

God and Time: Resolving a Cartesian Puzzle

By

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Abstract: As Descartes claims both that God is the immediate cause of all creation, and that creation is composed of distinct temporal parts, it is difficult to see how Descartes' God could exist as atemporally eternal. Yet, such a position seems to be precisely what Descartes tries to maintain. After explaining why it is so difficult for Descartes to grant God an atemporal existence, but why he nonetheless seems committed to doing so, I argue that this significant metaphysical puzzle can be resolved by appealing to the best way to interpret Descartes' account of time generally --namely, by interpreting Descartes as being a Temporal Dualist.

Descartes is certainly not the first (nor the last) philosopher to be faced with the struggle of trying to relate an atemporal God to a temporal world. Throughout the Medieval period, for example, it was common to conceive of God as being both necessary and eternal and the immediate cause of the changeable, temporal world. Though divine eternity was not always read in an atemporal way, i.e., as the proposal that God exists *outside of all* temporal categories, Medievals frequently conceived of divine eternity in this way to avoid significant problems associated with the other prevalent alternative: everlasting enduring (i.e., sempiternity). Though the latter, “everlasting” account of eternity was a live option, its tension with accounts of the divine nature being simple, immutable, and unified made it less favored. Many noted that existing *via* infinite temporal extension is contrary to the sort of unity that seems necessary for a being that is indivisible and perfect. As explained by Descartes in *Med III*, for example, “the unity, the simplicity, or the inseparability of all the attributes of God is one of the most important of the perfections which I understand him to have.”¹ Intuitively, if God exists through time, then God’s existence can be divided into the temporal parts of past, present and future. To the degree that God’s nature is composed of these distinct temporal parts, it seems God would be *divisible* (at least conceptually) along these temporal divisions. As, however, any type of division in God is clearly at odds with the traditional accounts of divine simplicity, puzzles about how to relate an (atemporally) eternal God with the temporal world have a long history that neither began nor ended with Descartes.

Though not unique to Descartes, this problem is particularly pressing within the Cartesian framework because Descartes is explicit in claiming both 1) that God’s relation to the world consists in immediate concurrence, and 2) and in claiming that the duration of the world is composed of “parts”. If

¹ AT VII 50; CSM II.34.

the created world exists *via* successive temporal parts, and God is immediately involved in the causation of each of these successive parts, then how could divine duration not itself consist of discrete, successive causal acts for Descartes?

Descartes clearly wants to offer a standard account of divine eternity. As he describes it in *Principles I.23*, “[in God] there is always a *single identical and perfectly simple act* by means of which he *simultaneously* understands, wills and accomplishes everything.”² Despite this traditional, atemporal description, this standard account is difficult to combine with some of Descartes’ other significant texts and metaphysical commitments. Indeed, in other texts, Descartes appears to instead suggest an everlasting sense of eternity. In the *Fifth Meditation*, for example, when Descartes is reflecting on what is entailed by God possessing existence in his essence, Descartes claims, “after supposing that one God exists, I plainly see that it is necessary that he *has existed* from eternity and *will abide* for eternity.”³ These temporal predicates seem at least suggestive of an everlasting enduring. Moreover, the everlasting interpretation offers a ready means of conceiving how God could be the immediate cause of the distinct, successive moments of creation; namely, by creating these moments *via* successive creative active. Despite significant grounds for interpreting Descartes as offering an everlasting account of divine eternity,⁴ such an interpretation carries heavy metaphysical consequences that are clearly unacceptable to Descartes, and thus is not the best way to interpret him.

It is a mistake to interpret Descartes’ God as being everlasting both because of the “imperfection” that is entailed from the disunity inherent in temporal parts, and because there are numerous passages where Descartes seems to indicate both his awareness of this problem and his explicit intent to reject this consequence. To deny that Descartes offered the problematic, everlasting

² AT VIIIA 14; CSM I.201, *emphasis added*.

³ AT VII 68; CSMII.47.

⁴ As has recently been argued in Gorham, Geoffrey. “Descartes on God’s relation to time,” *Religious Studies*, 44 (2008): 413-431.

account, I will do two things. One, present the various texts which best elucidate Descartes's views on divine eternity and two, show how these passages can consistently support divine concurrence being the immediate cause of each moment of a successive world, without thereby entailing successiveness for the divine nature. I will argue that interpreting Descartes as a Temporal Dualist resolves this difficulty.⁵

I. ***What's the Problem?***

To see an argument claiming that God's immediate concurrence of a temporally successive world requires God to exist successively, one can look to Geoffrey Gorham's article, "Descartes on God's relation to time," in which he argues this exact thesis.

