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Divine-Human Dialogue and the Nature of God

Erratum
article

DIVINE-HUMAN DIALOGUE AND THE NATURE OF GOD

William P. Alston

I

Prayer comes in all shapes and sizes. Commonly recognized forms include meditation, contemplation, thanksgiving, intercession, and petition. It is petitionary and intercessory prayer that has provoked the most perplexity. If God orders all things for the best, how could this ordering be influenced by our requests? Why would God do something He wasn't going to do anyway just because some human being asked Him to? A number of thinkers have made impressive contributions to this discussion, and I do not propose to add yet one more suggestion to that list. Instead I shall shift the focus to a set of issues concerning a more general feature of prayer of which divine compliance with requests is only one form. This more general feature is *divine response* to our prayers. (This feature, in turn, is a special form of a still more general feature, divine responses to what we *do*.) *Divine response* extends beyond the granting of petitions in several directions. At the first remove there is divine refusal to grant a petition; but I am more interested in wider variations. There is, of course, an infinite variety of things that God might conceivably do in response to one or another prayer. I ask God for vengeance on my enemies and in response He inspires a redoubling of efforts to spread the gospel of love. I thank God that I am not as other men—adulterers, taxgatherers, . . . , and in response He brings it about that I suffer a humbling decline in my fortunes. The general category of divine responses on which I shall be concentrating is *replies*. I ask God what I should concentrate on in my work. God replies that I should concentrate on a certain book I once began to write. I protest that this seems so far removed from serving others or working for His kingdom on earth. He tells me to let Him worry about that. . . . Thus I will be concerned with divine-human dialogues, or at least that sub-set that involves a divine *reply* to a human utterance, leaving aside only those dialogues initiated by God that end with a single human response. To be sure, some divine replies are themselves the granting of a petition, e.g., where the petition takes the form of a request for guidance. This is illustrated by the first reply in the four-step dialogue just presented. But a divine reply need not be a response to a petition, as is illustrated by the second divine reply in the same dialogue.¹



I should make it explicit that I am not restricting divine replies to cases in which the human recipient hears audible speech that he/she attributes to God, or to cases involving inner auditory imagery. But neither am I excluding such cases. I take it that God has a variety of means at His disposal for communicating with His creatures, and that He uses now one, now another as the occasion requires. In addition to audible words, spoken or written by a human being or not, these include auditory imagery and thoughts that simply pop into one's mind.²

How important is divine-human dialogue in prayer, more specifically in the prayer life of a Christian? If the Bible is any guide, very important. A large proportion of the Scriptures consists of records of divine-human communication. Of course, a considerable proportion of that is restricted to God's giving the word to some prophet with the human recipient just taking it; no divine reply to a human utterance is involved. But there is plenty of back-and-forth conversation as well. Here is a famous example.

The Lord said.... 'The outcry of the Israelites has now reached me; yes, I have seen the brutality of the Egyptians towards them. Come now; I will send you to Pharaoh and you shall bring my people Israel out of Egypt.' 'But who am I,' Moses said to God, 'that I should go to Pharaoh, and that I should bring the Israelites out of Egypt?' God answered, 'I am with you. This shall be the proof that it is I who have sent you; when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall all worship God here on this mountain.'

Then Moses said to God, 'If I go to the Israelites and tell them that the God of their forefathers has sent me to them, and they ask me his name, what shall I say?' God answered, 'I AM; that is who I am. Tell them that I AM has sent you to them.'

Exodus, 3, 9-14. New English Bible

But Moses said, 'O Lord, I have never been a man of ready speech, never in my life, not even now that thou hast spoken to me; I am slow and hesitant of speech.' The Lord said to him, 'Who is it that gives man speech? Who makes him dumb or deaf? Who makes him clear-sighted or blind? Is it not I, the Lord? Go now; I will help your speech and tell you what to say.'³

Exodus 4, 10-12

I imagine that some sincere Christians, in the spirit of "the age of miracles is past", would feel that such conversations are reserved for the biggies of the Bible, and that they are not for the likes of us. For such souls prayer consists *solely* of our dispatching our messages out into the silent beyond. (Of course,

for all or most of us that is what it frequently is.) But I suspect that this attitude is less common among Christians than it was 50 years ago. On a questionnaire I issued at the beginning of an adult education series I gave at my church last spring, the following question appeared:

Do you ever feel that God speaks to you? (Not necessarily in audible words. The question could be phrased: do you ever feel that God is communicating a message to you?)

The tally on that one was Yes-17, No-2. Admittedly, this is a self-selected group of people who took the trouble to attend an adult education series, and they are hardly a random sample of the churchgoers even of that particular parish, much less Christendom as a whole. Nevertheless, this result was a real eye-opener to me. In this paper I shall be assuming that divine-human dialogue is an essential component of at least the more developed Christian spiritual life, and that the conditions of the possibility of such dialogue put a significant constraint on our conception of God.

