

Can God Be Timeless Without Creation and Temporal Subsequent to Creation?

A Reply to Erik J. Wielenberg

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Abstract: Erik J. Wielenberg argues that William Lane Craig's understanding of *creatio ex nihilo* (creation out of nothing) is logically incoherent. According to Craig's account, God was timeless or atemporal without the universe, but created the universe (including time itself) and entered into time (or became temporal) at the moment of creation. Wielenberg argues, however, that this account entails that (i) the first cause of time is both timeless and temporal at the first moment of time, and (ii) the beginning of time is both caused and uncaused. In this article, I respond to Wielenberg's objections and show that they are unsuccessful.

Keywords: Erik J. Wielenberg, William Lane Craig, *Creatio ex nihilo*, Divine timelessness, Divine eternity

In a recent article, Erik J. Wielenberg (2021) argues that William Lane Craig's (2018a; 2018b) understanding of *creatio ex nihilo* (creation out of nothing) is problematic. More precisely, Wielenberg (2021, 86) argues that "Craig's theistic explanation for the origin of the universe is logically contradictory. It entails that the first cause is both timeless and temporal at t_1 , and it entails that the beginning of time both has a cause and is an uncaused agent-causal event". Hence, according to Wielenberg, Craig's view of *creatio ex nihilo* entails *two* logical inconsistencies. This is a rather unfortunate conclusion for Craig and those, such as myself, who agree with him.

Now, in its most basic form, the traditional doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* states that God brought the universe into existence without the use of pre-existing physical stuff. However, there are various ways to flesh out *creatio ex nihilo* and, in turn, various views or understandings of *creatio ex nihilo* exist (see, for example, Erasmus 2018, 15–40). Nevertheless, for simplicity, I will hereafter refer to Craig's (and my) view simply as 'Craig's Creation Hypothesis' (CCH). What, then, is CCH? Essentially, it is the view that God was timeless or atemporal without the universe, but created the universe (including time itself) and entered into time

(or became temporal) at the moment of creation. In other words, according to CCH, God is timeless without the universe (or timeless ‘prior’ to creating the universe, so to speak) because He alone existed at that point and His existence involved no change (which implies that reality, at that point or in that state, involved no temporal change or flow). However, at the moment of creation, God enters into time, or becomes temporal, because of His interaction with the temporal, created world.¹ Consequently, God is timeless without the universe, and temporal from the moment of creation onwards.

CCH surely appears to some people (especially non-theists) as a strange or bizarre view and, admittedly, it is an uncommon view amongst theists.² Nevertheless, why think that CCH is, not merely bizarre, but also *logically impossible*?³ Wielenberg presents two reasons for thinking this. His first grievance is stated as follows:

Since time begins with the creation of the universe, if there is some event that occurs at a given time, then the universe exists at that time, and hence God is temporal at that time. [The event in which God creates the universe] occurs at t_1 , which implies that the universe exists at t_1 , and hence God is temporal at t_1 . Therefore, when God exercises His causal power to create the universe, He is temporal rather than timeless, and the first cause is therefore temporal rather than timeless. But ... the first cause must be timeless; otherwise, how could it have the power to create time itself? ... 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, at t_1 , the power to create the universe ... —a contradiction. (Wielenberg 2021, 81–82)

This is a mouthful, so let us chew it over. Wielenberg’s first concern with CCH is that it unwittingly implies that, at the moment of creation (which we will denote as ‘ t_1 ’), God must be both temporal and timeless. On the one hand, God must be *temporal* at t_1 because time exists at t_1 and God is temporal whenever time exists. In other words, God must be temporal (according to CCH) during the event in which He creates time, an event that begins at t_1 . Consequently, God is the temporal first cause of the universe. On the other hand, God must be *timeless* at t_1 because only a timeless divine being can create time, or cause time to exist. In

¹ For example, one argument in support of this claim is (very briefly) the following: assuming the tense theory of time, God as an omniscient being must know tensed facts, such as ‘It is raining in Cape Town at the moment’ or ‘It is now t_1 ’. However, knowledge of such tense facts is changing knowledge (since these tense facts *change*) and, hence, God’s knowledge is constantly changing. This implies that God is temporal.

² It seems that most theists hold either that God is timeless or that God is temporal. Not many theists affirm that God is timeless without creation but temporal subsequent to creation.

³ After all, many of us affirm bizarre views that (as far as we know) are not logically inconsistent, such as the view that gravity is, essentially, the curvature of spacetime (as implied by Einstein’s General Theory of Relativity), or the view that our mothers-in-law actually like us.

other words, time itself cannot have a temporal cause for its existence. Consequently, God is the timeless first cause of the universe. We thus reach a contradiction that is most unpleasant for the proponents of CCH: (i) God is the temporal first cause of the universe, and (ii) God is the timeless first cause of the universe. Loosely speaking, Wielenberg's objection is that CCH entails that God's timelessness and His temporal-ness overlap, or both occur simultaneously, at the moment of creation (t_1).

