
RECONCILING GOD'S OMNISCIENCE WITH TIME AND SPACE: A CASE FOR ISLAMIC ATOMISM

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ABSTRACT

My aim in the course of this paper will be an attempt to reconcile the view that God is unrestrained by time and space [*the classical view of divine eternity*] along with God's knowledge [omniscience]. To do this, I hope to make apparent a particular issue concerning a timeless God and His knowledge of particulars and universals. This points to a possible solution in the understanding of substance and accidents as it is considered by Islamic atomism, which is a kind of occasionalism. This theory puts forward the idea that at every instant, the cosmos is created by God anew. The paper will demonstrate how this approach manages to unite God's non-temporal being and omniscience.

Keywords: Islamic Atomism; God; omniscience; time and space

When we talk about God in the traditional sense we usually refer to Him, quite intuitively, as a being that always was, is, and will be. He endures eternally while sustaining His creation and acting in human history. Thinking of God in this way seems to be more than just ascribing certain attributes to Him, it more importantly it refers to His actual existence and being. For God would fundamentally have to subsist eternally in order to maintain the attributes ascribed to Him, otherwise

God would be constrained by the same limitation[s] as His creation, namely in the form of time and space. It is precisely why Western theists insist that God is eternal. Nevertheless, exactly what does it mean to be eternal? How exactly should a term of this sort be construed? Davies² has clarified the two differing views of theists on this matter.

[1] According to the first approach, ‘God is eternal’ simply means He is non-temporal or timeless. It is this view that has been most prevalent throughout the course of theistic history. From amongst its many exponents, Boethius [c.480 – 524] and Anselm of Canterbury [1033 - 1109] are those who articulate eternity in a very vivid manner. Take Anselm’s account of eternity for instance, addressed from Boethius’s perspective.

“You were not, therefore, yesterday, nor will You be tomorrow, but yesterday and today and tomorrow You *are*. Indeed You exist neither yesterday nor today nor tomorrow but are outside all times (*es extra omne tempus*). For yesterday and today and tomorrow are completely in time; however, You, though nothing can be without You, are nevertheless not in place or time but all things are in You. For nothing contains You, but You contain all things.”³

[2] According to the second approach, the eternality of God means no more than that He has no beginning and no end, He has always existed and will continue to do so forever. Notice that this interpretation of God as an eternal being is one in which He is in-time or temporal and yet He has always existed and will go on existing forever. Swinburne (1977) refers to God as ‘*backwardly eternal*’ and ‘*forwardly eternal*’ and yet He is temporal, since for Swinburne, to propose that God is outside of time would be incoherent.

My aim in the course of this paper will be an attempt to plausibly reconcile the view that God is unrestrained by time [and space] altogether [*‘the classical view of divine eternity’*] along with God’s knowledge [omniscience]. This would, in turn, make a plausible case to conceive of God as absolutely timeless whilst retaining the ascribed attribute of omniscience. To do so, firstly, I hope to make apparent a particular issue concerning a timeless God and His knowledge of particulars and universals. Subsequently, in search to plausibly reconcile God’s omniscience with His timeless nature I hope to investigate the theory of Islamic atomism and how well it manages to unite the two attributes of God [His being non-temporal and omniscience]. I have focused my attention on the first view of eternity mentioned above the particular issues which it gives rise to.

To think of God as beyond time altogether, which is a denial of the claim that He is temporal, would mean two things, [a] He does not exist in any temporal location and [b] He does not experience temporal succession. This position suggests that a timeless God has no past, present, or future, and furthermore He does not change because whatever is subject to change first has, then lacks, some property which in turn necessitates a succession of events. However, this view seems to inevitably leads to complications with regards to the fundamental attributes ascribed to God.

God’s Knowledge

A traditional perspective of God would fundamentally uphold God’s omniscience as a significant attribute, because if God were to be even unaware of a creeping black ant beneath a rock on a dark night, it would imply ignorance on God’s behalf. So let us consider the thought that nothing, not even as much as a particle of dust in the heavens or on the earth remains hidden from His knowledge. This would quite obviously include that God knows, for instance, when an eclipse is due, whilst the eclipse is taking place, and when it has passed. So He is completely aware of the three stages of the eclipse, namely, [1] when there was a state when the eclipse did not exist, but was anticipated i.e. ‘it will be’

