Discussion: Kvanvig No A-Theorist

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Jonathan Kvanvig’s clarification of his views on divine timelessness and omniscience makes it clear that his reconciliation of divine timeless eternity and divine omniscience is effected only by embracing a B-Theory of Language according to which there are no tensed facts to be known. Kvanvig thus finds himself in the company of B-theorists who hold that in knowing tenseless facts God knows all the facts there are about the temporal world. If one embraces a tenseless theory of time, then the “reconciliation” of timelessness and omniscience is admittedly easy.

My response to Jonathan Kvanvig’s helpful and interesting elucidation of his semantical theory for tensed sentences can be short and to the point: Kvanvig’s clarification of his views makes it quite clear that his reconciliation of divine timeless eternity and divine omniscience is effected by embracing a B-Theory of Language according to which there are no tensed facts to be known, whether by God or anyone else, that is to say, there are no truth-variable propositions, not even those expressed by tensed sentences, and knowledge has exclusively as its objects propositions which do not vary in their respective truth values.

Thus, I erred in thinking that “Kvanvig holds both to the objective reality of tensed facts and to God’s timeless knowledge of all facts.” I now see that the first conjunct of the sentence cited is false. No doubt I was misled into so thinking by Kvanvig’s idiosyncratic token formulation of the propositional content of the sentence “It is now 1 June 1984” as

1. It is now 1 June 1984.

Such a token formulation is at best misleading, since the semantic value of the word “now” is, for Kvanvig (in contrast to Wierenga), not a tensed time, a constituent of an A-series, but the essence of a tenseless time in the B-series. The token formulation of the proposition expressed by the tensed sentence in question would thus be more perspicuously rendered by something like

1. ’t is 1 June 1984,

where t is to be analyzed metaphysically as the individual essence of the
relevant B-series moment. By retaining indexical words in his token formulations of the propositional content of tensed sentences, Kvanvig creates the false impression that he holds to the objective reality of tensed facts or to propositions which vary in truth-value in virtue of the passage of time.

Thus, Kvanvig averts the conclusion of my original argument by denying its premiss

4. If a temporal world exists, then if God is omniscient, God knows tensed facts.

Kvanvig is thus included in the company of B-theorists of whom I wrote,

The B-theorist escapes his argument by denying that there are any tensed facts, so that (4) is false. The B-theorist holds that God knows all the facts there are about the temporal world in knowing tenseless facts. Thus, if one embraces a tenseless theory of time, he eludes the objector’s snare.¹

I was interested in the attempts of thinkers who hold to the objective reality of tensed facts to reconcile divine omniscience with divine timelessness, for I freely grant that if one denies that tensed facts exist, then the “reconciliation” is easy.

That Kvanvig’s theory is a B-Theory of Language scarcely needs demonstration. He advises that we quit talking about tensed facts, for “Tense is a property of sentences, not facts.” He thereby makes it evident, not only that tense is a purely linguistic phenomenon, but also that the semantic value of tensed sentences does not include any metaphysical reality such as the property of presentness. He affirms a theory of propositions which holds that “there is no such thing as a proposition that is true at one time and false at another . . . . a proposition, if true at any time, is true at all times.” This affirmation entails that propositional content is uniformly tenseless, otherwise certain propositions would vary in truth value in virtue of their including the A-determinations of various moments or events. In conjunction with Kvanvig’s affirmation that if anything “is something that can be known, it has to be a proposition,” it also entails that God knows no tensed facts (indeed, there are no such things as tensed facts). When Kvanvig states that a theory “must delineate the constituents of the proposition I am tired in such a way that the proposition is true at all times if true at all,” he must assume that the propositional constituents of that proposition include (the essence of) a time in the B-series, lest that proposition and its contradictory I am not tired are both true at all times. Sure enough, the propositional constituents of I am now tired are said to include, not the essence of an A-series moment, which the token formulation now suggests, but “the essence of the time of utterance” which is tenselessly related to the essence of Jon Kvanvig by the being tired relation.

