

**THE SPATIAL LOCATION OF GOD AND CASPER
THE FRIENDLY GHOST**
Emily Thomas

Emily Thomas questions the common claim that spiritual objects – such as souls or God – cannot be spatially located.

1. Introduction

This paper will discuss the question of whether or not spiritual objects such as souls and the divine can be spatially located. As part of an argument against literal interpretations of divine omnipresence Hoffman and Rosencrantz put forward the following claim (*The Divine Attributes*, (Great Britain: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), pp. 39–41):

(C): Souls are necessarily not spatially located.

I intend to attack this claim, and although its veracity is especially pertinent to the debate surrounding divine omnipresence we shall see that it also affects issues concerning souls, disembodiment and ghosts.

This paper will begin by explaining the terminology used in Hoffman and Rosencrantz's argument for (C) before explaining the argument itself and showing how they use it to claim that divine omnipresence is impossible. I will then give a critique of (C), firstly by offering two counter-examples to it and secondly by discussing how we might differentiate between physical and spiritual objects if both can be spatially located. This paper seeks to show that (C) is, at best, seriously doubtful and as such cannot be used as part of Hoffman and Rosencrantz's argument against literal divine omnipresence or indeed any other argument.

(C) simply cannot be used as grounds for denying that God or any other spiritual substance necessarily lacks spatial location.

2. Hoffman and Rosencrantz's formulation of (C)

2.1 Clearing up some definitional clutter: Before explaining Hoffman and Rosencrantz's support of (C) we will briefly pin down the terminology used in the following arguments. This paper will distinguish between three types of objects: *concrete physical objects* (e.g. trees or biscuits), *concrete spiritual objects* (e.g. souls or the divine) and *abstract objects* (e.g. universals or numbers). Providing uncontroversial definitions of these objects is difficult; but we can say that physical and/or spiritual objects are held to be capable of having mental properties¹ (e.g. consciousness and intentionality) whereas abstract objects are absolutely not, and that abstract objects are absolutely held to have no spatio-temporal location². The obvious difference between physical and spiritual objects is that the latter are incorporeal – we cannot see, touch or bump into them whereas we can do all of those things with the former. Campbell writes: 'a spiritual object is one which does not have all the qualities of matter; it lacks at least some of: mass, volume, velocity, solidity' (*Body and Mind*, (United States of America: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), p. 19). Already here we have a problem emerging: if we accepted that a spiritual object might or might not have mental properties, spatio-temporal location and all the other qualities of matter then how are we to define it? How are we to distinguish such a spiritual object from peculiar physical ones like seemingly incorporeal radiation waves or brains that appear to be identical with minds? We will return to this question below.

2.2 Hoffman and Rosencrantz's argument for (C): Having explained the terminology that will be involved

in Hoffman and Rosencrantz's argument in support of (C) we will move to explain the argument itself. It is, surprisingly, very short. Hoffman and Rosencrantz simply differentiate between physical and spiritual objects by saying that the former are spatially located while the latter are not (Hoffman & Rosencrantz, 2002, p. 39). When considering the difference between concrete and abstract objects they write merely that 'since God is a non-spatial soul, he does not enter into spatial relations' (*Ibid*, p. 26). But where does this assumption that a soul is defined by its lack of spatial location come from? Hoffman and Rosencrantz seem to view (C) as an obvious truth, and they go on to write that a 'ghost' that literally has shape, size and extension would not count as a soul because it would either be an 'exotic physical entity' (e.g. a massless particle) or some sort of 'subtle physical stuff' (e.g. gas or plasma) (Hoffman & Rosencrantz, 2002, pp. 39–40). They add that even if a soul occupied only a point in space (and so did not have size or extension) it would still be spatially located and therefore 'not a purely spiritual being' (*Ibid*, p. 40). They conclude: 'When Western theism affirms the existence of God, angels, and so forth, it is affirming the existence of purely spiritual beings... we regard *not being spatially located* as a logically necessary condition of being a soul' (*Ibid*, p. 40). It seems then that Hoffman and Rosencrantz claim that (C) is true because not having spatial locations distinguishes spiritual objects from physical ones. If this is true then it would mean that no sort of spiritual stuff has spatial locations – souls and ectoplasm could not be found on any map.

