

The Irrevocability of Being

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Abstract

This paper aims first, to introduce and elaborate upon a certain principle about being (existence), roughly, that once something exists or has being, it cannot lose it: what is cannot, in this sense, *unbe*; and second, to apply this principle to a well-known issue in the philosophy of time, viz., that of whether future events, like past events, though of course not now occurring, nonetheless have being.

I

Let us begin by considering some ordinary worldly thing – this apple here on the table will do. The apple has its own history of being. At one time there simply was no such thing as this apple. Now, however, as the upshot of a complicated material process, the apple is there, it exists. Similarly, at some future time a process will occur that reverses the creation of the apple. The apple will get eaten, digested and absorbed into to an organism, or left to rot, disintegrate and disperse. One way or another, there will no longer be such an entity. First non-being, then being, then non-being.

Or so it seems. Can we not, however, appreciate a sense in which, even after the apple has disappeared, we have not gotten rid of it – a sense in which, once it has come into being, there is no getting rid of it? The apple remains as a possible object of thought, of reference. Were that not the case, we could not say about the apple that *it* has disintegrated, and hence that *it* no longer exists. But if the apple remains as a possible object of reference, then in some sense it is, or has being.

Perhaps disintegration is not sufficiently radical to be the equal of coming to be. Let us name the apple 'A'. God, let us assume, annihilates A: in a flash every trace of A is eliminated. The matter of the A is not merely transformed, or converted to energy; it is – defying physics (which is why we introduce God into the story) – reduced to nothing. Are we not still able to talk and think about A, that very entity, to say and think, in fact, that God has annihilated *it*,

reduced *it* to nothing? Then we still have 'it' as a possible object of reference, and in that sense A still is: it exists (has being).

Being (as we are presently using this slippery term) and the possibility of reference are two sides of the same coin.¹ What is (exists), what has being, is thereby a possible object of reference; what is a possible object of reference, thereby has being or exists. The idea is that the possibility of reference, being, cannot be lost or shed. What has being, what is a possible object of reference, cannot cease to be, i.e., to be a possible object of reference. An entity may be destroyed or annihilated, along with every trace or clue that it ever existed; but it remains in being. You will not find it anywhere, but it is still there. Not there to be found, nor in some inaccessible space; but there to be referred to and quantified over, and thus simply there, in being (existence).

We shall express the idea by saying that the being or existence of an entity is irrevocable. What *is* cannot *unbe*. This is the principle of the irrevocability of being.

Obviously, despite the irrevocability of being, there is a sense in which every worldly – that is to say, spatio-temporal – entity will cease to be (exist): every worldly entity will cease to be or exist as a worldly entity. Yet it will not cease to be in the simple, unqualified sense expressed by the existential quantifier. It will not lose being in the sense that would mean its unbeing. The irrevocability of being is a principle about being in this simple, unqualified sense.

Consider again our apple A. Once A has disintegrated or been destroyed etc., it will no longer have, as we may put it, worldly being. But it will still have being in the unqualified sense: it will remain true that $(\exists x)(x = A)$. Napoleon, The Empire State Building, the moon, the Colossus of Rhodes at some time either have ceased or will cease to be (exist), in the sense that they either have lost or will lose their worldly being. But in the unqualified sense, the sense of being in which to be is to be a possible object of reference, they will, like everything that is, that has being, never cease to be.

We refer, e.g., to Socrates, or the ancient city of Troy, and say of it that 'it no longer exists'. If we mean that there no longer is such an entity, that it is no longer there to be referred to, our assertion is in

¹ This point, which is embodied in the familiar rule of inference known as 'existential instantiation', explains why, when philosophers wish to deny the existence of a supposedly problematic type of entity (e.g. fictive entities, or abstract entities), they generally acknowledge responsibility for somehow explaining away the seeming possibility of referring to entities of the type in question.

an obvious way self-refuting. We mean, rather, that the entity in question is no longer alive, or intact, or in some other way extant; in short that it no longer has worldly being.²

Again, were we to assert about Socrates, say, that he is a possible object of reference, or that there is such an entity, our assertion would be marked by a certain redundancy (the other side of the self-refutation). In making the assertion we would refer to, and thus imply the existence of, the very entity whose existence we are asserting.

