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Cover Page Footnote

Dr. Michael Miller, Mount St. Mary's University, Instructor and Mentor Dr. Richard Buck, Chair of Department of Philosophy, Mount St. Mary's University, Sponsor. Richard and Tina Wolfensberger, My Parents and Biggest Supporters. God, the Final Cause and the Highest Good.

On God's Eternity: How the Boethian Position on Kairos (καιρός) Solves the Debate Between Eternalism and Open Theism

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Abstract

In the theological and philosophical realms, God is often described as being both outside of time and as ever-existing. However, both of these statements present a differing picture on God's relationship with eternity. If God is outside of time, God would know time as a single, eternal present. All events would simultaneously occur before God. However, when we describe God as being ever-existing, we imply that God would experience time in a temporal sense. God then, is present at the beginning and ending of time itself, seeing time as it elapses. The question concerning this relationship is further complicated when one considers the nature of time. Time may exist in two different realities. These realities are called the A-series and B-series of time. The A-series presents a tensed, chronological view of time. In this understanding, the past, present, and future all exist independent of the others in a more objective sense. The B-series contrasts with this view and presents a tenseless understanding of time. Time here does not exist in a more objective sense, but rather it exists in a relational sense. Time is only real insofar as we can say event x occurred before event y. In the modern philosophical debate on time, Eternalists and Open Theists present their beliefs regarding God's eternity and the tense of time. In this paper, I argue that the Boethian view on both of these questions solves this debate and presents a fuller understanding of God's relationship with eternity.

Keywords: Boethius, Eternalism, Open Theism, Classical Eternalism, Time, Philosophy, God

In his *Consolation of Philosophy*, Boethius presents a unique view of God's relationship to time. Boethius argued that God experiences time as an eternal present, yet still knows time temporally. However, even after Boethius' writing, debates enraged onwards as Eternalists argued that God just experiences time as an eternal now while the Open Theists insisted that God only knows time temporally. In the debate between Eternalists and Open Theists, the Boethian position mends the two sides and argues for the correct position on *Kairos*.

In the current philosophical theology landscape, a major debate exists between Eternalism and Open Theism. This debate is primarily centered on the nature of God's existence in relation to time. Does God experience time eternally as the Eternalists argue or does He know time temporally as the Open Theists understand? To understand what is being argued in the context of the debate, we must first define some of our terms.

First, there must exist a differentiation between what we mean by God's eternity.¹ The Ancient Greeks divided time up into two different phenomenon: *Chronos* and *Kairos*. *Chronos* dealt with a more linear model of time, such as event Y occurring after event X. *Kairos* on the other hand deals with a more metaphysical model of time. It can be translated to "Time of the gods" or "God's time" which shows that this conception of time is outside human understanding. There are two basic possible ways that *Kairos* can be described. It can be described as a timeless eternity or as an everlasting eternity (Kim, 2010, pp.7-8). A timeless eternity implies that God is entirely outside of time and has no temporal standing. The latter point is essential because it

¹ For the purpose of establishing a commonality of terms regarding God's relationship with time, I will be using the term *Kairos* (καιρός) to describe this relationship as it can be roughly translated to "God's time." Ancient Greeks differentiated *Kairos* (καιρός) with *Chronos* (χρόνος), which presented more successive view of time.

portrays a key element of the debate between Eternalists and Open Theists.² An everlasting eternity contrasts with its counterpart in that it describes God as existing in an infinite extension of time both forward and backward (Kim, 2010, p. 8). This conception of eternity is different than the prior because it suggests that God knows time temporally. In this viewpoint, He just has always existed and will always exist, which as a position is in a temporal framework. In the context of the existing debate, the everlasting view of *Kairos* is much more mainstream and accepted while the timeless view of *Kairos* had been the position traditionally championed in the past (Kim, 2010, p. 8).

In addition to discussing the context of the nature of *Kairos*, further discussion is needed on the tense of time. Time can either be tensed or tenseless. In the tensed view of time (A-series), time can be understood in a more chronological order (Markosian, 2016). The past, present, and future all exist apart from each other. Time is real. This is different than the tenseless view of time (B-series). In the tenseless view of time, only relations of time can be expressed such as “earlier than” or “after.” Time here is not real in the same way as the tensed view but understood as a relational concept.³

These clarifications leave us, then, with seemingly four basic stances that one can hold in this debate. The first position is that God exists in a timeless eternity with time being tenseless. The second position is that God exists in a timeless eternity, but with time being tensed. The third position is that God exists in an everlasting eternity with time being tenseless. The fourth position is that God exists in an everlasting eternity, but time is tensed. In this paper, I will show

² This seems to imply that God cannot know time temporally and only experiences time eternally.

