

Epistemic Greatness and Knowledge of Tensed and Tenseless Propositions:

A New Perspective on Plantinga's Nature of Necessity

In this paper, I argue that a coherent account of omniscience, as derived from Alvin Plantinga's Modal Ontological Argument (MOA) in *The Nature of Necessity* (1974), requires that God, in the actual world (α), have knowledge of all possible propositions in every merely possible world, including simultaneous knowledge of all tensed and tenseless propositions regardless of the ontology of time in α . I begin by outlining Plantinga's modal framework and the link between maximal greatness and trans-world omniscience. I then distinguish epistemic excellence from epistemic greatness and show how World Indexed Propositions (WIPs) secure God's knowledge of all merely possible propositions. Finally, I extend this modal structure to the ontology of time, arguing that the coherence of presentism and eternalism each generate unique possible worlds (PWs) with sets of tensed and tenseless propositions that an epistemically great being must know.

MOA to Transworld Excellences

The MOA is an ontological proof for the existence of God that derives the necessary existence of God from the mere possibility of their existence. Plantinga proposes that God, as the greatest being metaphysically possible, has the essential property of having greatness that is nowhere exceeded in any possible world (PW).¹ However, Plantinga presents that such a property entails a maximal level of excellence that is instantiated in every PW, as "the excellence of a being in a given world W depends only upon its (non-world-indexed) properties in W , while its greatness in

¹ Alvin Plantinga, *Nature of Necessity* (Oxford University Press, 1974), 202-209; this is another formulation of perfect being theism and the Anselmian statement that God is "that than which no greater can be conceived," as established in Katherine A. Rogers, *Perfect Being Theology* (Edinburgh University Press, 2000), 2-5, and Yujin Nagasawa, *Maximal God: A New Defense of Perfect Being Theism* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 7-11.

W depends not merely upon its excellence in W , but also upon its excellence in other worlds.”²

Therefore, if maximal greatness is instantiated in a PW, then that object instantiates the property “*maximal excellence in every PW*.”

Plantinga then, drawing upon the S5 modal system, presents that if the existence of a maximally great being is possible in the broadly logical sense, then it is possibly exemplified in some PW relative to α , such that “there is a world W^* and an essence E^* such that E^* is exemplified in W^* and E^* entails has maximal greatness in W .”³ The MOA then claims that if maximal greatness is possibly exemplified in W , then maximal greatness is necessarily instantiated in at least one PW relative to W . Additionally, if there is even a single PW in which maximal greatness is instantiated by an object, then that object in that world has the property of “*maximal excellence in every PW*.” However, Plantinga contends that maximal excellence can only be instantiated by an object in a world if that object exists in that world.⁴ Thus, if maximal greatness is possibly exemplified, then a maximally excellent being exists in every PW, including α .

What, then, does it mean for an object to have maximal excellence in a given PW? Plantinga poses that maximal excellence entails at least the properties of omniscience, omnipotence, and moral perfection, as they are quantifiers of an object’s relative greatness (excellence) in that world.⁵ That is, for any given two objects, a and b , if a possesses more knowledge, power, or goodness than b , then a is greater than b . Hence, omniscience, omnipotence, and moral perfection are maximal-excellence-making properties in a PW. Therefore, if maximal greatness entails maximal excellence in every PW, and maximal

² Plantinga, *Nature of Necessity*, 214.

³ Plantinga, *Nature of Necessity*, 214.

⁴ Plantinga, *Nature of Necessity*, 215.

⁵ Plantinga, *Nature of Necessity*, 199-200, and 214.

excellence entails omniscience, omnipotence, and moral perfection, then maximal greatness entails omniscience, omnipotence, and moral perfection in every PW. Thus, if a property, x , is an excellence-making property of God, then “ x in every PW” is a maximal-greatness-making world-indexed property of God that is instantiated in every PW. We can call these excellences that God in any given world instantiates in every given world a trans-world property.

Omniscience as Epistemic Excellence

Before we can consider trans-world omniscience, it is necessary to understand non-trans-world omniscience, or omniscience limited to a particular world. Borrowing from Plantinga’s terminology, we can refer to such omniscience as *epistemic excellence*, whereas omniscience in every PW can be referred to as *epistemic greatness*.⁶ Omniscience can be defined as a property predicated of some entity such that said entity is in possession of complete and maximal knowledge (i.e. knowledge of all true and real propositions).⁷ As such, epistemic excellence in some world, W , can be defined as the property of having knowledge of all propositions that are *true and real in W* . Furthermore, this excludes all propositions that are only true relative to another PW, W^* , as those propositions are not *locally real in W* .

