

God, Soul, and Time in Priest and Swinburne

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Abstract

Contra Swinburne I argue that God cannot exist within time. There is a sufficient condition for its being now now. Because the conception of God existing within time cannot account for this condition, it has to be rejected. Based on Priest I argue that God's creative act is this: to cause the actuality of the universe within the soul.

Keywords

Presentism, Idealism, God, Soul, Creation

1. Theories of Time

When philosophers seek to distinguish two accounts of what time could be they frequently rely upon McTaggart's theories of time.

On his *B-theory*, time is a well-ordered structure of events. Within this structure, an event is earlier, later, or simultaneous with another event. If it is earlier, later, or simultaneous with another event, then it is always true to say that it occurs earlier, later, or simultaneously with that event. The interval of time during which an event occurs, i.e. the position it occupies in the well-ordered structure of events does not change and is determined just by the relations of occurring earlier, later, or simultaneously with other events. For instance, the interval of time during which WWII occurs is determined by the events which occur simultaneously with and by the events which occur earlier or later than WWII. Deploying standard terminology, I call sentences about events occurring at a certain position in this structure *B-sentences* and what makes B-sentences true *tenseless facts*.

McTaggart's *A-theory* entails a view concerning the phenomenological flow of time in a metaphysically serious sense: time is the becoming past of future events by their 'running through' the metaphysical *highlight* of being present. According to the A-theory it is true that some events are past, some are present, and others are yet to

be present. For instance, there was a time when WWII was a future event, a time when it was present, and now is the time when WWII is over. Sentences about events happening now, in the past, or in the future are *A-sentences* and what makes *A-sentences* true are *tensed facts*.

Any B-theory of time is an incomplete theory of time. As long as we do not know which events are happening *now*, the B-Theory of time does not entail whether WWII is over, is present, or is yet to come.¹ Therefore, because it is a fact that WWII is over and that certain distinct events are happening now, there are genuine facts that the B-theory of time is silent about, i.e. tensed facts. That WWII occurs at a certain position in a well-ordered structure of events is part of but not the whole story.

2. Sentences, Propositions, and Statements

Swinburne (1990) elaborates a semantic framework of sentences, propositions and statements, which bears similarity to two-dimensional semantics. Nevertheless, I ignore recent developments in two-dimensional semantics and concentrate on Swinburne only.

According to Swinburne, sentences “are the primary truth-bearers” (Swinburne 1990: 122). How are we to understand knowledge of tensed and tenseless facts given that, according to Swinburne, sentences express propositions and statements? By knowing the truth of an *A-sentence* (*B-sentence*), do we know that a proposition is true or do we know that a statement is true?

Swinburne defines the notion of *proposition* as follows: “the proposition which a token sentence *S* expresses is that element of claim in what is said which is also made by any other token sentence [...] which is synonymous with *S*” (Swinburne 1990: 121). The *statement* expressed by a token-sentence *S* is “that element of claim in what is said which is made by any other token sentence *R* which predicates the same properties of the same individuals, at the same times and places (*however the individuals, times, and places are picked out*)” (Swinburne 1990: 121, *my italics*).

The token *A-sentence* “I deliver a lecture at Oriel College tomorrow” uttered by Richard Swinburne on August 14th 2007 expresses the same statement as the token *A-sentence* “Richard Swinburne delivered a lecture at Oriel College a week ago” uttered by someone else on August 22nd 2007 because despite a different mode of

¹ Even knowledge that George W. Bush is president of the United States during a period of time later than WWII does not enable us to know whether WWII is past, present or future, as long as we do not know whether George W. Bush is president of the United States *now* etc.

presentation the same property is said to be exemplified by the same individual. If the statement is true, then any token-sentence which expresses the same statement expresses a true statement, independent of when the sentence is uttered: what makes the statement true is that a certain event occurs at a certain position within the well-ordered structure of events.² For any statement expressed by an A-sentence there is thus a B-sentence expressing the same statement, as in our case the B-sentence “Richard Swinburne delivers a lecture at Oriel on August 15th 2007”. Precisely because of this behaviour statements cannot serve as a factor in the explanation of our knowledge of *tensed* facts: statements are true due to *tenseless* facts.

