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Book Review: The End Of The Timeless God

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There is much to commend in this book and it should attain a wide readership. Those already on the analytic theology scene, so to speak, will find McCall's book a refresher on what makes analytic theology helpful. For those familiar with, but skeptical of, analytic theology, this book will go a long way in assuaging common reservations. But as an introductory text that carefully outlines the aims of analytic theology and illustrates the utility of analytic theology, this book will be of most use to seminarians, undergraduates, ministers, and interested laypersons. If analytic theology is to break into the mainstream of Christian theological reflection, then this is a book to help blaze that trail.

The End of the Timeless God, by R. T. Mullins. Oxford University Press, 2016. Pp. xii + 248. \$110.00.

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R. T. Mullins has written an ambitious book. He aims to explain the traditional view of divine timelessness (DT) expressed by classical theists such as Augustine, Boethius, Anselm, and Aquinas (among others) and then to show that Christians ought to reject it. Mullins makes a number of good points, both on the historical side of the project and on the philosophical side, but in the end the work is *so* ambitious that he is not able to develop his historical explanation or his philosophical rejection persuasively.

In the beginning (3–10) Mullins outlines what commitments a “Christian Research Program” must include. He proposes six, all of which (except perhaps that God literally takes on “obligations”) are happily accepted by classical theists. However, he leaves out a commitment that is important to many Christian philosophers, and certainly to classical theists; the basic thesis of Perfect Being Theology (PBT), that God must be perfect, unlimited, that than which no greater can be conceived. A being than which we mere mortals can conceive a greater is not God. It is not clear whether Mullins allows that there could be a better being than the God arrived at by his version of a viable Christian Research Program.

In setting up his project, Mullins makes some helpful clarifications. In the last century or so the discussion about DT and—a necessarily related issue—the nature of time has often been cast in unhelpful language. For example (24–25), participants have often adopted McTaggart's A-theory and B-theory as if they referred to the ontological nature of time, whereas in McTaggart's original article they are about language. Mullins clarifies the contemporary debate explaining that it is mainly between presentists (only the present moment exists) and isotemporalists (all times are equally



existent). (Mullins uses the more standard term “eternalist” but, as I will note below, this can be misleading.) And Mullins makes the point that the disagreement is not over whether or not there is change. He rightly notes that both sides agree that things change (23).

However, Mullins’s statement of the motivation for positing a timeless God is incomplete. He associates the commitment to DT with the acceptance of the doctrine of divine simplicity (DDS), and sometimes writes as if the former theory stands or falls with the latter. Historically, some versions of DDS entail DT, and some do not. Moreover, DT alone does not entail DDS, and there are other reasons to embrace DT besides accepting DDS. One might accept DT, along with isotemporalism, as the most adequate way to solve the freedom/foreknowledge dilemma. Mullins barely mentions the dilemma in a page and a half at the end of the book under “Truthmaker Theory” (206–207). Perhaps a more fundamental reason for adopting DT along with isotemporalism is that PBT entails that God have the widest scope for the best sort of knowledge and power, that is, immediate knowledge of, and power over, everything always. There is a contemporary debate over whether or not DT plus isotemporalism enhances divine knowledge and power, but since Mullins does not include PBT among his commitments, this motivation for DT and the ensuing debate are not mentioned.

Given what Mullins *does* say—he quotes scripture off and on throughout—one suspects he might respond that his understanding of God and time is biblically based, and the Bible trumps PBT. But most classical theists hold that, while the Bible is the inerrant word of God, it is not the best reference for metaphysics any more than for the natural sciences. On the question of how to interpret the Bible, classical theism holds that any interpretation that understands God as actually limited—He forgets, He makes mistakes, etc.—must be incorrect. Mullins does not present an argument for how and by whom biblical interpretation is to proceed.

Mullins (74–126) holds that all of the great classical theists—Augustine, Boethius, Anselm, Aquinas (among others)—are committed to DDS, divine immutability, DT, presentism, and the view that God knows the future because He knows what He Himself will cause. Presenting this interpretation and noting the connections between doctrines is useful. Mullins argues that this is an incoherent set of commitments, since it entails that God cannot know what time it is *now*. And, on some readings of these doctrines, that criticism is telling. A problem is that Mullins’s historical examination is cursory. He offers a few texts and a few secondary sources and, regarding the latter, often not the most widely recognized experts.

Boethius left us a small body of work, and I believe Mullins is right about Boethius. He *may* be right about Augustine and Aquinas, but both of them bequeathed a huge corpus in which there are some texts that sound presentist and some that sound isotemporalist. Mullins’s quick glance does not inspire confidence that the former represents the true commitment. Which view does the *preponderance* of texts represent? Could it be

that both philosophers unconsciously assumed presentism without considering other options, and so were not *committed* to presentism? Could it be that there is an important distinction between earlier and later works? Could it be that the presentist texts can be read as only *quoad nos*?

