

# Time and Eternity in Hegel

*Andrzej Karpinski*

Regent's Park College, University of Oxford

[andrzej.karpinski@regents.ox.ac.uk](mailto:andrzej.karpinski@regents.ox.ac.uk)

## Abstract

This paper constitutes an argument for the contemporary relevance of Hegel's conception of eternity and its relation to time for debates in recent philosophy of religion. It is based upon two fundamental observations about Hegel's system. Firstly, that it establishes a priori the meaning of eternal divinity as the modern rendering of the logos, and hence does not make it in any way dependent upon worldly understanding of time. On the contrary, it is a particular Hegelian philosophy of time which emerges out of the logical development of eternity itself. Secondly, it provides for a mediation between eternity and time which allows to answer many objections posed to traditional concepts of timelessness (for example its relation to creation, contingency, etc.). As an introduction to the debate, I offer at the outset a selection of both classical (Boethius, Augustine) and contemporary models of the relation between time and eternity. Next, I elaborate upon Hegel's understanding of eternity as circular becoming through successive determination as presented in the Science of Logic. Here, I argue that Hegel's understanding of the eternal Absolute allows him to circumvent the boundaries of established ideas on eternity's relation to time. I further indicate that the most useful resource allowing to understand Hegel's notion of eternity and temporality can be found in his Philosophy of Nature, which forms a logical development out of the Idea's self-determination (Hegel's account of creation), and which contains his original conception of time as modelled on, though not identical with, the atemporal becoming of the Idea. I end by recapitulating the comparison of Hegel's relation between time and eternity and the models outlined before, arguing throughout that the utility of Hegel's thought in those debates does not necessitate an unreserved acceptance of his entire system.



## Introduction

The name G.W.F. Hegel is not frequently invoked in the discussions surrounding the relation between eternity and time in the context of contemporary philosophical theology. Perhaps it is largely owing to a popular understanding of Hegel as a philosopher of purely *historical* development – an understanding which I will indicate is deeply misleading. Hegelian thought, as will be here argued, provides important and unique conceptual tools for conceiving of this relationship, which become increasingly important, especially in the wake of the revival of interest in German idealism in theological circles throughout recent decades.

The context of Hegel's philosophical work is important for understanding his project as an attempt to return to the relevance of eternity for modern thought, which this paper will argue is also legitimate for contemporary debates in philosophy of religion. It is largely a reaction to Kant, who diminished the cosmological role of eternity which it enjoyed before the dawn of modernity, through considering it largely as an unnecessary postulate of pure reason (alongside the traditional concept of God in general).<sup>1</sup> Therefore, for Hegel, philosophical theology which intended to be genuine after Kant could not simply return to the Platonic or Aristotelian understanding of time and eternity, upon which much of prior Christian doctrine was built.<sup>2</sup> The wake of modernity in general and Kant's critical philosophy in particular did not allow for eternity to be simply postulated as part of a harmonious whole with nature. Hegel understood this shift in philosophical paradigm, and focussed his project partially on showing how an understanding similar to this Classical one could be logically developed from the state of pure lack of all presuppositions. The way which would lead to this is one of dialectic, wherein a logical category makes itself explicit as actually belonging to a larger, all-encompassing frame of reference. Such a thinking lets us develop a concept of God as the omnipresent Absolute, which is also present in nature as this nature's very universality. This context and method of Hegel's work reveal two crucial ways in which his philosophy might offer a new perspective on the time-eternity distinction.

Firstly, Hegel's idealism might serve to re-orient the time-eternity debate by thinking more 'from above' than 'from below'. One of the core problems of many accounts of the relation of God to time is that they assume a certain view of time, creation, and/or 'coherence', and then think whether a concept of God with certain attributes would be compatible with it. This is again a result of a certain post-Kantian way of thinking, in which what is immediately given is sensuous intuition interpreted through categories.

---

<sup>1</sup> See Alistair Welchman's chapter "Eternity in Kantian and Post-Kantian Thought," in *Eternity: A History*, ed. Yitzhak Melamed, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 183-195.

<sup>2</sup> On Hegel's aim to prevent the 'secularization' of time, see S.F. Baekers, "Die Zeit als Mitte der Philosophie Hegels," *Hegel-Studien*, 30, (1995), 123.

Hegel, on the other hand, develops a conception of God through first inquiring into the very logical presuppositions of any thought itself. He shows that an examination of the way we think (and the way we think about time notwithstanding) is generally based upon the set of eternal basic logical categories, which then by themselves unfold into a certain conception of temporal procession. In other words, Hegel does not assume a category of time and its content based on sensuous intuitions as simply given, as Kant does in his transcendental aesthetic.<sup>3</sup> He rather seeks to determine the very *logos* of any thinking based on Kantian categories and intuitions. This *logos*, because it forms the basis of time is by definition eternal, and, as Hegel also wishes to show, is divine in the sense of being the content of the idea of an eternal 'God of the philosophers'.<sup>4</sup> A conception of God is developed *a priori*, from which a philosophy of time logically flows. In order to demonstrate this, this paper will consider particular Hegel's works in which he demonstrates his logical system proper – the *Science of Logic*, and *The Philosophy of Nature* which comprises the second volume of the *Encyclopaedia of the Logical Sciences*. Other works, most notably the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and the *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, were considered by Hegel himself as more 'applied' versions of his work, and a detailed discussion of how time and eternity interact in Hegel's speculative interpretation of the doctrines of Christianity goes beyond the scope of this paper.

Secondly, Hegel goes beyond many standpoints in philosophy of religion, as he pursues a method of dialectical logic. Most contemporary views in philosophy of religion assume that a fixed binary opposition (for example between time and eternity) cannot be incorporated within a broader category which would make the very difference between the two intelligible. Dialectics' distinctiveness from 'regular' logic is primarily that any positivity necessarily must include within itself a negation, which taken at face value might be considered a violation of the law of non-contradiction. However, it enables Hegel to establish a unique conception of eternity which *both* includes all temporality within itself (in the mode of its conceptual universality, in Platonic language, the realm of the Forms), *and* by virtue of this very fact maintains a distinction from time. Though it will be seen that some conceptions of eternity come close to such a unique mediation (most notably the idea of 'eternal duration'), they do not fully do so.

It must be noted that the argument of this paper concerning the utility of Hegelian thinking, is one that is fundamentally dialectical and 'from above', and does not include within itself a justification of the entire Hegelian system. It rather argues that there are specific *elements* of that thinking, concerning Hegelian cataphatic and dialectical deductions, which can provide solutions for

---

<sup>3</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 178ff. Of course, Kant does provide a transcendental exposition of the notion of time, but it is still not fundamentally grounded a priori as logically developed from other categories, but necessitates sensible intuition to, as it is, 'prove itself' to exist.

<sup>4</sup> See Klaus Hedwig, "Hegel: Time and Eternity," *Dialogue*, vol. 9 (2), (1970), 145.

problems regarding divine eternity's relation to time. Those elements cannot, or at least will not be shown, to provide solutions for *all* problems in philosophy of religion. That said, before moving to Hegel I need to briefly set the scene of some contemporary standpoints in the discussions surrounding time and eternity within philosophy of religion.

### Selected Models of the Relation Between Time and Eternity

The following main types of relations between time and eternity are to be considered as a selection of the many available, based on their popularity in recent philosophy of religion and significance for the Hegelian philosophy of time and eternity.

*Timelessness.* This view holds God to be essentially absolutely distinct from all temporal events and not under the impact of time in any possible way.<sup>5</sup> The biblical basis for such a view is possible to be derived, though has been frequently contested and remains arguable.<sup>6</sup> However, what is beyond argument is that it has been historically a very popular and influential view to hold in Christianity, particularly in the Patristic period. Such a dualistic vision is usually said to originate in Plato's and more broadly Platonic thought. For Plato, time is distinctively a created category, and only resembles eternity in its nature. Time is the 'eternity' for the world itself – there is no world without time, yet time itself is only confined to the created and transient order, not to the eternal realm of ideality. In other words, time is the '(...) likeness of eternity, a likeness that progresses eternally through the sequence of numbers, while eternity abides in oneness.'<sup>7</sup> The precise determination of time, however, was given not against that eternity, but rather inscribed within the temporal order through the movement of heavenly bodies.<sup>8</sup>

Boethius, a Neoplatonist, modifies Plato's ideas on thinking of God as eternal. 'Eternity is the whole, simultaneous, perfect possession of limitless life (...)' he claims.<sup>9</sup> The 'eternal present' within which God dwells is outside of what we perceive as the present moment. God, in Boethius' thought, has

---

<sup>5</sup> Paul Helm in *God and Time*, ed. Gregory E. Ganssle, (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 28-61. Cf. Paul Helm, *Eternal God: A Study of God Without Time*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988).

