

GOD, TIME, AND CREATION

ABSTRACT: R.T. Mullins has questioned the tenability of a model of divine eternity according to which God exists timelessly sans creation and temporally since the moment of creation. His puzzlement about the model can be largely resolved by recognizing that two different understandings of causation may be applied to the origin of the universe, a medieval understanding of efficient causation by a causal agent and a modern understanding of causation as a relation between two events. Mullins' more fundamental reservations about a relational theory of time can be resolved by allowing an event to occur at a moment or by defining "change" in such a way that a change need not occur over two moments of time. Finally, Mullins needs to do more to justify his own model involving an undifferentiated, successionless, precreation time.

Introduction

R.T. Mullins relates that as a doctoral student he went in search of a timeless God.¹ Alas, his hopes were disappointed, and he ended up pronouncing instead the end of the timeless God. Mullins' search was unfortunately derailed by his assumption that divine timelessness was part of a package deal with divine simplicity, immutability, and impassibility, so that the untenability of those doctrines frustrated his attempt to find a timeless God. Mullins never argued that divine timelessness implies these other objectionable doctrines, however, so that the question remains whether a timeless God may not be found by pursuing the quest independently of those doctrines. That has been my own approach, which has led me to the discovery of a timeless God.

Craig's Model of Divine Eternity

Mullins has more recently offered a thoughtful and sympathetic critique of my model of divine eternity. According to that model God exists timelessly sans creation and temporally from the moment of creation. My model is meant to resolve a certain aporia:

God exists in time. Time had a beginning. God did not have a beginning. How can these three statements be reconciled? If time began to exist--say, for simplicity's sake, at the Big Bang--, then in some difficult to articulate sense God must exist *beyond* the Big Bang, alone without the universe. He must be changeless in such a state; otherwise time would exist. And yet this state, strictly speaking, cannot exist before the Big Bang in a temporal sense, since time had a beginning. God must be causally, but not temporally, prior to the Big Bang. With the creation of the universe, time began, and God entered into time at the moment of creation in virtue of His real relations with the created order.

¹ R. T. Mullins, *The End of the Timeless God*, Oxford Studies in Analytic Theology (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 1.

It follows that God must therefore be timeless without the universe and temporal with the universe.²

Mullins observes, “Many critics have questioned the coherence of this claim, but it is difficult to pinpoint what the problem is. . . because it is difficult to figure out what it means for God’s timeless phase of existence to be causally, but not temporally, prior to God’s temporal phase of existence.”³ But that was not the claim. As Mullins earlier and more accurately reports, “Craig says that God is causally, but not temporally, prior to the universe.”⁴

The claim that God is causally prior to the universe serves to draw attention to the scholastic understanding of efficient causation that underlay my original formulation of the *kalām* cosmological argument. Roughly, according to the scholastic notion of efficient causation, a causal agent *C* brings about an effect *E* by performing an action *A* (and unless *A* is permanent, we may add “at a time *t*”).⁵ In my statement of the *kalām* cosmological argument, I presupposed the scholastic notion. In fact, in my formulation of the argument, the cause and the effect are substances: God is the cause of the universe. By contrast if we employ a modern notion of event causation, then we have to reformulate the causal premiss of the argument: *If the universe began to exist, then the universe has a cause of its beginning.*⁶ In that case, the cause of that event is not God but the event of God’s creating the universe. By way of analogy, in the scholastic sense my parents are the cause of me, but in the modern sense, the uniting of their sperm and egg is the cause of my beginning to exist.

Now I confess that in my work I tend to switch back and forth between these two notions of causation without giving due notice. For example, I state, “God may be conceived to be causally, but not temporally, prior to the origin of the universe, such that His act of causing the universe to

² William Lane Craig, *Time and Eternity: Exploring God’s Relationship to Time* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2001), p. 233.

³ R. T. Mullins, “The Divine Timemaker,” *Philosophia Christi* 22/2 (2020): 225.

⁴ Mullins, “Divine Timemaker,” p. 225.

⁵ For a detailed and nuanced account, see Alfred J. Freddoso, “Introduction,” in Francisco Suarez, *On Creation, Conservation, and Concurrence: Metaphysical Disputations 20, 21, and 22*, trans. with notes by Alfred J. Freddoso (South Bend, Ind.: Saint Augustine’s Press, 2002), pp. xliii–lix.