³ While discussion of the objective existence (or non-existence) of time is certainly interesting, it is not the project being undergone in this paper. It is however, worth noting as a way of shedding some light on the true nature of the tensed and tenseless views of time.

how each of these four positions fail in of themselves and why the Boethian position presents a fifth and correct conception of God's relationship to eternity and time that mends the Eternalist and Open Theistic positions.

Each of these positions exhibits a stake in the overlying debate because each one articulates an opinion on God's relationship to time and also a belief on time itself. This stake provides a reason to critically examine each possibility. To start, the third position seems to be the one that could be most easily discarded. This view shares that God exists temporally, however this view would also hold true to the idea that time is merely relational. How could God exist temporally if time does not exist? Can God exist in something that does not exist? This relationship between God's existence and the non-existence of time seems like a contradiction. This provides clear problems that arise with maintaining this position, which is why this position is not adhered to (Kim, 2010, p. 146).

Traditionally the second position was the one most adopted and was the view most closely defined as Eternalism. This position is now referred to as "Classical Eternalism" due to contentions by contemporary Eternalists (Kim, 2010, p. 9). This view has come under fire in more contemporary times because the belief that eternity can exist in a tensed time has been criticized. In contrast to Classical Eternalism, Eternalism (in the first position) can only be understood in a tenseless time, since the tenseless view presents all of time: past, present, and future as a sort of eternal present.⁴ This Classical Eternalist position does however share some light on what Eternalism is. For the Eternalist, God must exist outside of time. God does not merely exist in an infinite regress and progress in this view. Rather, God is not in the equation at

⁴ This coincides with the notion that God experiences time as an eternal present, a view that implies that this experience is an eternal present as opposed to a chronological association.

all, even if He does experience what we call time. His experience must be centered on the B-series view of time however, because if He is outside time, He must necessarily experience it as an eternal “now” as a consequential view of time implies an existence in a temporal realm (in which past, present, and future will occur) (Wiitala, 2011, p. 257). Thus, the first position is the view that is currently associated with Eternalism.

By process of elimination, we can then see that the fourth position is the one adopted by the Open Theists. In this position, God knows time temporally since God exists in an infinite extension of time. This time must be equated with the A-series, however, because for God to know time temporally and exist in an everlasting manner, time itself must be chronological as opposed to merely relational.⁵ If time were merely relational, then time would not exist as we know it and God could never know temporal time (as it would not exist).

In the context of the debate, we will now need to primarily focus on the first position, that being adopted by Eternalists, and the fourth position, that being adopted by the Open Theists. However, there exists a stark error with the current standing of the debate. Both the first and fourth position imply that God cannot both exist in a timeless and everlasting eternity and that time cannot be both tensed and tenseless. This clarification of these positions is important for understanding the Boethian position on *Kairos*.

Boethius focuses on time in relation to God’s knowledge. Boethius accepts the view that God experiences time from a timeless point of view. It seems clear that God is not a temporal Being (as He is necessary) and thus would be outside time. However, he does not negate that God can know time temporally, attributing it to God’s providence. Negating God’s ability to

⁵ This view also assumes that the A-series time is both non-contradictory and correct, a position that is certainly contested as seen in McTaggart’s writings (Markosian, 2016).

know applies a limitation, something that an all-powerful Being cannot have (Wiitala, 2011, p. 258). Thus, this seems to be an early articulation of a sort of compatibilist approach.⁶

Boethius' position is in contrast to both the first and fourth positions. And it is tempting to consider him as a Classical Eternalist as there exists a general tendency to include him with other Classical Eternalists. However, I do not believe that to be the case. Boethius does not believe that God experiences a timeless eternity through a tensed view of time. Rather, he believes that God's timeless eternity is through a tenseless view of time. He does not, however, exclude the possibility of God knowing time temporally through a tensed view. Boethius seems to reconcile both the A-series and B-series view of time in regards to *Kairos*. This view appears to present a solution to the debate between Eternalists and Open Theists.⁷ To fully understand Boethius' position, we must look at who God is and the nature of God's knowledge in the *Consolation*.

