



2. God before time? Assessing three stories of God, time, and the world

¿Dios antes del tiempo? Evaluación de tres relatos sobre Dios, el tiempo y el mundo

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Abstract

Part of the task of doing philosophical theology is to provide a coherent and plausible ultimate explanation for reality. The philosophical theologian must provide a plausible story of the world that satisfies humanity's intellectual curiosities, but also a story that captures the imagination in a way that helps individuals find their own place in God's story. William Lane Craig has a particular story to tell about God, time, and creation. I want to explore the coherence and plausibility of Craig's story as compared to other prominent rivals in history such as Plotinus and a view that I will call pure divine temporality. I will argue that Plotinus' view faces certain difficulties, and that Craig's view only appears to overcome them. A closer examination of Craig's view reveals that he does not actually fare much better than Plotinus, and that a pure divine temporality view can better explain the world than Craig's view.

Keywords

God — Time — Eternity — Creation — Providence

Resumen

Parte de la tarea de la teología filosófica consiste en proporcionar una explicación última, coherente y plausible de la realidad. El teólogo filosófico debe ofrecer una explicación plausible del mundo que satisfaga la curiosidad intelectual de la humanidad, pero también una explicación que cautive la imaginación y ayude a los individuos a encontrar su propio lugar en la historia de Dios. William Lane Craig tiene un relato particular que contar



sobre Dios, el tiempo y la creación. Me propongo explorar la coherencia y la plausibilidad del relato de Craig en comparación con otros rivales prominentes en la historia, como Plotino y una perspectiva que denominaré temporalidad divina pura. Argumentaré que la perspectiva de Plotino presenta ciertas dificultades y que Craig solo las supera de forma aparente. Un examen más detenido de la perspectiva de Craig revela que, en realidad, no le va mucho mejor que a Plotino, y que una perspectiva de temporalidad divina pura puede explicar mejor el mundo que la perspectiva de Craig.

Palabras clave

Dios — Tiempo — Eternidad — Creación — Providencia

Part of the task of doing philosophical theology is to provide a coherent and plausible ultimate explanation for reality. The philosophical theologian must provide a plausible story of the world that satisfies humanity's intellectual curiosities, but also a story that captures the imagination in a way that helps individuals find their own place in God's story. William Lane Craig has a particular story to tell about God, time, and creation. I want to explore the coherence and plausibility of Craig's story as compared to other prominent rivals in history such as Plotinus and a view that I will call pure divine temporality. I will argue that Plotinus' view faces certain difficulties, and that Craig's view only appears to overcome them. A closer examination of Craig's view reveals that he does not actually fare much better than Plotinus, and that a pure divine temporality view can better explain the world than Craig's view.¹

Setting the Stage

I need to set the stage by defining some important terms and distinguishing different kinds of questions that one should ask. I start with two important questions about time, and then turn to the concept of God and eternity.

There are many important questions to consider within the philosophy of time, but I want to focus on two particular questions. The first

¹ Thank you to Tyson James, and audiences at the University of Lucerne and the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore for helpful feedback on earlier drafts of this paper.

I call the metaphysical question. What is time? The second is the ontological question, or what moments of time exist. I will quickly introduce each question and some potential answers.

The metaphysical question is one that rarely gets addressed in the philosophy of time. Most people quote St Augustine, saying that he knows what time is unless someone asks him, which is not terribly helpful. As Marcello Oreste Fiocco complains, most discussions in physics and the philosophy of time are not interested in the fundamental question of what time is.²

Historically, there are two broad answers to this fundamental question. One view is called the relational view. This is a view that is so nebulous that it is difficult to find someone who will fully articulate it.³ Typically, the claim is that time is not actually an entity in the world. All of our talk about time should be reduced to something else that does exist in the world. A common strategy is to say that time is a relationship between events, or perhaps time is the measure of change. Proponents of the absolute theory of time reject this and affirm that time is a thing in the world. They often claim that time is an uncreated and all-pervasive natured entity that makes change possible, is the source of moments, and is the thing that is responsible for ordering a series of moments into a coherent timeline. A moment of time is the way things are but could be subsequently otherwise. Time is not a moment, nor a series of moments. Time is the thing that produces moments and organizes the series of moments. Historically in the East and the West, there has been a debate about the absolute theory of time. Some take time to be an eternal entity in its own right, whilst others identify time with God. God is the uncreated and all-pervasive natured entity that makes change possible, is the source of moments, and is the being that organizes the series of moments

² Marcello Oreste Fiocco, "What is time?," *Manuscripta* 40 (2017): 43-65.

³ W. H. Newton-Smith, *The structure of time* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), 7; John Earman, *World enough and space-time: Absolute versus relational theories of space and time* (London: The MIT Press, 1989), 13.

into a coherent timeline.⁴ Craig affirms the relational theory of time, and I will revisit this below.

The next question is the ontology of time, or which moments of time exist. The two most popular answers are presentism and eternalism. Presentism says that only the present moment of time exists. The past no longer exists, and the future does not yet exist. Prior to Einstein, this was the majority view in the West. In fact, I struggle to find anyone in Western history clearly rejecting presentism prior to this, though some philosophers have tried to identify past thinkers who may have rejected presentism. Eternalism says that all moments of the timeline equally exist. There is a sense in which one can say that the past, present, and future exist on eternalism. Although strictly speaking, eternalism denies an objective present moment. Instead, there is the eternal series of moments that have always existed in their respective temporal locations. The year 1979 has always been earlier than the year 2525, though both eternally exist. The main figures that I shall be considering in this paper affirm presentism, so I shall assume presentism hereafter.