⁶ As I did for strategic reasons in my debate with Sean Carroll, who rejects an Aristotelian understanding of causation (William Lane Craig and Sean Carroll, *God and Cosmology*, ed. Robert Stewart [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016]).

begin to exist is simultaneous with its beginning to exist.”⁷ The first clause speaks in the scholastic sense of God as a causal agent, while the second clause speaks in the modern sense of the event of God’s creating the universe as the cause of the universe’s beginning to exist. No wonder the critics are confused! The two claims are, of course, entirely compatible: the causal agent who is responsible for the existence of the universe exists timelessly sans creation, and His creative act that brings the universe into being is simultaneous with the universe’s beginning to exist.

So Paul Helm’s puzzlement, noted by Mullins, is easily resolved.⁸ Intuitively, it is possible for God to exist changelessly alone and so to be timeless. Because He is a free agent, God can freely cause an event to occur, the creation of the universe. That moment is not only the first moment of time at which the universe exists, but also the first moment of time at which God exists. But there is this huge difference between them. The universe *came into being* at the first moment of its

⁷ William Lane Craig, *God, Time and Eternity* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2001), p. 275.

⁸ Helm wonders, “What could this be, a phase that is not earlier than the first moment of time, and with a temporal universe not temporally later than that phase? . . . God’s eternal phase is a state from which changes in time stem, but he brings these changes about not by being before, nor simultaneous with, the changes, nor do the changes occur temporally after what brings them about” (Paul Helm, *Eternal God: A Study of God without Time*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 222). I trust that the evident source of the puzzle is Helm’s infelicitous formulation of my position. God’s timeless phase does not exist “with a temporal universe” but sans the universe. Helm ought rather to say that changes in time stem from God’s timeless phase in that the agent responsible for the existence of the universe did not begin to exist at the first moment of time but exists timelessly sans creation, and that agent brings about these changes by acting simultaneously with the changes. So of the three interpretations of my model Helm proposes (p. 223), viz., (i) God is eternally timeless; (ii) there is no pre-creation phase in the life of God; and (iii) there is no creation, the correct interpretation is (ii). Reminiscent of al-Ghazālī, Helm rightly says that while it is possible for us to imagine such a pre-creation phase, there never was such a phase, for then it would lie in the past, which contradicts the hypothesis. This interpretation does not imply that such a state “is not a real phase at all” but “a purely conceptual phase” (p. 224); rather it implies that this real phase is not chronologically prior to the beginning of the universe. Cf. Natalje Deng’s confused exposition of my model in *God and Time*, *Elements in the Philosophy of Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 40-41, where she worries, “The problem was that we could only talk of a ‘before’ in quotation marks. Yet we needed there to literally be such a before on the view in question.” That is precisely what is *not* needed! She also says, “The question, though, is what ‘without’ and ‘subsequent’ mean here, if not before and after. Craig never really confronts this question, though he himself argues that they cannot mean that.” This complaint is groundless, for I am using those words with their meanings in ordinary language: “without” means “in the absence of” and “subsequent” means “posterior.”

existence; but God did not. God did not begin to exist at that point; He merely began to be temporal. So although He was not chronologically prior to the universe, He is somehow ontologically prior to the beginning of the universe. I attempted to capture that sense by saying that God is causally prior to the beginning of the universe according to the scholastic notion of causation. But if one finds that locution unhelpful, then dispense with it. The model is what it is regardless of the label we give to God's priority to the creation.⁹ We mean simply that God, unlike the universe, did not begin to exist at the first moment of time.

There is an analogy, as I have noted, in contemporary cosmology.¹⁰ The initial cosmological singularity from which the big bang emerges in the standard model is not a point in time and space. Rather it is the boundary of time and space, through which one cannot pass. If you go back in time, you eventually hit that boundary point beyond which you cannot go. That point is topologically prior to every spacetime point. Similarly divine eternity is the boundary of time. If you go back in time, eventually you will hit the beginning of time at the boundary of divine eternity. Perhaps we could similarly say that God's timeless state is topologically prior to time.¹¹

Now Mullins is careful not to endorse Helm's misgivings. Rather his worries are much more fundamental: he has doubts about the coherence of a relational view of time. Before looking at his concerns, however, it is worth mentioning that my model does not depend upon a relational view of time, even though that is my preference (since it is hard to see why in a world in which absolutely no events occur, in which nothing at all happens, there could be time). If one adopts instead a substantival view of time, according to which time is a substance, then the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* demands that time, as something distinct from God, was created by God and therefore had a beginning. So whether one adopts a relational or a substantival view of time, there must be a first moment of time and, hence, a state of affairs in the actual world of the timeless existence of God. Of course, we are now doing Christian theology, not natural theology, but it remains the case that the Christian substantivalist is committed to divine timelessness in some sense.

