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# ‘Eternity shut in a span’: the Times of God Incarnate

Robin Le Poidevin

## 1. THE TEMPORAL PARADOX OF THE INCARNATION

In a sermon preached on Trinity Sunday 1621, probably at Lincoln’s Inn, where he was Reader in Divinity, John Donne offered a vision of the crucifixion that captures, in a single poignant phrase, the extraordinary paradox of the incarnation: ‘I see those hands stretched out, that stretched out the heavens.’<sup>1</sup> In similar vein, in one of his Holy Sonnets, he addresses the following wondering passage to the Virgin:

Ere by the spheares, time was created, thou  
Wast in his minde, who is thy Sonne, and Brother.<sup>2</sup>

How is it possible that the Creator, and in particular (noting the implication in the couplet above) the creator of time could become a finite, and terribly vulnerable, part of the created order? At least at first sight, a being who creates time must be timeless. For temporal beings are dependent on time, and it makes no sense to imagine a being creating a condition of their own existence. Now, surely, if anything is an eternal and unchanging state, it is timelessness. How, then, can a timeless God take on flesh and so become part of history? For Christ is a temporal being: he is born, he begins his ministry around the age of thirty, and three years later he is arrested and put to death. There is a tension, then – indeed, to all appearances, an outright inconsistency – between the notion of God as time’s creator, and the notion of God as incarnate. This is what we might describe as the ‘temporal paradox of the incarnation.’

It might seem that there is a very swift way out of this paradox in the form of the Doctrine of the Trinity. The three persons of the Trinity, it will be pointed out, have distinguishing properties. Only the Son becomes incarnate, not the Father and Creator. Still,

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<sup>1</sup> Sermon 14, in Potter and Simpson (1957): 308. I am very grateful to my colleague, Chris Kenny, for drawing my attention to this phrase.

<sup>2</sup> ‘The Annunciation’, in Grierson (ed) (1912): 319.

in traditional Trinitarianism, the Son is ‘of one substance’ with the Father: the essential properties of divinity are exhibited by both. Among those properties, the relation to time will, surely, be fundamental. To be divine is to exhibit the maximum degree of independence from the constraints under which the created order labours, an independence which leads, by an argument we shall shortly examine, to timelessness. The timeless of the Son seems, indeed, to be enshrined in the words of the Chalcedonian Statement on the incarnation, according to which the Son is begotten of the Father ‘before the ages’<sup>3</sup>

To set out the problem explicitly:

1. God the Father is the creator of time.

So:

2. The Father is timeless.

3. The Son is of one substance with the Father.

So (from 2 and 3):

4. The Son is timeless.

5. The Son becomes incarnate.

6. To become, and so be incarnate is to be in time.

So (from 5 and 6):

7. The Son is in time.

So (from 4 and 7):

8. The Son is both timeless and in time.

This is a reductio of the conjunction of 1 (God as creator) and 5 (God as incarnate).

Certain components of the paradox I will not question, but pause here to comment briefly on them.

First, the initial premise. It may be questioned whether to be the creator of ‘all things’ includes or implies being creator of time. Anyone who denies this will not, of course, be exercised by the problem set out here. But they will have to have something to say in reply to the following thought: it appears to be an entirely contingent truth that time exists; and any

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<sup>3</sup> For the complete Statement, see Stevenson (1989): 351-3. ‘Before the ages’ is naturally interpreted to mean simply ‘before human history’, but it also suggests a more radical idea: that the begetting of the Son is something that is prior—in some non-temporal sense of ‘prior’—to time itself.

contingent existent requires the Creator for its ultimate explanation. However, there is a worry about 1, and that is that the very notion of the creation of time is paradoxical.<sup>4</sup> For if creation is a causal process, and causes precede their effects in time, then it seems, absurdly, that the creator of time must already be in time prior to time's existence! We may, it is true, distinguish the *creative act's* being in time, as a result of what follows it, and the *creator's* being in time. The first need not imply the second. Does paradox still lurk? I will leave 1, for the time being, intact, though it clearly cries out for elaboration, and I attempt to provide this later in the paper, returning to the paradox in section 4.

Second, the inference from 2 and 3 to 4. On Latin Trinitarianism, the inference is irresistible, since 'of one substance with the Father' is taken in a token sense, and by Leibniz's Law, if the Father is timeless, so is the Son. On Social Trinitarianism, in contrast, 'of one substance' can be given a type reading, and so there is room for a difference in the intrinsic properties of the Father and the Son.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, a radical difference in respect of their relations to time will affect their relations to each other: the Son exhibits an essential dependence not exhibited by the Father, and this might be thought theologically unacceptable. Even the Social Trinitarian, then, is unlikely to reject this particular inference.

