




ORIGINAL ARTICLE

‘Block’ing evil’s defeat

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Abstract

There is this view propounded by some theorists which claims that some conceptions of the nature of time are incompatible with the Christian position on the defeat of evil. The aim of this article is twofold. First, to clarify exactly which thesis about time’s nature is taken to be problematic for the defeat of evil. And second, to show that scriptural support for understanding the defeat of evil as requiring that evil not be in the range of the existential quantifier, something implicitly contended by those who put forward this problem, is weak and that these passages can be read in plausible ways which are affirmable by those who endorse the ‘problematic’ thesis.

Keywords: timelessness; evil; existence; time; eternalism

There is this view propounded by some theorists which claims that some conceptions of the nature of time are incompatible with the Christian position on the defeat of evil (Craig 2001a, 66–67; 2001b, 214, 2008, 609–610; Copan and Craig, 2004, 162, n.29; Mullins 2014, 127–132; 2021, 107; Hollingsworth 2024; Peckham 2021, 108).¹ The aim of this article is twofold. First, to clarify exactly which thesis about time’s nature is taken to be problematic for the defeat of evil. And second, to show that scriptural support for understanding the defeat of evil as requiring that evil not be in the range of the existential quantifier, something implicitly contended by those who put forward this problem, is weak and that these passages can be read in plausible ways which are affirmable by those who endorse the ‘problematic’ thesis.

Time’s nature

To get clear on what the fundamental problem is supposed to be, it will first help to clarify different views on the nature of time. I think a helpful way of doing this is by asking ourselves two questions, one concerning how to understand temporal predication and the other concerning how to understand temporal quantification, since different answers to these questions allow for different understandings of time’s nature.²

Starting with temporal predication, there are some who take tensed predications seriously and others who don’t. To see what this means let us speak of truth *simpliciter*, which refers to truth that is unqualified. Those who endorse a *static* view of time hold that whenever some predication is a truth *simpliciter* it is always true *simpliciter*, and hence never changes in its truth value no matter what time it is.³ Using the terminology of McTaggart,

both B and C series predications are of these sorts. By contrast someone who takes tensed predications seriously will deny this, holding to a *dynamic* view and claiming that sometimes some predication is a truth *simpliciter* without always being a truth *simpliciter*, with this implying that what facts there are changes with time, and so in McTaggart's language give us A series predications.

Concerning temporal quantification, there are also two main views (Williamson 2013, 4). The first is called *permanentism* and holds that what exists can never fail to exist,⁴ which can also be put as saying that always what exists is in the domain of the absolutely unrestricted quantifier (Correia and Rosenkranz 2020, 2004).⁵ By contrast, *temporaryism*, the second view, holds that sometimes there exists something that sometimes does not exist, with this view therefore claiming that things can fail to exist at various times. *Temporaryism*, however, can be subdivided into two distinct views, with one claiming that sometimes there exists something that never exists in the past, and the other that sometimes there exists something that never exists in the future, with this subdivision allowing us to formulate more positions on time's nature.

Before continuing it should be noticed that there is a distinction to be had between significantly tensed *predication*, resulting in a dynamic view of time, and significantly tensed *quantification*, which implies temporaryism (Correia & Rosenkranz 2018, 16). These views are distinct, and it would be a mistake to reduce one category to the other since they claim different things and as they allow us to formulate more positions on time's nature. Holding this distinction in mind will also be important when clarifying the problem concerning evil's defeat.

With this background we now have the tools needed to spell out different views on time's nature, with these being understood as a package of answers to the two questions considered above. Eternalism, then, claims that neither predication nor quantification are significantly tensed, and endorses a static view and permanentism, with this permanentism being derivable from its static view (Correia and Rosenkranz 2018, 15).⁶ Moving spotlight theorists, by contrast, hold that predication is significantly tensed, but that quantification is not, endorsing both a dynamic view and permanentism.⁷ Presentism, along with growing block and shrinking block theorists, hold that both predication and quantification are significantly tensed.⁸ However, whilst presentism endorses both subdivisions of *temporaryism*, growing block theory *only* endorses the claim that sometimes there exists something that never exists in the future, whilst shrinking block theorists *only* endorse the other claim, namely that sometimes there exists something that never exists in the past.

Whilst more could be said regarding the nature of time than this, what's been said here will be sufficient for what follows.

What's the fundamental problem?

To get a cursory grip on the supposed fundamental problem concerning the nature of time and evil's defeat, it will be helpful to quote some of its advocates. Craig, for instance, writes,

'on the static theory of time evil is never really vanquished from the world: it exists just as sturdily as ever at its various locations in space-time' (Craig 2001a, 66).

Given Craig's use of 'static', we might think that his objection is merely meant to cause trouble for those who reject significantly tensed *predication*, and so merely eternalists, given how we have characterized things above. However, his later use of 'exists' seems to suggest his concern is in fact more to do with whether a view rejects significantly tensed *quantification*.

Elsewhere Craig writes,

‘one gets a less robust eschatology on a B theory than on an A theory. If future-tense facts are illusory, then eschatology also takes on the appearance of an illusion. On an eternalist ontology, there is no becoming, no realization, no actualization of things and events’ (2008, 609).