The issues I will be discussing concern what God must be like if divine-human dialogue is to be possible. They all have the form: Is it possible for God to reply to human utterances if God is _____? I will discuss three such questions, involving omnidetermination, omniscience, and timelessness.⁴ Even though I am restricting explicit discussion to divine replies to human utterances in prayer, all the points I will be making apply equally to any divine responses to anything we do.

Before launching onto these specific problems I should like to set them in a more general context. Our understanding of prayer is one of the prime loci of the pervasive tension in Christian thought between “the God of the philosophers and the God of the Bible”, between God as “wholly other” and God as a partner in interpersonal relationships, between God as the absolute, ultimate source of all being and God as the dominant actor on the stage of history. One thing that seems to force us into the second and away from the first pole of these dichotomies is the personal communication involved in prayer. Each of our three problems is one form this basic tension takes in application to divine-human dialogue. Each issue has the form: “Is it possible for us to engage in back-and forth dialogue with a being that is transcendent in this way? Is it conceivable that such a being should enter into genuine interpersonal communication?”.

II

Let’s begin with the doctrine that I have called “omnidetermination”. This is the thesis that God has decided every detail of His creation, including all the putatively free choices and actions of human beings. It has been widely held in

the history of Christian theology, counting such distinguished adherents as Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, and Calvin. Nevertheless, it seems to me plainly incompatible with genuine divine-human dialogue, and much else in the Christian life as well. Dialogue requires two independent participants, neither of which wholly controls the responses of the other. There is no genuine communication *between* Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy. Bergen, the ventriloquist, issues all the messages, some of which he issues through his dummy, McCarthy. It is just a complicated way of talking to oneself. If there is to be genuine communication, each participant must be over against another participant that is responsible for one end of the exchange. Otherwise I am as misguided in regarding it as genuine communication as I would be in eagerly looking forward to receiving a letter I wrote to myself.⁵

Note that my claim has to do not with *any* sort of determination, but rather with the effective *choice* of A's utterances by the other participant, B. I am not arguing here, though this may also be true, that any sort of causal determination of utterances, or any sort of causal determination of utterances by another person, is subversive of true communication. The claim is rather that A and B are not in genuine communication if A is exercising an ability to determine B's moves in accordance with A's intentions. It is this intentional effective control of one participant by the other that I am claiming to rule out genuine communication.

It may be felt that my ventriloquist example is unfair, in that the trouble lies in the lack of complexity of one partner, rather than in his total subservience to the other. Well, let's complicate things. I ask questions of my computer and receive answers. To get closer to divine omnidetermination, let's suppose that I built the computer and devised the program. We can make the computer as complicated as you like. Is this a genuine dialogue? Here, unlike the ventriloquist case, I do not decide each individual utterance of the computer. It often provides new information and sometimes even surprises me. But is the computer *responding* to me in the way we suppose ourselves to respond to God in prayer? I am inclined to say, No; but rather than embark on the long, and perhaps futile attempt, to establish this, I shall content myself with the following point. Any inclination to suppose there to be genuine dialogue here stems from the facts that (a) I have not individually determined each computer response but have only deliberately instituted conditions that in turn determine those responses, and (b) that as a result I do not, in general, know in advance what those responses will be. Now condition (b) certainly does not hold of the divine-human case, under the assumption of omnidetermination. And although God certainly could determine my behavior by instituting conditions that determine it, he could equally well determine it directly, and hence even if He chooses the indirect route, given that He knows exactly what all the outcomes will be, He could hardly regard each action of mine as anything other than a carrying out of His

specific intention. Whereas I cannot regard the details of each computer response as a carrying out of a specific intention of mine. Thus the features of the example that support the diagnosis of genuine communication do not hold of the divine-human case on the assumption of omnidetermination.

Finally, to come closer to home, consider a "conversation" between hypnotist and subject, in which the latter is doing nothing but carrying out post-hypnotic suggestions. (It is irrelevant whether post-hypnotic suggestion can in fact determine such fine details.) Here the one party, the hypnotist, really is effectively deciding just what the other says, and the other is as complicated as a human being, in fact *is* a human being. Here we have as close an analogy to divine omnidetermination as we are likely to find, and the verdict, I suppose, would be clear. This is a charade, not a genuine case of communication. The hypnotist is going to enormous trouble to institute a complicated form of talking to himself. Nothing but the complexity of the mechanisms involved distinguishes this from the ventriloquist case.