Third, premise 5, which represents a fundamental component of traditional Christian doctrine. The word 'becomes' might be objected to on the grounds that this implies a change in an already temporal being, which then will immediately conflict with divine timelessness. But I suggest a more neutral reading, on which the change in question is to the world: the world is such that, there are times at which it contains an incarnate God, but at earlier times it does not.

The fourth component I will not question is premise 6. As Tom Senor (1990) notes, the events of Christ's life exhibit a temporal sequence, and this is sufficient for his being in time. (Senor also argues that becoming incarnate involves a change in the Son's intrinsic properties, which in turn implies that he is in time.)

Finally, I will not here explore the prospects for applying a 'reduplicative formula' to certain premises. This would involve reading 4 as 'The Son qua God is timeless', and 7 as 'The Son qua man is in time'. Although this avoids a formal contradiction, 'qua' requires

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<sup>4</sup> I am grateful to an anonymous referee for pointing out this further paradox.

<sup>5</sup> For a defence of Latin Trinitarianism, see, e.g., Leftow (2004); for a defence of Social Trinitarianism, see, e.g., Hasker (2010).

interpretation. One such interpretation is a compositional account, according to which there is a composite being which has temporal and timeless elements. Whether such a being could exhibit sufficient unity to be identified as a person, or whether instead the person of Christ becomes part of an impersonal composite, is a question I simply raise, without discussing here.<sup>6</sup>

The part of the paradox I want to focus on is the inference from 1 to 2, from the creation of time to timelessness. To some, this may seem a small step. For others, it will require explicit argument. The key linking notion, it was suggested above, is that of dependence.<sup>7</sup> A rather short sub-argument for the inference from 1 to 2 can be provided as follows:

1\* If x is the creator of time, then x is independent of time: there is a world in which x exists and time does not.

2\* If x is temporal, then x is not independent of time: there is no world in which x exists and time does not.

Therefore:

3\* If x is the creator of time, then x is not temporal.

3\*, together with premise 1 of the original argument, then leads to 2: the Father is timeless.

This sub-argument itself may seem too quick. In particular, 2\* might be contested as follows: God is independent of time in the sense that it was possible for him to exist but time not, since the creation of time was a free act. But although this entails that he is possibly timeless (that is, timeless in some possible world), it does not imply that he is actually timeless. His being actually temporal may be a necessary result of creating time. So a further assumption appears to be required, and that is the assumption that, as Brian Leftow has argued, whether an object is temporal or timeless cannot be a merely contingent matter.<sup>8</sup> To set out this reasoning explicitly: for x to possess a property F contingently, there must be a world in which x exists, but is not F. But for x in one world to be identical to some object y in

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<sup>6</sup> For discussion, see Senor (2007), Le Poidevin (2009) and Marmodoro and Hill (2010).

<sup>7</sup> Thanks to Rik Peels for pressing me to explain in more detail this crucial step in the argument.

<sup>8</sup> What follows paraphrases Leftow (1991): 43.

another, x and y must be sufficiently similar. If x is a human, and y a beetle, they cannot be identical. So no human being could have been a beetle. If x is a table and y the number 4, they cannot be identical, and so on. Now the difference between being temporal and being timeless is too great to permit trans-world identity. Therefore, it makes no sense to suppose that God could be temporal in this world but timeless in another: the difference is too great. So God is either essentially timeless or essentially temporal. If, therefore, God is actually temporal, he is essentially so, so there is no world where he exists but time does not. He therefore would not count as independent of time, on this conception.

There is a further line of objection to the argument, and that is that God's being independent of time does not imply that there is a world in which God exists but time not. For consider the case of moral values. According to an influential theory, moral truths are dependent on God rather than vice versa. But as moral truths are necessary, there is no world in which God exist but those truths do not obtain. So dependence is not always appropriately spelled out in modal terms. The reply is that, although not every kind of dependence is set out in modal terms, causal dependence is. And to say that God is the creator of x is naturally understood as implying x's causal dependence on x.

Thus, then, the temporal paradox of the incarnation, and the way in which its various components can be defended.