<sup>6</sup> Christoph Schwöbel concisely sketches the issue of Scripture (taken as a whole) showing God substantially to be outside time, yet also frequently (and metaphorically) picturing divine economy as always acting out within a temporal context. As a further note, Schwöbel's trinitarian framework for providing a description of God as both in and outside time is somewhat of a trinitarian 'application' of the more philosophical ideas developed in this paper. See Christoph Schwöbel, "The Eternity of the Triune God: Preliminary Considerations on the Relationship Between the Trinity and the Time of Creation," *Modern Theology*, 34 (3), (2018). For a broader discussion of the question of the biblical basis, see Alan G. Padgett's *God, Eternity and the Nature of Time*, (London: Macmillan, 1992), 23-37.

<sup>7</sup> Plato, *Timaeus and Critias*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 37d.

<sup>8</sup> Plato, 38e-39a.

<sup>9</sup> Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 168.

presence in which He exists perpetually within the world is also somehow simultaneous to all the linear development of time from absolute past to the absolute future.<sup>10</sup>

Another important contributor to the idea of divine eternity was Augustine. In his case, however, this contribution is ambiguous between concepts of *absolute* divine timelessness over against God's *everlastingness*. In the latter idea, the emphasis is placed not on God's absolute distinctiveness from time (which nevertheless isn't denied), but rather also existing *simultaneously* at all possible times – 'seeing' past, present and future through the same lens. For Augustine, time is a created reality similar to the world itself, following Platonic thought. God does not precede time in time – there was no 'time' in the same fashion before created time.<sup>11</sup> God has been doing 'nothing' before creation.<sup>12</sup>

*Relative Timelessness.* This view was proposed in recent philosophy of religion in order to prevent the doctrine of divine eternity from lapsing into some sort of divine temporality (as some strands of process theism insist), but on the other hand to acknowledge the need for some kind of change to occur within God.<sup>13</sup> According to proponents of relative timelessness, God creates time (*pace* Augustine and Boethius), but his nature itself is also changing within the framework of a 'divine' type of time. God's change does not depend in any way on the change that occurs within the world, but both can be conceived as the basis for two distinct types of time – the expression of the change within the created order, and the expression of change within God which allows him to 'sustain a dynamic, changing world'.

*Timelessness without creation.* This view is a response to the problems which ensue both within the theories of absolute timelessness (chiefly to do with relationship with creation and omniscience) as well as relative timelessness (also with reference to divine omniscience as well as change within God). Yet this standpoint also abides to the traditional understanding of these relations within which 'being within time' and 'being outside time' are unreconcilable (but which are reconciled in the framework of Hegel's dialectic).<sup>14</sup> Its proponents hold that God has been timeless before creating the world, yet the act of creating also means God's entering into time. In this 'post-creation' temporality, God is of course everlasting and existing simultaneously with every moment of time, yet within the framework of time which He has himself created. However, this view has often been criticized from the Augustinian side, as according to it, it cannot be said that there is in the nature of God any sense of a 'before' or 'after' the creation of the world. These categories

---

<sup>10</sup> Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, 170. Cf. Brian Leftow, *Time and Eternity*, (London: Cornell University Press, 1991), 112-123.

<sup>11</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1998), Book IX, 16.

<sup>12</sup> Augustine, Book IX, 14.

<sup>13</sup> Alan G. Padgett in Ganssle (ed.), 92-111. Cf. Alan G. Padgett, *God, Eternity and the Nature of Time*, (London: Macmillan, 1992).

<sup>14</sup> William L. Craig in Ganssle (ed.), 129-161, 129 on the contradiction mentioned.

themselves belong to the temporal understanding of them within the created order. God was eternal, hence was outside the very category of 'before' when there was no creation, indeed this eternity has been in itself the cause for time.

*Divine temporality.* Finally, there is a view which sees God as within time, dynamically acting and reacting to events – hence dispensing with the traditional understanding (which it sees as not having support in the words of the Bible and, sometimes, as a later Greek-Platonic rendering of the Christian and Jewish truths about God, which was then used to the standard Thomistic definition of God as a pure act without unrealized potentiality, i.e. possibility of change).<sup>15</sup> Divine temporalists protest against the traditional doctrine of divine immutability, and claim that God himself can and does change both in time and in history (and, in some versions, particularly of kenotic theism, that he can also undergo mental states and emotions).<sup>16</sup> God has a past, a present and a future, which he might perhaps know, but which he has not changed into yet. The precise relation of God to time, however, varies amongst divine temporalists, as does the question of whether time and history are realities created and sustained by God, or they are the very measure of change within the divine nature, etc.

Having had a background, cursory view upon some basic philosophical standpoints on the ideas of time and eternity, we can now examine some important elements of Hegel's system in more detail.

### Hegel's *Logic* – the Explication of Eternal Divinity

To indicate how Hegel can integrate eternity and transient process (though not yet explicitly temporal) within eternity itself, a cursory explication of three categories from the *Science of Logic* is necessary – Becoming, the True Infinite and the Absolute Idea. Within the Hegelian identification of dynamic conceptuality with active, yet atemporal eternity, the role of the *Logic* is, in a stunning turn of phrase "the exposition of God as he is in his eternal essence before the creation of nature and of a finite spirit".<sup>17</sup> The *Logic* of Hegel is attempting to furnish a conceptual structure which would replace the conception of God from pure actuality to pure process, that is, atemporal becoming-oneself through (again atemporal) determination.

According to Hegel, we can understand both the relationship between time and eternity, and the nature of the philosophical idea of God itself, because both are inscribed in the nature of being *and* in the nature of our thinking. One of the main aims in Hegel's *Logic* is to provide for an eternal

---

<sup>15</sup> Nicholas Wolterstorff in Ganssle (ed.), 187-214.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Paul Fiddes, *The Creative Suffering of God*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), esp. 46ff.

<sup>17</sup> G.W.F Hegel, *Science of Logic*, trans. George di Giovanni, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 29.

foundation of the world (ontology) and of thinking itself (transcendental philosophy and noetics), which would be developed from the state of pure *presuppositionlessness*.<sup>18</sup> This is done in response to Kant, whose main object of inquiry was to establish the transcendental principles and conditions of possibility of thought. After Kant, many philosophers and theologians (Hegel being both) sought to establish particular formal principles of what constitutes legitimate source of knowledge, upon which their philosophy or theology could be later elaborated. In theology, this is frequently called ‘prolegomena’, and some of the most important ones are those of Schleiermacher and Barth.<sup>19</sup> Hegel’s contribution is, firstly, to show a way how to establish those formal ‘rules’ of being and thought from, as he argues, a state of complete lack of any presuppositions, completely forgetting any judgement on anything which one could have – what he calls “Pure Being”.<sup>20</sup> The fact that they are elaborated without initially presupposing anything, and in a logical and systematic way is a response to Kant, who never provided a fully self-grounding logical deduction of the categories themselves, but only ultimately presupposed their existence (for example as I have indicated above with the category of time).

Secondly, it is a merging precisely of those conditions with the eternal essence of divinity itself. In this way, Hegel resembles and foreshadows many insights of traditional and contemporary theology which viewed God as the ground of all being and possibility of all thought. These eternal conditions and foundations of thought and being itself are in Hegel neither immanent to the subject (as with Kant’s foundations of knowing), nor to the world. They are eternal and distinct from the world precisely by virtue of their everlastingness and successive (atemporal and then temporal) self-determination – firstly within themselves and then with the world itself. In other words, for Hegel, if we want even to start to think about eternal divinity, which is the very *logos* of the world, we have to initially suspend all our empirical and rational presuppositions and judgements about the world, time, and God. It is to this that Hegel refers just one page before the earlier quote about God:

Any definition with which a science makes an absolute beginning can contain nothing else than the precise and correct expression of what is represented in one’s mind as the *traditionally accepted* subject matter and purpose of the science. That just this subject matter and this purpose are so

---

<sup>18</sup> Put succinctly, there is an important debate in Hegel scholarship on whether his *Logic* is only a transcendental philosophy (examination of the categories with which we think and which we synthesize with sensuous data), or also an ontology (examination of the fundamental principles of being itself). This paper assumes the latter interpretation. See for instance Robert Pippin, *Hegel’s Idealism: The Satisfactions of Self-Consciousness*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) for the former interpretation, and Stephen Houlgate *The Opening of Hegel’s Logic: From Being to Infinity*, (Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2006), 137-143 for the latter.