I conclude that the reality of divine-human dialogue is incompatible with divine omnidetermination. This result will be less disturbing when we realize that the proponents of omnidetermination have been mistaken in supposing it to be required, or even strongly supported, by the doctrine of divine omnipotence. It is quite conceivable that God should be omnipotent, able to do anything conceivable, including determining every detail of the creation, but voluntarily refrain from doing so. After all, almost all theologians recognize that God refrains from doing many things He can do, e.g., create some other possible world instead of this one, or annihilate His creation in 1870 A. D. Why should His omnipotence be incompatible with his voluntarily refraining from determining the putatively free choices and actions of human beings?⁶

III

Now let's consider whether divine *omniscience* is incompatible with genuine dialogue in prayer. The case for incompatibility is not nearly so strong as it was with omnidetermination, but there is a case. The knowledge of God that creates the problem is, of course, God's foreknowledge of the moves by the other party. Given that God knows in advance exactly how I will react at each point, can He be said to enter into genuine interpersonal communication with me? Doesn't that require each party to be responding to the other as the dialogue develops, so that each party is actively involved at each stage, confronted at each stage with the task of deciding how to respond to what is proffered by the other at that point? This is what it takes for genuine reciprocity, in which both parties are involved in the same generic fashion, each dependent on the other to provide, at each point, the occasion for a fresh response, newly minted on the spot. But

this is what we fail to get where one party knows in advance how the other will react to any move by the former (or, indeed, given omniscience, to any given situation). The absence of living involvement on the part of the foreknower can best be seen by noting that under these conditions the all-knowing one could turn his/her part of the proceedings over to a pre-programmed robot that would operate purely mechanically (not excluding electronically). Since h/she can know in advance how the other will react to any move h/she makes, h/she is in a position to decide in advance how h/she will react to any of those reactions. There is no need to wait until the other actually makes a move to construct a response. But then no real shaping of response, in the light of the activity of the other, would take place at each stage. The foreknower could have made creative decisions in planning the whole thing, determining what his/her response would be to what h/she knew the other would be doing at the stage. But there is no such active involvement as the putative dialogue unfolds; the one party has made all his/her decisions and is now reduced to passively watching the foreseen sequence of events. It is as with omnidetermination, though for a different reason, a charade, play-acting. It is a mock-dialogue, not the real thing.

Thus far I have argued only that an omniscient being *could* plan the whole exchange as far in advance as you please, thus avoiding any living involvement in the proceedings when they actually occur. But then what about the other possibility? Couldn't an omniscient being choose to forego that privilege and, for the sake of genuine interaction, wait until the other party makes a given move to decide how h/she will react? No, that is not possible. An omniscient being will, necessarily, know in advance what h/she is going to do at any given time. Otherwise prior to that time there would be something of which h/she is ignorant, and h/she would not be omniscient. God, if omniscient, not only may but must decide in advance how He will freely act at any given moment.

At the risk of fatuity, let me note that it is no answer to the above argument to point out that one can enter into genuine communication with another person one knows so well as to be able to anticipate how the other will react. Such knowledge, as actually possessed by human beings, is highly fallible and incomplete. People often surprise even those who know them best; and such knowledge as I have of how, e.g., my wife will react extends only to certain kinds of situations. I would be rash indeed to claim to *know*, exactly and in detail, how she would react to my announcement that I had just returned from a trip around the galaxy. It is because of these limitations of our knowledge even of our closest intimates that the possibility of genuine communication is not subverted. Because of these limitations I am not able to program a robot to hold up my end, secure in the knowledge that it will all go as predicted. But divine knowledge does not suffer from those limitations. Hence the analogy fails at the crucial point. If ignorance is not bliss, it at least is, or makes possible, mutuality.

Here I must pause to consider the following objection. "Let's agree that "living involvement" is precluded by perfect foreknowledge. And if living involvement is required for "genuine dialogue" or "real interpersonal communication", then that is ruled out too. But so what? Is it really so important that our contact with God be characterizable in those terms? What difference does it make *when* God decided how the conversation would go? We may naively suppose that God is shaping His responses on the spot, just as we do; but in many cases we have to revise our naive conceptions of God and His relations to His creation. Why shouldn't this be one of those cases? And what, of crucial value, would be lost in the shift? So long as God has freely decided to initiate contact and to respond to our initiations and responses in the way He has decided, what essential difference does it make when He made those decisions? Doesn't that still leave us with all we need and want in the way of sending messages to God and receiving messages from Him, and isn't that the crucial point? Have we lost anything more than a naive picture of the situation that represents God more anthropomorphically than is theologically warranted?"

It was in anticipation of this objection that I said at the beginning of this section that the case against omniscience was weaker than the case against omnidetermination. I don't see how anyone could respond to the argument against the latter by saying that omnidetermination still leaves us with everything essential. Surely it is essential to divine-human interaction that the human participant is playing some role in determining his/her side of the proceedings. But, with respect to the difficulties about omniscience, I will grant this much to the objection. We could learn to live with divine foreknowledge if we had to. The reconception of divine-human dialogue thereby enforced is not such as to rob it of its most essential value as communication. But if we can avoid this reconception, without violating any legitimate theological constraints, so much the better. I shall now proceed to argue that we can.

