

Be Careful What You Wish For: A Reply to Craig

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Recently William Lane Craig (2000, 2001) has attempted to resuscitate an argument, originally given by George Schlesinger (1980), against the tenseless or B-theory of time, according to which the only intrinsically temporal entities are the temporal relations of earlier/later than and simultaneity. According to Craig, the objective reality of temporal becoming—the passage of time or events in time, from the future to the present and into the past—is implied by “the experience of wishing it were now some other time; for example, [Wishing that] it were now 1968!” (2001, p. 160).¹ For, following Schlesinger, Craig maintains when I wish that it were now some other time, what I am wishing for or what my wish is about is that the temporal particular, the NOW, or the temporal property of *presentness*, or some other metaphysical substitute for the property of *presentness*, be at some moment in the temporal series other than the moment at which it is now located. Since, however, on the B-theory there is no moving NOW and there are no suitable tenseless surrogates with the same meaning as the wish, Craig concludes that B-theorists must maintain that anyone who has such a wish (including B-theorists themselves since such a wish is commonplace) is to that extent irrational. Since Craig believes that the wish is rational and that the rationality of the wish can only be explained by appealing to the objectivity of tense and temporal becoming he infers that the experience in question is a strong argument for the A-theory and against the B-theory. But is the wish rational? And can it be explained only if an A-theoretic ontology is true? The aim of my paper is to explore those questions and in so doing provide a B-theoretic response to Craig’s argument.

Craig’s use of the terms “rational” and “irrational” is ambiguous, so I shall begin by delineating two possible interpretations of the

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all references in the text will be to (Craig, 2001).

distinction. In one sense of the term, we could say that a fear or belief is rational₁ if there is some reason to believe that the fact in virtue of which the belief would be true or the fear realized exists. On the other hand if, after having been given reasons to doubt that the belief is true or that the fear would be realized one steadfastly holds on to the belief or fear, then that would be irrational₁. For example, if after entering an elevator and reading that it was just inspected I were to fear that the cords will break and I will fall to my death, then I would be caught in the throes of an irrational₁ fear. Thus, in the first sense an irrational belief or fear would be one whose object we still believe or fear in spite of the knowledge that its existence is highly unlikely.

It should be noted, however, there is an important difference between an irrational fear (and an irrational belief) on the one hand, and an “irrational” wish on the other, that may vitiate Craig’s entire argument against the B-theorist from the outset insofar as the first meaning of “irrational” is involved. To use an example of Schlesinger’s, I may have the belief that a tiger is outside my house, and consequently, I dread to open the door, but as soon as I am reasoned with and it is clearly demonstrated to me that there is no tiger anywhere within miles of my house, I shall—if I am rational—overcome my fear. However, the case of a wish is not analogous. I may wish that I win the lottery, or that there be a complete cure of all types of cancer by tomorrow, but even after it is explained to me that neither of these events is going to happen, I can still have the wish, nor would I be considered irrational to do so. When it comes to wishes, it is not at all clear that the categories of rational and irrational apply. The fact that something is not going to occur, even if you have reasons to believe that it will not occur, is not sufficient grounds for saying that the wish is irrational or that to be rational you should give up the wish. One often wishes for something to occur knowing full well that there is no chance of its happening and yet we do not say that the wish is irrational. For example, I wish that my parents were alive and here with me tonight. Even after I have been reminded that my parents have been dead for over 40 years, and even after it has been demonstrated to me that there is no life after death, I may still have the wish that my parents were alive and here. So even if what is wished for has no chance of success and I know it, I might still wish for it and would not be considered irrational to do so.

Thus, when Craig says that “[T]he theorist of tenseless time must regard every philosophically informed person who shares such experiences (including himself) as in that respect irrational” (p. 160), he must mean something other than would maintain the wish knowing that it is unlikely to be satisfied, since that, in itself, would not make the person

having the wish irrational even if one was a B-theorist. Moreover, since Craig agrees with Schlesinger that for such wishes, “there is *no chance* of my wish’s fulfillment” (p. 160; emphasis added) the wish would be irrational even for an A-theorist, given the first meaning of “irrational.” What, then, does he mean by claiming that such wishes are irrational on the B-theory and rational on the A-theory?