Once again, on the one hand it appears that Craig’s concern is addressed only to those views which reject significantly tensed *predication*, given his talk of those views which claim that ‘future-tense facts are illusory’. However, the next sentence, speaking of an ‘eternalist ontology’, would seem to imply that the problem at hand is actually one that is dependent on views of quantification, being problematic for those views which reject significantly tensed *quantification*.

Whilst one might claim that what’s really going on here is that Craig has two distinct objections, one in relation to those views which reject significantly tensed *predication* and one for those who reject significantly tensed *quantification*, I think it’s far more likely that Craig’s *fundamental* problem is to do with quantification and not predication, for he goes on to write,

On an A theory of time, once the eschaton arrives, evil, being part of the past, disappears forever from creation, thanks to the objectivity of temporal becoming. But on an eternalist ontology, evil is never really vanquished from creation. Evil’s being destroyed amounts to no more than later portions of the spacetime block’s being free of evil. But the earlier parts infected with evil exist just as robustly as the later parts. The stain of evil on creation is indelible (2008, 609–610).⁹

Although his use of A-theory might incline us to think it is significantly tensed predication that is being targeted, the remaining quote shows that it is questions of quantification that Craig is fundamentally concerned with. To see this more clearly, ask yourself the following question. Suppose a theory of time that accepted significantly tensed predication and rejected significantly tensed quantification were true, such as the moving spotlight, would Craig still have a fundamental problem given what he’s said? I take it that the answer to this would be yes, and therefore the fundamental problem is one regarding quantification.¹⁰

The same conclusion, I think, can be drawn from Mullins’s work.¹¹ One might be somewhat surprised at this since much of his elaboration of the problem focuses on theories of persistence, namely how perdurance (temporal parts theorists) and exdurance (stage theorists) views have problems making sense of certain Christian eschatological claims concerning evil. For instance, he writes,

There is another temporal counterpart, or person stage, of Sally that is experiencing an absolutely tragic evil. From all eternity that temporal counterpart of Sally is suffering this great evil. This temporal counterpart will never cease to suffer. ... This seems to exaggerate the problem of evil for the Christian since it cannot make good on the claims that the suffering will cease, and that evil will ultimately be defeated (Mullins 2014, 128).

However, once again, I don’t think it is theories of persistence that are really doing the fundamental work here. To see this, ask yourself the following question. Suppose if all the main views of persistence, including endurantism, were compatible with permanentism, would Mullins cease to raise a similar problem to the one he raised in the quote above?¹² I take it

that the answer would be no, since he would still say that the evil in a time slice permanently exists and that it is this which is the fundamental problem.¹³ As such, it is not theories of persistence which are driving the problem, it is rather questions of quantification.¹⁴

Therefore, I take it that the fundamental problem says that ‘past’ evils should not exist, for some reason or other, and so any view of time which implies that they do should be rejected, since these views of time are incompatible with what Christians should ‘supposedly’ say. Considering this, one might be inclined to think that this problem merely affects permanentist views, but this would be a mistake. For the problem will also apply to growing block theorists, since they reject that sometimes there exists something that never exists in the past. As such evils that were at one time present, do exist in the past at future times. Given this we can see that the fundamental problem will only be bypassed by those views which accept that sometimes there exists something that never exists in the past, and so any view which doesn’t affirm this will be subject to the problem.¹⁵

For ease we can say that anyone who says the ‘past’ exists, such that we have an existing ‘past’ block of timeslices, are subject to the problem, and that questions as to whether ‘future’ timeslices exist in the block, whether predication is fundamentally tensed, and what theory of persistence is true, are irrelevant to the fundamental problem at hand. ‘Past’ evils exist, and it is claimed that they shouldn’t, and so any view of time which says otherwise should be rejected.¹⁶

The obvious next question to be asked is why should Christians deny that ‘past’ evils exist? As far as I can tell, the *primary* reason given for this is that of scriptural texts, although there is rarely much discussion given to them.¹⁷ This is not to say that other arguments can’t be given for this claim, for perhaps one might suggest that God’s defeat of evil requires that ‘past’ evils exist, with this being something I’ll comment on at the end of the article.¹⁸ For now I’ll examine the scriptural texts, but before doing so, one final detour is needed.

What does ‘exist’ mean?

I’ve claimed that the fundamental problem regarding evil and time’s nature is one that is to do with quantification, and therefore existence, but working out how to interpret sentences which speak of or imply existence claims can be a somewhat complicated business. As Correia and Rosenkranz point out in a recent article,

there are ‘two distinct notions readily expressed by the tensed verb “to exist” that it is of crucial importance not to conflate: *the notion of being located at the present time*, and *the notion of belonging to the domain of quantification at the present time*’ (2020, 2000).¹⁹

This distinction, I suggest, will be vital when examining the scriptural texts below, and so it is important to get clear on this distinction.

