OUTSIDE TIME, OUTSIDE WORLDS

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Abstract
A.N. Prior was one of the first to note the similarity in the logical structure of time and modality: There is a parallel between the analysis of truth at a time and the analysis of truth at a possible world. Philosophers, however, sometimes want to talk about truth outside time or about truth outside possible worlds. By taking seriously the parallel in the logic of times and worlds this paper highlights some difficulties such accounts face when they try to explain traditional claims about God's existence.

1. *God's Atemporality*

There is a view that God is outside time. It goes something like this. God is an 'eternal' being whose existence is not reducible to mere existence at all times. Existence at all times is 'omnitemporal' existence, or as some call it 'sempiternal' existence, or as still others call it 'everlasting' existence. Anything which exists omnitemporally or sempiternally or everlastingly exists *in time*. Many things that exist in time fall short of omnitemporal existence, because they exist at some time or other but do not exist at all times. People, cats, dogs, houses, sand dunes all enjoy this limited kind of temporal existence, existing at some times and not at others. To exist *at all times* is the fullest way a thing can exist in time. But God's eternal existence requires something more, something fuller still. According to this view, God's eternal existence is ultimately 'a different mode' of existence: God's existence is outside time. He enjoys an 'atemporal' way of being.[1]

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[1] This way of being is, according to Thomas V. Morris, a magnificent way of being: 'the most exalted mode of existence imaginable' (Morris, 1991, p. 121). Of course since we are after all talking about God it makes some sense to attribute to Him the most exalted mode of existence. But is this something that is unique to God, something that He alone enjoys? Many philosophers say that many things enjoy an atemporal mode of existence. Certainly, if our ontology includes 'abstract' entities and if those are understood to be atemporal, then God is not the only entity to exist atemporally. So perhaps we must suppose that numbers and propositions enjoy a similarly exalted existence. William Lane Craig (2000, p. 61) finds
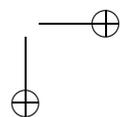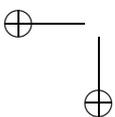
The atemporal view of God has many defenders. Augustine, Boethius, Anselm, and Aquinas all lend their weight to it. But it has its opponents too, people who believe that God's existence must be *in time*. Their claim is much less interesting and much more ordinary. If God exists in time and is merely omnitemporal or sempiternal or everlasting, then God's way of existing is not so hugely different from the way that we exist. We and He enjoy the *same mode* of existence, but He just enjoys a lot more of it, infinitely more of course; but otherwise God's existence is not so very different from our own. Let us simply call people who believe God is something like this the temporalists. And let's leave them to it. Except insofar as the temporalists provide a contrast to the atemporalists, it's the view of the atemporalists that is my focus here.

One crucial feature of the atemporal account of God centres on the idea that God's existence is not *bound* by ordinary pastness, presentness, or futurity. According to Boethius, God's eternal existence is 'illimitable'. As Stump and Kretzmann explain this medieval view:

> ...the life of an eternal being cannot be limited; it is impossible that there be a beginning or an end to it (Stump and Kretzmann, in Morris (1987), p. 222).

Past, future, earlier, later, beginning, end all describe limits — i.e., they all serve as ways of putting bounds on temporal duration. Temporal existence is defined by limit, and because it is so defined, temporal existence is not any part of God's existence. And so God is not any part of time. Delmas Lewis (1988) points out the strong Aristotelian flavour of this argument and notes that Boethius (probably) and Aquinas (certainly) in their separate accounts of eternity have in mind Aristotle's discussion in *Physics* 4. Aristotle, however, also considers whether 'the now' might itself be a kind of limit.[2]

Clearly an existence defined by any limited 'now' is incompatible with an illimitable existence. And atemporalists often speak instead of some kind of 'Eternal Present' or 'Divine Now' — that is, a 'now' appropriate to God's existence which is in no way susceptible of any limit. There is an important

trouble in such an assumption: 'The Platonistic view of infinite realms of metaphysically necessary, uncreated abstract objects posits a metaphysical pluralism which is radically opposed to the idea of God.' In their article 'Eternity', Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann focus mainly on medieval discussions and point out that in Boethius' account in particular for anything to count as eternal it must be a *living* thing. If that is what we mean by eternal atemporal existence then Craig needn't worry. But of course that is not what everyone means by eternal.

