On timelessness and mystery

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Abstract: The personal versus apersonal distinction plays a role within controversies about theism itself. Take, for example, the question of whether God’s eternality consists in timelessness (existing beyond or outside of time) or sempiternity (existing at every time). Timelessness is, at least prima facie, harder to reconcile with God’s being a person than is sempiternality. Relatedly, it is often said that sempiternal (temporal) conceptions of the theistic God are more easily reconciled with the practical elements of theistic religion. In this article, I will suggest that there are, however, also core elements of theistic religion that sit much more easily with timeless conceptions, and that some of these even relate to religious practice.

# Introduction

This volume is about personal versus apersonal conceptions of the divine. As is stated in the introduction, there are many reasons to be interested in this topic right now. Perhaps most importantly, apersonal conceptions of the divine seem to be gaining in popularity in the West, or at least they are gaining in relative popularity compared to more traditional, personal conceptions. Another (somewhat related) reason to be interested in apersonal conceptions of the divine is that some versions of them, or perhaps some views in their close vicinity, may be compatible with naturalism (itself not easy to define, but roughly the view of reality that denies that there are any supernatural entities, including gods or demons or angels). This might interest one if one is a naturalist, or if one is just interested in naturalism and its implications. Finally, there is reason to be interested in the personal versus apersonal distinction if one cares about the implications of theism and about the world view implicit in traditional Western theistic religions (such as Christianity, Judaism, and Islam). Of course the theistic God is a personal one: theism is roughly the view that there is a God who is omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent, who created the world, and who is still actively involved in the world; and this God is a person. But even just within debates about the implications of theism, the personal versus apersonal divide plays a role, because some versions of the traditional theistic attributes are at least prima facie easier to reconcile with God’s being a person than others. So when we try to work out coherent and defensible versions of theism, either as a theist, or as someone interested in the implications of theism, we come up against this topic too.

This chapter focuses on this third aspect of the personal-apersonal distinction, namely the role it plays in discussions about theism itself. More specifically, the focus is on the traditional theistic attribute of eternality. The God of Western theism is said to be eternal; the Old and New Testaments contain many passages calling God eternal, and various others that go in a similar direction even though they do not contain that word. So Western theists agree that God is eternal or lives in eternity, but they disagree on what that means. There are broadly speaking two rival conceptions of eternity (and God’s eternality), one that interprets it as timelessness, and one that interprets it as sempiternality (existing at every time). Roughly speaking, defenders of divine timelessness views say that God is beyond or outside of time, whereas defenders of temporal or sempiternal views say that there is no time at which God does not exist. And for each view, these statements capture what God’s eternality amounts to.

In this debate we can see one example of a place within discussions about theism where considerations of personality play a role. The reason is that timelessness is at least prima facie harder to reconcile with God’s being a person than is sempiternality. Prima facie, the further removed God’s relation to time is from ours, the harder it becomes to think of God as personal.

For this reason, it is often said that the temporal view is more easily reconciled with practical elements of theistic religions, such as petitionary prayer and worship, as well as ethical commands. All of these are after all thought of as directed towards or as issuing from a divine person.

However, I will suggest that there are also core elements of theistic religion that sit much more easily with timeless conceptions. Some of these can even be thought of as relating to theistic religious practice. In other words, some of the same features that make it harder to think of God as personal arguably play a role in theistic religious practice.

I will first consider a handful of arguments for and against timelessness, none of which are conclusive, but all of which give one a flavor of how the personal-apersonal distinction plays a role even in discussions about the details of theistic conceptions (section 2). I then suggest that there are core elements of theistic religion that sit much more easily with timeless conceptions and that some of these are central elements of religious practice (section 3).

