OMNIPRESENCE

Do not I fill heaven and earth? saith the Lord.
Jeremiah 23:24.¹

I Preliminaries

According to the tradition of western theism, God is said to enjoy the attribute of being everywhere present. But what is it, exactly, for God to manifest ubiquitous presence? Well, presumably, it is for God to bear a certain relation – the ‘being present at’ relation – to every place.

Quarrelling about the alleged relata of this preliminary response can generate a pair of dismissive answers to a rather natural follow up question – “And in just what manner does this ‘being present at’ relation relate God to places?”

“In no way at all,” says the atheist, “for no divine being exists.” “In no way at all,” says the relationalist, “for regions do not exist.”² Let us put on hold these dismissive answers in the ensuing discussion and openly acknowledge a working assumption of theism and substantivalism for the remainder of the essay. Thus, for present purposes, we shall count ourselves among the realists about God and regions.³

Most of us who subscribe to some kind of region realism do so because we countenance a substantivalist spacetime. Historically, however, it is more accurate to construe omnipresence as a relation between God and space, rather than as a relation between God and spacetime. Similarly (and for obvious reasons) eternality has been historically conceived as a relation between God and time, rather than as a relation between God and spacetime. In the discussion to follow I will attempt to respect this historical antecedent where I can, asking after a variety of relations that might be thought to bind God to spaces (on the supposition that there are such things).

In the present essay, then, I intend primarily to focus my discussion on the ‘being present at’ relation that figures so prominently in the divine attribute of omnipresence, on both fundamental and derivative readings of that relation, and on a host of philosophical problems that arise for each reading. The essay will be divided between a discussion of the historical positions of Anselm and Aquinas, a note on the controversy stirred up by the modern contributions of Hartshorne, Swinburne, Taliaferro, and Wierenga, a brief glance at two curious and under-explored approaches, an investigation of the promising prospects for further

¹ Compare Psalm 139:7-8: “Whither shall I go from thy spirit? Or whither shall I flee from thy presence? If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there: if I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there.”

² Theorists other than relationalists can give the second dismissive answer, too, so long as they do not include regions in their ontology (i.e., so long as like the relationalists they do not take spacetime to be an independent thing partially filled or occupied by other entities).

³ With the hope of remaining as neutral as possible on the debate about the nature of the divine being as conceived in western theism, I will say very little on the term ‘God’; nevertheless, in the subsequent discussion I will have occasion to comment on the relation between omnipresence and other commonly ascribed divine attributes such as simplicity, eternality, incorporeality, omnipotence, and omniscience. On relationalism and substantivalism see Earman 1989 and Nerlich 1994. Of course I’m not suggesting that the relationalist need turn atheist, but I will not be investigating relationalist reconstruals of occupation relations in what follows.
inquiry afforded by recent work on the metaphysics of location, and some concluding comments on special problems of occupation for the Christian theist.

II Two Historical Views and a Recent Controversy

One would think the ‘being present at’ relation is a thoroughly straightforward one, in current idiom – a perfectly natural and fundamental, external relation of occupation between objects and regions. At each moment they are present, for example, this die occupies a roughly cubical region, that tower a roughly cylindrical region, and the Earth a roughly spherical region. Such a simple occupation reading of omnipresence, however, has often been avoided for fear that it would conflict with other divine attributes.

In his Monologium and in his Proslogium, St Anselm explores some of these conflicts. Anselm begins in chapter 20 of the Monologium – “[God] exists in every place at every time” – by recognizing a need to assert some kind of presence relation or other on the grounds that nothing can be good or even exist (not even the regions themselves) where God is not. Thus, he endorses the claim that God exists everywhere. But in chapter 21 – “[God] exists in no place or time” – he also recognizes a need to deny the most familiar kind of presence relation on the grounds that it either violates the doctrine of divine simplicity with God’s being partly here partly there or else leads to the impossibility of God’s being wholly present at two different places, a trick that might be pulled off by a universal but not by a non-repeatable substance. Thus, he endorses the claim that God exists nowhere. Reconciliation in chapter 22 – “How [God] exists in every place and time, and in none” – is achieved by noting two different senses of ‘being present at a place’. The first sense, enjoyed by the die, tower, and planet in the example above, is just the fundamental and familiar occupation relation. Anselm dismisses this reading of God’s omnipresence, adding to the difficulties of simplicity and impossibility just mentioned a third problem of unacceptably confining the divine being by the constraints that seem wedded to being literally located, restrictions that are appropriate for creaturely items but not for their creator. (An association of certain kinds of predication with unacceptable confinement was once more common than perhaps it is today and was responsible for much medieval mischief in motivating attempts to show that God is extra-categorial.) The second sense, the acceptable and derivative one, is then endorsed but largely left in mystery.