[2] See *Physics* 4, 220a4–24; 221b1; 222a10–20.

role for an Eternal Present in the atemporal analysis of God: Without a Divine Now, an eternal atemporal God presents a stark contrast to the kind of temporal omnipresence we learned about at mother's knee. There is something comforting about God's omnipresence because it puts Him wherever we are. Whether we are at Myrtle Beach or at Waitarere Beach, omnipresence guarantees that God is *there* and with us. And his omnipresence is also supposed to guarantee that God is there at all times, whether at 4 July 1976, or at 25 April 2016, or indeed at any possible time. God's omnipresence is a guarantee that God is every*where* you could possibly be, *when*ever you could possibly be. But an atemporal eternal illimitable God is strangely different.

> Because an eternal entity is atemporal, there is no past or future, no earlier or later, *within* its life; that is, the events constituting its life cannot be ordered sequentially from the standpoint of eternity (Stump and Kretzmann, in Morris (1987), p. 225).

You and I are in time — we are temporal creatures whose lifetimes fit within clear temporal limits and which we normally do understand as having a sequential order. An atemporal eternal illimitable God seems not any part of this ordering. The resulting gulf between our contingent temporal existence and God's eternal existence has seemed discomfiting to some thinkers. Mother's explanation makes God near and close in a way that this medieval explanation does not.

   To say that God is Eternally Present, certainly sounds like saying God is *actually* present. But then we want to know what exactly it is to experience, or to exist, in the Eternal Present? Precisely how is the Eternal Present related to the ordinary present? Can an eternal being have ordinary temporal properties like you have and like I have?

   One main thrust within traditional philosophical theology is about trying to explain how or whether temporal existents like us and an atemporal existent like God can be related to each other. This is an old puzzle: for in effect the atemporalist is looking for something to do the same kind of work that the 'participation' relation has to do in Plato's metaphysics, linking a higher world of eternal, unchanging Forms to a lower world of contingent, created, temporal things. In this spirit, Stump and Kretzmann offer us *ET-simultaneity*. Eternal-temporal simultaneity is 'a species of simultaneity... that can obtain between what is eternal and what is temporal'.

ADRIANE A. RINI

(ET)   for every *x* and for every *y*, *x* and *y* are ET-simultaneous iff

> (i)   either *x* is eternal and *y* is temporal, or vice versa; and
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> (ii)   for some observer, *A*, in the unique eternal reference frame, *x* and *y* are both present — i.e., either *x* is eternally present and *y* is observed as temporally present, or vice versa; and
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> (iii)   for some observer, *B*, in one of the infinitely many temporal reference frames, *x* and *y* are both present — i.e., either *x* is observed as eternally present and *y* is temporally present, or vice versa (Stump and Kretzmann, in Morris (1987), pp. 230–231).

How comfortable is this relation between an eternal being and a temporal being? In order to answer, it might help to consider a parallel case.

2. *God's Non-Contingency*

There is also a view that God is outside possible worlds. It is a view that emerges in some of Leibniz' writings. The view goes something like this. God in his infinite wisdom considers all possible ways a world could be. In God's mind, all possibilities are equally real. They are not, however, equally good. All things considered, some possible worlds are better possible worlds. God in his infinite goodness chooses the best of all the possible worlds and makes that one alone actual. From this, it seems perfectly ordinary to say that God in His infinite power could have chosen another world — He could have chosen to actualize some second-best world. But He didn't do that. He could have picked one that was simply terrible. But He didn't do that either. God chose and actualized the best. Of course there is a question about how real a *choice* God has here. God's perfect goodness would seem to stand as proof against any other choice. He could *only* choose the best. But the Leibnizian tradition tells is that there is a real choice, that the actual world didn't have to be the one God actualized, that the actual world itself is a *contingent* thing. Similarly, all things in the contingent actual world are themselves contingent — any one of them, even every one of them, could have failed to exist and would have failed to exist if God had not chosen as He did. To be contingent is just to be able to fail to be, and any created thing is able to fail to be.