With those basic time questions on the table, I can move on to talk about God. I take the basic concept of God to be that of a perfect being which is the single, ultimate foundation of reality. That is a fairly thin concept, as most concepts are. Things get interesting when philosophers put forward a model of God which is a thicker conception or unique articulation of what it means to be perfect and what it means to be the single, ultimate foundation of reality. There are different models of God being debated throughout history and today. These models of God are typically in agreement on something I call the uncontested divine attributes. These are attributes that explain why God is perfect, and they are not hotly debated. I have in mind attributes like necessary existence, aseity, eternality, omnipotence, omniscience, perfect moral goodness, perfect rationality, and perfect freedom. These are distinct from what I call the contested attributes which are attributes that the models of God

⁴ For a history of this, see Emily Thomas, *Absolute time: Rifts in early modern British metaphysics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); Ryan T. Mullins, *From divine timemaker to divine watchmaker: An exploration of God's temporality* (New York: Routledge, 2025).

disagree over. I have in mind attributes like timelessness or temporality, immutability or mutability, impassibility or passibility, and simplicity or unity. It is important for readers to understand that attributes like simplicity and timelessness have been hotly contested for all of Western history.⁵

The focus of this essay is time and eternity, so I will limit my attention to defining divine eternity. To be eternal is to exist without beginning and without end. Pretty much everyone agrees that God is eternal, but throughout history there have been two related notions debated. If one wishes to say that God is timeless or temporal, one will need to add some additional claims. To be timeless is to exist without succession, without temporal location, and without temporal relation. A timeless God does not do one thing and then another, but instead exists as a whole or all at once in a timeless present that lacks a before and after. A timeless God did not previously exist, and will not exist in the future. And most certainly a timeless God does not exist right now. If God is simultaneous with a moment of time, then God is located at that moment of time. In which case, God is not doing a very good job at being timeless. A temporal God, on the other hand, can undergo succession and have temporal location. A temporal God can do one thing and then another. A temporal God did exist in the past, will exist in the future, and exists right now. This is the God who was, is, and is to come (Revelation 1,8; 4,8). The overwhelming majority of philosophers and theologians claim that God is either essentially timeless or essentially temporal. Craig seems to be the odd man out by claiming that God is accidentally timeless without the created universe, and accidentally temporal with the created cosmos. I will return to this theme below.

When it comes to articulating how God is the foundation of reality, Craig affirms the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*. It is best to define this view as compared to its rivals so that contemporary philosophers will stop twisting creation *ex nihilo* into whatever they feel like saying.⁶

⁵ For a history, see Mullins, *From divine timemaker*, chapter 2.

⁶ Cf. Ryan T. Mullins, "The precreation moment is easy to find: A reply to ben page and reflections on rival theories of creation," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 99, no. 9 (2026).

Historically, there is a difference between emanationist schemes and theories of creation. Further, there are several different theories of creation.

An emanation occurs when God's essence necessarily produces other things.⁷ On emanationist schemes, like Plotinus', God does not intend nor will the production of anything. The rest of reality just unintentionally and necessarily flows from the nature of God. This is different from a creation which says that God volitionally willed or intends the existence of the universe. However, there are different theories of creation. For example, there is the Platonic view of creation out of pre-existent matter that one finds in Plato's *Timaieus* and is later championed by Gersonides.⁸ This view says that God and prime matter have always existed. There is some state of affairs prior to our universe where only God and prime matter exist. The universe began to exist once God produced it out of the prime matter. This is different from creation *ex nihilo* which says that God once existed all alone. Prior to the universe, there was God and nothing else.⁹ The universe began to exist once God produced it, end of story. This is different from an eternal creation which says that God has always existed with a universe of some sort.¹⁰ Perhaps God has always been producing a single eternal universe, or perhaps God has always been producing an endless succession of universes. Some even say that God has always been producing a multiverse, though "multiverse" is usually just a term which means "our universe is bigger than what we can observe."¹¹ Which is not the sort of sci-fi notion that pop physics usually sells to us.

In order to explore the plausibility of Craig's story of the world in more detail, I want to compare and contrast his views with two rival stories of the world. I will start with Plotinus' incredibly influential story, and point out some problems that the view faces. After discussing

⁷ David Brown, *God in a single vision: Integrating philosophy and theology*, ed. by Christopher R. Brewer and Robert MacSwain (New York: Routledge, 2016), 18-19.

⁸ Levi Ben Gershom Gersonides, *The wars of the Lord*, vol. 3, trans. by Seymour Feldman (Philadelphia, PA: The Jewish Publication Society, 1999), 330, 338, 342.

⁹ Samuel Lebens, *The principles of Judaism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 31.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Cf. George F. R. Ellis, "Does the multiverse really exist?," *Scientific American* 305 (2011): 38-43.

Plotinus, I will give a deeper exploration of Craig's view, pointing out an assortment of problems. I will end by considering the pure divine temporality view, and argue that it fares much better at giving us a plausible story of the world.