Edward Wierenga has cast some light on this mystery. Taking as clues certain passages in the Proslogium, Wierenga finds in Anselm the double view that souls, like God, exhibit the acceptable form of being wholly present in more places than one and that this kind of multi-presence is wedded to sensations that are themselves related to different places. Wierenga then floats the promising hypothesis that Anselm’s positive and preferred account of God’s being at every place and time amounts to God’s sensing or perceiving at each place and time. To avoid the issue of embodiment, a precondition of certain kinds of perception, Wierenga redescribes the relation as a kind of inner sense or immediate knowledge of the goings on at the relevant location. Omnipresence for Anselm, then, is ultimately reducible to a kind of knowledge, immediate and localized for every region.

In addition to proposing an analysis of omnipresence in terms of knowledge, Anselm has identified three puzzles for anyone who wishes to champion the alternative, literal occupation account: The problem of simplicity – how can something that is not mereologically composite occupy more than one region? The problem of multilocation – how can something occupy (in the ‘wholly present’ sense) two numerically distinct regions? The problem of containment – if to occupy a region is to be contained by it, how can something that is essentially free of the constraints that bind all creaturely things occupy a region?

4 Especially, Monologium chapters 20-22 and Proslogium chapter 13, in Anselm 1948.

5 Wierenga 1988. I owe much of my understanding of Anselm and Aquinas on omnipresence to Wierenga from the days when I was among his students. I am delighted to acknowledge that here.
In his *Summa contra Gentiles*, St Thomas Aquinas offers an interpretation of omnipresence that analyzes divine presence by appeal to power rather than knowledge. Like Anselm’s, this account should be distinguished from the fundamental occupation relation, and unless it is so distinguished it may well give rise to a nest of further problems clashing with the Thomistic reading of eternity as atemporality. Echoing Anselm, Aquinas argues first, that God must be present in all things insofar as He must sustain them in existence (which in a sparsely populated world falls short of omnipresence, unless the regions themselves are similarly sustained), and second, that insofar as the presence of an incorporeal being is a function of its power, God’s infinite power ensures that He is everywhere. Aquinas both clarifies and supplements this emphasis on power in the later *Summa Theologiae*. Not just one kind of power, but two are at issue: the preserving or sustaining of a creaturely thing and an absolute and immediate control over all such things. Thus God is in all things, “giving them being, power, and operation,” which for Aquinas necessitates a relation of direct contact. Again, though, the kind of presence afforded through the contact of power is different from that of the contact of “dimensional quantity” or simple location for corporeal things, for unless power can take the place of a fundamental occupation relation, Aquinas seems to concede that God’s incorporeality and the ban on the literal co-location of bodies would both be in jeopardy. So long as God is present by contact of power and not by contact of dimensional quantity, a necessary condition of God’s causality is ensured while the genuine problems of co-location are kept at bay. Moreover, in addition to these two sorts of power, a kind of accessibility makes the list which Aquinas glosses with the Scriptural metaphor, “all things are bare and open to His eyes,” [Hebrews 4:13] suggesting an incorporation of the unmediated knowledge that characterized the Anselmian proposal. It is unclear whether the vision metaphor introduces a part of the analysis of omnipresence or merely observes a consequence of it with respect to knowledge, and since the primary emphasis is clearly on power, it seems best to regard Aquinas as putting a new interpretation on the table: whereas for Anselm omnipresence is primarily a kind of knowledge, for Aquinas it is primarily a kind of power.

Reflecting on this brief rehearsal of the Thomistic position can help us add three more entries on our list of puzzles to be addressed by anyone who wishes to champion the alternative, literal occupation account: *The problem of timelessness* – how can something occupy a region and be atemporal? *The problem of incorporeality* – how can something occupy a region and fail to have a body? *The problem of co-location* – how can two numerically distinct things each occupy the same region?

As Wierenga has noted, both Anselm and Aquinas develop accounts of omnipresence and its characteristic ‘being present at’ relation that are parasitic on our understanding of the straightforward, non-mysterious occupation relation with which we are all familiar. In other words, the special way in which God is credited with being everywhere is tantamount to God’s having knowledge or control over and sustaining in existence those items that stand in fundamental occupation relations to places. Owing to their derivative nature, I will henceforth refer to these historical conceptions as “non-occupation accounts” of omnipresence.

