

Can God Exist Outside Space-Time?

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Introduction

Many theists claim that God exists outside of space-time and created it. This article will show that such a claim is questionable and at least needs qualification to be regarded as meaningful.

Although it would be a quite valid approach, this article will not be suggesting that the idea of “creation” outside time is incoherent because “creation”, as an action, is an inherently temporal concept. Rather, I will make as much effort as possible to interpret the concept of “creation” in a tenseless, or atemporal (timeless), way and then show that without serious qualification *it still does not work* on account of it being ontologically meaningless to claim any difference between the “creator” and the “created” in an atemporal situation. In other words, I will be doing the opposite of attacking a straw man argument in taking a theistic concept that, as usually described, is weak and making a serious effort to strengthen it before showing it that it still fails under analysis or needs serious qualification.

Assumption

God, if he/she/it exists is the creator of anything that humans know. A claim that God exists outside space-time implies that God “created” space-time.

(I am aware that the word “created” implies time and a tense, but I will be as generous as possible about this, allowing the concept of “creation” to be generalized into an atemporal sense as much as possible.)

The Argument

1. Causation is a special case of contingency. When X is said to cause Y this means that Y is contingent on X and that X preceded Y. A characteristic of Y is that it is that which is caused by X so the existence of Y implies the existence of X. This, however, does not mean that Y caused X: X precedes Y and the object which comes first is given “priority” and regarded as the causer.
2. This makes causality an intrinsically temporal concept. If God is outside space-time then God cannot “cause” space-time in a temporal way. We cannot deny God totally with this reasoning, however, because it could be argued that causality is just a special case of contingency and that when people say that God “caused” space-time they really mean that space-time is contingent on God.
3. Outside time, even if we admit the coherency of “causation” by calling it “contingency” any *direction* for it is lost, there being no time in which to order things.

4. Let us accept the coherency of the concepts of existence and contingency outside space-time: we must if we are going to admit the possibility of God.
5. Let us assume that God exists outside space-time and that the existence of God implies the existence of space-time.
6. Therefore space-time is contingent on God.
7. To say that space-time is contingent on God must mean that the existence of God, with the characteristics of God, implies the existence of space-time.
8. A characteristic of space-time is therefore that it is contingent on God. The existence of space-time therefore implies the existence of God.
9. Therefore God is contingent on space-time.
10. Therefore God and space-time are mutually contingent.
11. Therefore, if we even allow the word “created” to be used atemporally, for lack of a better word, at most all we can say is that space-time “created” God and God “created” space-time. It is now incoherent to say that God has any special status as the “creator” of space-time.
12. If God exists outside space-time God is supposed to have created space-time.
13. Therefore, God cannot exist outside space-time.

Does this really mean that God cannot exist outside of space-time? Not necessarily: various objections can be made. Some of these may have merit, but at the cost of demanding a significant amount of qualification in the concept of “God”.

Objections

Objection 1: You have tried to force the idea of “causation” into a limited temporal sense.

Answer

I have done the *opposite*. I have recognized the usual limited temporal sense of the word “causation” and I have tried to be as generous as possible in extending this concept to be atemporal as “contingency”.

Objection 2: To give a direction to contingency we need merely assume an extra dimension of time, or if we do not want to call it “time” we can call it something else. God, or the start of this act of “creation” by God, would be “somewhere” on this dimension and space-time “somewhere else”. God could therefore still “precede” space-time in this extra dimension and be the “creator”.

Answer

You would need to establish the preferred “direction” of causation in this new dimension. You could say that God “precedes” space-time or that space-time “precedes” god by choosing to order events differently. Labelling one entity as the “creator” is arbitrary.

Objection 3: A “direction” of time in our space-time has meaning from thermodynamics. The tendency for entropy increase is what defines the “forward” direction in time. We could similarly have entropy exist in this extra dimension suggested in the previous objection. This would give it a direction and we could then say that God or the start of God’s act of “creation” precedes space-time.

Answer

This may still be arbitrary. The reason that we associate increase in entropy with the forward “direction” of time is based more on our perception of time than anything else. It is even debatable whether this means anything profound. With no human perception in this extra dimension what reason do we have to regard entropy as anything significant for assigning a direction to it? A possible answer to this is that the description of things in this extra time dimension best fits with our semantics for describing things in our space-time when considered in a particular direction, but this in itself suggests that some kind of structure at this level of reality would be needed to talk about it. This “time outside time” would need to contain events that resemble events involving physical things in “our” time, at least to the extent that they can be meaningfully considered in terms of thermodynamics. This allows various claims of “action” and “cause” outside time to be coherent, at least in principle, but the problem for theology is that it starts to make God and his/her/its behaviour seem much more physical and structured than is generally held to be the case by theists. Without something structured to analyze in this extra time dimension we are left with no way of setting a direction for contingency. Theists may suggest that God’s thoughts have a natural “structure” or “order”, but even this might be considered by many theists to be the reduction of God to a *thing*. It would certainly seem to require that God’s thought processes can at least approximately be mapped onto ours. A view such as “God is beyond our understanding” will not suffice if such an objection is to be used.