In order to help do this Correia and Rosenkranz suggest that we pay attention to how we use ordinary language, such as when we claim ‘there existed no broccoli in 800 BC’ (2020, 2001). They suggest that this use of existence merely serves to *locate things at times*. So, to take another example they give, ‘Dodos no longer exist’, should be taken to mean that Dodos are not located at the time of utterance, namely the ‘present’ time.²⁰ Nonetheless, we philosophers know there is another way in which existence talk is used that is distinctive from merely *locating things at times* and instead involves existential quantification. Thus, when speaking this way, to say that something exists is for it to be *in the range of the existential quantifier* (Correia and Rosenkranz 2020, 2002–2003). As Correia and Rosenkranz note, although both these types of existence are distinct they are nonetheless compatible. As such a permanentist, although holding that for all x and all times t , x exists at t (when thinking

quantificationally), does not think that this implies that everything is located at the present time. That is, permanentism 'is not already refuted by the fact that back in 800 BC, broccoli was nowhere to be found and so was not located at any time in 800 BC' (2020, 2004). For as Correia and Rosenkranz write,

'Permanentists deny that presently being something *entails* being located at the present time. But then, so should everyone else. This is not yet to rule out that always everything is located at what then is the present time. To say that always everything is located at what then is the present time—as *presentists* do—is to make a substantive ontological claim, and not to articulate a conceptual entailment. Even presentists should be ready to acknowledge this' (2020, 2004).

To quote them once again,

It is one thing to say that always everything will forever continue to exist—where 'exist' is equivalent to 'be something'—and quite another to say that always everything that is present will forever continue to be present—in the sense of 'present' characterised earlier in which dodos are present only when they are somewhere to be found. While everyone should deny the latter, growing blockers and permanentists alike accept, while presentists are bound to reject, the former (2020, 2006).

As Correia and Rosenkranz note, this should make it clear that there is a conceptual distinction between 'present existence as presently being something, and present existence as being present' or in other words, '*presently being within the range of the existential quantifier*, and the notion of *being located at the present time*.' (2020, 2006)²¹ With this distinction now elucidated we can turn to thinking about what scripture means.

For the Bible tells me, well what actually?

Before examining specific Biblical texts, let us first think about how we could understand the following claim given the distinction I've just explicated,

'at some future time, there will be no evil'.

Given the discussion above, we should see that this claim is ambiguous between two different readings, where the ambiguity concerns how we understand the phrase, 'at some future time, there will be'. On one reading, the phrase involves *temporal location*, and concerns the content of at least one future time, whilst on another reading the phrase involves *temporally modified quantification*, and concerns what is in our ontological catalogue relative to some future standpoint.

If we were to adopt a view of time which rejects that sometimes there exists something that never exists in the past, then we could only affirm one of the two readings, namely the *temporal location* reading. For on this reading, it could be true that there will be a time which has no evil located at it. However, the *temporally modified quantification* reading would have to be denied on this view of time's nature, since some evil time slice will always be captured by the existential quantifier. The view of time under consideration will therefore only be in trouble if we *must* affirm the *temporally modified quantification* reading of the statement.²²

With this as background we turn to examining the Biblical texts that have been used in support of the fundamental problem, noting that they will only provide support to this problem if they *require* a *quantificational* reading. If one can therefore offer a plausible

non-quantificational reading of these texts, their support of the fundamental problem can be ‘blocked’ or undermined. It is my contention that each passage can be given such a reading, namely a *temporal location* reading. Therefore, if advocates of the fundamental problem want to rely on these texts as support, they have much more work to do.

One of the most popular passages appealed to is Revelation, in particular Revelation 20–22 (Mullins 2021, 107; 2014, 131, 2025, 231; Peckham 2021, 108), with the texts which seem most relevant being the following:

‘the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more’ (Revelation 21:1, NRSV).

‘Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away’ (Revelation 21:4, NRSV).

Nothing accursed will be found there any more. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign for ever and ever (Revelation 22:3–5, NRSV).

Yet given the distinction noted above, each of these texts seems able to be understood in the following two ways. On the *temporal location* reading, the texts claim:

‘When said future/later time is present the first heaven and earth will not be located at that time’ (Revelation 21:1).

‘When said future/later time is present death, mourning, crying and pain will not be located at that time or at any later times. In virtue of not being located at that time, but at previous times, they will be said to have passed away’ (Revelation 21:4).

‘When said future/later time is present, nothing accursed will be located at that time or at any later times, and no night will be located at that time’ (Revelation 22:3–5).

By contrast on the *quantificational* reading the texts claim:

‘When said future/later time is present the first heaven and first earth will not be within the range of the existential quantifier’ (Revelation 21:1).

‘When said future/later time is present death, mourning, crying and pain will not be within the range of the existential quantifier’ (Revelation 21:4).

‘When said future/later time is present, nothing accursed will be within the range of the existential quantifier and neither will any night’ (Revelation 22:3–5).

