

How to Speak about a Supreme Being

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1 Introduction

If the transcendence tree to which our world belongs¹ 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 two introduces the notions of priority and posteriority, section three investigates the transcendence tree and its root mind, and section four looks at what follows about what we can say of this root.

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 **restriction 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 true that there are only false statements.
- *Contrast* is posterior to *likeness*. If contrast exists, it is like itself.

2.1.2 Imperfection

Imperfection is posterior to perfection, since something is only imperfect relative to some (itself perfect²) 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*.
- (Descriptive) *lawlessness* is posterior to (descriptive) *law*. Does the law stating that everything is lawless hold?

¹ For more on the transcendence tree, see my [Transcendent Mediocrity is the Default Position](#).

² The if the standard itself were imperfect, it would be so relative to a higher standard.

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*.³ 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 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

³ I make the traditional distinction between laws (which hold always), rules (which tend to hold), and chaos (where no regularity is discernable). 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.

the case of transcendence there is no such borrowing, and e.g. and author may dream up the ending of a story way before the midpart⁴.

3.2 Ontic 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.

At this point it is useful 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*. Here we shall distinguish between **ontic** statements, that are about a being as it is on its own level of transcendence, and **economic** statements, which are about a being "as seen from below", in terms of the world it dreams and from where it is described.

Whereas *ontic* statements about higher transcendence levels⁵ generally seem out of philosophical reach, we may still be able to make true *economic* statements about them. Even the statement that the root of the transcendence tree is a mind is purely economic – it is quite possible that ontically it is something completely unimaginable to us, or the whole notion of a transcendence relation ontically makes no sense at higher levels.

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.

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 levels⁶. We are talking economically 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 solipse⁷.

4.3 God as necessary

It is impossible for us, or anything else, to exist, unless God exists. So economically he is a necessary being⁸, and he exists in all non-empty possible worlds⁹. Given a suitable accessibility relation, this includes

- 4 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.
- 5 This applies even to the world we inhabit. We can state how it relates to us, and science has done a great job in doing so, but when we try to make ontic statements about it it will necessarily be in economic terms regarding the transcendent mind dreaming that world again.
- 6 The whole notion of *information* may have no meaning there.
- 7 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.
- 8 The traditional notion of God as a necessary being seems to be ontic, or to make an unwarranted move from the economic to the ontic, and to be out of reach of philosophy.
- 9 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 (which would make it non-empty), so under a symmetric accessibility relation it will not be reachable from the actual world either.

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 are grounded outside themselves, and can never be the root.

5 Conclusion

The primary conclusion is that philosophically can only speak about God in economic terms¹⁰. The secondary conclusion is that, in economic 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.

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.

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 economic expressions remains extremely relevant, e.g. we might say that *as sustaining this world* he is good, without thereby implying that goodness as such even has meaning at higher transcendence levels.

¹⁰ This itself is an economic statement about God, so it is not self-refuting. Also, this still includes two levels. Excluded is the ontic level, but there still is "transcendent God as understood by us" (which is the subject of this paper) and "God as dealing immanently with us". To see the difference, imagine a person who believes that God is transcendentally one, but deals with us as three.