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A Temporal First Cause? A Reply to Craig's Reply

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Abstract: In a recent paper in this journal, I argued that William Craig's theistic account of the origin of the universe implies that at the first moment of time, t_1 , God is both timeless and temporal, a contradiction (Wielenberg 2021). Craig responded to that argument; I here reply to Craig's response.

Keywords: Timeless God, Kalam, Cosmological argument, William Craig, Agent causation

In a recent paper in this journal, I argued that William Craig's theistic account of the origin of the universe implies that at the first moment of time, t_1 , God is both timeless and temporal, a contradiction (Wielenberg 2021). Craig responded to that argument; I here reply to Craig's response.

In the version of my paper that Craig quotes, I attribute to Craig the view that God "must be timeless at t_1 in order to have *the power to create the universe at t_1* " (Craig 2021, 90, emphasis added). There are two ways of reading this passage. Below, Claim A is the reading I intended and Claim B is Craig's reading of the passage:

Claim A: Suppose that, at t_1 , God exercises His power to create the universe, causing the universe to begin at t_1 . Given all of that, God must be timeless at t_1 . (On this reading, "at t_1 " at the end of the passage indicates the time at which God has the power-to-create-the-universe).

Claim B: Let P = the power to create the universe at t_1 . In order to have P , God must be timeless at t_1 . (On this reading, "at t_1 " at the end of the passage is part of the description of the power-to-create-the-universe-at- t_1).

Craig notes that on his view, a God who never creates and so does not exist *at t_1* (because there is no t_1) would nevertheless have power P (2021, 90–91), and so he

(Craig) is not committed to claim B. Because my argument depends on Claim A rather than Claim B (and Craig's example does not challenge Claim A), Craig's reply doesn't address my argument.

What is the basis for attributing Claim A to Craig? It is that, as I note in my original paper, when discussing his version of the *Kalam* Cosmological Argument (KCA), Craig routinely describes the universe as a temporal effect of a timeless cause, declaring, for example, that "the cause is eternal, but the effect is not" (2008, 154). Such descriptions suggest a view according to which there is a causal relation that holds between a timeless cause and a temporal effect, a causal relation that connects or bridges the timeless and the temporal. Additionally, Craig and Sinclair say that "[g]iven that time had a beginning, the cause of the beginning of time must be timeless" (2009, 192) and "God's timeless eternity is...causally...prior to the origin of the universe" (2009, 196). The most natural interpretation of such remarks is that God is timeless *when He causes the universe to begin*—i.e. at t_1 .

In his reply, Craig indicates that on his view, God is temporal rather than timeless when He creates the universe: "On my view, God is...temporal at t_1 " (2021, 90). This position seems to make a hash of Craig's characterization of the universe as a temporal effect of a timeless cause, and furthermore renders God in His timeless phase causally inert, leaving us with no reason to posit the existence of a timeless God. It now appears that on Craig's view, God is temporal when He creates the universe, and hence the first cause of the universe is properly described as temporal rather than timeless. Later in his reply Craig asserts that "God's creating the universe brings about the first moment of time" (2021, 91). Therefore, on Craig's view, the cause of time lies entirely within time itself: at t_1 , a temporal God agent—causes a temporal event, and this agent—causing (itself a temporal event) causes time to begin. I see no way of reconciling this view with Craig and Sinclair's declaration that "[g]iven that time had a beginning, the cause of the beginning of time must be timeless" (2009, 192), and so the contradiction in Craig's position that I note in my original paper remains unresolved.

Additionally, Craig's endorsement of the view that the cause of time's beginning is itself temporal seems to open the door to a variety of non-theistic alternatives to Craig's theistic explanation of the universe's beginning. Consider, for example, the following hypothesis: Without the universe, there exists a timeless, infinitely dense, dimensionless physical object, which we may call "Singularity". At t_1 , the first moment of time, the following event occurs: Singularity starts expanding (call this event "First Expansion"). From this first event, spacetime and its contents—the universe—ultimately emerge. (According to Craig, "[t]he initial Big Bang singularity is not considered to be part of physical time, but rather to constitute a boundary to

time” (2008, 156).) First Expansion is a temporal, uncaused event that causes time to begin. In those respects, it exactly resembles God’s agent–causal creation of the universe (“GA”).¹ GA and First Expansion are both temporal events; they are both uncaused; they both cause time to begin. GA entails the existence of God; on Craig’s view, when GA occurs, God “enters” time. First Expansion does not entail God’s existence. Instead, it entails the existence of Singularity. When First Expansion occurs, Singularity “enters” time. With his apparent abandonment of the view that “[g]iven that time had a beginning, the cause of the beginning of time must be timeless” (Craig and Sinclair, 2009, 192), it is not obvious what reason Craig’s view provides for the hypothesis that the universe is caused to begin by GA rather than by First Expansion.

Overall, then, Craig’s response to my initial paper does not address the first of my two main arguments, and Craig’s apparent endorsement of the view that the cause of the universe’s beginning is temporal (i) is at odds with his characterization of the universe as a temporal effect of a timeless cause, (ii) renders God in His timeless phase causally inert and so leaves us with no grounds to posit the existence of a timeless God, and (iii) opens the door to non–theistic explanations of the beginning of the universe.

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¹ In a footnote, Craig and Sinclair indicate that the premises of the KCA do not require that every event has a cause (2009, 194, n. 101).

Addendum

In the elaboration of this special issue, the respondents received a pre-published version of the paper they responded to. In the final editorial stage, some minor modifications were added by Erik Wielenberg to his paper for the final and published version. W. L. Craig did not have access to this final version for writing his response, which explains the slight difference of wording of one quotation he makes of E. Wielenberg's paper. Unfortunately, some substantial philosophical point hinges on this difference of wording, which is why we guest editors offered E. Wielenberg the possibility to respond with a further clarification. We guest editors apologize for this editorial misfortune that resulted in a misunderstanding, but we think that the clarification to which it accidentally led is in fact an enrichment of the present scholarly discussion.