Plotinus' Story of the World

Plotinus affirms a triad of divine beings, though this is not supposed to be the Christian doctrine of a single tri-personal being. For Plotinus, there are three distinct divine beings called the One, the Mind, and the World Soul. These beings are in a hierarchal relation in terms of greatness and fundamentality. Plotinus affirms that the One is the greatest being and the ultimate foundation of reality. According to Plotinus, the One is completely indescribable and unknowable. Plotinus describes the One as timeless, simple, and the greatest good, along with other interesting characterizations of this ineffable One. You might get the impression that Plotinus knows too much about this unknowable being, but I digress. For Plotinus, the One does absolutely nothing, and this mightily produces the Mind.¹² I was unaware that a being can mightily produce by doing nothing, but Plotinus assures me that this is true. The Mind does nothing but contemplate how amazing the One is, and this contemplation somehow unintentionally, and without reason or purpose, produces the World Soul. These three beings make up the Plotinian godhead. The World Soul is a divine being, but lesser in status than the Mind, and certainly lesser than the One. The World Soul is the being that produces our universe.¹³ For Plotinus, the universe is eternal, and so it never began to exist. Plotinus is clear about the entailment from this. He says that since the universe is eternal, God did not providentially plan nor intend for the universe to come about. If God existed prior to the beginning of the universe, then one could understand how God could make a plan and have a specific purpose in mind when creating, but Plotinus denies that

¹² Plotinus, *The Enneads*, trans. by Stephen MacKenna and John Dillon (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 137.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 149.

such a thing happened. Though Plotinus still wishes to maintain some semblance of divine providence, albeit an intentionless providence.¹⁴ This might strike one as implausible, but I shall carry on describing Plotinus' story of the world.

On Plotinus' emanationist scheme, God or the One does not volitionally will the existence of anything else. Everything else in reality just necessarily and unintentionally flows from the divine nature. God is not acting on the basis of reasons, and God has no purpose in producing the universe.¹⁵ This might sound odd to contemporary ears, but emanationism could be recast in terms of the contemporary debates over the metaphysics of grounding.¹⁶ Grounding is typically understood as a non-volitional entailment relation.¹⁷ For example the relationship between God and the singleton set {God} is said to be a non-volitional entailment relation. Emanationism is saying something similar about the One's relationship to the rest of reality.

In order to get a better comparison with Craig, I want to focus on Plotinus' story of how time and the universe came to be. Plotinus gives us his own account of what time is and how it relates to the World Soul's creation of the cosmos. Things get a bit convoluted at this point in Plotinus' story of the world. According to Plotinus, time did not always exist. He says, "Time was not yet: or at least it did not exist for the Eternal beings."¹⁸ Time did not always exist in itself, but was an idea in the Divine Mind. The Soul contemplated this and chose to aim at something more

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 136.

¹⁵ Cf. Christopher Isaac Noble and Nathan M. Powers, "Creation and divine providence in Plotinus," in *Causation and creation in late antiquity*, ed. by Anna Marmodoro and Brian D. Prince (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); 51-70; Riccardo Chiaradonna, "Plotinus' account of demiurgic causation and its philosophical background," in *Causation and creation in late antiquity*, 41-50.

¹⁶ E.g., M. S. Zarepour, *Necessary existence and monotheism: An Avicennian account of the Islamic conception of divine unity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

¹⁷ For more on grounding, see Kerry McKenzie, *Fundamentality and grounding* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

¹⁸ Plotinus, *The Enneads*, 227.

than the timeless present that the Soul resided in.¹⁹ Of course, as noted above, Plotinus had earlier said that the world is produced necessarily and not by deliberate action, but I will set that continuity error aside.

Plotinus says that the World Soul was timeless and then became temporal along with the production of the universe. He says that the Soul existed in eternity prior to time, and that the Soul's act to create the universe is the same as the act to create time. Time comes to exist with the universe.²⁰ He writes,

To bring this Cosmos into being, the Soul first laid aside its eternity and clothed itself with Time; this world of its fashioning it then gave over to be a servant to Time, making it at every point a thing of Time, setting all its progressions within the bournes of Time. For the Cosmos moves only in Soul—the only Space within the range of the All open to it to move in—and therefore its Movement has always been in the Time which inheres in Soul.²¹

There are several peculiar things here that make Plotinus' view incoherent. One serious problem is how the Soul can be timeless *before* it is temporal since any *before* implies time before time. Which is oddly a problem that Plotinus is aware of but does not address.²² This is actually an incredibly common problem throughout Western history, though it is typically used as an objection for anyone who affirms the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*. I will return to this problem below.

Here is another problem. Recall that Plotinus says the universe is eternal and has no beginning whatsoever. This makes it difficult to figure out when the World Soul would have been timeless. Plotinus also says that time is necessarily and eternally grounded in the Soul, and thus time is coeval with the Soul.²³ So it is even more difficult to figure out when the Soul could have been timeless. None of this makes sense because Plotinus had earlier told us that time did not always exist, and that the Soul was

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 232.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 227-228.

²² *Ibid.*, 226.

²³ *Ibid.*, 227.

once timeless. If the universe is without any beginning, I don't know why Plotinus told us a story of the universe and time not existing and then it coming to be. It is literally false, and seems to serve no metaphorical purpose either. This whole story of describing the indescribable One's intentionless providence, and the World Soul's timeless existence before time, yet somehow co-eternal with time, is a convoluted mess. The influence of Plotinus on Western thought cannot be understated, but perhaps Craig can offer a more coherent story of the world.

Craig's Christian Story of the World

Craig offers a somewhat different story of the world from Plotinus. Plotinus's Godhead has three distinct beings arranged in a hierarchy of greatness. For Craig, the Godhead does not involve three distinct beings with different ontological statuses. Craig affirms that there is one divine substance and three persons of equal divine status. Further, Craig affirms creation *ex nihilo*, and the commonly associated doctrine of divine freedom on which God freely willed the existence of our universe, but God could have refrained from creating entirely.²⁴ When God freely produced our universe, God did so for a reason and with purpose. Creation *ex nihilo* says that our universe began to exist at some point in the finite past, prior to which God was all alone.²⁵

Recall that Plotinus said if God existed prior to, and without, the universe, then one could make sense of the notion that God created the universe for a reason or purpose. What one sees in Craig's view is the claim that God existed prior to, and without, the universe. Further, Craig is adamant that God has a plan for the cosmos, and Craig develops this view in light of his commitments to Molinism. The sort of divine planning involved in Craig's view as compared to the lack of planning in Plotinus' story of the world appears to give Craig an advantage.