Anselm's body of work is more manageable than Augustine's or Thomas's but he, too, says things that sound presentist and things that sound isotemporalist. Mullins's evidence that Anselm was clearly and consciously a presentist is suspect. For example, Mullins notes that the way Anselm sets up the freedom/foreknowledge dilemma in a late work, *De Concordia*, sounds presentist. Perhaps. But the way he *solves* it sounds isotemporalist. And, contrary to Mullins's claim, Anselm never, anywhere, says that God knows the future by knowing Himself. Mullins quotes *Monologion* 22: God's eternity does not "leak away with the past into non-existence, or fly past, like the scarcely existing momentary present, or, with the future, wait, pending, in not-yet existence." Mullins says, "A clearer proclamation of presentism cannot be found" (105). The *Monologion* is Anselm's first philosophical work. Might he have changed his mind later? Moreover, just above the quoted text Anselm says that God must be present to all times and places. Most worrisome, a more literal reading of the Latin (in Schmitt's critical edition: I, p.40, ll. 21–24) says that the past does not exist *now* (*quod iam* [my emphasis] *non est*) and that the future does not exist *yet* (*quod nondum est*). This is consistent with presentism, but it is also consistent with isotemporalism. The isotemporalist, at any given time, holds that her past and future do not exist now in her present. The translation (from the *Oxford World Classics* edition, which Mullins ought to have cited) is misleading. A cursory outline of historical views would be acceptable if Mullins were clear that he is presenting one possible interpretation in order to move on to the philosophical case he hopes to make, but he adopts a tone of setting everyone straight (finally!) which grates upon the classical theist who is familiar with, and respects, his subjects.

Further, Mullins's philosophical analysis of the set of classical commitments is too quick. A striking example is his treatment of Aquinas's claim that creatures are "really related" to God, while God is not "really related" to creatures. Mullins reads this as holding that the claims which look to relate God to creatures—He is Lord, Creator, etc.—are just about concepts in human minds and he quickly dismisses the Thomist distinction (119–122). Thomas's doctrine is difficult, but even those who are not sympathetic to it will find Mullins's interpretation lacking. Today there is a growing literature supporting versions of (or similar to) Thomas's move, often expressed as grounded in an extrinsic/intrinsic distinction in the "properties" qualifiedly ascribed to God. If the move works, it may be possible to embrace all of the theoretical commitments that Mullins attributes to classical theists, including presentism, *and* allow that God can know what time it is. Maybe it can't be made to work, but Mullins does not give it a fair hearing.

Having rejected what he takes to be the classical theist view, Mullins moves to assessing theories which propose a timeless God and an isotemporalist creation (call this TGIC), and finds them wanting. Again, the arguments, while often well worth considering, are too quick to make the case successfully. I offer three examples: First, Mullins says that TGIC entails that there is never a time when God exists alone without creation. And that is right. TGIC holds that time, like space, is a category of creation. But Mullins holds that this entails that the created universe is “co-eternal” with God (135). And since God is present to all of time, God is temporal (150–152). This is puzzling. On TGIC God’s eternity entails that God is wholly—no parts, no stages—present to every moment of time, just as God’s aspatiality entails that God is wholly “here” to every point in space. There is no *place* where God exists alone without creation, but I don’t suppose Mullins would say that that makes the universe “co-aspatial” with God. Nor does the fact that God is “here” to every point in space mean that God exists as a spatial being.

Mullins notes (151) that subscribers to TGIC often make the spatial analogy. True. And he points out that time and space are not the same phenomenon. True again. However, he does not explain why the analogy is not apt. Time and space are categories of the created universe, both of which express a kind of limiting extension, such that temporal and spatial creatures (unless they are instantaneous or occupy only a point) cannot exist without being temporally and spatially spread out in time and space. That’s a severe limitation. The temporally and spatially extended universe does not share God’s eternity nor His aspatiality. (And this is why I strongly suggest that participants in the discussion about God and time *not* refer to the isotemporalist view as “eternalism.” For two thousand years western theists have applied the term “eternal” to God’s mode of being. The recent move of referring to the view that all times exist equally by the term “eternalism” muddies the waters. I do not say that it is just language that leads Mullins to his conclusion here, but that may contribute.) Classical theists understand creation *ex nihilo* to be God’s making things to exist, and so, even though they may accept that there is a first day in time, they hold that an infinite past is entirely consistent with creation *ex nihilo*. Mullins says that this is not the biblical view, but we all agree that the Bible allows interpretation.