What advocates of the fundamental problem need to do is give us a reason to think that the texts *must* have this latter meaning. I can only speak for myself, but it seems to me that they are more plausibly read as having the *temporal location* meaning.²³ To see this, think again about the example I gave above concerning Dodos. If I were to say that all Dodos have ‘passed away’, or that they are ‘no more’, or that ‘none could be found’, it seems to me far

more natural to think I was talking about what was the *temporal location* of the Dodos rather than trying to say anything about their status in regards to the existential quantifier.²⁴ So too with the passages above. For it seems unlikely to me that existential quantification was on the authors minds, unless they were, perhaps unbeknownst to us, writing this in the ontology room! For as Kripke says, ‘We did *not* learn quantification theory as our mother tongue. Somehow or other the weird notation ‘ $(\exists x)$ ’ was explained to us, by teachers or books’ (1976, 379). But I’m not convinced we’ve been given any good reason for thinking that the authors in question had been taught such a notion and that they *must* have meant it given what they wrote. Instead, it seems plausible to me to think that they had the *temporal location* meaning in mind, since this seems part of our mother tongue. At the very least, far more needs to be done by advocates of the fundamental problem to show otherwise.²⁵

An advocate of the *quantificational* reading might reply by suggesting that since these texts are inspired, something assumed by advocates of the fundamental problem, it could be that God intended to convey the *quantificational* reading even if it was not what the human authors intended. As such, the *quantificational* meaning should also be implied. In principle I have no objection to it being *possible* that God had this meaning in mind. However, I don’t think it is a good hermeneutical principle to read out of a text specialist metaphysical theses which are likely not the human authors’ intention but *may* have been a way in which God intended the text to be understood. The reason for this is that I don’t think we typically have a good enough grasp as to what God intends the text to say beyond the meaning the author was trying to convey, and especially when this is regarding some specific contemporary metaphysical doctrine. Yet because of this, I don’t think we should be asserting that ‘this is the additional meaning that God meant by this text’, when we have no strong reason to think God would have intended this additional meaning rather than not, such as in the case above.

Another passage appealed to by advocates of the fundamental problem is 1 Corinthians 15:54 (Craig 2001a, 67; 2001b, 214; Copan and Craig 2004, 162, n.29),²⁶ with it reading,

‘When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled:

‘Death has been swallowed up in victory’ (NRSV).

Here once again the text can be read in two ways, with the *temporal location* reading being:

‘When said future/later time is present there will be no death at that time or at any later times’.

And the *quantificational* reading saying:

‘When said future/later time is present death will not be within the range of the existential quantifier’.

Just as in the previous case, here too I think the *temporal location* reading is more likely. The reason for this is that the start of the verse appears to concern temporal location and should be read as saying something like ‘When the time comes in which this perishable body puts on imperishability and immortality’. But then it is natural to think that the remainder of the verse should be read in the same way, namely to do with temporal location, and so claiming that ‘from that time onwards the body will not die such that one can say death has been swallowed up in victory’. The following verse also makes sense on this understanding, since one can still taunt death from this time onwards by saying ‘Where, O death, is your victory?’

Where, O death, is your sting?’ (1 Corinthians 15:55, NRSV). Yet all of this is compatible with those who advocate a theory of time which claims the past-block exists, and more needs to be done to suggest that we must also read the verse quantificationally.

In fact, it is somewhat surprising to me that Craig reads this text in a quantificational manner, since he regularly claims that it is a mistake to automatically read texts quantificationally and as to do with ontological commitments (Craig 2017, 387–388, 447–450; 2014, 119–123). But this text will only do the work Craig wants it to if the claim that death being swallowed up in victory entails the ontological claim that death is now not in the range of the existential quantifier. I suspect that those of us with philosophical training naturally often read existence claims about being to do with existential quantification, but I’m unconvinced that the authors of the text had this training and/or were intent on making this point.²⁷ Rather, I think we should follow Craig’s more general advice and be wary as to how we interpret claims to do with existence and non-existence, and from this realise that this verse is plausibly about temporal location.²⁸

Another text, which is related to 1 Corinthians 15:54 in virtue of being about what 1 Corinthians 15:54 is echoing, has also been used to support the fundamental problem, namely Isaiah 25:8 (Lebens and Goldschmidt 2017, 3).²⁹ The text reads,

‘he will swallow up death for ever. Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken’ (NRSV).

But once again it seems to me that ‘when said future/later time is present death and tears will not be located at that time or at any later times’ is plausibly what the text means as opposed to the *quantificational* reading, namely ‘when said future/later time is present death and tears will not be within the range of the existential quantifier’. It is not that the text couldn’t mean the latter, but once again one needs to do far more to show that it *must* be read in this way.³⁰

Similarly, the *temporal location* reading seems plausible to me when considering Romans 8:21 (Mullins 2014, 134), ‘that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God’ (NRSV). Thus I assume this is naturally read as, ‘when said future/later time is present creation will not decay at that time or at any later times’, rather than ‘when said future/later time is present a decaying creation will not be within the range of the existential quantifier’. And much the same is true of the promises in Matthew 5 (Mullins 2021, 105–109, 2025, 229–233), such that, for example, ‘Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted’ (Matthew 5:4, NRSV) should be read along the lines of, ‘when said future/later time is present there will be comfort given to those who mourn at that time and at all later times’, rather than, ‘when said future/later time is present mourning will not be within the range of the existential quantifier’.³¹ At the very least, in all these cases it seems to me that far more work needs to be done on behalf of advocates of the fundamental problem in order to suggest that the existential meaning *must* be implied by these texts, since they will only be problematic for various views of time if this is the case.³²

Let me finish by commenting on two final texts. The first is 1 Corinthians 15:28,

‘When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to the one who put all things in subjection under him, so that God may be all in all’ (NRSV).

