

Omniscience, Time, and Eternity: Is Aquinas Inconsistent?

Kevin M. Staley
Saint Anselm College

Thomas Aquinas holds that as far as temporal things are concerned, only present things exist. He also holds that God knows immediately, all at once, in a single act, the past, present, and future. Critics contend his holding both positions is incoherent. In this essay, I examine the arguments against Aquinas by both his direct and indirect accusers, and I consider two recent replies offered on Aquinas' behalf. Having indicated certain weaknesses in the case for the defense, I conclude by offering a simple defense of my own, which I believe to be effective and textually grounded.

Thomas Aquinas holds that as far as temporal things are concerned, only present things exist. He also holds that God knows immediately, all at once, in a single act, the past, present, and future. Critics contend his holding both positions is incoherent. Coherence, they argue, requires either that Aquinas deny God an immediate knowledge of the whole of time or that he affirm that the past and the future exist along with the present. My intention is to defend Aquinas against the charge of incoherence.

Criticism of Aquinas is both direct and indirect. In recent work on Anselm, Katherin Rogers contends that God's perfect knowledge of the whole of time logically entails eternalism. Eternalism, as Rogers defines it, holds that all times—past, present, and future—are equally real and that the apparent non-reality of the past and future is a function of our limited cognitive capacities.¹ Since Aquinas' concept of God's perfection is the same as Anselm's, if Rogers is right, Aquinas is wrong about time. Delmar Lewis and William Lane Craig have directly charged Aquinas with incoherence as well. In this essay, I will examine the arguments against Aquinas by both his direct and indirect accusers, and I will consider two recent replies offered on Aquinas' behalf. Having indicated certain weaknesses in the case for the defense, I will conclude by offering a simple defense of my own, which I believe to be effective and textually grounded.

I. Aquinas Under Fire

Rogers has presented a number of arguments for eternalism and against presentism. Presentism holds that "all that exists, exists in the present since that is all there is."² She argues that God's perfection entails that He knows each moment in time directly and immediately. Since direct knowledge of a non-existent is *per se* impossible, every instant in time must exist all at once. Moreover, "if all times are equally real in the eyes of God, they are equally real

¹ "Anselmian Eternalism," p. 1. Forthcoming in *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*.

² *Ibid.*

simpliciter since it is God's perspective that determines ultimate reality."³ Presentism undermines divine perfection. For if only the present moment exists, argues Rogers, then: 1) God's knowledge changes; 2) God does not know what time it is now; and 3) his knowledge of the future is not direct or immediate. God's knowledge changes since He would not know future events until they actually occur. God does not know what time it is now; for if only the "now" enjoys the unique privilege of actual existence, and if God's knowledge bears upon the past, present, and future in identical fashion, then God's knowledge would be blind to the privileged "now." Finally, if the future does not exist, then "God's knowledge of the future is not derived from future events being actually present to him," since only actually existent entities can be present to one another.⁴ In sum, the claims "that God perfectly knows individuals at the same time they exist and that He knows all time as if it were present can be reconciled only on the thesis that all time is actually present to God."⁵

Aquinas' two metaphors for exemplifying the relationship of God's eternal knowledge to time, together with his account of God's knowledge of future contingents, strongly suggest that he, like Anselm, should abandon presentism and adopt eternalism.

The first metaphor had been popularized by Boethius. God is compared to an observer high in a watchtower who observes the whole of a passing parade below. Temporal observers are on the ground near the parade and see it only bit by bit.⁶ But since members of the parade co-exist, using this metaphor seems to commit Aquinas to the co-existence of the past, present, and future. Aquinas' second metaphor compares God to the center of a circle. As a circle's center is equidistant and directly opposed to each point on the circle's circumference, so God is equally present to and knowledgeable of each moment in time. But again, the metaphor suggests that moments in time, like the points on the circumference, co-exist. Thus, John Delmas Lewis has contended:

This spatial analogy reveals that Aquinas, like Anselm, conceives of time primarily as a linear continuum, such that instants of time are strictly analogous to points on a line. . . . As with Anselm's analogy, the explanatory force of Aquinas' analogy is purchased at a certain metaphysical price. It is only because all of the points on the circumference exist together and in the same way that each may be related in the same way to the center. . . . What does follow is that all temporal objects and events co-exist timelessly in the eternal present.⁷

One might dismiss Lewis' contention by arguing that he has simply pushed Aquinas' metaphor too far. Yet Aquinas' account of God's knowledge of future contingents lends theoretical weight to Lewis' argument. According to Aquinas, future things can be known in

³ Ibid. p. 10.

