

## DID GOD BEGIN TO EXIST EX NIHILO?

PAUL DOUGLAS KABAY

*University of Melbourne*

**Abstract.** I argue that the following two claims provide us with sufficiently strong reason to conclude that God came into existence from nothing a finite time in the past: (1) that God is omnitemporal; and (2) that there is a first moment of time. After defending the possibility of God beginning to exist *ex nihilo* from various objections, I critique two alternative attempts at providing an account of the relationship between an omnitemporal God and the beginning of time (that of Alan Padgett and William Lane Craig). I show that these either fail to be an alternative to my own model or are less supported by the relevant evidence.

### What should we conclude given the beginning of time and the omnitemporality of God?

Arguably it's the case that God is omnitemporal. By that I mean that God exists at each and every moment of time. Arguably it's also the case that time, along with the rest of the created order, has a beginning – that is to say the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* is true. Various arguments have been proposed to show that these claims are true. William Lane Craig, for example, reaches the conclusion that God is omnitemporal based on the fact that God interacts with a temporal world, together with the claim that God's omniscience entails that he has knowledge of tensed facts.<sup>1</sup> (Craig 2001a, pp. 86-109) According to Craig, these require that God is a temporal being. Also forming an essential part to Craig's position is the claim that tense and temporal becoming are objective features of reality, which is to say

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<sup>1</sup> See also Craig 2001b. A defense of a similar position can be found in DeWeese 2004.

that the A-theory of time is true, and the B-theory of time is false.<sup>2</sup> (Craig 2000a and 2000b)

There are also various arguments on offer that apparently show that time, and so the whole created order, has a beginning. The claim is thought to be strongly confirmed by the findings of physical cosmology, at least for physical time.<sup>3</sup> In addition, lest it might be thought that a non-physical/metaphysical time could be infinite in the past (generated perhaps by a succession of consecutive mental events with no beginning), various philosophical arguments, based on the properties of infinite collections, have been proposed. According to such arguments, infinite collections have properties that can't be instantiated in certain totalities or physical arrangements, such as the series of temporal events.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, infinite collections can't be formed through successive addition, which is how the temporal series is formed given the truth of the A-theory of time.<sup>5</sup> (Craig 1979a, pp. 102-110)

I don't intend to defend such arguments in this paper. This has been done extensively elsewhere. The point of mentioning them is to show that the claims that time began and that God is omnitemporal are respectable positions to take. What I wish to do in this paper is inquire into the implications of these two claims. Given that time has a beginning and that God is omnitemporal, what should we conclude?

I wish to suggest that the reasonable conclusion to draw from these two premises is that God began to exist *ex nihilo* a finite time in the past. This is quite a radical idea and I intend to defend the drawing of this inference in the rest of this paper. But an initial argument from analogy might help to soften the unintuitive elements in this claim. It's possible to conceive of the universe as a complex physical object with the property of omnitemporality. Now, if it turns out that time has a beginning, we have no difficulty in concluding that the universe began to exist a finite time in the past from nothing. I suggest that we should draw a similar conclusion from the fact that

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<sup>2</sup> For a defense of a similar position, also from a theistic perspective see Padgett 2000, pp. 82-121. For a defense of the position from a non-theistic perspective see Smith 1993 (although it should be kept in mind that Smith's version of the A-theory is very different from that of both Craig and Padgett).

<sup>3</sup> A philosophically useful summary of the findings is to be found, among other places, in Craig & Smith 1993. Craig 2000c argues that alternative physical models to Big Bang Cosmology do not contradict the claim that physical time has a beginning.

<sup>4</sup> Surprisingly few philosophers, from either side of the theological fence, have thought that such arguments are sound. The classic defense of them is Craig 1979a, pp. 69-102. The literature critiquing these arguments is quite extensive but two interesting examples are Kabay 2006 and Guminski 2002.

<sup>5</sup> The best defense of this (and most concise) is to be found in Craig 2007, pp. 77-8.