<sup>19</sup> Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 3-128; Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Vol. 1:1: *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, (London: T&T Clark, 2009), 1-84.

<sup>20</sup> And what Stephen Houlgate calls “Radical Self-Criticism”, see *The Opening*, 24-28.

represented is a historical warrant for invoking such or such fact as conceded, or, more precisely, only for pleading that such or such fact should be accepted as conceded.<sup>21</sup>

### *Becoming and determination*

Pure Being is, according to Hegel, the first thought of any thought which makes itself absolutely presuppositionless – the first ‘determination’ of that thought precisely through total lack of determination. Pure Being is rather in itself a lack of realizing what its own nature is. Precisely this Pure Being, for Hegel, renders itself to be Nothing. It makes itself explicit to be Nothing because it did not determine itself against anything else. *A thought of total absence manifests itself to be absence of thought*, the ‘being’ of absolute lack of being manifests itself to be Nothing. This Nothing, however, when considered in itself without determination, renders itself explicit again as Pure Being, because it is equally immediate and indeterminate.

Imagine a simple exercise in ontology – we are asked to draw ‘being’ on a piece of paper. What would we draw? Anything which will be drawn would not be ‘being’ itself but rather the being of *something*, a being of a something which is distinguished from the being of something else – being of a drawn cat, let’s say, from a being of a drawn dog. Yet drawing ‘being’ itself is an impossible task, and we are left with, for Hegel, the empty sheet of paper which we started with.

Note that this is the first instance of Hegel protesting against classical theisms’ ‘apophatic’ vision of God as pure, undetermined, inexplicable Being. Philosophy after Kant’s turn towards conditions of knowledge cannot, anymore, assert the being of God and the being of the Idea(s) as the objectively existing grounds of reality. This has to be demonstrated through the method of the dialectic, wherein successive demonstrations proceed alongside revealing that the Whole, which is God, can only be *God as well as its determinations within His own otherness*. God has to be sought in determination through the negative. This means that our knowledge of God has to be not as a totally ‘Other’ being, but rather as determined by other elements of our cognition and thinking. Simply taking for granted God’s being as pure and undetermined results in humans not being able to know the existence of God without necessary support of an experience of faith (which is important for Hegel, yet inferior to speculative knowledge). This is because such a ‘pure’ idea of God can simply be criticized as lacking any substantial content (precisely what Kant has done in the *Critique of Pure Reason*).<sup>22</sup>

At this point, what becomes explicit is the Becoming of that Being into Nothing and vice-versa, which will be an important aspect of Hegelian understanding of eternity. This Becoming is the process of that ‘rendering’, or ‘making explicit’, or ‘realizing x to be’ that we have used above. Of course, this rendering explicit of the *logos* itself is different from our becoming self-conscious of

---

<sup>21</sup> Hegel, *Science of Logic*, 28.

<sup>22</sup> Hegel, 60-66;



this development within finite temporality.<sup>23</sup> Eternal Being of God is for Hegel Being *as* Becoming, which it makes itself explicit to be – *both* in the eternal structure of ontology itself, *and* in the apprehension of it by finite temporal minds like ours. This Becoming is one describing neither change, nor temporality, nor even movement, but rather is, for Hegel, the eternal model of the ‘dynamic’ which is even more fundamental than the two – the dynamic of *determination*.<sup>24</sup> God eternally Becomes himself, i.e. God eternally determines himself (in many different ways, as expressed later in the *Logic*). This neither means that God changes, nor that He is temporal. He is Himself, but his Being proves itself to be all-encompassing within its own Becoming, which (as we will see) is the model for Hegel for any concrete temporality. If God were to be thought simply as totally Other without any positive determination, then for Hegel, after the Kantian critique, we are left with merely a postulate of pure reason and ultimately with nothingness without content.

As I have written above, what is *not* sought in this exposition of the category of Becoming is its justification on philosophical or all the more theological terms, alongside a justification of the entirety of Hegel’s system. Indeed, there have been multiple philosophical and theological critiques of this first step of the *Logic* and the further ones.<sup>25</sup> Rather, the aim is to show that the scheme of thinking about eternity as atemporal Becoming can be a legitimate alternative to some other renderings of the time-eternity distinction. Take the seemingly very similar concept of ‘metaphysical time’ of God put forward by some proponents of relative timelessness.<sup>26</sup> They operate upon a propositional logic, wherein there can either be a strong dualism between time and eternity, or there can only be one of them (in their case it is time in two different versions – created and divine). Because of that, they cannot espouse Hegel’s solution of positing Becoming of being towards its own negation as the basis for any ontology of change or temporality. Hegel, on the other hand, considers *determination* to be the primary ontological category, placing it as the source for any change, spatiality and temporality. ‘Metaphysical temporalists’ simply reproduce the unresolved dualism of time and eternity by positing two types of time. One is considered through pure duration (which we essentially do not know how to understand), the other through measure of worldly change. For Hegel, however, the monism of eternity, which is becoming, encompasses within itself all temporality, *as well as* eternity simply as the negation of that temporality. In other words, what we will see is that there is for Hegel a ‘higher’ eternity of the Absolute Idea (here already foreshadowed in Becoming) within which particular difference between eternity and temporality can become intelligible. To understand this better, we need to attend to another fundamental Hegelian concept – the True Infinite.

---

<sup>23</sup> See Dieter Henrich, *Hegel Im Kontext*, (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1971), 82.

<sup>24</sup> See Houlgate, *The Opening*, 271-283.

<sup>25</sup> See for example Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 92ff.

<sup>26</sup> See for example Padgett, *God, Eternity*, especially 125-130.

*True Infinite*

The True Infinite (*Wahre Unendlichkeit*) is, in the words of Hegel himself, ‘the fundamental concept of philosophy’.<sup>27</sup> Even not considering Hegel’s thought as the only right one, we can still maintain that it is *the* crucial concept to understand his way of thinking in general. In how he presented Becoming as a category expressing the dynamism which occurs between being and nothing vanishing (letting themselves known to be) each other, Hegel already foreshadowed the two core elements of this thought. First is an alternative to simple logical-binary thinking based on the law of non-contradiction, and the second is the dependence of the identity of a thing on its own sphere of negativity – that which it is not. The True Infinite is an elaboration of this way of thinking, in that it expresses the way in which full determination of a thing can be achieved – in other words, it is the scheme of the self-determination of any being, and in particular the realm of eternity as the perfection of being.

Where we have left the *Logic* was the sphere of determinate being – one which is not determined substantially through its simple existence (because that is simply nothing), but rather one which is determined negatively, i.e. through its difference from other beings. But thought quickly realizes that there is an infinite number of – we could add, temporally – finite things, which determine each other. We are stepping on the way of a specific Hegelian cosmological argument for the existence of God. This is the step at which a Hegelian understanding of being is still in the realm of pure temporal immanence. That is, the determination of finite things in that unending chain as infinite in number is still immanent to those finite things. Even if the Universe has a limit, there must still be, for Hegel, some Other against it will determine itself, and all of that is within the infinity of finite immanence without an end, which is also temporal.

The next step of the thinking of the *Logic*, the infinite appears to be not only immanent to finite things, but also to be their Other as a whole, a determination of the *whole* of the realm of finitude. The things which become in their finitude are finite because they are different from the realm of the infinite. And *vice-versa*, the infinite is precisely the *in*-finite because it is a negation of the finite. That is what Hegel calls “altering determination of finite and infinite”.<sup>28</sup>

However, it is only to the infinite’s detriment. The fact that it is determined to be a *negation* of the finite, *restricts it*, and therefore it remains a contradiction, because it cannot become itself. The infinitude of infinity is restricted by its limit which remains finitude – its other. Were the infinite, taken as a simple negation of the finite, to become and embrace the finite, it would, according to what Hegel calls “understanding” (and we may call non-contradictory, binary, ‘static’ thinking) cease

---

<sup>27</sup> Hegel, *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences I: Science of Logic*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), sec. 95.

