5. God, Eternality, and the View from Nowhere

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Within Judeo-Christian thought, the nature of god is characterized by the combination of a unique set of divine characteristics including omnipotence, omniscience, necessity, perfection, eternality, omnibenevolence and creator ex nihilo. Several logical and conceptual difficulties arise from attributing this set of different attributes to god. While some of these difficulties arise from attempting to reconcile members of the set with our experience (e.g., the problem of evil) and others arise from trying to reconcile the members of the set consistently with other members of the set, some of the most difficult and controversial difficulties arise from simply attempting to understand certain ones of these characteristics individually.

Of these attributes, considered individually, eternality proves to be one of the most important and thorniest to attempt to analyze. Eternality is one of the most important characteristics in the set of characteristics traditionally attributed to god because even a superficial analysis of the meaning of the claim that god is eternal indicates that god’s eternality is logically connected to claims concerning the other attributes – particularly the claim that god is necessary, the claim that god is immanent in the world, the claim that god knows or cares anything at all about human existence, or the claim that god is deserving of human worship, adoration and supplication. Concerns about god’s relation to time are not recent ones or unique to Judeo-Christian thought. Aristotle’s concern about the relationship of the Prime Mover to time and to the possibility of change in which temporal location would result were primary concerns which motivated his separation of the Prime Mover from the actual world of existent objects (including human beings). As all students of Aristotle are aware, if the Prime Mover is to be pure actuality and contain no change or even the possibility of change, then the Prime Mover must be completely “removed” from the actual world. Thus, Aristotle maintained that the pure actuality of the Prime Mover can be preserved only by making the sole object of the Prime Mover’s thought its own thought. The only connection between the Prime Mover with the actual world is accidental and incidental. Aristotle thus thinks that in order to consistently characterize the necessary nature of the Prime Mover it is necessary to remove the Prime Mover from all contact with the actual world. For the modern
theist, Aristotle’s price tag for such a Prime Mover is unacceptable since apparently such a creature could not be a proper object of worship.

Now it is well known that when St. Thomas Aquinas adopted Aristotle’s argument for the Prime Mover as his first and “most manifest” way of proving god’s existence, he ignored the momentous implications of Aristotle’s argument for the theist. Aquinas simply says, “and this everyone understands to be god” or “this we call God”. Aquinas thus adopted and adapted the part of Aristotle’s argument concerning the Prime Mover which he considered to be attractive for the theist; however, he conveniently ignored what Aristotle took to be the logical implications of the argument for the nature of such a being. Consequently, for the modern philosopher, Aquinas’s price tag for such a being is unacceptable because of the difficulty of reconciling the claim that god is necessary and eternal with any claim about god’s immanence in the world or benevolence towards human beings or accessibility through prayer or supplication.

In addition to the famed dilemma of Plato’s Euthyphro, the theist is thus faced with the additional dilemma in trying to account for the relationship of a necessary being with time and the world. I will call this dilemma “the Unmoved Mover Dilemma”. This dilemma is such a thorny one that it is no wonder that Aquinas chose to ignore the whole problem. The Unmoved Mover Dilemma must be more fundamental and prior to the dilemma of the Euthyphro (the problem of evil dilemma) since in order for the problem of evil to arise, there must be some satisfactory explanation of the nature of god according to which god is aware of the existence of the world and human beings and cares about our well-being. The Unmoved Mover Dilemma presents the initial, ostensible choice for the theist between a necessary being which is eternal and immutable on the one hand and one which is aware of human existence, immanent in the world, and concerned and involved with human affairs on the other. The difficulty, of course, is to provide an account of how god can be both. It is crucial for the classical theist within traditional Judeo-Christian thought to have some understanding of the nature of god according to which god can be consistently and manifestly concerned with human affairs and active in human history without being changed by that involvement.

I have earlier argued that it is possible to provide an empirical understanding for claims concerning god’s eternality in such a manner so that one can make sense of such claims without having to deny completely that god can be a proper object of meaningful temporal predication. A satisfactory understanding of the notion of eternality is the first step toward the possibility of providing some plausible response for the theist to the dilemma of the Unmoved Mover. In order to account for god’s involvement in human affairs, it is necessary that the theist be able to make temporal claims meaningfully about god, e.g., “god appeared to Moses on Mount Sinai”, “god loves us”, and “god is watching over us”. There are many considerations which enter into making god a proper object of worship for the theist (For example, it seems that god must be deserving of our worship, and hence, the problem of evil raises the question of