Notice, although it would be redundant to refer to A and assert of it that $(\exists x)(x = A)$, it does not follow that there is no fact, no true proposition, to be asserted here. It is a fact about A that A might not have existed (that it might not have been the case that $(\exists x)(x = A)$). How could this be a fact unless it were a fact that there is such thing as A, i.e., that $(\exists x)(x = A)$.³ It is precisely the underlying fact of unqualified being or existence that accounts for the redundancy in the corresponding assertion.

Troy is a city that no longer exists. Here, 'exists' functions as a predicate meaning: has worldly existence (is intact, extant, etc.). If Troy no longer exists, there exists a city that no longer exists. This need not be, or entail, a contradiction. It means that $(\exists x)(x$ is a city and x is no longer extant). There are, after all, vanished cities.

So far, the worldly entities we have mentioned are all real versus fictive entities – like, say, Valhalla, or Pegasus, or Pickwick. There is in philosophy an issue about whether there are fictive entities. This is an issue into which we need not enter. If there are no such entities, there are no relevant entities to which the irrevocability of being might apply.⁴ On the other hand, if there are such entities, their being is as irrevocable as the being of the Sun Valley, or War Admiral or Winston Churchill. However he comes to be, once Achilles or Hamlet has come to be, he is: he has being. And once he is, he can no more unbecome than Alexander The Great or Napoleon.

² Those who believe in an immortal soul will say that, after the death of Socrates, his soul continues to exist or be. What, we might ask, distinguishes the soul's immortality from the continued existence which belongs to everything that is, hence to the body of Socrates (the human being) as well as his soul? Presumably, the soul, as a non-material entity, is distinct from the body and thus, apart from its being in the unqualified sense, it has a purely temporal being that survives the disintegration of the body.

³ The point is due to G.E. Moore. See his 'Is Existence a Predicate?', *Philosophical Papers* (Collier Books, 1962), 123.

⁴ Of course, someone who holds this view owes us an account of what is going on when, as it seems, we refer to such entities.

Abstract entities (numbers, forms, universals), are generally regarded as non-temporal; but the irrevocability of their being is independent of their non-temporality. Suppose we believe there is such an entity as the Form Of Beauty. There is, let us suppose, no time at which the Form of Beauty came to be. Nor is there a time at which it will cease to be. But *this* not-ceasing-to-be of the Form derives from its non-temporality and must not be confused with the not-ceasing-to-be that derives from the Form's being – which, like all being, is irrevocable. With the irrevocability of its being in mind, our basis for asserting not-ceasing-to-be of the Form of Beauty is precisely our basis for asserting not-ceasing-to-be of an instance of the Form, say the Taj Mahal or Venus. It is simply that the entity in question is and hence cannot un-be.

Of course, in some ways abstract entities differ from worldly entities. They are not, e.g., subject to the real/fictive distinction. Another difference is that whereas worldly entities can lose their worldly being and yet be, abstract entities, have no kind of being they can cease to have. Given, e.g., that there is such an entity as the number three, there is no way or sense in which it can cease to be. Notice, this must not be confused with the claim that the number three necessarily exists. The idea is not that there must be such an entity but that, given that it exists, it cannot (in any sense) cease to be. Necessary being is one thing; the irrevocability of being is something else.

As with fictive entities, there are philosophers who deny the existence of abstract entities. Once again, we need not argue about this. Our point may be stated conditionally. If there are numbers, if they exist, their being, like that of anything else, is irrevocable.

