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OMNISCIENCE AND TIME, ONE MORE TIME: A REPLY TO CRAIG

Edward Wierenga

In "Omniscience, Tensed Facts, and Divine Eternity," *Faith and Philosophy* 17 (2000): 225-241, William Craig objects to my attempt to show what is missing in standard arguments from facts about knowledge of temporal change to the conclusion that divine omniscience is incompatible with divine eternity or atemporality. I had proposed two accounts of the objects of knowledge and belief according to which what we know changes over time but which permit God to know everything we know, or everything he needs to know in order to be omniscient, from an atemporal perspective. I defend this project against Craig's objections.

William Craig sides with those who hold that divine omniscience is incompatible with divine eternity, and he has recently claimed to "show" that accounts to the contrary by Jonathan Kvanvig, Brian Leftow, and me are "untenable".¹ I can't speak for Kvanvig or Leftow, nor do I propose to defend their views. But I do have some interest in defending my own views. In particular, I want to argue that Craig has failed to uncover any problem with the proposals I had made.

The standard reason for holding that divine omniscience is incompatible with divine eternity (or divine atemporality) holds that since what we know changes as time goes by, so God's knowledge must, too. More precisely, it is often held that which propositions or objects of belief are true changes over time. In that case, anyone who knows all truths would have to know different propositions at different times; there would be no one perspective from which someone could know everything.

I think it is clear that for this line of reasoning to succeed it needs to be supplemented with an account of what the objects of knowledge and belief are, as well as a statement of exactly what is required for omniscience. In my view, many of the philosophers who have argued for the incompatibility of divine omniscience and divine eternity have ignored this part of the project.² I have proposed two alternative accounts of the objects of knowledge and belief, and I have argued that on neither one does it simply follow from facts about change and omniscience that God's knowledge changes over time.

According to the first of these accounts, the objects of knowledge and belief are eternal propositions—the true ones are always true and the false ones are always false. What we know when we know that something is



past or present or future—more generally, what we express by sentences containing such temporal indexicals as tenses or words like ‘now’—are a peculiar variety of eternal proposition. What changes over time is not which ones are true but which ones *we have access to*. We can only believe propositions to which we have access, so as time goes by, what *we* know changes. But nothing would prevent an omniscient being from knowing all of these truths at once, or from an atemporal, eternal perspective.

The details of this proposal were inspired by a Fregean/Chisholmian approach to the problem of knowledge *de se*, of knowledge of oneself as oneself. Frege wrote, “Now everyone is presented to himself in a particular and primitive way, in which he is presented to no-one else. So when Dr. Lauben thinks that he has been wounded, he will probably take as a basis this primitive way in which he is presented to himself. And only Dr. Lauben can grasp thoughts determined in this way.”³ The idea is that the object of a first-person belief for a given person is a peculiar proposition that contains or involves a special individual essence or haecceity of that person. The last sentence in the passage from Frege is inessential to the theory: it need not be the case that such first-person propositions are accessible only to the individuals whose haecceities they contain; what matters is that believing one of your own suffices to give you a belief *de se*. That leaves it open that God believes all true “first-person” propositions, although he gets a *de se* belief in the process only when the haecceity in question is his own.

Belief in something as happening in the present is strikingly similar to believing oneself to have a property.⁴ Accordingly, the Fregean/Chisholmian account can be extended as follows: the proposition expressed, at a given time, by a sentence using the present tense or the indexical ‘now’ is a proposition that involves the individual essence or haecceity of that time. The sentences