God is so intimately involved with the unfolding of the Cartesian world, it is hard to see how He could be removed from time. Consider, to begin, God's creation of finite souls. Since the parts of my duration are 'completely independent', I will not continue to exist 'unless there is some cause which as it were creates me afresh at this moment – that is conserves me' (AT, 7, 49; CSM, 2, 33). In creating afresh the successive parts of my duration, God's action is always characterized as an ongoing and temporally extended process rather than a 'once and for all' decree.⁶

As Gorham here notes, to try to 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.

Two of the most significant passages concerning God's concurrent causing of the diverse moments of creation are found in the *Meditations* and the *Principles*. In *Med III*, Descartes claims that a

⁵This terminology and position is drawn from my book, *Descartes Temporal Dualism*.

⁶Gorham 419.

“lifespan can be divided into *countless parts, each completely independent of the others,*” along with the entailment that one’s continued existence is thus dependent on a “cause which as it were creates me afresh at this moment – that is, which preserves me.”⁷ Likewise, in *Principles 1.21*, Descartes claims, “from the fact that we now exist, it does not follow that we shall exist a moment from now, unless there is some cause – the same cause which originally produced us – which continually reproduces us, as it were, that is to say, which keeps us in existence.”⁸ In these two passages, Descartes explains the radical contingency of all creation. As Descartes explains it, every moment of creation is so radically contingent on God’s immediate concurrence that there is merely a conceptual distinction between creation and preservation.⁹ Creation and preservation are only conceptually distinct since the same creative act is required to bring something into existence at its origin as is required to keep that thing in existence after that first moment.

In making every moment of creation so immediately contingent on divine “reproduction”, the entailment that there must be successive divine acts seems compelled by the sharp divisions that Descartes draws between each of these moments. These sharp divisions are explicit in *Principles 1.21*. Here Descartes claims that the “nature of time is such that its parts are not mutually dependent, and never coexist.” Likewise, in the *1st set of Replies*, Descartes explains that the “divisions of time [are] separable from each other.” Not only does Descartes repeatedly describe duration as being composed of parts, but he needs duration to be composed of genuinely distinct parts in order to explain motion

⁷ AT VII 49; CSM II.33.

⁸ AT VIIA 13; CSM I.200. See also: *1st set of Replies*, AT VII 109; CSM II.79: “Now I regard the *divisions of time as being separable from each other*, so that the fact that I now exist does not imply that I shall continue to exist in a little while unless there is a cause which, as it were, creates me afresh at each moment of time.”

⁹ AT VII 49; CSM II.33: “”Hence the distinction between preservation and creation is only a conceptual one.”

and change.¹⁰ Intuitively, without changes in time, there could be no changes in substances, since contrary properties are only possible when properties are time-indexed.

It is also evident that Descartes was aware of the reasons to resist the everlasting interpretation. These reasons are described in Descartes's own texts and those of some Medieval predecessors. Classic accounts of divine eternity abound, but the most famous statement of this view is certainly offered by Boethius. Boethius describes God's eternity as "the complete, simultaneous and perfect possession of everlasting life," which he contrasts with the "everlasting life of creation."¹¹ *Why God's existence must be simultaneous and thus could not include temporal parts* was also made explicit. Stated simply, to apply temporal qualifications to God, i.e., past, present, future, is to limit God. Anything whose existence is divisible into parts is thereby excluded from possessing an infinite nature, since at any possible moment of the thing's existence, much of its own nature is not possessed – what is past is lost, and what is future is not yet gained.¹²

The medieval reasons in support of atemporal divine eternity are evident, explicit, and clearly ones that Descartes both understood and supported. There are numerous passages where Descartes discussed both the nature of divine eternity, and the limitations inherent in a duration composed of parts. In *Principles I.23*, for example, Descartes clearly echoes Medievalists language about divine simultaneity as being necessary for the perfection of the divine nature. He claims, "There are many things such that, although we recognize some perfection in them, we also find in them some imperfection or limitation, and these therefore cannot belong to God. For example, the nature of body

¹⁰ Duration needs to be composed of parts in order to ground the possibility of motion insofar as there can be no change of any kind without temporal change. I provide an extensive discussion of this point in Descartes' Temporal Dualism,, however, the central reason is straightforward. Descartes assume a standard time-indexing solution to the problem of change. Without a change in time there can be no other changes, because two contrary properties exclude themselves at a particular moment. He discusses this point in *Principles I.39*: AT VIII A 64; CSM I.242.