Boethius uses neo-platonic language when referring to God. According to Boethius, temporal goods such as honor and family cannot truly satisfy. We must turn then, to the highest good, that which cannot pass away. The highest good for Boethius is the Good: God (Boethius, B. III, m. 10). God has no beginning and will not pass away.⁸ Boethius also applies another attribute to God: Oneness. God is One. If God is the highest good, then He must be One since

⁶ Compatibilism in this sense referring to the view that God can experience time in accordance with position one but also knowing time in accordance with position four. This is not to be confused with compatibilism in terms of the debate regarding the co-existence of free will and determinism.

⁷ If we accept the Catholic doctrine of original sin, this view of *Kairos* needs to be further explained given the human condition. Humans, being a fallen race, would seemingly always find ways to disagree due to our inherent ignorance. And Boethius would likely subscribe to this position. However, this matter of fact does not negate Boethius' solution to the debate.

⁸ We still cannot use terms such as "always existed" or "outside of time" yet without the appropriate context.

there cannot be two highest goods. If two goods possessed the exact same attributes and both did not pass away (ergo the highest good), then they would be the same good. This principle is seen in mathematics. There can only exist one infinity. Infinity plus one is still infinity. Infinity multiplied by two is still infinity. Similarly, there cannot exist two highest goods.⁹

The highest good is also above our human understanding. This relates to the Boethian investigation of free will versus divine foreknowledge. If God knows x , must it be the case that x ? This question can perhaps be better understood in relation to human actions. If God knows that I do action y at time z , must it necessarily happen that I do action y when time z occurs? If yes, then how can free will exist? My action appears to be dependent on God's foreknowledge of the act as opposed to a rational and subjective choice to do the action. If the answer is no, we run into another problem, namely, how can God know the action occurs at a specified time if the action never occurs at a specified time? This problem exists because God's knowledge of temporal events is tenseless here. Boethius seems to resolve these questions by appealing to God's relation with time.

Boethius believes that God experiences time in a timeless eternity (B. V, m. 6). He writes:

Since every judgement grasps the things that are subject to it in accordance with its own nature, and since God has an ever-eternal and ever-present moment condition, his knowledge as well has passed beyond all the motion of time and is stable in the simplicity of its own present; it embraces the infinite reaches of what has passed and what is to come and, in its own simple perception, it looks at all things as if they are being carried out *now*. And so, should you want to ponder the foresight by which God distinguishes all thing, you will more accurately determine that it is not a foreknowledge as of something that is to come, but rather a knowledge of a never-failing present (B. V, m. 6).

⁹ The Good surely surpasses all human reason and as such, this analogy, or any superlative applied can never truly capture the breadth of the Good. I believe that the example of the infinite in mathematics is helpful because it shows how two "things" with the same value and properties can never be different, even if we try and suppose differences (which would actually result in different properties and the result would be one good being higher than the other).

Boethius, by this account, shares that God experiences time as an eternal present, being outside of time. Here we see the mistakes that many thinkers make when they falsely label Boethius as a Classical Eternalist. This view of time presented by Boethius is the tenseless view. God's eternal presence does not include knowledge of time as the past, present, future as God does not see the past as the past nor the future as the future. Rather, He experiences the totality of time as a present; a present that is eternally occurring. This refers back to the debate among Eternalists about whether time belongs in the tensed or tenseless views. Boethius sides with the tenseless view in this case since time is not as past, present, and future but just present.

In this eternal present, God still experiences the events before other events, similar to how we view events. However, in the case of God, everything occurs outside of time as an eternal now, seemingly differing from the fourth position, which claims that God exists in an everlasting eternity, one with a tensed view of time. Boethius clearly argues in his work that God experiences a tenseless view of time as a timeless eternity. The work of Boethius is not finished with this conclusion, however.

Boethius also argues that God knows tensed time in an everlasting eternity. Boethius is careful not to apply limitations to God, especially in regards to His divine knowledge. We should ask then, if God does not know time as we know it (and He created it), would that imply a limitation on His knowledge? This is an interesting question because after we see that the first position is correct in asserting that God experiences a tenseless view of time from a timeless eternity, then the work should be done.¹⁰ However, it is not finished. Boethius argues that God is not limited by time.

¹⁰ This statement of course, does not celebrate the Eternalists as victors just yet. However, this point does acknowledge a belief shared by Eternalists that is in fact correct under the Boethian model of *Kairos*.

For Boethius, God knows time from an ever-present now in a timeless eternity. However, he also argues that God knows time from an everlasting eternity. Boethius calls God “ever-eternal” (B. V, m. 6). This view implies that God has always existed and always will exist. God’s eternal existence here shows that God not only experiences a timeless eternity (outside of time) but also an everlasting eternity (always existing). Boethius’ position here also calls to mind God as the highest good. The Good cannot pass away. It must always exist or else it is only a strict temporal good. God is not a temporal good, however. Rather, to not pass away means to be everlasting. God must not only exist outside of time altogether, but also must never pass away.