When Craig claims that B-theorists are irrational he seems to have in mind a stronger sense of “irrational” (and weaker sense of rational) than “not reasonable to suppose will occur given the relevant background information.” Craig is assuming that if a wish *can* be fulfilled, that is, if it is a broadly logically possible wish, then it is a rational₂ wish. Alternatively, we could say that if the referential meaning of the wish, or the (ontological) fact that must obtain in order for the wish to be fulfilled *could* exist, then the wish is rational, in this second sense of the term, even if the ontological fact (or “fulfillment maker” as I shall also call it), does not actually exist. On the other hand, if a person wishes something for which there is no and couldn’t possibly be a referential meaning then he or she is being irrational. Thus, to wish that the square root of 3 were 8, that my four-legged chair remain four-legged, but nevertheless have only three legs, or that there be two uniquely supreme beings, would all be irrational₂ wishes since there are no and could not possibly be any fulfillment makers or ontological facts for those wishes, or equivalently, their referential meaning would be impossible.

There is a related notion of rational/irrational distinction (call it “2a”) that needs to be distinguished from—even though it is parasitic on—the second notion. According to it, a wish is irrational_{2a} if what one wishes for *is known by one to be impossible* and rational_{2a} if what one wishes for is impossible although it *is not known by one to be impossible*. Clearly, Craig cannot have this distinction in mind when he says that on the A-theory the wish that it were now some other time is rational since then he would be admitting that the A-theory is logically impossible and thus irrational₂ in a sense that would undermine his position. Moreover, if the wish is rational_{2a} then it could not possibly be fulfilled and his claim that the B-theorist is irrational_{2a} would be indefensible. Certainly no B-theorist would be so irrational so as to wish it were now some other time knowing it to be impossible.

Clearly, then, the crucial questions are whether the wish that it were *now* some other time is rational₂—could it be fulfilled?—and if it is not rational₂, is that an objection to the B-theory? I think the answer to both questions is “no.” To see why let us consider the analogous cases of the personal indexical “I,” and the spatial indexical “here.” For example, consider the wish that *I* were some other person, say Arnold

Schwarzenegger. Is that a rational₂ wish? I think not. Since “I” refers to the person who uses the term, the wish would be fulfilled only if I, Nathan Oaklander, were the same person as Arnold Schwarzenegger. Of course, given that I, Nathan Oaklander, am identical with myself and not with any other person, the fulfillment of the wish is logically impossible. Therefore, my wish is irrational₂ in the sense that it has no (reference) meaning because there is no and couldn’t possibly be a fulfillment maker to satisfy it.

Similarly, consider the wish that *here* were some other place, say, New York. Since “here” refers to the place where I am using the term, and that place is Ann Arbor, the wish would be fulfilled only if Ann Arbor were New York, which is absurd. Thus, the wish that here were some other place is irrational₂, since it could not possibly be fulfilled and therefore has no meaning in the sense required. For those reasons, the analogous grammatical construction regarding time, namely, I wish that *now* were some other time, say, 25 December 2005, is also open to the charge of irrationality₂. Since “now” refers to the time at which I make the wish, and that time is 18 August 2005, the wish would be fulfilled only if the date 18 August 2005 were the same date as 25 December 2005, and given the necessity of identity that is impossible. Thus, the temporal wish, like the analogous personal and spatial wishes, has no and couldn’t possibly have a fulfillment maker and so, in the relevant sense, *is* meaningless and irrational₂.

