future is less commonsensical, which is why this argument largely works better against the presentist than the growing-block theorist since they have a higher view of the past.

An example of how this topic is an issue for the presentist is found in the sentence “Abraham Lincoln was the 16th President of the United States.” This sentence is true if, and only if, Abraham Lincoln was, in fact, the 16th President of the United States. What makes the above statement true but not the statement “Abraham Lincoln was the first President of the United States?” The answer is that Lincoln was, in reality, the 16th President and not the first. The problem is that presentism holds that only present events or objects exist, which means anything that has a basis in reality, or a grounding for a truth claim, must exist in the present. Abraham Lincoln does not exist in the present moment, thus he could not be the 16th president in the current moment either. Another example is the statement “George Washington had false teeth.” Most people would say that he did have false teeth instead of questioning the truth value of the statement itself. Unfortunately, though, if presentism is true, the sentences above do not seem to have any grounding of truth in them, despite our deepest beliefs that they are obviously true.

Some authors sum up this problem by showing three ideas that are necessary for this argument to work: “(i) presentism, (ii) that there are ... truths about the past, and (iii) truthmaker theory.”⁴ Nobody would give up on truths about the past, this seems to be a common sense attitude, and presentists obviously would not give up presentism. Thus the presentist is left with trying to uphold or deny the truthmaker theory.

One way of satisfying truthmaker theory is to locate truthmakers either in the present, or in an atemporal sense.⁵ The problem with locating the truth claims in the present is that somehow you must say that the world has a current claim to truth about something that no longer exists (under the presentists view) and is also based solely on the present. It seems that this idea isn't

⁴ Ingram and Tallant, “Presentism.”

⁵ Ingram and Tallant, "Presentism."

exactly what people have in mind when they say that “Abraham Lincoln was the 16th president.” They don’t seem to be referring to some present entity that causes this, but are calling upon the sheer truth of the statement which is based on past events. It seems that we ground our knowledge on past things because those things correlate to reality.

There is somewhat of an issue of locating something atemporally while positing that things exist only in the present. Most who posit this hold to an “abstract time.”⁶ This view is that there is only the present but an abstract timeline describes how things were. There are several problems with this, namely the difficulty in defining what abstract time is and then explaining how this abstract time works. It is safe to say that this is not a very commonsensical approach. If presentism’s main arguments are based on common sense then other viable options should be explored.

There is a final option⁷ to deal with this argument, which is to deny the truthmaker theory. The problem with doing so is that the truthmaker theory seems to be intuitive. Although there is a fair amount of philosophical doubt on the theory, it still holds some weight with common sense. So to reject this theory should at least spread doubts about the commonsensical aspect of the presentist view. This is because the presentist seems forced to defeat a common sense argument that supports the truthmaker theory, which is not conducive to making an argument from common sense for presentism.⁸ The Truthmaker Theory creates an interesting problem for the presentist but is a fairly debated topic. When this argument is combined with the argument about the extent of the present moment, discussed below, then an even bigger issue

⁶ Ingram and Tallant, "Presentism."

⁷ There is, actually, another option, namely to locate truthmakers in God’s omniscience. In this view, statements are true because God knows them to be true. This seems to flow the wrong way in that God knows things precisely because they are true. This introduces the idea of a Euthyphro Dilemma which was originally asking the question about God’s righteousness, but there is not enough space to go into this topic further.

⁸ For more information on truthmaker see <https://iep.utm.edu/truth-ma/#H9>.

arises. It makes one wonder about the truth claims that not only come from our lifetime, but events from just a minute ago, as they may no longer exist in the present and thus have no basis in reality anymore.

Extent of the Privileged Now- Another objection to presentism is that it is difficult to define what one means when referring to the “present,” specifically the extent of the present moment. In other words this objection is questioning how long the “present” moment stays in existence. There are two choices when it comes to answering this objection, both of which cause tensions with the common sense argument for presentism. The first is to say that the present moment exists instantaneously. This answer uses the idea that the present is constantly changing by coming into existence and then ceasing to exist within an instant.⁹

There are a couple of problems with this answer, though, the first being that time would not be fluid like it seems to be, but instead is more like blips. A great example of how this would work is the use of a film. Although we see fluid motion on the screen, the projector is actually putting up individual images so fast that we cannot see the transition points of each individual picture. This is not a fatal flaw for the presentists by any means. Instead this just shows that time works differently from how one initially expects.