“It is sunny now” uttered or written at 12:20 p.m. on March 23, 2001,

and

“It is, was, or will be sunny at 12:20 p.m. on March 23, 2001”

thus express different propositions. The latter is one that is accessible at any time or from any temporal or atemporal perspective. The former expresses a “present-time” proposition that includes the haecceity of the moment 12:20 p.m., March 23, 2001. As a matter of fact, we are only capable of believing such a proposition at its time. Believing a proposition expressed by a sentence with a temporal indexical in it accordingly is different from believing a proposition with a non-indexical temporal reference. But the difference, on this account, is not that the former propositions vary in truth over time, while the latter kind are eternal. Rather, both kinds of propositions are eternal, but our access to and capacity to believe the former kind is ephemeral. The difference is in us, not in which eternal propositions are true. Furthermore, it may be that while we are thus limited in our access to present-time propositions, God is not. And just as he

has a *de se* belief only when he believes a first-person proposition involving his own haecceity, so he only has a present-time belief, a belief *de praesenti*, if he believes a present-time proposition *at its time*. Merely knowing a present-time proposition does not give God a temporal position or perspective; it would take knowing one *at its time*.

Craig claims that this view is "multiply defective".⁵ He says that it is implausible and incomplete. Craig seems to have two reasons for thinking the view to be implausible. First, he claims that we do not typically have such propositions involving haecceities of times consciously in mind. He says, "I may be utterly unconscious of the present time and certainly am not forming beliefs about its properties or its haecceity."⁶ And he adds, "that is to say, Wierenga's analysis does not provide a plausible account of the cognitive significance of one's beliefs. I take it as obvious that when I believe 'it's raining,' I have no beliefs concerning a certain time and the ascription of a peculiar property to that time, even if the propositional content expressed by a statement of my belief does include such a time and property. Recall that Wierenga is offering an account of *de praesenti* belief, not the propositional content of belief."⁷

I will take up the question of propositional content below. First, however, I want to note that we are not always very good judges of exactly what concepts or properties are included in the propositions we believe. Do any pair of propositions attributing necessarily co-extensive properties to the same object contain the very same concepts? Some philosophers think they do; others disagree. At least some of them, then, are mistaken about what properties they are thinking about when they believe such propositions.

I am not sure that I understand Craig's distinction between belief and its propositional content, but to the extent that I do, I think my proposal is about the propositional content of belief, where that is understood as concerning the *propositions* that are believed. Craig's questions raise serious and difficult questions about the nature of belief, in fact, questions too difficult to settle here. A way of making my proposal somewhat more plausible, however, begins by noting that if a friend calls me from an unknown location and says, "I am here," I understand the cognitive significance of what she says, but I do not know which proposition she expressed—I do not know the propositional content of her belief. Similarly, if you send me an undated note which says, "It is sunny now," I can understand the cognitive significance of what you have written, but I do not know which proposition you asserted.⁸ Moreover, if you wrote the same note on two different days, it might well be that your mental state is the same on each day, as is the cognitive significance of the sentence you write. But the propositions so expressed (and believed) may well be different. My proposal was intended to flesh out that idea.

Hilary Putnam has argued that meaning "ain't in the head."⁹ He holds, for example, that what I mean when I think, "There is a glass of water," depends on whether I am on earth, where water is H₂O, or whether I am on Twin Earth, where the term 'water' refers to a similar but chemically distinct substance XYZ. Perhaps this context dependence also affects which proposition I believe. At any rate, it does seem plausible to hold

that at least part of what it is that we believe is determined by things not in the consciousness of the believer or "internal" to the believer. What I believe when I say, "I am here," is determined in part by where I am located. Similarly, what I believe when I say, "It is sunny now," is determined in part by my temporal location. According to the proposal under consideration, the contribution that my temporal location makes to which proposition I express using a present-time indexical is that it provides the haecceity of that time. My talk of "grasping" a proposition obscured this point that something external to my mental state can contribute to which proposition I believe; it made it seem as though the proposition I believe had to be before my mind's eye in such a way that I could mentally examine it and tell exactly what its constituents are. Perhaps describing such propositions as "accessible" is less misleading—a proposition is accessible to us if we are in the right temporal or spatial location and mental state to "hook up with" it. The important point, in reply to Craig, is that if it is not essential that the propositions we believe are wholly transparent to us, then even if I am not consciously aware of thinking of the haecceity of a moment of time, it does not follow that the proposition I then believe fails to include or involve such an haecceity.

