

Craig on the Experience of Tense

In his recent book, *The Tensed Theory of Time: A Critical Examination*,¹ William Lane Craig offers several criticisms of my views on our experience of time. The purpose of the present essay is to respond to some of those criticisms. The best place to begin the discussion is with Craig's own account of our experience of time and what I take to be the confusions upon which it is based.

As I have indicated throughout, there are two ways in which we think about, talk about, and understand time. We understand time in terms of temporal becoming, or events being past, present, and future and changing their position with respect to those notions, and we understand time in terms of temporal relations, which are unchanging relations of earlier/later than and simultaneous with, between, and among events. All philosophers of time, whether A-theorists or B-theorists, would agree or should agree that at the preanalytic level of ordinary language and thought, there are temporal relations and there is temporal becoming. The ontological question concerns the truth ground of temporal language and thought. In virtue of what are temporal judgments true? Understood preanalytically, our judgments, thoughts, and language about time are ontologically neutral. It is the task of the philosopher to determine what entities are necessary to adequately interpret those judgments. Craig does not agree. Craig maintains that our language and thought about time express what he calls "properly basic beliefs," and I have nothing to criticize if what he means is that we ordinarily think and talk about time in several different ways. Unfortunately, that is not what Craig means. Craig argues that since the reality of tense and temporal becoming is a properly basic belief—a universal belief whose veridicality is given to us in experience²—the A-theory of time is true. Indeed, according to Craig, the A-theory is necessarily true, since "our experience of tense and temporal

becoming is an intrinsic defeater-defeater that overwhelms any B-theoretic arguments against the reality of tense without specifically rebutting or undercutting them."³ In this he is mistaken, since his reasoning either assumes what needs to be proved or confuses common sense with ontology or both.

Craig begins by assuming not only that judgments that reflect the transitory and static aspects of time (to use phrases coined by Broad) are true but also that the A-theory of time is a basic datum that is given to us in experience in virtue of which they are true. Thus, in characterizing our belief in temporal becoming and the reality of tense as property basic, Craig is assuming at the outset that the A-theory of time is true and enjoys "such powerful warrant that it itself defeats the alleged defeater brought against it by simply overwhelming it."⁴ This way of putting the matter begs the question twice over. First, it assumes that our experience of time is A-theoretic, that we experience time in accordance with Craig's ontology. And second, it assumes that the B-theory is attempting an ontological reduction of our experience of A-theoretic time. Both assumptions are mistaken. Admittedly, our experience of temporal becoming (and temporal relations) are data that need to be explained, but it does not follow that it is an experiential datum that time flows in some A-theoretic sense. For that reason, the B-theory does not attempt an ontological reduction or elimination of an A-theoretical ontology from our experience analogous to the way in which a physicalist attempts to eliminate mental phenomena. Thus, Craig's talk about defeater-defeaters that overwhelm the attempt to defeat a properly basic belief is irrelevant and question-begging. B-theorists are not attempting to defeat the experience of time, but rather they are attempting to explicate what are the ontological commitments of that experience. Craig packs into the experience an ontology that assumes what needs to be proved and then criticizes the B-theory for trying to eliminate an A-theoretic ontology that is given to us in experience.

That Craig begs the question against the B-theorist is evident by the following passage:

Now it is precisely my contention that belief in the objectivity of tense and the reality of temporal becoming is a properly basic belief. Indeed, I should say that belief in the reality of tense and temporal becoming enjoys such powerful positive epistemic status for us that not only can we be said to know that tense and temporal becoming are real, but also that this belief constitutes an intrinsic defeater-defeater which overwhelms the objections brought against it. The truth of these stronger claims, is, however, not essential to the A-theorist's case; all he need do is show the proper basicity of our belief in tense and refute the B-theoretical defeaters brought against it. We have already observed that the experience of tense is universal among mankind.⁵

Of course, there remains the issue of whether the B-theorist can provide an adequate account of our experience of time. Before I revisit that issue and consider some of Craig's arguments against my account of our experience of time, I want to point out a difficulty in reconciling Craig's account of properly basic beliefs with many of his other "basic" beliefs.