To understand the import of 1 and 2, and the validity of the inference from one to the other, requires an analysis of time and temporal existence, and that is what I shall attempt in this paper. The temporal paradox, I want to suggest, is made much worse by a certain view of (space)time, namely the substantivalist view, on which time is a container that is ontologically independent of its contents (though its geometry is perhaps causally affected by them). This bears particularly on the inference from God as creator of time to divine timelessness. In contrast, the problem is made more tractable by a radically reductionist account of time, on which time is not an object in its own right, but rather the causal structure of what we might continue to describe as time's contents: events and states of affairs. There are independent reasons in favour of that reductionist view, reasons I will allude to briefly, but my main object in this paper is simply to expound the view, show how it leads to a natural account of what it is to exist in time, and how it offers to dissolve the temporal paradox of the incarnation. It also offers an understanding of how God can in one sense (or perhaps two senses) be independent of time as a result of being the creator of time, and yet, in the incarnate Christ, be part of it.

Here, then, are the questions I want, all-too-briefly, to address:

- (i) What is time?
- (ii) What is it to exist in time?
- (iii) What is God's relation to time?
- (iv) Can we, in the light of our answers to those questions, resolve the temporal paradox of the incarnation?

I will take these in turn.

## 2. WHAT IS TIME?

One way of focusing this intimidating question is to ask what the relation is between time and the events and states of affairs that we say take place in time. Traditionally, this has been posed in the form of the question whether there can, or cannot, be time without change.<sup>9</sup> But there are more than two choices in this area, and the relation between time and its contents is naturally allied to a corresponding question about the relation between space and its contents. It will be convenient, then, at least initially, to talk of spacetime,<sup>10</sup> We can order the views in terms of their representation of the degree, and direction, of dependence between spacetime on the one hand and its contents on the other. At one end of the spectrum, we have:

Super-substantivalism, which holds that the fundamental entity is spacetime, and that concrete objects are regions of spacetime. This makes spacetime independent of its contents, and its contents not only dependent for their existence on, but also reducible to, spacetime.

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<sup>9</sup> A question raised, perhaps for the first time, by Aristotle in Book IV of the *Physics* (Hussey (1983)). The classic contemporary discussion is Shoemaker (1969).

<sup>10</sup> 'Spacetime' here is not intended as meaning specifically relativistic spacetime. As used here, the term is neutral between different physical theories, so that we might talk of 'Newtonian spacetime', etc. I assume we would want to give the same general answer to the question 'what is the relation between time and its contents?' as the parallel question concerning space. The symmetry may however break down when we consider the connection between those contents and the direction of time, which has no obvious spatial parallel.

This is a relative newcomer to the debate.<sup>11</sup> More familiar is:

Traditional substantivalism, which holds that there are concrete objects other than spacetime, and these are contained within a spacetime that could exist independently of them. Those concrete objects are not, however, reducible to spacetime regions.<sup>12</sup>

For both super-substantivalism and (non-super) substantivalism, spacetime relations between objects are mediated by spacetime points. (The notion of mediation here can be illustrated by a simple example: the relation ‘being an aunt of’ is a mediated relation, in that for one person to be an aunt of another there has to be a third person who is a sibling of the first person and a parent of the second. In contrast, ‘being more massive than’ can hold between two objects directly, without the need for any third object.) But the status of ordinary objects is perhaps somewhat anomalous on substantivalism: on the one hand, they are not reducible to spacetime, but on the other hand, it makes dubious sense to suppose that they could exist without it, for they would then lack extension.

Moving further along this spectrum of views, we encounter a reversal of the dependency between spacetime and its contents, in:

Modest relationism, which holds that spacetime is a construction from its ‘contents.’ Standardly, the spatial part of this reduction holds that space is simply the network of spatial relations between objects. This permits spatial vacua (what we would ordinarily describe as regions of space devoid of objects), which amount to no more than the holding of direct spatial relations between objects, unmediated by any other object. In contrast, the standard form of temporal relationism, familiar from the Leibniz-Clarke correspondence,<sup>13</sup> rules out temporal vacua (periods of time without change). But the door is open to the view that time is the network of unmediated temporal relations between events/states of affairs, permitting undifferentiated periods of time without change, while warning us not to reify these periods as objects in their own right, divisible into different parts. Further on, and now at the extreme end of the spectrum from super-substantivalism, we have:

Reductionist relationism, which reduces, not only spatial points and temporal

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<sup>11</sup> Super-substantivalism (under the name ‘monistic substantivalism’ is defended in preference to traditional substantivalism (‘dualistic substantivalism’) in Schaffer (2009).

<sup>12</sup> Substantivalism is defended in Nerlich (1994), and criticised in Earman (1992).

<sup>13</sup> See Alexander (1956).

moments, but also spatial and temporal relations to something more fundamental. In the case of space, it is not immediately clear what this more fundamental relation could be.<sup>14</sup> But in the case of time, the obvious candidate is causality. Thus time, on this view, is simply the causal structure of events/states of affairs.

