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Against the Fifth Prescription

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SET QUESTION

Evaluate the utility of Michael Rea's stylistic prescriptions for Analytic Theology.

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Awarded a merit.

In this paper, I assess and probe the efficacy of Michael Rea's methodological prescriptions for Analytic Theology. I disagree with one of the prescriptions (P5) and give my reasons, I further suggest for it to either be reworked or completely removed as to avoid risking meaningfully discussing God. Rea suggests four stylistic prescriptions (P1 – P5). Focusing on (P5): conceptual analysis could be used as a form of evidence so long as there is no contradiction in the definition of the concept. In the case that a contradiction exists, it is enough ground to reject the concept wholesale. In the case a contradiction does not exist, it could be entertained as a possibility and featured in an argument. P5 is where I disagree with Michael Rea and there are two points of contention that risks conducting AT meaningfully. The central contention is that: there are concepts that are perpetually featured in theology and philosophy that are not free of contradictions, namely infinity. Infinity is a concept that can be conceptually analyzed but gives rise to many contradictions, I discuss that contradictory concepts may be a limitation of human processing and that very limitation (that may falsely prompt a contradiction) need not be reason for discarding the entire concept. Although, there certainly is a nuanced difference between flat out impossible contradictions such as a squared circle and contradictions that may feature a complexity that is beyond human reason such as infinity (another example is a reconciliation between predeterminism and freewill) – concepts of this nature feature an exceeding caliber of complexity that may be beyond human cognition. That is the first point of contention, and I expound on this in section (I).

Infinity is also a concept featured particularly in God's attributes that presume infinite qualities such as omniscience, omnipotence and so on. Therefore, it could be problematic insofar as infinity is a concept that is routinely presumed in philosophical theology, but the concept gives rise to many contradictions through paradoxes and there is rarely (if ever) a justification offered. If a contradictory concept is forbidden from use, then according to AT, we can no longer use infinity as a concept which is an essential requirement to the "omnigod" thesis or the general understanding of the "classical God". This would mean that the classical God that possesses "infinite" attributes is not allowed to be discussed as per Rea's P5. This is the second point of contention, and I further discuss this in section (II).

Section (I) – Infinity as applied to P5

P5 as defined by Rea:

> Treat conceptual analysis (insofar as it is possible) as a source of evidence (Crisp and Rea, 2009)

One point of contention here is that there exist legitimate concepts actively in use that also give rise to contradictions such as infinity. The contradictory nature of infinity can be observed through the paradoxes that arise from our current understanding of infinity, emblematic of which are Zeno's paradoxes. By discussing the paradox, I hope to demonstrate two points: (1) That prima facie contradictions could sometimes be a lack of understanding and, (2) a contradiction is not basis for discarding the entire concept as purposeless.

Consider one of Zeno's most famous paradoxes: Achilles and the Tortoise. In this example, Zeno assumes that space and time are infinitely divisible which simply means that one could keep halving any time interval or distance ad infinitum. Zeno posits that if a tortoise begins the race at point A, which is 100m in advance from where Achilles begins the race at point B. Achilles must run from his point of start at B to the tortoise's point of start at A, but in the interim, the tortoise would have already moved to A1 to which Achilles must now cover. In his attempt to cover the distance moved by the tortoise(A1), there is a new distance A2 moved by the tortoise and so on.

Figure 1

Zeno does not take into consideration motion as continuous; he only focuses on positions in succession. Therefore, every time Achilles reaches the point where the tortoise was, the tortoise would have moved a little further and these segments keep repeating as an infinite series of events. Today, this particular Zeno paradox is arguably resolved philosophically. L.E. Thomas explains that the real Achilles is not a series of snapshot or frozen instants and his existence is a trajectory rather than a mathematical concept that must be imagined as a “growing line” (Thomas, 1952). Of course, the rigor of today’s philosophical reply is of a higher caliber simply because of the information gap, but in antiquity, Aristotle attempted a refutation to Zeno’s paradoxes; however, it remained disputed as a refutation (Huggett, 2025). It is also resolved mathematically by what is called a “convergent series” which simply means that a series may have infinite intervals but that does not necessarily mean that the total is also infinite. For example: 1/2 + 1/4 + 1/8 + 1/16 and so on, could go on infinitely but their sum still adds up to exactly 1. Certainly, an infinite series could possibly have an infinite sum, but in the case of Zeno’s “Achilles and the tortoise” paradox, the sum is exactly 1 since it is a convergent series (which means Achilles eventually catches up with the tortoise). For the sake of clarity, an example of an infinite series that also has an infinite sum would be standard iteration (divergent series): 1 + 1 + 1.. = ∞. At the time of Zeno, there was no certainty about Aristotle’s reply to Zeno’s paradoxes because there did not exist a mathematical reply that could be deemed objective. The paradoxes that Zeno put forth have been majorly attended to in the modern day, the reason why it seemed like a paradox (an expression of a “contradiction”) is due to lack of understanding to which I hope to have demonstrated (1).