<sup>28</sup> Hegel, *Science of Logic*, 110ff.

to be infinite. The understanding holds the finite and the infinite to be opposites, but that results in a contradiction of a 'finite infinite'.

(...) the infinite remains over against the finite, with the result that there are two determinacies. There are two worlds, one infinite and one finite, and in their connection the infinite is only the *limit* of the finite and thus only a determinate, *itself finite infinite*.<sup>29</sup>

Hegel's solution is similar to what Becoming has been for the Being-Nothing pair. The True Infinite, instead of restricting itself in the total otherness from the finite, determines itself within finitude, and precisely that grants it the status of True Infinite. It turns itself not to be a static 'unity' of the finite and the infinite, somewhat on a 'higher level', but rather the *movement* between the finite and the infinite, each determining itself against each other. True Infinite is what there is as positive, because it encompasses within itself the scheme of double negation. The positive affirmation which is the basis for Being itself (now determined, therefore different than the first presuppositionless Being) is the scheme of Hegel's thinking about God. God is therefore the very dynamism of becoming between his 'there', his total aloofness from the world, and the 'here' the concrete temporal presence. For God, difference, including the differentiation of temporality from eternity within God himself, is not something detrimental or finitizing to the divine nature, an impediment in the realization of its own omnipotence and impassability, but rather is the *enrichment* of his own being.<sup>30</sup>

To clarify, let us think about the True Infinite on the example of God's attribute of omnipotence. Now, it is important to remember that again we cannot simply, in the manner of pre-Kantian metaphysics, assert the being of God with a property of omnipotence and then define it accordingly. God has to, so to say, '*prove*' His own nature to the finite doubting mind, because this is a mind which already doubts His existence. How can this be done? Hegel inquires here into the unique Christian phenomenon of the Incarnation and abstracts from it its philosophical content. God's omnipotence means that he can do whatever he wants, and the best way to give testimony to this *is to become its own opposite*, finite humanity. Otherwise, God's infinity would be paradoxically finitized through its inability to become its very opposite. Jesus Christ as a unity of eternal divinity and finite temporality, is for Hegel the supreme religious manifestation of the True Infinite.

The significance of the True Infinite appears when we substitute the words 'finite' and 'infinite' for 'temporality/time' and 'eternity'. For Hegel, there is neither 'atemporal' Being which provides for ontological fulness, as in Neoplatonic philosophy inherited by divine atemporalists (like Paul Helm). Nor is eternity of God lost by being fully immanent in time, as in unqualified divine temporality

---

<sup>29</sup> Hegel, 111.

<sup>30</sup> Robert R. Williams, *Tragedy, Recognition and the Death of God: Studies in Hegel and Nietzsche*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 188.

(like for Nicholas Wolterstorff, see above). Rather, Hegelian divine eternity, as we will see later being more concretely applied to problems of nature, is understood through the scheme of conceptual becoming of its own negation. It is not confined within absolute otherness (as in Kierkegaard and especially early Barth), nor just the prevalence of some features of temporality – eternity is *omnipresent* and precisely through this is also *transcendent*. As Hegel claims, thought which rests merely on established dualities turns itself to be essentially dogmatic:

This metaphysics [scholasticism – A.K.] became *dogmatism* because, due to the nature of the finite determinations, it had to assume that of *two opposite assertions* (which is what those sentences were) one had to be *true* while the other was *false*.<sup>31</sup>

In other words, if we were to confine divine eternity to being ‘out there’ and in total difference from temporality, then we simultaneously, for Hegel, limit divine omnipresence and omnipotence through restricting the very realm in which God ‘can’ operate. On the other hand, our idea of God is one of a God who is fully self-determining, if we claim that there is a new type of eternity. It is an eternity which encompasses within itself both the dimensions of divine eternity proper, and the finite extension of God’s *logos* in the finite and temporal creation.

#### *The Absolute Idea*

The Absolute Idea which is the divine concept in its full determination, is such a development upon the prior structure of the True Infinite, that it is being which knows itself and therefore conceptualizes itself as completely determinate.<sup>32</sup> What the analysis of the Idea will attempt to show is that what Hegel calls the realm of finite and temporal spirit – humanity – can make itself conscious of eternity through thought,<sup>33</sup> eternity which, as we have indicated, is both the source of all temporality, omnipresent *in* it and embracing it, and finally is also an eternity which in itself is the dynamic of becoming-other and simultaneously becoming-itself.

The Absolute Idea is the final category of the Logic, and, for Hegel, the actual sole concern of all philosophy, truth itself.<sup>34</sup> Having maintained the core Hegelian methodological ideas, we have to necessarily arrive at some kind of most universal category within the framework of which all possible determinateness of finite moments (or aspects) can occur. We have already seen in the structure of the True Infinite, and even in a deeper foreshadowing in one of Becoming, that methodologically Hegel’s dialectics always involves a *positing* of a category in its immediacy (Pure Being and finitude), *negating* the category in order to find its determination through otherness (Nothing and the ‘bad’ infinite), and then founding another, more universal category which

---

<sup>31</sup> Hegel, *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, sec. 32.

<sup>32</sup> Hegel, *Science of Logic*, 752.

<sup>33</sup> See Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion: Volume I: The Concept of Religion*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 120 (lecture manuscript).

<sup>34</sup> Hegel, *Science of Logic*, 735.

encompasses itself and its otherness within itself so as to achieve fuller self-determination (Becoming, True Infinite). The Absolute Idea therefore, in a nice turn of phrase, is a 'totality which is never complete'<sup>35</sup>, because there is always in it *both* a pre-determined scheme of all things (the living and becoming universal encompassing everything), *and* space for possible novelty and contingency (what I will investigate in due course).

A useful analogy of the Absolute Idea is any sort of universal, assuming that nominalism is false (which it largely is for Hegel). A universal 'riding a bike' is, for Hegel, the eternal concept (form) of riding a bike. This does not mean, however, that it does not allow for contingent particularizations of various instances of riding a bike, for example me riding it to the local shop *versus* a professional cyclist doing it on Tour de France. If someone found a new way of riding a bike, that would be a new contingency, new moment within the totality of the eternal (and unchanging) idea of riding a bike, which in itself is part of the Absolute Idea. Of course, the Absolute Idea is the top of the hierarchy of universality, because for any 'particular' universality we might find a broader framework. For example, if at some point in the future no one will ride a bike anymore, because there will be new forms of transport available, the universal 'riding a bike' might cease to exist, but even more 'general' universals (like 'moving') still will persist.

*Possible objection: Hegel's alleged pantheism*

Granted that we only use certain Hegelian categories and elements of his system as thought schemes which enable us to understand the relationship between time and eternity. Isn't it still necessary, however, to accept his alleged 'pantheistic' view of God and creation in order to be able to apply those categories to our thinking? Such an objection does not have validity, because both Hegel's system and Hegel himself in his writings excludes the possibility of an interpretation of his endeavour as Spinozian or pantheistic (and hence also divine-temporalist).<sup>36</sup> Pantheism is, according to him, precisely the product of what he calls "system of identity," based on static and fixed oppositions.

The proposition, *nothing comes from nothing, nothing is just nothing*, owes its particular importance to its opposition to *becoming* in general and hence also to the creation of the world out of nothing. Those who zealously hold firm to the proposition, nothing is just nothing, are unaware that in so doing they are subscribing to the abstract *pantheism* of the Eleatics and essentially also to that of Spinoza. The philosophical view that accepts as principle that being is only being, nothing only nothing, deserves the name of "system of identity"; this abstract identity is the essence of pantheism.<sup>37</sup>

---

<sup>35</sup> David G. Carlson, *A Commentary to Hegel's Science of Logic*, (London: Macmillan 2007), 598.

<sup>36</sup> Divine temporalism is of course not synonymous with pantheism, but, at least in most conceptions of pantheism, the converse is true.

<sup>37</sup> Hegel, *Science of Logic*, 61.