Craig claims that "B-theorists are 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," and that B-theorists are "irrational."⁶ Nevertheless, Craig is committed to the proposition that McTaggart's paradox can be a defeater of certain A-theoretical interpretations of our belief in tense and temporal becoming, and he does take McTaggart's paradox seriously enough to "consider extensively the B-theoretical defeaters brought against the tensed view of time, including McTaggart's paradox."⁷ Clearly, Craig wants to have it both ways. On the one hand, Craig takes metaphysical defeaters of the A-theory seriously enough to want to refute them. Indeed, Craig himself gives dialectical arguments, based on McTaggart's paradox, against other versions of the A-theory, so he evidently believes that McTaggart is relevant to ontology.⁸ On the other hand, Craig claims that "McTaggart's paradox is an engaging and recalcitrant brain-teaser whose conclusion nobody really takes seriously,"⁹ thus implying that basic beliefs are metaphysically sacrosanct and immune to refutation. How can we understand this waffling? Only by seeing that Craig confuses ontology and common sense. At times Craig recognizes that McTaggart's argument could defeat an A-theoretic ontology, and so he is implicitly treating properly basic beliefs as true, but ontologically neutral. At other times he treats the basic belief in tense and temporal becoming as tantamount to a specific ontological analysis. That is, he both distinguishes the preanalytic claim that time passes from its metaphysical interpretation, and then he identifies the preanalytic claim with the metaphysics of his version of the A-theory. Thus, he concludes that the B-theory is absurd and that defenders of it are irrational, since they must deny our most deeply seated and ineludible intuitions about the nature of temporal reality. What he fails to realize is that it is not our intuitions that are mistaken (at least on the standard B-theory¹⁰) but only the A-theoretical interpretations of them.

The question remains regarding what account of temporal experience can be given that is consistent with the B-theory. Craig argues that there is none and appeals to several features of our experience to establish his point, to wit, our experience of events as happening in the present, the peculiar attitudes we have toward past and future events, and our experience of the process of temporal becoming. In the course of his discussion, he criticizes some of the things I have said in earlier essays on these topics, and in the remainder of this essay, I shall reply to his objections.

The first type of experience allegedly indicative of A-time is the experience of the present and the presence of experience. According to Craig, we experience things and events as present when we perceive them and when we perceive them our experience is present. But Craig does not mean by this that we experience events, things, or acts of perception as having the nonrelational property of presentness, since on his latest view he seems to deny the existence of such a property. Rather, since to be present is to exist, it follows that our awareness of the present is an awareness of what exists. The B-theorist need not disagree, since she can maintain that to perceive that something exists is the perception that it is present, but this does not commit her to an A-theoretic ontology. To perceive that something is present is just to have a nonreflexive awareness of the perception of an object.

Craig's main objection to the B-theorists' account of the experience of the present is that the awareness of an event as present is not a reflexive awareness of events as it would have to be if the B-theory were correct.¹¹ Craig approvingly quotes Quentin Smith:

For proponents of this thesis [i.e., B-theorists], apprehending an A-determination requires a reflexive act of consciousness in which I turn my attention back onto myself and discern that my psychological experiences stand in some B-relation to some other event(s)... Definitions such as these do not square with our many unreflexive awareness of events as present, past, or future; I perceive the cloud to be passing at present over the treetops without at the same time reflexively grasping my own perceptual experiencing of the event. I am not attending to my perceiving but to that which I am perceiving: the cloud passing over the treetops.¹²

Is it really the case that, if the B-theory were true, all acts of consciousness would have to be reflexive? I think not, and we can see that this is not the case if we are careful to draw the distinction between our perceiving a cloud as present and our judging that a cloud or the perceiving a cloud is present.