Here one might claim that ‘all in all’ suggests a quantificational reading, implying something like ‘over all things’, where all is taken to be the domain of the universal

quantifier. The thought then would be that if there is evil in ‘past’ existing timeslices, God can’t really be said to be ‘all in all’ since there are plausibly ways in which He cannot be in evil. However, I think many biblical commentators would think it a mistake for the ‘all in all’ claim to be read in this way, after all Barrett (1971, 361; Fitzzymer 2008, 575) suggests that this text is to be read soteriologically and not metaphysically, and points to 1 Corinthians 15:54–57, which I have already commented on, as providing a guide for understanding this text.³³ Therefore, assuming I’m correct in thinking that the 1 Corinthians 15:54 passage should be read as implying *temporal location* and not *quantification* then so too should this passage.

The other text is Isaiah 43:25, which reads,

‘I, I am He who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins’ (NRSV).

Lebens and Goldschmidt (2017, 2) employ this verse as providing motivation for their ingenious attempt at making sense of God changing one’s past.³⁴ It seems here that whilst the latter part of the verse can be given a *temporal location* reading, namely, at times later than your sin I will not remember your sin, this seems more difficult for the former part of the verse depending upon how one reads ‘blots out’. Before commenting on this, however, let me note that many theists, more generally, will struggle to read this verse at face value. After all, it is controversial, given divine omniscience and perfection, to think that God no longer remembers something He once remembered, even purposefully,³⁵ and those who think God is timeless will certainly have to interpret at least some of the text non-literally since a timeless being does not remember, since nothing is ever past to Him. As such, we might question how much weight we should put behind this text in determining our metaphysics even if it may seem to imply a *quantification* reading in virtue of ‘blotting out transgressions’.

But perhaps we can read the text in such a way that blots out means that at said time and onwards your transgressions will not exist in the sense that one can say of you from that time and onwards that you are not deemed sinful. If we are also to take ‘blotting’ to be to do with something like physical recording, something talked about in Revelation (20:12), then one could say, as it does in Colossians 2:14, that to blot out refers to erasing ‘the record that stood against us with its legal demands’ (NRSV).³⁶ But read in this light, a temporal location reading of the Isaiah passage makes sense, namely that God will at some later time cover the record of your ‘past’ sins such that from that time onwards they are no longer said to put you in the wrong. If this is a plausible reading, then it is how someone who denies that sometimes there exists something that never exists in the past should read this text.³⁷

One might reply that my suggested reading requires some interpretative hoop jumping so to avoid the *quantificational* reading and that this is a weakness.³⁸ This is a somewhat fair concern, but I don’t think it should count too heavily against this interpretation, since interpreters regularly make such jumps in order to avoid various interpretations and implications of such texts, with the question we are left with often being when it is permissible to make such jumps and when is it not. If one has prior reason to affirm that sometimes there exists something that never exists in the past, then such hoop jumping may well be permissible here. Additionally, I’m inclined to think that although it is a fun philosophical project to take the strongest metaphysical interpretations of a text and see if one can make philosophical sense of them,³⁹ we should in practice be cautious as to how much metaphysics we can *actually* read off the Biblical text, especially when its attestation is sparse. The biblical authors were not trained metaphysicians who used their language to convey precise metaphysical truths, but were instead aiming to convey important theological

truths in the language they had available to them. I take it that in most cases the truths they were attempting to convey can be unmoored from the metaphysical presuppositions they themselves may have held to or implicitly implied, and it is therefore only sometimes that metaphysical conclusions can be drawn from the text, namely when some clear theological message that was trying to be conveyed requires it. One could obviously employ a different interpretative strategy if one wishes, such as taking scripture to provide persistent metaphysical instruction, even if sometimes couched in terms of metaphor, but it may lead one to conclusions that many would rather not accept, such as saying ‘God really does have a hand and God really does have breath’ (Hazony 2019, 25), since this is what scripture says.⁴⁰ All I can say here is that I’m less inclined to go this way.

The upshot of this discussion is that I don’t think defenders of the fundamental problem have given us sufficient reason for thinking that scripture must teach that our ontological catalogue, relative to some future standpoint, requires that there be no evil, for all it plausibly speaks about is there being ‘future’ temporal locations in which there is no evil at that time and beyond.

Attempting to force the existential reading

Obviously, if my preceding conclusion is correct, then this is an issue for advocates of the fundamental problem. What they need to therefore do, if they are to rely on scripture as their motivation, is to force the adoption of an existential reading. Here let me consider three different ways in which they might seek to do this.

Denying the distinction

One option would be to deny that there is a distinction between *temporal location* and *temporally modified quantification* and that everything to do with existence should be read in a quantificational manner. This seems a hard sell, for I agree with Correia and Rosenkranz (2020, 2004) that there is a conceptual distinction here and whilst presentists might want to affirm that always everything is located at the present time, this does not negate the conceptual distinction, with their claim instead being a substantial ontological claim that non-presentists will deny.

It also seems that the distinction is a useful one for the presentist, since it allows them a way to answer the triviality objection to presentism, namely how we are to understand the presentist claim, ‘only present things exist’, without it being trivial. For as Correia and Rosenkranz note, with their distinction in hand one can say the meaning of such a claim is, ‘Presently nothing fails to be located at the present time’ (2020, 2007) which according to their view is equivalent to, ‘What there is only includes what is located at the present time’ (2020, 2009) neither of which are trivial. One can try and answer this type of objection in alternative ways, but it’s far from clear that the other options are preferable.⁴¹ As such, I don’t think this is a good way forward for defenders of the fundamental problem.