Craig demurs because he does not believe that the spatial and personal cases are analogous to the temporal one. Craig raises two related objections. First, he claims that the wish is “evidently rational” and “intuitively reasonable” and the B-theorist could only think otherwise by twisting the meaning of the wish. For when I wish that it were now some other time, what I am wishing for—what my wish is about or what it intends—is not that 18 August 2005 were 25 December 2005 which is logically impossible, but rather I am wishing that “instead of the NOW being at [18 August 2005], I should like it to be at [25 December 2005]” (p. 160). Craig continues,

Such a wish *makes sense* only if tense and temporal becoming are objective features of reality. Therefore, the rationality of such wishes implies that the tensed theory of time is correct. (p. 166; emphasis added)

His second objection, which follows from the first, is that the case involving personal indexicals is not analogous to the temporal case, for while a violation of the necessity of identity would occur in the personal case, “By contrast there is no such difficulty in wishing that some

other time were present” (p. 162). Thus, on the B-theory the wish is logically impossible and so irrational, whereas on the A-theory the wish is certainly possible and so rational because the tensed theory of time is possible.

There are, it seems to me, several question begging assumptions and confusions in Craig’s argument for A-time and against B-time. In order to see how they arise I want to introduce a second notion of meaning and a third notion of rationality. In a second sense, the meaning₂ of a sentence or thought is whatever is (intended to be) asserted by a sentence or represented by a thought. Thus, for example, if I say, “The cat is on the mat or the dog is on the mat,” then what this sentence states and what the corresponding thought intends is that the cat is on the mat or the dog is on the mat. Suppose we call this sense of meaning “intentional meaning₂.” Then we could say that a wish is rational₃ if and only if it “makes sense” and a wish makes sense only if its intentional meaning₂ or cognitive significance can be accounted for. To account for the intentional meaning of a thought or a sentence is to provide something on the side of the *subject* in the form of a mind-dependent content or propositional character that intends what the thought is about such as a fact or falsehood, or on the side of the *object* in the form of a mind-independent proposition which is the meaning of the sentence or thought. Craig infers that since the wish that it were now some other time “makes sense” (that is, it has intentional meaning₂ or cognitive significance), it is evidently rational in the sense of having referential meaning₁ or the possibility of a fulfillment maker. But that is a fallacious inference since it confuses the third notion of rationality with the second. Just because such wishes are the expression of thoughts with tensed contents it does not follow that the ontological facts that would fulfill those wishes are even possible, much less does it follow that “such wishes *make sense* [that is, have intentional meaning] only if tense and temporal becoming are objective features of reality” or that “the rationality of such wishes implies that the tensed theory of time is correct” (p. 166), (i.e., that tensed facts are the referential meanings of the wishes in question).

Craig writes in ways that presuppose the distinction between the intentional meaning of a wish (upon which a wish’s being rational₃ depends) and its referential meaning (upon which a wish’s being rational₁ and rational₂ depends)—between what the wish is about or intends and what ontological fact would fulfill the wish—but he doesn’t realize that it undermines his argument against the B-theory. Consider the following passage:

As Schlesinger points out, even though there is *no chance of my wish's fulfillment*, there is no lack of clarity as to what exactly I am wishing for. 'Anybody familiar with my plight would fully sympathize with me and unfailingly grasp what feature of the universe I should like to be different from what it is: instead of the NOW being at t_1 , I should like it to be at t_0 ' (p. 160; emphasis added).

This passage is striking. When Craig claims that "there is no chance of my wish's fulfillment," he must be talking about reference meaning, and when he says that "there is no lack of clarity as to what exactly I am wishing for" he is talking about intentional meaning. But why should the fact that we can wish for it now to be some other time, constitute an argument against the B-theory? Craig reasons that because the wish is intuitively reasonable (or rational₃), that what I am wishing for—the cognitive significance of the wish—involves or implies an A-theoretic ontology, and since he assumes that "it is hard to think of anything that is more evident [or obvious] to us than the fact of temporal becoming" (p. 159), he concludes that the ontological significance of the wish, if I may so put it, is "evidently rational₂." These assumptions and confusions do little to demonstrate that either the wish is rational or if it is that the existence of such a wish would constitute an argument against the B-theory.

