Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

Volume 21 | Issue 1

Article 7

1-1-2004

Wierenga No A-Theorist Either

William Lane Craig

Follow this and additional works at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy>

Recommended Citation

Craig, William Lane (2004) "Wierenga No A-Theorist Either," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 21 : Iss. 1 , Article 7.

DOI: 10.5840/faithphil200421122

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol21/iss1/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers by an authorized editor of ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange.

WIERENGA NO A-THEORIST EITHER

William Lane Craig

The defender of the coherence of divine timelessness, divine omniscience, and a tensed theory of time may either argue that no incoherence has been shown in the notion of a timeless being's knowing tensed facts or else provide an account of divine omniscience according to which a deity who is ignorant of tensed facts may still count as omniscient. With respect to the first strategy, I took Wierenga to be arguing that in grasping present-time propositions involving a time's haecceity God is able to know the tensed propositional content or facts expressed by tensed sentences, even though such grasping does not in God's case issue in beliefs *de praesenti*. In his reply, Wierenga makes it clear that in his first proposal he is not offering a defense of God's knowledge of tensed facts at all, so that this proposed account does not even pretend to offer an account of God's knowledge of tensed facts. With respect to the second strategy, Wierenga characterizes as misleading my description of his 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." But if Wierenga's re-definition of omniscience is intended to preclude propositions expressed by tensed sentences' being simply true, then he will have preserved divine omniscience only at the expense of denying the tensed theory of time. In that case, the second strategy proves no more successful in defending the coherence of divine timelessness, divine omniscience, and a tensed theory of time than the first strategy.

Edward Wierenga is one of the most subtle and careful thinkers to have tackled the various conundrums of divine omniscience, and I am grateful for his reply to my critique of his defense of the coherence of divine timelessness, divine omniscience, and a tensed theory of time.¹ I want at the outset to endorse heartily his fundamental claim that any adequate discussion of this subject must involve an account of what the objects of knowledge and belief are, as well as a statement of what is required for omniscience. I have elsewhere tried to survey the various proposals currently on offer and have tried to show that on none of them can a timeless being have knowledge of tensed facts and that therefore, given a tensed theory of time, such a being does not qualify as omniscient or, at least, maximally excellent cognitively.²

Now there are two broad strategies available to the defender of the coherence of divine timelessness, divine omniscience, and a tensed theory

of time: either to argue that no incoherence has been shown in the notion of a timeless being's knowing tensed facts or else to provide an account of divine omniscience or of the objects of knowledge according to which a deity who is ignorant of tensed facts may still count as omniscient. I took Wierenga to be pursuing both of these strategies.

With respect to the first strategy, I took Wierenga to be arguing that in grasping present-time propositions involving a time's haecceity God is able to know the tensed propositional content or facts expressed by tensed sentences, even though such grasping does not in God's case issue in beliefs *de praesenti*. I took it that for Wierenga a time's haecceity involved the tense determination *presentness*, just as on his view a person's haecceity involves the property *being me*. In his fourteenth footnote of his reply Wierenga expresses confusion concerning the question of whether a time's haecceity involves its tense. This question is, however, crucial in my opinion, and by it I mean, in effect, to ask whether the times whose haecceities are under discussion are, in Wierenga's view, moments of an A-series or moments of a B-series. Since the relations among times discussed by Wierenga are tenseless B-relations, the haecceities must belong to times in an A-series and include their respective A-determinations, if God is to possess knowledge of tensed facts in grasping propositions involving such haecceities.

In reading Wierenga's reply, I now see that I was mistaken in interpreting him to be offering a defense of God's knowledge of tensed facts at all. For now he clearly states that according to his account the propositional content expressed by tensed sentences and known timelessly by God is, in fact, tenseless: "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." This view is the standard B-Theory of Language. Wierenga writes,

' . . . it turns out that what God knows are wholly tenseless propositions, not present-time propositions.' 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.

Wierenga thus affirms that his temporal haecceities do not include a time's tense determination, so that God's knowledge is restricted to tenseless facts. Hence, we may simply set to the side the (admittedly interesting) discussion of the alleged deficits and defenses of this proposed account,³ since it does not even pretend to offer an account of God's knowledge of tensed facts.

The upshot is that the whole weight of the defense of the coherence of divine timelessness, divine omniscience, and a tensed theory of time falls on the second strategy. I indicted Wierenga's account as an unacceptably

ad hoc revision of the traditional definition of omniscience because 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. On Wierenga's definition a being could count as omniscient even though he is ignorant of an infinite number of true propositions.⁴ This is just not what we ordinarily mean by "omniscience."

Wierenga's main response⁵ to this objection is intriguing and revealing:

... 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.

In rejecting these characterizations of his view, Wierenga has, in effect, abandoned a tensed theory of time.