The direction with Boethius’ position on God’s everlastingness leads us to ponder the fourth position. While Boethius strongly defends God as experiencing time as an eternal present, does this exclude God from knowing time temporally as we do? If God does not, is that a limitation? Boethius argues that this would be a limitation and thus God must know time as we do.

If God knows an event as an eternal present, then He would know that event Y precedes event Z and proceeds from event X. However, all three events would occur as a now. If we view this present from a temporal perspective (God’s knowledge is not limited by time), then event X, Y, and Z would all be occurring simultaneously, even though God would recognize which event came prior and later.¹¹ In God’s divine wisdom, He would know event X (the past being currently present), event Y (the present being currently present), and event Z (the future being currently present) as an eternal past, present, and future respectively. Thus, event X, being experienced presently, would be known eternally as the past to events Y and Z. Likewise, event Z, being experienced presently, would be known eternally as the future to events X and Y. There

¹¹ This example was inspired by Wiitala’s example found on page 258.

would be an inherent chronology to this experience, not unlike *Chronos*, however distinct in that this relation of time pertains to God's knowledge and not experience. The view of time would be a qualified tense, however. Even X would exist as a real past and event Z would exist as a real future, all in a chronological order. This view on time as expressed in events X, Y, and Z, and as drawn from Boethius, expresses approval at God knowing the tensed view of time from an everlasting eternity.

This Boethian position on time presents a solution to the debate between the Eternalists and Open Theists then. Boethius presents himself as a compatibilist on this debate and reconciles the core precepts of both the first and fourth positions. How then are they to be reconciled?

I believe that a helpful example exists in the Christian Tradition. Take for example the Triune God and the Incarnation of Christ. God exists as a Trinity; God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost. Each distinct Person of the Trinity is fully God and each Person shares the same divine substance. Each Person, being divine and God, are timeless yet everlasting. However, God the Son chose to become incarnate in nature and take upon Himself the form of man. This act of assuming humanity placed God in temporal time, even though He fully retained His divine Personhood and nature. God the Son became the Christ and thus as a man, experienced time as all men do: temporally in the tensed view of time. Jesus Christ still remained a Divine Person, possessing the fully divine nature. As such, He would have experienced time as God does, as an eternal now. Jesus also would have known time as a man for He is a man. Thus, in Christ, we see how God experiences time eternally and knows time temporally. This is not to say that all Three Divine Persons are not distinct. Only the Son became incarnate as Christ. As such, God the Father and God the Holy Ghost continue to eternally experience time as a present.

In the example of the Incarnation, we see how it is possible, especially in the Christian tradition, that God experiences tenseless time as present, yet knows tensed time temporally.

The Eternalists are absolutely correct that God exists in a timeless eternity. He is outside of time. Time in this view is tenseless. Time is merely relational which is why God must be outside of it. Open Theists, on the other hand, are also correct in arguing that God knows time temporally. After all, God relates to sensible beings best by appealing to our senses.

The core issue with the first and fourth positions is that they take an incompatibilist approach to the debate. The eternalists insist that if God experiences time as an eternal present, He cannot know time temporally. Likewise, the Open Theists accept that if God knows time temporally, He cannot experience all of time as an eternal present.

If one were to adopt the Eternalist position on *Kairos*, the Incarnation of Christ would not only be absurd, it would be impossible, even for God. While my statement is surely a provocative claim, especially for a Christian eternalist, it is true. God cannot act outside His nature. For example, God, being all-good, cannot do evil. Likewise, if God only experiences time as an eternal present, He cannot act against His nature, which is to know time temporally. Thus, a temporal event such as the Incarnation becomes outright absurd and uncharacteristic of God. What a terrifying thought for a Christian!

The correction to the Eternalist position is to include the rationale from the Incarnation to this view. God cannot be limited by His knowledge. We must make room for events like the Incarnation.¹² God also created time as part of creation. It does not make rational sense for the

¹² Many Christian thinkers, such as St. Thomas Aquinas, have posited that the Incarnation was not only necessary for the salvation of mankind, but would have occurred even if man had never sinned. We are sensible creatures who know things primarily through our senses. As such, the most fitting way for us to know God is through our senses. It makes sense that God would choose to become man so that we may know God more fully in our corporeal state. For more information, see St. Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae*, Third Part, Question 1.

creation to limit the Creator. As such, God experiences time as an eternal present and does not exclude God from knowing time in a temporal sense.

