

Comments on Waller, “God and Time: Resolving a Cartesian Puzzle”

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In her paper, Dr. Waller addresses the apparent difficulty that arises when the atemporality of God as *cause* is compared to the temporal world as *effect*, given a Cartesian metaphysic. How, one might wonder, could an atemporal, immutable God create a world of temporal, changing parts?

In tacit agreement with Geoffrey Gorham, Waller contends that this is vexing particularly for Descartes, given his commitment to two conditions:

- (1) God’s *immediate concurrence* with nature. In this case, we mean God’s immediate, divine *conservation or preservation* of His creation *at each moment that it exists*, and
- (2) The duration of the world as being composed of *successive temporal parts*.

These two conditions appear to be inconsistent with God’s *atemporality* for Descartes (or eternity, in the proper sense).

The “elegant” solution is to appeal to Descartes’ temporal dualism, and Dr. Waller does a fine job explaining the unique interpretation she brings to Cartesian scholarship on this matter. God can create things with real temporal *parts* without having to do so through distinct, successive creative *acts*. More succinctly, God could create everything in all its temporal diversity by means of a single, enduring act.

Yet if we back up a moment, I’d like to stop and wonder whether or not the problem itself is only apparent. So I have a worry, and then a quibble.

- (a) So why should the Cartesian take Gorham’s observation seriously at all?

First, I think I understand—if only very loosely—how there *could* be a problem explaining the atemporality of God (as cause) to the temporal world (as effect). However, Waller’s reference to Gorham on this matter is extremely charitable. As she admits in the beginning of the paper,

To try and conceive of Descartes's God as being atemporally eternal is most difficult when one is focusing on Descartes' claims about the "independent" moments of time and their radical contingency on divine concurrence. (4)

Well, from a Medieval perspective, there's nothing difficult at all about removing God from time while keeping God immediately involved in a temporal, complex, changing world. Neither Waller nor Gorham ought to worry too much that Descartes' view of divine conservation raises any more (or less) problems for a proper view of Divine eternity than does any view of creation that implies a plurality of discrete, temporal, composite substances. Unless the problem is more carefully outlined, there is no explicit inconsistency among the following:

- (i) God's act of creation is eternal (atemporal);
- (ii) God's act of conservation is not really distinct from His act of creation; and
- (iii) There is genuine successiveness in the nature of duration.

All of which are atemporally, simply (i.e., without complexity), and immutably initiated and maintained. Some additional claim on the part of the objector must be offered to show this. As both Waller and Descartes understand, God can create *composite, imperfect, corporeal* substances while not violating His metaphysical simplicity, perfection, or immateriality, so why not *temporal* ones as well?

Further, as Dr. Waller reveals, Descartes was quite familiar with the Medieval solutions to many of these problems. He would also have recognized that one doesn't need to invoke any complex, Medieval mechanisms to make this work either, it seems. Descartes' Causal Adequacy Principle from the 3rd Meditation appears sufficient to allow a cause to produce an effect that is either formally less than, or very much unlike its cause (i.e., equivocal). Since for Descartes, God contains the perfections of all things either formally or *eminently*, then God's producing temporal, complex objects is no more a metaphysical worry for Descartes than it is for any theory that invokes a divine being that's metaphysically eternal and perfect.

You can take that claim in whatever direction you like, of course.

In fact, notice that it appears actually impossible for God to create a composite substance that doesn't endure in some way, i.e., that doesn't have the mode of intrinsic duration (ignoring the backdrop of

Cartesian possibilism/voluntarism). If that's the case, then what is really interesting about Waller's analysis is that intrinsic duration almost looks like an Aristotelian *proprium*—an essential accident (or mode)—that all created substances, whether extended or thinking, must have in order to exist.

So if there's more to the problem, Gorham hasn't given it to us.

(b) Maybe one might think that the problem is not so much the fact that God is eternal, but that under Descartes' view of divine conservation, God seems required to perform many *distinct*, successive acts of creation—the “cinematic view”, as many Early Modern philosophers describe—as opposed to initiating a continuous act that produces a multiplicity of events in successive detail—much like how the power a television receives (which is constant) allows for a single show to be projected successively over time.

This seems to be the problem that Dr. Waller is addressing, and that the Cartesian texts tease us about.

Yet why is *temporal dualism* required to answer this problem?

As Dr. Waller reminds us, Descartes believed in the radical contingency of creation, a position that he inherited from the Medievals. In order for a substance to endure from one moment to the next, it must be continually conserved by God, and since creation and conservation have the same effect for the entire duration of the creature there appears to be no real distinction between any particular act of creation and its corresponding act of conservation. The distinction is merely *conceptual*:

The *same power and action* are needed to preserve anything at each individual moment of its duration *as would be required to create that thing anew* if it were not yet in existence. Hence the distinction between preservation and creation is only a conceptual one. (AT 49; CSM 33; italics my emphasis)

Descartes attributes this view to Aquinas, but he would have also been familiar with it from Suarez as well:

When the conservation is from exactly the same agent and with the same concurrence on the part of the material cause (or, as the case may be, with the same independence from a material cause), *then the conservation is not an action different from the production (or*

creation), *except merely conceptually* or because of some connotation and relation. It follows that, speaking formally and *per se*, the conservation and the [initial] action are not in reality two actions. (DM XXI.2.3; italics my emphasis)

What this means is that creation and conservation are *one* real action, even though that action falls under different concepts at different times (creation, conservation). Yet there is one formal concept (the communication of being) that the action always satisfies at all times. So one can believe that the act itself of conserving a substance can be continuous, and unitary, even though in nature it produces effects that have real temporal parts which we can measure.

Now Dr. Waller's solution is probably more elegant, as she tells us, and I suspect that it is, but it seems necessary here only if we think there's a unique problem at all for Descartes to solve on this front.