Craig's second reason for holding that my proposal is implausible is that it is not really analogous, he claims, to the haecceitist account of *de se* belief that inspired it. He says, "Just as first-person propositions must be expressed in English via first-person indexicals, so present-time propositions, as Wierenga conceives them, must seemingly be expressed via present-tense indexicals. The absence of temporal indexicals from most of our tensed beliefs renders implausible the idea that by means of them we grasp propositions which involve essentially the ascription of properties to a time."¹⁰

It is no doubt true that many of the sentences we use to express our present time beliefs do not contain such temporal indexicals as 'now', 'at present' or 'currently'. But the present tense of verbs is itself temporally indexical. I had in fact introduced the objection to atemporal omniscience as claiming that "those [propositions] expressed by sentences containing such temporally indexical elements as tenses or the word 'now' vary in truth over time."¹¹ In any event, the phenomenon is surely wide-spread, regardless of the frequency of temporal indexicals. It seems immaterial whether there is just one linguistic device or several to accomplish the same end.

Realizing that the present tense is temporally indexical is perhaps what motivates Craig to add a final attack on the plausibility of my proposal. He writes, "Moreover, Wierenga's analysis of tensed beliefs is drastically incomplete, since it overlooks all but present-tense beliefs. How are such beliefs like 'John left at 8:00' or John will come home at 3:00' to be analyzed?"¹² I should not have thought that the account was incomplete in this way, since I had written that

we may concentrate in this way on knowledge expressed by sentences with a *present* time indication, because knowledge expressed by sentences whose verbs are in the past or future tense is best understood as knowledge that fundamentally involves the present. Thus,

what we know when we know, for example, that it rained is that it rained *before now*. And what we know when we know that it will rain is that it will rain *later than now*. In other words, knowledge that something is past or future is always knowledge that is relative to the present.¹³

In any event, this is how Craig goes on to conjecture that the account would be developed. But he judges that to be grounds for another objection. He notes that on this view, "the propositional content of God's beliefs is wholly tenseless, and all he grasps are the tenseless B-relations between times and events. ... Since the attribution to a tenseless time of a property involving tenseless B-relations of *earlier than*, *simultaneous with*, or *later than* does not serve to introduce tense, it turns out that what God knows are wholly tenseless propositions, not present-time propositions."¹⁴ Craig goes on to suggest a way in which I "could escape this conclusion." However, since that is the conclusion for which I was arguing, I have no desire to escape it. Craig identifies a feature of the proposal, not a flaw: although we know different propositions at different times, those propositions are eternally true, and God can thus know them without being himself in time. As far as I can tell, nothing Craig says refutes that possibility.

The proposal we have been discussing assumes that the propositions we believe when we know what is happening are eternally true. Suppose, however, that some such propositions really do vary in truth value over time. In *The Nature of God* I employed such an account to give a different reply to the claim that omniscience requires temporality.¹⁵ The account in question is the view that some propositions are *perspectival*, that is, true or false only relative to an *index*, where an index might include a person, a time, a place, a world, and so forth.¹⁶ Thus, the perspectival proposition *I am sitting* might be true relative to <Wierenga, now> but false relative to <you, now>. And the perspectival proposition *It is sunny now* might be true relative to <Wierenga, 12:20 p.m. on March 23, 2001> but false relative to <Wierenga, 12:20 p.m. on March 24, 2001>. Moreover, we should distinguish *believing at an index* that a proposition is true, which is what I do when I believe *It is sunny now* from my position at <Wierenga, 12:20 p.m. on March 23, 2001>, from believing *that a proposition is true at an index*, which is something anyone does who believes that *It is sunny now* is true at <Wierenga, 12:20 p.m. on March 23, 2001>.