And as Hegel writes in another instance:

The object of religion is the truth, the unity of the subjective and the objective. But in particular religions, the absolute often becomes separated again from the finite, even where the former already goes under the name of spirit; in such cases, spirit is no more than an empty name. (...) It is also possible to conceive of this abstract universal (...). If man equates this universal with nature, his religion is one of pantheism. But pantheism has no content, for God, as a subject, disappears, because the subject no longer has any distinct existence. Another possibility is to conceive of God as united with the world: this applies to the Indian doctrine of incarnation, to the art of the Greeks, and, in a much more refined sense, to the Christian religion, in which the unity of divine and human nature is made manifest in Christ. The Christian incarnation is not presented in an anthropomorphic form unworthy of the deity, but points instead to the true Idea of God.<sup>38</sup>

What Hegel means by saying that in pantheism “God as a subject disappears” is that such a doctrine, analogously to its opposite - maintaining exclusive divine otherness, *finitizes* God through restricting God’s being to a certain pre-defined sphere, namely nature. It is a characteristic of merely finite understanding to operate upon a binary thinking wherein the Absolute is sought within a restricted sphere of either total identity or total otherness. That said, an instrumental usage of Hegelian categories for perhaps not exactly Hegel’s purpose (without being faithful to all aspects of Hegel’s system), which is the argument of this paper, isn’t excluded. They might equally well serve an idea of God which essentially involves self-mediation between total transcendence (in Hegel’s case eternity of conceptual ideality) and total omnipresence (within finite and temporal humanity).

Eternally becoming God is a *personal* being through possessing the fulness of freedom. In Hegel’s words:

The highest and most intense point is the *pure personality* that, solely by virtue of the absolute dialectic which is its nature, equally embraces and holds *everything within itself*, for it makes itself into the supremely free (...).<sup>39</sup>

The divine Idea is not (or more precisely *not only*) immanent to nature because that could not be the foundation of its freedom and personality. Freedom, for Hegel, is self-determination.<sup>40</sup> God is fully free and omnipotent not because there is in him a *potential* towards any possible determination, but rather because he already possesses and encompasses all possible actual and potential determinations.

---

<sup>38</sup> Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 106.

<sup>39</sup> Hegel, *Science of Logic*, 750.

<sup>40</sup> Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), sec. 4-10.

*An alternative to conceiving of eternity from the perspective of finite temporality*

Hegel is therefore one of the most ‘cataphatic’ philosophical theologians, in that, instead of thinking about eternity in apophatic terms as negativity and otherness towards the human experience of temporality, he commences with the understanding of *God* which determines all other conceptions and from which all of them logically flow (including time). Hegel is not absolutizing the dualism of time and eternity itself, not beginning with our sense of time and attempting to ‘fit’ God into it, but rather beginning with God and showing *His* absoluteness through his omnipotence of all-encompassing *becoming* of all things both within and in difference from God. In this way, Hegel seems to be even more Platonic, Boethian and Augustinian than much of contemporary philosophical theology.

This stands in contrast to most contemporary philosophy of religion. For most authors defending particular standpoints listed above, what comes first is a certain vision of time (which we will examine in due course) and a certain set of problems which a postulated mode of God’s relationship with that vision of time has to ‘solve’. In other words, the nature of God’s relation to time becomes a *hypothesis*. Take as an example a book by Paul Helm, a proponent of unqualified divine eternity. Helm proposes his view of eternity as a hypothesis which is defined,<sup>41</sup> and then ‘tested’ against a set of logical problems that might be put forward against its coherence (for example questions pertaining to divine personality, immutability, omniscience, etc.).<sup>42</sup> Hegel, on the other hand, proposes to suspend *all* possible visions of God, time, eternity, and even ‘coherence’ itself, in order to let the idea of God define *itself* in a manner of a purely presuppositionless logic. As I have indicated above, my point is not about arguing for an adoption of Hegel’s entire system. Rather, it is, among others, a call to reconsider the highest authority in thinking about time and eternity from mere a hypothetico-deductive method of what Hegel calls a “logic of understanding”, into opening new ways non-binary thinking which puts God as supreme universal and beyond many supposedly ‘fixed’ and ‘rational’ distinctions.

The discussion of the *Science of Logic*, even if very abstract, is necessary for theologians to understand both Hegel’s onto-theology, and even more generally *how he thinks*, which is frequently in ways much different than much of contemporary philosophy of religion. However, it is using the very dialectical Logic that we are ready to see further how a conception of God which overcomes the fashionable absoluteness of difference between immanence and transcendence, aids in understanding the relation of time and eternity. Temporality is not only, like in Plato, an image of eternity, but happens *within* God’s eternity itself, as a necessary part of this eternity’s own

---

<sup>41</sup> Helm, *Eternal God*, 23-40.

<sup>42</sup> Helm, 56-194.

self-definition as *not*-temporality. And temporality must also include within itself eternity as a determination of what defines it as temporality.

### Hegel's *Philosophy of Nature* – Explication of Eternity within Finite Temporality

#### 'Transition' from Logic to Nature

The intent behind Hegel's *Philosophy of Nature* was not to construct a cosmogony, nor to create an ultimate system to which all posterior discoveries in natural science must conform. Methodologically, it was following a description of the speculative grasping of phenomena in Nature within the all-encompassing (but, as we argued, never closed) system of logical development. *Philosophy of Nature* cannot assert the existence and legitimacy of its object, because that, since Descartes' famous method of doubt, counts as nothing simply obvious, but rather a presupposition.<sup>43</sup> Therefore, Hegel develops *a priori* proofs for the existence and functioning of the world as we observe it empirically by taking the existence of Nature to be logically flowing from the endpoint of the *Logic* as a necessity within the functionality of this very logic.

The last sentences of the *Science of Logic* are very mysterious on the relationship of Logic and Nature in Hegel's system, and must be taken with reference to later remarks on the subject given at the start of the part of Hegel's *Encyclopaedia* which deals with Nature. In the *Logic* itself, what is definitely clear is one thing. Its conceptual and abstract dynamic of becoming is inherently circular if it does not determine itself negatively through otherness which, for Hegel is precisely the incarnation of the Idea in the world of Nature (and then of finite Spirit – humanity). The Absolute Idea, as we have seen, has achieved full self-determination through encompassing every possible moment and determination (therefore it is an expression of the divine Being-itself). But if it was this moment of conceptual eternity at which the Idea's (and God's) self-determination would stop, it would necessarily loop back into the simple immediacy of pure being, and the process of divine self-determination would be eternally circular.<sup>44</sup> It is therefore necessary, within the very abstract conditions of divine Idea, to determine itself in created finite (and temporal) being. This does not 'add' anything to the Idea, but rather constitutes a further determination within it. There is no 'transition' between Logic and Nature as two separate things – "(...) there is no transition that takes place; the simple being to which the idea determines itself remains perfectly transparent to

---

<sup>43</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences, Part II: Philosophy of Nature* [hereafter *Philosophy of Nature*], (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), section 245.

<sup>44</sup> This circularity within the Logic mimics the grand circularity of the whole system – the Logic determining itself in Nature, Nature giving rise to Spirit (humanity), and Spirit in turn, as described in the *Phenomenology*, ascending back towards the abstractness of the realm of pure Logic, and hence pure divinity. Cf. Martin Wendte, *Gottmenschliche Einheit bei Hegel: Eine logische und theologische Untersuchung*, (Berlin: Walter, 2007), 63.



it: it is the idea that in its determination remains with itself'.<sup>45</sup> The Idea therefore, in creation, exhibits the same movement as was perceptible within the *Logic*: the positing of Nature as Other and then uniting itself with it through the restoration of positive, universal, all-encompassing identity.

Put differently, upon creation of finite temporality, it is not the case that there are now two distinct entities: God and a created world in some mysterious sense 'apart' from God. On the contrary, it is rather that God himself, through displaying the act of creation, gains a new dimension in both difference and unity. Otherwise, what would be the 'overarching' framework providing the condition for the very *unlikeness* between God and creation? It certainly, for Hegel, cannot be anything supreme to God himself.

To this problematic we can apply similar considerations as have been furthered above in the discussion of immanence and transcendence within the True Infinite. Some more 'Spinozian' interpreters of Hegel have understood the relation discussed as follows: the logical Idea, within its self-conceiving self-determination, *realizing itself to be* nature from the very outset – which could secure an ontological understanding of the *Logic* as purely immanent to the world of Nature, with no divine ontological (not merely conceptual) externality over it.<sup>46</sup> Hence, there would be no existence of Idea apart from Nature and a natural conclusion would be pantheism. But apart from the noted problems of positing another 'unsublated' binary of immanence and transcendence, this interpretation does not sit well either with the end of the *Logic* or, all the more, with Hegel's explicit refutation of pantheism we have referred to above.