The second, more damaging, problem with this answer is that the definition of an instant is something that has zero duration. This does at least stop the dilemma of dividing that unit up further since zero cannot be divided up any further. The present is then forced to exist through snapshots of time. This is not a major issue, though it does seem rather difficult to grasp that the fluidity we see in motion occurs by snapshots. It certainly shows the counterintuitive nature of time.

⁹ St. Augustine, book 11 *Confessions*, chapter 15.

The other option is to argue that each moment exists for only a short duration. This second response has a problem in choosing what that specific amount of time is. Some could say that what is “now” depends on one’s experience or what one is talking about, but that doesn’t really fit in with the presentist’s view. If someone is experiencing or talking about an event that someone else isn’t then they seem to have two different “nows.” This would not be consistent with an absolute now that the presentist holds to because different nows are being experienced. So it seems that the presentist is stuck in a situation of choosing how long the absolute now exists for and why we must agree with that decision and not our own.

The problem in essence is that if there are no discernable boundaries for what “now” is, then what stops us from including bits and pieces of the past because we do not know when the present began. Then why not include bits and pieces of the future since we do not know the ending boundary for this moment either? If one cannot clearly define and set limits to what “now” is then it seems hard to say that it is the only thing that exists. The presentist might argue that there is a unit of measurement for time that is considered the smallest possible measurement, Planck Time. The smallest unit of time is found by taking the fastest speed, the speed of light, and traveling the shortest distance, a Planck length. This would be the proposed duration of the present. This does take care of the arbitrariness of the decision of how long the present moment exists. The issue with this is that this amount of time goes by incredibly fast. So fast that we just cannot notice such a length of time. Yet it seems like we do notice the present. So this defeats the argument from arbitrariness, but questions our sense experience of the present moment which is dangerous for the presentist to do.

Special Theory of Relativity

At this point, the reader might be wondering if there is any evidence, at least any that is not based on philosophical ideas, for either side in this debate. Luckily for the reader, there actually is some scientific evidence to go through in this debate, namely Einstein's Special Theory of Relativity (or STR). STR was first formulated by Einstein and, through his interpretation, he showed that time should be viewed with respect to one's speed and relation to the event being viewed. Essentially the idea behind this theory is that as one's speed is increased in relation to an event, then time "slows down" for the viewer. STR is based on these two postulates:

1. The laws of physics work the same in every reference frame that is not accelerating (whether at rest or traveling with a constant speed and direction).
2. The speed of light in a vacuum is constant.

The first postulate comes from the fact that there is no experiment that can be conducted to know for certain whether, say, one rocketship is moving past another rocketship or if the other rocketship is the one moving past the first. From the frame of reference for each one it seems that the other is the one moving, as long as both are going at a constant speed and in a constant direction. The people on both spaceships feel like they are at rest and so see the motion of the other spaceship. The physics will get back the same answer for both when doing experiments about each other. So there is no real reason to prefer one's point of view over the other. Motion, then, would be defined in relative terms instead of absolute.

The second postulate seems to have weird implications, but it has been known and tested even before Einstein's STR. No matter the relative motion of the frame of reference, the speed of

light will be constant. There are plenty of tests and experiments done to support this postulate as well as STR as a whole.¹⁰

One of the interesting implications of STR is *time dilation*, in which time seems to slow down (from the perspective of an outside observer) once the reference frame is going at a constant high speed, especially the closer it gets to the speed of light. This causes a problem for presentism because it shows that it is at least possible for time to be going at different rates depending on the relative speed of one's reference frame. This really causes one to stop and wonder about the rate at which time passes. It seems as though time passes at a normal, absolute rate, say one second per second, but time dilation shows this to be a mistake. Instead, time should be viewed as tied to the relative motion of the observer.

Presentism requires there to be a privileged, or absolute, now. For this to be the case, all the events that are happening throughout the universe that exist “now” must exist simultaneously with each other. As mentioned above, time is related to the relative motion of the observer. If such an interpretation is correct, then there is no way to have every frame of reference in the universe view the same collection of events as simultaneous. This leads to another problem STR has with presentism, namely that Einstein's interpretation leads to a rejection of any absolute view of time. If there cannot be an absolute now, then there cannot be an absolute view on time. Thus, under the standard interpretation of STR, presentism is false.