2.3 Using (C) to reject literal divine omnipresence: Before we move on to critically analysing Hoffman and Rosencrantz's support of (C) we will put it into context, by saying a little bit about what they are trying to use it to do as regards the doctrine of divine omnipresence. The doctrine teaches that God is everywhere, and the traditional, literal interpretation of this

holds that God is spatially present but separate to the entire universe. This idea is expressed by Anselm as follows: 'He undergirds and transcends... encompasses and penetrates all other things... He who exists in all things and through all things' (*Monologion and Proslogion with the Replies of Gaunilo and Anselm*. Translated by Thomas Williams. (United States of America: Hackett Publishing Company Ltd., 1996), pp. 26-7). If (C) is true then souls cannot have spatial location, and this would mean that God cannot be spatially located either, as he is generally considered to be some sort of 'super-soul'. Hoffman and Rosencrantz write that according to Western theism God is made of the same spiritual stuff that human souls are made of: God is supposed to be a purely spiritual, non-physical being (Hoffman & Rosencrantz, 2002, p. 39). Obviously then if God exists he cannot be literally omnipresent. Hoffman and Rosencrantz thus advocate a metaphorical account of divine omnipresence, which could perhaps be understood to mean either that God is close to the universe because he created it or because his power over it is such that it is *as if* he were omnipresent (*Ibid*, p. 41).

3. Problems with (C) – Spatial Ghosts and Disappearing Electrons

In this section I will attack Hoffman and Rosencrantz's support of (C), firstly by giving two counter-examples to it and secondly by offering an alternative way of distinguishing between spiritual and physical objects that does not rely on the attribute of spatial location.

3.1 Casper the Friendly Ghost: My first counter-example to (C) is the possible existence of ghosts. I think that when Hoffman and Rosencrantz claim ghosts are not spiritual substances because they are spatially located they are begging the question. Ghosts are described by Scott

Sturgeon as being phenomenally like us but lacking bodies, while their lights are on there is no inside: 'Ghosts are the disembodied of philosophical thought experiment' (*Matters of Mind*. Great Britain: Routledge. 2002), pp. 101–2). I think that other than the fact they are spatially located ghosts fulfil all the criteria of being a spiritual object, and so Hoffman and Rosencrantz are rash to reject this counter-example to (C) so quickly. Campbell writes that while spiritual objects are sometimes described as lacking all of matter's characteristics (by being completely non-spatial) this might be in error 'if ghosts are any guide' because while ghosts lack mass and solidity they have position and shape (Campbell, 1984, p. 19). I'm deeply uncertain about Hoffman and Rosencrantz's claim that a ghost would be either an 'exotic physical entity' or some sort of 'subtle physical stuff'. As Campbell points out, spiritual objects are neither supposed to be composed of the ordinary material elements nor subject to ordinary material laws (*Ibid*, p. 19). He gives the example of a 'shaft of light', writing that it appears to resemble a ghost because it is not solid or composed of ordinary material elements *but* adds that its behaviour does conform to physical laws: 'the particles which make it up play a part in the economy of non-thinking, non-living, spatiotemporal world' (*Ibid*, p. 19). We'll illustrate this idea using an example: 'Casper the Friendly Ghost'. Casper is a concrete object with mental properties, who also has spatial location and shape. We will ignore the fact that cartoon ghosts also appear to look like floating white sheets and that sometimes they can pick up fallen swords; we will assume that our ghost is completely invisible and incorporeal. So, we can imagine Casper wandering around in his haunted castle, floating up stairs or passing through walls as he pleases. It seems very obvious to me that Casper is nothing like a gas, because not only does he float where he chooses and not where the air currents send him but he is also not composed of any physical matter at all. And it is this latter reason that also seems to make him different to massless particles;

massless particles are still, after all, particles. They obey the laws of physics, they are part of the physical world. Casper does not obey the laws of physics and I so I think that he is not a particle of any kind, massless or otherwise. Just as ghosts are not like a shaft of light neither are they akin to gasses or massless particles. I think that Casper *is* different to physical objects, and that he is more akin to spiritual ones.

