

# How to Speak about a Supreme Being

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## 1 Introduction

If the transcendence tree to which our world belongs<sup>2</sup> has a root, and that root is a mind, then what can be known about that mind? It seems there are two sources of knowledge, *theology* (that mind may have revealed itself to us) and *philosophy* (we may be able to reason about it from first principles). Here we shall look into that latter aspect, for the sake of this paper assuming all of the following:

1. The tree (or graph) is rooted. The (directed) graph may have another shape than a tree, but at least there is one root without incoming arcs from which all nodes are reachable.
2. That root is a mind, not a world. In section three we qualify this statement further.
3. That root is not me – solipsism is not true for me, and the root transcends me.

Section 2 introduces the notions of priority and posteriority, section 3 investigates the transcendence tree and its root mind, section 4 looks at what follows about what we can say of this root, and section 5.

## 2 Prior and posterior notions

Some notions are grounded in their opposites. For instance, motion depends on some reference point that is taken to be immobile. Inconsistency requires consistency, because if everything were inconsistent, reality would be consistent in its inconsistency. We shall call such notions **posterior** to those opposites, which we shall call **prior** to them.

Sometimes priority depends on context. If the context provides multiplication, then positive numbers are prior to negative ones, since if a negative number exists, then so does its square, which is positive.

Accepting the existence of a posterior notion while rejecting the corresponding prior notion leads to a **re-*striction* paradox**, which lays at the basis of most self-refuting statements. For instance, the claim that only scientifically provable knowledge exists refutes itself by not being a scientifically provable fact, but (if it were a fact) one of a kind prior to scientifically provable ones.

We shall give some examples of prior-posterior pairs, spread over a few broad categories.

### 2.1 Formal posteriority

This is the easiest category, as the priority relation follows from the terms. They tend to be analytical given proper definitions. This category can be subdivided again.

#### 2.1.1 Negation

Negations are posterior to their positives. This can often be shown by repeated application of the negation.

- *Negation* (denial) is posterior to *affirmation*. The negation of a negation is an affirmation.
- *Falsehood* is posterior to *truth*. If there were false statements, and only false statements, then it would be is true that there are only false statements.
- *Contrast* is posterior to *likeness*. If contrast exists, it is like itself, and contrast can only be between things that are like themselves.

#### 2.1.2 Imperfection

Imperfection is posterior to perfection, since something is only imperfect relative to some (itself perfect<sup>3</sup>) standard. Besides, either the imperfection is pervasive (leading to a *perfectly* imperfect situation), or it is not, in which case the exceptions are perfect.

- *Incompleteness* is posterior to *completeness*. Some situation either is or is not completely incomplete.
- *Disorder* is posterior to *order*.

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<sup>2</sup> For more on the transcendence tree, see my [Transcendent Mediocrity is the Default Position](#).

<sup>3</sup> If the standard itself were imperfect, it would be so relative to a higher standard.

- (Descriptive) *lawlessness* is posterior to (descriptive) *law*. Does the law stating that everything is lawless hold?

### 2.1.3 Relativity

*Relativity* is posterior to *absoluteness*, as the question whether all is absolutely relative shows.

- *Illusion* is posterior to *reality*. Something can only be an illusion if reality is different. Besides, if all were an illusion, then it would be reality that all is an illusion.
- *Movement* is posterior to *rest*. Likewise *change* is posterior to *constancy*.
- *Exception* is posterior to *rule*.<sup>4</sup> Likewise, *inconsistency* is posterior to *consistency*.
- *Diversity* is posterior to *unity*. It takes a different units to be diverse. Likewise *heterogeneity* and *homogeneity*.
- *Moderation* is posterior to *radicality*. Someone always moderate is radically moderate.

## 2.2 Fundamental posteriority

This depends on the existence of the notion itself. The weak anthropic argument is based on these, and performative contradictions follow when the posterior notion is asserted whereas the corresponding prior notion is denied.

- *Non-existence* is posterior to *existence*. The notion exists.
- *Meaninglessness* is posterior to *meaning*. The notion of meaninglessness cannot exist without meaning.
- *Doubt* is posterior to *certainty*. An amoeba may not know anything, but it cannot doubt either. Total skepticism is self-refuting.
- *Potency* is posterior to *actuality*. If there is potency, then that potency exists actually.

## 2.3 Contentual posteriority

This depends on the nature of the world, and on non-analytic, non-univocal notions. Contentual posteriority is therefore often harder to prove. We shall just give examples of how posteriority shows.

- *Evil* is posterior to *goodness*. Disobedience of a morally loaded command is either good or evil. If it is good, then goodness exists. If it is evil, then still the *result* of disobeying an evil command is good, as it prevented evil.
- *Createdness* is posterior to *uncreatedness*.
- *Destruction* is posterior to *creation*.
- *Dissatisfaction* is posterior to *satisfaction*. Dissatisfaction implies the wish that things were satisfactorily different.