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7 For a discussion of the tension between Aquinas’s doctrines of omnipresence and eternity see La Croix 1982.

8 Perhaps there is a questionable move in sliding from ‘infinite’ to ‘all’ (e.g., one can think about infinitely many natural numbers without thinking about them all and presumably, one could bear infinitely many such presence-as-power relations without bearing them to all of the regions). But let that go.

9 *Summa Theologiae* I, 8 in Aquinas 1975.

10 Wierenga 2006 and 1997. For the record, scholars are divided on whether Anselm and Aquinas really advocate the non-occupation accounts as a substitution for (as opposed to an addition to) a literal reading of omnipresence, and Robert Pasnau (in private communication) has made an interesting case for the combined view.
The non-occupation accounts of omnipresence have been influential, and new variants have been formulated, expanded, and advocated by recent writers in the philosophy of religion. Four prominent contributors on this theme over the last century include Charles Hartshorne, Richard Swinburne, Charles Taliaferro, and Edward Wierenga. Despite the advantages of the historical and derivative conceptions of presence, a version of the problem of incorporeality resurfaces to divide these authors. Swinburne, for example, joined the debate as a non-occupation theorist of a Thomistic stripe who wished to illuminate the consequences of acknowledging the sort of universal power that makes for divine omnipresence. Following (to a degree) the lead of Hartshorne, this investigation led him to the question of God’s embodiment. Hartshorne had earlier endorsed the rather surprising thesis that the immediacy that characterized God’s knowledge of and power over everything found in the world doubled as a guarantee that the world thus conceived is God’s body. Accordingly, to the extent that omnipresence is read as knowledge and power, God’s omnipresence determines God’s embodiment. Hartshorne’s conclusion rests on the dubitable foundation that a mind has as its own whichever body it both knows and controls in a nonmediated way, a premise that seems at once too weak and too strong: too weak for it fails to secure my exclusive relation to my body (since both God and I presumably meet the relevant criteria) and too strong for plausibly, there exist parts of my body that I have no non-mediated power over and no knowledge of at all – mediated or otherwise. Swinburne’s discussion is more modest and more nuanced than Hartshorne’s, but nevertheless accords to God a restricted form of embodiment, allegedly compatible with “the traditional theistic view that God has no body.” On Swinburne’s view, restricted embodiment means both that God is able to move directly any object (capable of motion) without the benefit of causal intermediaries and that He knows directly (again without causal intermediaries) the qualities exemplified in any region at any time. Thus, restricted embodiment is a consequence of a combination of Anselmian and Thomistic themes. According to Swinburne, the embodiment is limited insofar as God has no particular orientation or restricted point-of-view on the world (as we do) and since God is not pained by disturbances in material bodies nor affected in thought by the states of those objects (as we are).

But for some, limited embodiment is problem enough. Taliaferro, for instance, vigorously resists the suggestion to see the world as God’s body, citing the sort of immediacy essential to the non-occupancy accounts of omnipresence as altogether different in kind from the relations that we bear to our own bodies. Wierenga has also taken to task the embodiment theses found in Hartshorne and Swinburne on the grounds that whereas Aquinas stressed God’s presence as a presence in things that stand in fundamental occupation relations to regions, these later theorists extend the relevant doctrines of knowledge and power to the regions themselves, whether occupied or not. But, complains Wierenga, it would be unmotivated to take God’s knowledge and power of and over a region that happens to be occupied by some material object as a reason to count that object among the parts of God’s body, when the knowledge and power in question are indifferent to whether the region is occupied at all. The object isn’t doing any work, so to speak, in providing access to the region, and thus fails to have even a diminished claim on being an instrument or body through which God knows or can manifest power.

On the strength of this four-way discussion between Hartshorne, Swinburne, Taliaferro and Wierenga, it is rather interesting to note that one of the most compelling motivations backing non-occupation accounts of omnipresence – namely, that they permit an adherence to the incorporeality of God untroubled by qualifications and partial concessions – is much less secure than it is often taken to be.