# Arguing about timelessness

This section surveys four arguments, each of which gives a flavor of how the personal-apersonal distinction plays a role in the debate about eternity: the argument from personhood (against), the argument from the incompleteness of temporal life (for), the argument from music (against), and (the argument from tensed facts (against, conditionally)). The upshot will be that as far as these arguments are concerned, both timeless and temporal conceptions of divine eternity are defensible, although the situation is a little more complicated with the final argument than is sometimes supposed.[[1]](#footnote-1)

A defender of the temporal conception might argue as follows. Surely there are some activities that make persons personal. That is, there are some activities that are such that if one cannot engage in any of them, one is thereby precluded from being a person. Candidates for such activities include remembering, anticipating, reflecting, deliberating, deciding, intending, and acting intentionally. How could a timeless being do any of these things? Thus, a personal God cannot be timeless.

Prima facie, the further removed God’s relation to time is from ours, the harder it becomes to think of God as personal. But this is not to say that a friend of timelessness has no more argumentative room to maneuver. There are at least two salient directions open to him. First, perhaps these claims about personhood are a little too strong. It is not that any person has to engage in at least some of these activities; rather it is just that any person has to be at least capable of performing some of them. And with this weaker requirement the difficulty may vanish. Who is to say whether a timeless God might not be capable of performing some such activities, even if God does not actually perform any of them?

Alternatively, one might question the grounds for thinking that these activities must be impossible to perform outside of time. Naturally, we theorise about these activities from a human point of view, and thus from the point of view of persons who are essentially embedded in time. This may lead us to overgeneralize. Perhaps there are timeless ways of engaging in some of these activities that we are bound to systematically overlook. These versions may not involve change (such as a change in one’s mental states), unlike the versions we are familiar with (Craig 2009; Murray & Rea 2008: Ch. 2). How much can our own experience really tell us about what a timeless creature’s actions and deliberations would be like?

There is a different argument for divine timelessness that is somewhat related to this one. One can imagine the defender of timelessness going on the offensive and suggesting that being timeless is in fact a way of living the richest life a person can live. (Of course this offensive presumes a successful defensive, i.e. it presumes a convincing answer to the previous objections against the very idea of a timeless person. But put that to one side.)

This line of thought leads to the Argument from the Incompleteness of Temporal life. That argument has its home in perfect being theology, the approach to theology that involves figuring out what God is like on the basis of God’s being the most perfect (or greatest possible) being. A general version goes as follows. The most perfect being, namely God, has the most perfect mode of existence. But temporal existence is a less perfect mode of existence than timeless existence. Therefore, God has a timeless mode of existence.

But of course friends of temporality can reply to this too. Why think that temporal existence is less perfect than timeless existence? Granted that *our* lives are incomplete in many ways. Our experiences involve gain and loss. And in our case we also have an awareness of the inescapable passage of time. Relatedly, for ordinary temporal beings, neither the distant past nor the future are perceptually accessible. We remember parts of the past, but only imperfectly; and we merely anticipate the future. We have a kind of knowledge about the past that we do not have about the future. Moreover, we cannot change or re-experience the past, nor can we skip ahead to later moments except one at a time.

But then again, God is no ordinary person. The defender of temporality can reply that while God’s life has temporal features in that God experiences succession, God’s temporal experience is otherwise very much unlike ours (Mullins 2014). For example, God is omniscient, so God forgets no part of the past and already knows all about the future. It is true that experiencing succession means experiencing things one at a time. But why should that be a limiting feature?

At this point the friend of temporality might in turn go on the offensive and maintain that our experience of succession is the basis of some good-making features, such as the ability to enjoy music. A perfect being would have all good-making features. So in fact, a perfect being would be able to enjoy music and therefore would be in time. Call that the argument from music.

I would imagine that a defender of timelessness can in turn reply to this. Perhaps there is in fact a way of enjoying music that is open only to God, on which it does not require temporality. Impossible, one wants to object – but why exactly? Music takes time to unfold. But then so does everything else. And on the timeless conception, God knows about everything else, even though God’s life does not involve succession. So perhaps God can know what it is like (and be able) to enjoy music in a way that doesn’t require temporality.

Now, some have argued that in order for God to know everything despite being timeless, a particular metaphysical view of time known as the B-theory of time has to be true. Since many in this discussion reject the B-theory of time, this has often been treated as an argument against timelessness.

