Is Theism Coherent?

Kenneth J. Coughlan

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Theism, unlike theories based in non-theistic moral realism, not only provides a stopping point for the inquiry into the source of objective moral values but can justify that stopping point as being a reasonable one. If, however, the very concept of the theistic God is incoherent, then he would cease to be a reasonable explanation for the source of morality.

Charles Taliaferro presents various arguments that are commonly raised against the coherence of the theistic God, three of which concern omnipotence, omniscience and eternity.

If "omnipotence" means God can "do anything whatsoever"[1] then the skeptic may reasonably ask, "Can God do something that was not done by God?,"[2] creating obvious difficulties. However, Norman Geisler explains that this objection is based in a misunderstanding of what is meant by God's omnipotence.

> Of course, … God cannot do what is actually impossible to do. Since it is impossible for God to do things contrary to His unchanging nature, it is understandable that He cannot do any contradictory thing. … So God can do whatever is possible to do – there are no limits on His power except that it be consistent with His own unlimited nature.[3]

Thus, a correct understanding of omnipotence avoids the skeptic's rhetorical ploy.

> In regard to omniscience, Taliaferro explains a common objection.
> If God knows what you will freely do tomorrow (let's refer to it as *x*), it is the case now that you will indeed do *x*. But if it is true now that you will freely do x, how can you also be free not to do *x*? Arguably, freely doing some act seems to involve you having a *bona fide* ability either to do the act or not. Some philosophers conclude that omniscience is incompatible with future free action.[4]

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[1] Charles Taliaferro, "The Coherence of Theism," in *Philosophy of Religion: Classic and Contemporary Issues*, ed. Paul Copan and Chad Meister (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 175.

[2] Ibid., 176.

[3] Norman Geisler, *Systematic Theology, Volume Two* (Bloomington, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 2003), 539.

[4] Taliaferro, "The Coherence of Theism," 177.

However, this is only a problem on an A-theory of time. If we make our free choices within time but God sees all events past, present and future from His transcendent perch, then we can exercise free will and God can also know all events at all times without His knowledge interfering with our free choice.

William Lane Craig argues that this is also not a problem on A-theory.

> According to [Luis] Molina, logically prior to the divine decree to create a world, God possesses not only knowledge of everything that could happen (natural knowledge) but also everything that would happen in any appropriately specified set of circumstances (middle knowledge). He then decrees to create certain free creatures in certain circumstances and, thus, on the basis of His middle knowledge and His knowledge of His own decree, God has foreknowledge of everything that will happen (free knowledge).[5]

With God's decree having taken place temporally before the allegedly free events that follow (i.e., at point T-0), then I am not certain Craig's solution truly avoids the horn of the objection. However, if his argument does hold true, then the objection based upon the alleged incoherence of omniscience fails on either an A or B-theory of time.

In regard to the argument that the concept of God existing eternally is incoherent, Taliaferro points out that there are multiple ways in which God's eternity has been interpreted by philosophers, including

> (1) the thesis that God is eternal insofar as God is not temporally extended. … God's being is like an eternal present … (2) … God is temporally extended but without origin or end … (3) … God was eternal (without temporal extension) and then underwent temporal extension at creation.[6]

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[5] William Lane Craig, "The Coherence of Theism: Introduction," in *Philosophy of Religion: A Reader and Guide*, ed. William Lane Craig (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 208.

[6] Taliaferro, "The Coherence of Theism," 177.

Norman Geisler argued in favor of the first position.

> …an eternal being cannot change, whereas time involves change by which measurements of befores and afters can be made. Thus, an eternal Being, such as God is, cannot change. … It follows, then, that the eternal cannot be endless time. It must be something qualitatively different, not just different in quantity. … The eternal Now is unchanging, while the now of time is ever changing. … God's Now has no past or future; time's now does.[7]

William Lane Craig, however, argues against a timeless existence for God and prefers Taliaferro's third option. In contrast to Geisler, he claims that

> divine omniscience would seem to require that God exist temporally in order to know the truth of propositions expressed by tensed sentences. … All He could know would be tenseless truths … But such ignorance is inconsistent with the standard account of omniscience and is surely incompatible with God's maximal cognitive excellence.[8]

Craig's argument, though, overlooks the fact that if the true nature of time is as B-theory describes, then ultimate reality is tenseless, just as God sees it. There are no such things as "tensed" truths. It is God who sees things accurately and our tensed perception that is incomplete. When we speak in tensed terms, what we are really describing (whether we realize it or not) is merely how different concurrently existing points are "indexed" or ordered as being "before" or "after" other points.

Regardless, however, for the skeptic to successfully argue that the notion of God's eternality is incoherent, she must adequately explain why all these options lack coherence, an obstacle that to date has not been met.

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[7] Geisler, *Systematic Theology*, 102-03.

[8] Craig, "The Coherence of Theism: Introduction," 206.

Therefore, Taliaferro successfully demonstrates that the concept of the theistic God is not incoherent, or at least that the skeptic has a long journey ahead in attempting to prove that it is. As a result, incoherence does not save the atheist from the ramifications of the moral argument when raising the problem of evil.