It should be clear now, the irrevocability of being is not tied to any kind or category of entities: it is a principle that holds of whatever has being, simply in virtue of the fact that it is, that it has being. Suppose there are entities whose existence or being is necessary, e.g., God. The irrevocability of the entity's being will derive not from the necessity of its being but from the sheer fact of its being. Whether necessary or contingent, being is irrevocable. This is a principle that seems to qualify as a principle about what Aristotle calls 'being qua being'.

It is not just when engaged in abstract metaphysics that the principle may strike us. Consider the following passage from the musings of the Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa:

It sometimes happens – and always unexpectedly – that right in the middle of my feelings there arises such a terrible lassitude for life that I cannot possibly imagine a way to overcome it. As a cure, suicide is not sure; death, even including

unconsciousness, is still very little. It is a lassitude which desires not to cease existing – which may or may not be in the realm of the possible – but a deeper, more horrific thing: to cease from ever having existed, which is in no way possible.⁵

What Pessoa tells us is ‘deeper, more horrific’ than ceasing to be (exist), what is ‘in no way possible’, is not that he might cease to exist, or that he might not have existed, but that he might cease to *have* existed. In what way or sense is this impossible? He has existed for a number of years. In order that he should cease to have existed, his being (existence) would have to be revoked. But being (existence), present or past, cannot be revoked: what is cannot unbe.

Something else. The truth about being to which Pessoa alludes and which we are going on about cannot be explicated in terms of any strictly logical law or principle. It may be tempting to think that what lies behind the irrevocability of being is the logical principle of non-contradiction. Thus, e.g., Thomas Aquinas, after citing an authority who observes that God could not bring it about that a woman who was seduced was not seduced, argues (appealing to Augustine and Aristotle) that a contradiction does not fall ‘under the scope of God’s omnipotence’, and that the supposition ‘that the past should not have been implies a contradiction’.⁶ It seems to me, however, that the impossibility of God’s undoing the past, of making some object or event in the past unbe, is in a real sense prior to the impossibility of contradictory propositions holding true: prior, that is, to logical impossibility.

Let S be the event of seduction. We may state Thomas’s argument as follows. Suppose that S has occurred. So, it is true that $(\exists e)(e = S)$. If God could make S unbe, then God could also make it true that $\neg(\exists e)(e = S)$, and thus that God could make it true both that $(\exists e)(e = S)$ and that $\neg(\exists e)(e = S)$. In this way, if God could make events/objects unbe, God could make contradictory propositions true. Yet, according to Thomas, not even God can make contradictory propositions true.

But why should we not object that in making S unbe, rather than adding the truth of its contradictory, God would take away the possibility of its being true that $(\exists e)(e = S)$? If God could make S unbe,

⁵ *The Book Of Disquiet*, trans. Ian Watson (Quartet Books, 1991), 64–5.

⁶ See *The Summa Theologica*, Part I, Question 25, Fourth Article. A similar view about undoing the past and contradiction is expressed by Michael Dummett in ‘Bringing About the Past’, *Philosophical Review* (1964), and David Lewis, ‘The Paradoxes of Time Travel’, *American Philosophical Quarterly* (1976).

there would nothing about which it could be either (redundantly) asserted that there is (was) such a thing, or (self-refutingly) asserted that there is (was) no such a thing. There would be, in this respect, *simply nothing to assert*. The unbeing of S would thus issue not in the truth of contradictory propositions about S, but in the absence of any propositions about S, and *a fortiori* in the absence of propositions about S that might stand in the relation of contradiction.

Imagine that, prior to God's making S unbe, we write down '($\exists e$)($e = S$)' on the blackboard:

$$(\exists e) (e = S)$$

God then causes S to unbe. According to the argument we are challenging, this entitles us to add ' $\neg(\exists e)(e = S)$ '. It now looks as if we have written down a contradiction:

$$\begin{aligned} (\exists e) (e = S) \\ \neg(\exists e) (e = S) \end{aligned}$$

The mistake, I am saying, lies in the assumption that, if God makes S unbe, we are entitled to add ' $\neg(\exists e)(e = S)$ '. The correct representation of God's having made S unbe would, rather, look like this:



Instead of adding ' $\neg(\exists e)(e = S)$ ', we should simply erase ' $(\exists e)(e = S)$ '. To represent the unbeing of S, what we need is not a blackboard on which sentences expressing a contradiction about S appear but a blackboard on which nothing appears, an empty blackboard.