⁹ Helm, for his part, is quite prepared to speak of God's timeless phase, according to the model, as "logically" or "explanatorily" prior to the state of divine temporality (Helm, *Eternal God*, pp. 221, 225).

¹⁰ Craig, *God, Time and Eternity*, pp. 272-73.

¹¹ Helm comes close to expressing such an analogy when he says that perhaps God's timeless phase is the limit of God's temporal phase, just as the edge of a desk is not a part of the desk but simply where the desk ends (Helm, *Eternal God*, p. 223). Helm's temporal analogy needs adjustment, however; rather than say that 2:00 o'clock is the later limit of the previous hour, not a part of it, we ought rather to say that if the universe was created at 2:00 o'clock, then God's timeless phase is the limit of the hour beginning at 2:00 o'clock.

With respect to a relational view of time, Mullins notes my reservation about thinking that God, existing changelessly alone without creation, would exist temporally prior to creation. On a relational view of time, time comes into being with and continues after the first event, not before it, for there is nothing to distinguish such a state from a state of timelessness. Mullins expresses my worry thus: “Time exists if and only if actual change occurs. No changes occur [unless] God creates, so no time exists [unless] God creates. The act of creation marks the first event, and thus the first moment of time. Since no change occurred prior to the first event, there can be no time prior to the first event.”¹²

This leads to Mullins’ objection to a relational view of time. He writes,

I find it counterintuitive to say that time exists if and only if change exists. This is counterintuitive because change does not occur at a moment of time. Instead, change occurs over a series of moments. . . . A change is things’ being one way at a particular moment, and then being different at the next moment. If time exists if and only if change exists, then it would seem that time cannot exist without there being a series of moments. This has a counterintuitive entailment—there is no time at the first moment because there is no change at the first moment.¹³

Notice that this argument identifies an event with a change. A relational view of time requires that events occur in order for time to exist. If an event can occur at a single moment, as in physics, where events are commonly indexed not just to moments but even to instants, a first event would occur at a moment of time even if that event were not a change. Mullins needs to show that events, like changes, occur only over a series of moments.

Alternatively, if we do identify an event with a change, then we may challenge Mullins’ claim that a change is something’s being one way at a particular moment and then being different at the next moment. Although this is doubtless the case for quotidian changes, we already know that when we are dealing with such extraordinary situations as the beginning of time, the usual definitions may not apply. For example, we cannot accept as the definition of “begins to exist” the *prima facie* plausible definition “ x begins to exist” =_{def.} “ x exists at a time t and there is a time $t^* < t$ at which x does not exist,” lest we rule out by definition a beginning of time. Rather we must say something like “ x begins to exist” =_{def.} “ x exists at a time t and there is no time $t^* < t$ at which

¹² Mullins, “Divine Timemaker,” p. 226. I have substituted “unless” for “until,” lest one think that God sans the universe is waiting to create and, hence, is temporal.

¹³ Mullins, “Divine Timemaker,” p. 226.

x exists.”¹⁴ Similarly, with regard to changes, rather than adopt Mullins’ explication of a change, we may say instead that “ x changes” =_{def.} “ x acquires at t a property which x did not possess before and x does not begin to exist at t .”¹⁵ This definition would encompass the sorts of quotidian changes Mullins is thinking of as well as a change in God at the moment of creation, without allowing that the beginning of the universe is itself a change.¹⁶ In virtue of God’s changing at the moment of creation, time comes into being at that moment.

So it is not the case that on my view the first moment of time would imply “a sort of backward causation where the occurrence of later temporal states causes the first moment to be temporal,” which Mullins and I agree would be absurd.¹⁷ Rather, this is an acute problem for the relationalist who claims that time exists prior to and because of the occurrence of the first event. It is also a problem for the substantivalist who thinks that time exists prior to God’s creation of time.