If some propositions are perspectival, then omniscience should not be understood as knowledge of all truths *simpliciter*; that would leave out those propositions that are only true relative to some index or other. So a reasonable account of omniscience would hold instead that

- (O) x is omniscient if and only if for any proposition p and perspective $\langle S, t \rangle$, (i) if p is true at $\langle S, t \rangle$, then x knows that p is true at $\langle S, t \rangle$, and (ii) if x is at $\langle S, t \rangle$ and p is true at t , then at $\langle S, t \rangle$ x knows that p .

The first clause requires that an omniscient being know all the eternal truths—those true at every index—as well as which perspectival propositions are true at which indices, and the second clause requires in addition that an

omniscient being know all the perspectival propositions true at the being's own perspective or index. This definition is thus neutral on whether an omniscient God is in time or outside of time, which depends not on his being omniscient but, more sensibly, on whether he is at any temporal perspective.

Craig objects to this account. He writes,

Wierenga's definition of [O] is, however, unacceptably contrived. For the ostensibly perspectival nature of truth is not a sufficient condition for exempting knowledge of a certain class of propositions from the concept of omniscience. In Wierenga's view, God has knowledge of propositions stating exclusively tenseless B-facts, such as that *p* is true at *t*, whereas temporal persons know a multitude of objectively true propositions which remain unknown to God. Persons located at *t* know not merely that *p* is true at *t*; they know *p simpliciter*, an objectively true proposition of which God is ignorant. Wierenga redefines omniscience in such a way that a being which does not know tensed propositions can nonetheless be declared to be omniscient. But in the absence of independent ground for accepting [O], such a procedure is unacceptably *ad hoc*.¹⁷

On one point Craig misunderstands the view. It does not insist that God has knowledge of "exclusively tenseless B-facts" or knowledge only of eternal propositions. Indeed, it holds that *if* God is at any temporal perspective, then to be omniscient he must know the perspectival propositions true at that perspective. Since it is not part of the view either that God is or that he is not at any temporal perspective, it does not take a stand on whether he has knowledge of perspectival propositions.

On the more important, critical point, Craig seems to be mistaken. The definition (O) does not seem to me to be *ad hoc* at all, much less "unacceptably" so. For one thing, it has been standard since late antiquity to hold that *omnipotence* does not require the ability to do absolutely anything: there are limitations on ability compatible with being omnipotent. What would be wrong with adding that there are similar restrictions on *omniscience*, that some limitations on knowledge are compatible with being omniscient? Moreover, it is somewhat misleading to describe the view as allowing that there is a "multitude of objectively true propositions which remain unknown to God" and that temporal persons "know not merely that *p* is true at *t*; they know *p simpliciter*, an objectively true proposition of which God is ignorant." For the perspectival propositions which God does not know are not really true *simpliciter* but only relative to or at some index or other. Moreover, it seems only sensible to hold that God does not know such propositions from the point of view of any index at which he is not. And surely he is not at some indices, for example, <Craig, *t*> (for any time *t*), for God could not be at such an index without being identical to Craig. Thus, when Craig knows the perspectival proposition *I am in La Mirada, California now* at the index <Craig, *t*>, Craig knows something at an index which God cannot know at that index. Given the close analogies between first-person knowledge and present-time knowledge, it seems only natural

to hold that God similarly lacks knowledge of any perspectival proposition true only at indices at which he is not temporally present, if such there are.

I do not know whether either of the two accounts I have presented is likely to withstand more sustained scrutiny. But I am confident that they continue to serve their intended purpose, which is to show a glaring lacuna in the standard attempts to derive God's temporality from his omniscience and facts about change over time. If the former account, or something like it, is correct, then the propositions we know fleetingly and only at certain times when we have temporal knowledge are propositions that are nevertheless eternally true and available for God to know whatever his temporal position. If the second account is correct, then the propositions we know when we have present-time knowledge are perspectival propositions, true only relative to certain temporal indices at which we are present. Whether God knows them depends, not on whether he is omniscient, but on whether he is located at any temporal indices. Anyone who wants to argue from the facts of temporal change that divine omniscience requires divine temporality, therefore, owes us at a minimum an account of the objects of temporal knowledge and belief. In addition, the objector should provide enough details about the nature of omniscience for us to see what it requires in the way of knowledge of these objects. Finally, if the correct account of our knowledge of the present admits of perspectival propositions, then the objector should also provide independent reasons for thinking that God is located at temporal indices or perspectives. To my knowledge, no one has attempted any of this.