¹¹ *Consolations V.VI*

¹² *Monologion* Chapter 21: 29.

includes divisibility along with extension in space, and since *being divisible is an imperfection.*”

Accordingly, Descartes concludes this discussion by claiming that we must “suppose that there is always *a single identical and perfectly simple act by means of which [God] simultaneously understands, wills and accomplishes everything.*”¹³

As it is evident that Descartes was both aware of the Medieval reasons for maintaining that God is atemporally eternal, and sought to follow these reasons, the difficulty that Gorham noted shows its teeth. Making an atemporal being the cause of a temporal world may be generally problematic, but it is particularly so when this means of causing is immediate concurrence. If God is the immediate, concurrent cause of all existence, and all of existence endures through successive moments, then how can these successive moments not be concurrently caused by successive causal acts, which would require a successively enduring creator?

An Elegant Solution: Temporal Dualism

A solution for how it is possible for Descartes to relate an atemporal God to a temporal world follows a general proposal about how to best interpret Descartes’ view on time; namely, by interpreting Descartes as a “temporal dualist.”¹⁴ In interpreting Descartes as a “temporal dualist”, I argue that Descartes offers dual notions of time corresponding to the distinct temporal categories of successive duration and time-in-thought (which is an innate idea of time). This distinction is drawn from *Principles I.57*, and from an analysis of Descartes’ accounts of motion, measure, and innate ideas. The relevant discussion from *Principles I.57* is as follows:

Some attributes or modes are in the very things of which they are said to be attributes or modes, while others are only in our thought. For example, when time is distinguished from

¹³ AT VIII A 14; CSM I.201, *emphasis added*.

¹⁴ I offer an extended defense and explanation of this view in *Descartes’ Temporal Dualism*.

duration taken in the general sense and called the measure of movement, it is simply a mode of thought...in order to measure the duration of all things, we compare their duration with the duration of the greatest and most regular motions which give rise to years and days, and we call this duration 'time'. Yet, nothing is thereby added to duration, taken in its general sense, except for a mode of thought.¹⁵

Following this passage, temporal dualism identifies “successive duration” with being the attribute which exists “in the very things” and “time-in-thought” as being a mode of thought used to measure this duration. The account of “time-in-thought” as an innate idea is the most controversial claim in this proposed interpretation, and thus the part that needs the most explanation. I have argued that time-in-thought is an innate idea of an infinite, successive series (a type of mental yardstick) that all minds possess and apply as a means for conceiving of duration. Accordingly, time-in-thought provides a way to “measure the duration of things” through the application of this mental yardstick.

In *Descartes' Temporal Dualism*, I argue that the cosmic motions are employed in applying the innate idea of time-in-thought. This argument is based on a consideration of Descartes account of measurement, given in *Rule 14*. In this text, Descartes explains the process of measuring in contrast to the process of counting. He claims, “If we consider the order of the parts in relation to the whole, we are then said to be counting; if on the other hand we regard the whole as being divided up into parts, we are measuring it.” In other words, he claims that measuring is a process of division that takes a whole and divides it into parts, whereas counting is a process that begins with parts and builds up to wholes. In describing measuring as a means of dividing, Descartes additionally identifies the necessary prerequisite of determining a unit according to which the dividing/measuring can be done. When thinking of time, the number of “temporal” units that occur within a given expanse is obviously variable

¹⁵ AT VIII A 27; CSM I.212.

according to the unit of measure – whether one divides any temporal expanse according to the unit of hours, minutes, or seconds, for example, the number of temporal units determined will vary greatly. The Temporal Dualism thesis takes this account of measurement and argues that the cosmic motions provide the units necessary for applying the innate mode of mind, time-in-thought, in such a way that the intrinsic duration of objects can be conceptually broken into specifiable parts.

In my book's defense of Temporal Dualism, I indicate both significant philosophical reasons why Descartes should posit an innate idea of time, and additionally note a number of texts where Descartes seems to actually do so. The first task, i.e., the argument for why the idea of time-in-thought *should be* an innate, focuses on what is required for time to be capable of measuring any duration. Many of these ideas are drawn from Suarez, another type of temporal dualist.¹⁶ In order to measure any duration, Suarez explains that the thing used to measure must be infinite, successive, and non-repetitive. These qualities alone are sufficient for suggesting that a thing that could measure any duration could neither be a part of the temporal world, nor be an idea derived from it. An idea of time cannot be an idea that is fictitious nor adventitious, since a fictitious idea is malleable in ways that this idea is not (since its nature must be set in one particular way in order for it to function). Likewise, since no experiences could give rise to this idea (since we can never observe an infinite succession) it can not be an adventitiously acquired idea either.