One way Hoffman and Rosencrantz could reply to this counter-example would be by claiming that ghosts (as defined as spiritual objects) are impossible, as indeed many materialists would³. Such a claim would be controversial though because it seems we can imagine ghosts through being disembodied and it's hard to deny the possibility of things we can imagine. Richard Swinburne imagines the following: a man might loose the ability to operate the chunk of matter he formally used to learn about the world but still be able to have knowledge of, and move, objects in the room around him (*The Evolution of the Soul*, (Great Britain: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 152). This would not mean that the room was his body, for he could also gradually shift the focus of his knowledge and control into other rooms. Hart writes similarly writes: 'You can visualise what you would see in the mirror even if all the rest of your body were gone... So, you have a recipe for visual experience of yourself disembodied'. Sturgeon agrees with Swinburne and Hart that such disembodiment is coherent, adding that it gives us good reason to believe ghosts are genuinely possible. If this is the case then (C) is simply false, because here we seem to have an example of spiritual objects that are spatially located.

3.2 Non-spatially located sub-atomic particles: My second counter-example to (C) is the possible existence of non-spatially located sub-atomic particles. I think simply that if we accept (C) and define spiritual objects as those lacking spatial locations then it's possible our definition would inadvertently include some physical objects. For

example, John Bigelow writes that in particle physics it's unclear whether electrons have any spatial location during periods when they are not interacting, exchanging energy or being observed (*The Reality of Numbers*. Great Britain: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 23). Fraser MacBride replies to this objection, writing that all such quantum physics might mean is that we don't know what location an electron is occupying, not that it isn't occupying one ('Where Are Particulars and Universals?', *Dialectica* Volume 52, 1988. p. 221). But even if such particle physics is *only* showing us that sometimes physical objects lack determinate locations I think this sort of doubt is enough to move us away from defining physical objects as those that are spatially located and spiritual objects as those that are not. I don't think Hoffman and Rosencrantz would want even the hint of a suggestion that electrons are not physical objects – but are instead possibly souls – because they lack spatial location.

While I don't pretend that these two counter-examples are watertight (I wouldn't want to claim categorically that ghosts are possible and that electrons do sometimes lack spatial locations) I do think that they show (C) to be seriously doubtful. If Hoffman and Rosencrantz wanted to shore up their support for (C) then they would have to find some way of getting around these counter-examples, and I can't see any obvious or easy way of doing that.

3.3 An alternative way of distinguishing between physical and spiritual objects: Having presented the counter-examples to (C) it is time to offer an alternative definition of 'spiritual object' – one that does not rely on the attribute of spatial location. In order to do so we need to look at the attributes of the various different types of objects – what are the differences between physical, spiritual and abstract objects? The idea that mental properties belong only to spiritual objects would be a highly controversial one, and I think my counter-examples have shown that there is no obvious reason why spiritual objects shouldn't also have

spatial location and volume. (In fact, the possibility of ghosts tends to imply that they *would* have spatial location.) How then should we distinguish between physical and spiritual objects, if not by the idea that one has spatial location and the other doesn't? I think simply that we should define a spiritual object as a concrete, incorporeal object that is outside the normal laws of physics. This should include ghosts, souls and ectoplasm but exclude massless particles and rays of light. If God is indeed some sort of super-soul then this means (C) presents no reason why he couldn't be spatially located, too.

4. Conclusion

We have seen then that (C) is far from an obvious truth and that in fact it is a fairly doubtful one, due to the fact that we have spatially located spiritual stuff and the possibility of non-spatially located physical stuff. Hoffman and Rosencrantz seem to use the attribute of spatial location as a way of distinguishing between physical and spiritual objects, but we have seen that there is no need to do this as we can say simply that spiritual objects are corporeal and do not comply with the laws of physics whereas physical ones do. While I have not considered the whole of Hoffman and Rosencrantz's argument against literal interpretations of divine omnipresence here it is safe to say that they cannot base any such upon (C). They've failed to show that it's not possible to have a spatial location for souls like God, and other objects made out of spiritual stuff like Casper the Friendly Ghost.

Emily Thomas is a graduate student of philosophy at the University of Birmingham.

Notes

¹ Either the claim that physical objects are capable of having mental properties or that all spiritual objects have mental

properties would be debateable. Just as some dualists might deny that physical stuff is capable of having mental properties, so some physicalists would be happy to accept the existence of spiritual stuff lacking mental properties e.g. 'ectoplasm'.

² Admittedly, universals like 'blueness' can be instantiated in the world, but if anything like an actual object 'the blue' exists it is not.

³ Interestingly, Hoffman and Rosencrantz are dualists, and *usually* dualists cite the possibility of ghosts as proof of the existence of souls. Their replying in this manner would be coherent but unusual.