[2] when it was actually existing i.e. 'it is' [3] when once more it became non-existent, but a short while ago it had been i.e. 'was'. Corresponding to these alternative or successive states amounts to three different cognitions [will be, is, and was]. A succession of these three different cognitions, however, necessitates a change in the cognisant being because a change in the object of perception implies a change in the content of perception itself which evidently leads to a change in the subject of perception, i.e. the percipient themselves. Now, if God is outside of time altogether He can have no different states corresponding to these three states, for that would amount to a change. In fact, he, whose state does not alter at all [i.e. is non-temporal] cannot conceivably know these three aspects of the eclipse, because a particular event occurs at a particular moment in time and undergoes a change with the passage of time. Similarly, if the object of knowledge succeeds and changes from one state to another, inevitably, knowledge changes as well and if knowledge changes so must the knower. Consequently, having to deny perceptual knowledge to God, since perceptual knowledge is characterised both temporally and spatially, would not allow God to be the omniscient divine being understood in the traditional sense.

Therefore, it would seem that the nature of a timeless God fails to correspond to the primary attribute of omniscience ascribed to Him, and as a result a temporal God may appear to overcome issues of this kind. It is why Pike (1965) has suggested that the doctrine of omniscience corresponds more with the understanding that God is temporal rather than God is outside of time.⁴ Pike's inference is based on the idea that if God is 'outside of time' [in the sense that He bears no temporal to the events or circumstances of the natural world] then God could not know a given natural event was going to take place in the future i.e. before it actually happened. If it was the case that God knew what was going to happen before it actually did, then at least one of God's cognitions would have occurred before that natural event [or any future event for that case]. In turn this would violate the idea that God bears no temporal relations to natural events.

However, in a desperate attempt to preserve the timelessness of God one could go on to suggest, as the medieval Persian Philosopher Avicenna [980 – 1037] had claimed, that God knows everything [i.e. all the particulars] but only in a universal manner so that perceptual knowledge is superfluous for Him. The thought is that since God is the emanative cause of all existing things, He would necessarily know both the existents and the relations subsisting between them. In the case of our eclipse example, God knows after such a series of events a solar eclipse would occur, that is along with all the antecedents and consequences of the eclipse. He is completely aware in a determinate manner of its qualities and properties and can differentiate it completely from all the other events of the same nature, i.e. an eclipse in general. So He knows that the sun and moon exist for they are His creations, He knows they make revolutions and their spheres intersect at two points and sometimes they are simultaneously stationed in their nodes, and as a result the body of the moon comes between the sun and the observers, creating what we call an eclipse. However, when this particular eclipse actually occurs in time, God cannot know it because He is completely free from temporal change altogether. Nevertheless, He need not know it in time, or the way it actually occurs temporally, simply because He knows it already in a universal manner. His knowledge remains the same, before, during, and even after the eclipse which in turn would not necessitate a change. It implies that God knows the eclipse as well as its attributes and accidents by a knowledge which characterises Him from eternity to eternity, which is not subject to any change whatsoever. Therefore, all is known to Him and laid bare before Him in a single view that is homogeneous and uninfluenced by time. That which is influenced by time cannot be known to Him ‘*now*’, so at the time of the eclipse it cannot be said He knows it now [at that particular instance], nor after the eclipse has cleared [as in that particular time when it has expired] can He know that it has ceased to exist. Since nothing defined in the relation to time can conceivably be known to Him as it would necessitate a change in the knower.

Although this may seem a rather ingenious way to avoid the complications which arises in regards to God's knowledge if He is non-temporal, its implications tend to defeat the purpose of defending the omniscience of God. Nicholas Wolterstorff (1975) has proposed the same claim in a somewhat different manner stating:

“Instead of agreeing that God is fundamentally noneternal because he changes with respect to his knowledge, his memory, and his planning one could try to save one's conviction that God is eternal by denying that he knows what is or was or will be occurring, that he remembers what has occurred, and that he brings about what he has planned. It seems to me, however, that this is clearly to give up the notion of God as a redeeming God; and in turn it seems to me that to give this up is to give up what is central to the biblical vision of God.”⁵

Evidently enough it seems that the above suggested view compromises God's omniscience to such an extent that it questions the traditional understanding of God. It would suggest that God cannot know of newly emerging states of His own creation. He would not know John, for instance, as an individual whose actions come to be [or exist] after they had not been [or non-existent]. He would be oblivious to John as a person as well as his actions. Furthermore, and quite interestingly, it would also necessitate an ignorance of location [space] on God's behalf, since for a temporal being such as John to perform any action would necessarily require a temporal location. So if God is oblivious to the action as in when it is happening [in time], He would also have to be oblivious of exactly where [in temporal location] it is taking place, bearing in mind He has no knowledge of John's action whatsoever. This would imply that He is unaware of the accidents of John and his friends but knows man, his accidents and properties only in a universal [general] manner. He knows man has a body comprising of various limbs and organs all acting together to create the actions and movements humans perform, like

walking and talking etc. He further knows some organs work singularly, whereas others work in pairs and that the faculties should be distributed among his physical parts and so on. Therefore, as far as God is concerned John is distinguishable from his other people only through the senses, and not from the intellect. This is because the basis of distinction is the designation of a particular dimension, whereas the intellect does not occupy any spatial dimension. In addition, this would result in God also being oblivious to John's abstract or mental states: his thought, feelings, desires, beliefs, and even in the belief in God.