One thought experiment that helps us to understand this theory is imagining a train which is going very fast, say half the speed of light, getting hit at the front (referred to as F) and back (referred to as B) by two different strikes of lightning. Now say that this happened as the train

¹⁰ <https://math.ucr.edu/home/baez/physics/Relativity/SR/experiments.html> is a fairly concise survey of a large amount of the thought experiments and physical studies that support STR. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AInCqm5nCzw> is a video by Crash Course which has visual effects to help you understand some of the implications of STR.

was passing parallel to a station and since it did not stop it kept its speed constant. Person 1 was sitting at the station when the lightning struck the train and from their point of view both strikes happened at the exact same moment.¹¹ The odd thing is that, for person 2, who is in the middle of the train, the lightning strikes were not simultaneous. Due to the relative motion of the train, person 2 will observe F before they observe B. When measuring the two strikes, person 2 will find that F happened before B. The first postulate of STR states that we should not privilege either person 1's or person 2's views on the matter. Instead, we have to accept that they just disagree on the order of the lightning strikes. When this idea is applied to the universe as a whole, one realizes that not only will persons 1 and 2 disagree about the order of events, but every frame of reference will have a different order. So it is impossible to have a single set of simultaneous events that make up "now." For one frame of reference events could be seen as ABCD but for a different frame of reference CBAD or any other combination.

Eternalism

Many physicists see the tension between STR and presentism, and so turn to eternalism, another view on time. Eternalism is different from the other view in that it does not hold to any sort of privileged, or absolute, now. Instead it holds to the idea that the past, present, and future are all equally real. To explain further, there is no objective difference between any point in time and another. There are, however, subjective views on time from different points of reference. A similarity can be found when we use the term "here" to describe physical locations that we can

¹¹ For the sake of argument let us assume that there is no human error and that the person was able to clearly tell exactly when the lightning strikes actually struck.

directly observe and “there” to describe locations we cannot directly observe. This is how the eternalist says we should view time. The term “now” is used to describe the time that we can directly observe and “then” and other tensed words are used for times we cannot directly observe. Just as the viewing of physical locations is subjective, so is our viewing of time. Locations that are subjectively far from each of us exist without our viewing of them. Paris still exists, even when I am in Arkansas. So also, for the eternalist, the past and future still exist even though they are not considered part of our subjective “now.”

Against STR-Not all philosophers agree with this, though. William Lane Craig argues that the standard interpretation (above) is “based essentially upon an untenable and obsolete verificationist epistemology and so cannot force abandonment” of presentism.¹² According to verificationism all properties of time and space (and other metaphysical entities) can be reduced to our measurements about those things. As a verificationist, Einstein believed that time and space were defined in terms of ideal measuring devices, ones which would not wear down or change. So if two ideal clocks were measuring time differently (if they seem to be running at different speeds), then time itself must be moving at different rates in each clock’s frame of reference. However, verificationism is widely accepted as false by many philosophers.¹³ Thus it is also plausible that when two clocks differ, it is merely that the clocks are changing instead of time itself. So Craig says that “there is no reason to think that” STR requires an eternalist understanding of time.¹⁴

Craig says that we don’t necessarily have to go with Einstein’s view, we can instead go with an alternative view which can be reconciled with presentism. For example, one could adopt

¹² Craig, 66.

¹³ Craig, 47.

¹⁴ Craig, 51.

Newton's view of absolute time and space. Craig points out that Newton "had theological grounds for positing" that absolute time exists, namely that "space or time [are not] in any way attributes of God Himself, but rather ... concomitant effects of God."¹⁵ Newton believed God to be temporal, so God's view of time was absolute time. As will be discussed later, though, this was not the common view throughout church history. So for those who feel comfortable with God being outside of time, Einstein's interpretation of STR meshes well with that view. So perhaps one may supplement Einstein's philosophical grounds, mentioned above, with our own theological grounds and thus be on equal footing with Newton.