Contrasting with Eternalists, the Open Theists are correct in acknowledging the Incarnation as not only possible, but ideal. They consider the point that as sensible beings, God would be able to share His love with us through our senses. However, there is an aspect about this view that is unsettling. How can we fully appreciate God's power and authority over creation if He is not outside of it? For a pantheistic deity, this problem doesn't provide much of an issue.¹³ However, the Christian and Boethian conceptions of God is not pantheistic in nature. Rather, God surpasses nature and is not bound to it. In the eternalist position, God is rightly viewed as superior to His creation. As such, He is not limited to mere temporal powers. Instead, He supersedes it. The Open Theists, however, do a poor job at acknowledging the pure sovereignty of God over creation. Realizing this aspect of God solves the issues that Open Theism face.

The Boethian position on *Kairos* resolves both of the issues that Eternalists and Open Theists encounter. For Boethius, God is not limited in or by time. God is fully outside of time, not subject to its authority like man is (similar to the first and second positions). However, God also knows time inside of time (similar to the third and fourth positions). His knowledge of His creation is not limited. After all, He is the Designer. With these views on time, we must affirm both the A-series and B-series of time. God experiences time in a tenseless manner since time for Him is an eternal present. However, God's knowledge of time includes the tensed view of past, present, and future. The standpoint that God experiences a tenseless time as an eternal present yet knows of a tensed time in a temporal manner is the Boethian position.

¹³ Pantheism is the belief that God encompasses all of the universe. In this view, God exists in a temporal reality and is not only a part of the universe but the whole of it.

Boethius can also reconcile the Trinity in his view on *Kairos*. For Boethius, God is firstly eternal and outside of time (B. V, m. 6). This view concerning eternity is also crucial to his reconciliation of free will and divine foreknowledge.¹⁴ This answer leads many to read Boethius as an Eternalist. This is true because all Three Persons of the Trinity experience time in this way. However, Boethius also, in removing limitations from God's knowledge, allows for the Incarnation because it is possible and true in the Boethian tradition that God knows time temporally, showing that he cannot be an eternalist. Boethius manages to preserve God's sovereignty in His timelessness, but also His fittingness in the Incarnation. This position then, both highlights the positive aspects of both positions while amending their flaws.

A common objection to my argument is that the Eternalist and Open Theistic positions cannot be reconciled. An Open Theist would respond, if God is outside time, how can He also work in time? This seems to be difficult to reconcile. However, God cannot be limited by time. This is why the eternalists argue that he must experience time in a tenseless view because the tensed view implies limitations. A Boethian would respond to this objection by highlighting that God's knowledge is based on an eternal present. This solution does not mean that God cannot work inside time. God in fact does work in time despite being outside time. Time in this case is just in a tenseless (relational) construct of time.¹⁵ The Open Theists then would be grossly mistaken for applying the tensed view of time to God's experience, since the tensed view is to be understood in the everlasting stance.

As per another objection, an Eternalists would argue that God is not a temporal being since temporal beings have beginnings and ends whereas God does not. Rather, there is a stark contrast

¹⁴ The argument that Boethius makes is fascinating, but ultimately not essential to the contents of this paper.

¹⁵ It can be argued that tensed time does not exist, as McTaggart does.

to experiencing time as an eternal present and knowing time as a temporal phenomenon. If God is outside of time, then He cannot know time as it is inside of time. If we turn back to the example of the Incarnation, we see several flaws with this argument. Like the problem with the Open Theists, this view on *Kairos* implies limitations on God. Why is it the case that God must not know time temporally? Christ surely knew time temporally and He is a divine Person. However, even if we exclude the Incarnation from the argument, the problems for the Eternalists still remain. God's experience and God's knowledge are different. God can fully experience time while being outside of it and as an eternal present. However, this is not exclusive to God knowing time temporally.

The overlapping objections lie in the compatibility between tensed and tenseless time. It seems normal for us to experience time as a past, present, and future. We live in a world of causes and as such, things change and we can point to the past, present, and future as separate and real phenomenon. Likewise, we also refer to time relationally and discuss events as "before" or "after," signifying the importance of the tenseless view of time. But we are not God! If we reconcile these two views of time, then we clearly see a compatibility that not only removes limitations to God, but it compliments His work especially seen in the Christian tradition.

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