This is relevant to the argument from music in the following way. I said that the defender of timelessness might be able to maintain that God can know what it is like to experience music even though God is timeless. The thought was that there should be no special obstacle to this, since everything takes time to unfold, so if God manages to know about everything while being timeless, God should be able to know what it is like to experience music too. But then, some have argued that a timeless God can only know about everything if the B-theory is true, and it is not (or at least they take this to be a high price to pay).

Another way to put this thought is as follows (this is not a thought I endorse, but it is a way of putting this thought): on the B-theory, it is not the case that everything takes time to unfold. On the B-theory of time, time doesn’t pass. So nothing really unfolds. Everything just *is*. Even music. And this is what is doing the work for the friend of timelessness here. If the defender of timelessness is able to reply to the music argument, it is only by changing the way we think of music, and the way we think of everything else in time and of time itself beyond all recognition. That is also how they are able to respond to the omniscience argument.

These two arguments are usually treated separately. The first is about experience – it is about whether God might be able to experience music in spite of being timeless. The second one that brings in the metaphysics of time is about knowledge. In particular, it is about God’s knowledge of fundamental tensed facts, like that it is Monday today. The B-theory says there are no such facts. A-theorists say that there are, and that the (robust) passing of time consists in change in the fundamental tensed facts.

So we have an issue about experience on the one hand and knowledge on the other hand. Nonetheless, the issues seem to be related. After all, one can think of the music argument as being about whether God *knows what it is like* to experience music even though God is timeless. So that is about (a kind of) knowledge again.

Let me retrace the dialectic once more. The defender of timelessness says, yes, God has some timeless way of experiencing music. In fact, that timeless way of experiencing music is just God’s timeless way of experiencing everything else. After all, what is so special about music – the prima facie problem it poses derives just from its unfolding in time, but then so does everything else. But God knows about everything else too. The rejoinder to this was that it relies on the B-theory (which some would like to reject). The worry was that this timeless way of knowing about things requires time to be B-theoretic.

Is it the case that for a timeless God to know about everything, time has to be B-theoretic? The short answer is that time’s being B-theoretic probably helps but that it will not by itself solve the problem.

Ordinarily, the argument proceeds roughly as follows. God is omniscient. But that means God knows all the fundamental temporal facts (which, if time is A-theoretic, includes fundamental tensed facts, like that it is 18:00 now). So if time is A-theoretic, God knows such fundamental tensed facts. And if that is the case, then what God knows changes. (After all, the fundamental tensed fact that it is 18:00 will be replaced by another such fact, namely that it is 18:01, and so on.) But if what God knows changes, then God changes, and if God changes, then God is temporal rather than outside of time.

On the B-theory, the fundamental temporal facts are tenseless: they do not change over time. They are such facts as that my writing this occurs (tenselessly) on a Monday. For that reason, a strictly parallel argument for the conclusion that on the B-theory, God is temporal too (if God is omniscient), would not succeed.

But this is not quite the end of the story. Suppose someone argues as follows. Since God is omniscient, God knows what time it is. But what time it is changes (it is 18:00 first, then 18:01, and so on). But then what God knows changes, and if so then God changes. And if so, then God is temporal, rather than outside of time.

Whether this argument would go through on the B-theory is a little less obvious. On the B-theory, there certainly is a sense in which what time it is changes. After all, the B-theory is a theory according to which time is real and there are different times that stand in succession relations to one another. Moreover, change on the B-theory is to be understood as involving suitable variation over time, and the B-theorist treats being past, present or future just like everyone treats being here or there. That is, being past, present or future is a perspectival matter, just like being here or there. In particular, any time is present relative to itself, just like any spatial location is here relative to itself. So provided you think ‘it is now 18:00’ at 18:00 and you think ‘it is now 18:01’ at 18:01, both of your thoughts are true.