One empty blackboard, you may complain, is like any other. What is there to distinguish the representation of the fact that God has made S unbe from the representation of the fact that God has made some (any) other event, S', unbe? Nothing. That S is no longer occurring

and that S' is no longer occurring, these facts may be distinguished; but not that S and S' have been made to unbe. There is, in the latter case, nothing to be distinguished.

God destroyed Sodom and God destroyed Gomorrah. We can distinguish the fact that Sodom no longer exists from the fact that Gomorrah no longer exists. However, if God had made Sodom and Gomorrah unbe, there would be no facts about Sodom, nor facts about Gomorrah. There would be nothing, no relevant facts, to distinguish.

Maybe this yields our contradiction - not at the level of facts about the being of Sodom etc. but at the level of facts about the being of such facts. If, e.g., God made Sodom unbe, there would be this fact, that God has made Sodom unbe. However, we said that if God made Sodom unbe, there would be no facts about Sodom. So it would be true both that $(\exists f)(f = \text{the fact that God has made Sodom unbe})$ and true that $\neg(\exists f)(f = \text{the fact that God has made Sodom unbe})$.

No. We have simply repeated, at a new level, the same mistake. If God made Sodom unbe, there would be no facts about Sodom, including the fact about Sodom that God made Sodom unbe - including, moreover, the fact about Sodom that there are no facts about Sodom. No matter what level of fact we consider, once the being of Sodom has been revoked, there is, from top to bottom, no entity on which the fact might be grounded. If we do not grasp this, we do not yet grasp what it would be for something unbe.

That is to say, we do not yet grasp what it would be, etc., *if it could* be. For the whole point here is that it *cannot* be. God cannot make S, or Sodom, or anything else, of any kind or category - event or thing, worldly or abstract, fictive or real, temporal or non-temporal - unbe. God can no more make something unbe than God can make contradictory propositions true. These are both impossible. But they are different impossibilities. The truth of contradictory propositions is an impossibility of logic; the unbeing of what is, is an impossibility of being.

Consider the assertion (two paragraphs back) that if God made Sodom unbe, there would be no facts about Sodom. Would there not be *that* fact? The answer, as before, is that if God made Sodom unbe there would be nothing for the fact to be about; so there would be no such fact. In revoking the being of Sodom, God would revoke the being of all facts about Sodom (that fact included). With the unbeing of Sodom, were that possible, all facts about Sodom would, as it were, erase themselves from being. Of course (as I hope we all sense here) it is impossible. The impossibility, however, is not one of logic but of being.

II

Being and time, as anyone who has reflected seriously on either topic will appreciate, have deep connections. One connection, or so we shall propose, is this: if being is irrevocable, future events do not exist or have being. The idea – which has, in fact, been implicit at points in our discussion of being – is not just that future events are not now occurring (a tautology that holds equally of past events), but that, in contrast to both past and present events, there tenselessly are no such events, nothing over which to quantify. If this is correct, the irrevocability of being entails a temporal asymmetry of being.

Intuitions about such an asymmetry divide sharply⁷ and, obviously, the issue has implications in the philosophy of time.⁸ Our present interest, however, is confined to the connection between the asymmetry and the irrevocability of being. In the remainder of the paper we shall present and discuss an argument which claims to establish that the temporal asymmetry of being follows from the fact of its irrevocability.⁹

Imagine that a series of gongs is in progress. The gongs are separated by ten second intervals and are produced by a reliable mechanism set up to continue indefinitely. Five seconds, say, after the fourth gong occurs, it is true that,

(1) $(\exists e)(Ge \text{ and } e \text{ occurred five seconds ago}).$ ¹⁰

⁷ See, e.g., Gilbert Ryle's 'It Was To Be', *Dilemmas* (Cambridge University Press, 1954) (pro-asymmetry) and A.J. Ayer's 'Fatalism' in *The Concept Of A Person* (Macmillan, 1964) (anti-asymmetry).