God is omnitemporal and time has a beginning. Of course, one is tempted at this point to point out that there are all sorts of differences between a physical universe and God. This is true, but I wish to argue that none of these differences are at all relevant. Take, for example, the following: God is a non-physical object, whilst the universe is a physical object. Although this is true, I don't think that this is a relevant difference. To see this we only have to consider the possibility of a finite mind such as my own – assuming for now that such a thing is a non-physical substance. This is clearly a temporal entity, and on some cosmologies (such as Hinduism or Jainism) it is omnitemporal, and indeed without beginning. But one could conceive of a scenario in which a mind such as my own is omnitemporal and yet time had a beginning. Again we would have no difficulty in concluding that my mind came into existence from nothing a finite time in the past.

Of course, there are further differences between a mind such as my own and God. But one would have to show that these are relevant differences. In the section that follows I will address a number of these, and show that there doesn't seem to be anything impossible about the idea of a God who came into existence from nothing a finite time in the past. Before I do so, however, I wish to address a point that just might be playing on the mind of the listener at this point in the paper. One might suspect that at this stage I am perhaps making use of a notion of deity that is somewhat 'watered down', for want of a better phrase. I wish to make it clear that I am not – or at least I do not think that I am. I am assuming what many would accept is a strong version of theism. Specifically, I take it for granted that God is a logically necessary mind that exists independently of everything else (that is to say, has existence *a se*), and is the creator of everything that exists other than itself. It is my contention that it is possible for a being of this sort to begin to exist from nothing, and that the two claims mentioned (that God is omnitemporal and that time has a beginning) provide us with sufficient reason to conclude that this is in fact the case.

### **On the Possibility of God coming into existence *ex nihilo***

In this section of the paper I wish to address three distinct reasons why someone might think that the idea of God coming into existence *ex nihilo* a finite time in the past might be incoherent. The reasons are: a logically necessary being can't begin to exist; a being that exists *a se* can't begin to exist; a being that begins to exist can't be the creator of everything else that exists. I hope to convince the reader that there are sensible replies to each

of these, and that it is therefore reasonable to conclude that it is possible for God to begin to exist *ex nihilo* a finite time ago.

**Objection 1: it is impossible for a logically necessary being  
to begin to exist *ex nihilo***

Let's begin with the first of these objections: is it impossible for a logically necessary being to begin to exist *ex nihilo*? It does not take much reflection to see that the answer to this question is a straightforward, no. A logically necessary being is simply a being that exists in every possible world. To say that there is a logically necessary being that begins to exist is not to say that in every possible world there is a being that begins to exist. That does sound unintuitive and wildly implausible. After all, there would seem to be possible worlds in which nothing begins to exist because there is no time in such worlds. Rather, what I am suggesting is that there is a being that exists in every possible world, and in some of these possible worlds (including perhaps the actual world) this being begins to exist. That is to say, the property of beginning to exist is an accidental, and not an essential, property of this being. Such a being's relationship with time must be a contingent affair. It will exist in possible worlds in which there is no time or change, and in worlds in which there is time and change. It will exist in worlds in which time is finite in the past and worlds which are infinite in the past (assuming that such a thing is logically possible).

Note also that I am not claiming that a logically necessary being can begin to exist at just any moment in the temporal series of events. If a being began to exist at some moment later than the first moment of time, then it is clear that this being could not be logically necessary – its nonexistence is obviously conceivable and possible. After all, it fails to exist temporally prior to its coming into existence. However, a necessarily existing entity could be omnitemporal. That is to say, a being that begins to exist can exist of necessity so long as it existed at every moment of time. If time had a beginning, then it could exist at every moment even though it began to exist, as it would begin to exist from the very first moment of time.