Finally, to be comprehensive in our survey, we should acknowledge a hybrid account, according to which spacetime is an object in its own right, ontologically independent of those contents, but whose direction is derived from the causal structure of those contents. This combines a substantivalist account of temporal separation relations (which are mediated by instants) with a reductionist account of temporal asymmetry—the asymmetry, that is, of before and after.

Although I am not here in the business of offering a decisive argument for any one of these positions, we might just pause to note that an attractive feature of the radically reductionist view. My reason for doing so is that it is this position that I will later appeal to in attempting to resolve the temporal paradox of the incarnation. It is important, then, to be clear that such an appeal is not a desperate ad hoc invocation of an otherwise unmotivated position, but to one which has merits quite independently of its role in understanding the incarnation. One merit of reductionism is that it offers a very simple explanation of what is otherwise the puzzling fact that the arrow of causation points in the same direction as the arrow of time: causes, in other words, always precede their effects.<sup>15</sup> On the reductionist view, the arrow of time just is the arrow of causation. The reductionist view also fits very well with two characteristic features of temporal experience. Why do we not perceive the future? Because perception is a causal process: the object of a perceptual state is a cause of that state. It must therefore be earlier than that state, since temporal priority reduces to causal priority. Backwards causation is ruled out by definition. Why does the experienced order of our perceptions correspond (with, it seems, some rare but interesting exceptions<sup>16</sup>) to the actual

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<sup>14</sup> Some speculative suggestions are made in my (2007).

<sup>15</sup> Is it unreasonable to rule out a priori the possibility of backwards causation? For reasons to think not, see Mellor (1998): Chapter 12. For a critical discussion of the causal theory of time order, see Sklar (1977): Chapters 9 and 10.

<sup>16</sup> See, e.g., the discussion of Benjamin Libet's 'backwards referral' experiments, which seem to show that experienced order can sometime reverse the order of perceptions, in Dennett (1991): Chapter 6.

order of those perceptions? Because both are determined by the causal order of those perceptions. Where a perception of, e.g., a C# played on a violin is coloured by the memory of a D played a second earlier on the same instrument, what results is a perception of the C# as succeeding the D. And since causal order determines temporal order, the perception of the D was indeed prior to the perception of the C#.

An obvious objection to the reductionist view, however, is that time is much more pervasive than causation. That is, we can imagine widely separated events between which there is no causal connection nevertheless occupying a common time series. Surely it is possible for events to be temporally related without being causally related? The right response for the reductionist here, it seems to me, is to deny the implicit assumption that time is unified: that every event is temporally related to every other. Why suppose that the whole of what exists must occupy a common time series? If there are parallel causal series, series that stand in no causal relations to each other, what explanatory benefit is there in insisting that they are not also parallel time series, but one single time series? Admittedly, we do seem to have an intuition that temporal connection does not imply even indirect causal connection, but the source of this can be found in our perceptual experience: we perceive temporal order between events without necessarily also perceiving a causal order between them (though if the temporal proximity is sufficiently close, we might well seem to perceive a causal connection, especially if the events are regularly repeated). And that fact about experience is entirely compatible with the existence of unperceived causal relations between the events. Conversely, we may perceive events between which there is no direct temporal connection. Suppose that two initially independent causal series impinge at the same moment on an observer, for example light from two supernovae. The observer's perception of the supernovae as occupying a common time series does not imply that the distant events have any direct temporal relation to each other: they may instead occupy two converging time series.

On this reductionist view, then, the topological structure of time will be as complex as the network of causal connections, with their diverging and converging branches. The notion of disunified time turns out, in fact, to have theological benefits, as we shall see later.

### 3. WHAT IS IT TO EXIST IN TIME?

The different accounts above of what time (or spacetime) is will give rise to correspondingly

different accounts of what it is to exist in time. For the supersubstantialist, to exist in time is to be partly constituted by time, since a concrete object is just a region of spacetime—or more narrowly a region with certain properties. For the (non-super-) substantialist, to exist in time is to be contained in, without being constituted even partly by time. What these two views have in common is the asymmetric dependence of ordinary objects on spacetime. Spacetime could exist without ordinary objects, but not vice versa. That objects depend on spacetime is a direct consequence of super-substantialism, since they are nothing more than modified regions of spacetime, and the directness of this consequence might seem to give the supersubstantialist a dialectical advantage over the traditional substantialist.<sup>17</sup> For the modest relationist, to exist in time is for one's life to exhibit a temporal structure: there are, in other words, temporal relations between one's instantiation of different properties. Finally, for the radical reductionist, the account is the same as the modest relationist's, except that the temporal relations in question reduce to causal relations, so that to exist in time is simply for one's life to exhibit a causal structure. It is this account that I am particularly interested in.