²⁴ William Lane Craig, *Systematic philosophical theology*, vol. 2a, *On God: Attributes of God* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 2025), 328.

²⁵ William Lane Craig, *God, time, and eternity: The coherence of theism II; eternity* (London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2001), 255.

In *On God: Attributes of God* (*Systematic Philosophical Theology*, vol. IIa), Craig quotes Luis de Molina as saying that God's act of will reflects "an absolutely complete and unlimited deliberation."²⁶ Molinism famously claims that there are at least three so-called logical moments somehow embedded into God's single timeless moment. Logical moments have a remarkably similar structure to temporal moments, but proponents assure us that these are in no way temporal.²⁷ In his defense of Molinism, Craig describes God's deliberation and decision-making process as follows. At the first logical moment there is God contemplating all of the things that God could create. God has not decided to create at this initial logical moment. Then, at a subsequent logical moment, Craig describes God as considering what creatures would do in hypothetical situations if God decides to create anything at all. Craig goes on in his description to say,

God then deliberates which order he will instantiate, including what decisions he will take and what decisions he would take under other circumstances, and freely chooses to create a certain world order. Finally, then, on the basis of his decision to create some world order, God knows every detail about that order.²⁸

Notice that Craig describes God prior to any divine decision, then God deliberating, and then God making a decision. This might sound better than Plotinus' view since it seems to involve God having robust freedom and creating the universe for a reason or purpose. Unfortunately, Craig also denies that God deliberates, so this might make his story of the world no better than Plotinus.²⁹ I will return to this below.

For now, I want to highlight a striking similarity to Plotinus' World Soul. Craig agrees that time has not always existed, and that time comes to exist with the creation of our universe. Also, much like Plotinus' World Soul, Craig says that "God is simply timeless without creation and

²⁶ Craig, *On God: Attributes of God*, 255.

²⁷ For a deeper exploration of this issue, see Ryan T. Mullins, "Does providence entail divine temporality? Maybe," *Religions* 15 (2024): 1-13.

²⁸ Craig, *On God: Attributes of God*, 260.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 331.

temporal subsequent to creation.”³⁰ Craig often refers to these as God’s timeless phase and God’s temporal phase. Here is a lengthy quote from Craig on the matter.

Imagine once more God existing changelessly alone without creation, but with a changeless determination of his will to create a temporal world with a beginning. Since God is omnipotent, his will is done, and a temporal world comes into existence. Can God remain untouched by the world’s temporality? It seems not. For at the first moment of time, God stands in a new relation in which he did not stand before (indeed, there was no “before”). For at the moment of creation, God comes into the relation of *sustaining* the universe, or, at the very least, of *co-existing with* the universe, relations in which he did not stand before. Since he is free to refrain from creation, God could have never stood in those relations, had he so willed. But in virtue of his creating a temporal world, God comes into a relation with that world the moment it springs into being. Thus, even if it is not the case that God is temporal prior to his creation of the world, he nonetheless enters into time in virtue of his real relation to the world. So even if God is timeless without creation, his free decision to create a temporal world also constitutes a free decision on his part to exist temporally.³¹

Earlier I pointed out a problem for Plotinus. If the World Soul was timeless *before* the beginning of time, that implies time before time began. This is incoherent, and Craig knows it.³² This is why one will notice that Craig chose his words somewhat more carefully than Plotinus. I say “somewhat” because this quotation from Craig says there is “no before” the universe, but in the very next sentence Craig describes God as existing before the universe. There is a “no before” before there is a “before” which is somewhat confusing. However, as I said before, Craig often speaks of God’s timeless phase of existence and God’s temporal phase of existence, all while refusing to posit any before and after relation between the two phases. This helps avoid the obvious problem that Plotinus encounters. However, Craig’s pen often slips when he is trying to talk about the sense in which God is *prior* to the universe. One of the main criticisms of Craig’s view is that philosophers cannot figure out what exactly the

³⁰ William Lane Craig, *Time and eternity: Exploring God’s relationship to time* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2001), 235.

³¹ Craig, *On God: Attributes of God*, 333-334. Emphasis in original.

³² Craig, *Time and eternity*, 236.

relationship is between God's timeless and temporal phases.³³ This creates a serious plot hole in Craig's story of the world.

Assessing the Timeless and Temporal Phases of God

How exactly is God's timeless phase related to God's temporal phase of existence? Notice that the two phases cannot be in a standard before and after relation, nor can they be simultaneous. Those are temporal relationships and a timeless God cannot stand in temporal relationships. Craig says that God's timeless phase is causally prior, without being temporally prior, to God's temporal phase.³⁴ I don't know what that could mean. A fairly standard causal principle in the philosophy of time is that causes are temporally prior to their effects.³⁵ In fact, the temporal asymmetry of causation is often appealed to in order to establish the direction of time. So, there can be no sense in which God's timeless phase is causally, but not temporally, prior. Some philosophers reject this standard causal principle because they believe that some causes can be simultaneous with their effects. That won't help Craig either since simultaneity is a temporal relationship, and God's timeless phase cannot be in a temporal relationship with His temporal phase.

One suggestion is that God's timeless phase might be ontologically prior to the universe.³⁶ I'm not sure what that could mean without just going back to Plotinus' view. Mere ontological dependence relations are

³³ Paul Helm, *Eternal God: A study of God without Time*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 222.

³⁴ Craig, *Time and eternity*, 233.