IV

To carry this out I must explain how our third problem, concerning *timelessness*, becomes enmeshed with the second. If the divine being is not subject to temporal succession, this will alleviate the strain that omniscience places on mutuality. The above argument depended on thinking of God as knowing *in advance* how a given human being would react in any situation, as well as knowing *in advance* what He will do at any given moment. That is, the argument depicts God as temporal, performing a given action at a time and knowing, at a time, that *p*. It supposes that God's actions and states can be dated, and that God moves through a succession of moments. But this is not the dominant conception of God in the Christian tradition, though the tradition has come under heavy attack

on this point in this century. What if we think of God, God's knowledge, and God's activity as timeless? How will that affect the above argument?

It will subvert it entirely. If God is timeless, God does not know anything *in advance*, because God does not know anything *at any time*. God timelessly knows that I issue a certain utterance at t_1 , feel queasy at t_2 , and so on. *What* God knows, in these instances, is dated, but God's knowledge of them is not. God, as the infinite eternal *now*, is all at once simultaneous with every moment of time, and with everything that is happening in time.⁷ Thus insofar as God's knowledge of what I do at t_1 stands in anything like a temporal relation to my doing it, it is simultaneous with my doing it, not earlier than my doing it. God knows what I do at t_1 by seeing me do it right then and there, not by virtue of being able to anticipate it or foreknow it.⁸ Since God doesn't know *in advance* what I will do and what He himself will do, He is in no position to decide the whole thing in advance and let it run off mechanically according to a pre-arranged program. He is no more in a position to do that than to do anything else that requires occupying temporal positions and undergoing succession in His own life and activity. Since God's knowledge of anything that happens in time is simultaneous with that happening, His relations with those happenings and with the creatures involved need suffer no loss of "living or active involvement", or "decisions on the spot" by reason of His omniscience.⁹

"But," it may be said, "we have indeed jumped from the frying pan into the fire. For divine timelessness poses difficulties for divine-human dialogue far more severe than those posed by the omniscience of a temporal deity. As we have seen, genuine interpersonal interaction requires that each party engage in a continuous process of shaping and modifying its responses in the light of the developing contributions of the other. And this shaping must take place at the appropriate juncture in the proceedings. Unless I respond to your move when (just after) you make it, I am not engaged in active communication with you. But if God is timeless God doesn't do anything *at any time*; therefore He doesn't do anything when, or just after, e.g., I ask Him what I should concentrate on in my work. Hence God never *responds* to anything done by a human being. And much less does He engage in a "continuous process of shaping and modifying His responses in the light of the developing contribution of" the human side of the supposed dialogue. In short, since dialogue is essentially a temporal process, involving temporally interrelated messages and replies, a timeless being is logically debarred from participation.¹⁰ The objection to temporal omniscience was that the responses were shaped at the wrong time. The objection to timelessness is more radical; there are no responses at all."

I believe this assessment to be unwarranted, and I can indicate why by making use of the standard way of showing how a timeless deity can perform acts in time.¹¹ That way consists in distinguishing the aspect of the action that is internal

to the agent, in this case God, and the aspect that consists in some effect produced by that agent. In the case of God that internal aspect will simply be an act of will; since God is bodiless He acts in the world by directly producing worldly effects of His volitions, not by producing those effects by movements of His body. The crucial point is that the two aspects can differ in temporal status. The worldly effect will be at a time. But it is quite compatible with this that the divine volition should be timeless, should be embraced with all other divine activity in the one eternal *now*. The action is in time by virtue of its effect, but not by virtue of the immediate activity of the agent. In speaking to Moses God wills that Moses should hear certain words in certain circumstances at a certain time. The hearing of those words by Moses is dated, but the divine volition is not. How can a timeless being act in the temporal world? By timelessly performing acts of will that have temporal effects.¹²

Now it may seem that even if this provides a wholly satisfactory answer to the question: "How can God, though timeless, have said that *p* to Moses at a certain moment?," as I am convinced it does, it does not suffice to answer the question: "How can a timeless God, in saying that, be *replying* to a question Moses had asked just before?." And it must be admitted that more is required for God's replying to Moses at t_1 that *p* than is required for God's saying at t_1 that *p*. Not everything that God says is a reply, much less a reply to that question. However the question before the house is not: "What are the necessary and sufficient conditions for God's saying that *p* in reply to Moses' asking what God's name is?" The question is as to whether divine timelessness would prevent anything God says from being a reply to something some human being said. More specifically, we are considering the claim that it couldn't, just because a timeless God can't say anything *after* a human utterance X, this being required for anything's being a reply to X. And the standard treatment of the temporal acts of a timeless being does give us all we need to take care of this.