Presentism and implicit implication

Another option is to suggest that the Biblical authors would have assumed presentism, and so when they speak of the present time they would have thought that existential quantification must be limited to that present time as well. As such, when we read claims about the present time we should also be understood as asserting what a presentist thinks about existential quantification.

There are several things to say here. First, some work will need to be done to show that all the authors under question assumed presentism to be the case. Second, even if we could do

that, we will also need to know exactly what they meant by presentism, since presentism is notoriously difficult to define. For whilst I've given a construal of it here, this characterization is by no means universally accepted.⁴² In fact, given the wide diversity as to how presentism is understood, it has recently been argued that presentism doesn't in fact name a distinctive view but rather there are multiple different views which go by the name (Tallant and Ingram 2021). As such one would need to work out which view the authors held, since some views which go under the name presentism allow that 'past' evils exist in some sense and therefore they would nonetheless be within the range of the existential quantifier.⁴³ Additionally, if Lebens and Goldschmidt (2020, 376; 2017, 10), and myself (Page 2023) are right, it's far from clear that presentism alone has the resources to make it the case that evil is not within the range of the existential quantifier even on a presentist understanding.

The final thing to say is that it's questionable that we must assume the metaphysical theory the authors held, with this often being something that we reject in other cases so long as the primary meaning of the text can still be affirmed.⁴⁴ But since the texts in question are most naturally read as being to do with *temporal location* rather than *existential quantification*, as I've argued above, one can accept the primary meaning, namely about what is the case at future temporal locations, without being committed to the authors' metaphysical presuppositions. Therefore, unless we have reason to accept that there are some theological truths which *require* evil to no longer exist within the range of the existential quantifier, we are under no theological compulsion to accept their metaphysical view. What we require, therefore, is some other theological truth which clearly requires that evil should not be within the scope of the existential quantifier, since from this we can return to the texts above and then be content in following the author's metaphysical assumptions, if they were a particular type of presentist, which would also lead to this conclusion. Until then, however, it is highly suspect that we should be forced down this line.

Defeating evil

One way that we might try to achieve what is missing above is by suggesting that the theological truth that evil is defeated requires evil not to be in the range of the existential quantifier.⁴⁵ But then we must ask, why should we think defeat requires such a condition? Unfortunately, those who think it does appeal to the same scriptures I've commented on above, which as I've attempted to show, are more plausibly to do with temporal location and therefore do not do the job they had hoped. Instead, it seems the best option is to argue on philosophical grounds that 'defeat' requires evil to no longer be in the range of the existential quantifier. But much work will need to be done to make this strategy plausible, since it seems to me that the two most prominent accounts of defeat, those by Adams (1999) and Stump (2022), are compatible with a view of time that rejects that sometimes there exists something that never exists in the past, although arguing this will have to wait for another occasion. One could of course argue that these accounts of defeat are insufficient for some reason, and that a sufficient account will *require* that evil not be in the range of existential quantifier, but making good on this is something advocates of the fundamental problem will need to demonstrate.

Conclusion

The upshot is that those who want to rule out certain views on the nature of time due to their supposed incompatibility with certain Biblical texts and the defeat of evil have a lot more work to do to make good on their claim. An advocate of a view of time which rejects that sometimes there exists something that never exists in the past can very plausibly read all these texts as being to do with *temporal location*. As such they do not need

to be presently concerned that there are strong Biblical grounds that make their view theologically impermissible.