Typically, the reality of a given proposition has to do with whether the proposition is true in the actual world.⁸ However, when applying the concept of reality to PW, a proposition, p , is *locally real* in a world, W , if it is true relative to that world’s State of Affairs (SOA) such that it is impossible that W obtain and the WIP, P in W , *fail to obtain* had W been α .⁹ Under Plantinga’s modal framework, every PW, W , entails a unique possible SOA described by the set S , that

⁶ Derived from definitions of greatness and excellence in Plantinga, *Nature of Necessity*, 214.

⁷ Edward R. Wierenga, “Omniscience.” In *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Revised Apr 16, 2021. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/omniscience/>

⁸ And thus real by definition; see Plantinga, *Nature of Necessity*, 44.

⁹ Actuality and local reality as put forward Plantinga, *Nature of Necessity*. 48-56.

entails every proposition that is *true in W* and *locally real in W* .¹⁰

$$S = \{p \mid p \text{ is true in } W \wedge p \text{ is locally real in } W\}$$

As such, it is not possible that W^* obtain and any proposition, p , entailed by S^* not obtain.¹¹ We can then deduce that to have complete and maximal knowledge limited only to a given PW, W^* , is to have knowledge of all propositions entailed by the set S^* of W^* . Thus, for any world, W , if an epistemically excellent being, G , exists in W , then G must have knowledge of every proposition in set S . Thus, by understanding Plantinga's application of possible world semantics, we are granted a modal epistemic framework for understanding omniscience limited to a given PW (epistemic excellence).

Omniscience as Epistemic Greatness

However, epistemic excellence is a necessary but insufficient condition for maximal greatness. This is because a being that has maximal and complete knowledge of every proposition in every possible world has a greater degree of greatness than one who only has knowledge of every true and real proposition in only one world. Therefore, the latter being cannot instantiate the property of having greatness that is nowhere exceeded in any given PW.¹² Thus, whereas epistemic excellence is only a maximal-excellence-making property, epistemic greatness is a maximal-greatness-making property. Given that epistemic greatness entails epistemic excellence in every PW, it follows that any entity that is epistemically great in W is also epistemically excellent in W . Thus, said entity necessarily knows all propositions contained in set S .

What sets epistemic greatness apart is that it should denote not only having knowledge of

¹⁰ Plantinga, *Nature of Necessity*, 44-45.

¹¹ Plantinga, *Nature of Necessity*, 46.

¹² Plantinga, *Nature of Necessity*, 202-209.

S but also having knowledge of all possible propositions that are true relative to every PW.

However, this would imply that a maximally great being in W must have knowledge of *unreal*, and *locally false* propositions relative to W , which is contrary to epistemic excellence, and thus self-defeating of epistemic greatness. To account for this, using Plantinga's conception of World-Indexed Propositions (WIPs), I present that God in W , must have knowledge of all merely possible counterfactual proposition as WIPs that are true and real relative to every PW.¹³

Plantinga presents that propositions that are locally true in at least one world can be referenced as a true WIP in every PW.¹⁴ If there is a proposition p that is locally true and real in W , that proposition can be expressed by the WIP, q , where q asserts that p is true in W . Here "truth in W " is a world-indexed property predicated of p that is true and real in every PW.¹⁵

Plantinga offers that each PW entails a unique set or "book", denoted by the variable B , where B is the set of every proposition that is true in W , not limited to a particular SOA but every SOA in every possible world as WIPs that are true and real in W .¹⁶ This means that every book associated with a given PW contains all WIPs for every other PW; therefore, the book on each world contains a library of every true WIP relative to the set S of every PW.¹⁷ Thus, Plantinga presents that "each world exists in each world" as merely possible SOAs that would obtain if any PW that entailed said SOA were to obtain.¹⁸ Therefore, to be epistemically great is to have knowledge of the set of all true and locally real propositions in that world, S , as well as to have knowledge of all WIPs that would have been true in another PW, should that world obtain, for every PW with a unique SOA, i.e. set B , where $S^* \subseteq B^*$.

¹³ See Plantinga's discussion of counterfactuals and temporal counterfactuals in *Nature of Necessity*, 174-180.

¹⁴ Plantinga, *Nature of Necessity*, 55; 62-65.

¹⁵ Plantinga, *Nature of Necessity*, 46-47.