³⁵ Richard Swinburne, *The Christian God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 81-90; Sam Baron and Kristie Miller, *An introduction to the philosophy of time* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019), 128; Graham Oppy, "Are there any Gods?," in *Is there a God? A debate*, by Graham Oppy and Kenneth L. Pearce (New York: Routledge, 2022), 11; Alison Fernandes, *The temporal asymmetry of causation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023). This principle is also common place within Indian philosophy. Michael T. Williams, "Analytic philosophy of time in early Modern India," in *Temporality and eternity: Nine perspectives on God and time*, ed. by Marcus Schmucker, Michael T. Williams, and Florian Fischer (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2022), 167.

³⁶ Craig in personal correspondence.

mutually compatible, like the grounding relation between God and the singleton set {God}.³⁷ That does not capture incompatible states of affairs like God existing alone, and God existing with a cosmos. Which is precisely what Craig wants to affirm, so mere ontological dependence cannot help Craig out.

Another suggestion is that God's timeless phase could be logically prior to God's temporal phase, but this won't work either. As Alan Rhoda points out, mere logical priority obtains between items that are co-present. Incompatible states of affairs cannot be co-present.³⁸ God's timeless phase cannot be co-present to God's temporal phase since they describe completely incompatible states of affairs. Remember, one is *God all alone* and the other is *God with the universe*. So mere logical priority is ruled out.

This issue was actually discussed in the 13th century surrounding the controversy over the doctrine of eternal creation vs creation *ex nihilo*. During this time period, there arose a distinction between priority of nature and priority of duration. As one 13th century Franciscan text explains, that which is before and after merely in accordance with nature can and must exist at the same moment. That which is before and after in duration can and must exist at different moments. In light of this distinction, one form of argument in favor of creation *ex nihilo* is called The Turning Argument. The idea is that any state of affairs which involves turning necessarily involves duration and succession. Here are examples of turning: from *unjust* to *just*, from *not good* to *good*, from *non-being* to *being*. This argument was used to establish that God is prior to creation in nature and duration since the universe began to exist, meaning that the universe was preceded by non-existence. The universe turns from *non-being* to *being*.³⁹

³⁷ Fabrice Correia, "Ontological dependence," *Philosophy Compass* 3 (2008): 1013-1032.

³⁸ Alan R. Rhoda, "Foreknowledge and fatalism: Why divine timelessness doesn't help," in *Debates in the metaphysics of time*, ed. by L. Nathan Oaklander (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 265-266.

³⁹ Richard C. Dales, *Medieval discussions of the eternity of the world* (New York: E. J. Brill, 1990), 160-161.

This raises the most serious problem for Craig—God’s timeless phase comes to an end. This is very odd since to be timeless is to exist without beginning, without end, and without succession. Since this phase ended, it is not doing a very good job at being timeless. Craig’s view looks like a clear case of turning because God turns from one phase to a different incompatible phase, which means that it cannot be a priority of nature but rather is a priority of temporal duration. Which, in turn, entails that the timeless phase is earlier than the temporal phase, and thus is not actually timeless.

The inability to establish a clear and coherent relationship between the timeless and temporal phases introduces a serious implausibility into Craig’s story of the world. With this in mind, I want to return to another continuity error in Craig’s story.

The Timeless Phase Eradicates Divine Deliberation and Freedom

Again, Craig wants to maintain that God is timeless without creation. There is no change or succession, yet Craig also wishes to affirm that God is free to create or not create our universe. As is often pointed out, freedom involves a moment of indecision about what to do at a subsequent moment.⁴⁰ As I quoted earlier, in *On God: Attributes of God*, Craig affirms a detailed theory on God’s deliberation process called Molinism. Molinism offers an account of how God considers whether or not to create anything at all, and which universe in particular to create. Earlier I pointed out that this appears to give Craig an advantage over Plotinus’ view of planless providence. Yet I say it is inconceivable that a truly timeless God could be described as freely deliberating over such things. A truly timeless God is just timelessly doing whatever He is timelessly doing, end of story. There is no moment where God is undecided about what to do, thinks about it, and then selects a course of action. There is God simply doing

⁴⁰ In the 12th century, Peter Lombard follows Aristotle on this point (*The sentences — Book 2: On creation*, trans. by Giulio Silano [Ontario: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 2008]).

whatever He timelessly finds Himself doing. I fail to see how such a being could be free, nor how such a view is consistent with Molinism. As I alluded to earlier, Craig actually goes on to deny basically everything in his Molinist story.

In *On God: Attributes of God*, about 100 pages after defending Molinism's account of divine deliberation, Craig says that "omniscience alone precludes God's deciding in the sense of making up his mind after a period of indecision."⁴¹ Craig elaborates, "An omniscient being cannot literally reflect and deliberate because he already knows the conclusions to be derived."⁴²

How can Craig defend a view of creation, providence and foreknowledge that is built on divine deliberation and then maintain that God does not deliberate? What is going on here? There is a long history of theologians waffling back and forth over whether or not these so-called logical moments in the life of a timeless God are real or just conceptual distinctions in our head. Much like Molina, Craig waffles between these two views. Craig seems to side with the opinion that these are merely conceptual distinctions. He repeatedly refers to these logical moments as conceptual distinctions.⁴³ However, on one page he refers to this as "conceptual, atemporal priority within the knowledge of God." Yet Craig also says on this page that this is not "a mere figment of the imagination." He says that there is a basis in reality, and that basis is one of "conditionship" between various aspects of God's knowledge.⁴⁴ I must confess that I find this notion of conditionship somewhat murky at best. Given everything I have described before about how logical priority, priority of nature, and ontological priority work, I do not understand how any of this makes sense. Molinism says that God is *undecided* at the logical moment of natural knowledge and *decided* at the logical moment of free knowledge. These are incompatible states of affairs, and thus cannot be

⁴¹ Craig, *On God: Attributes of God*, 331.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 259.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 253.

co-realized in some timeless state of affairs. What is going on is that Molinism is positing a series of eternal contradictions into the timeless life of God!⁴⁵

The Relational Theory of Time is Incoherent

I want to discuss one final problem for Craig's story of the world—it relies on an incoherent metaphysics of time. Again, the relational theory says that time is not a thing in our ontology. Time can be reduced to something else that exists. Throughout his writings, Craig gestures towards different kinds of relational strategies, but like most relationalists, it is little more than gestures. For example, Craig sometimes says that “time would not exist in the utter absence of events.”⁴⁶ I want to briefly run through different relational theories to show that each fails to reduce time away and ends up sneaking time back into the story of the world.