## 2.4 Broad posteriority

The notions of priority and posteriority can be extended – e.g. to non-contrastive pairs, in which case we can state that e.g. *change* is posterior to *time*. For our current purpose we are only interested in *incompatible* pairs, however.

A more relevant extension is to **weak posteriority**. A notion is weakly posterior to another when it can be derived from that other notion, but not vice versa. *Determinism* is weakly posterior to (libertarian) *freedom*, because one can freely decide to create a deterministic system, whereas there is no path along which freedom can be reached from determinism.

## 3 Transcendence

Now let us return to the transcendence tree.

### 3.1 Simulation

Transcendence is fundamentally different from simulation. In a simulation, features of a higher world as used to model a lower world, which is then immanent in that higher world. The most blatant simulation is total, as when e.g. robots in an enclosed space behave relatively independent from the rest of the world

<sup>4</sup> I make the traditional distinction between laws (which hold always), rules (which tend to hold), and chaos (where no regularity is discernible). So the exception proves the rule, because if there were a law there would be no exception, and if there were chaos there would be nothing to except from.

outside that space. Many simulations are more abstract, but a revealing feature for simulations in our world is time dependence: the time in the simulated world is taken from the time in the actual world. In the case of transcendence there is no such borrowing, and e.g. an author may dream up the ending of a story way before the midpoint<sup>5</sup>.

### 3.2 Ontic, ontoid, and economic statements

In a transcendence relationship, the transcendent mind defines the nature of the world it dreams, within the limitations laid on it by the world it itself lives in. That means that the transcendent mind may behave *totaliter aliter* to the immanent minds, and it would seem impossible to say anything about it philosophically. But isn't that itself already a philosophical statement about the transcendent mind?<sup>6</sup>

In principle there are three kinds of statements possible, in terms pertaining to some level:

1. Upward statements – about a higher level in terms pertaining to a lower level.
2. Ontic statements – about a level in terms pertaining to that level.
3. Downward statements – about a lower level in terms pertaining to a higher level.

Ontic statements seem indeed unattainable by us. Even the very statement that the root of the transcendence tree is a mind is upward – it is quite possible that in terms pertaining to the transcendent level it is something completely unimaginable to us, or the whole notion of a transcendence relation makes no sense at higher levels. The issue may seem the possible total otherness of the transcendent level, but there is more, for the problem is not restricted to speaking about higher levels – statements about the true nature of the world we inhabit are equally unreachable. We can state how the world *relates* to us, and science has done a great job in doing so<sup>7</sup>, but when we try to make ontic statements about it it will necessarily be in terms regarding the transcendent mind dreaming that world.

Downward statements are possible, and will be in terms of thoughts – but they can't help us in speaking about a supreme being. Here even the detour (upward statements about downward statements) is impossible, because there is no level above the supreme being.

Upward statements, however, are less forbidding. And since we are not merely trying to speak about *something* at a higher level but about the very mind dreaming our level, it helps to borrow a bit of theological terminology. God's dealing with the world in the most general sense is called the *divine economy*, and things pertaining to God *as dealing with the world* are called *economical*. We can thus distinguish upward statements in:

- **Ontoid** statements – about the supreme being as it is on its own level of transcendence;
- **Economic** statements – about the supreme being as it acts in the world it dreams and from where it is described.

For instance, as an ontoid statement, an author is timeless as seen from within the story: any time the author lives in is unrelated to time in the story, except maybe for convenience (some authors may plan and write their stories "on the go", in a forward manner – but others may start from a very general plot line, which they progressively make more detailed). Yet, as an economic statement, to the extent that the "author's hand" is discernible from inside the story, it may be discernible in what is the case at specific times and places. So the author is on his own level, i.e. ontoidally, timeless, but in his dealings with the world, i.e. economically, temporal<sup>8</sup>.

Ontoid statements – that describe the transcendent level in terms pertaining to the immanent level – form what is called the *via analogica*. They seem the highest we can reach where it comes to describing the transcendent philosophically.

## 4 God's properties.

Let us call the presumed mind at the root of the transcendence tree **God** (and use the traditional pronoun *he*). We can derive two closely related facts about God<sup>9</sup>.

5 A typical example concerns J. K. Rowling, who wrote the last chapter of the last book in the Harry Potter series before writing anything else, and before conceiving of most of what would happen on the way to that final chapter.

6 The answer to this will be in footnote 14.

7 Science tells us with great precision what a gravity field, or an electron, *does*, but nothing about what it *is*, other than "something that does this", or "an effect of a collection of things doing this". And that doing, in the end reduces to "having this or that effect on our senses".