On the contrary, the Idea 'freely discharges itself'<sup>47</sup> into Nature, because of its inherently personal character as a being free to self-determine itself in externality of the created world. Its necessity becomes its freedom. Although it is right to say that Hegel believed in the necessity of creation, one has to remember that, similarly as within the framework of the paradoxes of omnipotence and relations of God to propositional logic, Hegel too holds that his version of *dialectical* logic is inherent in the very nature of God, not externally imposed upon him. If freedom, as we have noted earlier, is for Hegel simply self-determination, then the divine Idea is perfectly free precisely through encompassing all determinations within all externalities, including Nature. One could here refer to the problem, discussed in philosophy of religion, of the compatibility of divine eternity with the supposedly free decision of God to create the world. If God is in himself beyond time, then there cannot be a change in God in terms of 'making a free decision' to create. God is rather

---

<sup>45</sup> Hegel, *Science of Logic*, 752-753.

<sup>46</sup> This seems to be argued by Stephen Houlgate, *Introduction to Hegel: Freedom, Truth and History*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 108.

<sup>47</sup> Hegel, *Science of Logic*, 753.

free in terms of having everything prefigured within his own *logos* before creation, and then exercising this *logos* in finite contingency.

*Question of the eternity of the world*

The issue of the eternity of the world, frequently affirmed in many ways by non-Christian Platonism, was the most significant idea against which the doctrine of creation from nothing (*ex nihilo*) was developed in the Christian tradition. In contemporary debates surrounding the time-eternity distinction, this doctrine has had its influence mainly through the matter of the compatibility of God's timelessness and the singular act of creation seeming to result in two particular different 'periods' in God – 'before' and 'after' creation. This of course by itself stands against the doctrine of a God which is atemporal and without change. Augustine's solution, as we have seen, has been to claim that time itself is a created reality, so there can be no 'before' of creation in a temporal, but only causal sense. Many of those who, sometimes for other reasons, do not side with Augustinian atemporalism, reject this interpretation in favour of others. As we have seen, advocates of relative timelessness see creation of time as within the interval of divine 'metaphysical' time of which created time, through creation, is some sort of mirroring. Supporters of 'timelessness without creation' believe that God himself descended to created temporality after its foundation, while divine temporalists posit time as a category to which God himself abides, and therefore do not have to bother much with this problem at all.

Hegel surprisingly rejects the question of the eternity of the world as meaningless within his own system – and this is precisely through the logic of his concept of infinity as well as the 'both-and' mediation within the Idea. To this, he applies the 'cataphatic' thinking that we mentioned before. Divine atemporalists posit eternity as the infinite other to the world, preceding it and then coexisting with it in absolute distinction, in other words, an incomprehensible Other to finite temporality (though it seems that it is not fully other to those philosophers who want to 'fit' God into a particular theory of time). But the result of this approach can only be that this eternity turns out to be its own finitizing.<sup>48</sup> It is a property of dualistic thinking which divides clearly between the finite and the infinite, thereby making the infinite itself finite through delimiting it as the Other of the finite. Creation, as we have seen, remains *both* in otherness *and* in identity with the eternal Idea. In otherness, as it is the external determination of the Idea which it gets into out of its own logical necessity; and in identity, as it is in itself prefigured as this determination *eternally* within the Idea itself. In this sense, creation abides by the grand dialectical logic of 'both-and' mediation prefigured within the True Infinite and made possible within the Absolute Idea. Creation is eternal not in the sense of being everlasting, but because it has been eternally preconceived within the self-determination of God, in the language of some Patristic authors (notably Origen), in the mind

---

<sup>48</sup> Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion. Volume III: The Consummate Religion*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007), 26ff (lecture manuscript).

of God. To some challenges posed by contemporary philosophy of religion Hegel answers, then, that there is no division of God into the 'before' or 'after' creation. It is neither temporal nor even causal, if we understand causality through the lens of a dualism between two different substances, not one substance overarching the other *within itself*.

With respect to the temporal aspect, and particular standpoints in the debates on God and time, Hegel would reject all anthropomorphisms of rising 'anticipatory pleasure' of God which purport to explain what he was doing before creation (namely, that he would more and more eagerly anticipate its creation and then finally decide for it when the pleasure would be maximal).<sup>49</sup> Following Augustine, there is no time before creation, only the abstract becoming-himself of God, within which (here Hegel perhaps departs from Augustine) creation is already *implicitly* present. Nor is the divine Idea necessarily descending into finite temporality when it commences upon creation, because through its very omnipotence and omnipresence it can remain the Whole present in *both* temporality – as its finite moments; *and* in eternity – as its abstract universality and ideality. In the divine Idea, in self-determination of creation of finite Nature, there *is* change in a sense that God has become the very framework overarching both finitude and infinity, and there simultaneously *is no* change in a sense that this very determination, in its abstract universality, was already prefigured within God as a necessity of his own self.<sup>50</sup>

Following upon our previous example, the perfect concept of 'riding a bike' pre-figures within itself all possible kinds of riding a bike, even those of which perhaps we do not know yet. In that sense, we can say that the universal 'riding a bike' is, as an *abstract* universal already completed, but necessitates *concrete* instantiation in order to be concretely apprehended in finite time.

God, therefore, is eternal as ideality and as universality, alongside even particularity of the world pre-conceived in the form of its concepts (including even the concept of time, which Hegel deems in itself paradoxically eternal), and becomes *both* eternal *and* temporal within finite creation.

But what is best also endures, not only the lifeless, inorganic universal, but the other universal, that which is concrete in itself, the Genus, the Law, the Idea, Spirit. For we must distinguish between what is the whole process and what is only a moment of the process. The universal, as law, also has a process within it, and lives only as a process; but it is not a *part* of the process, is not in process, but contains its two sides, and is itself processless.<sup>51</sup>

The relation between eternity and time for Hegel is ontological, not voluntaristic. With that pre-figuration of all particularity in ideality, one also cannot accept the view furthered by some theological interpreters of Hegel, that his God is somehow 'incomplete' within himself.<sup>52</sup> The

---

<sup>49</sup> Brian Leftow, "Why Didn't God Create the World Sooner?," *Religious Studies*, vol. 27, (1991), 157-172.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. Hedwig, *Hegel: Time and Eternity*, 139-153, esp. 146.

<sup>51</sup> Hegel, *Philosophy of Nature*, sec. 258 zusatz.

<sup>52</sup> John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 159.

creation of the world did not 'add' anything to eternal God substantially, it is rather that eternity itself gained a new dimension through temporality. Finally, God is also not *solely* temporal alongside creation, as the divine temporalists argue. That would entail the intrusion of *temporal*, finite change within the *atemporal* 'change' within the Idea as eternal process and becoming. God kenotically descends upon finitude, is subject to worldly circumstances but at the same time dialectically also is all ideality, including the ideality of this very change (as the concept of change, or the concept of time, which are in themselves eternal).

#### *Problem of simultaneity*

Before discussing Hegel's conception of time, we have to briefly consider his standpoint on the possible character of eternity as the existence of all possible times simultaneously within God. In this way, there is no absolute irreconcilable difference between eternity and time, as in absolute divine timelessness, but on the other hand eternity and time are not collapsed into each other. According to E. Stump and N. Kretzmann, this is the version which was initially argued for by Boethius, and hence one of the standard interpretations of divine atemporality as eternal duration or temporal simultaneity. Stump and Kretzmann themselves propose an elaboration of such understanding of divine eternity as eternal duration, through the so-called 'ET-Simultaneity'. This model conceives of God for whom *both* his being is eternal *and* all singular temporal events are simultaneous – God can therefore know all possible times and interact with finite creation. The authors offer the following analogy:

Imagine two parallel horizontal lines, the upper one representing eternity and the lower, time; and let presentness be represented by light. Then from a temporal viewpoint the temporal present is represented by a dot of light moving steadily along the lower line, which is in this way lighted successively, while the eternal present is represented by the upper line's being entirely lighted at once. So from a temporal viewpoint the temporal present is ET-simultaneous with the infinite present of an eternal being's life. On the other hand, from the viewpoint of a being existing in the persisting eternal present, each temporal instant is ET-simultaneous with the eternal present, but only insofar as that instant is temporally present, so that from the eternal being's point of view the entire time line is lighted at once. From an eternal viewpoint, every present time is present, co-occurrent with the infinite whole of the eternal present.<sup>53</sup>

Another, similar standpoint which also resembles the aforementioned Hegelian 'both-and' mediation, is Leftow's concept of eternity. The basis of his account is the so-called 'Zero Thesis', which states that because of God's omnipresence, the 'distance between God and every spatial creature is zero.'<sup>54</sup> Ignoring the quite anthropomorphic account of God in this statement (as if

---

<sup>53</sup> Eleanor Stump and Norman Kretzmann, "Eternity, Awareness and Action," *Faith and Philosophy* 9 (3), (1992), 475.