However, the propositions expressed by the token A-sentences “I am going to deliver a lecture at Oriel College tomorrow” and “Richard Swinburne delivered a lecture at Oriel a week ago” are distinct because “two sentences express the same proposition if and only if they are synonymous” (Swinburne 1990: 121) which these A-sentences clearly are not. On Swinburne’s view, because two token-sentences can express the same statement but different propositions the latter must have content and truth-value independently of the statements expressed.³ The truth of a proposition expressed by a token-sentence depends on facts, which do not matter for the truth of a statement. It depends on the factual speaker, time, and place of utterance.⁴ The truth of the proposition expressed by the A-sentence “Richard Swinburne delivers a lecture at Oriel now” depends on the time of utterance because it is true only when uttered while Swinburne is delivering a lecture at Oriel but false otherwise.⁵ It is true if and only if the corresponding tensed fact obtains that Swinburne delivers a lecture now. Knowledge of *tensed* facts therefore is knowledge of the truth of a proposition expressible by an A-sentence. It is not knowledge of the truth of the statement expressed by the same sentence.

What about knowledge of *tenseless* facts? Based on Swinburne’s assumption that the objects of our beliefs and *a fortiori* the objects of our knowledge have to be mentally accessible we can exclude

² As Swinburne says: “The truth-value of a statement is invariant – if true, it is true always and everywhere.” (Swinburne 1990: 122).

³ Swinburne says: “Just as the truth-value of sentences may vary with time, so may the truth value of the propositions which they express. Yet the truth value of statements which sentences express does not vary with time” (Swinburne 1990: 124).

⁴ Swinburne states it thus: “Propositions are [. . .] meaning-involved expressions waiting to be pinned down to who, where, and when, before their truth can be determined [whereas] statements are meaning-involved expressions already so pinned down” (Swinburne 1990: 122).

⁵ The truth of the statement expressed by the sentence “Richard Swinburne delivers a lecture at Oriel now” is independent of whether Richard Swinburne delivers a lecture now or not because the same statement is expressed in the token B-sentence “Richard Swinburne delivered a lecture at Oriel on August 15th”.

statements as the proper objects of belief and knowledge *tout-court*: their truth depends on external factors which might not be mentally accessible.⁶ If I utter the sentence “Richard Swinburne is sitting on the left of me on August 15th 2007” then the truth of the statement depends on the external factor whether the man sitting next to me on that date really is Richard Swinburne.⁷ If statements are excluded as the proper objects of knowledge, then propositions have to play this part because propositions are mentally accessible. By knowing that Richard Swinburne delivers a lecture at Oriel on August 15th 2007 I know the truth of the proposition that Richard Swinburne delivers a lecture at Oriel on August 15th 2007. I can express this proposition by the B-sentence “Richard Swinburne delivers a lecture on August 15th 2007”. The fact that this sentence expresses a statement which could be expressed by a different sentence does not matter when it comes to my knowledge. I may know that Richard Swinburne delivers a lecture at Oriel on August 15th 2007 and be convinced that it is false when someone utters “that a certain Christian philosopher delivers a lecture at Oriel on the day I marry the love of my life” – although those sentences express the same statement.

3. Play on words or genuine Problem: Why is it now Now?

According to the semantic framework provided, the sentence “It is now now” uttered during an interval of time T expresses the same proposition as the sentence “It is now now” uttered during any other interval of time T*. Because there are tensed facts this sentence cannot express a false proposition when uttered: it ascribes to the present moment the property of occurring now, and this is always true because now is the time when the present moment is. Priest is right: “Metaphysically, there is no time that is not now. There is no time but the present. If we ask what time it is, the empirically uninformative but metaphysically true answer is always ‘Now’” (Priest 2003: 236). Because the terms “now” and “present moment” are interchangeable the proposition is also analytic. The sentences (a) that it is now now, (b) that the present moment is now, (c) that now is the present moment, and (d) that the present moment is the present moment express the same proposition.

⁶ Swinburne (1990: 123) states that: “Our ordinary [...] notion of belief with which I and other participants in these debates are operating, is the notion of a relation to something mentally accessible. This mentally accessible thing is part of the subject’s ‘view’ of the world, it is how things seem to him”.

⁷ As Swinburne (1990: 123) says: “Which statement a given proposition determines depends on external factors not fully accessible to the subject.”