12 Hartshorne 1941.
13 Swinburne 1977: 102-104.
III    A Brief Glance at Two Under-Explored Non-Occupation Relations

Before renewing an investigation into the prospects of reviving an account of omnipresence featuring a fundamental (rather than derived) occupation relation, perhaps it would be worthwhile to note two other rather under-explored non-occupation relations that (unlike the accounts emphasizing knowledge and power) do not as easily raise the question of regarding the world as God’s body. Curiously, each proposal has some genuine purchase on the notion of being everywhere present. Both suggestions are admittedly bizarre, but the detour through them won’t take much time and they are fun and interesting to entertain.

The first takes the relation between God and region to be mereological. Not, as some pantheism might have it, with God claiming the regions (as well as everything else) as proper parts, but the other way around. That is to say, each region (as well as everything else) would have God as a proper part. By occupying the unique position of being a locus of universal overlap all the while remaining a mereological simple, God would thus turn out to manifest exactly the right qualifications to function as the null individual – that elusive counterpart to the null set in set theory whose most salient characteristic is being a proper part of anything distinct from it. Omnipresence would thus amount to being a proper part of each region.16

The second takes the relation between God and spacetime to be that of numerical identity. Locations have locations, even if they cannot be properly said to occupy or fill those locations; spacetime itself, then, has an arguable claim on omnipresence. On this view, our substantivalist spacetime would (despite current opinion) be without beginning or end and a necessarily existing entity, as well as being the subject of omnipotence, omniscience, perfect goodness, and the lot. Spinoza’s monism (under at least one plausible reading) presents itself as an historical candidate for such an interpretation, and perhaps there is also something of a stoic precedent in all of this, as well. Compare the many-sided imagery of Acts 17: 27-28: “God is not far from each one of us. For in him we live and move and have our being.” Moreover, it is worth noting that there is somewhat less pressure to deny divine attributes of the receptacle than to deny them of the fusion of its material contents (as is more common in the literature on embodiment and the corporeality of God). Finally, such an identification would ground one straightforward interpretation of the immanence of God and would effectively side-step the increasingly common complaint of the incoherence of taking God to be outside of spacetime (but at a considerable price!). Omnipresence would thus amount to being everywhere not in the sense of occupying a region but in the sense of being identical to the most inclusive region.17

IV    An Old Time Revival

What of reviving the literal occupation account of omnipresence? Again, insofar as the derivative readings proffered by Anselm and Aquinas are parasitic on this fundamental relation, it is not as if a proponent of one of those historical camps or of their descendants lacks the conceptual resources to entertain the view. Moreover, many of the advantages of the historical views need not be lost, and they may be improved upon. Not only may omnipresence be significantly related to omnipotence and omniscience, literal occupation of every place may go some considerable distance toward resolving some of those perplexing ‘how-is-that-possible’ questions that threaten such incredible claims of direct and unmediated knowledge and power. To put it another way: rather than having knowledge and power as components of its analysis, omnipresence may receive an explanation quite independent of omniscience and omnipotence, but then be available as a tool to explore the possibility (and mechanics) of these other divine attributes.

16 For a more comprehensive discussion of the null individual, its friends and foes, its philosophical profile, and the prospects of and obstacles to identifying it with God, see Hudson (Forthcoming A).

17 Note, however, that mereological simplicity seems irredeemably forfeit on this proposal, and unless divine simplicity is reinterpreted as something like there being no difference between subject and attribute or between essence and existence in God, that undesirable consequence may be enough to do it in.
Still, we must not forget our list of puzzles, which have certainly discouraged any appeal to the perfectly natural and fundamental, external relation of occupation as the key to omnipresence. A reminder:

*The problem of simplicity* – how can something that is not mereologically composite occupy more than one region?

*The problem of multilocation* – how can something occupy (in the ‘wholly present’ sense) two numerically distinct regions?

*The problem of containment* – if to occupy a region is to be contained by it, how can something that is essentially free of the constraints that bind all creaturely things occupy a region?

*The problem of timelessness* – how can something occupy a region and be atemporal?

*The problem of incorporeality* – how can something occupy a region and fail to have a body?

*The problem of co-location* – how can two numerically distinct things each occupy the same region?

Fortunately, recent work in contemporary analytic metaphysics offers some hope of intelligibly addressing these worries and of re-establishing the fundamental occupation relation as one of the candidates for providing the proper analysis of omnipresence.¹⁸

V Occupation Relations

Ordinary objects stand in a variety of location relations. In this section, I propose to explore different candidate-descriptions of these kinds of occupation that have emerged in the recent literature, descriptions that presuppose a primitive and fundamental occupation relation. Although occasioned more or less exclusively by work on the metaphysics of material objects, the attention that has recently been devoted to the metaphysics of location relations may provide some genuinely valuable insights into the nature of omnipresence.

