

## God and eternity: further thoughts<sup>1</sup>

In the handout ‘God and eternity’, we discuss the analysis of eternity developed by Stump and Kretzmann in their article ‘Eternity’. You should read that handout first, as in this handout, we extend that discussion further.

### ETERNITY AND RELATIVITY

Central to Stump and Kretzmann’s analysis of eternity is a new account of simultaneity.

The familiar concept of simultaneity is that two things are simultaneous if they exist or occurrence at one and the same time. But this is, obviously, a definition that presupposes that the two things are in time. Call our familiar concept ‘T-simultaneity’ (for temporal simultaneity). But an eternal being is atemporal, ‘outside’ time. The events that constitute the life of an eternal being do not, from its perspective, follow one another in time. Its whole life is experienced as ‘now’, i.e. as ‘present’. That ‘present’ isn’t flanked by past or future, it is not a moment in which future becomes past. It is a non-temporal present.

This is a new idea of simultaneity, call it ‘E-simultaneity’ (for eternal simultaneity). Two events or beings are E-simultaneous if they exist or occur in one and the same eternal present. Any two events in God’s life will be simultaneous, since all events in God’s life are present, in the eternal ‘now’. This is an atemporal concept of simultaneity.

But these two ideas of simultaneity are quite different. How, then, can we talk about any event being simultaneous with the existence of an eternal being? To do this, we have to appeal to the idea of a ‘perspective’ or ‘frame of reference’. From our temporal perspective, God is present at every moment in time. God is never past or future, and no part of God is past or present. From God’s eternal perspective, every event in time is observed as occurring in the eternal present. Stump and Kretzmann call this relation between time and the eternal, ET-simultaneity. ‘From a temporal standpoint, the present is ET-simultaneous with the whole infinite extent of an eternal entity’s life. From the standpoint of eternity, every time is present, co-occurrent with the whole of infinite atemporal duration.’ So God experiences every moment in time as present together, and the whole of God’s existence is simultaneous with each moment in time.

Although it seems odd at first, this idea that we can only talk about simultaneity when adopting a particular perspective or frame of reference is, in fact, not one that we can avoid. Einstein’s special theory of relativity shows that even T-simultaneity is relative to a frame of reference given by relative motion. For

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<sup>1</sup> Lacewing, M. (2017) ‘God and eternity: further thoughts’

example, whether two lightning flashes occur together depends on one's (speed of) motion relative to them. If someone who is stationary, relative to the lightning flashes, sees them occur at the same time, then someone who is moving very fast away from one flash and towards the other, will see them occur at two different times. Now, everything in the universe is moving relative to something else. There is no fixed absolute point that we can say is completely still. There is no further question of whether the two lightning flashes are really simultaneous (any more than whether X is 'to the left' of Y - it all depends where you are standing). Einstein's theory doesn't allow for a privileged frame of reference. And so there is no single 'correct' answer as to whether two events are T-simultaneous or not.

Strictly speaking, then, we should replace the idea of T-simultaneity with that of RT-simultaneity - the existence or occurrence of two or more things at the same time within the reference frame of a given observer. This helps us understand the idea of ET-simultaneity as another case in which simultaneity depends upon a frame of reference, except in this case the difference between the frames of reference is not motion through space-time but between temporality and atemporality.

## **TWO IMPLICATIONS OF THE ANALYSIS**

In the remainder of this handout, we consider two implications of which Stump and Kretzmann's analysis of eternity, and so God's relationship to time, for traditional puzzles in the philosophy of religion.

### Can God be both eternal and omniscient?

In an earlier article, 'Omniscience and immutability', Kretzmann argued that, as long as we think that God cannot change - that God is 'immutable' - then God cannot be omniscient. The thought that God cannot change comes from the thought that God is perfect. But we can also argue that an eternal being cannot change, since it exists in the eternal present, while change involves a 'before' and 'after' the change.

Kretzmann argued:

- P1. A perfect being is not subject to change.
- P2. A perfect being knows everything.
- P3. A being that knows everything always knows what time it is.
- P4. A being that always knows what time it is is subject to change.
- C1. Therefore, a perfect being is subject to change.
- C2. Therefore, a perfect being is not a perfect being.
- C3. Therefore, there is no perfect being.

This argument is a *reductio ad absurdum*, which is a form of argument that shows that some claim leads to a contradiction. The contradiction is (C2). If (P1)-(C1) are true, then the concept of a perfect being is incoherent.

In 'Eternity', Stump and Kretzmann respond to the challenge. (P3) is not clear. It could mean either of two different claims. What it should say is

P3'. A being that knows everything always knows in the temporal present what time it is in the temporal present.

This is because (P3) and (P4) are supposed to show that an omniscient being will change, the idea being that as the time changes (as time passes), the knowledge of an omniscient being changes. First, it knows that it is 3.12, then it knows that it is 3.13, and so on.

However, on their analysis of eternity, this is not how to understand the knowledge that an eternal being such as God has. The correct claim is

P3''. A being that knows everything always knows in the eternal present what time it is in the temporal present.

This says that an eternal being knows of any temporal instant what time it is in that temporal framework, i.e. the time at which every temporal event occurs, but the eternal being, and hence its knowledge, isn't in time. So its knowledge does not change 'over time'. On this reading, (P4) is then false. God knows what time it is in the temporal present, but without his knowledge changing. God knows what is happening as it is happening, since every time is ET-simultaneous with the eternal present.

#### Can an eternal being act in time?

People have often identified specific events as actions of God, whether these are miracles or answers to prayer or something else. If God is outside time, does it make any sense to say that God acts at specific times?

Stump and Kretzmann's solution is this: God's action cannot occur in time, because God's existence is in the eternal present, but the effects of God's action can. So, for example, God could atemporally bring about something's coming into existence at a time or again, bring it about that some object in time changes in a certain way.

This has a further implication. Normally, we think of the effects of some action, e.g. water on the floor, come *after* the action, e.g. spilling your glass. But that cannot apply to atemporal actions. Events in time don't come after God's actions, since God is ET-simultaneous with every moment in time. This gives us an account of what it is for God to answer prayer. While the prayer comes first and the answer comes later *in time*, both the prayer and the response to the prayer are ET-simultaneous.