These accounts of time and existence in time are related in complex ways to the debate over persistence through time, specifically the debate between three-dimensionalists and four-dimensionalists.<sup>18</sup> If we take the supersubstantialist view, it is hard to see how we could avoid four-dimensionalism, since regions of spacetime have parts, and if objects are just regions of spacetime then they too have parts.<sup>19</sup> The reductionist view, on which to exist in time is to exhibit a causal structure, raises a tricky question for three-dimensionalists, who want to reject temporal parts of objects, and hold that numerical identity can relate objects at different times. For even if we allow that continuants (as well as, or instead of, events) can be causal relata, causation, being an irreflexive relation, cannot hold between an object at one time and the numerically identical object at another time. An object by itself does not exhibit an internal causal structure: only the states of affairs of which it is part do so. In what sense,

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<sup>17</sup> As Schaffer (2009) argues.

<sup>18</sup> For an extended discussion of this debate, and a defence of the four-dimensionalist view, according to which persistence is not a matter of numerical identity over time, but of being extended by virtue of having different temporal parts at different times, see Sider (2001).

<sup>19</sup> We might, perhaps, imagine a completely homogeneous spacetime, but part of the explanatory role of substantialist spacetime is to ground the spatio-temporal structure of its contents. A partless spacetime could not do this.

then, can a three-dimensionalist object exist at different times? The best answer the three-dimensionalist can give, it seems, is this: an object exists at different times only in a derivative sense, by being part of states of affairs which, in virtue of exhibiting a causal structure, exist at different times.<sup>20</sup> The four-dimensionalist, in contrast, will say that an object exists at different times in a non-derivative sense, in that what stand in causal relations to each other are different temporal parts. Their relative position in time is nothing over above their relative position in the causal series that constitutes the whole four-dimensionalist object.

Could we combine three-dimensionalism with (traditional) substantivalism? In principle, we could, but the result is an over-complex picture of what it is to exist in, and persist through time. According to this picture, there are two kinds of object: spacetime on the one hand and material objects on the other. Spacetime itself has perforce to be viewed in four-dimensionalist terms: it has spacetime parts, as we have already noted. It exists in spacetime in a non-derivative sense. In fact, since it constitutes a location, each spacetime point exists at itself. If we take a three-dimensionalist view of material objects, then they exist at spacetimes only in a derivative sense. Perhaps we can live with this duality, but it is, to say the least, a rather unparsimonious picture of the world.

#### 4. WHAT IS GOD'S RELATION TO TIME?

With the theoretical background laid out, we can return to the question of God's relation to time, and how its meaning is affected by our stance on what it is to exist in time. In particular, we are concerned with the first step in the temporal paradox of the incarnation, from creation to divine timelessness, and the sub-argument for that step. According to that argument, the creator of time must exist independently of time, so he is at least possibly timeless: there is a world in which he exists but time does not. But if he actually exists in time, then there is no world in which he exists and time does not. A being cannot be merely contingently timeless. So if God is possibly timeless, he is essentially, and so actually so.

To set it out explicitly, re-labelling and rewording premises from the earlier arguments (where 'A' marks an assumption, and 'C' an intermediate or final conclusion):

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<sup>20</sup> See Simons (2000).

A1. God<sup>21</sup> creates time

A2. If God creates time, then there is a possible world in which he exists and time does not.

A3. If x exists in time in one world, and y exists in another world where time does not, then x is not identical to y.

So (from A3):

C1. If God actually exists in time, then there is no possible world in which he exists and time does not.

So (from A2 and C1):

C2. If God creates time, then he does not exist in time.

So (from A1 and C2):

C3. God does not actually exist in time.

That initially compelling argument depends a great deal for its plausibility on a view of time as ontologically prior to its contents, that is, on either super-substantivalism or traditional substantivalism. For on those views, the contents of time are ontologically dependent on time: there is no world in which those objects exist but time does not. A temporal God would, as one of time's contents, be dependent on time, and therefore could not be its creator.

At this point, we should consider the strategy of treating God as an atypical occupier of time. Granted, standard occupants of time are ontologically dependent on time. But not so (it might be argued) God. We cannot conceive of what it would be for a mushroom, qua mushroom, to exist in a timeless world, for part of what makes it a mushroom is the way in which it developed. And we might take a similar view of a mountain, or planet. But perhaps God can somehow be in time without being ontologically dependent on it. If we take this line, however, we obscure the conception of being in time: are there two ways of being in time, one which implies dependence and the other not? Further (though perhaps this is simply a development of the same objection), there is the principle A3: a temporal object and a timeless object look too different to be identified.

