

Attributes of god

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There are two main views of what it means to say that God is eternal:

- God is timeless, he is outside time and not bound by time; God is the creator of time.
- God is everlasting, he moves along the same timeline that we do but never begins or ends.

The past is the past for God as well as for us and the future is unknown to us and is also to some extent unknown to God because it has not happened yet. Our understanding of what it means for God to be eternal is important because it affects many other attributes of God for example, God is omniscient – can God really know the details of events which have not yet happened? the problem of evil – if God can see the whole picture from the beginning can he be partly to blame for things being the way they are? And God is omnipotent – can God change the past and undo events which have already happened or is that beyond his power? The view that God is timeless has been very popular among Christian thinkers for example, Anselm, Augustine, Boethius and Aquinas. God being timeless is the idea that God exists outside time, and can see the past present and future with perfect knowledge.

Time is argued as an aspect of creation like space, and God is in control of it. God is not bound by space; he can be and is everywhere at once. In the same way God is not bound by time but exists in every part of history and every part of the future while being present in the world today. This view of God being timeless is popular because it shows that God is not limited. As an aspect of creation, time is something introduced by God rather than something God is dependent on.

God's omnipotence is not threatened if God is not bound by the restrictions of time – perhaps a God who could not know the future would be less powerful than one who could. It is a view that God is unchangeable (immutable), which is argued to be a necessary part of God. People who don't like the idea of God being everlasting argue that if God was bound by time then he would be much more limited. He would not know what the outcomes of actions might be; he would have to wait and see how events turned out before he decided what to do next.

If this was true God's omnipotence and omniscience would be reduced to the point where God could hardly be called all-powerful and all-knowing. Those who defend the view that God is outside time argue that other concepts of God's relationship with time do not recognise the uniqueness of God. God can bring events in time and can cause changes in people without being changed himself, because God is not a person in the same way we are.

There are things which are possible for God, because of the unique nature of his existence, even if we may not be able to see how they could be possible from within our limited understanding. Other people have raised objections to the view that God is timeless, saying it creates more problems than it resolves. It has been argued that if God is timeless and unchangeable then God cannot be a person, or be said to have a 'life'. A person with a life has to be changeable in order to have relationships and respond to people according to what they do.

A timeless God would not be able to love because a timeless God is immutable and therefore is not affected by anything. Jurgen Moltmann and

Charles Hartshorne argued that love cannot be compatible with immutability. A loving being responds to the object of his/her love. If the loved one is feeling happy, the one who shared that love is in that happiness too; if the loved one suffers, then the one who loves feels pain too. But these feelings change/happen within time. Therefore God has to exist within time, so that God is able to respond to us through love.

If there is a living God who has relationships with people as individuals then it is argued that God cannot also be timeless. Richard Swinburne writes that the view of a timeless God contradicts the Bible: ' If God had thus fixed his intentions ' from all eternity' he would be a very lifeless thing...Yet, the God of the Old Testament is a God in continual interaction with men...' Swinburne argues that the view of God outside time is one which is not biblical but which has entered Christian thinking through the influence of ancient Greeks, and then re-enforced by Thomas Aquinas.

Swinburne does not see why a perfect being should have to be changeless; it was Plato who planted the idea about a world that was unchanging but do we have to accept Plato's ideas? In the Bible, Swinburne argues God does not have fixed purposes for all eternity. He does not intend for all of time to have something happening which is then unchangeable. God interacts with people and his decisions about what will happen may change because of the on-going process of his relationship with individuals.

A biblical example of this is Hezekiah's illness when he prays to God and God gives him another fifteen years of life. Perhaps, Swinburne was right and that God does have plans but was persuaded to change his mind. However, there

are passages that suggest God has fixed intentions which do not change. Unlike humanity, God knows with perfect knowledge what he will do and has no need to alter his views. Augustine considered the question of whether the Bible supports the idea of a God who is timeless or a God who is everlasting and reached the opposite conclusion to Swinburne.

For Augustine, the problem was that God had made the world at a particular point in time, which raised the issue of what God had been doing all the time beforehand. Augustine wondered why, if God was everlasting, he picked a particular moment to create the universe, and how God might have been spending his time before the universe existed. For Augustine, the biblical account of creation points towards a timeless God, who chooses to create day and night and chooses to create the seasons but who transcends ideas of 'before' and 'after'.