An answer by theists could be that God’s interference in our space-time clearly shows some kind of direction of time, for example, when he/she/it has conversations with people, but only the aspects of such behaviour which manifested themselves in our space-time could be considered temporally. The being doing all this from outside time cannot necessarily be considered with some sort of temporal order due to this.

By claiming the existence of entropy in an extra dimension outside space-time in which God performs creative acts you are adding an extra layer of physics to reality and putting all kinds of constraints on God. Putting God outside space-time in the first place is generally done to *avoid* these issues. It only makes sense to talk about entropy when you have laws of physics to control state changes of the universe. What is the point in claiming that God is above physical laws and then extending them out into this place which he/she/it is supposed to inhabit?

The objection more or less seeks to show that god can be outside time by, well, giving him a different time to inhabit. For, all practical purposes it deliberately makes God, and his act of creation *temporal* – just with a different time. It should be accepted, however,

that the objection could be valid, at least in principle, but only at the cost of adding a lot more detail to the God claim and bringing God much closer to being something subject to human analysis. This sort of solution is unlikely to appeal to most theists.

Objection 4: Why must there be a direction to contingency for us to say that God is the creator? Suppose, for example that there are many space-times, such that each is contingent on God and God is contingent on each. God would still be “central” to reality by being that thing which has a direct relationship of contingency, even if there is no direction to it, with everything.

Answer

Various ideas like this can be proposed and some of them may have merit. The problem is, getting some sort of “preferred” status for God that does not just result from semantics may be more difficult than you think. Of course, the concept of a being which is “intrinsic” to all of reality, in a way that you or I are not, may be definable in a coherent way, but theists tend not to make any attempt to deal with this. Instead, they simply assert that God existed “before” the universe and “created” it, or that God “created” it from outside space-time, or they use some kind of muddle of the two in which the act of creation occurred “before time” and yet was somehow “outside it” – like the blank part on an audio cassette. Any view attempting to put God outside space-time, unless significantly qualified, has been shown to be incoherent in this article.

Objection 5: We could also understand the idea of “contingency” slightly differently to the way you have described it by using the definition of “contingency” in modal logic. We could say that something is necessary, or non-contingent, if it exists in all possible worlds – that is, if its existence is logically required in all possible worlds – and that something is contingent if it only exists in some possible worlds. If God is necessary in all possible worlds, and the universe only exists in some possible worlds, or the universe as we know it only exists in some possible worlds then we can say that God is non-contingent and the universe is contingent. This could be considered an abstracted, atemporal way of saying that God caused the universe.

Answer

It is hard to imagine how God could exist in all possible worlds. Argument from complexity, even if valid in a possible world with complexity, would probably not suffice, for example, as complexity may not be a feature of all possible worlds. This would really require the validity of something like an ontological proof of God. Of course, if some proof does validly demonstrate the existence of God in all possible worlds then it does so whether we actually know the proof or not, so theists could potentially suggest that such a proof is possible (I dispute this) and that the *necessary* existence of God is a *possibility*. There is at least one proof intended to demonstrate the existence of God in all possible worlds – Alvin Plantinga’s modal ontological argument [1], regarded by many atheists as deeply flawed.

Let us assume, however that God is necessary and does exist in all possible worlds to see where this gets us. We have a number of possibilities:

- If the universe exists, as we know it (i.e. with the same characteristics), in all possible worlds, then both God and the universe are necessary according to the standards of modal logic. God therefore has no preferred status.
- If the universe exists, with different characteristics, in all possible worlds, and for any given world, the characteristics of the universe in that world are independent of any characteristics that God may have in that world then, while God's necessity admittedly seems to make him/her/it "special" there is no reason to associate this with the idea of "creation". God has no preferred status relative to the universe.
- If the universe exists, with different characteristics, in all possible worlds, and for any given world, the characteristics of the universe in that world are dependent on the characteristics that God has in that world, then the existence of the universe cannot be said to be contingent upon God, as both always exist anyway. It might seem important that the universe's characteristics are dependent on the characteristics of God, but the problem is that, outside time, there is no way to establish a direction for this contingency.
- If the universe exists in some possible worlds, but not in others, such that whether or not a given possible world has a universe is independent of the characteristics that God has in the world then the existence of any universe is merely dependent on what world it is in. God may be necessary and the universe may be contingent but, without some "link" of contingency between God and the universe it is ontologically meaningless to say that the universe is *contingent on God*.
- If the universe exists in some possible worlds, but not in others, such that whether or not a given world has a universe is dependent on the characteristics that God has in particular the world then it may seem that this is a better case for saying that the universe is contingent on God. Admittedly, out of all these situations, this is the best one, from a theistic point of view, but it is still not very good. Even if the universe only happens to exist in worlds with particular kinds of God, how does this establish any "connection" between the universe and God in which God takes precedence. The fact that God's characteristics are not the same in all possible worlds means that God's characteristics are contingent, rather than necessary, yet it is on these characteristics that the existence of the universe is alleged to depend. The existence of the universe is therefore not dependent on something necessary but on something that is contingent. We now have the same problem again. We appear to have some "link" of contingency here, but we could just as well reverse it to say that God is necessary and the characteristics of God are contingent on the existence or otherwise of the universe, so that if the universe does not exist then God's characteristics must be such that he/she/it belongs to a particular set of possible gods and if the universe does exist then it alters these characteristics of God so that he/she/it belongs to a different set of possible gods.