A second issue is Mullins’s claim (137–143) that TGIC leads to a modal collapse; it makes God’s eternal act, and hence creation and all that that entails, necessary. And that’s a problem! I applaud Mullins for appreciating and pressing this claim, but there are moves to make, and he does not give them a hearing. One might avoid the modal collapse if one works with the distinction, made in the contemporary literature and mentioned above, between the extrinsic and intrinsic “properties” of God. Or one might bite the bullet on the modal collapse. There is a long and respectable tradition of holding that God does the best. Couldn’t God do otherwise? Sure, if He wanted to. But in His perfect and self-diffusive goodness, He

doesn't want to. Mullins assumes that God must be able to do otherwise in some libertarian sense. And that is a popular position. But in the context he could at least mention—with some primary and secondary citations—that other opinions are possible.

A third example where Mullins's arguments seem facile is in his discussion of the Incarnation. He first proposes to *explain*, not just assert, the doctrine of the Incarnation as promulgated by the ecumenical councils (166). Throughout the book he complains about the thesis that some doctrine might be an "impenetrable mystery." I would suppose that anyone who had taught philosophy grants that a doctrine might be intrinsically coherent, and well-explained to an audience, and yet members of the audience still find the doctrine to be an impenetrable mystery. The view that this couldn't or shouldn't happen with the Holy Spirit's guidance of Christ's Church met in council needs more of an argument than Mullins gives to it.

He proposes to examine the "Two-minds" theory of Christ's one person with two natures. Traditionally the way the Incarnation is expressed is that the Second Person of the Trinity, the Son, "assumed" a human nature, a human body and soul. (Talk of "minds" is anachronistic, of course, but that is a minor issue.) But, says Mullins, we must reject this approach because Thomas P. Flint's explanation of the doctrine of assumption leads to Nestorianism, the heretical view that Christ is two persons, not one person with two natures. And Flint's idiosyncratic, Molinist way of explaining the assumption does seem Nestorian. Flint says that a human soul and body might or might not be assumed, and if it *is* it's *not* a person and if it *isn't* it *is* a person. The more standard expression of assumption holds that the soul and body assumed by the Son could not possibly be someone else's soul and body, any more than Rogers's soul and body could be someone else's. The thought is just incoherent.

Mullins might have devoted more time to an examination of the standard approach. Instead, he opts for a different relationship. "To say that the Son is human is to say that He is appropriately related to a human organism or body . . . If the second divine person is embodied in a particular human organism, He will be a human person" (179–180). If I am understanding Mullins, this is not Apollinarianism—the heresy which holds that the divine mind is the thinker in the human body—since the divine mind and the human mind are both in there. Mullins spells out general, limiting, criteria for *any* mind to be embodied. For example, "The mind acquires perceptual knowledge as mediated through the body" (180). But a timeless divine mind cannot meet these criteria. "The divine mind as timeless and omniscient cannot acquire any knowledge" (191). And "If a timeless divine mind cannot be incarnate, Christians must give up belief in timeless divine minds" (192). But Mullins, contrary to (what I had thought was) his intention is rejecting the conciliar understanding. On his view, the Son is embodied and embodiment is so limiting that the Son Incarnate is not timeless *or omniscient or omnipotent*. How, then, is He

divine? Chalcedon holds that the Son does not abandon or lose His divine nature when Incarnate.

These three examples are representative of the philosophical analysis as a whole. There are many useful ideas, interesting connections, and provocative arguments, but all are presented too quickly, debatable assumptions are taken as settled, and alternative or opposing views are not given a careful hearing. The book is a good read as a step in the debate, but hardly—as Mullins’s tone throughout would suggest—the end of the debate. The timeless God is safe . . . at least for the present.

The Hiddenness Argument: Philosophy’s New Challenge to Belief in God, by J. L. Schellenberg. Oxford University Press, 2015. Pp. x + 142. \$35.00 (hardcover).

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John Schellenberg almost singlehandedly brought the problem of divine hiddenness, or the hiddenness argument, to the attention of academic philosophers. But why stop with that stodgy lot? His latest book *The Hiddenness Argument* aims “to provide an accessible, brief, but vigorous statement of the hiddenness argument and an explanation of the associated issues designed for wide consumption” (ix). Freshman philosophy students could understand and benefit from this book. It is ideal for introductions to philosophy or undergraduate courses in the philosophy of religion. I myself enjoyed reading it and recommend it to academic philosophers as an introduction to the issues.

The book has eight chapters, as well as a short coda and a relatively comprehensive list of recent work on the hiddenness argument (making it all the more helpful for philosophy students). Chapter 1 lays out the basic critical thinking tools and vocabulary needed to appreciate the hiddenness argument. This material, while presented well, is unavoidably dry. This book would have engaged an even wider audience had this material been saved until later, say, just before discussion of the argument’s first premise. Chapter 2 identifies the sort of theism at issue, but it isn’t crucial to a basic understanding of the argument. Chapter 3 is my favorite. Its main goal is to explain why the hiddenness argument was only discovered in the late twentieth century rather than centuries before. The most useful function of the chapter, however, is that it allows the reader to see, in engaging fashion, how Schellenberg’s argument is distinct from its predecessors.