Perhaps more compelling than the philosophical grounds suggesting that Descartes *should* maintain that there is an innate idea of time, however, are the various textual places where Descartes seems to indicate that he in fact does so. In particular, Descartes seems to indicate an innate idea of time both in his *Correspondence* and in the *Meditations*. In correspondence with Mersenne (October

¹⁶ An extended discussion of Suarez's account of time and how it relates to that of Descartes is offered in *Descartes' Temporal Dualism: pp. 19-25, 57-59*. Suarez's account is taken from *Disputationes Metaphysicae* 50.9-12. In *Opera Omnia*, reprint. Hildesheim: Olms, 1956.

1639), and with Elizabeth (May 1643), Descartes seems to reference an innate idea of this sort.¹⁷ In his correspondence with Mersenne, Descartes is discussing true and immutable natures (i.e., the natures that ground the “truths” of innate ideas), and claims that “no logical definition can be given which will help anyone to discover [such thing’s] nature. I think the same of many other things which are very simple and are *known naturally*, such as shape, size, motion, place, *time*, and so on.”¹⁸ Likewise, when talking to Elizabeth, he describes “certain *primitive notions* which are as it were the patterns on the basis of which we form all our other conceptions.” He lists very few such notions, but on this list he includes being, number, and duration.¹⁹

Descartes also seems to point to an innate idea of time in both *Med I* and in *Med V*. In *Med I*, Descartes is listing the sort of simple and universal knowledge he could still possess even if he could not trust any empirical knowledge. On this list he includes, “corporeal nature in general...the shape of extended things...the quantity, or size and number of these things...*the time through which things may endure...and so on.*”²⁰ In the French version, he describes this “time” as “the time which measures their duration”, which clearly references the time-in-thought that he distinguishes from duration in *Principles I.57*. In suggesting that time-in-thought could be known and trusted whether or not one could trust empirical knowledge, this passage suggests that it is a likely candidate for being an innate idea. Lastly, in *Meditation V*, when Descartes is doing a survey of the things he now recognizes as certain (prior to him establishing the existence of the external world in *Meditation VI*) he says that he is able to confidently “*enumerate various parts and local motions; and to these motions...assign various durations.*” He adds, about this discovery, that “the truth of these matters is so open and so much in harmony with my nature, that on first discovering them it seems that I am not so much learning something new as

¹⁷ AT II 597; CSMK 139. AT III 665; CSMK 218.

¹⁸ AT II 597; CSMK 139, *emphasis added*.

¹⁹ AT III 665; CSMK 218.

²⁰ AT VII 20; CSM II.14, *emphasis added*.

remembering what *I knew before*; or it seems like noticing for the first time things that were long present within me although I had never turned my mental gaze on them before.”²¹ As time-in-thought is what allows Descartes to enumerate durations, it seems that Descartes again references the idea of time-in-thought being an innate idea he had long possessed, but hadn’t fully recognized until this point.

Given both the philosophical and textual case that has been sketched so briefly here, the Temporal Dualist account is before us to the degree necessary to apply it to the problem of how to relate an atemporal God to a temporal world. When I originally argued that Descartes maintained two distinct accounts of time (i.e., intrinsic duration and the innate idea time-in-thought), I argued that one of the best reasons to support this interpretation was its ability to cleanly and elegantly resolve a number of significant Cartesian, metaphysical puzzles. Specifically, I showed how this interpretation provides a plausible way of explaining Descartes’ account of temporal parts. It seems that the same solution that it offers to the puzzle of temporal parts can be applied to the puzzle of God’s relation to time. To explain how it might do the latter, I will briefly explain how it does the former.