Against Common Sense- Another major issue presentists have against eternalism is that this view is in tension with the commonsensical view that most people have of time. In response to this objection, first one needs to be reminded that there were several objections above that showed the thin ice on which the presentist's argument from common sense is founded. At some points it seemed that common sense was pitted against itself while trying to protect presentism, such as: recalling truths about the past and the extent of the present moment. At least one could say that common sense is not as sturdy a support for presentism as is sometimes believed. As such, it should not be as important an objection to eternalism. Though one should still grant it is not the view one would hear when asking the average person.

The supposed tension with common sense should not be held against eternalism too harshly, though. There have been several instances in history where scientific discovery has caused a significant paradigm shift in thinking for the average person. Instances such as the ancient Greeks found the Earth to be spherical and not flat, the Earth orbits the sun and not the other way around, the Earth is not the center of the universe, germ theory in medicine obliterated

¹⁵ Craig, 46.

the miasmatic “bad air” theory among other medical practices, etc. So the Einsteinian interpretation of STR, mentioned above, could be added to this list for overturning the common sense belief of the average person with respect to the philosophy of time.

Another response to this objection from common sense is to ask why would the average person know enough to have a scholarly opinion of this topic? One should not ignore the consensus of the average person, but it should be taken into account that this topic goes a lot deeper into specialized fields of research that the average person has not thought about before. If this is the case, then the average person could simply not be informed enough to have a reliable opinion. Again, this is not to unfairly discredit the objection, but merely to show that it is not as strong as one might believe. Craig, a proponent for a presentist view of time, has even stated that “this is difficult and mysterious territory.”¹⁶

In the end the common sense objection is nearly impossible to refute. So the response to this objection was not to disprove common sense, but simply to undercut it. Just because it is not the go-to response of the average person, does not mean that it is incorrect. Remember from the discussion on common sense above, that common sense should not have the final say in any argument, but instead it simply requires enough evidence for one to overturn their reflexive view on the topic. In light of earlier discussion about the weaknesses of the objection it should not weigh much against arguments in favor of eternalism.

Argument from Theology

For the Christian, there is another route one can take when trying to answer questions about time, namely how does God relate to time? Christians must strive to keep all of our

¹⁶ Craig, 112.

theories about the world within the context of proper theology and consistent with Scripture. The biblical authors, though, were not focused on trying to explain this specific aspect of God. There are verses that seem to support both the presentist and eternalist view on time. On the one hand God acting in time seems to support God being in time and so acting in the present moment. On the other hand we have verses talking about God's nature being other than ours and that time works differently for him.¹⁷ The authors were not concerned about explicitly stating what stance we should take on this philosophical discussion. Instead they were focused on expressing foundational characteristics of God, such as his loving and powerful nature.

One of the essential characteristics of the Christian God is that He is the Creator of everything, both Heaven and Earth. If God created everything, then He created the entire universe. This is not hard to understand but this change of terminology helps redirect us to what most cosmologists, those who study the origins of the universe, say about how time and space began together. In other words time and space are connected in a very deep way. So it seems that the universe is understood as a space-time dependent object. So if God did create the physical universe then God must have also created time itself in the act of creating. So it seems that God would have existed in a timeless way apart from creating the universe. It is generally accepted by Christians that God has always existed, but that does not answer whether He exists inside or outside of time. It is this question of how He exists with respect to time that we must delve deeper into. Theologians agree that this is difficult to understand for us because God's experience is different from ours, since God is immaterial and thus exists in His spiritual form.¹⁸

¹⁷ Psalm 90:2-4 says that God has existed from everlasting to everlasting and that a thousand years to the Lord is like a day. The issue is that these verses are poetic and can be interpreted multiple ways, some in favor of eternalism and some in favor of presentism.

¹⁸ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 168.

There are two dominant views¹⁹ in Western theology about God's relationship to time, which are: divine timelessness and divine temporality.²⁰ Divine temporality is the view that God exists inside of time, in other words God has a similar type of relationship to time that we do. This view describes God as *everlasting*, which means God is temporally existing through all of time, existing forever. God views events in a specific order, but God exists forever. Time exists infinitely in both the future direction and the past direction and God exists in every moment of time.