Independently of the implications of creation, a super-substantivalist view provides reasons to suppose God to be timeless. For on that view, if God is within spacetime, then

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<sup>21</sup> I drop the qualification 'the Father' as not being relevant to this particular step in the temporal paradox of the incarnation.

either he is constituted by, or else he constitutes, spacetime. Either way, he is not the creator of spacetime. In addition, he must have spacetime parts, for a spacetime without structure cannot impose structure on its contents. And this in itself is an unwelcome consequence. Moreover, whether we say that God is constituted by spacetime, or constitutes it, we face difficulties. If he is constituted by spacetime, then he is a merely derivative object. And if God himself constitutes spacetime, we and every other (material) object are simply local modifications of God. We have moved rather far away from a traditional monotheistic picture and towards a pantheistic one. And this is unlikely to be embraced by any defender of a reasonably orthodox view of the incarnation.

But once we put it in the context of relationist views, the inference from creation to divine timelessness looks much less compelling. And the part of the argument which the relationist can resist is C1 (and the general principle which motivates it, namely A3). First, for the relationist, time's occupants are not dependent on time: the dependence, rather, is the other way around. Second, when we shift from a substantialist to a relationist view of time, the suggestion that we face a dichotomy between two starkly opposing images—a God who shares our time series versus a timeless God—becomes less plausible. There is a sense in which God is both outside time and within it. What we suggested in the previous section was that, for objects without temporal parts, existence in time is derivative: objects exist at different times only by virtue of being components of states of affairs which themselves obtain at times (in a non-derivative sense, since they exhibit a temporal structure). Considered only in itself, a continuant is not temporal—that is how it manages to be a continuant rather than a collection of temporal parts. So God too is only in time in a derivative sense: he participates in temporal states of affairs. Considered only in himself, he is not temporal. This effectively pulls the rug out from underneath A3. As long as we think of temporality as integral to an object's being (as on a supersubstantialist or substantialist view it is), the difference between it and a possible temporal object is too great for us to identify them. But if temporality is derivative, it is not so integral to an object, but a matter of how the states of affairs in which it participates are ordered.

This is the moment to return to a paradox noted in section 1: that if God creates time, and causality is a temporal process, then his creative act precedes time itself, which is absurd. Substantialist views invite this paradox. For the creation of (space)time is the creation of an object in its own right, and the cause, if prior to its effect, cannot be contained within that object: so there is a time before time. The reductionist relationist account, in contrast, gives

us a way of avoiding this paradox. For time on that view is just the network of causal relations between events/states. So in creating anything with a causal structure, God creates a time series. And if the creative act itself stands in a causal relation to creation, then that creative act is in time. But there is no implication that the creative act precedes time itself: it simply precedes every time it brings into existence.

(Of course, we may choose to think of the creative act as of a quite different order from the ordinary causal relations that obtain in the world, by analogy with an author and their novel.<sup>22</sup> In writing *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, George Orwell determined the events of the novel, and the causal relations between those events. But his so determining those events is not part of the novel, and do not stand in the same relation to those events as, say, the sinister forces of the Ministry of Truth. Anyone attracted to this picture of God's creative act will not take that act to be an event in time. Quite what the literal truth behind the analogy is, however, remains obscure. And the fact that the causal relations in the novel are not real, but purely fictional, may strain the analogy to breaking point.)

It may seem that, in this account of how God is, in one sense, in time, and in another, outside it, we have removed the all-important difference between God and ordinary continuants such as ourselves. However, there still remains significant differences between our relation to time and God's.

Recall the question of unity that was raised concerning the reductionist picture. There is no a priori reason why there should not be isolated causal series. But on the radically reductionist picture, a causally disunified world would also be a temporally disunified one. Suppose, then, that part of the life of God (e.g. a phase of his mental life) forms a causal series that is isolated from the causal network in which our own lives take place. That part of God's life would not be in our time. And that means that, again in a purely derivative sense, God is not in our time either, insofar as he participates in events which are not in our time. And this is simply an illustration of God's independence from our time: he can engage in activities that do not form part of the history of our world. He can, in fact, stand in temporal relation to several distinct time series. We cannot.