A common strategy is to say that time is reducible to change or movement. Plotinus argues that time is not to be identified with movement. Movement is things being one way and then being another, which all takes place within time. So, time cannot be movement since movement takes place within time. Otherwise, we get the absurd statement that, “Time is the extension of Movement in Time!”⁴⁷

However, a proponent of the relational theory might say that Plotinus' objection is too quick. I disagree. It is quick enough. Why? Because change is typically understood as things being in incompatible ways at different moments of time. D.H. Mellor says, “Change here I take to be temporal variation in the properties of things. By this I mean that changes are things having, at different times, incompatible properties, i.e. properties that no one thing could have at the same time.”⁴⁸ Here is what

⁴⁵ For more details on this argument, see Mullins, “Does providence entail divine temporality?”

⁴⁶ William Lane Craig, “No trouble: A reply to Wielenberg,” *TheoLogica* 5 (2021): 90.

⁴⁷ Plotinus, *The Enneads*, 223.

⁴⁸ D. H. Mellor, *Mind, meaning, and reality: Essays in philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012): 169.

matters. If “time is the measure of change,” that means “time is the measure of time.” That is nonsense, so I agree with Plotinus that this reduction of time to something else is absurd.

Another common relational attempt to reduce time to something else is to say that time is a relationship between events. Of course, you will need to know what an event is. Unfortunately for the relationalist, an event is typically defined as a substance having a property at a time.⁴⁹ In which case, saying “time is a relationship between events” is to say, “time is a relationship between time.” That is absurd, so I suggest looking elsewhere.

Craig is subject to this critique as well. According to Craig and J. P. Moreland, “An event is the coming, continued possession or going of a property by a substance at or through a time.”⁵⁰ It seems like time is being built into the notion of an event, but events are the very things that are supposed to explain the existence of time on Craig’s view. The problem is that events have an occurrence or a when, thus presupposing the existence of time. Hence, there appears to be a vicious circularity here in the relational understanding of time.⁵¹

I do not know of any relational attempt to reduce time to something else that does not land in some kind of absurdity like this. Plotinus agrees with me. After surveying various attempts to reduce time away to something else and constantly encountering circularity, Plotinus says “Enough.”⁵² Finally, something coherent from Plotinus that I can agree with.

⁴⁹ Ulrich Meyer, *The nature of time* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 15.

⁵⁰ J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical foundations for a Christian worldview* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2017), 194.

⁵¹ Some might try to complain that the absolute theory of time also faces a circularity objection, but this is to misunderstand the circularity. The relational theory denies that time is an entity, but each attempt at reduction involves sneaking time back into the world as an entity in its own right. So, the reduction is a failure. The absolute theory says time is an entity, and each analysis of time will unsurprisingly involve time being temporal. There is no vicious circularity here.

⁵² Plotinus, *The Enneads*, 226.

Time am I, Destroyer of Worlds

Thus far I have pointed out some serious problems in Craig's story of the world. In order to assess the overall plausibility of Craig's story of the world, I want to contrast it with a third option. For lack of a better term, I will call this the pure divine temporality view. I will argue that this story of the world fares better than Plotinus and Craig. On this view, God has no timeless phase of existence. God is temporal through and through. There are many proponents of this view throughout history and today. Today we have Nicholas Wolterstorff, Richard Swinburne, and Keith Ward affirming this view, though this is by no means a modern notion. Some scholars say that divine temporality was the majority view at Oxford in the early 14th century.⁵³ There is some debate as to whether or not Rene Descartes affirmed temporality.⁵⁴ Within the Islamic tradition, the 9th century group called the Karrāmīs embraced pure divine temporality, as did 12th century thinkers like Faḥr ad-Dīn ar-Rāzī and Abū Barakāt al-Baghdādī.⁵⁵ There is even the famous hadith Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī 4826, Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim 2246. This text says that one should not curse time for Allah is time.

The suggestion that God is time often sounds crazy to contemporary theologians who are unfamiliar with the history of ideas. Many who endorse pure divine temporality in the past suggest that there is a sense in which time should be identified with God. Within Indian philosophy, this is a major theme. Anindita Niyogi Balslev claims that some of the earliest sacred texts within Indian philosophy engage in “identifying the supreme Lord with time.”⁵⁶ Balselev has in mind texts like the Atharva Veda and the Kāla-sukta. The Bhagavad Gita is another example. In 10:33-34, God says, “I also am imperishable time and I the creator

⁵³ Dales, *Medieval discussions of the eternity of the world*, 199.

⁵⁴ Geoffrey Gorham, “Descartes on God's relation to time,” *Religious Studies* 44 (2008): 413-432.

⁵⁵ Jon Hoover, “The Muslim theologian Ibn Taymiyyah on God, creation, and time,” in *Temporality and eternity: Nine perspectives on God and time*, ed. by Marcus Schmucker, Michael T. Williams, and Florian Fischer (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2022), 94-95.