The crucial point is simply that the standard treatment shows us the sense in which an utterance of a timeless God can be temporally later than a human utterance, viz., with respect to the worldly effect involved. God willed that Moses should hear "I AM; that is who I am" or rather an equivalent sentence in the appropriate language, just after Moses had asked his question, and in such a way that Moses would take this to be a message from God. The effect on the receiver occurred just after the question being answered, and it was intended by God to occur then. Why should we suppose that any more is required in the way of temporal placement for God to be credited with replying to Moses? If this is sufficient to date what God did, then that dating should be sufficient to satisfy temporal conditions for counting as an answer to Moses. Why should we suppose that the initiatory volition of the answerer must also be assigned a later date? Even with communication between human beings the fact that A's voluntary

initiation of a reply to B's utterance always comes later than B's utterance is due to human limitations rather than to requirements imposed by the concept of a reply. Suppose that you emit a cry of despair and I offer consolation. As we are actually constituted I will not initiate my attempt at consolation until some finite time (however short) after your cry. But isn't that just due to our limitations? If I could be so closely tied to you as to apprehend your cry while you are in the act of producing it, and if I were able to offer my consolation (or at least do the most immediate part of this, the volition) at that very same moment of apprehension, would I not still be responding to your cry? We can't actually bring this off, we can't respond that quickly, but that has no bearing on the *concept* of a reply. I recognize that the concept prevents anything I do *before* X from being a reply to X, but simultaneity is ruled out only by human limitations.¹³ And if a response to X that is simultaneous with X, from the side of the respondent, is a conceptual possibility even for a human responder, we certainly can't rule out responses to human actions by a timeless deity on the grounds that none of His volitions temporally succeed any human action.¹⁴

I believe that this is a sufficient answer to the objection. But we can further defend and elucidate the possibility of dialogue with a timeless deity if we explore further just how a timeless deity can reply to a human utterance. And to do that we must bring out what is required for an utterance, Y, to be a reply to a human utterance, X, over and above Y, on its effect side, being later than X.

In order for Y to be a reply to X, in the full-blooded sense in which we are interested, it must be, as we might say, issued "as a reply" to X.¹⁵ But what does that involve? As a start, Y was done *because of* X.¹⁶ If S was not influenced in any way to issue Y by the fact that T had issued X, then S could not be deemed to be replying to X in issuing Y. But not just any sort of influence will do. If T, by saying the code phrase 'I am hungry' releases a noxious substance in the air, and this leads S to say 'What is that awful smell?', S does not thereby reply to T. One crucial lack here is that S need not have known that T said what he did in order for S to remark on the smell; S did not utter Y "in the light of" T's having uttered X; an awareness of X played no role in leading S to utter Y. And so a second component is that S utters Y *in the light of* T's utterance of X. The fact that T has uttered X plays an essential role in S's reasons for uttering Y. But even this is not enough. Suppose that having overheard you say to Smith at a cocktail party "It's in the bag," I say to Jones that you are a conceited ass. I made my remark in the light of your having made yours; my awareness of your saying 'It's in the bag' played a major role in leading me to say what I said. Yet I wasn't replying to you. I am still not uttering Y *as a reply* to X. What is missing here is that I do not utter Y in order to communicate a message to you, the issuer of X, a message that is appropriate to your having uttered X. (I am assuming that I do not intend you to hear what I said to Jones.) Thus a

third condition is that S utters Y *in order to communicate an X-appropriate message to T*.¹⁷ This condition includes the other two. I couldn't utter Y with that intention without doing it in the light of X, and hence without X's playing some role in my uttering Y. But be that as it may, I shall sum up these three conditions in the phrase 'utter Y as a reply to X'.¹⁸

Thus the question I wish to consider is whether a timeless deity can say something *as a reply* to a human utterance. And I propose to approach this issue by first asking whether an *omnidetermining* deity could satisfy that condition. Could a God who decides every detail of His creation *reply* to a question from Moses? Well, in a way this is possible. God's masterplan for creation could include as components (a) Moses' asking this question, and (b) immediately afterwards Moses' hearing the words 'My name is I AM' and hearing those words in such a way as to be convinced that this is a message from God. In that case, wouldn't God be sending that message to Moses as an answer to his question? Wouldn't God be saying that in the light of Moses' having asked his question, and in order to communicate to Moses a message that is appropriate to that question? And as far as the '*because of*' condition is concerned, the usual counterfactual requirements for causal influences are satisfied. If Moses had not asked that question at t_1 God would not have said that to Moses, in such a way that Moses received the message at t_2 . For if God had not brought about the question at t_1 He would not have brought about the hearing of the answer at t_2 .