God's existence, on the other hand, is different. God is not contingent; He exists necessarily. He cannot fail to exist in the way that even an entire possible world can fail to exist. So, since the actual world itself and everything
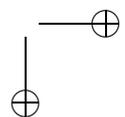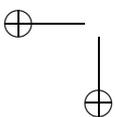
in it is contingent, and since God is not contingent, God must be *outside* the world He actualizes.

Robert Merrihew Adams discusses this view in 'Theories of Actuality':

> Let us begin with a couple of simple but clearly unsatisfactory theories of actuality which are strongly suggested by some fragments of Leibniz. The first of them may be called the *divine choice theory of actuality*.
>
>> [E]ven if it is certain that what is more perfect will exist, still, the less perfect is none the less possible. Propositions of fact involve existence. But the notion of existence is such, that the existent is the sort of state of the universe which GOD chooses [*literally*, which pleases GOD]. But GOD freely chooses what is more perfect. Thus finally a free action is involved. [The translation is Adams' own.]
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> The theory suggested here is that for a possible world to be the actual world is for it to be the world that God chooses. (Perhaps it will be suggested that what is offered in this passage is not a theory of actuality but a theory of existence, according to which, for a thing to exist in any possible world is for it to be chosen by God *in that world*. But, I think, that is not what Leibniz intended. For according to Leibniz, what God freely chooses the more perfect of, as he is said to choose here, is complete possible worlds, and not components thereof.)
>
> It is evidently also part of the theory that God (who exists necessarily, according to Leibniz) chooses freely and could have chosen another possible world instead of the one He has chosen. I doubt that Leibniz or anybody else has held the alternative version of the divine choice theory, according to which the actual world is the only one God could have chosen. In any case, such a necessitarian form of the theory would be liable to objections....
>
> The historic, nonnecessitarian version also faces difficulties, however. For if there is a plurality of possible divine world-choices, the actual world must be distinguished from the other possible worlds as the object of God's *actual* choice. But if that is what the divine theory of actuality says, it does not solve the problem of actuality. As it merely pushes back, from worlds to divine choices, the question, in what actuality consists. (Leibniz seems to have thought of this problem....), (Adams, in Loux (1979), pp. 191–192).

Leibniz constructs an image of God surveying all possible worlds — no one of which is actualized but any one of which could be actualized. Possible worlds, on this view, therefore exist antecedently to God's actualizing. So, when God chooses — singling one out from all the other possibilities — and actualizes that one, what exactly does He *do*? What is it for Him to make a possible world actual? Adams, of course, is concerned about how precisely to answer and finds it difficult to answer in the context of this Leibnizian framework.

Perhaps the most serious problem here shares much in common with the problem about God's eternity. If mother taught that God is always with us, then surely God is *actually* with us. If a necessary being is just one who exists in all possible worlds, then all we have is the *modal* equivalent of sempiternity. On the other hand, if God's necessary existence means that He cannot be said to exist in a world, but exists outside worlds, the problem then becomes a question about how a being whose existence is not in a world can be said to bear a contingent relation to us?

3. *Playing the Parallel*

Stump and Kretzmann offer ET-simultaneity as an answer to the problem of how an eternal being can be related to merely temporal beings. So let's look at what the modal equivalent of ET-simultaneity might be.[3] What we are looking for, then, is 'a species of actuality that can obtain between what is necessary and what is contingent' — that is, between what is outside worlds (O) and what is in a world (W). Let's call this *OW-coactuality*:

(OW)   for every *x* and for every *y*, *x* and *y* are OW-coactual iff

      (i)   either *x* is necessary and *y* is contingent, or vice versa; and

      (ii)   for some observer, *C*, in the unique necessary reference frame, *x* and *y* are both actual — i.e., either *x* is necessarily actual and *y* is observed as contingently actual, or vice versa; and

      (iii)   for some observer, *D*, in one of the infinitely many contingent reference frames, *x* and *y* are both actual — i.e., either *x* is observed as necessarily actual and *y* is contingently actual, or vice versa.