What shall we think about this objection? First, we should note that CCH does not claim that God is timeless at t_1 but, rather, as regards God's atemporality, it merely claims that God is timeless without or sans the universe. Contra Wielenberg (2021, 82), Craig and friends, as to my knowledge, do not claim that the first cause must necessarily be atemporal 'at t_1 ',⁴ but they happily affirm that God is, or 'becomes', temporal at t_1 . Hence, there is no *explicit* contradiction in CCH. But Wielenberg will surely not be pleased with this response to his objection, as he might still intuit that something is amiss with the notion of CCH. Even if the contradiction is not explicit, it might still be implicit, for there seems to be something murky behind the scenes of CCH.

Perhaps this murkiness results from the fact that the issues surrounding the nature of time are knotty, and various views of time are out there. This is expected because, although we have an intimate experience with time, we still struggle to understand or explain or perceive what, exactly, time *is*. Consider, for example, the debate about substantivalism versus relationism as regards time. Substantivalism is the view that time is an entity that may exist with no change, that is, time is what makes change possible and it is distinct from any event or sequence of events. Relationism, on the other hand, is the view that no time exists without change; time *just is* the set of temporal relations between things or the sequence of all events ordered by the relation *earlier than*. Which is more plausible, substantivalism or relationism? Or consider the debate over the A-theory (or the *tense* or *dynamic* theory), according to which objects are located in time by tenses (or the properties of *being past*, *being present*, and *being future*), and the B-theory (or the *tenseless* or *static* theory), according to which objects are located by dates (or the relations of *being earlier than*, *being simultaneous with*, and *being later than*). Is the A-theory or the B-theory correct? Or again, consider the issues related to the distinction between physical time (i.e., time as understood in contemporary physics) and metaphysical time (i.e., time as understood in a metaphysical sense that extends beyond physical reality to non-physical reality, such as God's thoughts). Is this a legitimate distinction? Does Einstein's Special Theory of Relativity give us reason to do away with metaphysical time? Is

⁴ Even the quotations of Craig that Wielenberg (2021, 82) presents in support of this claim *do not* make this claim.

physical time merely a measure of metaphysical time? These are but some of the many issues related to CCH, issues that ought to be addressed in order to deal with CCH responsibly.

Fortunately, Craig (2000a; 2000b; 2001) has dealt with all these and other related issues in painstaking detail.⁵ For example, Craig (2001, 267) recognises the problem posed by Wielenberg:

Now if time had a beginning at some moment in the finite past, it follows that God sans the universe exists atemporally, even if subsequent to the moment of creation He is temporal. Now *prima facie* such a conclusion seems bizarre, even incoherent. For on such a view there seem to be two phases of God's life, which stand to each other in a relation of *earlier/later than*. But a timeless phase can hardly be coherently said to exist earlier than a temporal phase of God's life.

Craig then goes on to offer a solution to this problem. In a nutshell, Craig revises the Padgett-Swinburne solution (which seems to be some form of substantivalism of metaphysical time) such that the changeless state that is prior to our time is not merely metric-less, but also involves no discrete intervals. Perhaps we may understand the solution rather loosely as follows.

Let us distinguish between an instant and an event. An *instant* is an undivided temporal point, whereas an *event* is a change from one instant to another. Accordingly, at any instant, the world (or reality) is in some state (think of a photograph); and during any event, the world changes from one state to another (think of a roll of film flowing from one frame to the next). Now, let ' t_n ' denote some instant in the world's timeline, and let ' $e(n, n+1)$ ' denote some event in which the world changes from the state at t_n to the state at t_{n+1} , where n is some positive natural number. Then, assuming that time had a beginning, the world's timeline comprises the instants: $t_1, t_2, t_3, \dots t_n$.⁶ But t_1 is *not* the very first event; rather, the first event is $e(t_1, t_2)$, the second event is $e(t_2, t_3)$, and so on. Consequently, we may say that, at t_1 , the world is in a 'timeless' state in the sense that there was no prior states and no change has occurred (think of the very first frame of a roll of film). This state (at t_1) would be the state in which God alone

⁵ Some other authors have addressed similar issues. For example, Alan G. Padgett (1992) argues that God is in His own relative, non-measured time (or relative timelessness) and that God created the universe, with its measured time, such that He 'can enter into our space or Measured Time at will' (Padgett 1992, 130). And Richard Swinburne (1993) argues that God was in His own undifferentiated time (which may be referred to as a timeless state in light of its changelessness) prior to His creation of our time. See also the interesting discussion in Leftow (1991).

⁶ We are, of course, describing time as having one initial instant as opposed to, say, being a left-open interval. Moreover, I am using the term ' t_n ' merely as a conceptual marker as a point in time and, thus, if one insists that, for any t_n and t_{n+1} , conceptually there are an infinite number of instants between t_n and t_{n+1} , then this would not affect the conclusion of my argument.

exists without the universe and without any change having occurred. God could have remained in this state if He so wished. Fortunately for us, however, God decided to create the universe, and His creative act results in the very first event $e(t_1, t_2)$ in which time as we know it (intuitively as the temporal sequence of *events*) begins. In other words, from $e(t_1, t_2)$ onwards, our time exists and God may be said to be temporal in light of His knowledge of tensed facts and the changing world.