There is another interpretation of the rational/irrational distinction, related to the third that can shed further light on the error in Craig's argument against the B-theorist. On this interpretation, a wish is irrational_{3a} if what one wishes for is *inconceivable* and rational_{3a} if what one wishes for is *conceivable*. However, since there is an interesting kind of psychological relation of conceivability such that being conceivable does not entail being possible, the B-theorist can maintain that the wish is rational in the sense of being conceivable, while still maintaining that it is impossible for it to have a fulfillment maker, and hence an irrational₂ wish.

Before concluding I would like to consider Craig's claim that "By contrast [to the personal case where wishing that I were A.S. involves a logical impossibility] there is no such difficulty in wishing that some other time were present" (p. 162). I strongly disagree. By endorsing Schlesinger's account of what I am wishing for, Craig is endorsing an A-theoretic ontology that is susceptible to the dialectical difficulties found in McTaggart's paradox. On Schlesinger's hybrid A/B theory of time, events acquire and shed the monadic A-properties of *pastness*, *presentness*, and *futurity* as the NOW moves along the B-series of earlier and later events, but Craig explicitly rejects Schlesinger's proposal when he says that "I am convinced, like McTaggart and many others, that such a hybrid A-B theory is incoherent, so that we must choose

either a pure A-theory or a pure B-theory” (Craig, 2003, pp. 391-92).² Thus, if, as Craig asserts, Schlesinger is right in his interpretation of the meaning of the wish, then according to Craig’s own remarks the wish would be incoherent and those who believe in it, including himself, would be irrational₂.

Of course, Craig would reply that the A-theory of time implied by such wishes is not the hybrid A/B theory, but rather a pure A-theory or presentist metaphysics. On this view, Craig says, we should take “time’s flow as a metaphor for absolute becoming, that is to say, the successive actualization of states of affairs or events’ and/or things’ acquisition of the property of presentness” (2000, p. 222). It would take us too far a field to evaluate the prospects for Craig’s theory of time in this paper. Suffice it to say, that in order for events or states of affairs to be *successively* actualized, they must come into exist one *after* another, but as I have argued in detail elsewhere (Oaklander, 2004a,b,c), on Craig’s metaphysics of presentism the existence of temporal relations does not have an adequate ontological foundation, and that, as a result, his account of time and becoming *is* subject to McTaggart’s paradox and must therefore be rejected.

In general, we can make sense of many false sets of beliefs, many false theories and stories. We can even know that they are false and wish they were true. We can all wish that the Santa story were true and that he would give us lots of money and we can all express this by saying “I wish Santa would give me lots of money.” The true believer in Santa might feel more virtuous and more rational when he wishes Santa would give him big bucks, but only because he does not have to consider the extra counterfactual scenario—the Santa theory being true. Of course, the B-theorist is not really wishing the A-theory is true, so this makes the B-theorist look more irrational to the A-theorist. For the true believer in Santa, how irrational all the nonbelievers must look!, and for Craig “B-theorists are [such] a source of wonderment” that he finds it “simply amazing that such persons can convince themselves that our most deeply seated and ineludible intuitions about the nature of reality are delusory” (Craig, 2000, p. 165).

I shall conclude with a rather different way of looking at things. The B-theorist can not only understand what the A-theorist means and

² See, William Lane Craig “McTaggart’s Paradox and the Problem of Temporary Intrinsic,” *Analysis* 58 (1998): 122-27; especially p. 127 where he says “hybrid A-B theorists, like McCall, Schlesinger, and Smith are, it seems, in deep trouble.” And, in (Craig, 2000) he criticizes “George Schlesinger, who has repeatedly (*and, I think, vainly*) tried to defend the literal movement of what he calls the NOW along the B-series” (p. 221; emphasis added).

reject it as false, he can wish the A-theorist were more rational, and offer some other analysis or theory about what the A-theorist ought to be wishing for (a surrogate) given the B-theory is true. What these surrogates might be is, however, a question for another occasion.³

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