⁸ For example, both the so-called 'static' view of time, in which the past/present/future contrast is somehow analyzed away or treated as merely subjective and events are assigned unchanging positions in a spatio-temporal manifold, as well as the 'dynamic' view, in which the contrast is conceived (à la McTaggart) as a movement of events from the future into the present/past, seem on reflection to assume that the totality of events is given 'all at once' – and thus to entail a temporal symmetry of being. C.D. Broad's view, on the other hand, wherein events acquire being in the temporal present, clearly entails a past/present versus future asymmetry being (see note 13, below).

⁹ The argument, let us emphasize, is not about the being of future individuals (like so-and-so's next child), nor about the truth of future-tensed propositions (like the proposition that there will be a sea battle tomorrow, but, to repeat, about the being of future events.

¹⁰ The existential quantifier is, of course, to be read tenselessly.

Our question is whether (as proponents of symmetry would maintain) it is also true that,

(2) $(\exists e)(Ge \text{ and } e \text{ will occur in five seconds})$.

The argument for the asymmetry is a reductio. If we assume that future events exist on a par with past and present events, i.e., if we assume symmetry, we can be led to an evidently false conclusion.

Let us once again employ God in our reflections. In the bible, God every so often intervenes in the natural course of events to cause things that are naturally impossible: seas part, hungry lions turn away from available prey, water spurts out of rocks, and so on. Surely God has it within his power to make it the case that no gong occurs in five seconds.

Thus it is in God's power to falsify,

(3) It will be the case that $(\exists e)(Ge \text{ and } e \text{ occurs in five seconds})$.

Falsifying (3) is in God's power despite the fact that conditions are in place that causally ensure that (3) will be true. Given the irrevocability of being, however, this turns out to be in conflict with that assumption of symmetry.

Assume, i.e., that being is symmetrical over time: future events have being in the same unqualified sense as past/present events. On this assumption, if (3) is true, (2) is true. (If there will be an event of such-and-such description, then there tenselessly is such an event.) Thus if (3) is true, there is a gong that is the gong that will occur in five seconds. This means that to falsify (3) – to make it the case that there is no gong in five seconds – God must cause the gong that will occur in five seconds not to occur, and therefore not to be. Since, on the symmetry assumption, that event has being, to falsify (3) God would have to revoke its being. But this is not within God's power. Nothing, not even God, can make something unbe. (What is cannot unbe.)

Of course it *is* within God's power to falsify (3). On the assumption that being is symmetrical over time, something that evidently is within God's power is not within God's power.

Let us call this the Irrevocability Argument (the IA). The IA is not intended as a contribution to theology. The reference to God is just the familiar philosophical device for drawing attention to the fact that causally or naturally impossible events may nonetheless be (in the jargon) metaphysically possible.¹¹ It is part of the story that

¹¹ Metaphysical possibility is usually understood as, in a sense, falling between causal and logical possibility: what is metaphysically possible is

conditions are in place that causally ensure a gong in five seconds. To say that, nonetheless, God can make it the case that no gong occurs, is just a way of saying that, nonetheless, it remains a metaphysical possibility that no gong occurs. Yet, if we assume a temporal symmetry of being, the IA demonstrates that there is no such possibility: it is excluded by the irrevocability of being.

Notice, in our story conditions are in place that causally ensure a gong will occur in five seconds. We may, if we wish, stipulate that complete causal determinism holds. This would not touch the IA. It is not determinism but the irrevocability of being that, on the symmetry assumption, is the source of God's inability to prevent the next gong from occurring.

Nor does determinism play any role in the irrevocability of being. Being would be irrevocable in a completely random, or lawless, universe. Or in a quantum universe. Whatever event settles the fate of Schrödinger's cat, once that event occurs, it is, and once it is, it cannot unbe.