For on a tensed theory of time there is a time which is uniquely and objectively present. Therefore, propositions which are true at some time *t* but false at some other time *t'* are simply true when *t* is present. It is the tenseless theory of time which trades in truth *simpliciter* for truth at a time. Since no time is ever uniquely and objectively present, it makes no sense to ask what just is true, *simpliciter*. Rather one must index truth to times. Such times are ordered in a tenseless B-series, not in an A-series, for if times are tensed, then there is a time which is simply present and propositions true at this time are simply true. Just as serious actualists reject the indexical account of actuality espoused by modal realists like David Lewis in favor of an account according to which propositions are simply true rather than merely true in *W*, so serious tensed time theorists reject an indexical account of presentness in favor of an account according to which propositions expressed by tensed sentences are simply true rather than merely true at *t*. If time is tensed, then, as I said in my critique, a definition of omniscience which takes account of the times at which propositions are true will look, not like Wierenga's, but like Davis's definition

O': *S* is omniscient = *df.* For all *p*, if *p* at *t*, then it is true at *t* that *S* knows that *p* and does not believe $\sim p$.

If Wierenga's definition is intended to preclude any propositions' being simply true, then he will have preserved divine omniscience only at the expense of denying the tensed theory of time. In that case, the second strategy proves no more successful in defending the coherence of divine timelessness, divine omniscience, and a tensed theory of time than the first strategy. Like Kvanvig,⁶ Wierenga turns out to be no A-theorist either!

NOTES

1. Edward Wierenga, "Omniscience and Time, One More Time: A Reply to Craig," *Faith and Philosophy*, vol. 21, no. 1 (January 2004); in response to William Lane Craig, "Omniscience, Tensed Facts, and Divine Eternity," *Faith and Philosophy* 17 (2000): 225-241.

2. See my trilogy on God and the nature of time: *The Tensed Theory of Time: A Critical Examination*, Synthese Library 293 (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2000); *The Tenseless Theory of Time: A Critical Examination*, Synthese Library 294 (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2000); *God, Time, and Eternity* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2001).

3. Consider, for example, my charge that Wierenga fails to give a plausible account of our beliefs *de praesenti*. Any such account must explain our belief states and the cognitive significance which grasped propositional content has for us. In his reply Wierenga, however, explains, "my proposal is about the propositional content of belief, where that is understood as concerning the *propositions* that are believed." This is, in effect, to concede my point, for an account of the propositional content of our beliefs does nothing to explain the cognitive significance our beliefs *de praesenti* have for us. My remarks on the analogy between our beliefs *de se* (expressed by personal indexicals) and our beliefs *de praesenti* (expressed by temporal indexicals) are aimed at Wierenga's account as an account of our belief states, not of the propositional content of our beliefs.

4. Wierenga rightly points out that his definition of omniscience does not restrict God's knowledge to tenseless truths. But I plead innocent to his charge that I have misunderstood him here, for when I say, "In Wierenga's view God has knowledge of propositions stating exclusively tenseless B-facts," I mean by "Wierenga's view" his view of God, not his definition of omniscience.

5. Wierenga does present two independent arguments to motivate his revised definition, both of them arguments from analogy: (i) Omniscience is analogous to omnipotence, which is properly restricted in certain ways. I find this argument to be very weak, however. For the reason omnipotence is suitably circumscribed is that the bald claim that omnipotence means the ability to do anything (universal possibilism) is incoherent, whereas the standard definition of omniscience (O) is not. In any case an acceptable definition of omnipotence places no non-logical limit on God's power, as Wierenga's definition does on omniscience. (ii) Knowledge of tensed facts is analogous to knowledge of personal facts, which are appropriately indexed. This is the best argument for Wierenga's redefinition, for there does seem to be a tight analogy between facts expressed by personal and temporal indexicals (as opposed to spatial indexicals, since there are no objective spatial "tenses"). But this analogy could at most motivate (though it would not require) treating personal and temporal indexicals alike; it would not motivate Wierenga's way of doing so. To avoid the charge that his definition is *ad hoc*, he would have to show that competing analyses of such indexicals are less plausible than his account. Still, Wierenga could claim that his account of the objects of knowledge offers at least one plausible solution to the problem posed by indexical words, so that his solution is open to the defender of divine timelessness without being *ad hoc*. But I doubt that his account does provide a plausible solution. For indexing is a way of eliminating, not preserving, perspectival content. When it is claimed that "Chicago is here" is true at location *l*, the idea is that the propositional content of that sentence is spatially neutral but is truly expressed perspectivally by someone at *l*. In the same way, indexing personal and temporal indexical sentences to persons and times would eliminate private propositions and truth-

variable propositions. But Wierenga clearly understands his account to preserve perspectival propositional content, for he provides as examples of such propositions *I am sitting* and *It is sunny now*. Thus, Wierenga's account seems to be incoherent. (If one does advocate a view according to which propositions are both personally neutral and tenseless, then my remarks on pp. 235-236 of my original article become relevant.)

6. See William Lane Craig, "Kvanvig No A-Theorist," *Faith and Philosophy* 18 (2001): 377-380.