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Notes

1. Lebens and Goldschmidt (2017) also think about an argument like this, but from a Jewish perspective. Also note that the language of 'defeat' is not always employed, but something along these lines is what seems to be in mind.
2. My brief elaboration on these questions is indebted to Correia and Rosenkranz (2018, chs.1–2, esp. 10–11, 14–16) and I point readers there for more details.
3. It is also important to clarify, as Correia and Rosenkranz note, 'that our adoption of the operator approach to tense, and our corresponding assumption that the language to be used contains tensed clauses on which temporal operators operate, in no way prejudice the issue of whether tensed propositions that are not always true can ever be true *simpliciter*. Thus, opting for the static view according to which there are no tensed propositions apt to be true *simpliciter*, does not entail rejection of the suggestion, sketched above, that, say, in "On May 10th, the world economy is collapsing" the phrase "On May 10th" is a temporal operator that operates on a present-tensed clause and shifts the circumstances against which to evaluate the embedded clause to those prevailing on May 10th. For, even if such clauses, and the more complex sentences embedding them, may express tensed propositions, their truth may for all that still be relative to times and so not be absolute' (2018, 11).
4. This does not imply that what exists is necessary, with this being necessitism, permanentism's modal analogue (Williamson 2013).
5. Deasy (2017, 2019) sets out views on time's nature in a similar way.
6. This may not be sufficient to classify Eternalism, at least as it is usually understood, since it also takes time to be anisotropic, holding to a B-theory of time, rather than C, both of which are compatible with the static view.
7. Note that not all who endorse these two theses might be called moving spotlight theorists, since their theories differ in ways. For instance, Williamson (2013) and Correia and Rosenkranz (2011, 2012) give theories that accept these two theses but are taken to be different from the moving spotlight view.
8. For more on this understanding of growing block see Correia and Rosenkranz (2018, Ch.4).
9. It might be possible to formulate other concerns from Craig's work, such as arguing that certain theories of the atonement don't work given certain positions on the nature of time, or that Jesus existing permanently on a cross is theologically problematic in some way (Craig 2001a, 67, 2001b, 214, 2008, 610; Copan and L 2004, 162, n.29). How distinct and persuasive these objections are, however, isn't something I can examine here.
10. Sadly, we can't ask the converse question, would Craig still have a concern if predication is not significantly tensed but quantification is significantly tensed, since temporaryists seems to require a dynamic view of predication.
11. What I say here could also be said for Peckham (2021, 108) and Hollingsworth (2024, 171–172), who both set out the same problem. The worry they seem to be wanting to express concerns quantification and not predication.
12. Some have argued that endurantism is compatible with permanentist views, such as Benovsky (2009).
13. Similar to what I said about Craig, perhaps Mullins could still claim to have distinct theological objections based on things like the nature of personal salvation, which is a problem also raised by Qureshi-Hurst (2022). Sadly, just as in note 9, this is not something I can examine here, although I suspect these types of worries can be overcome in the way Le Poidevin (2016) suggests.
14. I think we can also see this by noting that *if* presentism were compatible with perdurance and/or exdurance views (for some arguments that it is see, Brogaard 2000; Magalhães 2011), then it doesn't seem as though Mullins's arguments would be successful against this combination of views, as the quantificational thesis presentism endorses will block his concerns.
15. Both Presentism and shrinking-block can therefore bypass the problem, but since no one holds to shrinking-block, in practice it is only presentists who can be thought to overcome the worry.
16. Note that the fundamental problem is sometimes presented as an argument against divine timelessness, and whilst it certainly can be used as an argument against those defenders of timelessness who endorse 'for things in time that there exists something that never exists in the past', it's not clear all defenders of timelessness will endorse such a view, namely those who think presentism is compatible with divine atemporality (Leftow 2018; Page 2023). Additionally, there is nothing inconsistent, as far as I can tell, about holding that God is temporal and a theory of time which endorses the claim that there exists something that never exists in the past, yet if one were to do so the argument would also count against this view too. The argument is therefore better put as merely

claiming that one cannot hold that a 'past' block exists irrespective of God's relationship to time, since 'past' evils should be thought not to exist.

17. Recall that I am bracketing other arguments that Craig and Mullins might also be said to give from their discussions (see notes 9 and 13).

18. One might think another way to argue this claim is to say that God would not be morally permitted to allow evil if it did not cease to exist, but I take this just to be a component of the defeat reason mentioned above, and I shall comment on the defeat style reason at the end of this paper. Perhaps another reason for adopting this claim would be by suggesting that God would realise a better world if there was ultimately no evil existing in the new creation and we should think that God has made a world so to realise this state of affairs. However, I think this line of reasoning will require some work in order to make it plausible. If God had to bring about the best, and the type of world posited was the best then there would be less work to do, but many theists resist this thought (Leftow 2005a, 2005b; Rubio 2020). But then perhaps a world where evil exists in the new creation is a 'good enough' world for God to create? Ultimately, in order to make this reason convincing, one will need to spell out a plausible theory of God's reasons for action and His relationship to value, since it isn't clear that all theories will get the required result (e.g. Murphy 2017, 2021).

19. Emphasis my own.

20. Of defining the present time they write, 'What it is for a time to be the present time should be no mystery – at least there is a perfectly plain and familiar usage of the phrase "the present time" in ordinary language according to which, at any given time t , that phrase denotes t , and according to which, correspondingly, a time t is present whenever t is the referent of "now". Accordingly, just as the phrase "the present time" refers to a different time at different times, something may at some time be present, in the sense defined, without being present at another' (Correia and Rosenkranz 2020, 2002).

21. Emphasis my own. Note also that given that both of these notions are tensed one might worry that an *eternalist* will not be able to employ the distinction, but as Correia and Rosenkranz note, this is a mistake. They write, 'Eternalists can nonetheless still distinguish between two readings of "x exists at the present time". On one reading, it is equivalent to " $\exists y(y = x)$ "; and the only difference to their temporaryist opponents is that eternalists take the latter to have its truth-value permanently. On another reading, "x exists at the present time" is equivalent to "x is located at t " whenever " t " co-refers with "now". Since for eternalists, the qualification "at the present time" is idle on the first reading, it is unsurprising that most eternalists prefer to use "x exists at the present time" in its second reading, which is analogous to David Lewis's use of "x exists at the actual world"' (2020, 2006).

22. From now on I will just refer to this as the *quantificational* reading.

23. I can also attest that others who I have spoken about this with think the same, although I have performed no systematic X-Phi type experiments.

24. Leithart's reading of the text, 'The elimination of death is eschatological. It is not a return to a deathless past but the promise of a deathless future' (2018, 348), seems on face value to agree with my suggestion, given that talk of 'past' and 'future' can be easily understood in terms of earlier and later temporal locations.