However, the statements expressed by saying on different occasions that it is now now are themselves different. The first statement expressed is that the interval of time T is the interval of time T, the second is that the interval of time T* is the interval of time T*. Because “periods of time are the periods they are in virtue of the actual or possible events that end or begin when they begin or that end or begin when they end” (Swinburne 1993: 209) the intervals of time T and T* are periods of time at which certain actual or possible events end or begin. Intervals of time are individuated by the events occurring during them, and the statements expressed are, firstly, that the events (whichever events) that occur during T are the events that occur during T, and secondly, that the events (whichever events) that occur during T* are the events that occur during T*. The two statements expressed are analytic. Because statements, if true, are always true, we obtain the following conclusion: Independent of whether we focus on the proposition or the statement expressed, the sentence that it is now now is a rather banal play on words because both the proposition and the statement expressed are always true and analytic.

So are we to say that it is now now is not a philosophical problem? It is a philosophical problem: that it is now now expresses an astonishing fact. The more we are convinced that it is not a philosophical problem because semantic analysis suggests that it is a mere play on words, the less we are able to see the genuine problem. That it is now now is a philosophical problem. We have to ask the right *questions*: *Why is it now now? Why is the present moment – this very moment – the one such that it is a tensed fact that this moment is now? Why are the events that occur now occurring now? Why is it 2007 now and not 1467? What is a sufficient condition for all of this?*

A sufficient condition for its being now now cannot rest in any *modal facts* about intervals of time. The fact that the present interval of time is distinct from any other interval of time is a necessary condition for the possibility of its being now now but it is not a sufficient condition for its being now now: each interval of time is distinct from any other interval of time and this is not sufficient for it to happen now. That each interval of time is self-identical is not a sufficient condition either: any interval of time is self-identical. Even that, at least as long as the universe is actual, there always has to be a tensed fact such that *some* moment of time is the present moment, this does not account for *this* present moment’s being now. The modality of time does not provide a sufficient condition for its being now now. *Metaphysical facts* fare no better. Instead of the events which are occurring now, WWII might be happening right now. There is no contradiction in the notion of a possible world which is a duplicate *simpliciter* of the actual world in which WWII happens now. Metaphysical facts might provide necessary conditions for its being

now now, but they do not provide a sufficient condition. It is not an *empirical fact* that it is now now for the simple reason that “we have no scientific or empirical idea of what presence is” (Priest 2006: 158). It is not entailed by the laws of nature that the present moment is now. It is thus consistent with the laws of nature that another interval of time should happen now, and therefore it is consistent with the laws of nature that the present moment is already past or still in the future.

A sufficient condition for its being now now is not found in modality, metaphysics, and the natural sciences. They may provide necessary conditions for the possibility of its being now now but they do not provide a sufficient condition for its being now now. I suggest the following: God is a sufficient condition for its being now now because God appears to be the only being powerful enough directly to cause a certain interval of time to be such that it is a tensed fact that *this* interval of time is *now*; God causes it to be now now. God aside it is hard to see what an answer to the question “Why is it now now?” might look like. While undoubtedly for some this is reason to reject the question, I accept it as a *theological* fact that it is now now.

4. Swinburne’s God and Time

In several papers and books Swinburne argues that God is everlasting, which “we must read as claiming that God exists throughout all periods of time” (Swinburne 1993: 218). God has always existed and will always exist (cf. Swinburne 1977: 215); he is a “temporal being” (Swinburne 1993: 218) existing within time. What does it mean to exist within time?

Because there are tensed facts, it is a necessary condition for a being to exist within time that there are tensed facts of the kind that this being exists *now*. A being could not exist within time if there were not at least once a fact of the kind that this being exists now. While temporally finite beings only exist for a finite number of “non-overlapping periods of time of equal finite length” (Swinburne 1996: 179) God exists for an infinite number of such intervals of time. In other words, there is no present moment when an everlasting God does not exist. Even before the universe was created God existed within time, although according to Swinburne there were no *measurable* intervals of time before the creation of the universe. It would be *senseless* to say that God existed for a particular interval of time before he created the universe because, pertaining to Swinburne, we can speak of intervals of time only if there are laws of nature enabling a perfect clock: “Time has a metric only where and when and to the extent to which there are perfect clocks whose construction could be

described – i.e. the laws of nature take simplest forms on the assumption that certain periodic processes which could be constructed and would coincide with each other measure equal intervals” (Swinburne 1996: 176). Although there were tensed facts before the existence of a metric of time – because “whether an event E2 occurs after of before an event E1 is independent of whether there are laws of nature” (Swinburne 1993: 208) – it would be meaningless to speak of a measurable interval of time between those events: “Whether there is a truth about how much later or earlier than E2 E1 occurs [...] depends on whether there are [...] laws of nature” (Swinburne 1993: 208).