There is, however, this objection to the account given of God's relation to time. We have spoken just now of individual time series, in the plural. But the inference from creation to timelessness is framed in terms of time simpliciter, as a single unified whole. And one

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<sup>22</sup> A suggestion C.S. Lewis makes in his (1952): 'Time and beyond time'.

might think that the existence of any time series at all is a contingent matter, given that God's creation of time is a wholly free one.<sup>23</sup> But if God necessarily has a mental life, and if that mental life has a causal structure, then (given the causal theory of time order) it seems that, after all, God has no choice over whether or not time exists. It is nevertheless still true—and this is surely the important part of the doctrine of the creation of time—that God is the ultimate source of any time series that does exist. So although the existence of time (that is, some time series or other) is a necessary fact, it is not independent of God.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, the existence of our time series remains contingent, and God's act in creating it entirely free.

We might further widen the gulf between ourselves and God by adopting a four-dimensionalist view of ourselves (and other ordinary objects), but not of God. We would then conceive of ourselves as time-bound in a much more radical sense. Human beings, as we might put it, are nothing more than natural processes. Consider, by analogy, a tornado. This is nothing more than a vortex of air currents, along with the debris that such currents pick up on their travels. Both of these vary from time to time. And yet the tornado gives the appearance, especially from a distance, very much of a material object that, although it may change its shape somewhat, nevertheless manages to move from place to place while remaining something we can track over time. It is a process that behaves like an object. So, the suggestion might go, is each of us. There is, then, no interesting ontological (as opposed to conceptual) distinction between 'me' and 'my life': I am just an extended process that has different temporal parts at different times. God, in contrast, is a genuine continuant, not just a process, and so is more fully a substance than anything in his creation. How appealing we find the idea of such a contrast between ourselves and God, however, is likely to be affected by the stance we take on the incarnation, to which we now, finally, turn.

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<sup>23</sup> As Leftow (1991) insists as part of his defence of divine timelessness: see Chapter 12. Thanks to Leftow for pressing this objection in correspondence.

<sup>24</sup> Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pointing out a parallel here with Augustine's view of concepts as necessary existents that nevertheless depend for their being on God

## 5. CAN WE RESOLVE THE TEMPORAL PARADOX OF THE INCARNATION?

It will now be somewhat clearer, I hope, how we might try to make sense of the temporal aspect of God's becoming man. The 'timelessness' of God, we have suggested, can consist of two features: (i) he exists in time only in the derivative sense that his actions form a causal series; (ii) the various causal sequences that form his life may, but need not, be part of the causal sequence that involves us, and if they are not then he is not in our time series, though he is in a time series. This is, of course, timelessness of a much less radical kind than is represented by one tradition in Christian thought. Indeed, it allows God to be, in another sense, temporal. But it also allows God to be in our time without thereby being dependent on our time. Now this relation to time, exhibited we may suppose by the Son as well as the Father, is not at all inconsistent with a transition to a much more integrated form of life within our time. On becoming incarnate, the Son begins a life wholly contained within the causal series that constitutes our own history. And we may suppose further that, in a kenotic act of renunciation of divine powers,<sup>25</sup> the Son loses the ability to engage in a mental life, or any other kind of life, that is causally isolated from our history. He is then wholly within time in a way in which he was not before.

Contrast this with the substantialist picture, on which the creation of time would be a separate creative act from the creation of its contents. Thinking of Donne's vision ('I see those hands stretched out...'), we may wonder how God could come to occupy a temporal structure that he had himself created. For substantial spacetime is not like a house that one might build in order subsequently to occupy it, as Pugin designed and built The Grange at Ramsgate for his own use, and in which he subsequently died. There is, unfortunately, no incarnational parallel here. Coming to occupy a house is a merely extrinsic change in the builder. In contrast, substantial spacetime does not merely contain its contents: their spatio-temporal properties are logically dependent on it. On divine super-substantialism, of course, spacetime does not need to be created, since God already constitutes it. But that picture will have grave difficulties accommodating an orthodox account of the incarnation, for it seems the incarnate Son would only be part of divine spacetime, and so not the whole of the Son,

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<sup>25</sup> On the kenotic model of the incarnation ('kenosis' = emptying), the Son gives up certain of the divine properties, such as omniscience and omnipotence, in becoming incarnate. He remains wholly divine in a moral sense. For discussion see, e.g., Evans (2006).

unless we suppose, combining Social Trinitarianism with divine super-substantivalism, that the Son is only part of spacetime, with the Father constituting a different part. That is not a happy result.

Earlier, we contemplated the possibility of combining a four-dimensionalist approach to our own persistence through time with an insistence that God alone is a true continuant, numerically the same God from one time to another. That would mark another sense in which we were more fully temporal beings than he. But then what exactly happens when the Son becomes incarnate? Does he remain a continuant? Then he does not truly enter into our (four-dimensionalist) condition. Does he cease to be a continuant, and become instead simply a process with different temporal parts? Then it is not truly the Son who becomes incarnate, but rather a process somehow continuous with the Son's pre-incarnate life. The Son himself goes out of existence at that point. No: incarnational doctrine does not sit happily with different approaches to divine and human persistence.