It should be noted that the situation described above does not change whether we assume Axiom S5 of modal logic or not: assertions of necessity and contingency, in the modal

logic sense, can merely be regarded as making separate statements about things: it is difficult to establish any reasonable basis for any directional link between them.

Some readers may object to this by saying that if contingency works in both ways then it is meaningless to talk about ultimately what the contingency is *on*. For example, if we can argue that, without time, “God is contingent” and “the universe is contingent” can both be valid statements, or some variation of this, then there is no ultimately necessary thing on which things can be contingent. We only get into this situation, however, by using the modal logic idea of regarding things as “contingent” purely by virtue of them existing in only some of all possible worlds, not because we have found something for them to be contingent on. When I say that statements such as “The universe is contingent on God” can equally validly be expressed as “God is contingent on the universe” I am not claiming that any “link” of contingency has been found, or that the coherence of this even needs to be recognized within the framework that we are currently using, but rather that such a link must be asserted if the claim that “God created the universe” is going to have any atemporal coherency.

Some readers may say that, if it is impossible to say firmly whether the universe is contingent on God or God is contingent on the universe then there is no way for a particular possible world to “know” whether God should exist in it or not, whether the universe should exist or not, what characteristics God should have and what characteristics the universe should have. Modal realism as proposed by David Lewis [2], however, recognizes that possible worlds can be differentiated from each by means of an index and we need merely say that any of these are contingent on this index.

It should also be noted that, in the above situations, any claim that God can have different characteristics in different possible worlds implies that, since God is perfect, there are multiple ways in which an entity can be perfect. I will not be pursuing this further here, but it may cause issues with some theistic positions.

Objection 6: If any attempt to set a direction for “contingency”, or whatever we call some atemporal equivalent of “causation”, is arbitrary then the same applies in temporal situations. We could say that rain caused a puddle because it preceded the puddle but we could equally well say that the caused precedes the cause and that the rain is caused by the puddle. You are merely doing the same thing in an atemporal context to try to make everything look arbitrary. If your reasoning were valid it would be incoherent to speak of causation, atemporally or temporally. If you tried to use reasoning like this *inside* time, instead of just *outside* of it, it would be seen for the silliness that it is.

Answer

Of course there is arbitrariness in associating the word “creation” with a particular direction of the relationship of contingency between objects in time, but we could say that about labelling of *any* concept. We could imagine an alternative human society in which the word “creation” was used for contingency in the opposite direction, but the semantics

in use applies to a particular direction and in saying that God “creates” things there are two clear claims:

1. There is a relationship of contingency, or something which can be considered an extension of the concept of contingency, between God and what he is said to “create”.
2. There is a direction of this relationship which can justifiably be said to relate to the direction with which we associate “creation” in temporal situations in a better way than the opposite direction.

Objection 7: You demand coherency from God, but God is beyond your limited understanding and does not have to satisfy your idea of coherency.

Answer

God can be as incoherent as he/she/it wants for all I care. At issue is the set of statements made by *you*, a *human*, in *human language*, which is expected to communicate meanings to humans according to the conventions of human language, about God, in the form of descriptions of his attributes, claims for his/her/its existence, arguments to support those claims and answers to objections to those arguments. I am not demanding coherency from God: I am demanding it from *you*.

Would it be persuasive if I claimed that a big red rock eater gave me special powers and uttered randomly selected words from an Esperanto dictionary in answer to any criticism, claiming that any accusation that my speech is incoherent is invalid because *the big red rock eater is not bound by the human standards of logic*? No, because it is not the big red rock eater doing the incoherent talking: it is me.

Conclusion

It is not just impossible for God to have “created” the universe from outside space-time. Without a significant amount of qualification it is incoherent, even if we do our best to remove any temporal limitations on the idea of “creation” by allowing it to be atemporal “contingency”. Without time there is no direction to contingency and no way in which an entity can be said to be the creator or the created.

Of course, it may be possible to qualify the idea of “creation” by God to avoid these problems, but any logical argument can be defeated by redefining your way out of it. The issue would really be whether any such redefinition or clarification made sense and did not start to weaken various theological claims.

References

[1] Plantinga, A. C. (1965). *The Ontological Argument from St. Anselm to Contemporary Philosophers*. New York: Doubleday.

[2] Lewis, D.K. (1986). *On the Plurality of Worlds*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.