Kvanvig’s semantical theory of tensed sentences raises all sorts of questions which are interesting in their own right,³ but I leave them aside in order to underscore the main point: his account succeeds in reconciling divine timelessness and divine omniscience only by sacrificing the reality
of tensed facts. The question now becomes whether any such B-Theory of Language is tenable or plausible—Kvanvig’s theory entails, for example, that I never know that my wife is kissing me (since objects of knowledge are exclusively propositions and propositions are uniformly tenseless or truth value-invariant), which conclusion may strike us as more than mildly implausible.

NOTES

2. Ibid.
3. Kvanvig’s semantical theory contains a number of inconcinnities which need to be ironed out. For example, his claim that the propositions

1. John runs.
2. The semantic value of “John” in the sentence “John runs” has the property of running, which is the semantic value of the predicate of that same sentence.
3. The property which is the essence of John is mutually exemplified with the property of running.

are necessarily equivalent is very problematic. For (2) is plausibly taken to affirm that the semantic value of “John” is a concrete object, somebody named “John” who has the property of running. Such an understanding would be in line with the New Theory of Reference according to which propositions, like sets, have concrete objects among their constituents. But then Kvanvig surprises by affirming that “the semantic value of ‘John’ is some property which is the essence of John’, which leads to (3). But are we then to suppose, in accord with (2), that it is the essence of John which has the property of running? That is clearly absurd. Rather (3) tells us that these two properties are mutually exemplified. But then (2) is false, since the semantic value of “John” does not, after all, have the property of running. Furthermore, (2) cannot be equivalent to (1) and (3), since (2) alone entails the existence of the sentence “John runs.” (1) and (3) have no such referent and so can be true in worlds in which no such sentence exists. Moreover, Kvanvig’s assertion that “the tense of the sentence used to express the original proposition John runs is irrelevant to the question of the relationship between the three propositions” is problematic, for (1) is ostensibly a tenseless or truth value-invariant-proposition; but how can (3) be a tenselessly true proposition? So construing (3) would make John an eternally running being. Perhaps both (1) and (3) have among their metaphysical constituents some time. This view is suggested by Kvanvig’s proposal that the same proposition is expressed by the sentences “I am tired” and “I am now tired.” But this “redundancy theory” of now fails to account for the phenomenon known as double-indexing. (See my The Tensed Theory of Time: A Critical Examination, Synthese Library 293 [Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2000], pp. 11-17, 124-125.) In addition, Kvanvig analyzes the proposition I am now tired in terms of the ascription of the property being tired now. This analysis faces the same sort of problem which Trenton Merricks has spotted in the solution proposed by proponents of time-indexed properties to the Problem of Temporary Intrinsics: rather than analyzing I am now tired in terms of the pre-
sent inherence of the familiar property being tired in some subject, we are required to postulate an exotic, unanalyzable property being-tired-now. (See my The Tenseless Theory of Time: A Critical Examination, Synthese Library 294 [Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2000], pp. 185-186.) Oddly, Kvanvig then inconsistently claims that his theory proposes to analyze I am now tired in terms of a two-place relation being tired between Kvanvig’s essence and the essence of the time of the utterance. Wholly apart from the difficulty that it is surely not Kvanvig’s essence which is tired, this solution is akin to a Relationalist solution to the Problem of Temporary Intrinsics and implies the counter-intuitive conclusion that Kvanvig has no intrinsic properties after all. (See my Tenseless Theory of Time, pp. 184-190.) These and other issues merit discussion which would be tangential to the main thrust of my argument here.

4. —Unless, that is, Kvanvig were willing to affirm that tense is an ontological category which, though not captured in the propositional content of tensed sentences, is nonetheless objectively real. Then my argument on p. 236 of my “Omniscience, Tensed Facts, and Divine Eternity” would need to be taken into account.

5. Kvanvig’s theory allows us to say that the tenseless proposition Kvanvig kisses his wife at t has a cognitive significance for Kvanvig that involves a tensed belief state in virtue of the way in which he grasps the tenseless propositional content expressed by the tensed sentence: nonetheless, because there are no non-propositional facts on his account and knowledge is exclusively propositional, Kvanvig cannot know the tensed fact that he is kissing his wife. For a defense of the objective reality of tensed facts and a critique of various B-Theories of Language, see my Tensed Theory of Time, Part I.