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NOTES

1. William Lane Craig, "Omniscience, Tensed Facts, and Divine Eternity," *Faith and Philosophy* 17 (2000): 225-241. Craig's targets are Jonathan Kvanvig, *The Possibility of an All-Knowing God* (New York: St. Martin's, 1986), Brian Leftow, *Time and Eternity* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), and Edward Wierenga, *The Nature of God* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989). I had earlier discussed some of these issues in "Omniscience and Knowledge *De Se et De Praesenti*," in David Austin, ed., *Philosophical Analysis: A Defense by Example* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1988), pp. 251-258. And I give a short summary in "Timelessness out of Mind: On the Alleged Incoherence of Divine Timelessness," Greg Ganssle and David Woodruff, eds., *God and Time* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp.153-164.

2. For references to this voluminous literature, see the works cited in n. 1.

3. Gottlob Frege, "The Thought," trans. A.M. and Marcelle Quinton, in P.F. Strawson, ed., *Philosophical Logic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 26. For Chisholm's development of this idea, see Roderick Chisholm, *Person and Object* (LaSalle, Ill.: Open Court, 1976).

4. For some considerations in favor of this claim, see *The Nature of God*, p. 180. See also Ernest Sosa, "Consciousness of the Self and of the Present," in James Tomberlin, ed., *Agent, Language, and the Structure of the World* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1983), pp. 131-143, and Richard Feldman, "On Saying Different Things," *Philosophical Studies* 38 (1980): 79-84.

5. "Omniscience, Tensed Facts, and Divine Eternity," p. 229. Craig's summary of the view is accurate enough, except that he represents me as holding that "tense belongs to the propositional content of tensed sentences, so that God must...know tensed facts" (228). I think instead that tense is a feature of language; the view under consideration says that tensed sentences express eternal (tenseless) propositions.

6. Ibid.

7. P. 240, n. 11.

8. I am here thinking of cognitive significance along the lines of David Kaplan's "character", and the propositional content as similar to his "content", where the former includes implicit rules about determining the content or proposition expressed on the basis both of the meaning of the expression and of the external context in which the expression is inscribed or uttered. See David Kaplan, "Demonstratives," in Joseph Almog, John Perry, and Howard Wettstein, eds., *Themes from Kaplan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 481-613. A major difference, of course, is that Kaplan's contents expressed by sentences containing a present-time indexical would include the actual times, whereas on my proposal, they include the haecceities of times.

9. Hilary Putnam, "Meaning and Reference," *Journal of Philosophy* 19 (1973): 699-711.

10. P. 229. I wonder whether "present-tense indexicals" is a typographical error for "present-time indexicals," since, as I claim in the text, Craig's objection dissolves as soon as it is recognized that the present tense is a temporal indexical. I would prefer, however, to speak of beliefs expressed by tensed sentences rather than of "tensed beliefs".

11. *The Nature of God*, p. 175.

12. "Omniscience, Tensed Facts, and Divine Eternity," p. 231.

13. *The Nature of God*, pp. 179-180 (original emphasis). Craig's exposition of my proposal's application to Prior's "The 1960 exams are over" (p. 228) follows exactly this line.

14. P. 230. Craig introduces this section with a confusing question I shall not try to explain: "Does the haecceity of an time *t*, then, include its tense?" Despite my inability to understand this question, I think that Craig intends to press the objection stated in the text.

15. *The Nature of God*, pp. 186-190.

16. For simplicity I will only consider indices of persons and times.

17. "Omniscience, Tensed Facts, and Divine Eternity," pp. 234-235.