One might object that on a standard B-theoretic account of tensed language, the content of each of these thoughts is tenseless. What one thinks and knows at each of these times is something that one could know at all times (e.g. that 18:00 is simultaneous with 18:00). This tenseless content can always be truly believed via a tenseless sentence, namely ‘18:00 is simultaneous with 18:00’. But only at 18:00 can it be truly believed via the tensed sentence ‘18:00 is present’. So on the B- theory, knowing what time it is (over a period of time) does not involve gaining and losing pieces of knowledge. So it is not the case on the B-theory that what one knows (in knowing what time it is) changes.

But now notice that on such a B-theoretic account of tensed language, what one believes at each time is not the only thing that matters. It also matters how one believes it. This point has long been recognized (and parallel points hold with respect to other indexicals such as ‘I’ or ‘here’). Believing something truly via the sentence ‘18:00 is (now) present’ can make one jump up in haste when believing it via ‘18:00 is simultaneous with 18:00’ does not. There is a difference in cognitive significance in the two cases.

So with this in mind, one could also argue as follows. God is omniscient. And if so, then God knows what time it is. And if a person S knows that time it is, then how S believes (what S believes) changes over time. Therefore, how God believes (what God believes) changes over time. But if how God believes changes, then God changes, and if so, then God is temporal, not outside of time.

Of course, this argument is also not knock-down. Who is to say whether God resembles persons embedded in time when it comes to their ways of keeping track of which time it is and acting at the right times? Why not think God is able to act in a timely manner without having to believe contents via tensed representations? Whereas we would only jump up in haste when believing a tenseless content via the sentence ‘18:00 is present’, a timeless God may not require any such thing in order to act at the right times.

But then again, the argument does not mention God’s actions; it only mentions God’s knowledge. Suppose the reason we were worried about an incompatibility between omniscience and timelessness had to do with knowing what time it is. In that case the worry should not automatically disappear as soon as the B-theory is adopted. Since God is omniscient, would God not need to know what time it is, no matter what God’s mode of action may be?

Ultimately, the point of the above is to encourage reflection on the role of temporal metaphysics in all this. Suppose one thinks that for God, knowing what B-time it is does not involve any changes in how God believes. What then does it involve, for God? Which aspects of our temporal nature would an omniscient divine being share and which would they not share? The point is that when it comes to determining whether an omniscient God can be timeless or not, these kinds of considerations will be rather crucial, independently of whether or not time is B-theoretic. To put the point differently, whether or not time is B-theoretic, we human persons often are able to keep track of which time it is. If time is B-theoretic, this does not involve knowing what the current fundamental tensed facts are, because there are no such facts. Rather it involves something slightly different, and arguably something more. It involves knowing some fundamental tenseless facts *and* accessing these facts in a certain way. The key question is whether this something more would be unimportant for an omniscient divine person.

Overall, it is certainly not the case that the friend of timelessness cannot respond to these challenges. It is just a little more complicated than adopting the B-theory. Just like in the case of the arguments from personhood and from music, it is a matter of taking up particular views on the ways in which God’s divine attributes might amount to something different from what we would expect based on our own experience as persons embedded in time.

# Religion, science, and mystery

Section 2 surveyed a number of considerations for and against thinking of the theistic God as timeless. All of these were of the following form: if there is a personal God, what is the most plausible conception of what that God is like and how that God relates to time? In this section I would like to argue for two claims that together lend some further support to timelessness - though support of a slightly different kind.

My first claim is that a temporal God is a God that is less *wholly other* than a timeless one. What I mean by this is that a temporal God (one whose eternality consists roughly in existence at every time) is less radically unlike us and less radically removed from us and other persons we are familiar with than is a timeless one. Consider the moves made in the previous section. The friend of temporality emphasizes that God’s life may contain very different kinds of events or sequences of events from ours; God’s life need not involve loss or gain, for example. Similarly, God may not have our epistemic limitations with respect to the past and the future. These are ways in which one can emphasize how God is sui generis and at a metaphysical distance from us. But the friend of timelessness needs to work far less hard in order to maintain this metaphysical distance between us and God. As mentioned, the further removed from time God is, the harder it becomes to think of God as a person, and this is partly because the persons we are most familiar with are centrally characterised by temporality. Thus, understanding God as a temporal being involves less radical a departure from the categories of temporal experience and personhood that we are familiar with than understanding God as a timeless personal being, with its vision of changeless versions of acting or deliberating. That latter set of ideas really is mind-blowing. After all, we are not talking about an abstract item like a set or a number. We are talking about a person who would be alive, but who would lack the very feature that arguably is the most defining characteristic of all the persons we are familiar with from ordinary life, namely temporality.