⁴ Rogers, unpublished manuscript.

⁵ Rogers, unpublished manuscript.

⁶ See *Compendium Theologiae* 133; *De Veritate* II, 12 resp.; and *Summa Theologiae* I, Q. 14, art. 13, ad 3.

⁷ J. Delmas Lewis, "Eternity, Time, and Tenselessness," *Faith and Philosophy*, Vol. 5, January 1988, pp. 72–86; p. 80.

their causes in three ways. They can be known necessarily if the future is a necessary effect of its cause. Aquinas thinks the prediction of an eclipse is an example of this kind of knowledge. Things can be known only conjecturally if the cause only tends toward the production of an effect and can be impeded by other causes. Such is the case for foreknowledge of a successful harvest. Finally, future events cannot be known at all if they exist in their cause which is equally disposed to opposite effects, as is the case for free choice.⁸ Since future contingents must exist in their causes in only the second or third of the aforementioned modes, no certain knowledge can be had of future contingents by knowing their causes. According to Aquinas, not even God can have infallible knowledge of future contingents through knowledge of their causes.⁹ God, who knows actual existents in his power, in their secondary causes and in themselves,¹⁰ has infallible knowledge only when He knows them in themselves.

Aquinas' explication of the meaning of the phrase "in themselves" leaves little doubt that it means "as they are actually existing by their own proper act of existence." He uses various phrases: "prout unumquodque eorum est actu in seipso"; "in sua existentia"; and "esse quod habent . . . in seipsis."¹¹ In short, "a contingent is referred to divine knowledge according to its act of existence in the realm of nature."¹² From these and related passages, William Lane Craig concludes: "Thus, the presence of all things to God does not seem to be merely epistemic; rather, Aquinas' understanding of foreknowledge seems to require that the past and the future be ontologically on par with presently existing reality."¹³ He adds: "Nevertheless, I find it inconceivable that he [Aquinas] consciously adhered to such a theory of time. For him, becoming was not mind-dependent, but real...."¹⁴

That Aquinas would have considered eternalism inconceivable is, I think, evident on two grounds. First, his methodology is an empirical one. The evidence of the senses, not the perfection of God, is where one is to begin. Surely Aquinas was aware that the world is not always exactly as it appears. So, one can imagine that Aquinas might reluctantly concede the

⁸ *In Aristotle's Libros Peri Hermeneias et Posteriorum Analyticorum Expositio*, lect. 14, 19.

⁹ *De Veritate*, II, 12, ad 6.

¹⁰ *Summa Contra Gentiles* I, 66. 8.

¹¹ "Respectu cuius, si tempus locutionis de medio subtrahatur, non est dicere hoc esse cognitum quasi non existens, ut locum habeat quaestio qua quaeritur an possit non esse: sed sic cognitum dicitur a Deo ut iam in sua existentia visum." *Summa Contra Gentiles* I, 67.9 (Textum Leoninum emendatum ex plagulis de prelo Taurini 1961 editum). "Et horum cognitio dicitur notitia visionis: non enim Deus rerum quae apud nos nondum sunt, videt solum esse quod habent in suis causis, sed etiam illud quod habent in seipsis, inquantum eius aeternitas est praesens sua indivisibilitate omni tempore." *Ibid.* 66.11. (Textum Leoninum emendatum ex plagulis de prelo Taurini 1961 editum). "Deus autem cognoscit omnia contingentia, non solum prout sunt in suis causis, sed etiam prout unumquodque eorum est actu in seipso." *Summa Theologiae* I, 14, art. 13, resp. (Textum Leoninum Romae 1888 editum).

¹² "Ad secundum dicendum, quod sicut dictum est, contingens refertur ad divinam cognitionem secundum quod ponitur esse in rerum natura: ex quo autem est, non potest non esse tunc quando est, quia quod est, necesse est esse quando est, ut in I perihemeneias dicitur; non tamen sequitur quod simpliciter sit necessarium, nec quod scientia Dei fallatur, sicut et visus meus non fallitur dum video Socratem sedere, quamvis hoc sit contingens." *De Veritate*, 2, 12, ad 2 (Textum Leoninum Romae 1970 editum).

