

The Theistic Apologist's Worst Nightmare: A Reality Where Time Is Unimportant

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Abstract

Some views of reality feature time as a constructed phenomenon instead of part of the fundamental framework of reality. These kinds of views have serious consequences for some arguments used to support the existence of God by claiming that God is needed to “cause” the universe, because they relegate time and causality to an unimportant, and possibly parochial, position. Further, if most of reality is atemporal, as some views now suggest, then the entire concept of God is questionable because it appears to rely on concepts such as intention which only make sense as temporal ideas.

Introduction

Most people would probably view space and time as the “fundamental” framework of reality, as basic parts of reality, so that reality without them is inconceivable without them. We might easily imagine a reality without cars, cats or tax returns (even if their non-existence might seem implausible – plausibility is not what we are talking about here), but most people would probably find it difficult to imagine a reality without space and, more importantly for this article, time.

Some proposals now challenge this idea of time as fundamental. In these views time is not a fundamental, basic part of reality. Instead, we experience time because, at least in part of reality, things are put together in a way that can be described in terms of time.

This kind of idea causes serious problems for some of the arguments used to support the existence of God because it removes time and causality as things that are central to reality. For example, the first cause argument is an attempt to show that God must be needed as the cause of the universe. I will now discuss how time could be a constructed thing and why this causes these problems for theistic apologists.

Time as a Constructed Thing

In some views of reality, time is a constructed thing, rather than a fundamental thing.

One example of such a proposal is Max Tegmark's ultimate ensemble view of reality [1,2], a kind of physical expression of modal realism [3]. In this view of reality, every mathematically describable object exists. Some of these objects would be describable in terms of time and some of them would have descriptions similar to the description of what is, to us, the *local* universe with its space-time. One of these objects would actually *be* the local universe with its space-time. Although the time in the local universe is an

abstraction, we would experience the “flow” of time because we would be embedded in this particular object as observers.

The important thing about this view is that our perception of the flow of time is nothing to do with time being an important feature of reality as a whole. In fact, time would have no relevance to almost all of reality. It is only in a relatively small proportion of mathematical objects that things would be describable in terms of time. What we think of as consciousness is a temporal process: it is hard to imagine anything like consciousness or an observer existing without time, so observers like us can only exist in objects – parts of reality – where there is time. This may make it seem to observers that time is universal and important, but that would simply be an observer selection effect.

Tegmark’s proposal is not the only one that rejects time as a fundamental part of reality. In *The End of Time: The Next Revolution in Physics* [4] Julian Barbour argued that our perception of time is largely an illusion that comes from our experience of individual moments, rather than due to it having any fundamental nature, though I think that whether or not these views of time as non-fundamental make it an illusion is a semantic issue. The UDASSA proposal [5], apparently originated from Usenet postings by Wei Chan, also views time as an emergent property of some objects and, as with the Tegmark view, as not even a feature of most of reality. In one of my own articles on Occam’s razor [6] I have proposed an atemporal view of reality in which time is constructed, a position which is being developed further in some of my later articles [7,8,9,10,11]. Cosmologies in which time is constructed have also appeared in science fiction [12].

How can things exist atemporally?

Some readers may have trouble with the idea of things existing atemporally. Even saying, “Reality in general is atemporal,” requires us to use the present tense of the verb “to be” and some readers may ask *when* this atemporal reality is supposed to exist. It may be tempting to think of an atemporal view of reality as a reality which exists in a single moment. This would be incorrect though. If time is a constructed, provincial thing then reality as a whole would not exist in a single moment: the language of time, including references to words like “moment”, would be inappropriate for describing most of reality.

It is hard to discuss concepts like this in conventional language, because our intuition that time is fundamental is so deeply ingrained in us that references to time cannot be avoided in any statements that we make. This, however, is merely a defect in our language. We do not need to consider such things as an atemporal universe to see that our language imposes such temporal ideas on us when they are not always suitable:

Consider this mathematical statement:

“ $1 + 1 = 2$ ”

Let us translate that into human language:

“1 plus 1 equals 2.”

I used the present tense of the verb “to equal”, so what I just said is the same as:

“1 plus 1 equals 2 *now*.”

or some people might view it as:

“1 plus 1 equals 2 *always*.”

From where did this “now” or “always” come? The original, mathematical statement “ $1+1=2$ ” does not describe events in time. It describes a *relationship*. It has nothing to do with time. The “=” in mathematical notation is part of an atemporal language that can describe things without reference to time at all. Conventional human language cannot do that. As soon as we try to translate the mathematical statement into human language we are forced to replace relationships with verbs, and artificially introduce tenses and time. Human language does a poor job of expressing this kind of atemporal relationship, probably because our intuition tells us that time is a basic thing, although we might deal with this by inventing some atemporal, grammatical construction. Similarly, reality could consist of many different kinds of relationships, most of them atemporal, with just a small proportion of these being the sorts of relationships that we, embedded in them, perceive as “time”. Asking when the construction of time occurs would be a fallacy. The “construction” would not be an “action” or “process” occurring in time, but merely a set of relationships.