¹⁶ Plantinga, *Nature of Necessity*, 45-46.

¹⁷ Plantinga, *Nature of Necessity*, 47.

¹⁸ Plantinga, *Nature of Necessity*, 47.

Under this conception of epistemic greatness combined with Plantinga's use of S5 modal logic in the MOA—if a given proposition, p , is merely possible then it is necessarily possible such that God knows p indexed to a specific PW entailed in *set B* of every PW because $\Diamond p \rightarrow \Box \Diamond p$ (Rule 5 of S5 logic).¹⁹ This means that what is merely possible in a given PW is necessarily possible in every PW. Furthermore, if p is merely possible, then there actually exists some PW, W^* , with an SOA that entails p is true. Thus, the WIP, p in W^* , is true and contained in the set B of every PW. Thus, if a proposition is merely possible, necessarily God has knowledge of that proposition as a world-indexed counterfactual proposition of a way the world could have been.

Knowledge of Tensed and Tenseless Propositions

Turning to the temporal dimension, I propose that there is at least one PW where only tensed propositions are locally real and true, W^p , and at least one PW where only tenseless propositions are locally real, W^e , depending on the ontology of time in those worlds — presentism and eternalism, respectively. This is because presentism and eternalism are both possibly exemplified properties of a world resulting in merely possible SOAs that are instantiated in some PWs relative to α . Thus, regardless of the ontology of time in α or any other PW, God in any given PW must have knowledge of tensed and tenseless WIPs simultaneously.²⁰ Thus, for any possible SOA that describes how the world could be, God must have knowledge of both all tensed and all tenseless WIPs for every PW contained in set B of that world.

A tensed proposition is a temporal proposition that expresses an SOA relative to the present moment, such that its truth value depends on the metaphysical present and therefore

¹⁹ James Garson, "Modal Logic." In *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Revised Jan 23, 2023. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/logic-modal/>

²⁰ For a defense of timeless knowledge of temporal propositions see Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann. "Eternity." *Journal of Philosophy* 78, no. 8 (1987): 429-458. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2026047>; or Brian Leftow, "Time, Actuality, and Omniscience." In *Time and Eternity* (Cornell University Press, 1991), 313-337.

changes as the present moves. For example, the tensed proposition “It is raining now” is necessarily true only at the moment of time in which it is asserted, with “now” functioning as an indexical locution relative to a metaphysically privileged present moment.²¹ A tenseless proposition, by contrast, expresses an SOA relative to the entire temporal dimension, such that the proposition is indexed to a specific moment in four-dimensional spacetime, such that its truth value is fixed across all moments. For example, if the SOA reflects that it rained on October 24, 2024, then the tenseless proposition “It rained on October 24, 2024” is true at every moment, regardless of when it is asserted.

Because tensed propositions vary in truth value across all moments of time while tenseless propositions do not, I propose that they cannot be propositionally equivalent. Let $P(t)$ represent a tensed proposition and $P(e)$ a tenseless one. Since equivalence requires identical truth values across all valuations, and $P(t)$ and $P(e)$ differ in truth value across moments of time, it follows that $P(t) \neq P(e)$.²² Therefore, if $P(t)$ is possibly true, it is locally real only in a PW whose temporal ontology supports tensed truth-conditions; likewise, $P(e)$ is locally real only in a PW supporting tenseless truth-conditions. However, given my assertion that there is at least one PW where only tensed propositions are locally real and true, W^p , and at least one PW where only tenseless propositions are locally true and real, W^e , if an epistemically great being G exists in any PW, W^* , G must simultaneously know the world-indexed propositions “ $P(t)$ in W^p ” and “ $P(e)$ in W^e ”.

Presentism

²¹ For an in-depth analysis of divine knowledge of tensed propositions see Richard Swinburne, “Omniscient.” In *The Coherence of Theism* (Oxford University Press, 1993), 167-183.