<sup>54</sup> Leftow, *Time and Eternity*, 222.

'distance' was even a dimension for God), Leftow later goes on to conclude that, given the Zero Thesis, all events happen in the process of change which is never relative to God, as God is omnipresent, but rather occur *both* within the dimension of temporality *and* of eternity. "God is eternally present with *t* and with what occurs at *t* in *eternity*", Leftow argues, "what occurs at *t* in eternity is identical with what occurs at *t* in time (...)".<sup>55</sup> This idea of eternity is actually a subtly different rendering of simultaneity, with the reservation that things which are temporal also occur within in their changeless version within eternity. To enable this and not fall into contradiction with the logic which Leftow follows (which is a different one than Hegel's), he has to further distinguish between being eternal and being *in* eternity.<sup>56</sup> The former would be reserved only for God, while the latter for the eternal aspect of all temporal events. Temporal events have their reference frame within eternity, where both God, God's effects and all things are simultaneous. On the other hand, temporality is 'another time', which is a finite application of those effects of divine activity within time, but still maintaining their basis and their reference in eternity.

Leftow, in this way, comes closer to Hegel than Stump and Kretzmann, yet does not yet arrive at the dialectical understanding of time and eternity which the German philosopher exhibits. Stump and Kretzmann cannot allow for an event to occur both in time and in eternity, while for both Leftow and Hegel such a possibility exists. However, Hegel goes further than Leftow in claiming that God's omnipresence means not simply lack of distance between God and finite things, but rather those finite things being within God himself. Therefore, for Hegel any finite temporal event is not simply *simultaneous* with its analogue in eternity as its basis, but rather itself is another determination of that eternity within time, eternity which has a character more of atemporal conceptuality rather than simultaneity. In using the phrase 'simultaneous' by itself, there is a danger of transposing the language of temporality onto the nature of God - how can something, from our perspective, be 'simultaneous' without time? Hegel does think of eternity as the 'Now, without before or after', but this Now is not simultaneous with all events in a sense that two temporal things are simultaneous with each other (Stump and Kretzmann), nor do finite things have their reference frame within eternity, but rather the Now is the Now of the Idea *within* which all things occur in their temporal manifestations.

Absolute timelessness is distinct from duration; the former is eternity, from which natural time is absent. But in its Notion, time itself is eternal; for time as such—not any particular time, nor Now—is its Notion, and this, like every Notion generally, is eternal, and therefore also absolute Presence. Eternity will not come to be, nor was it, but it is. The difference therefore between eternity and duration is that the latter is only a relative sublation of time, whereas eternity is infinite, i.e. not relative, duration but duration reflected into self.<sup>57</sup>

---

<sup>55</sup> Leftow, 230.

<sup>56</sup> Leftow, 237.

<sup>57</sup> Hegel, *Philosophy of Nature*, sec. 258 Zusatz.

There hence is no difference between God and eternity, for Hegel, which would not be in itself grounded in a larger totality of a 'higher' conceptual eternity itself, and this is the form of 'both-and' mediation taken in its most radical form. Any two different instantiations of riding a bike both always fall within the over-arching framework of the eternally and really existing universal 'riding a bike', otherwise the difference itself, for Hegel, cannot be made. Yet it does not mean that a difference is abolished, only that it is sustained within a larger framework.

### Time

Hegel's narrative about temporality is logically consistent with the unfolding of previous categories analysed in the *Logic*. The Idea, in the order of successive self-determinations resembling the movement of the *Logic* itself, first determines itself as pure and content-less *space*. Though similar to the cosmogony of the Genesis narrative, wherein the space and (probably) time are created during the first day, Hegel does not offer an account of creation through a narrative story, but rather, similarly as in the *Logic* and on the foundation of thinking that the *Logic* provides, describes how presuppositionless thought comes to know logically and *a priori* about the nature of particular manifestations of the Idea within the natural world, time in itself included. This is of course, at its core, a reaction to Kant, for whom perception and experience were necessarily grounded within space and time, but simultaneously space and time were also necessary only for those perceptions and intuitions to occur. Hegel's logical derivation of time is more cosmological and less subjective in that sense – time is not a necessity of the subject's intuiting of the phenomenal world, but is rather *what space logically turns itself to be*. Temporality is a self-negation of space, which is necessary for space to determine itself against its own negation, an 'other' of space which is simply a different space in a temporal difference. Time is therefore a negative reality:

It becomes the opposite of what it was. The past, which was, is no longer; and the future, which will be, is not yet. Only the present is; but it immediately ceases to be; and what now is not, comes into being. If we were to use the traditional language of philosophy to apply to this, we would say that in time 'being' becomes 'non-being', while 'nonbeing' becomes 'being'.<sup>58</sup>

Time is the *becoming* of space, in which the atemporal becoming of the *Logic* manifests itself in the transience of space which includes within itself all finite change. "It is because things are finite", Hegel says, "that they are in time; it is not because they are in time that they perish; (...)".<sup>59</sup> Time is therefore not the *condition*, but rather simply a *product* of the fact of change and transience of space, one which is established prior to developing a conception of time.<sup>60</sup>

---

<sup>58</sup> John Burbidge, "Concept and Time in Hegel," *Dialogue* 12 (3), 406.

<sup>59</sup> Hegel, *Philosophy of Nature*, sec. 258, *zusatz*.

<sup>60</sup> In contrast to Padgett, for instance, for whom time is "the dimension of the possibility of change [my emphasis]", in *God, Eternity and the Nature of Time*, 123.

We can see therefore, that whereas for the philosophers of religion we have discussed earlier, time is a reality which is absolute and immediately given, and the eternal God must in some sense be proven to be compatible with it, Hegel's concept of time as the becoming of space and itself just a moment of the eternal Idea reverses this order of knowing and conceives of time as a derivation of the logical self-becoming of God. As a moment of the divine eternity which encompasses it through being its ideality, transient temporality "has no power over the Notion [Idea], (...) on the contrary, it is the power over time, which is its negativity only *qua* externality. (...) the notion of eternity must not be grasped negatively as an abstraction from time, as it were, outside time, (...) for that would turn eternity into (...) one of the moments of time".<sup>61</sup>

A manifestation of this is Hegel's overcoming of the distinction between two particular conceptions of time, famously proposed by J.M.E. McTaggart.<sup>62</sup> An *A-theory* of time (also known as 'process' or 'tensed') privileges the moment of the Now, through which time flows from future to past and hence it itself is 'static'. A *B-theory* ('stasis' or 'tenseless' theory) of time thinks of the 'Now' as an illusion of perceiving consciousness. Rather, time itself is the stretch of past, present and future, without any privileged moment through which it flows. The particular moments and events flow on the 'static' line of time (and presumably also space). Hence the only existent moment of time in the A-theory is the 'Now', while in the B-theory it is all the possible stretch of time.<sup>63</sup>

Time for Hegel is neither according to the A theory, wherein it would be reduced to the immediacy of the present moment through which space flows. Past and the future, though not having existence by themselves, determine the Now as their negation, rather than being mere illusions. Nor is time simply according to the B theory, as it would then amount, in Hegel's words, to "a receptacle in which everything is placed as in a flowing stream, which sweeps it away and engulfs it".<sup>64</sup> Temporality is, as a manifestation of the divine logic in its externality, also abiding to the mediatory 'both-and', a present as a negation of the past and the future, and also the whole span of time from past, through present, to future, as the becoming of space, *relative* to change rather than *constitutive* to it.

What is, however, the more precise relationship between the atemporal becoming of the Idea and the becoming of time? Hegel presents us here with a problematic contradiction within the conception of Nature which he advances. On the one hand, Nature abides to the logic of the Idea, because the Idea itself is developed in the *Logic*, as we have seen, on the basis of fundamental

---

<sup>61</sup> Hegel, *Philosophy of Nature*, sec. 258, remark.

<sup>62</sup> J.M.E. McTaggart, "The Unreality of Time," in Robin Le Poidevin, Murray MacBeath, *The Philosophy of Time*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 23ff.

