THE EVIDENTIAL PROBLEM OF EVIL, GREATER GOOD THEODICY, AND A STATIC CONCEPTION OF TIME

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*I affirm the honor code.

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Observing the full measure of evil in the world, much of which appears gratuitous from a human perspective, one may conclude that God's allowing of such a world renders His existence implausible. This is known as the Evidential Problem of Evil (EPOE). Christian apologists have raced to the podium to provide a sound theodicy, or a morally sufficient reason for God permitting evil and the extent to which it occurs, to answer the EPOE. Typically, God's morally sufficient reason stems from the claim that he allows evil in order *to bring about some greater good* or *to prevent a state of affairs that contains greater evil*; hence, they are called Greater Good Theodicies (GGT). Which view of time one adopts will have significant implications for how God "brings about" greater goods from particular evils and ultimately defeats evil. Time can be broadly conceptualized as being either *static* or *dynamic*. Static conceptions of time affirm that *past, present, and future events never cease to exist*: every event exists at its perspective moment in the whole of time. Dynamic conceptions of time affirm that *there is an objective passage of time*: the past ceases to exist, and the future has yet to exist. In this paper, I argue that GGT fails to solve the EPOE on a static conception of time. I will demonstrate this by briefly explaining the arguments for and against both conceptions of time. Then I will offer five critiquing arguments against a static conception of time from its implication that evil "still exists."[1]

[1] It would be impossible to fully evaluate the competing theories of time in a paper of this size. However, the objective is to provide insights into why the interaction between the problem of evil and the philosophy of time turns out to have significant theological consequences. God's relationship to time—whether timeless or omnitemporal—has a place within this discussion, but is not the main objective. Rather, it is the evaluation of how static time coheres with a solution to the EPOE. For many Christians, time may seem like an obvious concept: one moment passes into the next, leaving the past behind and arriving at the present moment, which was once the future. Taken literally, this common thought represents a dynamic understanding of time. Many philosophers and physicists, even those who are born-again Christians, understand time as changeless in its entirety,

Dynamic Conception of Time

To say that time is dynamic or changing is to identify an objective passage of time from one moment to the next. The present is real and objectively exists "now." The past and future objectively do not exist. Advocates of dynamic time conclude that time must be *tensed* (known as the A-theory of time) as opposed to *tenseless* (known as the B-theory of time). For example, the sentence "Jesus of Nazareth was crucified" expresses a tensed statement—namely, that the event occurred in the past. If time is tensed, then the flow of time is an objective feature of reality, and the present moment distinguishes what has already occurred in the past from what has not occurred yet in the future.[2] Christian thinkers who ascribe to this view of time tend to accept God as omnitemporal, existing temporally throughout all time and experiencing the present as we do.

William Lane Craig provides extensive scholarship on the arguments for and against a dynamic conception of time. As a brief summary, Craig presents a case for a dynamic conception of time, featuring twin inductive arguments: the ineliminability of tense from language and the human experience of temporal passage as a properly basic belief.[3] Advocates of static time critique the linguistic argument on one of two fronts. First, an idea attributed to Bertrand Russell, that tensed sentences can be expressed tenselessly without a loss in meaning. To the contrary, contemporary philosophers have shown that tenselessly translated sentences do not hold equal meaning to their tensed counterparts.[4] Second, D. H. Mellor defends the view that tensed

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while acknowledging that specific moments within the entire structure change at its different points. William Lane Craig, *Time and Eternity: Exploring God's Relationship to Time* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001), 167.

[2] Within the ontology of time—the study of which moments of time actually exist—there are multiple views that are compatible with a dynamic conception of time, such as presentism (the view that only the present exists), growing-block theory (the view that past and present moments exist, but not future moments), shrinking-block theory (the view that the present and future are real—hence, "shrinking"—but not the past), and morphing-block theory (the view that the flow of time is not necessarily linear, and that the past and future can really change). Therefore, an advocate of the dynamic conception of time does not necessarily believe that only the present exists. Rather, they necessarily believe that time objectively changes. Since presentism is the common perspective, I will proceed with a bias towards it throughout the discussion.

[3] Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 115-163.