From this difference in how radically unlike us a timeless (as opposed to a temporal) God would be, there arguably follows a difference in how fully we could hope to understand that nature of a timeless (as opposed to a temporal) God. There are clearer epistemic limitations built into the timeless research program than into the temporal one.

In sum, my first claim is that a timeless God is more *wholly other* than (more radically removed from) human persons, and that therefore the idea of a timeless God is to some extent bound to remain mysterious, more so than a temporal one.

My second claim is one that has recently been defended by Tim Crane in a book entitled *The Meaning of Belief: Religion from an Atheist’s Point of View* (Crane 2017); it is that the element of mystery is an important ingredient of religion (and a fortiori of theistic religions).[[2]](#footnote-2) I will provide support for this and further argue that the reasons (at least in the case of theistic religion) partly lie in religious practice.

The main aim of Crane’s book is to correct what Crane sees as shortcomings in the New Atheists’ conception of religion (where by ‘New Atheists’, he means such writers as Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, and A. C. Grayling). This critique is not my topic here. However, since I will be discussing Crane’s conception of religion, a conception that Crane recommends over the one he thinks is assumed by the ‘New Atheists’, I need to say a little bit about the controversy.

In his review of Crane’s book, Arif Ahmed questions the accuracy of Crane’s complaint that the New Atheists have an oversimplified picture of what religion consists in.

‘I can imagine many humane and thoughtful Jews, Christians and Muslims finding in this book an almost unimprovable articulation of their own approaches to faith. I myself have learnt, and I expect many atheists will learn, much more than I thought could intelligibly be said about what religious belief could and perhaps should be. What it is, is another question.’ (Ahmed 2018)

I take it that Ahmed would allow that Crane has an accurate conception of the religion practiced by some people, namely those humane and thoughtful theists he mentions. Here I am focusing on just these (call them ‘humane’) theists. If it turns out this is a much smaller group than one might have hoped, so that that is a large concession towards the New Atheists, so be it. What follows is intended to be only about humane theism, i.e. the version of theism that is embraced by the group Ahmed mentions at the beginning of the quote.

As regards humane theism, Crane’s conception of religion seems to be on right track, and this is in line with my second claim. To begin with, what is meant by ‘religion’? Crane acknowledges that there is likely to be no single essence of religion, but he proposes to define the phenomenon as ‘a systematic and practical attempt by human beings to find meaning in the world and their place in it, in terms of their relationship to something transcendent’ (2017, 6). One of these transcendent entities is the God of Western theism.

Crane then characterizes religion in terms of two ingredients: the religious impulse, and identification. I will focus on the religious impulse, which is the tendency towards forming a certain belief.

According to Crane, the belief in question is that ‘*this can’t be all there is; there must be something more to the world’*, something that gives life as a whole meaning. Crane also approvingly cites William James, who speaks of the belief ‘that there is an unseen order, and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto’ (James 1902, 53). So it is a belief about what the world is like, but one with important practical implications regarding the behaviors that are likely to produce alignment with that unseen order.

Crane goes on to flesh out this content by considering how religion differs from science, even though it too makes factual claims, such as that there is a transcendent element to reality. He says that while religion is also an attempt to understand the world, it is a very different kind of attempt to understand the world than science is. It can even make the world harder to understand – think about the problem of evil. Faith, says Crane, is not just belief, but a commitment to a world view rather like one might be committed to a friend.