Mullins’ final reflection that

It seems like time is being built into the notion of an event, but events are the very things that are supposed to explain the existence of time on Craig’s view. The problem is that events have an occurrence or a when, thus presupposing the existence of time. Hence, there appears to be a vicious circularity here in the [relationalists’] understanding of time.¹⁸

¹⁴ For further refinements, see William Lane Craig and James Sinclair, “The *Kalam* Cosmological Argument,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology*, ed. Wm. L. Craig and J. P. Moreland (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), p. 184

¹⁵ Again, refinements would have to be introduced to cover cases in which x acquires a property which it previously had and lost, as in a clock’s reading 12:00 o’clock.

¹⁶ Mullins’ appeal to the initial cosmological singularity in the standard big bang model to illustrate his point is defective. For the singularity is not the first moment of time but, as mentioned, the boundary of time (and space). So his argument that this “this first moment is not temporal” is superfluous. N.B. that on my definition the universe does not change at the singularity.

¹⁷ Mullins, “Divine Timemaker,” p. 226.

¹⁸ Mullins, “Divine Timemaker,” p. 227. I substitute “relationalist” for “creationist,” since the alleged problem concerns relationalists alone.

confuses an event's entailing the existence of time with an event's presupposing the existence of time. Of course, events occur at times, but that is not to say that time is more fundamental than events, that there exists a fundamental sequence of empty moments of time at which events then take place.

Mullins' Model of Divine Eternity

All this has been said with respect to the model that God is timeless sans creation and temporal since the moment of creation. What alternative does Mullins offer in its place? He articulates what he calls "the identification view," which "maintains that time is an aspect of God's being like an essential attribute or mode."¹⁹ Now it is immediately evident that the label for this view is a misnomer. Time is not identified with God. That would be to repeat the mistake of the simplicity theorists who identified God with a property. Just as no property is a personal being, so time is not a personal being. Rather saying that time is an aspect of God's being like an essential attribute or mode of God is just another way of saying that God has the essential property of being temporal or is essentially temporal. We, too, have the property of being essentially temporal. That tells us nothing about what time is. Is it a substance? Is it a relation?

Mullins proceeds to lay out a version of the view of divine eternity associated with what I have dubbed the Oxford School, according to which God exists in an undifferentiated, non-metric time that passes away as a whole at the moment of creation. Mullins does not, however, engage with my several criticisms of this view.²⁰

He does respond to one worry: that such an eventless, successionless state looks suspiciously like a state of timelessness. Indeed, Mullins' view and my view are very much alike. But Mullins says that there are at least two stark differences. First, God's state of existence sans the universe is only contingently without succession. "God can possibly undergo succession because God could change by freely performing some action."²¹ But this feature differentiates Mullins' view only from what he calls the Augustinian view, not from my view. Second, on Mullins' view God's precreation moment is a temporal location that is earlier than the moment of creation. That is a difference, indeed; but the relevant question is: what grounds have been given for characterizing this changeless, successionless state as a temporal state at all? Mullins falls back on his previous argument: "Is this a problem for the identification version of divine temporality? I say no. This is because no changes occur at a moment. Change is always over a series of moments. Thus, the lack of change in the precreation moment is not indicative of

¹⁹ Mullins, "Divine Timemaker," p. 232.

²⁰ Craig, *God, Time and Eternity*, pp. 268-70.

²¹ Mullins, "Divine Timemaker," p. 235.

timelessness because no change can occur at a moment.”²² The reasoning here is convoluted;²³ but Mullins can say that given the falsehood of relationalism, there is no justification for taking that changeless state to be timeless. The problem is that the failure of Mullins’ argument against a relational view of time removes the justification for thinking that God is temporal sans the universe.

Conclusion

In sum, Mullins’ misgivings about the view that God is timeless sans the universe and temporal with the universe do not serve to defeat that model. Neither has he given reason to prefer his model instead. It seems, then, that Mullins’ search for a timeless God should continue. If he pushes back in time far enough, he will, I believe, encounter Him.

²²

Mullins, “Divine Timemaker,” p. 235.

²³

If changelessness is sufficient for timelessness, as the relationalist holds, then the absence of any events for whatever reason will preclude the state of existence sans the universe from being temporal.