Divine timelessness is the view that God exists outside of time. In other words God's nature does not include a connection to time, like ours does. Whereas we experience things as a succession of events, God experiences all events together. The word *eternal* is used with this view so it has an atemporal sense that is relayed. This doesn't stop God from knowing how we view the order of events, it is just that He does not have that same view as us. The view that God is eternal, and therefore timeless, has been the common view for most of Church history. Some theologians define God's eternity as "God has no beginning, end or succession of moments in his own being, and he sees all time equally vividly, yet God sees events in time and acts in time."²¹ Church fathers as early as Augustine and Boethius supported this view. Augustine, to be fair, was far less adamant about this view and seemed more puzzled about the topic, whereas Boethius was less unsure about his thinking.²² Augustine sees God as the origin for everything, including time itself, so God must be outside of time.²³ Boethius seemed to contrast God's

¹⁹ There are some in between views (Craig's is discussed in a footnote below), see here for more information <https://iep.utm.edu/god-time/>.

²⁰ Deng, "Eternity in Christian Thought."

²¹ Grudem, 168.

²² Deng, "Eternity in Christian Thought."

²³ Augustine, *Confessions*, Book XI.

eternal nature with our everlasting nature and he simply appeals to people's common knowledge of this fact.²⁴

These early church fathers heavily influenced important figures to come, including St. Anselm of Canterbury. In his Ontological Argument, Anselm states that “God is that, than which nothing greater can be conceived.”²⁵ So God must be the greatest possible being. In order to be the greatest possible being God has to have certain attributes that lead to his greatness. Anselm argued that existing timelessly would be better than to exist temporally. Thus, Anselm argued that God must have an eternal, timeless nature. St. Thomas Aquinas also held to divine timelessness due to his agreement with divine simplicity. This view holds that God’s very being is simple and complete, so it does not change.²⁶ If God is in time, though, then He experiences changes, thus He would be experiencing constant changing, whether by getting older or by having His knowledge change through time. When discussing Aquinas’ thoughts on this, scholars say that he believed God’s relationship with time “ought to be understood in negative terms... God’s timeless eternity is unending, lacking both beginning and end, and an instantaneous whole lacking succession.”²⁷ Duns Scotus seemed to have held to this view too, seemingly for the same reason as Aquinas, divine simplicity.²⁸ The doctrine of God’s unchanging character is still alive in theological discussions today.²⁹

While the discussion above is interesting and worthwhile in its own right, there is one important question that comes about, namely can we have free will if God knows the future? A commonly accepted characteristic of God is that He is all knowing, or *omniscient*. If God is

²⁴ Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, Book V Prose VI.

²⁵ Anselm of Canterbury, *Proslogion*, in *Philosophy the Quest for Truth* by Louis P. Pojman, 101.

²⁶ For more information on this topic see <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/divine-simplicity/>

²⁷ Deng, “Eternity in Christian Thought.”

²⁸ Deng, “Eternity in Christian Thought.”

²⁹ Grudem, 168.

omniscient and knows things about the future, then those things are true and will happen without fail. The problem is that if those things are true and will happen, do we have free will when that choice arises? Free will here is used in the *libertarian* sense, in that we are only free if, when given a choice we could have chosen otherwise (I could have taken a ham sandwich for lunch instead of a PB&J). We tend to think and act like we have free will, but if the future is already set in stone, due to God knowing what will happen, then it seems like we cannot choose otherwise. This of course has serious implications because God knows not just that we will be jealous of someone twenty years from now, or that you will lie tomorrow to those closest to you, but ultimately He knows whether or not someone will be saved. God is going to judge someone based on their actions, namely whether or not they accept Jesus, yet it seems a bit unjust to judge someone based on a decision that they have no option to do other than. So is there a way to mesh the doctrines of free will and God's omnipotence about future events?