¹³ Craig, William, "Aquinas on God's Knowledge of Future Contingents," *Thomist*, Vol. 54.1, January 1990, pp. 33–79; p. 62.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

subjectivity of secondary qualities. But that the past no longer exists is so global a feature of our sensory knowledge of the world, should the past really exist, the testimony of the senses is no longer credible. Conceding the reality of the past or future undermines completely Aquinas' empiricism. Second, two principal categories of Aquinas' metaphysics—the categories of act and potency—are founded upon the reality of change. Should each moment of change co-exist with all the others, change is not real and the concept of potentiality, it seems to me, is completely undermined. So conceding the reality of the past and future undermines Aquinas' metaphysics as well. If eternalism is true, Aquinas' entire epistemological and metaphysical project collapses.

II. Recent Defenses of Aquinas and their Weaknesses

Brian Leftow and Brian Shanley have recently defended Aquinas in this matter. Each adopts a similar strategy. The key lies in making some crucial distinction so that the non-existential actuality of the past or the future in itself is compatible with God's eternal knowledge of the past and future as actual.

Brian Leftow attempts to make this distinction by appealing to Einstein's theory of relativity. Just as the same physical event can both be and not be simultaneous with another in different frames of reference, so something can be actual in God's eternal frame of reference even though it is not actual in some human, temporal frame of reference. As Leftow sees it, Aquinas contradicts himself only if he claims that an event is both actually existent and non-existent in the same frame of reference. But Aquinas never makes such a claim.

While initially appealing, Leftow's frame-of-reference defense has several weaknesses. It does not adequately explain why it is that God's frame of reference does not trump all other frames of reference in regard to their relative veracity. Though one space-time observer may not be in a privileged position to judge simultaneity vis-à-vis other space-time observers, that is, though all space-time observers stand on the same ontological and epistemic footing, they do not stand on equal footing with God. Second, Leftow's position commits him to attributing a dual existence to created, temporal entities. He observes, for example, "if God's omniscience is to include knowledge of temporal creatures, then these creatures must also exist in eternity."¹⁵ But if God knows non-existent future contingents only as they exist in eternity, God does not know them in their own proper existence. If one responds that their own proper existence is just their existence in eternity, then, it seems to me, one has conceded that eternalism is the case. If one insists that a contingent's temporal and eternal existences are distinct, then it is difficult to see why they are not two things rather than one.

Finally, A. N. Prior raises a strong objection to any frame-of-reference defense. "I simply cannot see," says Prior, "how the presentness, pastness, or futurity of any state of affairs can be in anyway relative to the persons to whom this state of affairs is known." The future, he argues, is open to alternatives in a way that the past is not. The past is wholly determinate, whereas the

¹⁵ Brian Leftow, "Aquinas on Time and Eternity," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, LXIV 3, 1990, pp. 387–399; here p. 398.

future, if truly contingent, is open to contrary alternatives. But something cannot be completely determinate for one observer and not for another. Any indeterminacy would lie on the side of the knower rather than the thing known. Thus, Prior concludes, the indeterminate state of future affairs “either exists or it doesn’t”; a past event “has already occurred or it hasn’t, and there’s the end to that.”¹⁶

Shanley’s defense of Aquinas begins by claiming that critics have been misled by the static, visual metaphors that Aquinas uses to exemplify God’s knowledge of time. Both the parade and the circle metaphor depict God as a static observer. But Aquinas, notes Shanley, construes God’s knowledge as the active cause of things. Because knowing Himself as cause means that God’s knows the effects to which his causality extends and because God’s causality extends to the singular, material existents, God knows all contingents.¹⁷ God’s knowledge of future contingents is, as Shanley sees it, just “a more complicated case,” “a subset of the larger question of how God knows contingents *simpliciter*.”¹⁸ Taking the causative dimension of God’s knowledge into account, argues Shanley, allows for a distinction between “(1) a created being considered as passively produced and subsisting in time as its proper measure and (2) the same created being considered as the effect or terminus of God’s eternal causal knowledge.”¹⁹