Nonetheless, in an attempt to sustain this particular view of a timeless God it may be suggested that when different things pass in succession over the same thing a change in that thing is a necessary result. Therefore, it could be rightly asserted that he who did not know something then came to be aware of it, underwent a change. This proposition can be substantiated by purporting the following three states:

[1] The first state can be said to be one of pure relation, like being situated on the left or the right side of something. This situated state can by no means be termed as an essential attribute because if and when something is on your right hand side and then switches position to your left hand side, it is only your relation which alters and not your essence.

[2] Similarly, the second state, suggests that if you possess the potential power to move certain objects which are at hand, then the absence or those objects will not alter your vital energy or potential in moving them. Since your power-to-move is objects is primarily, and to move a particular object is secondary. Therefore, the relation of power to a body or object is not an essential attribute, but merely a relation. The existence or nonexistence of bodies or objects involves relation, and not a change of the state of the one who possesses power over them.

[3] The third state however, is one which the essence does actually undergo a change of state. This takes place, as mentioned earlier, when one who is ignorant becomes aware. It can also refer to one who lacks a power and then manages to possess it. This amounts to change and thus implies that an alteration in the object of knowledge necessitates an alteration in the knowledge itself. For the reality of any specific knowledge lies in its being relative to a specific object of knowledge as such. If the relation alters in any way then creating a different relation to that object of knowledge, would evidently create a different knowledge. The succession of cognitions involved in this process would inevitably create a change in the knower.

In reply to this position one could say that God has only one knowledge of the eclipse at a particular time – one which does not involve change of any kind. Suppose that before the happening of the eclipse He possesses the knowledge of ‘will be’, during the eclipse this very knowledge is the knowledge of ‘is’, and after it has ceased to exist it is the knowledge of ‘was’. These three differing states can be considered as relations that do not replace the essence of knowledge, which in turn do not necessitate a change in the being. These differences must then be categorised as pure relations.

God’s Omnipotence

If God manages to know all temporal events whilst non-temporal Himself [that is He does not suffer any change at all], how is it then He interacts in human history? That is, not only knowing what is precisely due to happen, what is actually happening, and what has accurately happened, but rather intervening in a temporal realm without being affected by it in the slightest manner. Paul Helm (1988) suggests that:

“God’s eternal existence has no temporal relations whatsoever to any particular thing which he creates. This does not mean that there are no relations at all between the eternal God and his creation, only no temporal relations. There is for, example, the relation of knowledge. God

knows his creatures. This knowledge is time-free; it is not, for example, foreknowledge, or memory, nor is it contemporaneous knowledge. It is knowledge about which makes it makes no sense to ask how long the knower has known, or when he came to know.”⁶

Surprisingly enough, Helm reduces the matter to the somewhat brute fact that ‘*God knows and that is all*’. He finds that for those who attempt to raise questions in a strict philosophical manner are guilty of a category mistake. Furthermore, Davies (1982) provides an analogy in order to overcome this issue in which he suggests that the act of teaching only occurs when learning occurs, no matter how many blackboards I vigorously fill with diagrams, unless learning is involved there is no teaching.⁷ To teach however, I must undergo and experience some change [of whatever kind that may be]. Therefore, it is a limitation and a condition on my part that I can only bring about the change required for you to learn by changing myself in time. But there is nothing in the notion of teaching that requires such a change in the teacher themselves. Thus, in the case of God why should He not teach you by bringing a change in you without in any way changing Himself.

Islamic Atomism

However, I really don’t find these answers satisfactory. Concerning Helm’s argument for instance, it would be rather unfruitful if you were to dismiss a philosophical inquiry in order to maintain and support your claim. Therefore, I propose to relate a theory which manages to overcome the issues of God’s attributes in relation to time and space. To do so let us first understand the relationship between space and time. If they were independent of one another, space and time cannot really have a meaning. Take space for instance; without possessing a three dimensional body we cannot realise the existence of space [be it all of space or only which a given object may occupy]. The same can be said for time where the existence of motion requires a body to be affected.