Nevertheless, although in a sense God's utterance could be performed *as a reply* to Moses' question, we still have to say that this fails to be a reply in the full-blooded sense that is required for "genuine dialogue". What, then, is missing? Just this. The X putatively responded to in no way "stands over against" God as something independent of His will, something introduced into the situation by the initiative of another, something to which He has to adjust His conduct, something that requires a special *ad hoc* "response" on His part. In "replying" to Moses' question God is merely adjusting one decision of His to another. The dynamics of the affair are wholly internal to the divine conation. He is not confronted with something to which He has to *fashion* a response. The supposed response is simply another link in the initial (and in this case final) chain of systematically interrelated decisions. Without an other that is sufficiently outside my control to make its own independent contribution to what is going on, there is nothing for me to reply to.

Thus if the *uttered as a reply* condition is to be sufficient for genuine dialogue, we must specify that the X in question is, to some degree, independent of S's will. This enriched condition constitutes an impassable roadblock for a traditionally prominent form of Christian theology, according to which God is always agent, never patient; always cause, never effect. Since such a theology must endorse omnidetermination, it cannot recognize divine *responses* to human

beings, in a full-blooded sense of ‘response’. We have already seen that omnidetermination is incompatible with genuine divine-human dialogue from the human side, since it rules out the human being’s playing any real role in the proceedings. What we have just seen is that it is equally incompatible from the divine side. It equally prevents God from making the kind of contribution required for genuine dialogue, viz., a genuine response to the contributions of the other party.

Now let us consider the question of whether, and if so how, a timeless deity can utter Y as a reply to S, once we enrich that concept to require that X be, to some degree, independent of God’s will. There is no doubt that this additional stipulation poses a problem over and above that posed by the kind of response that is compatible with omnidetermination. With the latter we simply have to think of God as performing one all-inclusive act of will. That will take care of everything: the existence of the temporal world in all its details and the appropriate interlocking of creaturely activity and divine action, with “responses” on each side to action on the other. Since all this is determined by the divine will, the one fell swoop, to adapt Quine’s pun, can be a full sweep. Furthermore God’s knowledge of His creation can be wholly contained in His knowledge of what He wills. There will be nothing in the former that is not in the latter. On this story there is obviously no need for temporal succession in the divine activity. One creative act of will, together with God’s awareness thereof, will be sufficient. But once we allow (or rather once God allows) some creatures to determine some details of their activity, once God refrains from deciding just what actions they perform, the divine activity takes on an additional complexity. It can no longer be confined to a single creative act of will. Even apart from divine *responses* to human actions, if God is to have knowledge of the latter that knowledge will stem from something other than His knowledge of His own will. He must, so to say, “see” what Moses is doing when Moses is doing it. So our problem is this. Can we (or rather can God) cram the initial creative volition, all the awarenesses of what free creatures are doing freely, *and* the responses to these (including adjustments that are made in the overall plan) into the eternal now? Can it embrace all that without spilling over into temporality?¹⁹ We have already noted that the divine response to a free human action (or at least the volition thereto) could be simultaneous with that action; and so they at least are fitted for cohabitation in the eternal now. Moreover if, as I am taking Stump and Kretzmann to have shown, it is possible that God should, without undergoing temporal succession, be all at once aware of everything that happens throughout time, there is no bar to the awareness of each and every free act, along with the responses thereto, occupying the one eternal now. So the question boils down to whether this totality of awarenesses of, and responses to, human free acts, can find a place in the eternal now *along with* the basic creative act of will by

which God determines everything that He determines in the world.

Well, why not? If an omnidetermining divine volition can itself be timeless, I cannot see that this additional complexity poses any new bar. Why should it be any more “difficult” to combine all this in the eternal now than simply to combine all the infinite detail of God’s creative activity? And in any event, this talk of how difficult it is or how God brings it off is not to be taken seriously. God is omnipotent, and we are in no position to determine “how” He does what He does. If there are no logical impossibilities in the supposition, it is within the divine power. And once we fully grasp the point that a timeless deity can be all-at-once simultaneous with every temporal state of affairs, we can see that there is no logical impossibility in God’s creating the world, “hearing” Moses ask a question, and answering that question, all in the same timeless *now*.²⁰

Thus I conclude that a timeless omniscient God can enter into genuine dialogue with human beings in prayer. But I must also conclude that God has achieved this capacity by foregoing the complete determination of His creation.²¹

V

I had originally intended that the high point of this paper would be an argument for the possibility that God, though not essentially or necessarily temporal, had freely decided to enter into the temporal process Himself, so as to be able to interact with His creatures. This position was to be opposed both to the tradition of Augustine, Anselm, and Aquinas, for whom God is essentially and necessarily timeless, and to process theology, for whom God is essentially and necessarily temporal. According to this intermediate position, God is essentially timeless in the sense that, apart from His free choice to the contrary, none of His actions or states would be datable nor would He live through temporal succession. But God has the capacity to freely choose to render His activity, or portions thereof, temporally ordered. And this permits Him to enter into genuine interaction, conversational and otherwise, with temporal creatures. I was going to spring this rabbit out of the hat after arguing that such genuine interaction is impossible for a timeless deity. However in the course of working out the paper I changed my mind on that crucial issue, with the result you have just witnessed. Nevertheless, I still feel that my intermediate position is rather interesting, and worthy of more than the little or no attention it has received thus far. And so I commend it to your attention. In particular I commend it to the attention of those undoubtedly numerous persons who have failed to be convinced by my argument for the compatibility of divine timelessness and genuine divine-human interaction.