“Only when considered precisely as the effect of God’s creative activity and thus taken up into the measure of divine eternity,” Shanley continues, “do all temporal beings become present to and co-exist with God.”²⁰ Since God sees what exists at each moment as “causally,” not temporally present to Him,²¹ it does not follow from the fact that God sees the future as actual or present that it is in itself actual or present. Phrases such as “as present” and “all at once” in sentences like “God sees the whole of time as present all at once” do not, insists Shanley, modify the object known; rather they modify the way in which God knows them “according to the causal order eternally caused by Him.”²²

Shanley has provided an interesting and accurate account of the creative dimension of God’s knowledge that is often overlooked by Aquinas’ critics, but I do not think it will satisfy them for several reasons. First, Aquinas clearly distinguishes between God’s knowledge of future contingents as known in Himself, in their proximate causes, and in themselves.²³ It is the last of these modes of knowing, knowledge of the thing immediately in its own existent actuality, that gives grist to his critics’ mills. Shanley has argued that God eternally knows future contingents precisely under the formality of “the effect or terminus of God’s eternal causal

¹⁶A. Prior, “Formalities of Omniscience,” *Philosophy*, 37, 1962, pp. 114–29; p. 128.

¹⁷ Brian Shanley, “Eternal Knowledge of the Temporal in Aquinas,” *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. LXXI 2, pp. 197–224; see pp. 205–210.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 206.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 218.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 219–222.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 222.

²² Shanley, p. 232.

²³ *Summa Contra Gentiles*, I 66 8.

knowledge,”²⁴ but he has not sufficiently clarified how the preceding differs from God’s knowledge of future contingents in Himself.

Second, Shanley’s position entails that the following sentence is true: Some future contingent that does not exist in itself co-exists with God in eternity (as the terminus of His creative knowledge). But this is either false (given that only what exists in itself can co-exist with another) or it implies the same problematic dual-existence doctrine that characterized Leftow’s defense.

Third, some critics might charge that the key to Shanley’s defense of Aquinas, God’s knowledge as creative, also implies eternalism. For to claim that God creates in a single act directly and all at once the world as actually existing over some period of time seems as problematic, if not more problematic, than the claim that he knows the world in this fashion.

Finally, God’s act of creating (which can admit no difference in itself) is identically related to each moment in time; it is the very same act by which he causes something to exist at some time and at the next. So, if God’s knowledge mirrors His causality, His knowledge must be identically related to each moment in time as well. But on the presentist view, the “now” is unique and differs from the past and future in that it alone exists. Thus, on the presentist view, God does not know something that temporal knowers do, namely, what time it is now. Thus, we are back at our beginning. If God is perfect, presentism must be false.

III. Aquinas Re-defended

While not pretending to have discovered the final word on this matter, I believe that Aquinas can be successfully defended. First, I would like to note what Aquinas and his critics hold in common. Both embrace either implicitly or explicitly the following two principles. The first principle, here named the Principle of Co-existence, states that only that which exists in itself can, without qualification, be present to or co-exist with another. All other modes of co-existence, in thought or in causes, are qualified co-existence. The second, which I will call the principle of Absolute Existence, states that to refer to something as it exists in itself is to refer to it absolutely without qualification and not according to one of its aspects or its relations to another. Referring to something as existing in the mind of God, in His causality, or in a certain frame of reference is not to refer to the thing itself absolutely.

Appealing to the Principle of Co-existence, Aquinas’ critics contend that if God knows, is present to, and thus co-exists with things past and/or future, then He is present to them as they exist in themselves. Applying the Principle of Absolute Existence, they contend that past, present, and future must exist absolutely (and only seem not to exist to us). Aquinas, for whom the future does not exist, must, having accepted the first principle, claim that the future is not present to and does not co-exist with God until it exists. And indeed, he makes this claim in *De*

²⁴ Shanley, p. 221. Shanley admits that God has knowledge of the thing in itself and not merely as in intention (pp. 221–222).

veritate, Question II, article 12. Objection nine, which embraces a modified version of the co-existence principle, contends: “As something is related to actual existence, so it is related to truth. Since future contingents bear no relation to actual existence, they bear no relation to truth. True knowledge of future contingents is therefore impossible,”—even for God.²⁵ Aquinas agrees, but adds that “although a future contingent while it is future does not exist, still from the time it is present, it does exist and has truth, and in this way it stands under God’s vision.”²⁶ In other words, during the time in which it is non-existent, the future does not stand under God’s vision; it exists under God’s vision only when and not until it exists in itself.