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[3] The idea of substituting modal language for Stump and Kretzmann's temporal language came up in a conversation in 1999, at Texas A&M University, with Michael Hand and Jonathan Kvanvig.

In the temporal case, ET-simultaneity is defined relative to the two observers *A* and *B*, one of whom is outside time and one of whom is in time. So in the modal case, we define OW-coactuality with reference to two observers, *C* and *D*, one of whom is outside worlds and one of whom is in a world (or, in at least one).

If there is a problem with OW-coactuality then we should expect a problem with ET-simultaneity as well. Here is what seems to be a problem with OW-coactuality. It comes up when we try to get clear about what it means to say '*x* is necessarily actual.' Consider, first, '*x* is contingently actual.' This means *x* is true in the actual world and its truth in the actual world is contingent — i.e., it did not have to be the case that *x* is true in the actual world. That much at least is standard and straightforward. So let's replace 'contingently' with 'necessarily'. Then '*x* is necessarily actual' would seem to mean that *x* is true in the actual world and could not fail to be true in the actual world. Even though *x* might be true *in other possible worlds*, if *x* is *necessarily* actual, then *x* cannot fail to be true *in the actual world*. But that seems not to give the right sense of being *outside* worlds. It does not have anything at all to say about being outside worlds. And so, OW-coactuality is not a way of explaining how a being outside worlds can be related to a contingent being. This also casts doubt on the effectiveness of ET-simultaneity as an explanation of the temporal case. The problem there appears to involve the meaning of '*x* is eternally present.' It is perfectly clear that '*x* is temporally present' means *x* is true now. And, to be true now is to be true in time. Anyone who wants to use ET-simultaneity wants, I think, to understand '*x* is eternally present' to mean

(1)   *x* is true now and *x* is outside time.

But truth at any time is truth in time. So, *x* is true now — i.e., the first conjunct in (1) — means

(2)   *x* is true now and *x* is in time.

This makes (1) incoherent. So, if '*x* is eternally present' is coherent, then it cannot mean (1). The parallel with OW-coactuality brings out the oddness of '*x* is eternally present.' Following our discussion of OW-coactuality, '*x* is eternally present' would have to mean something like this:

(3)   *x* is true now, and even though *x* might be true at other times, *x* cannot fail to be true now.

But here we are no longer talking about truth outside time. If '*x* is eternally present' does not capture the sense of being outside time, then it cannot be

ADRIANE A. RINI

used to explain a relation between a being who is outside time and a temporal being.

If we take to heart the similarity in the structure of our ordinary talk about worlds and our ordinary talk about times, then we should at least be able to say that OW-coactuality and ET-simultaneity stand or fall together. A.N. Prior was one of the first to note the similarity in the logical structure of time and modality. He was also conscious of a difference in attitude to the metaphysics of time and modality. As Prior explains:

> I wonder whether anybody wants to put forward anything like the following as a piece of serious metaphysics: There really are such objects as possible worlds, and what we loosely describe as propositions of modal logic are in fact predicates of which these objects are the subjects (Prior (1968), p. 191).

> ... this seems a tall story, and as I have said, I doubt whether anyone seriously believes it. But plenty of people believe an exactly similar story about tenses, i.e. believe that tensed propositions are predicates of "instants", and that there is — really is — an instant at which I unalterably "am" drinking (p. 192).

The challenge to anyone wanting to argue that God exists outside times or outside worlds is to show either that the world-time parallel does not apply here or that OW-coactuality is after all coherent.

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