In addition to existing at every moment of time, it would also have to be the case that there are no other ways for a concrete being to exist besides being temporal. Reality must be such that temporality exhausts the options for existing. It can't be the case that a being can have a non-temporal existence in such a reality, for instance. If reality were such that a concrete being could exist in a non-temporal state, then the fact that God came into existence *ex nihilo* would entail that God failed to exist in this other non-temporal mode

of being. As such, it is possible for God to fail to exist and so he would not exist of logical necessity. Of course, this is not to say that reality *can't* be such that there are other non-temporal modes of being available to a concrete object – just that as a matter of fact there are no such modes of being available to a concrete being. There might be possible worlds in which such modes of being are available to a concrete being, and in such worlds, God would have to exist in such modes. But in those possible worlds in which God comes into existence *ex nihilo*, there are no such modes of being. Of course, all of this is just to say that the temporal fixes the boundaries of the world in which God begins to exist *ex nihilo*.

So we can see then that there are at least three conditions that must be met in order for it to be possible for a logically necessary being to come into existence *ex nihilo*. First, the coming into existence *ex nihilo* must be an accidental property of this being. Secondly, such a being must be omnitemporal – that is to say, it must exist at every moment of time. Thirdly, as a matter of fact there must not be any other modes of being available to exist in other than temporal being – that is to say, the world in which God begins to exist *ex nihilo* must be a strictly temporal reality. I do not think that there is anything incoherent about these conditions being met, and so I conclude that it is possible for a logically necessary being to begin to exist *ex nihilo* a finite time in the past.

**Objection 2: it is impossible for  
a being that exists *a se* to begin to exist**

God is thought to be a being whose existence is not dependent on the existence of any other being, or at least any other concrete being. That is to say, God exists *a se*. Is it the case that a being that exists independently can't begin to exist? But why think that this is so? The only reason that I can think of is what might be called the Causal Principle (CP):

CP: *everything that begins to exist has a cause of its beginning to exist.*

If the CP were true, then it would seem to be the case that it isn't possible for an independent being to begin to exist. This is because any being that begins to exist is dependent upon some being to be the cause of its existence – but an independent being cannot be caused to exist by some other being.

But it seems to me that even this conclusion is drawn far too hastily. After all, it doesn't take into account the possibility of self-causation. If there is nothing incoherent about self-causation, then the truth of the CP

will not rule out an independent being beginning to exist. This is because such a being could be the cause of its own existence and so not be dependent upon any being other than itself for its existence. But, of course, many are going to reject the idea that self-causation is coherent.<sup>6</sup> But it is not clear to me that it fails to be coherent. The only way that it could fail to be coherent is if we could rule out relations of simultaneous causation. If a cause had to be temporally prior to its effect, then it is the case that a being couldn't be self-caused. This is because such a being would have to exist before it existed in order to bring itself into existence – an idea that is obviously incoherent. But if a cause can be simultaneous with its effect, then there is nothing incoherent about a being causing itself to exist. On such an account of causation, a being does not have to exist prior to its own existence in order to bring itself into existence. All that it requires is that such a being exist exactly at the same time as its own existence – and that much is clearly satisfied.<sup>7</sup> And, of course, there are no good reasons to think that a cause can't be simultaneous with its effect.<sup>8</sup> We can conclude then that the truth of the CP does not rule out an independent being beginning to exist a finite time in the past.

But one wonders whether it is the truth of the CP that should be questioned in this case, rather than the possibility of an independent being beginning to exist *ex nihilo*. Advocates of the CP are motivated by the intuition that things can't come into existence randomly and without any reason at all – that is to say, the coming into existence of things can't be inexplicable. This seems to be a reasonable intuition in my view. But it isn't clear that what I am proposing will clash with this intuition. After all, if the indepen-

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<sup>6</sup> I am aware that the notion of self-causation has not been popular among philosophers, although there are exceptions to this rule – most notably Descartes who thought that it was essential to his ontological proof in *Meditation V* (see Milner 2002). I for one have never understood the opposition to it.

<sup>7</sup> Some have objected to self-causation on the basis that it is explanatory vacuous – See for example Craig & Copan 2004, pp. 176-7. Presumably the point here is that a cause must be explanatory prior to its effect, and something cannot be explanatory prior to itself. My response is that it is not clear to me that a causal relationship need have any explanatory value. That is to say, it is not a necessary condition that the citing of a cause must explain an effect. I think that causal and explanatory relations are quite distinct, although it is true that we sometimes cite the cause of something in order to explain it. But there is no reason to think that the causal relations of the world necessarily obey our explanatory expectations.