What is crucial for understanding Aquinas’ position is noting and keeping constantly in mind that adverbial phrases such as “only when” and “not until” pertain to the creature that comes to exist and pertain in no way at all to the divine act of knowing. And therefore, although from the claim “the future is not seen by God until it is present,” the claim “God does not **now** know the future but **tomorrow** He will” seems truly to follow, it does not. It neither follows nor is true for the very simple reason that God no more exists in the temporal **now** than he does in the future or the past; and so God simply cannot be described as already possessing **now** or at any time knowledge of what will be or has been, though it is often convenient to speak in this way. How, then, are we strictly to speak of God’s knowledge of things temporal?

The clue lies in a simple statement late in Aquinas’ exposition of the circle metaphor mentioned earlier: “Something is not able to co-exist with eternity in the present except as being present to the whole of it,” says Aquinas, “since the eternal does not have the duration of succession.”²⁷ That is, the partlessness or simplicity of God’s eternity entails that what exists even for a moment must be present to God for all eternity. What makes the circle metaphor useful is not the co-existence of the points on the circumference; rather it is the simplicity of the center point. The center of a circle can be identically related to all points on the circumference, regardless of whether they co-exist or not, precisely and only because it lacks extension.

Aquinas makes a similar point in his exposition of the parade metaphor in the *De Veritate*.²⁸ He notes that when we human observers watch a parade, we see it bit by bit because

²⁵ “Praeterea, unumquodque sicut se habet ad esse, sic se habet ad verum. Sed futura contingentia non habent esse. Ergo nec veritatem; ergo non potest de eis scientia esse.”

²⁶ “Ad octavum dicendum, quod quamvis contingens, dum est futurum, non habeat esse, tamen ex quo est praesens, esse habet et veritatem; et sic divinae visioni substat....” Note that Aquinas’ response to Objection Nine begins with a reference to Objection Eight. The content of the response clearly indicates that it is a response to Objection Nine. Aquinas makes no response specific to Objection Eight. I am unaware of any explanation for this textual curiosity.

²⁷ “Aeterno autem non potest aliquid praesentialiter coexistere nisi toti: quia successionis durationem non habet.” *Summa Contra Gentiles*, I, 66.8.

²⁸ The entire passage in question reads as follows: “Si aliquis videret multos transeuntes per unam viam successive, et hoc per aliquod tempus, in singulis partibus temporis videret praesentialiter aliquos transeuntium, ita quod in toto tempore suae visionis omnes transeuntes praesentialiter videret; nec tamen simul omnes praesentialiter quia tempus suae visionis non est totum simul. Si autem sua visio tota simul posset existere, simul praesentialiter omnes videret, quamvis non omnes simul praesentialiter transirent; unde, cum visio divinae scientiae aeternitate mensuretur, quae est tota simul, et tamen totum tempus includit, nec alicui parti temporis deest, sequitur ut quidquid in tempore geritur, non ut futurum, sed ut praesens videat: hoc enim quod est a Deo visum est quidem futurum rei alteri, cui succedit in tempore; sed ipsi divinae visioni, quae non (est) in tempore, sed extra tempus, non est futurum, sed praesens.” *De Veritate* 2, 12, resp.

the time of our vision does not exist all at once. Were our vision not in itself successive or measured by time, we would see all at once the parade, which passes bit by bit before us, even though we stood next to it at some point along its path. What is interesting here is that Aquinas does not assign to the eternal knower a special perspective. In this passage, God is not likened to a man located high atop a tower. The parade does not stretch out before Him as a coexistent whole. What is important about the eternal knower is not a privileged perspective on reality that we lack; rather, it is that His knowing is not itself divided by time. Because his knowing is simple and partless, real succession in the object known does not give rise to succession in God's knowledge of the known.

Aquinas' account of God's eternal knowledge of time does not, therefore, require that eternalism be true. It requires only that the privileged actuality of the present when it is present be present to the whole of God's simple eternity. And this it cannot fail to do, for it is impossible to be present only to a part of that which is without parts. God's eternal knowledge of the temporal remains paradoxical; it would appear that although the future is not present to God, when it is present to Him, it will never be and will never have been absent from Him. Tensed verbs, even future perfects, fail us when thinking about God. Happily, however, the obscurity of this paradox does not compel us to deny, for fear of contradiction, the more evident truth that in matters temporal, only the present exists.