NOTES

1. We might also note in passing that divine answers to questions do not, in general, pose the severe problems that attach to favorable divine responses to certain sorts of petitions. If I (we) pray for peace in Central America and, in response, God brings this about, the question inevitably suggests itself as to why God should have waited for our request to bring about peace. But God could hardly have replied to my question before I asked it. It is true that, without my asking, God could have done what He did under another description, viz., "telling me that I ought to finish that book." But even under that description, it is quite understandable that God should have waited for the opportune moment to deliver this exhortation, and that this was the moment at which I asked Him what I should do, thereby rendering myself open to His exhortation.

2. Needless to say, the human recipient will not take the phenomenon to embody a message from God unless certain contextual indications are present. For example, the thought that I ought to finish that book may often occur to me without my taking it to be an exhortation from God. But if the thought forms itself distinctly in my mind just after I have asked God what I should concentrate on and have kept my mind blank in expectation of an answer, and, moreover, if this thought is accompanied with a strong sense of conviction, then I will take it to be God's reply to my question.

3. Some may deny that these exchanges are, or involve, *prayer*. One may reserve 'prayer' for divine-human communication initiated by the human participant. I don't want to get involved in controversy over the word 'prayer.' I want to discuss divine-human dialogue over its full range, when it is properly called 'prayer', and when, if ever, it is not.

4. Many contemporary philosophers feel that there is also a serious, and perhaps insoluble, problem as to how an immaterial being could "speak," or communicate messages in any way, or, indeed, act in any way. My reasons for thinking that this difficulty can be resolved are set out in some detail in my "Can We Speak Literally of God?", in Axel Steuer & J. W. McClendon, eds., *Is God GOD?*, Nashville, TN, Abingdon Press, 1981.

5. Of course, we can think of circumstances in which I would not be misguided in looking forward to this. For example, I have forgotten what I wrote and am eager to have my memory refreshed. But it still fails to qualify as a case of interpersonal communication.

6. For an effective presentation of this possibility, see Nelson Pike, "Overpower and God's Responsibility for Sin", in A. J. Freddoso, ed., *The Existence and Nature of God* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983).

7. See Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann, "Eternity", *Journ. Philos.*, Vol. 78, no. 8 (August, 1981), pp. 429-458, for a special concept of simultaneity that is designed for this application.

8. If we accepted omnidetermination we could say, with Aquinas, that God knows what I do by virtue of knowing that He willed it. But since I don't accept divine determination of human free choices and actions, I can't accept that as an account of all divine knowledge. (See below, p. 12) I am forced to say that God's knowledge of events He does not determine must stem from God's "seeing" them happen. To be sure, since Aquinas combined this account of divine knowledge with a doctrine of divine timelessness, he no more thought of God's knowing events *in advance* than I do. God's willing my action at t_1 , by virtue of knowing which God knows what I do, no more precedes my action than the knowledge does. It too is a timeless activity of God.

9. This move is precisely parallel to the way in which the difficulties allegedly posed for human free will by omniscience are alleviated by the doctrine of divine timelessness. Here too, so long as we think of God's knowing *in advance* what I do at t_1 , it would seem that this is incompatible with

my having two or more genuine alternative possibilities from which to choose at t_1 . But if God is timeless, He doesn't know *in advance* what I will do. He knows what I do because He "sees" me doing it. Contemporaneous knowledge of my doing what I do poses no threat to the real possibility of the alternatives between which I choose.

10. Cf. Nicholas Wolterstorff, "God Everlasting", in C. J. Orlebeke and L. G. Smedes, eds., *God and the Good* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1975), p. 197: "...some of God's actions must be understood as a response to the free actions of human beings...And I think it follows, given that all human actions are temporal, that those actions of God which are "response" actions are temporal as well."

11. See, e.g., St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, II, 35-36; Stump & Kretzmann, *op. cit.*, pp. 447-450.

12. In (human) action theory we are familiar with the point that the date of what an agent most immediately does in an action can differ from the date of one or another effect that is a necessary condition of the performance of an action of that type. X willed to pull the trigger, and did so, at 10 PM on August 28, but the victim did not die until September 6. When did X kill Y? There is no single date of the action; instead we have one for the volition (and what it immediately issued in), and another for the effect ultimately aimed at. The present point differs from this only (!) by the fact that the "date" of the volition is the eternal *now*.