8 Temporality and atemporality form only one pair of many such compossibles – my [A Baker's Dozen Compossibles](#) describes many more.

9 One can also reason the other way: for each posterior property we encounter, the prior property exists. So there is something unchanging, something simple, and so on. This might be used as the basis for a Leibniz-like ontological argument.

## 4.1 God as the root

To the extent that there is a sufficient ground of everything, he is the end of the grounding chain. As such, he must have a zero information content – in classical theology expressed by the term **simple**, which term we shall adopt here.

This leads to the question how anything can follow from zero information. We shall not go into that in this article, except by pointing out that the laws of lower worlds (including the laws of mathematics and logic) are imposed by the transcendent mind, and may not hold at higher levels<sup>10</sup>. We are talking ontoidally here, and *to us* the root is simple.

He cannot have any parts or multiplicity, because either God as a whole precedes any parts he may have (in which case this “God as a whole” would be simple, and be the true root), or he himself is grounded in those parts (which then would form (part of) a world that needs grounding itself).

## 4.2 God as the only

As the root of the tree, God does not inhabit a world. He is a solipse<sup>11</sup>.

## 4.3 God as necessary

It is impossible for us, or anything else, to exist, unless God exists. So economically he is a necessary being<sup>12</sup>, and he exists in all non-empty possible worlds<sup>13</sup>. Given a suitable accessibility relation, this includes the singleton world, in which precisely one thing exists. This fact also allows us to derive both conclusions.

1. In the singleton world clearly God cannot have any multiplicity, since there is none.
2. In the singleton God is also clearly the only, since he is the single thing that exists there.

## 4.4 God as the prior

God is then both simple and the only. There is nothing derived about him, nor does he have parts with contrasting properties. This means that all his properties must be prior, because if he had any posterior properties, the prior ones would also exist, and not be him.

Also, posterior notions being grounded outside themselves, anything posterior can never be the root.

## 5 Conclusion

The primary conclusion is that philosophically can only speak about God in terms pertaining to our level of existence<sup>14</sup>. The secondary conclusion is that, in ontoid terms, God does not have any posterior properties. This opens up the *via negativa*, allowing us to state unambiguously what God is *not*. For instance, we can say that God is not evil. In the case of weak posteriority, if both the prior and the posterior exist, we can state that God is not the posterior. So if freedom exists, God is not deterministic.

The notions of priority and posteriority apply also to adverbs – “totally” is prior to “partly”, for instance. So if God is powerful, he is almighty. Further analysis would specify what that means in detail.

This *via negativa* is then widened further by the realisation that, not living in a world himself, he lacks any of the properties that derive from being a being in a world. This allows us to state his being timeless, spaceless, immaterial, and so on.

<sup>10</sup> The whole notion of *information* may have no meaning there.

<sup>11</sup> Solipsism is the belief that one is a solipse, the root of the transcendence tree. To the extent that God has beliefs regarding this, he will correctly believe himself to be a solipse, and so be a solipsist who is right.

<sup>12</sup> The traditional notion of God as a necessary being seems to be ontic, or to make an unwarranted move from ontoid to ontic, and to be out of reach of philosophy.

<sup>13</sup> I take the empty world to be *truly* empty, even without abstracta and the like. If such an empty world is deemed impossible, then God simply exists in all possible worlds. If it is possible, it will have no accessible other worlds (having such would make it non-empty), so under a symmetric accessibility relation it will not be reachable from the actual world either.

<sup>14</sup> This itself is an ontoid statement about God, so it is not self-refuting. Also, while excluding ontic statements, this still includes both ontoid and economic statements. As an example, a rational person may accept that “transcendent God as understood by us” (which is the subject of this paper) is one, but still believe that “God as dealing immanently with us” is three, or shorter: that the transcendently one God deals with us as three persons, and that there is no way for us to know whether such numerical notions would even make sense ontically.

On the positive side it is harder to make strong claims. Our minds being derivative from his mind, anything prior that could be said about our minds could be attributed to him too. The limitation to terms pertaining to the immanent level remains extremely relevant, e.g. we might say that economically, *as sustaining this world*, he is good, without thereby implying that goodness as such even has meaning at higher transcendence levels<sup>15</sup>.

## 6 Reference

Bergmann, Michael & J. A. Cover (2006). Divine Responsibility without Divine Freedom. *Faith and Philosophy* 23.4, pp. 381-408.

<sup>15</sup> Economically he is necessarily good, whereas ontically he is completely free - he could have decided not to be good. The difference is one of accessibility relation: in any world in which the truths we normally take as necessary hold, he is good. Other worlds may fall outside the scope of modal logic as is true for us. This answers the claim that God's freedom contradicts His necessary goodness - see Bergmann & Cover (2002)