5. God is Eternal

Because God is the sufficient condition for its being now now, i.e. because God is the sufficient cause for its being now now, God cannot exist together with time. God could not be a sufficient condition for its being now now if He were to exist in time.

The everlasting God, “*who is omnipotent at a time t is able to bring about the existence of any logically contingent state of affairs after t* (the description of the occurrence of which does not entail that P did not bring it about at t), given that he does not believe that he has overriding reason for refraining from bringing it about” (Swinburne 1977: 223, my italics). Because one can only act at the present moment an everlasting God would be subject to the fact of its being now now in order to be able to act, i.e. in order to be able to cause a state of affairs to obtain at a later moment of time. When the present moment is now, then the everlasting God cannot cause it to be now now; it is already now now. In other words, an everlasting God can only act at the present moment and cause a state of affairs to obtain later than the present moment. Therefore, this God cannot cause the present moment to be now. He Himself needs the present moment to be now *already* in order to be able to act at all. But cannot God cause the state of affairs of its being now now to obtain simultaneously with its being now now? At least not according to Swinburne: his account of God’s (and of any other being’s) way of acting “rules out not merely backward causation [...] but [also] simultaneous causation” (Swinburne 1993: 214) God cannot simultaneously with its being now now cause it to be now now. Cannot God be the sufficient cause at t1 that t2 is the “next” present moment? He cannot because in this case t1 would be t2.

In sum, because God is a sufficient condition for its being now now, he cannot exist within time. If that means that God is eternal, then the theological fact of its being now now shows that God is eternal.

6. Again: Why is it now now?

That it is now now is an astonishing fact, both theologically and existentially speaking, although the proposition and the statement expressed are always true and analytic. God is the sufficient cause for its being now now, and therefore God cannot exist together with time. I suggest the following: That it is now now is God's *creative act*. The universe is *actual* if and only if some interval of time is the present moment, i.e. if and only if certain events occur now. If no events occurred now, then the universe would not be actual, and if the universe were not actual, then no event would occur now.⁸ This is what we mean by the term *actuality*. That the universe is actual just means that there is an interval of time which is now. *The sufficient cause of the present moment's being now thus is the sufficient cause of the actuality of the universe in its particular state*. Events which already happened, and events which will happen can be said to exist, but not to be actual. Their existence is a purely logical one. To say that these events exist only means that there are true statements about them.

7. Priest's Soul and Time

According to Priest "now is the time it is inside the soul" (Priest 2003: 237). Because the universe is actual if and only if some interval of time is the present moment, the actuality of the universe consist in its being now inside the soul. Since "subjective space is the soul" (Priest 2000: 153) and subjective space "is the space of one's own psychological interiority, *the zone of awareness where [one's] experiences happen*" (Priest 2000: 152, my italics) there is more to say about the happening of experiences and its being now inside the soul. I suggest the following: When experiences happen in the soul, then it is now inside the soul. However, because "there logically and metaphysically could be a pure consciousness utterly devoid of contents" (Priest 2006: 158) there can be a subjective space without any experiences happening in it. Would it still be now inside the soul if the soul were to be empty? Because the conjunction of the claims that the universe is actual and that there are souls devoid of contents does not entail a contradiction it could be now inside the soul even if there are no experiences in it. Is it metaphysically necessary that it is now inside the soul? Only if it is metaphysically necessary that the universe is actual. Since it seems metaphysically possible (although

⁸ This does not entail that the universe would not exist now if there were no change. A changeless universe is a universe in which events occur and in which an interval of time is the present moment.

perhaps not conceivable) that there should be nothing it seems not to be now inside the soul essentially. A welcome result because if the soul can enjoy beatific vision the soul must be able to be eternal: God is eternal. But is the soul itself actual in the way the universe is? If the actuality of the universe depends on its being now inside the soul, then on pain of circularity the soul cannot be said to be actual. The soul is the space in which the universe is actual, so “it follows in a fairly precise sense that *I am out of this world*” (Priest 2000: 153). That it is now now means that it is now inside the soul. Because that it is now now is God’s creative act, Creation is its being now inside the soul. It is the actuality of the universe within the soul.⁹

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7. Literature

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