[4] Craig, *Time and Eternity,* 118.

sentences are not necessarily dependent on tensed facts.[5] Craig subsequently argues that Mellor's account fails to coherently describe truth conditions for tensed sentences.[6]

Furthermore, Craig explores two arguments against a dynamic conception of time. Cambridge philosopher John Ellis McTaggart argues for the self-contradiction of tensed time, concluding the unreality of time itself, which has come to be known as McTaggart's Paradox.[7] A second argument against a dynamic view proposes that the passage of time is merely a psychological feature of reality that does not correspond to the true nature of time itself. Craig concludes that neither of these arguments suffices against a *true* dynamic conception of time. I encourage the reader to view Craig's interaction with these arguments further.

Static Conception of Time

If time is static, then there is no objective passage of time. What we experience as "now" is not a true feature of reality. Indeed, the human experience of the passage of time and temporal becoming is illusory. On this view, the universe is generally taken to be a four-dimensional space-time block containing various singular points, with time being a fourth dimension. Each point or moment within the fourth dimension of time is equally real. Nothing passes away or goes out of existence; everything always exists in the point at which it occurs. All moments of time exist eternally. According to proponents of a static view, since there is no objective feature of tense, time is tenseless.[8] In terms of temporal ordering, the best we can objectively describe a tenseless universe is to speak of *before and after* relations. Events occur before or after other events, but there is no past, present, and future, literally speaking. Christians who accept the tenseless theory frequently believe God to be timeless.

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[5] Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 116.

[6] Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 121.

[7] J. Ellis McTaggart, "The Unreality of Time," *Mind* 17, no. 68 (1908): 457-474.

[8] I previously mentioned that this is famously known as the B-theory of time. In the study of the ontology of time, this view can be called Eternalism.

Although Craig ultimately adopts a dynamic conception of time, he lays out a noteworthy case for a static conception. Advocates of this view primarily appeal to their interpretation of Albert Einstein's Theory of Relativity as the crucial supporting argument.[9] Interpreting STR realistically, as Herman Minkowski did in 1908, implies a static conception of time, since the whole of four-dimensional spacetime itself never changes.[10] Craig offers several reasons why the space-time interpretation is superior to Einstein's own relativity interpretation. However, he defends a third interpretation, the Lorentzian interpretation, which posits the existence of absolute simultaneity and is compatible with a dynamic conception of time.[11] I am not arguing for a particular interpretation here, but merely offering considerations regarding a static view.

Advocates of a dynamic conception have argued against a static conception on the charge that they have misinterpreted relativity theory by "spatializing" time.[12] Time is no longer a temporal dimension but becomes part of the physical dimension, meaning that time no longer exists as a previous notion. In fact, how can a tenseless universe maintain any sense of temporal ordering, even simply before and after relations? According to philosopher Peter Kroes, "This tenseless occurrence of events only leads to a formal ordering relation between the physical

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[9] Although Einstein originally presupposed a dynamic view of time, he later became in favor of a static view, seeing the universe as four dimensional rather than three dimensional. Craig notes that strictly based on Einstein's relativity interpretation, Relativity Theory is compatible with a dynamic view of time. Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 167-188.

[10] Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 167-169. See H. Minkowski, "Space and Time," in *The Principle of Relativity*, by A. Einstein, et al., trans. W. Perrett and G. B. Jeffrey (New York: Dover Publications, 1952) 73-91.

[11] He summarizes his perspective as follows: "A Lorentzian theory of relativity is wholly compatible with the reality of tense and temporal becoming, since these are characteristics of absolute time. Hypothetical observers using Einstein's conventions for synchronizing clocks may calculate that some distant event is present, past, or future depending upon their relative motion, but these judgments are not to be taken literally, since the measuring devices used by such observers are distorted in virtue of their motion relative to the privileged reference frame, and therefore their judgments are skewed. Only an observer at rest in the privileged frame can use Einstein's procedure for synchronizing clocks in order to determine what events are really present." Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 173-174.