<sup>8</sup> The doctrine of simultaneous causation is only a little less controversial than the doctrine of self-causation. Some are of the view that causal priority entails temporal priority – See for example Le Poidevin 1988 and Ehring 1987. Although most interesting, I do not think that such arguments are conclusive. Indeed, they seem to rule out being able to find a causal account of the beginning of the universe.

dent being that comes into existence were a logically necessary being, then although it comes into existence uncaused, it isn't the case that its existence is inexplicable. Such a being exists because it must exist – that is to say, it exists in every possible world. I tend to think that the CP should only apply to contingently existing entities that begin to exist. Necessarily existing beings that begin to exist are explicable for reasons other than being caused.

I conclude therefore that there is no convincing reason to think that an independently existing being couldn't begin to exist from nothing. It is now time to turn to the final objection to the possibility that God begins to exist *ex nihilo*.

**Objection 3: a being that begins to exist can't be the creator  
of every other contingent being**

Perhaps the notion that God can begin to exist is incompatible with the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. According to such an objection, if God begins to exist, then he can't be the cause of all contingently existing things. Some things would exist independently of God's creative activity.

But it takes little reflection to see that this objection is far from convincing, especially given the coherence of the notion of simultaneous causation. Even if there have always been contingent entities in existence from the first moment of time, God could be the cause of all such entities. On this account, God's beginning to exist could be simultaneous with his causing other contingent entities, including time, to exist. We would be required to postulate some additional state of God in addition to his existence from the first moment of time only if God required some sort of 'preparation' in order to bring about his creation. But God does not require such a state of preparation. Given that God possess the essential properties of omniscience and omnipotence, he requires no preparation at all for instantiating his intentions. But even if he did require some sort of preparation, some 'warm up' so to speak, this would not require us to postulate a state in addition to his temporal state from the first moment of time. Creation could take place a specified interval of time after God's coming into existence *ex nihilo*.

It seems to me then that there is no incompatibility between the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* and God beginning to exist *ex nihilo*. It seems to me that there are no good reasons to claim that it is impossible for God to begin to exist from nothingness. I conclude that it is indeed possible for God to begin to exist *ex nihilo*.



### Alternative Accounts

Although I believe I have shown that there is nothing impossible about the idea that God can begin to exist from nothingness, more work is required to demonstrate that the inference from God's omnitemporality and the beginning of time provides sufficient reason to believe that God came into existence *ex nihilo*. It is probably not the case that the inference is deductively valid. This is because there is available at least one other account of the nature of the relationship between an omnitemporal God and the beginning of time that doesn't entail that God began to exist *ex nihilo*. Assuming that such an account is coherent, it follows that it is possible for God to be omnitemporal and for time to begin, and yet God not to have begun to exist *ex nihilo*. But I wish to make the case that although the inference is not deductively valid, it still provides strong support for the view that God did indeed come into existence *ex nihilo*. What I intend to do, therefore, is show that these premises better support this conclusion than they do the alternative accounts.

I will examine two of the most well known accounts of the relationship between God and the beginning of time: those of Alan Padgett and William Lane Craig. I will show, first, that Padgett's account isn't really an alternative to mine. That is to say, I will show that Padgett's account seems to entail that God came into existence *ex nihilo*. Secondly, I will show that the relevant premises (that God is omnitemporal and that time had a beginning) more appropriately support my account than it does Craig's simply because Craig's account goes beyond the available evidence, whilst mine does not.

According to Padgett, God exists temporally prior to the moment of creation in a state of metrically amorphous time. (Padgett 2000, pp. 7-10, 125-30) At the moment of creation he creates the laws of physics and, as a result, produces a metrically differentiated time in which physical events take place. On Padgett's proposal we can articulate the relationship between God and the beginning of time in this way: God exists in metrically amorphous time *sans* creation, and begins to exist in metrically differentiated time subsequent to creation. On my own account, God is non-existent *sans* creation, and temporal subsequent to creation.<sup>9</sup> On Padgett's account,

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<sup>9</sup> The use of the word 'sans' (which means 'without') in this area of debate seems to have been introduced by William Lane Craig – see Craig 1979b. My use of the phrase, and indeed Craig's use of the phrase (see below), must be understood very carefully. When I say that God is non-existent *sans* creation I mean that there is no state of God's being in addition to that which he has from the first moment of time. I do not mean that he would be non-existent



unlike my own, there is an important sense in which God has an existence independent of time – if by ‘time’ we mean metrically differentiated time.