25. Given the genre of Revelation this seems even more required. Thus, as Middleton writes, 'We are, of course, here dealing with eschatological imagery and so should not be overly literalistic' (2022, 86). Similarly Mounce says, 'The entire presentation stretches the limits of human vocabulary and thought to emphasise the glorious reality of God dwelling amongst his people' (1997, 380–381).

26. In the Copan and Craig reference 1 Corinthians 15:55 is cited, but given the quote, I take it that the verse was meant to be 54 as it is in Craig's other references.

27. A reviewer writes, 'it seems they would only need to have a weaker claim in mind; namely that it is still in existence in any way'. Suppose this is right, then it seems like some type of ontological pluralism will be required in order for it to differ from the existential reading. If an advocate of the fundamental problem wants to pose this as a suggested reading, then they are welcome to do so. But just as with the existential reading, I find it hard to believe that the authors of these texts were trying to write in an ontologically pluralistic way within these contexts, and I'm not sure they would even have known what that meant. In any case, even if the texts can be read in an ontologically pluralist manner, all I need to do here is show that the texts in question plausibly don't *have* to be read as giving a quantificational or ontologically pluralist reading, with temporal location reading doing exactly that.

28. One might reply that advocates of the views of time I'm considering are the ones who typically appeal to this type of quantification as being ontologically committing such as when one makes various claims about the past and so I might be cutting off the reason for adopting such a view. But advocates of such a view don't need to say that all propositions about existence are ontologically committing, given the distinction of meaning I made above, but only that some are which commit us to the existence of the past. Which they are, and why they are is something I leave to advocates of those views to determine. Additionally, it's far from clear that this is *the* reason people adopt these views of time, and there are other reasons for adoption that could be appealed to instead.

29. It's not clear to me that Lebens and Goldschmidt think the texts they give *must* be read in the quantificational way, and that an orthodox believer *must* not adopt views which deny that sometimes there exists something that never exists in the past, rather than merely suggesting that the texts can be plausibly read in this way and a consistent story can be told as to how it will be the case that there is no evil. As such, their argument may be more weakly expressed than the other advocates of the problem I'm considering.
30. Once again, all I need to show is that the texts in question plausibly don't *have* to be read as giving a quantificational reading, since doing so will call into question their support of the fundamental problem.
31. If we take mourning to be a type of suffering, then this can be translated into suffering talk, with the comfort either implying that they do still suffer but will be comforted throughout it, or the comfort removing the suffering. In either case, both types of reading can be given, and I think the *temporal location* reading is plausibly what the author meant.
32. Another text, which I comment on elsewhere (Page 2020), namely 2 Corinthians 5:17, 'So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!' (NRSV), can also plausibly be given a temporal location reading.
33. A reviewer writes the following, 'Biblical commentators are often not the most reliable guide in this respect. They tend to eschew metaphysical readings in general, but arguably that has more to do with their training/pre-suppositions/biases than anything rooted in the texts.' Let me just note that this cuts both ways, namely that a metaphysically minded philosopher, yours truly included, will be far more likely to look for any hint of something metaphysical within or implied by a text, given their training, rather than it truly coming from what the author of the text itself meant by it and its implications.
34. Note that their translation of the text substitutes 'blots out' for 'erases'. The question as to which is more accurate, I leave to textual scholars.
35. Lebens and Goldschmidt don't think this as a case of divine forgetting, since on their view no sinful action of the past is there to remember (2017, 11), but for a recent defence of divine forgetting (Willard-Kyle, forthcoming).
36. This line of response may not move Lebens and Goldschmidt, for I have relied on other texts which are authoritative to the Christian tradition, rather than those texts which are authoritative to a Jewish perspective, to which Lebens and Goldschmidt belong.
37. Compatible with what I have suggested, a colleague suggests one could also read Isaiah 43:35 in light of Romans 7, where here it is suggested that transgression and/or sin involve the breaking of a law, but that Christians have died to the law through the body of Christ (7:4) so that they are released from the law (7:6). But if the law is no longer binding on a Christian then that Christian is no longer deemed sinful. Therefore, from that time onwards, this Christian will not be deemed sinful.
38. One might think, why all this hoop jumping, why not just hold to a lower view of scripture instead? This is obviously an option, but since those I'm interacting with have a high view of scripture, I am assuming that position to see if there is a reply.
39. This is something I have done in the past (Page 2020, 2021) and would be happy to do in the future.
40. A colleague informs me that in a seminar discussing this passage, Hazony really does think God has a hand whereby there is some resemblance between our hands and God's that isn't just that we can do things with our hands and God can do such things too.
41. For a good discussion as to why this solution is preferable see Correia and Rosenkranz (2020, 2006–2010).
42. For instance, Cameron (2016) and Tallant (2019) don't seem to think that the way I've presented presentism adequately captures the view.
43. For example, ersatz presentist views would seem to have evil existing in a different form.
44. For some nice examples, one could look at the work of Heiser (2015a, 2015b, 2017) who spends much time unearthing the presuppositions of the biblical authors, many of which people see no reason to affirm today. But other examples could be given as well.
45. Mullins (2014, 127–132, 2021, 107) speaks of defeat whilst other authors use different terminology but seemingly to express the same idea.

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