[12] Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 188-189.

events, not to a temporal ordering."[13] Additionally, Craig strongly discourages the notion that temporal becoming is illusory. In the first place, it contradicts with human experience, as we do experience temporal becoming. Static theorists have poses the response that temporal becoming is real but "mind-dependent." That is to say that if there were no minds or conscious beings to experience temporal becoming, then it would not exist. Past, present, and future are only possible if minds are able to perceive them. However, the question is "how the presence of conscious minds serves to introduce temporal becoming into this static picture."[14] Another problem with a static conception is the issue of intrinsic change and perdurantism—that objects extend in spacetime through temporal parts—which will be examined later on.[15] Again, I encourage the reader to explore these critiques and responses further.

Greater Good Theodicy and Time

Now that we have summarized the two conceptions of time, the problem that arises should be fairly obvious. On a dynamic conception, evil is a past event. It is no longer in existence. One day, Christ will return and complete his triumph over evil by eliminating it from existence. On a static conception, evil exists equally and permanently at the time of each event. The crucifixion of Jesus still exists. Christ is permanently hanging on a cross and enduring excruciating pain. This event does not "pass away," as it does in a dynamic view. Every particular instance of evil will always exist at its respective moment in spacetime.. Herein lies the connection to the EPOE. The Christian will ultimately argue that God has some good reason for allowing evil, such as character building, divine judgment, possibility of higher virtues, displays of divine mercy, and the possibility of redemption in Christ (Felix Culpa). If GGT is probable and explanatorily powerful, then it is not improbable that God exists given the amount

[13] Peter Kroes, *Time: Its Structure and Role in Physical Theories*, Synthese Library 179 (Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1985), 210.

[14] Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 197.

[15] Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 200.

of evil. But on a static conception of time, does GGT morally outweigh the amount of evil? I argue that since evil "still exists" on a static conception of time, the GGT does not sufficiently outweigh the extent of evil in the world. At the very least, the static view is explanatorily inferior to the dynamic view on how it accounts for the GGT. I will demonstrate this using the following five arguments.

Temporal Becoming

The crux of a GGT is to demonstrate that God's morally sufficient reason for permitting the gross extent of evil in the world is that he brings about some greater good from it. The good result must outweigh the evil, but it is not always easy to measure the value of a particular good against a particular evil. Part of what makes the good more valuable is that they "become of" what "was once" evil. That is, the evil passes away, and the good replaces it. We see this exemplified in character-building theodicies, where some evil act produced wondrous fruits in a person. Jesus said that cutting off your right hand for the sake of righteousness is better than having your entire body sent to hell (Matt 5:30). Although speaking hyperbolically, Jesus's theological point remains literally true: eternal gain is more important than earthly pain that passes away (2 Cor 4:18). Ultimate value comes from eternal life in Christ, not from temporary pain and suffering—although these are very real and can be unfathomably difficult (Rom 8:18). The temporariness of evil and its "passing out of existence" contrast with the eternal nature of the good. The "replacement" of evil with the good represents one aspect of what makes the good morally outweigh the consequences of evil, which is central to a GGT. My argument is that this only makes sense on a dynamic conception of time. On that view, evil truly does pass out of existence and "becomes" good as providentially accomplished by God. On a static conception, this is not the case. Evil events do not end or pass out of existence; it is not temporary, in contrast

to the biblical teaching. While the good may come "after" the evil, both the good and the evil are equally real and equally exist. The moral value of the good over the evil is in doubt.[16]

Elimination of Evil

Insofar as particular evil events have been mentioned as they relate to the GGT, a similar critique applies to the existence of evil itself. Andrew Hollingsworth, a professor at Temple Baptist Theological Seminary, presents a clear and persuasive argument for a dynamic conception of time grounded in "the elimination of evil" (EOE).[17] In his case, the idea that all moments in space-time are equally real is shown to be theologically inconsistent with the EOE, since sin and evil ultimately remain in existence. He rhetorically exemplifies his argument by noting that "While it may be true, for example, that Ignatius of Antioch enjoys the EOE and God's eternal peaceful kingdom at the eschaton, it is also true that Ignatius 'still' concretely endures the torturous death of being mauled by lions."[18] The same can be said for the cross. I argue that is morally unacceptable. But there is an additional theological problem for the static theorist. In what sense does Christ truly conquer sin and death at his return? He would not eliminate them from existence, which seems inconsistent with the biblical data (Rev 21:4). The triumph of Christ over sin, death, and evil is implicitly undermined.