There are various problems one could raise concerning Padgett’s proposal. For example, it is not clear that one should accept his thesis of metric conventionalism, as it is not clear that time fails to have an intrinsic metric. (Ganssle 2001, pp. 117-8) But even more importantly, I think, it seems to me that all Padgett achieves with his proposal is the pushing back of the original problem. Recall that the issue at stake was how God relates to the beginning of time. Padgett has shown us how God relates to the beginning of metric time, but we can still ask: How is it that God relates to the first metrically amorphous interval that characterizes his existence *sans* creation? Padgett is suggesting that God is merely omnitemporal – that is to say, there is nothing more to God’s existence than his temporal existence. The only new twist to his account is that God has a temporal existence with a metric and a prior temporal existence without such a metric. But he still accepts that time has a beginning – it is just that the beginning of time is a single metrically amorphous interval or moment. This metrically amorphous moment comes into being, passes away all at once (because it is metrically amorphous) and physical time comes into being. But in that case, it would appear that God began to exist – at the single moment of amorphous time. Padgett’s proposal then is not really an alternative to my own. Indeed, given the problems with the claim that time does not have an intrinsic metric my own proposal would seem to be preferable, as it does not assume conventionalism with respect to the metric of time.

On the other hand, the account provided by Craig is indeed a genuine alternative to my own. (Craig 2001b and 2001a, pp. 217-36) Craig suggests that subsequent to creation God is omnitemporal. But God is timeless *sans* creation. In this timeless state, God timelessly causes the universe to come into existence. Upon the creation of time, God is in time. The relationship between God in his timeless state and the beginning of time is a purely causal one with no temporal relations at all. There are two phases then to God’s existence (a timeless phase and a temporal phase) which are causally connected to form a single divine life. Unlike my own theory, on Craig’s account God has an existence that is independent of time. God exists *sans*

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in some other possible world in which this creation does not obtain. Given that I take God to be a logically necessary being, he would exist in all possible worlds, and so in that sense of ‘sans creation’ he would exist. My use of ‘sans creation’ refers to how he is in the actual world (as it does for Craig as well).

creation – it is just that he exists timelessly. On my account he fails to exist *sans* creation.

That there are difficulties with this most fascinating of theories is certainly an understatement. Before offering any critiques of Craig's view, however, it is important to understand what it isn't saying. It is important to see that Craig isn't saying that God is in a timeless state before creation, where 'before' means 'temporally prior to'. Craig's position is that the timeless state is causally but not temporally prior to the moment of creation. Indeed, the timeless state does not, nor could have, any temporal relation with the first moment of creation – it cannot even be simultaneous with it. Although Craig holds that the A-theory of time is true, and so the first moment of time has passed away and no longer exists, one can't conclude from this that Craig's position entails that God's timeless state (which is the cause of the first moment of time) has passed away or changed in some way.<sup>10</sup> This would be true only if God's timeless state was in a temporal relationship with the first moment (say if it were simultaneous with it, for example). But it has no temporal relationship with the first moment of time – it is only causally prior to the first moment and not temporally prior. As such, Craig's position doesn't entail that God's timeless state passes away or changes. It does no such thing. On Craig's view, God's timeless state *sans* creation brings about (in a tenseless sense) the first moment of time. This never changes precisely because it is timeless.