While Crane is right to emphasize the difference between religion and science, it is not clear whether he goes far enough in this. In his review, Ahmed suggests that Crane’s pattern for religious explanation (‘X happened. Accept it. Try to understand it.’) is a nonstarter:

‘Suppose I want to explain why there are infinitely many prime numbers, why the French Revolution happened when it did, or why I took the last cookie in the jar. What kind of explanation would it be to say ‘X happened [or: X obtains]. Accept it. Try to understand it’? The natural and right response is that what I said is not explaining anything but rather rejecting any obligation to do that.’ (Ahmed 2018)

Ahmed’s point is well taken. Perhaps what ‘Accept it. Try to understand it’ really does, rather than aiming to explain, is aiming to help one cope by lessening one’s need to understand and be offered explanations. And the way it might be aiming to do that is by encouraging one to accept that there are things that affect one that one does not and cannot understand.

This in fact is something that Crane emphasizes when he describes the content of the religious impulse. While in science, non-negotiable mystery would be a bad sign, in religion it plays an important role. One can agree with this without taking on board Crane’s suggestion about a religious pattern of explanation. Crane says that ‘religion is *essentially* a struggle: to reconcile what can be explicit and what cannot be expressed, between what is mysterious about the world and what is clearly known.’ Crane even claims that the religious impulse is inherently paradoxical. On this point, he quotes Alfred North Whitehead:

‘Religion is the vision of something which stands beyond, behind and within the passing flux of immediate things; something which is real, and yet waiting to be realized; something which is a remote possibility and yet the greatest of present facts; something that gives meaning to all that passes an yet eludes apprehension; something whose possession is the final good and yet is beyond all reach; something which is the ultimate ideal, and the hopeless quest.’ (Whitehead 1967 (repr.), 192)

It is often said that a temporal God fits well with the practical elements of theistic religion. And that is true. Practices such as worship and prayer are directed towards a person, and believers think of their entire life as an evolving relationship with the divine person(s). And as mentioned, the further removed from us, the harder it is to think of God as a person.

But the elements of mystery and otherness also seem to play a central role in religious practice. The kind of relationship religious practitioners take themselves to be in is one where the divine person(s) is one on whom one can ‘throw oneself’, the ground of all being. This is not a relationship like any other. For it to be possible, there *needs* tobe a fundamental metaphysical and epistemic gulf between the creator and the created. Part of what makes that relationship special is that it is a relationship between oneself and a divine person who is radically removed from oneself and who has to remain beyond one’s understanding in many ways.

The claim that an element of mystery is essential to religion (and a fortiori to theistic religion), has implications for theism’s relation to the empirical, and thus for empirical arguments for the existence of a designer. A relevant contemporary example would be fine-tuning arguments. These are arguments based on results in modern physics, especially cosmology and particle physics. Let us focus on a particular presentation of a fine-tuning argument, by John Hawthorne and Yoav Isaacs (hereafter H&I; see e.g. (Hawthorne and Isaacs 2017)). Call the claim that one or more agents designed the basic physical features of the universe DESIGN. Theism, it seems, is a specific design hypothesis. H&I define fine-tuning as follows: a universe is fine-tuned for a property just in case that universe possesses that property, and the probability of its having that property is extremely low in all physically-respectable measures. (A measure over a parameter gives one a way of talking about the probability of the parameter taking certain values. A physically-respectable measure H&I take to be a measure suitable for ideal physics, to which the measures that current physicists employ are a defeasible but reasonably good guide.)

The fine-tuning datum is that the universe is fine-tuned for being hospitable to life. Then one can formulate a Bayesian argument for the conclusion that conditional on this physical finding, and on a few other assumptions such as that there is only a single universe, DESIGN is far more probable than its negation.

There are lots of physics-based and philosophy-of-probability-based objections to the argument that one might raise and that have been raised. But for the purposes of this discussion, what is more relevant is an objection that H&I attribute to Dietrich Bonhoeffer:

‘[H]ow wrong it is to use God as a stop-gap for the incompleteness of our knowledge. If in fact the frontiers of knowledge are being pushed further and further back (and that is bound to be the case), then God is being pushed back with them, and is therefore continually in retreat.’ (Bonhoeffer 1997)

H&I interpret this as follows. There is something wrong with empirical arguments for theism because we can already tell that eventually, scientists will find an explanation for the fine-tuning datum that does not involve DESIGN. (Although H&I eschew talk of explanation elsewhere, they put this in explanation-theoretic terms, and I will follow them in this.) Eventually, there will be no role for God to play here. And that is why one should not now attach any importance to the argument.