Having distinguished two kinds of time in Descartes’ metaphysics: intrinsic duration, and time-in-thought, and having argued that the latter of these is an innate idea used to measure the former, this distinction offers a handy way of explaining the parts language. Namely, if time-in-thought is a primitive notion according to which we conceive duration, and this idea is a sort of mental measuring stick comprised of an infinitely extended numerical succession, then every time we conceive of duration by way of this idea, we will conceive of duration as being composed of successive parts. Accordingly, when duration is conceived *via* time-in-thought, it is divided. The existence of these divisions do not, however, necessarily entail that duration is divided in its mode of creation. If duration could be continuous in its creation and only discontinuous as a result of how it is conceived (*via* time-in-thought),

²¹ AT VII 63-64; CSM II.44, *emphasis added*.

then its continuity is prior to its discontinuity, and the discontinuity need not be traced back to any discontinuity in God.

Temporal dualism allows this “middle way”, i.e., a way of explaining how their can be real parts in duration, without requiring that these parts ever exist as separate as opposed to just *separable*. As this is a point explained in *Descartes Temporal Dualism*, that text can speak for itself.

As time-in-thought is [an innate idea akin to] a sequentially ordered measuring stick, its application to duration divides duration into parts. ...Thus, if time-in-thought is the measure of duration, then every time we conceive of duration by means of time-in-thought, we conceive of duration as “divided up into parts”. .. The “parts” created through time-in-thought are not simply how duration is conceived as opposed to how it really is [because] time-in-thought is an innate idea, and thus an idea of a true and immutable nature. Thus, when time-in-thought structures our conceiving of duration, we learn more than just a fact about how duration is conceived.²²

Put simply, creation is composed of *really* distinct parts insofar as time-in-thought is an innate idea, and thus the ideas it provides are a veracious. The innate idea of time-in-thought does not tell us that creation is composed of temporal parts of some determinate size, but rather that every moment of creation is distinct from every other moment because we can conceive of God with drawing his concurrence at any point along the yardstick, and God can do anything that we can clearly and distinctly conceive. Thus, the divisions we can conceive correspond to really distinct parts in creation. Since all of creation can clearly and distinctly be conceived as separable from every other moment at any given

²² *Descartes' Temporal Dualism*, 94.

moment, creation *really* is composed of parts. Yet, these parts are grounded on how creation is conceived through the innate idea of time-in-thought alone. There is thus nothing in this account that requires God to create these parts *via* successive creative acts.

Describing duration as being composed of really distinct parts that may never actually exist as separate directly parallels how Descartes relates minds and bodies. When Descartes claims that there is a real distinction between minds and bodies, he never claims that minds and bodies are distinct in their creation and then formed into a unit *via* some separate creative act. Indeed, when he describes the link between minds and bodies he describes them as forming a type of unity, and simply adds that their existing as a unity does not limit them from being composed of really distinct parts. As he says in the *Principles*,

Even if we suppose that God has joined some corporeal substance to such a thinking substance so closely that they cannot be more closely conjoined, thus compounding them into a unity, they nonetheless remain really distinct. For no matter how closely God may have united them, the power which he previously had of separating them, or keeping one in being without the other, is something he could not lay aside."²³

Applying this distinction to time, even if God creates *via* a singular, unified act, God would not thereby limit His capacity to break this unity at any moment. Insofar as God chooses not to exercise this capacity, we continue in our existence - an existence that is veraciously conceived as having really distinct parts.

²³ AT VIII A 29; CSM I.213. The oddity of conceiving of a unity composed of really distinct parts is one that I think both Descartes and the modern reader feels. Indeed, I believe this oddity provides a plausible explanation for the apparent inconsistency in how Descartes sometimes describes the parts of time as distinct, and sometimes describes them as merely separable. Accordingly, this apparent inconsistency is explained while simultaneously leaving real parts for duration that are consistent with creation's radical contingency on divine concurrence. This is accomplished without entailing any sort of problematic successiveness in divine acts and thereby in the divine nature.

Conclusion

Though explaining a link from the atemporal to the temporal is always problematic, this link is particularly problematic for Descartes. Despite substantial hurdles, however, Temporal Dualism provides the means for Descartes to consistently maintain both that every moment of creation is radically contingent on divine concurrence, and to support a traditional account of divine eternity. When Descartes claims that “there is always a single identical and perfectly simple act by means of which [God] simultaneously understands, wills and accomplishes everything,”²⁴ we can take this statement as being consistent with Descartes general account of time and with his account of how creation and preservation are only conceptually distinct. Descartes’ claim is neither *ad hoc* nor an ungrounded attempt to appear consistent with the historical norm with which he is actually in conflict. Rather, Descartes can accept a traditional, atemporal account of divine eternity as a direct corollary of his overall metaphysics of time, i.e., as a consequence of temporal dualism.

²⁴ AT VIII 14; CSM I.201.