

No Trouble: A Reply to Wielenberg

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Abstract: Eric Wielenberg’s two alleged contradictions in my view of God, time, and creation are easily resolved. The first is dissolved by appreciating that God’s power to create the universe is a modal property which God may possess even if He never in fact exercises that power. The second contradiction evaporates once one adopts a relational view of time.

Keywords: Wielenberg, *Kalām* cosmological argument, Time, Eternity, Creation

Eric Wielenberg argues that my “theistic account of the origin of the universe” is logically incoherent and should therefore be rejected. More specifically, my hypothesis “that the beginning of the universe was a temporal effect of a timeless personal cause” is incoherent because it embodies two logical contradictions. Wielenberg’s critique is thus aimed, not at the *kalām* cosmological argument (KCA) itself, the soundness of which remains unaffected by his critique—unless my hypothesis can be shown to be an entailment of its premises, which neither of us claims. Rather Wielenberg has entered into the discussion of one of the most fascinating and recondite topics of philosophical theology: the nature of divine eternity and God’s relationship to time. His critique will therefore be of interest to philosophical theologians in general, not just to partisans of the KCA.

The KCA is compatible with various construals of divine eternity besides my own. An adjudication of the question of the nature of divine eternity will require first and foremost a decision concerning the nature of time itself. If time is tenseless, then it is easy to see how a timeless being could be the cause of a first temporal event like the beginning of the universe. For on a tenseless theory of time, all events in spacetime exist tenselessly, and the entire spacetime manifold exists as timelessly as God, time being merely an internal parameter ordering its events. Although my

defense of the KCA is predicated upon a tensed theory of time, other philosophers have defended it on the assumption of a tenseless theory.¹

Next, we shall have to consider whether a relational or a substantival view of time is correct. My hypothesis is based upon the assumption of a Leibnizian view, according to which time would not exist in the utter absence of events. But on a Newtonian substantival view of time, according to which time would exist even in the absence of any events, new options present themselves. Neo-Newtonian philosophers have conjoined a substantival view of time with the doctrine of metric conventionalism in order to argue that God exists in a non-metric time prior to creation.² On such a view there need be no infinite temporal regress of events, despite the fact that God existed literally temporally prior to creation.

Such alternative construals of God's relationship to time are free of the contradictions alleged by Wielenberg against my account and thus show that rejection of my particular theistic account of the origin of the universe need not impact the soundness of the KCA. In any case, having devoted considerable thought to the articulation and defense of my own hypothesis,³ I do not think that it is self-contradictory in the way that Wielenberg alleges. The hypothesis that God is timeless sans creation but temporal since the first moment of creation is admittedly strange, but I cannot find an inconsistency in it.

Consider then Wielenberg's first alleged contradiction:

God must be temporal at t_1 because the universe exists at t_1 ; yet He must be timeless at t_1 in order to have the power to create the universe at t_1 . Craig's various commitments therefore imply that at t_1 , God is both temporal and timeless—a contradiction. (2021, 82)

On my view God is, indeed, temporal at t_1 ; but I do not think that in order to have the power to create the universe at t_1 , He must be timeless at t_1 (that is to say, it must be true at t_1 that God is timeless). Even in possible worlds in which God freely refrains from creation, so that there is no time at which God exists, He has the power to create a world. Omnipotence is a modal property which does not entail any exercise of God's creative power. So existing timelessly sans the universe God has

¹ See Loke (2017, 67–75, 119, 141–153) and Pruss (2018).

² See Lucas (1973, 311–12); Padgett (1992, 122–46); Swinburne (1993, 204–22).

³ See my *God, Time and Eternity* (2001); *The Tensed Theory of Time: A Critical Examination* (2000); *The Tenseless Theory of Time: A Critical Examination* (2000). For a popular account see my *Time and Eternity: Exploring God's Relationship to Time* (2001).

the power to create the universe. His actual exercise of that power is simultaneous with the beginning of the universe and the first moment of time. So the contradiction is illusory.

What about the second alleged contradiction? Wielenberg thinks that God's exercise of causal power (GA) cannot be causally, even if not temporally, prior to time's beginning to exist. "The problem with that suggestion is that it makes a temporal event—GA—causally prior to the beginning of time, which is impossible, since it would make the existence of time a prerequisite for an event that is causally prior to the beginning of time and hence would require time to be causally prior to itself." (2020, 83–84) Wielenberg is evidently presupposing a substantival view of time, according to which moments of time are explanatorily prior to events occurring at them. But on my preferred relational view of time, events are explanatorily prior to the existence of time. Events do not occur at independently existing times; rather time is a concomitant of the occurrence of events. Were there no events, there would be no time. On a relational view of time God's creating the universe brings about the first moment of time. Wielenberg may not like a relational view of time, but it is hardly self-contradictory.

In conclusion, I have not been able to discern in my unusual hypothesis any logical incoherence. Nonetheless, I am grateful to Eric Wielenberg for helping to bring my view to the attention of philosophical theologians.

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