<sup>63</sup> Gregory Ganssle (ed.), *God & Time*, 13-15.

<sup>64</sup> Hegel, *Philosophy of Nature*, sec. 258, zusatz.

ontological categories (being, becoming, infinity, etc). But on the other hand, Nature is the Idea in its *externality* – its difference from the Idea, though inscribed within the Idea itself, is still maintained.<sup>65</sup> This means that, though temporal order of Nature is resembling the Idea (but not in a form of Platonic emanation), it has in itself differences from it which, as differences in their *concepts* are prefigured within the Idea, but as *actuality*, allow for contingent causation of finite events.<sup>66</sup>

In the case of time, this dialectic between necessity and contingency is exhibited in the character of its motion. Whereas atemporal becoming, as discussed in the *Logic*, moves from being to non-being, so then to return to being and that *ad infinitum*, time is for Hegel a category describing the motion of space from non-being of pure potentiality of the future, to being as the immediacy of the present, to non-being of the past again.<sup>67</sup> Moreover, whereas God in his atemporal becoming becomes constantly himself *to himself*, that is, the movement within God is profoundly circular, time rather has a linear structure.<sup>68</sup> It is modelled upon becoming, but itself is only *intuited* becoming. Becoming's circular movement is applied to reality as its own externality, which results in a linear progression of time. Moreover, it also allows for contingent events, as I have demonstrated. This is because the non-being of the future, though structurally determined by becoming's movement of return from nothing to being, is 'pre-ordained' within the system only in the sense of the system being its *law* (or Idea), whereas the concrete instantiation of that law (like in natural science) is in itself not pre-determined. Hegel's eternal God knows the future, therefore, as it presents itself in its universality, but this universality itself is instantiated in contingent events. In this way atemporal becoming paradoxically both *is* and *is not* the passage of time. This makes this conception different to the ideas of 'metaphysical time' proposed in the theory of relative timelessness; or eternity as either simultaneity (Boethius and later Stump and Kretzmann) or reference frame for temporal events (Leftow).

## Conclusions

Hegel's thought in general, and thought on time and eternity in particular, is perhaps so difficult to fit neatly into established categories and models precisely because of its intention of building a

---

<sup>65</sup> Hegel, sec. 248, remark.

<sup>66</sup> One can add that this might also serve as Hegel's solution to the problem of evil, namely that evil is only a wrong contingent actualization of some good eternal universal.

<sup>67</sup> Burbidge, *Concept and Time*, 409.

<sup>68</sup> Burbidge, 409.



system within which all possible categories could fit in themselves. The aim of this paper was to argue for Hegel's conception of time and eternity which, firstly, responds to the modern challenge through re-establishing God as the all-encompassing *logos* of the world, and secondly, both contains elements of the outlined theories of eternity and temporality, and at the same time transcends them. The paper also purported to show how particular methods of thinking related to Hegel's philosophy can be helpful to conceive differently of questions related to the time-eternity distinction, without the need to justify his entire system.

As for simple divine atemporality, the main difficulty Hegel sees in such a model is that it defines eternity negatively or apophatically in relation to time. That is not acceptable under the conditions of Kant's critique of metaphysical speculation. Hegel responds through the idea of presuppositionless beginning of thinking, while for the latter he elaborates an idea of absolute, speculative thinking which itself is eternal, and cannot be reached solely through negation, but rather sublation. Another question was one of the relation of an atemporal God to the world. It is logical to assume that an eternal God, if not under any of the possible categories of succession, would not be able to create a world which had some sort of beginning, apart from himself being in some sort of divine temporality. To this question Hegel provides his answer in the relation of becoming to time, which is one of *both* identity *and* difference.

In the case of relative timelessness the 'metaphysical' time in which God dynamically unfolds himself to sustain the world (assuming the truthfulness of the A-theory of time) seems on first glance very similar to Hegel's becoming of the Absolute Idea. However, to foreshadow our later considerations, becoming in Hegel is always becoming *already what the Idea is* – the movement of the *Logic* is inherently circular, if it does not determine itself externally (which is the determination of divine eternity in created temporality). In this way, Hegel not only secures *both* relative and absolute timelessness (they, alongside others, can coincide within the Hegelian system as it does not operate fully upon propositional logic within the law of non-contradiction), but he also presents a theology which does not confine God to 'obey' only one given theory of time.

This paper also argued, against those who would see Hegel as a divine temporalist (or even a 'divine historicist'). Such a view would work on an assumption of Hegel's God as *solely* within time and history, becoming more conscious of itself in time, being reducible to the dynamic and vital self-differentiation and self-sublation of all things in the natural world. A notion of God being solely immanent to temporality is against the very essence of Hegel's system, which, as we have seen, cannot allow for a one-sided, undetermined polarity to sustain itself (in this case immanence against transcendence).

Ultimately, Hegel always works on this fundamental presupposition of the primacy of negative determination and the principle of equating truth with the 'wholeness' of the 'broader view', which for him stems from the very presuppositionlessness of the *Logic*. As this article argued, one does

not have to agree with this presuppositionless system in its entirety in order to start thinking differently about time and eternity. Or, start thinking as it has been traditionally thought, but with bearing on the change in the philosophical paradigm at the dawn of the modern age.

## References

Augustine. *Confessions*. Translated by Henry Chadwick. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.

Baekers, S.F. "Die Zeit als Mitte der Philosophie Hegels." *Hegel-Studien* 30 (1995).

Barth, Karl. *Church Dogmatics, Vol. 1:1: The Doctrine of the Word of God*. Translated by G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance. London: T&T Clark, 2009.

Boethius. *The Consolation of Philosophy*. Translated by David R. Slavitt. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008.

Burbidge, John. "Concept and Time in Hegel." *Dialogue* 12, nr 3 (1973).

Fiddes, Paul. *The Creative Suffering of God*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992.

Ganssle, Gregory. *God and Time*. Downer's Grove: InterVarsity, 2001.

Hedwig, Klaus. "Hegel: Time and Eternity." *Dialogue* 9, nr 2 (1970).

Hegel, G.W.F. *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*. Translated by H.B. Nisbet. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.

Hegel, G.W.F. *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences I: Science of Logic*. Translated by Klaus Brinkmann and Daniel Dahlstrom. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

Hegel, G.W.F. *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Basic Outline: Part II: The Philosophy of Nature*. Translated by A.V. Miller. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004.

Hegel, G.W.F. *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion. Volume I: Introduction and the Concept of Religion*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007.

Hegel, G.W.F. *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion. Volume III: The Consummate Religion*. Translated by Peter Hodgson. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007.

Hegel, G.W.F. *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*. Translated by H.B. Nisbet. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975.

Hegel, G.W.F. *Science of Logic*. Translated by George Di Giovanni. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

- Helm, Paul. *Eternal God: A Study of God Without Time*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988.
- Henrich, Dieter. *Hegel Im Kontext*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1971.
- Houlgate, Stephen. *Introduction to Hegel: Freedom, Truth and History*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2005.
- . *The Opening of Hegel's Logic: From Being to Infinity*. Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2006.
- Le Poidevin, Robin, and Murray MacBeath, eds. *The Philosophy of Time*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993.
- Leftow, Brian. *Time and Eternity*. London: Cornell University Press, 1991.
- . "Why Didn't God Create the World Sooner?" *Religious Studies* 27 (1991).
- Melamed, Yitzhak, ed. *Eternity: A History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.
- Milbank, John, [ed.](#) *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*. 2. Oxford: Blackwell, 2006.
- Padgett, Alan. *God, Eternity and the Nature of Time*. London: Macmillan, 1992.
- Plato. *Timaeus and Critias*. Translated by Robin Waterfield. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Schleiermacher, Friedrich. *The Christian Faith*. Translated by Paul Nimmo. London: Bloomsbury, 2016.
- Schwöbel, Christoph. "The Eternity of the Triune God: Preliminary Considerations on the Relationship Between the Trinity and the Time of Creation," *Modern Theology* 34 (3), 2018
- Stump, Eleanor, and Norman Kretzmann. "Eternity, Awareness and Action," *Faith and Philosophy* 9, no. 3 (1992).
- Wendte, Martin. *Gottmenschliche Einheit bei Hegel: Eine logische und theologische Untersuchung*. Berlin: Walter, 2007.
- Williams, Robert R. *Tragedy, Recognition and the Death of God: Studies in Hegel and Nietzsche*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.