But it is just this point that raises a problem for Craig's position. His fundamental assumption is that two entities can stand in a causal relationship with one another without there being any temporal relationship between them. That is to say, A causes B without A being earlier than, or simultaneous with B. Now I wish to suggest that although there is nothing inconsistent about this notion of causality, at best it is very odd and at worst it is meaningless in as much as it is supposed to be an account of causation. I would have thought that it is part of the meaning of causality that a cause stands in some sort of temporal relationship with its effect. I am not saying that a cause must be temporally prior to its effect. After all, there is nothing wrong I think with the idea of a cause being simultaneous with its effect. But Craig's concept of causation would have to be independent of even this sort of temporality.<sup>11</sup> Of course, Craig could always reply to this by saying that, if it's true that

<sup>10</sup> This, for example, seems to be the position of Paul Helm in Ganssle 2001, pp. 163-4.

<sup>11</sup> On some accounts (such as the dynamic causal theory) causal relations are sufficient to establish temporal relations. On such accounts A causing B entails A is earlier than B. Craig's model is explicitly rejected by DeWeese on the basis that it is incompatible with a dynamic causal theory of time (see DeWeese 2004, p. 270).

a cause must be temporally related to its effect, all that follows is that God isn't literally the cause of the universe. The relationship isn't causal but is some other relationship of dependence. If this is Craig's response, then he needs to say a lot more about the nature of this relationship before we can accept his account of creation. At best then, Craig's position is tentative and inconclusive. Craig is correct when he exclaims that „I should be the first to admit that my hybrid view of divine eternity is certainly curious.” (Ganssle 2001, p. 186) But he is certainly incorrect when he follows this with, „...the view that God is timeless sans creation and temporal since creation ... is the most plausible doctrine of divine eternity.” (Ganssle 2001, p. 186)

But even with these difficulties aside, I believe that the relevant premises (that God is omnitemporal and that time began) more appropriately supports my own account of God's relationship with the beginning of time than does Craig's. The reason for this is quite straightforward. Craig's account entails things that go beyond these two claims and my account doesn't. Both accounts entail that God begins to exist and both premises supports this. But Craig's account makes an additional claim about God's ontological state. His account entails that God, in addition to beginning to exist, has a timeless existence. But the claims about omnitemporality and the beginning of time do not warrant this extra inference. Strictly speaking the truth of these claims only supports the claim that God began to exist. On the truth of these claims we are not entitled to claim that God has any extra ontological status beyond time. But my account does not postulate any extra ontological status to God beyond time. One does not require postulating this extra ontological state in order to account for the omnitemporality of God and the beginning of time. The postulation of a timeless state of God *sans* creation is largely superfluous once one allows for simultaneous causation. After all, God only needs to be in existence at every moment of time, given the possibility of simultaneous causation, in order to account for the beginning of the universe – an additional timeless cause is not required. This is, of course, a methodological point I am making. One shouldn't make claims that go beyond the given evidence unless it's necessary – and as I have attempted to show earlier in the paper, it isn't necessary in this case.

### Concluding Remarks

There are still some loose ends to tie up before concluding this paper. According to my account of the relationship between God and the beginning of time, God came into existence *ex nihilo* a finite time in the past. God

really has a finite age. Given what we know from contemporary big bang cosmology, I estimate that God is approximately fifteen billion years old. (Craig 2002, p. 145) Of course, God being only fifteen billion years old is quite compatible with Craig's model, because on that model God began to exist a finite time in the past. But on Craig's model, God didn't begin to exist *ex nihilo*, but rather he began to exist from a timeless state. That God has an age of a *mere* fifteen billion years (with no additional ontological state) does sound deeply unintuitive, but it need not be once we keep in mind the conclusions reached earlier in the presentation. God can be a *mere* fifteen billion years old and yet exist independently and of logical necessity and be the creator of everything else that exists, including time itself. That he is fifteen billion years old, however, is an accidental property that he possesses. There are possible worlds in which God exists in a timeless state without any creation. There are possible worlds in which he exists as described by Craig's account, in which God is temporal subsequent to creation but in addition he has a timeless existence *sans* creation. And if you believe that an infinite temporal regress is possible, then you will believe that there are possible worlds in which God has an age that is greater than any finite number. But in the actual world we have good reason to believe he is a mere fifteen billion years old!

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