Something else to be clear about is the relation between the irrevocability of being and fatalism. Philosophers often point out (correctly) that determinism neither entails nor is entailed by fatalism. The irrevocability of being is similarly independent of fatalism. The fatalist would say that, if it is true that if a gong will occur in five seconds, necessarily a gong will occur; hence God can do nothing about it. But the irrevocability of being is indifferent to whether the occurrence of the gong is necessary. Whether necessary or contingent, once the gong occurs, it is, and once it is, it cannot unbe.¹²

If the IA is correct, time contains an asymmetry of being. We might say (restricting our domain to events) that whatever is in the past or present, that in the future there is nothing. Present events are (exist) in the sense of coming to be¹³; past events, since they have already come to be and as such cannot unbe, are in the

thereby logically possible, but need not be causally possible; what is causally possible is thereby both metaphysically and logically possible; what is logically possible may be neither causally nor metaphysically possible.

¹² Ryle, in the paper cited above, muddies the waters by presenting fatalism as if it depended on the denial of the asymmetry.

¹³ This means that an event's 'coming to be' cannot be conceived as a change on the part of the event or as something that happens to it. See C.D. Broad's discussion of 'absolute becoming' in his *An Examination of McTaggart's Philosophy* (Cambridge University Press, 1938), II, Part I.

sense of simply being (the past simply is). And future events? There are no future events.¹⁴

The question, to be sure, is whether the IA is correct. Some may wonder how the argument holds up in light of the concepts of modern physics, in particular, that of space-time. But although an interest in physics might incline one to dismiss the IA as uninteresting or unimportant, the framework of space-time hardly provides a basis for criticizing the IA, since it makes no use of the past/present/future contrast and thus does not allow the asymmetry issue even to be stated. But of course our everyday grasp of time – the framework from within which physics itself takes off and is applied – is not without the resources to formulate objections to the IA. We shall conclude the paper by considering three such objections.

The first is this. The IA depends on the evident fact that God has the power to falsify (3), that is, to prevent a gong from occurring. It is also part of the argument that (3) is true, that a gong will occur. These two propositions – that it is true that a gong will occur and yet that God can prevent a gong from occurring – are (the objection says) inconsistent. If it is true that a gong will occur, then it is necessary that a gong will occur, since if no gong occurs, then, quite simply, it is not true that a gong will occur. If however it is necessary that a gong will occur, God does not have the power to prevent a gong from occurring.

Maybe the fallacy in the objection is obvious. It is the fallacy committed by fatalism. In a way, when the fatalist tells us that if it is true that a gong will occur, then it is necessary that a gong will occur, what he says is correct:

(T) Necessarily (if it is true that a gong will occur, then a gong will occur).

In effect, (T) is an instance of a necessary truth about truth, viz.:

Necessarily (if it is true that p, then p).

The mistake made by the fatalist is to confuse (T), which is a necessary truth, with, (T') If it is true that a gong will occur, then

¹⁴ Donald Davidson remarks: 'If I turned on the light, then I must have done it at a precise moment, in a particular way – every detail is fixed. But it makes no sense to demand that my want be directed at an action performed at any one moment or done in some unique manner.' ('Actions, Reasons and Causes', in *Essays on Actions & Events* (Oxford University Press, 1986), 6. Why does it not 'make sense' etc.? It is not because the particular action at which my want is directed is somehow indeterminate, but, I would say, because, being future-directed, there is no particular action at which my want is directed (rather, it is directed at my performing an action of a certain kind.)

necessarily a gong will occur, which is false – and then, on this basis, to arrive at the false conclusion that nothing, including God, can prevent a gong from occurring. Once the confusion is exposed, the objection to the IA collapses (along with fatalism).