H&I think this is silly and ‘based on some sort of putative clairvoyance. How can Bonhoeffer or anyone else presuppose that science will eventually figure everything out?’ They point out that a theist especially has no reason to suppose that ‘everything we come across in the world will make perfect sense with or without God […]’ (Hawthorne & Isaacs 2017, 140).

A full consideration of the relation between theism and empirical findings is beyond the scope of this article. What I would like to do here is to provide some further support for my second claim (that an element of mystery is essential to religion), by pointing to the fact that Bonhoeffer’s objection expresses something essential to religion. (Whether there are also considerations pulling in the opposite direction is another matter.) Given the way H&I read the objection, namely as a stubborn refusal to accept the probabilistic boost to theism that fine-tuning provides just because the argument may be overturned in the future, they are right to dismiss it. But the objection is one that a theist, by their own lights, is right to make again and again. The point, from the theist’s perspective, is that in a sense the theistic God is not the kind of entity that fills explanatory gaps, even permanently. Or to say this differently (without using explanation-theoretic vocabulary), it is that in a sense God is not the kind of entity that one can argue for empirically, because in a sense theism is not an empirical hypothesis. So whatever the fine-tuning argument is an argument for, it cannot be the God of Western theism.

Of course this raises a host of further questions. (What does ‘in a sense’ mean? How can theism not also be an empirical hypothesis, whatever else it may be? Many theists intend to make literally true claims about the theistic God, and they seem to be positing a specific designer in that theism entails DESIGN.) But what is behind the objection is the understandable wish to retain a certain epistemic and metaphysical distance between us and the specific designer in question, and to leave room for the element of mystery. There is a need to do this, and this need does not arise from theoretical considerations alone. Rather, the elements of mystery and otherness are essential to religious practice.[[3]](#footnote-3)

# Concluding remarks

Though the theistic God is a person, this God is (or would be) a person like no other, and a relationship with this God is (or would be) a relationship like no other. In particular, there are features of this relationship that rely on the existence of a metaphysical and epistemic gulf between God and human persons. In other words, there is an element of otherness and of mystery that is essential to religion, and to religious practice. This in turn has a bearing on how best to think of the divine attributes. For example, a God whose eternality consists in being outside of time altogether (rather than just existing at every time) is more radically removed from us and bound to remain more mysterious. After all, we are persons centrally characterised by temporality. Thus, although both timeless and temporal conceptions of eternality are defensible, ultimately, timeless conceptions do better justice to the element of mystery and otherness – a key element of religion that plays a role in religious practice.[[4]](#footnote-4)

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1. This section partly builds on material in Deng 2018 and Deng 2019a. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For further discussion of Crane’s conception of religion, particularly its upshot with respect to the possibility of naturalistic religious practice, see (Deng 2019b). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. One might object that this sounds like mysticism, so that this cannot be right as an interpretation of religion in general. Of course I have already limited the application of this conception of religion a little (to ‘humane’ theists), but I did mean to include members of orthodox communities, instead of limiting the discussion just to mystical faiths. Crane anticipates this objection and says: ‘This is not to say that orthodox versions of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity should be regarded as mystical faiths, but only that they place certain epistemic limits on believers: that is, limits about what they can know’ (Crane 2017, 57). This is exactly right. Admittedly, there is a difference between saying there are limits to what can be known (or said) and saying that there is hardly anything that can be known (or said). And there is a danger that talk of an ultimate mystery can mask a slide between these two claims. But a proper understanding of theistic religions, including the role that their metaphysical commitments play in associated religious practices, suggests that this element of mystery is essential. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This work was supported (in part) by the Yonsei University Future-Leading Research Initiative of 2018 (2018-22-0100). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)