There are many ways into our topic. Let us begin by posing a pair of questions about locations:

(Q1) When an object, \( x \), is located at a non-point-sized region, \( r \), is \( x \) thereby located at each of the subregions of \( r \), as well?

(Q2) When an object, \( x \), is located at each of two regions, \( r \) and \( r^* \), is \( x \) thereby located at the fusion of \( r \) and \( r^* \), as well?

Affirmative answers to (Q1) can be rooted in very different kinds of theory. To get a sense of the debate in question it will help to have some machinery before us. What follows is certainly not exhaustive but is nevertheless representative of some of the ways relations between objects and regions have been recently conceived. Consider the following five definitions deriving from work by Josh Parsons.¹⁹

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¹⁸ The material in the next section “Occupation Relations,” which introduces and discusses a number of alleged kinds of literal occupation, is drawn largely from chapter 4 of my 2006. In that work, I focus on material objects, but the present section differs from its predecessor by omitting the adjective ‘material’.

¹⁹ Parsons (Unpublished). The first two definitions (i.e., of ‘entirely located’ and ‘wholly located’) and the fourth and fifth definitions (i.e., of ‘pertending’ and ‘entending’) while inspired by use a different primitive and have different content than the definitions given to those phrases by Parsons. Note that the definition of ‘entirely located’ involves a claim about the non-existence of a certain kind of region, while that of
Take someone who thinks that all non-point-sized objects are composite and pertend. Given the definitions of ‘partly located’ and ‘pertending’ this theorist holds that strictly speaking the answer to (Q1) is negative; an object always has exactly one location. But he can explain why we might tend to regard it as affirmative, since when an object, x, is located at a non-point-sized region, r, x is partly located at each of the subregions of r as well (even if x is neither wholly nor entirely located at those regions). The pertension theorist, however, should be careful to add that ‘being partly located at region r’ does not entail ‘being located at region r’ – for despite what is suggested by its name, being partly located is not a species of location.

A theorist who would unqualifiedly answer (Q1) in the affirmative is one who thinks that some non-point-sized objects are composite and pertend while others are simple and extend. What one may have thought was exclusively an a priori battlefield has recently been an arena in which a posteriori arguments from contemporary physics have provided unexpected support favoring recognition of some entending objects.22 One thing that emerges, then, is that these two theorists disagree about whether an object’s occupying a non-point-sized region guarantees that it sports proper parts, with our extension theorist leaving open the exotic possibility of extended simples.

On the other hand, a kind of theorist who would answer (Q1) clearly in the negative is one who thinks that some non-point-sized objects are spanners.

‘x spans’ =df x is an object that is wholly and entirely located at exactly one non-point-sized region, r, and there is no proper subregion of r, r*, such that any part of x is located at r*.23

A ‘wholly located’ involves a claim about the non-existence of a certain kind of object. Parsons is to be commended for noting and correctly emphasizing the importance of this crucial distinction.

20 In this and the definitions to follow, I use ‘non-point-sized’ rather than ‘extended’ in order to be neutral (i.e., in order to leave open the possibility of a receptacle that is the fusion of at-least-two-yet-no-more-than-countably-many point-sized regions – a region which would then be both non-point-sized and non-extended).

21 Why the fanciness? Why not just say ‘x extends’ means ‘x is located at a non-point-sized region and is a mereological simple’? This won’t do, for the proposed definiens would then apply to three of the four different ways an object may be thought to be related to regions (to be discussed below), and one of the main aims of this section is to clearly distinguish those different ways.

22 See the discussion of non-locality and quantum mechanics in Parsons (Unpublished). See also the support for extension contributed by the null individual in Hudson (Forthcoming A).

23 See McDaniel (Forthcoming A) from which I borrow the term ‘spanners’. My characterization, however, differs from his in using ‘entirely located at exactly one’ and in replacing ‘continuous region’ with ‘non-point-sized region’ so as not to prejudice the possibility of spatially or temporally disconnected simples.
Although the proponents of spanning objects accept (as do the friends of entension) the possibility of non-point-sized mereological simples, they deny (against both the pertension and entension theorists) that an object’s occupying a non-point-sized region guarantees that it either occupies or partly occupies each of that region’s proper subregions. Spanners do not enjoy any variety of multiple location.