A general difficulty with kenotic accounts, on which the Son gives up at least certain of the properties of divinity, namely those that would conflict with Christ's status as truly human, is that the divine properties are not accidental, but essential to God. And nothing can lose its essential properties without ceasing to exist.<sup>26</sup> So is God's relation to time one of his essential properties? Can we suppose that God's independence from time is something that he could give up? Well, one of the senses of independence we identified is something he is not required to give up. As a continuant, he is not bound by time in the way that a four-dimensionalist object is bound by time: his existence in time is derivative. This is just as true of the incarnate Son as of the pre-incarnate Son. But there is another sense of independence from time, namely God's ability to engage in a causal series that is not part of our causal series, which the Son does give up. And here the usual kenotic strategy for dealing with the general difficulty of not being able to give up essential properties recommends itself: the essential property is not F (where 'F' can stand for omniscience, omnipotence, independence from our time, etc), but rather 'F unless freely choosing not to be F'.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> More precisely: nothing can lose its de re essential properties without ceasing to exist altogether, and nothing can lose its de dicto essential properties—those it requires for falling under a certain sortal—without ceasing to fall under that sortal. So the objection is that, after kenosis, God would not be God.

<sup>27</sup> For critical discussion of this kenotic strategy, see Morris (1986), esp. p. 97 f.

## 6. CONCLUSION

At the outset, we posed four questions. We now have candidate answers to those questions, from the perspective of a reductionist relationist account of time. They are no more than sketches, but together they form what is arguably a coherent and plausible strategy for dealing with the temporal paradox of the incarnation, the problem of how the creator of time can live a life in our time. To summarise:

- (i) Q: What is time? A: The causal structure of events and states.
- (ii) Q: What is it to exist in time? A: For one's life to exhibit a causal structure. One's location at different times is just the relative position of the stages of one's life in a causal series.
- (iii) Q: What is God's relation to time? A: Insofar as he is causally responsible for initiating the causal history of the cosmos, he is the creator of cosmic time. He exists in time in the derivative sense outlined in (ii). And he is capable of having a life that is not causally connected to our history.
- (iv) Q: Can we resolve the temporal paradox of the incarnation? A: Yes, given a reductionist relationist view of time. The limited notion of 'timelessness', of independence from time, outlined in (iii) is consistent with the Son's life being part of our causal series, though he does (temporarily) give up the ability to participate in a life not in our history.

I am in partial agreement with Richard Holland, when he writes:

The important issue [in the debate over God's relation to time] does not seem to be whether God is "in" or "outside" of time, as if the participants in the debate were attempting to ascertain God's "temporal location." Rather it seems as if the question at the heart of the debate is whether God experiences the coming-to-be and passing-away of states of affairs.<sup>28</sup>

Although he is not explicit on the point, his remarks fit most naturally with a relationist view

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<sup>28</sup> Holland (2012): 170. I say 'partial agreement' because I would want to distance myself from the implication that time involves objective becoming. But that is another story. I engage with this aspect of time, in connection with the incarnation, in Le Poidevin (2016).

of time. Holland's strategy is to make the doctrine of the incarnation dialectically central in the debate over God's relation to time, and argues that our understanding of the incarnation requires abandonment of the traditional doctrine of the timelessness of God. What I have argued, in effect, is that, while we may concede this argument, there is still quite a bit that can be said concerning God's independence from time.

The moral of our discussion is that—as both Leibniz and Clarke were keenly aware—there are intriguing and quite complex connections between theological issues and the relationist/substantivalist debate over the nature of spacetime. Favouring a reductionist relationist view (for which independent reasons can be urged) over a substantivalist one goes some way towards demystifying the mystery of time and incarnation that so beguiled the metaphysical poets. But let the last word be theirs. Here is Richard Crashaw (1612/13-1649), writing on the Nativity:

Welcome to our wondring sight  
Eternity shut in a span!  
Summer in Winter! Day in Night!  
Great little one, whose glorious Birth,  
Lifts Earth to Heaven, stoops Heaven to Earth.<sup>2930</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> 'Hymne of the Nativity', in Martin (1957).

<sup>30</sup> An earlier version of this paper was given at Queen's University, Belfast, in December 2012. I am grateful to the participants, and especially to Joseph Diekemper and Brian Leftow, for their comments. I would also like to thank Rik Peels and an anonymous reviewer for their comments on the penultimate version of the paper.

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