Since (2) requires comprehensive examination by virtue of the simple fact that it would be an extraordinarily difficult task to discuss the uses of infinity (there are numerous) I will defer from an exhaustive list and will discuss one use, its analysis and contend with a minimal clarification that would hopefully showcase (2). Robert Batterman, who is a philosopher of science, says in one of the field’s defining papers:

> Without the thermodynamic limit, in fact, statistical mechanics is incapable even of establishing the existence of distinct phases of systems. (Batterman, 2005) To maintain the scope of the current discussion, the technicalities will be avoided. The thermodynamic limit is a mathematical tool employed in mechanics that allow scientists to define distinct phases with precision. Infinity is employed as an assumption to the number of particles in said system whereby if that assumption is not made, there would be no way to prove that different phases of matter (liquid and gas, or, magnetized and nonmagnetized) exist as actual separate states. It made contrast between them possible. The use of infinity is certainly prevalent whether one believes in the existence of an actual infinity or not. So, the concept, with its contradictory baggage and with its disputed existence

> still yields positive uses. (Norton, 2014)

To sum up, not only does P5 not account for the idea that contradictions may (1) be a lack of understanding, and (2) that a contradictory concept is not sufficient reason that warrants an immediate dismissal. There is a third sub-problem (3). Now there is certainly a difference between infinity as a concept and a squared circle. Infinity has some room for justification even with all the contradictory baggage (that still persist today through newfound paradoxes); however, it would be an impossible task to justify the existence of a squared circle. The third problem (3) I find with P5 is that it does not address the differences between the two. It flattens the contrast insofar as if P5 were to strictly be applied, then infinity would be treated the same way as a squared circle, and both would be dismissed. This dismissal is problematic when speaking about the classical God which leads directly to the next point of contention.

Section (II) – Infinity as applied to God

The particular relevance of "infinity" to the ultimate point I hope to establish is that it is also implicitly applied to God. If God is infinite (I shall not try to justify God's infinitude here), then it would be problematic to attribute infinity to God according to P5 considering that the concept is inextricably tied to paradoxes. Namely, one cannot, by intellectual limitation, or "medical impossibility" as Russel put it (Placek 1999, p. 119), expound on or sufficiently define a concept that has ached giants throughout the dawn of time; limitation in understanding could be an essential feature of infinity. If paradoxes persist as a feature of infinity across time, then either our understanding of it is incomplete or human rational facilities cannot capture the concept accurately. This conclusion follows because a cogent understanding of anything, when applied, will not lead to a paradox (since contradictions cannot exist). It follows then, that the classical God with infinite attributes must be discarded according to P5.

It might be argued that the mathematical (quantitative) infinity is being confused with the divine infinity (qualitative). In my attempt to offer a solution, I have accounted for this objection and requisite to clearly define the "divine infinity". Importing a mathematical understanding of infinity into a philosophical discussion is certainly a category error (to which some may object). My engagement with the contrary position thus far has been undertaken solely to present the strongest format of the view that does not believe that said import of the mathematical infinity is a category error, and to show that it still does not hold. The only rigorous and thorough analysis of the concept has been conducted by the mathematical enterprise. Therefore, to justify the infinitude of God, being steered into the mathematical enterprise as to have some material to use for their quest is inevitable. I conceded calling that a "category error" to steelman the opposing view and hope to have showed why the argument still does not work.

With that, I see three options to resolve this: either (i) infinity as applied to God (qualitative) becomes the first thing that must be defined without any contradictions (judging by the historicity of the concept, this is arguably impossible), or (ii) P5 must expand to allow for "contradictory concepts" wholesale, or (iii) P5 must flesh out the nuanced differences between a contradictory concept that could possibly be justified enough to use and between a contradictory concept that is flat out impossible.

If there is persistence on the use of non-contradictory concepts (that could be perceived to be the case out of ignorance as earlier discussed – I do not claim that God is a contradiction), then AT would not be discussing the classical God who is omniscient, omnipresent and so on.

NOTES

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