Recall our second question:

(Q2) When an object, x, is located at each of two regions, r and r*, is x thereby located at the fusion of r and r*, as well?

Affirmative answers to (Q2) might initially seem automatic and inescapable. One who thinks that all objects pertend is likely to imagine cases in which (Q2)’s corresponding conditional is vacuously satisfied on the grounds that pertending objects are never located at more than one region (at best being partly located at more than one region). One who thinks that some objects entend may consider cases in which the non-point-sized simple itself makes both the antecedent and consequent of (Q2)’s corresponding conditional true. Finally, one who thinks that some objects span will not thereby see any threat to an affirmative answer, for a spanner also satisfies (Q2)’s corresponding conditional vacuously.

Nevertheless, I think that the same sorts of consideration that lead some to take entension seriously may also lead to uncovering a neglected notion of occupation and to a negative answer to (Q2). If we begin thinking of ‘being located at’ as a one-one relation, we are left with a choice between pertension and spanning for non-point-sized objects (and with some minor explaining to do involving partial-occupying, if we opt for pertension). Indeed, thinking that location is one-one and accepting the possibility of non-point-sized simples would be one straightforward motivation for accepting the possibility of spanners. But ‘being located at’ is a perfectly natural external relation, and without some argument to the contrary, perhaps one should take as a default position that a single object can bear this relation to more than one region. Accordingly, the possibility of entension appears to gain some plausibility. 24 But once one is willing to grant that ‘being located at’ can hold in a one-many pattern, one should not restrict that pattern without good reason, and entension embodies a restriction.

According to our account of entension above, when an object entends it is wholly located at each of the regions where it is located at all. But if we are willing to claim that occupation is a one-many relation, we might briefly consider a maximally liberal proposal according to which any set of regions is such that there could be a single object that occupies all and only the members of that set. Consider, for example, an object that bears this perfectly natural external relation of occupation to a cubical region, S, and also to another cubical region, S*, (where S and S* do not overlap), and to no other regions. Moreover, let us add that our object is a simple and thus fails to be partly located at any region. By hypothesis, this object is neither located nor partly located at proper subregions of S and S* and it also fails to be located at the fusion of S and S*. Such an object would ensure a negative answer to (Q2).

Objects of this kind would nevertheless enjoy multiple location. The simples of this species would in one respect be like entending objects (since they would be wholly located at more than one region) but could in another respect be like spanners (for they could in fact be located at a non-point-sized region without also having themselves or their parts located at any of its proper subregions). The composites of this species would in one respect be like entending objects (since they would be located at more than one region) but could in another respect be like pertending objects (since they could be partly located in some regions). Let us then add one final definition.

24 See Sider (Forthcoming) who argues in this fashion not only for the possibility of a single object occupying more than one region but also for the possibility of a single region hosting more than one object. Again, though, perhaps this establishes at best a presumption in favor of the relevant thesis which may be trumped by good arguments against multiple occupancy or co-location.
‘x multiply locates’ =df (i) x is an object that is located at more than one region, and (ii) x is not located at the fusion of the regions at which x is located.

Entending, spanning, and multiply located objects would be (or in the case of multiple locaters would occasionally be) non-point-sized or even extended mereological simples. There are some long-standing friends of the possibility (and perhaps of the actuality) of extended simples, and the number of their supporters is ever increasing. Philosophers who endorse the possibility of extended simples (on non-theistic grounds) include John Bigelow, Ned Markosian, Fraser MacBride, Kris McDaniel, Josh Parsons, Ted Sider, and Peter Simons. On the working assumption, then, that we have a number of conceptual possibilities alive in the contemporary literature now clearly displayed, how can we make use of any of this machinery to revive a literal occupation account of omnipresence?

VI Occupation Accounts of Omnipresence and Our Six Puzzles

Pertension, entension, spanning, and multiple location provide us with four clearly different ways to conceive of God’s relation to regions.

Recall our first puzzle: the problem of simplicity – how can something that is not mereologically composite occupy more than one region? Assuming divine simplicity, this is exactly the sort of question that historically has proved worrisome for a literal occupation account of omnipresence, for pertension is the natural default understanding of literal occupation. So reasoned Anselm, for example, as he took the occupation of an extended region to require proper parts. Let us soften Anselm’s rejection, though, to disqualify pertension only and leave untouched the other three conceptions that accommodate simplicity.