Note, the IA would contain an inconsistency if it required both the truth of (3), that a gong will occur, and that God prevents a gong from occurring. But it does not require this. What the IA requires, and what turns out to be in conflict with the symmetry assumption, is not that God actually prevents a gong from occurring but only that God has the power to prevent a gong from occurring.

The second objection to the IA (put to me a few years back) proposes a way in which, given the assumption of symmetry and the truth of (3), God might, without having to revoke the being of anything, nonetheless bring it about that there is no next gong. God (the idea is) might achieve this by choosing to actualize a different world, a world just like this one except for the fact there is no next gong. In this way God would ensure that there is no next gong without being encumbered with the impossible task of revoking its being.

But when, exactly, is God supposed to choose the alternative possible world (the world without the next gong)? No doubt, God might have at the outset (when he initially set about choosing worlds) chosen a world in which there is no next gong. This, however, is irrelevant. The IA envisions – and certainly this is possible – that God might intervene *now*, at a point in the actual, ongoing series of events that is the history of the already chosen world. What the objection must intend, then, is that God, despite having initially chosen a world in which there is a next gong, might now choose a different world – a world in which there is no next gong.

Assume then that God initially chooses a world in which there is a next gong. The difficulty is, on the symmetry assumption, the gong in question already exists at the time of God's intervention. Given the symmetry assumption, to suppose that God might at *that* point choose a world in which there is no next gong is to suppose that God might revoke the being of the world he initially chose – in fact, the being of his own act of choosing.¹⁵

The third objection asserts that we are failing to distinguish between the being and occurring of an event. On the assumption of

¹⁵ Where 't' stands for the time of the relevant gong, and 'O' for occurring, God's choosing our actual world would, on the assumption of symmetry, entail that $(\exists e)(Ge \ \& \ Oe,t)$; on the assumption of asymmetry, it would entail, instead, that it will be the case that $(\exists e)(Ge \ \& \ Oe,t)$.

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symmetry, an event always has being. But, even with the assumption in place, the event is not always occurring, and thus, on the assumption, has being before it occurs. This allows us to suppose that whereas the next gong already has being, God might cause it not to occur. In that case, the hypothesis that God causes the next gong not to occur would not, on the symmetry assumption, entail the impossible, viz., that God revokes the being of the next gong.

Generally, the idea is that assuming that all events – past, present and future – have being (the symmetry assumption), future events may be distinguished from past and present events by the fact that they are neither now occurring, nor such that they have already occurred. Rather, they have yet to occur. They exist, as it were, waiting to occur. On the symmetry assumption, God's freedom to intervene in the future relates not to the being but the occurring of events.

But what is it for an event to 'occur'? Let E be our event. On the symmetry assumption, the occurring of E cannot be conceived as the coming to be of E, since, on the assumption, at any given time E already is. Or think of it this way. If there is a time at which E comes to be, that will already, contrary to what we are assuming, entail asymmetry; for if E's occurring at t is E's coming to be at t, it follows that when t is future, there is no such event as E.

Maybe there is another way to understand what it is for an event to 'occur'. Let us suppose that E's occurring at t is E's coming to be located at t: E's acquisition of t as its date or position in time. To say 'E occurs at t' thus means not that E comes to be at t, which (as we have just seen) entails asymmetry, but that an already existent E acquires t as its position in time. For God to prevent E from occurring at t, then, is, on the symmetry assumption, for God to prevent E from acquiring t as its date or position in time – which, plainly, does not entail that God revokes the being of E.

The trouble is, having a date or position in time is essential to an event. An event can no more lack a position in time than a physical entity can, while extant, lack a position in space. (The difference is that, when nothing is left of it, a physical entity, while remaining a possible object of reference, no longer has a position in space, whereas, in contrast, there is no way an event can lose its date.) However, if E's occurring is E's acquiring a date, precisely this impossible state of affairs – an event existing without a date – would have to be realized. For how could E 'acquire' its date at t unless, prior to t, E exists without a date? Or shall we say that E's acquiring its date is its coming to be? But this, as we saw, entails the asymmetry.

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