Therefore, let us say that both cannot exist independently – rather they co-exist. Further, if they co-exist and are necessarily dependent on one another then space and time are not, as usually held two, but rather one, namely space-time. This space-time is motion which can be rightly said to constitute the matrix of reality. Space can be said to play the role of matter and substance, while time can be said to play the role of energy, activity, change, development, and movement. The two are involved in each other like object and energy and thus together constitute motion. Furthermore, portions of space which are constituted by matter are actually atoms which are constantly moving in time.

Bearing this in mind, I now refer to Islamic Atomism which neatly manages to link the immutability of reality with the observable changes and manifold forms in nature by describing reality as composed of simple and unchangeable minute particles, namely atoms. This kind of atomism suggests that atoms and their accidents subsist for only an instance in time, the reason being is that every object comprises of [a] substance and [b] accident. Now a substance is a non-divisible entity having no parts – rather it is categorised as an abstract entity not managing to retain any physical properties whatsoever, without occupied by an accident. However, accidents are instantaneously and constantly altering characteristics which cannot endure two successive states. Therefore, for a substance to exist as a physical object in space and time it must be involved in a constantly changing series of accidents. As a result, the atoms and their accidents exist for only an instant in time and space before being destroyed. In Islamic Atomism, God is repeatedly creating the whole of the universe anew every instant from nothing. The continuity in our experience of the repeated creation of the universe is attributed to the compassionate consistence of God. Gerhard Böwering (1997) has provided an illustrative example of Islamic atomism based on the principle described above where he states:

“Allāh creates within the human being first the will and then the capacity to write, creating both will and capacity anew in every instance. Then God creates, anew in every instance, the movement of the hand, and finally, the motion of the pen concurrent with it. Every instant and action in the process of writing is independent from every other; all stages of the process issue from God alone. It is only in appearance that there is a coherent action of writing. Similarly, a self-consistent world in space and time, working harmoniously, is only an appearance. The true one actor is God alone.”⁸

On the whole then what this theory suggests in regards to time and space is that we only have the present moment [you may loosely call it Presentism, although not in the exact sense] which is actual [which exists *now* and only now]. The past, in this case has been destroyed and created anew at every instant to constitute the present, and the future is not yet. However, what implications would this view have on the ascribed attributes of a timeless God such as His omniscience and omnipotence? Would this continuing process of creation and destruction aid a timeless God in preserving the traditional attributes?

As a matter of fact, this theory creates a much better ground for preserving God’s omniscience in the sense that His continuous creation of the universe at every instant would firstly imply that He has the knowledge of every single existing [and non-existing] thing since He is able to recreate their precise state anew instantaneously. Subsequently, since His knowledge is one which does not change [He is non-temporal] His repeated creation can be said to be concurrent with that unchangeable knowledge. So in effect the creation is subject to change [i.e. temporal] according to His fixed knowledge [which is non-temporal]. You may think of it as a God who follows the blue-print of His own unchangeable knowledge in order to re-create His creation at every instant. It can further, and more effectively, substantiate the issue of God interacting in human history. However, the question of how He can interact – moving from a non-temporal realm into a temporal one – without being affected by it?

This would seem to be a question relating more significantly to causation, which would require further analysis.

In conclusion, I have discussed in particular the issue relating a timeless God and His omniscience and omnipotence. I have suggested how the view of a God who knows particulars in a universal sense tends to defeat the purpose of positing an omniscient God. I have further, provided the case of Islamic atomism or occasionalism to reconcile a timeless God's omniscience, showing that it can unite the two attributes of God in a plausible manner. However, I acknowledge that Islamic atomism does and certainly will come with its own set of problems, which may not entirely be in relation to time and space, but what is noteworthy is that it manages to express a theoretical instance which coincides with the traditional understanding of God's omniscience and His relation to time and space.

ENDNOTES

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² Davies, D. *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982)

³ Davies, D. *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982)

⁴ Pike, N. "Problems for the Notion of Divine Omniscience." In: Davies. B. *Philosophy of Religion a guide and anthology*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000)

⁵ Wolterstorff, N. "God is 'everlasting', not 'eternal'." In: Davies. B. (2000). *Philosophy of Religion a guide and anthology*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 501

⁶ Helm, P. "A Different Modern Defense of Divine Eternity." In: Davies. B. *Philosophy of Religion a guide and anthology*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 528

⁷ Davies, D. *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982)

⁸ Böwering, G. The Concept of Time in Islam: *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 14 no.1 (1997), 60

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