Spanning, like pertension, is a one-one relation, and although it does not require proper parts, this conception would require a unique region at which God would be located, all others (whether sub-or-super-regions of the privileged region) being thereby rendered ineligible to host the divine presence. On the grounds that this conception is too restrictive, let us also disqualify a spanning conception of omnipresence.

Multiple location appears rather better off in this regard, at least at first blush. As it says right on the label, multiple location is not one-one, and a single object enjoying this feature can be found at several regions. But not at all of them. A definitional constraint on multiple location as it appears above ensures that such an object is not located at the fusion of the regions at which it is located. Consequently, whereas this conception would be infinitely more liberal than spanning, it would ban the most inclusive region from being among those that can host God. On the grounds that this conception is likewise too restrictive, let us disqualify a multiple location conception of omnipresence.

Accordingly, let us understand our literal occupation account of omnipresence as ubiquitous entension. Once again, to entend is to be wholly and entirely located at some non-point-sized region [in the case of omnipresence, at the maximally inclusive region] and to be wholly located at each of that region’s proper subregions [in the case of omnipresence, at every other region there is]. Whereas our earlier definition of being ‘entirely located’ would then require that there be no region disjoint from the maximally inclusive region at which God is also located, it should be obvious that this condition is automatically satisfied. Moreover, our earlier definition of being ‘wholly located’ would then require that for every region there is, God does not have any part that fails to be at that region, but again assuming the mereological simplicity of God it should be obvious that this condition is automatically satisfied as well. Recall, then, our second


26 One qualification: Should it turn out that there is no maximally inclusive region (i.e., if every space is a proper subregion of a larger space), then entension is disqualified owing to its definitional link to being entirely located somewhere or other, and omnipresence would simply amount to being wholly present at each of the infinitely many contained regions.
puzzle: the problem of multilocation – how can something occupy (in the ‘wholly present’ sense) two numerically distinct regions? In exactly the same way God can occupy more than one region without forfeiting mereological simplicity – by entending.

Two of Anselm’s three worries thus receive answers, but what of the third puzzle we extracted from our discussion of Anselm: the problem of containment – if to occupy a region is to be contained by it, how can something that is essentially free of the constraints that bind all creaturely things occupy a region? I think the best the entension theorist of omnipresence can hope for here is to insist that freedom from the constraint of location consists in God’s bearing occupation relations accidentally rather than essentially. That is to say, whereas God is wholly present at every region there is – a type of presence that embeds the perfectly natural and fundamental location relation – God would have existed even if there had been no regions at all. In this respect, God enjoys a freedom from occupation that many of God’s creatures do not; for creatures, but not their creator, occupation proves to be an ontological condition.

A similar sort of concession seems equally appropriate in response to our fourth difficulty: the problem of timelessness – how can something occupy a region and be atemporal? Despite the inventive and ingenious literature on atemporality, perhaps nothing can.27 It would seem that occupying a region of spacetime is sufficient for having some temporal location or other and to that extent also ensures some literal temporal predication, but once again, this may well be among God’s accidental rather than His essential features. Had there been no spacetime, God would still have existed. Mystery that it is, this verdict is no worse than the declaration that God is atemporal to begin with – it only serves to show that those who do not care for an essential tie between God and time do not have to accept one on the entension reading of omnipresence. And if an accidental tie is deemed unacceptable on the grounds that God would thereby once again forfeit simplicity, we may simply note that this complaint is better directed at the temporal-parts commitments of pertension, not the mereologically-neutral stance of entension.

Our fifth problem strikes me as considerably more difficult: the problem of incorporeality – how can something occupy a region and fail to have a body? My own view of the matter is that anything that occupies a region is a material object, and that the occupier inherits the shape, size, dimensionality, topology, and boundaries of the region in which it is entirely located.28 Anyone similarly attracted to the simple occupancy analysis of ‘material object’ and these related theses has a bullet to bite if he wants to endorse an entension-based reading of omnipresence, for God will then exemplify the shape, size, dimensionality, topology, and boundaries of whatever is the most inclusive region. We can again tender our previous reassurance and declare that these are merely accidental and extrinsic characteristics of God, but undoubtedly the concession will be declined by many who think that these properties cannot be accommodated in any form. It would seem that some kind of embodiment will turn out to be an unavoidable cost of the present hypothesis, but as we observed in the debate between Hartshorne, Swinburne, Taliaferro, and Wierenga (explored in section II above), it may be a cost borne by adherents of traditional non-occupancy accounts as well. To be fair, however, the simple occupancy analysis of ‘material object’ is certainly controversial (and negotiable for the traditional theist). Moreover, it would be a reasonable rejoinder that these are simply not the same kind of “body problem” in any event and that there is precious little support to be garnered on this matter from Hartshorne and Swinburne’s earlier and hedged embodiment theses.