Let us put it differently for some extra clarity. Think of a possible world W in which God alone exists and in which no change has occurred—reality has been in no previous state, and no change from one state to another has occurred. Now, one is obviously justified in thinking that W involves or contains just one timeless state in light of its changelessness or, in other words, W involves only one state that is neither temporally prior nor posterior to any other state. Importantly, the state in W is intrinsically similar to the *initial state* (IS) of reality before any change took place.⁷ Of course, once the first event occurs (or reality changes from the IS to another state) then the IS may be said to ‘occur’ at t_1 , the first instant of time. However, *when* reality was in the IS, *then* there were no sequence of events and the IS may rightfully be described as timeless; the IS only undergoes an extrinsic change of becoming temporal (or part of time, or being located at a temporal instance) once the first event occurs.⁸

As an analogy, consider the first metal ring R_1 of a steel chain. When the chain has not yet been made and R is not attached to any chain, then R_1 is (obviously) not part of the chain and has no location in the chain. However, once the chain is being formed (i.e., another metal ring R_2 is added to R_1 , R_3 is added to R_2 , and so on), then the chain comes into existence and has indexes, and R_1 undergoes an extrinsic change in which it becomes part of the chain and obtains a location or position in the chain. Likewise, God (similar to R_1) may be described as timeless

⁷ Craig (2001, 271) puts it as follows: ‘The impression that the state of affairs of God existing changelessly sans creation is timeless may be reinforced by a thought experiment: think of God in a changeless, solitary state in a possible world W^* in which He freely refrains from creation. In such a world, it is entirely plausible and coherent to conceive of such a state as timeless. But no intrinsic difference exists between such a state and the state of affairs of God existing sans creation in the actual world. The allegedly initial segment of the actual world TW is perfectly similar to the world W^* . It seems groundless to say that in one world God is temporal in such a state and in the other world atemporal’.

⁸ Craig (2001, 271) remarks, ‘Now the only possible reason we could have for calling such a static state temporal is that temporal states of affairs obtain after it. But insofar as the state of affairs of God existing sans the universe obtains, there are, of course, no temporal states of affairs, not in the future or anywhere else. Nothing exists but God in this utterly changeless state’.

in the initial state (since time, or at least a sequence of events, does not exist at this state); and God may be described as temporal from the first event onwards.⁹

To be sure, this brief account of metaphysical time and CCH is terse and rather loose. Nevertheless, it does illustrate how God can be ‘timeless’ without creation and temporal subsequent to creation. Such an account might be odd (although, I find it rather attractive), but it is surely not logically impossible. Regrettably, Wielenberg does not address this account. Indeed, he misunderstands CCH: ‘... on Craig’s view, the temporal event of the universe beginning is caused by God in His timeless phase but all temporal events caused by God are caused while He is in his temporal phase. Therefore, God must be in His timeless phase and His temporal phase at once—an impossibility’ (Wielenberg 2021, 82). The confusion in this quotation is clear, since God’s creating the universe and God’s becoming temporal occur simultaneously at t_2 (or during $e(t_1, t_2)$, if you will), and God possesses His causal powers at all instances ($t_1, t_2, t_3, \dots t_n$); hence, there is no inconsistency. So much for Wielenberg’s first objection, which turns out to be toothless.

What about Wielenberg’s second objection? According to Wielenberg (2021, 84–85), God’s *act of creating time* and *time’s beginning to exist* are the same event and, since the former is uncaused, the latter must also be uncaused. Hence, CCH entails that the first event is both caused and uncaused. This objection confuses *an event* (as a temporal duration) with the state of affairs *within the event*. A bowling ball’s resting on a mattress and the mattress’ having an indent might occur during the same time period—or event—but they are distinct state of affairs, and the one may cause the other. Likewise, God’s act of creation and time’s beginning are distinct state of affairs, and the former may cause the latter, even if they are simultaneous or within the same temporal duration. Of course, the term ‘event’ may refer to (i) a state of affairs that happens or takes place, or to (ii) a temporal duration. Nevertheless, to confuse these meanings in an argument, as Wielenberg does, is to commit the fallacy of equivocation.

In summary, then, we may conclude that Wielenberg has not shown that it is logically impossible for God to be timeless without creation and temporal subsequent to creation.¹⁰

⁹ One reviewer asks, ‘Is a decision not also an event?’ In other words, if God has libertarian free will, then does God not undergo a change from an *undecided state to create* to a *decided state to create* at t_1 and, if so, does this not undercut CCH? Well, yes, assuming that God has libertarian free will and could refrain from his creative act, God surely undergoes a change in which he decides to create the universe ‘now’. However, this change would not occur at t_1 or at God’s initial static, changeless state but, rather, it would occur at t_2 (or, more precisely, it would be the event involving the change from t_1 to t_2). Plausibly, this change is simultaneous with God’s actual act of creation. Consequently, there is no problem if God’s creative act involves a free decision.

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