⁵⁶ Anindita Niyogi Balslev, “Time and the Hindu experience,” in *Time and religion*, ed. by Anindita Niyogi Balslev and J. N. Mohanty (Leiden: Brill, 1992), 166.

whose face is turned on all sides. I am death, the all-devouring and (am) the origin of things that are yet to be.” In 11:32 God says, “Time am I, world-destroying, grown mature, engaged here in subduing the world.” The Indian philosopher Raghunātha Śīromaṇi (c. 1460-1540 CE) made some effort to develop the metaphysics of identifying time with God.⁵⁷

The notion that absolute time is to be identified with God can also be found within the Christian tradition. The earliest example I know of is the 14th century philosopher Nicole Oresme who argues that absolute duration is the eternity of God.⁵⁸ Though this is an odd example since Oresme clearly affirms divine timelessness.⁵⁹ Henry More, Isaac Newton, and Samuel Clarke are classic examples of thinkers who affirm divine temporality and believe that time is to be identified with God in some sense, perhaps as an essential divine mode or attribute.⁶⁰ Today, the metaphysician Timothy O'Connor makes a similar suggestion. He writes,

An adequate theory of God's temporality plausibly should have it that time—or perhaps “God's time”—is fundamentally a mode of God's own being, rather than being an external dimension that conditions Him as it does his creatures.⁶¹

In my book *From divine Timemaker to divine Watchmaker*, I develop this view in more detail. Here is the idea in brief. The absolute theory of time says that time is an uncreated and all-pervasive substance that has a particular nature. Something about that nature is what makes change possible, is the source of moments, and is the thing that unifies a series of moments into a coherent timeline. Also recall that a moment of time is the way things are but could be subsequently otherwise. When one

⁵⁷ Debika Saba, “Hinduism, Nyaya-Vaisesika,” in *Encyclopedia of time: Science, philosophy, theology, and culture*, ed. by H. James Bix (London: SAGE Publications, 2009), 663.

⁵⁸ Nicole Oresme, *Le Livre du ciel et du monde* (London: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1968), 177.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 163-165.

⁶⁰ For more, see Mullins, *From divine Timemaker to divine Watchmaker*, chapter 5. Cf. Thomas, *Absolute time*.

⁶¹ Timothy O'Connor, “The unity of the divine nature: Four theories,” in *Classical theism: New essays on the metaphysics of God*, ed. by Jonathan Fuqua and Robert C. Koons (London: Routledge, 2023), 143-144.

claims that time is to be identified with God in some sense, one is claiming that it is proper to attribute *time* of God. Why? God is an uncreated and all-pervasive substance with a particular nature. Given that God is omnipotent and free, there is a way things are, but could be subsequently otherwise. Hence God merely existing is enough to produce or ground a moment. Any subsequent actions that God may perform will bring about the next moment and so on. Whatever theory of providence one may affirm, that is how one will articulate the sense in which God unifies a series of moments into a coherent timeline.

On my view, God creates the universe out of nothing, and thus the universe has an absolute beginning. Within Western and Eastern thought, there is a very common definition of what it means for a thing to begin to exist. A thing begins to exist when it is preceded by nonexistence.⁶² First, that thing does not exist, and then at the next moment it does exist. As Al-Māturīdī says, “it is known that [something] *Creatio ex Nihilo* comes into existence after it did not [exist].”⁶³ He goes on to say, “Therefore, it is established [that the relationship between God and the Universe] is that of succession, [God] being the first and [the Universe] the second, in that order.”⁶⁴ Historically, this is why proponents of creation *ex nihilo* affirmed that there is a state of affairs prior to creation in which God alone exists.

Some proponents of this view, like Newton and Clarke, posit an infinite number of moments prior to God’s creation of our universe. In agreement with Craig’s discussions on the kalam cosmological argument, I think this runs into some serious problems since it is impossible to traverse an infinite series of moments. However, not everyone who affirms this pure divine temporality view agrees with Newton and Clarke

⁶² Hoover, “The Muslim theologian Ibn Taymiyyah on God, creation, and time,” 90; Bonaventure, *The Breviloquium* 2.1.3, in *The works of Bonaventure*, vol. 2, trans. by Jose de Vinck (New York: St Anthony Guild Press, 1963), 71.

⁶³ Shaykh Abu Mansoor al-Maturidi, *The book of monotheism: Kitaab at-Tawheed; God and the universe, a manual of Sunni theology*, trans. by Sulaiman Ahmed (London: Maturidi Publications, 2019), 65. Bracketed in original.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.* Bracketed in original.

on this point. For example, Dean Zimmerman says that there is a single state prior to the beginning of the universe.⁶⁵ This is a single moment of time that never began to exist because it is not preceded by non-existence. As Craig admits, this is consistent with the kalam cosmological argument. He says, “strictly speaking, none of the arguments I have defended implies that time itself had a beginning. Rather what they entail is that time which is divisible into distinct intervals must have had a beginning.”⁶⁶

At this precreation moment, there is God all alone deciding whether or not to create a universe, and if so, which universe to create. God can even be described as plotting and planning to take over the universe. After God devises His plan for the universe, He freely produces the universe out of no pre-existent material. Subsequently, God exists with the universe that He has freely created. If one is so inclined towards Molinism, one can describe a series of three moments prior to creation in order to account for God’s deliberation process and free choice to produce our particular universe. What matters, though, is that the initial moment of reality did not begin to exist.