Finally, recall our sixth puzzle: the problem of co-location – how can two numerically distinct things each occupy the same region? A common answer is that they can do so provided that they are of fundamentally

27 An exception to this rule: Perhaps something can occupy a region without being temporal if the world at which the region is to be found is a space-only world. For a brief discussion of this issue see Hudson (Forthcoming B).

28 See the Introduction to Hudson 2006 and Markosian 2000. Note that I did not say ‘of the region in which it is wholly located’, for the entension theorist doesn’t think there is any such unique region. For a discussion of what to say about shape properties for the pertension, entension, spanning, and multiple location theorists, see “the problem of shapes” in chapter 4 of my 2006.
different kinds. The ‘fundamentally’ seems required, for ‘being a co-located thing’ is a kind, and unsurprisingly all coincident entities (if there are any) are at least of that sort. What, though, are the fundamental kinds? Do objects divide at the most basic level into the concrete and the abstract? Or perhaps into substances, properties/relations, and facts? Or maybe into the material and the immaterial? Or into objects, stuff, and spacetime? Or into the divine and the non-divine? Of course, one could dodge the heavy burden of giving a full blown answer to the question at hand and maintain that whatever the correct response turns out to be – God is of a fundamental kind all His own. Accordingly, whereas God’s omnipresence would ensure God’s being co-located with every other thing, such coincidence would always be of the harmless and acceptable variety. It is worth noting, though, that even with such widespread space-sharing, appeals to location might still be able to serve their historical individuating function. Since the entension theorist recognizes occupation as a one-many relation, it should come as no surprise to learn that she may be attracted to an individuation principle for located objects that says – necessarily, for any located objects, \( x \) and \( y \), \( x \) is located at all and only the same regions as \( y \) iff \( x = y \).

VII Some Concluding Remarks on Omnipresence and Christianity

What additional puzzles might confront the Christian theorist tempted by entension and its apparently satisfying reading of omnipresence? It depends.

Recall the final suggestion of the preceding section: namely, that the entension theorist may be attracted to an individuation principle for located objects that says – necessarily, for any located objects, \( x \) and \( y \), \( x \) is located at all and only the same regions as \( y \) iff \( x = y \). If our Christian theist is a Trinitarian recognizing three numerically distinct persons each of whom is omnipresent, perhaps she will hesitate over that individuation principle. Or what if our Christian theorist accepts the Incarnation and holds that there is a special sense in which the Son but not the Father was hanging on the cross, despite the fact that both were and are omnipresent? Or what if our Christian theist maintains that the Son is literally present in the consecrated bread and wine, while the similarly omnipresent Father and the Holy Spirit are not?

These are excellent and difficult questions, and I have neither the space nor expertise to enter here the controversies with which they are associated. I will remark in closing, however, that once again the relation of entension may serve as a promising source of resolution for some of those debates. Even if one took the Anselmian/Thomistic accounts to suffice for omnipresence, entension remains available to provide partial readings of additional special claims of location such as Christ’s presence in the Eucharist or the specific comings-and-goings of the Holy Spirit. Accordingly, if the ‘located at’ in the principle noted above ranges over these very different types of occupation, even the Trinitarian may embrace the individuation principle without apology.

At the outset of this essay, I noted that according to the tradition of western theism God is said to enjoy the attribute of being everywhere present, and I asked – ‘what is it, exactly, for God to manifest ubiquitous presence?’ As we have seen, for Anselm it is a kind of knowledge, for Aquinas a kind of power, and for many of their intellectual descendents a kind of mixture of knowledge and power. On the strength of recent work in the metaphysics of location relations, however, some western theists (and especially some Christian theists) may wish to entertain with full seriousness that God’s omnipresence involves a non-derivative and literal location relation – the relation of entension.

29 Of course, the pertension theorist attracted to location-as-individuation principles could say this too, and ignore what from his point of view is idle complexity in talk of regions in the plural. For more on location and individuation principles, see “the problem of diachoric identity” in chapter 4 of my 2006.

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