This discussion also dates back to the early church fathers.³⁰ Just as Boethius did, one can see that “this problem [of foreknowledge] dissolves in the face of the fact that God does not know anything beforehand but has an immediate, atemporal knowledge of all things.”³¹ In other words, God's knowledge may be about things in the future from our perspective, but this is not the case for Him. If God is timeless, then He can see every point in time and since He is also omniscient, then He would know all things about all times. Thus it is not the case that God knowing something is necessarily the cause for it to happen, but that God is seeing what we will freely choose to do in our future. Thus, it is our free choices that establish what God knows about

³⁰ For more information see <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/free-will-foreknowledge/#BoetSolu>

³¹ Deng, “Eternity in Christian Thought.”

the future, not vice versa. So holding to an atemporal God and eternalism helps the theologian who wants to harmonize God's foreknowledge with libertarian free will.³²

Does presentism fare any better than eternalism? If the present moment is all that exists then there are only a couple of options with God's foreknowledge about future moments. One option for presentists is that God is actively determining all things. Since God is all-knowing and all-powerful, He knows what He is going to do and that nothing can stop Him from doing it. Thus He knows what He is going to do in the future and so can predict the future. This solves the problem of how God can have foreknowledge under the presentist's view, but it causes a bigger issue when it comes to our free will as persons. If God is actively determining what we will do, then we have no choice but to follow His determination, whether it leads to obedience or disobedience, good or evil, heaven or hell. This is most definitely an issue for the presentist who values God's foreknowledge but still wants libertarian free will. There is one way for a presentist to keep God's foreknowledge and libertarian freedom, namely open theism. For the presentist the future does not yet exist, so the open theist would say that God knows all future possibilities. There is no actual future to know, according to the open theist, so it does not have any truth value yet, but God knows every possible outcome the future could bring. This knowledge is in the present and so he has foreknowledge of every single possibility that could happen.³³

³² William Lane Craig has an interesting view that goes against Augustine's. Remember Augustine states that since God created the universe He must therefore be timeless. Craig's argument is, instead, that before creating the world God was timeless, but after the creation of the world God entered into a temporal relationship with the world and thus became temporal. Keep in mind that Craig agrees that "the consensus of theologians is that God was timeless "before" the creation of the world." What Craig disagrees with is God's mode of being with respect to time AFTER the creation of the world, which is a different issue. Fortunately Craig gives those who disagree with him a "way out," which is to essentially hold to eternalism. So the argument breaks down once the view on time is switched from presentism to eternalism. So this argument works well for defending his own view, but it has no force against eternalism.

³³ This latter option really leads to Molinism and Middle Knowledge, check <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/free-will-foreknowledge/#MoliSolu> for more information. For those who find this option uncomfortable with this view it should be noted that this is a minority view.

For the Christian, then, there is not one answer that must be chosen. Instead there are a couple of choices to choose from: a timelessly eternal God, a deterministic God, and an open theistic God. The latter two of these can be reconciled with presentism, but the first cannot. It must be noted that it is, in fact, this first option that many in church history have decided to follow. If we allow the sway of church history to guide our decision then the first choice must be seriously considered, which would then force us to drop a presentist theory of time and, instead, go with an eternalist view of time. Thus the Christian eternalist view meshes well together with a timelessly eternal God.

Conclusion

In the end, this whole debate centered on one's level of commitment to common sense. The presentist view seems to assert that common sense is the best source for information on this topic. As such, the presentists build a strong argument based largely on common sense. Eternalists, though, argue that common sense is not always right, and that topics such as STR show that people can be mistaken, and so produce arguments that challenge common sense. The eternalist view instead has a strong cumulative case argument from STR and historical theology. So it seems that the quantity and quality of arguments for eternalism should outweigh the bigger, and sole, argument from common sense for the presentist view. This paper is not meant to totally prove one side is right and the other wrong. There are too many philosophers, who are more intelligent and have studied this subject for far longer than me, who disagree about this very difficult topic. Instead the goal was to show that one can be justified in holding to the eternalist view, and that there are many important reasons to believe in eternalism. This is not to say that others cannot be justified in holding to the presentist view. It just seems that the arguments break

down for both sides when dealing with presuppositions, both in metaphysics and theology, that are rather difficult to prove untenable. It seems sufficient to say that until more breakthroughs are made on this topic, one must be content with disagreeing with someone as long as both views work with the presuppositions that are held by each party. In other words, for the Christian philosopher/theologian, as long as one is searching for the truth about the characteristics of God and who holds to certain views of God that do not contradict Scripture, then disagreeing on this topic is not a matter of core orthodoxy. This paper, for instance, was written from a perspective of trying to harmonize the classical view of God's foreknowledge, in which He knows all things, and the doctrine of libertarian free will. As such, it has been shown that eternalism is a very strong option, especially when tied together with an atemporal, omniscient God.

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