To perceive an object is present does not involve a reflexive act, whereas to judge that an object perceived or the perception of an object is present does. To perceive a cloud as present is just to be aware of perceiving the cloud. And to presently perceive a cloud is just to perceive a cloud. Craig would agree. In fact, he expresses the same view: "Our belief that they [events] are happening presently is really no different than our belief that they are happening.... Hence, if beliefs like 'I see a tree' are properly basic, so is 'I am presently seeing a tree,' since the former is a tensed belief identical with the later."¹³ When we assert that "I am presently seeing a tree," we are making explicit what is implicit in the experience expressed by "I see a tree," namely, that when I see a tree, I am aware or conscious of seeing a tree. In other words, to see a tree is to be nonreflexively conscious of seeing a tree, and to

be nonreflexively conscious of seeing a tree is to be nonreflexively conscious of both the seeing and the tree as being present. There is nothing more to the awareness of an object being present, or to the perception of an object as being present then, than having a nonreflexively (or "non-positional," to use Sartre's phrase) consciousness of perceiving a tree. For that reason, whenever I perceive something, I am aware of the perceiving and the object perceived as being present. Thus, the existence of grammatical tense in "I am presently seeing a tree" need not commit us to an A-theoretical metaphysics.

To see a tree or to presently see a tree is to be nonreflexively conscious of the experience of seeing a tree, but to judge that a tree or cloud is present, or to judge that a certain event is past or yet to come, is something altogether different. To be conscious that I am presently perceiving a cloud does not involve a reflexive awareness of a temporal relation between the experience of perceiving and the cloud, it simply involves being conscious of perceiving the cloud. However, the judgment that the cloud is present, or the judgment that the perceiving of the cloud is present, does involve a reflexive awareness of the simultaneity of "this" perceiving with the passing cloud.¹⁴ Where reflection comes in is when we judge that an object (or consciousness state) is past or future, for example, that what I am remembering is past or what I am anticipating is future.¹⁵

Another aspect of our temporal experience that Craig believes undercuts the B-theory is our differential experience of the past and future. We dread unpleasant future events and feel relief over unpleasant events once they are past. Craig criticizes my account (in essay 16) on the grounds that it attempts to ground our different attitudes toward the past and the future by appealing to the asymmetry of time. Craig claims that "[i]t seems to me quite evident that Oaklander's bid to substitute the asymmetry or anisotropy of time for temporal becoming is a failure."¹⁶ This argument against me is, however, guilty of the straw man fallacy, since I never said that the anisotropy of time is what gives time its intrinsic direction, and in fact, I do not think that it is the case. I took the ground of the different directions to the temporal relation to be a primitive, irreducible difference and attempted to explain our different attitudes (relief, anticipation) in terms of the simple temporal relation of succession and our different mental states and experiences at different tenseless clock times toward one and the same event. The anisotropy of time has nothing to do with it. I feel relief because the unpleasant event is earlier than my memory of it, and I feel anxiety because the unpleasant event is later than my anticipation of it. At the time when I have relief, I am also having the experience of things and events that I know take place after an unpleasant experience (e.g., feeling the numbness of the novocain wearing off), and when I feel anxiety, I am also having the experience of things and events that I know are precursors of my later unpleasant

experience, for example, seeing the dentist's office as I drive up to it. Since I know what "earlier" and "later" means by having experienced what relations those terms refer to, I can have different emotions toward the same event, depending on whether or not I judge it to be it is earlier, simultaneous, or later than the time at which I am conscious of remembering, perceiving, or thinking about it. If I am relieved that a remembered event is past, then I am reflexively aware (i.e., I judge) that the remembered event is earlier than the temporal perspective I have when I remember it. And when I anticipate a future event, I am reflexively aware (i.e., I judge) that the anticipated event is later than the perspective I have when I anticipate it. The reality of an A-theoretic ontology has nothing to do with it.

Craig appeals to our experience of temporal becoming as a further refutation of the B-theory:

The external world is presented to us as a tensed world. What could be more obvious than the fact that we see things coming to exist and ceasing to exist, that we experience events happening? ... Yet the world of temporal becoming is even more obvious to us than the existence of the external world itself. For in the inner life of the mind we experience a continual change in the contents of consciousness, even in the absence of any apprehension of an external world, and this stream of consciousness alone constitutes for us a temporal series of tensed events.¹⁷

There are two main problems with this passage. First, while it is obvious that we see things coming to exist and ceasing to exist, it is not obvious that Craig's presentist ontology is true. In fact, it is false, as I have shown. Hence the appeal to the obvious fact of generation and corruption does not support the reality of A-time. Second, the fact that the inner life of the mind is experienced as a continual change does not imply that the series of events we experience come marked out as past, present, and future rather than earlier and later. Indeed, on the B-theory, the continual changing stream of consciousness is a temporal series of B-series events and not tensed events. The fact that our experience divides events into past, present, and future might be explained by reference to our temporal perspective and our temporal relations to those events, rather than by the fact that they are *really* past, present, and future.