²² This argument presupposes that tensed propositions are not reducible to tenseless ones, a point contested by some eternalists. However, on any non-reductive account of tense, the truth-conditions diverge, and my argument proceeds on that basis

Presentism and eternalism are both models of the ontology of time that have different conclusions of what SOAs are locally real at a given moment.²³ Mozersky defines presentism as “the doctrine that everything is present... [i.e.] that, and only that, which is present exists,” so as to be locally real.²⁴ Which means that only the metaphysical present is locally real and that there are no moments distinct from the present that are real in an SOA. This does not deny temporal relations but holds that there is only one real moment whose SOA changes as the present moves, with no temporal dimension on which discrete moments of time can be mapped (three-dimensionalism).²⁵ Instead, objects are wholly located at the present moment, coming into and going out of being as the metaphysical present changes.²⁶

Under presentism, only tensed propositions are locally true and real in an SOA, as there are no other real moments to index tenseless propositions.²⁷ Statements like “it rained on the 24th of October 2024” mean nothing as there is no real thing in the metaphysical present that can be referred to as “the 24th of October” other than at the moment that it is an indexical locution for the present. Under this model, these non-present dates and times are not real. Rather, such dates function merely as linguistic indexicals within consciousness rather than references to real temporal locations.

I present that a PW governed by presentism, W^p , is coherent and free of contradiction, and therefore possible in the broadly logical sense. Thus, the proposition “this world has a presentist ontology of time” is possibly exemplified. By Plantinga’s modal framework, if a maximal SOA is merely possible, then it is actualized in some PW and therefore possible relative

²³ Nina Emery, et al. “Time.” In Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Revised Nov 24, 2020. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/time>

²⁴ Craig Callender, Ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Time* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 122.

²⁵ From Nina Emery, et al., “Time.”

²⁶ This is the theory of Endurantism in response to the problem of persistence, see Callender, Ed. *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Time*, Ch 1; Written by Yuri Balashov.

²⁷ David Ingram, et al., “Presentism.” In Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Revised Feb 1, 2022. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/presentism/>

to every PW. Thus, since W^p is merely possible, W^p exists relative to every PW. Hence, I conclude that there is at least one PW in which only tensed propositions are locally real, and an epistemically great being must know set S of W^p as WIPs in every PW.

Eternalism

Eternalism posits that there is an infinite number of real, distinct moments mapped in four-dimensional space-time.²⁸ All moments are metaphysically coequal, with no privileged present bisecting the temporal dimension into preceding and proceeding relations to some fixed moment.²⁹ Under this ontology, tenses, tensed propositions, and tensed locutions are non-existential as there are no privileged moments of time onto which they can be mapped. Thus, locutions like “now,” “today,” “soon,” etc. lack ontological significance outside of the individual consciousness and its phenomenological perception of temporal succession.³⁰

This does not mean there are no temporal relations whatsoever, rather, in an eternalist world—which is an enumeration of a static theory of time—all temporal relations must be expressed via tenseless propositions, since there is not an ontologically privileged referent and every moment is equally real.³¹ Thus, no object or SOA undergoes change simpliciter in this world, as all temporally mapped SOAs are predetermined. Rather, they possess temporal parts located at different moments, and variations among these parts are interpreted as change as the temporal dimension is traversed.³²

²⁸ Paul Helm, “Eternity.” In Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy Archives. Revised Feb 4, 2010. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/FALL2017/entries/eternity/>

²⁹ Paul Helm, “Eternity.”

³⁰ For a more nuanced exploration of this, see J. M. E. McTaggart, “The Unreality of Time.” *Mind*, 17, no. 68 (1908): 457–474. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2248314>

³¹ Paul Helm, “Eternity;” Nina Emery, et al., “Time.”

³² This is the theory of perdurance in response to the problem of persistence as addressed in Callender, Ed. *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Time*, Ch 1; Written by Yuri Balashov.

I present that eternalism, much like presentism, is also coherent and therefore possibly exemplified. As such, the proposition “this world is governed by the eternalist ontology of time” is also merely possible in the broadly logical sense. Thus, by the same modal reasoning as above, there exists at least one PW, W^e , in which only tenseless propositions are locally real, such that an epistemically great being must therefore know set S of W^e as WIPs in every PW.

Conclusion

Finally, given that presentism and eternalism are both merely possible in the broadly logical sense and therefore exemplified in at least one possible world each, I present that for every PW, W^* , there exists at least one alternate PW, W^p , whose SOA is identical with W^* except that W^p operates under a presentist ontology of time, where only tensed propositions are true and real. Likewise, the same holds for W^e and eternalism, *mutatis mutandis*. As such, regardless of the ontology of time in α , via WIPs, an epistemically great being must have simultaneous knowledge of tense and tenseless propositions in α as at least counterfactual knowledge of the near identical SOAs in W^e and W^p despite their differing temporal ontologies. Thus, we can conclude based on the presuppositions of the MOA that God necessarily has simultaneous knowledge of tensed and tenseless propositions.

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