Notice that this view has God existing alone *before* the universe began to exist. Since God is purely temporal, there is no funny business in describing this. God once existed all alone and then created the universe. There is no need to avoid saying “before” because God did exist before the universe. So, this avoids the problem that Craig has in describing God’s prior timeless phase. In fact, Craig concedes that it might seem more attractive to affirm such a view since, “It enables us to speak literally of God’s existing before creation. And yet we seem to avoid the problematic claim that God has endured through infinite time prior to creating the universe.”⁶⁷

Someone like Craig might complain that this single precreation moment still looks like God begins to exist, but I say this is to ignore

⁶⁵ Dean W. Zimmerman, “God inside time and before creation,” in *God and time: Essays on the divine nature*, ed. by Gregory E. Ganssle and David M. Woodruff (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 88-89.

⁶⁶ Craig, *God, time, and eternity*, 268.

⁶⁷ Craig, *Time and eternity*, 234.

the definition of what it means for something to begin to exist. Further, I don't see why Craig's view would be preferable here. Craig has a single precreation moment for God as well, although it is said to be a timeless moment. Merely adding "timeless" to it does not illuminate how this would avoid God beginning to exist. What avoids God beginning to exist is paying attention to the definition of what it means for something to begin to exist.

In at least one writing, Craig affirms a different definition of what it means for something to begin to exist. In one place, Craig says,

Something comes into being at a time t if and only if the following three conditions are met: (i) The thing exists at t , (ii) t is the first time at which the thing exists, and (iii) the thing's existing at t is a tensed fact.⁶⁸

This definition would imply, on my view, that God begins to exist, which would be a problem. However, I think Craig's definition fails to capture what it means to begin to exist. In fact, I think Craig unwittingly concedes this point. To see this, I want you to notice something very important about this definition. It starts with the phrase, "Something *comes* into being at a time," which implies that the thing was not there and then came to exist. Yet nothing in Craig's definition captures this *coming to be* like the traditional definition does. Again, the traditional definition says that X begins to exist if X is preceded by nonexistence. There was no X, and then X came to be.

To see this point more clearly, consider someone like Paul Helm who affirms an eternalist ontology of time. On his view, God and the universe are co-eternal. There is no state of affairs where God exists alone without the universe. Yet Helm maintains that he is affirming creation out of nothing because there is a first moment of time. Craig has been highly critical of this view. He says,

All this adds to the doctrine of ontological dependence is that the tenselessly existing block universe has a front edge. It has a beginning only in the sense that a yardstick has a beginning. There is in the actual world no state of affairs of God

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 214.

existing alone without the space-time universe. God never really brings the universe into being; as a whole it co-exists timelessly with Him.⁶⁹

I think Craig is right to criticize Helm on this point because there is no legitimate sense in which the universe comes into being. Yet Craig cannot push this objection and stick with his definition of what it means to begin to exist. For the proponent of an eternalist ontology of time can easily affirm all three of the conditions of Craig's definition. The first two conditions are obviously satisfied, though Craig might doubt the third condition. This is because some 20th century philosophers who affirmed an eternalist ontology of time tried to rid the world of tensed facts. However, this de-tensing project was largely abandoned several decades ago, and today most eternalists think that tensed facts are somehow grounded in tenseless facts.⁷⁰ What this means is that the eternalist can and does affirm condition (iii) of Craig's definition. So here is the problem for Craig. If he keeps his definition of *begins to exist*, then he cannot run his objection against Helm and others who affirm eternalism and creation *ex nihilo*. I think the better option is for Craig to ditch his definition and go with the traditional definition of something beginning to exist.

Craig has another objection to the pure temporality view worth considering. This one also focuses on God's precreation moment. He says,

The problem is that such a changeless, undifferentiated state looks suspiciously like a state of timelessness! It seems to have the topology of a point, the traditional representation of timeless eternity. The only sense in which such a state can be said to be temporal is that it exists literally before God's creation of the world and the beginning of differentiated time.⁷¹

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 213.

⁷⁰ This is why so-called ersatz presentism has been developed as a possible solution to the grounding objection. This view tries to ground tensed facts on tenseless facts. *E.g.*, Craig Bourne, *A future for presentism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Thomas M. Crisp, "Presentism," in *The Oxford handbook of metaphysics*, ed. by Michael J. Loux and Dean W. Zimmerman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

⁷¹ Craig, *Time and eternity*, 234.

I must confess that I don't understand the problem here. Any given single moment of time has the topology of a point, and nothing about this somehow renders a single moment of time as timeless. Recall that a timeless being lacks temporal location, cannot stand in temporal relations, and cannot undergo succession. With that in mind, consider three reasons for thinking that the pure temporality view's precreation moment is not timeless. On the pure temporality view, God literally exists before the creation of the universe. That temporal relation is enough to not be timeless. Further, there is the tensed fact <God exists right now> which means that God has a temporal location. Finally, a temporal God can undergo succession, whereas a timeless God cannot undergo succession. The pure temporality view clearly sees it as possible for God to undergo succession.

Craig has one final worry about this view that I wish to consider before concluding. Craig thinks it sounds odd to say that God is time. He asks, "Should we say that time died on the cross?"⁷² Personally, I don't find it an odd thing to say that God is time. It is no more odd than saying that God is omnipotent or that God is omniscient. When I say "God is time," I am making a standard attributional statement. Could I say that time died on the cross? I suppose I could if I were feeling poetic, somewhat like saying "On that cross the immortal did die." I could also say, "Omnipotence died on the cross," or "Necessary existence died on the cross." It sounds funny, but so would saying "Omniscience died on the cross," or "Love died on the cross." Strictly speaking it is better to say that a person with those divine attributes and a human nature died on the cross. God the Son has a human nature, died on the cross, and God the Son has various attributes such as omnipotence, omniscience, time, and love. So, what's the big deal?

⁷² Personal dialogue with Craig.