Hollingsworth anticipates that defenders of a static view will posit some form of hypertime, i.e., a higher dimension of time, in order to hypothesize that God changes the past to make it as if evil had never occurred at all.[19] Two unavoidable problems arise from this form of

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[16] This has similar ramifications to Craig's criticism of the problem of *Creatio Ex Nihilo*, where he argues that "A robust doctrine of creation therefore involves both the affirmation that God brought the universe into being out of nothing at some moment in the finite past and the affirmation that He thereafter sustains it in being moment by moment." Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 212. He develops this argument more extensively in an article. William Lane Craig, "Creation and Conservation Once More," *Religious Studies* 34 (1998): 177-188.

[17] Andrew Hollingsworth, "Eschatology, the Elimination of Evil, and the Ontology of Time," *TheoLogica: An International Journal for Philosophy of Religion and Philosophical Theology* 8, no. 1 (June 2024): 166-184.

[18] Hollingsworth, "Eschatology, the Elimination of Evil, and the Ontology of Time," 171.

[19] Hollingsworth, "Eschatology, the Elimination of Evil, and the Ontology of Time," 172.

explanation: first, if God changes the past to the extent that he erases all evil from the world, then *God would literally not know that evil had occurred*, which challenges his omniscience; and second, if God erases all sin and evil, then there would be *nothing to conquer or atone for*. Both his knowledge and triumph are undermined. If God eliminated evil by wiping away moments in time, God would literally forget that he eliminated evil, because to remember his own actions against evil is to remember that evil previously existed. And if God did so, the atonement, along with his inevitable defeat of sin and death, is rendered gratuitous. Hollingsworth takes it even further with original sin: "Let's suppose that God eliminates Adam's original sin from the timeline. This would not result in a mere redemption or transformation of the timeline; rather, it would result in an entirely new timeline, a very literal new creation… History will be completely re-written."[20] This supposed "solution" causes all sorts of new problems. Therefore, I do not find hypertime and "the elimination of evil by changing the past" to be a plausible solution.

Temporal Ordering

Now I approach the static view from its logical coherence. If Kroes is correct that a tenseless theory cannot explain temporal ordering, then the entire structure of GGT falls apart. Namely, because it would not be logically true to say that God "brings about" some greater good from evil events. The four-dimensional block universe would have a sequence of physical events, but not a sequence of temporal events. The notion that God "brings about" some greater good is essential to GGT, but false according to static time. The two are incoherent. I argue that a temporal ordering is a necessary component of how God uses evil to establish the greater good. God tenselessly (and perhaps timelessly) using an evil event, which obviously comes first, to then bring about some greater good, is to assume temporal ordering. To say that God brings about some greater good from every instance of evil *physically*, but not *temporally*, is highly objectionable. Therefore, the static conception is logically incompatible with GGT, since GGT

[20] Hollingsworth, "Eschatology, the Elimination of Evil, and the Ontology of Time," 177.

assumes a temporal ordering of events, whereas a static view implies that such ordering is merely illusory. The only way for an advocate of static time to circumvent this critique is to offer a cogent account of temporal ordering on their view of time, or to redefine the parameters of GGT. Otherwise, only a dynamic conception of time is logically compatible with GGT, and so is the preferred view.

Temporal Parts

To make sense of a tenseless universe and divine timelessness, static theorists generally hold to an ontology of time known as perdurantism, which considers temporal objects as extended into temporal parts over its succession of moments, together constituting that object. Just as a person can be stretched out over certain points in space, so a person is "stretched" into different parts over time. Ryan Mullins argues that perdurantism fails to reconcile our eschatological hope in Christ with the problem of evil because the personal identity of the sufferer is not numerically identical to the personal identity of the one who receives eternal life. The personal counterparts who suffer will never cease to suffer, while the other counterparts experience eternal bliss.[21] This takes the previous critiques to a new extreme, for not only is it true that the *event* of suffering will never perish, but there is a (temporal) part of *each person* that never stops suffering. The stage of suffering in each person's life is actually coeternal with God.[22] A possible, yet inadequate, response to justify this conclusion is to say that the quantity of temporal parts that experiences eternal joy in Christ outweighs the temporal parts that experience suffering. While this seems obvious, however, it is not. For time is plausibly infinitely divisible, meaning between any two moments is another moment, in which the quantity of parts would be