This idea of atemporal things is difficult for many people to grasp. Some people would probably persist in thinking that “ $1+1=2$ ” means that $1+1=2$ *always*. Likewise, people often wonder if the passage of time is an illusion and “all of time exists in a single instant”. If time is a constructed phenomenon, as proposed in the cosmologies that I mentioned, saying that history really exists in a single instant would only go partway to the truth because it would still be trying to force temporal language (“exists” and “instant”) onto an atemporal situation. What we think of as time would actually be (and human language forces me to use the word “be” as nothing atemporal is available) a set of relationships which do not rely on time but describe a flow of time and observers in it.

As an analogy for how time could be atemporally constructed, imagine a reel of film. When fed through a film projector it portrays a flow of events, but really it is just a set of still frames. The still frames describe a flow of events. Even if the film was cut up into separate frames, and they were scattered all over the floor, they would still describe a sequence of events, because there would be an obvious order to the frames: each frame would still be related to the frame that followed it and preceded it. Imagine that the film is of two characters discussing whether or not there is a “flow” of time. In reality, all the individual frames are lying on the floor, but the relationships are still there.

This analogy is limited in one respect. If we look outside the flow of time portrayed in the film we see the individual frames of film scattered on the floor in our time, which might suggest that time must be constructed within some “outside time”, or within an instant such as an outside time. This is inevitable with a real-world example using film as I could hardly make up an example where the film’s frames are scattered in an atemporal way on a floor: any real-world example must occur in time. It is, of course, possible, in principle, that we could live in a universe with time that is constructed within some outside time, though if that were the case we may doubt that this time is fundamental. The important thing about the kinds of cosmologies that I have mentioned here, however, is that the whole idea of time, whether our time is constructed in another time or not, is ultimately just not important or fundamental to reality as a whole.

Some readers may wonder how this deals with the problem of “where the universe comes from”. If these kinds of cosmologies were correct then that would depend on the semantics of the word “universe”. If “universe” is supposed to mean “absolutely everything” then questions of causality (in temporal terms) would not even apply at such a level and it would be debatable that the question means anything. We might still debate why things are as they are – why there is a reality here at all – and whether or not this has any theistic relevance, but the question would already have to be beyond the scope of simplistic “first cause” type arguments to have any chance of sensibly discussing it. A different, now common, understanding of the word “universe” is that it means “local universe” – what we think of as “our” space-time – everything relating to “our” big bang, irrespective of whether or not there is anything else. With this sort of semantics, our universe would contain time and causality within itself, but only as a way of describing the relationships within it. Asking for the cause of the “first event” would be naïve: the entire universe, with all of its “time”, would be an object that exists atemporally because of its relationships with other objects in reality.

Implications for Theological Arguments

Theistic apologists should hope that these kinds of views are wrong, because if true they cause problems for the type of argument for God’s existence which suggests that he is needed as the cause of the universe. An example of this type of argument is the first cause argument, a version of which was proposed by Thomas Aquinas. A modern version of this kind of argument is that proposed by William Lane Craig, who seeks to show that actual infinities cannot exist and that there must therefore be a start to time, and therefore a creator to cause the universe. This is regarded as a modernized version of the Kalam cosmological argument [13]. As well as being used by philosophers, similar kinds of arguments are often used informally by many theists, when they say things such as “Everything has a cause”, “Do you think the universe just came from nowhere?” and “Nothing comes from nothing”. Statements like this assume some kind of universality of time and causality. If any of the atemporal views previously discussed are correct, such theistic arguments would be hopelessly naïve by insisting on a cause for the first event in time in a universe in which causality, and time itself, are no longer important, but merely provincial things – strange local customs of reality. Such theistic arguments would not

merely be flawed: an apologist using them would not even be speaking the right language and would be like someone who has brought a baseball bat to a football game.

Some theists might say that this kind of view of time merely confirms arguments that God is necessary as the causer. They might say that their arguments merely show that the universe must have a cause outside time and that these kinds of views of time merely agree with this. The problem with this is that these kinds of views of time do not regard what is outside time as “supernatural” (whatever that means): they regard an atemporal reality as something which can be reasonably discussed scientifically and physically. Considering things outside time would not require us to postulate a god.

A second problem for theistic apologists arises when we consider the idea that God is supposed to be a being with intention and a will. Such ideas seem temporal in nature, yet with time a provincial feature of the local universe (and possibly some other insignificant parts of reality) it would be hopelessly naïve to project temporal ideas such as “intention” onto reality as a whole.

Conclusion

In some theistic arguments for God, God is proposed as logically necessary to cause the universe. The first cause argument is one such argument. William Lane Craig’s modern version of the Kalam cosmological argument [13] is another. A further, simple expression of this kind of idea is found in statements such as “Everything has a cause” and “Nothing comes from nothing”.

The problem with these kinds of arguments is that they assume some kind of universality of time and causality – that these kinds of ideas are so intrinsic to reality that they should be accepted as general without any need for evidence. A problem is caused with this by some modern cosmological views, such as that proposed by Tegmark [1,2] in which time is merely a constructed phenomena in our locally observable environment and in which it is not fundamental, or even important, to an understanding of reality in general. If any of these kinds of cosmological views are correct then “first cause” and similar arguments are not even made in the right language.

Further, if most of reality is atemporal, as the kinds of views mentioned suggest, then the entire concept of God is questionable because it appears to rely on concepts such as intention which only make sense as temporal ideas.

I do not expect this to remove the issue of God from debate. These cosmological views may be wrong. Even if they are shown to be right I expect theism, as always, to adapt its arguments and start claiming God in such gaps as it can find.

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