13. It is also true, no doubt, that human limitations require that you *receive* my consolation, apprehend my response, after that to which I was responding, to avoid jamming the communication channel. But that does not prevent my willing to issue the consolation at the same moment as your cry. This is the same distinction between the time of volition, or the most immediate issue thereof, and the time of certain crucial effects.

14. Stump and Kretzmann, *op. cit.*, pp. 450-451, in treating this problem say that for an action to be an answer to a prayer it must be made *because of the prayer but need not be later than the prayer*. I agree that something like a 'because of' is the heart of the matter (see below, where, however, I choose a much richer term than 'because of'), but in saying flatly that being *later than* is not required Stump and Kretzmann fail to take account of the distinction between the way that requirement does hold (date of the crucial effect) and the way it does not (date of the initiatory volition).

15. I have specified a full-blooded sense in order to exclude defective or border-line cases, e.g., those in which something I said was, in effect, a reply to your question, although I didn't intend to be replying to you.

16. This is as far as Stump and Kretzmann carry the matter. (*Op. cit.*, pp. 450-451.) The ensuing discussion will reveal the inadequacy of this phrase. It should be noted that 'Y occurred because of X' is not intended to entail that X causally determined Y, but only that X played some role in the replier's issuing Y.

17. This is a cumbersome formulation, but I don't know how to say anything smoother that will cover the whole territory. Specific forms of X-appropriate utterances include giving an answer to a question, refusing to answer a question, offering consolation to an expression of anguish, sneering at someone's recital of failure, making an objection to a thesis propounded, saying something on the same subject as X, where that is in order, and so on.

Note that since "X-appropriate message" occurs in an intentional context, "in order to communicate an...", this condition can be satisfied without the message's being in fact appropriate to X. Suppose that you asked "Is he still feigning?", and I, supposing you to have asked "Is it still raining?", reply, "Yes, it's coming down cats and dogs". I replied to you, even though I did not in fact produce

an X-appropriate message, for I did say what I said in order to communicate to you an X-appropriate message.

18. We have been restricting ourselves to the concept of a *reply* because we are specifically concerned with *dialogue*. But the concept I have been adumbrating is a special form of a more general concept of a *response*, where a response is not necessarily a communicative utterance and not necessarily a response to a communicative utterance. Our discussion could be expanded into a general treatment of divine responses to human actions; but to do so would entail drawing boundaries around the concept involved here, the concept of free, voluntary, intentional responses, a concept which excludes, e.g., “responses” typically dealt with in “stimulus-response” theory, as well as unintentional “responses”.

19. Strictly speaking, if created agents do sometimes act in ways not fully determined by God, then more than these actions will fall outside the scope of the initial creative act of will. For these free actions of created agents will themselves affect many subsequent states of affairs in the world; hence none of those states of affairs will be fully determined by God either. Since this further complexity adds no further difficulties about timelessness, I shall, for simplicity of exposition, proceed on the simplifying fiction that it is only free creaturely actions that God fails to uniquely determine.

20. The strongest objections to this position I can think of are easily answered. It might be felt, for example, that if two acts of will are simultaneous one cannot be in the light of the fact that *p*, whereas the other is not. But there are clear counter-examples to this within human volition. I can simultaneously will to scratch my head and to reply to your question, even though the latter but not the former is done in the light of the fact that you asked your question. Various other allegations might be made as to the impossibility of simultaneous realizations of states or activities we are attributing to God, but I cannot see that any such allegations have greater force than the one just considered.

21. Let me note that when we think of God as timeless we short circuit human analogues of the sort I invoked in connection with omnidetermination and omniscience. One might try to argue against the compatibility of timelessness and genuine dialogue by invoking the abnormally prescient human being I introduced in section III. Such a person can foresee all the responses of his/her partner to anything h/she might say and, being in such a position, could turn the whole affair over to a suitably programmed robot. In that case the hyper-prescient one would lack any real living involvement in the moment-by-moment development of the conversation. Thus it would not be genuine dialogue. And, so the argument goes, don't we have to say the same of a timeless God who does not have to wait and see what the human partner will say at a given moment? But the analogy fails at a crucial point. Just because God is timeless, God does not know *in advance* what Moses will do at t_1 . This completely subverts the supposed analogy. A timeless God neither can, nor has any occasion to, *pre-program* a robot (*in advance*) and turn the matter over to it. Cannot, because this requires a temporal position. Has no occasion, or need, to, since a timeless God *is* directly involved in the moment-by-moment development of the conversation by virtue of His simultaneity with each moment of the temporal process. This is essentially the same point we made earlier in invoking divine timelessness to resolve the difficulties (for dialogue) presented by divine omniscience.