[21] Ryan Mullins, "Four-Dimensionalism, Evil, and Christian Belief," *Philosophia Christi* 16, no. 1 (2014), 128. In a subsequent article, Mullins argues extensively for the reconciliation between the ontology of time and the eschatological hope in Christ. Ryan Mullins, "The Ontology of Time and Hope in the Resurrection: A Critical Examination of Eschatological Presentism," *Journal of the Oxford Graduate Theological Society* 3, no. 1 (2022): 149-168.

[22] Mullins, "Four-Dimensionalism, Evil, and Christian Belief," 128.

equally infinite.[23] Again, for a GGT to make sense, the good must sufficiently outweigh the evil. Even if time is not held to be infinitely divisible, the theological problem of eternal suffering and evil remains. A dynamic conception of time avoids this deeply troubling concern by adopting endurantism, which holds that an object is wholly present at each moment it exists.

Moral Evil and Natural Evil

I have yet to distinguish between moral evil and natural evil, which, thus far, has been intentional. Now, I argue that a static conception of time has the same problems whether one is speaking of moral evil or natural evil. This is not so much a new argument as a reiteration that underscores the issue further. Defenders of a static view cannot get around the issue by saying that my critiques only apply to certain kinds of evil. Evil actualized through active moral agency has the same implications as evil stemming from natural disasters. In both cases, according to a static conception of time, evil eternally exists at whatever moment it occurs, whether a person commits a violent crime or a hurricane destroys an entire city. The sort of evil makes no difference. Moreover, this point applies equally to what some consider to be gratuitous evil. If a GGT accounts for gratuitous evil, as it should, then there arguably is no such thing as truly pointless evil, as God would turn it into some greater good. This is then subject to the previous arguments.

In bringing these five critiques to a conclusion, it is important to emphasize what I am saying and what I am not. My reasoning is not that time cannot be static because of the EPOE. Rather, I am suggesting that the most compelling case for the EPOE, which is some form of the greater good theodicy, does not adequately cohere with a static conception of time. Christians who are favorable towards the static view must find an alternative theodicy to solve the EPOE—but perhaps that alternative would run into similar problems—or redefine the parameters of GGT. I argue that this is unnecessary, as the dynamic view is persuasive on its own right and

[23] Mullins, "Four-Dimensionalism, Evil, and Christian Belief," 129.

coherent with GGT. My reasoning, therefore, concludes that in answering the EPOE with GGT, the dynamic conception of time is preferred.

Greater Good Theodicy and Dynamic Conception of Time

None of these critiques apply to the dynamic view of time: time is tensed, and the objective present exists and constantly changes. As previously mentioned, what seems to me to establish the plausibility of the GGT as a solution to the EPOE is, in part, the temporal ordering and becoming of the greater good in place of the evil. For this to occur, the evil must cease to exist. Only the dynamic view entails these temporal realities, whereas static time has shown to be inconsistent with them. Therefore, the major theological disparities between a dynamic and a static conception of time, given the context of the EPOE, lead us to prefer the former.

Conclusion

In conclusion, a static conception of time does not cohere with GGT, since evil will never pass away from existence and thus God will not "bring about" greater goods temporally in place of evil. Even if evil is absent from the eternal life of God's people, the experience of evil never truly ends. GGT is incompatible with the lack of temporal ordering, for only in a non-temporal sense could God be said to "bring about" a greater good, which strips the theodicy of its merit. The fundamental theological understanding of God's triumph over evil is reduced to a mere physical reality, and one that does not occur in objective time, namely, because there would be no objective time. The theological and emotional ramifications for static time in light of the EPOE are unavoidable. These criticisms should be dealt with by any proponent of static time who attempts to respond to the EPOE with GGT. In dynamic time, the past is a series of previous moments that no longer exist. Only on this view of time does God coherently "bring about" greater goods and defeat evil. For this reason, the dynamic conception of time proves to be the only consistent view of time when offering a GGT.

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