For similar reasons, I find his remarks on my debate with Kiernan-Lewis unconvincing. I argued that according to the B-theorist, we cannot know that a headache has ceased to exist in any A-theoretic sense, since no headache does in fact cease to exist in that sense. Thus, Kiernan-Lewis cannot argue that since we all know what it is like for a headache to cease to exist, and the B-theory cannot account for this, the B-theory must be false. Craig's comment on this criticism of Kiernan-Lewis is that

even if the B-theorist [Oaklander] denies us the propositional knowledge that our headache has ceased, he cannot deny the phenomenological fact that we know what it is like to be aware that our headache has ceased. On the B-theory I have an undeniable awareness or experience of things' really ceasing to exist, even though they do not; in other words I am deceived by non-veridical experiences.¹⁸

From my point of view, this argument begs the question, for I have argued that we do not have an awareness of things really ceasing to exist because our experience is not equivalent to the A-theoretic account of it. The claim that Craig (and Lewis) make is that the very awareness of temporal becoming involves a becoming of awareness, but this the B-theorist will deny. There is a continual change of awareness, but that does not imply that there is a becoming of awareness in an A-theoretical sense, since change just involves a succession of experiences strewn along the B-series. For these reasons, I do not believe that Craig has undermined the B-theorists' account of our experience of tense.¹⁹

NOTES

¹ William Lane Craig, *The Tensed Theory of Time: A Critical Examination* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic, 2000).

² *Ibid.*, p. 165.

³ See Craig, *Tensed Theory of Time*, pp. 138, 164-65.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 138, my emphasis

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 165.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 138.

⁸ Consider that in criticizing George Schlesinger, Craig says that "absolute becoming is necessary, but it goes too far to specify that such becoming takes the metaphysical shape of a 'now' which literally moves along the B-series of events. The feeling of relief is rational only if an event which was present no longer is; but whether that event existed before becoming present and exists after ceasing to be present is a further metaphysical question, which I discuss in my *The Tenseless Theory of Time: A Critical Examination*" (*Tensed Theory of Time*, p. 152). He has also vehemently argued against other A-theorists such as Storrs McCall, Quentin Smith, and AN. Prior.

⁹ Craig, *Tensed Theory of Time*, p. 165

¹⁰ For a nonstandard version of the new B-theory, see essay 25.

¹¹ Craig, *Tensed Theory of Time*, p. 139.

¹² Quentin Smith, "The Phenomenology of A-Time," *Dialogos* 52 (1988): 147-48

¹³ Craig, *Tensed Theory of Time*, p. 139-40.

¹⁴ For a response to the objection that "this" reintroduces tense into the analysis, see essay 25.

¹⁵ In Ronald C. Hoy, "Explaining the Appearance of Temporal Passage," *CHRONUS: The Annual Proceedings of the Philosophy of Time Society* 5 (2002-2003): 41-60, Hoy takes seriously the idea that ordinary temporal beliefs, including ones about mental occurrences, such as relief that an unpleasant event is over, can and ought to be replaced in a correct scientific image of reality. For that reason, it may be argued, as Hoy has in private correspondence, that Craig and Smith are insufficiently "theoretical" in trying to take experience at face value. See Hoy, "The Theoretical Character of Husserl's Account of Time Consciousness," in *The Importance of Time, Proceedings of the Philosophy of Time Society, 1995-2000*, ed. L. Nathan Oaklander (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic, 2001), pp. 171-77, where he argues that even Husserl takes all perceptual temporal consciousness to involve (necessarily) a reflexive component. But he is not so naive to think that ordinary folk in ordinary language would be able to articulate such reflexivity.

¹⁶ Craig, *Tensed Theory of Time*, p. 154.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 159.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 160.

¹⁹ I wish to thank Heather Dyke and Ronald C. Hoy for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this essay.