

Eschatology, the Elimination of Evil, and the Ontology of Time

ANDREW HOLLINGSWORTH

Temple Baptist Theological Seminary, Brewton-Parker College

ahollingsworth@bpc.edu

Abstract: Part and parcel of the eschatology of the three Abrahamic faiths is the belief that sin and evil will be eliminated upon the consummation of God’s kingdom on earth. Not only do these beliefs affirm that God will ultimately “deal” with the problem of sin and evil, but that sin and evil will be no more. I refer to this eschatological belief as “the elimination of evil” (EOE). The EOE has important implications for how one understands the ontology of time. In this paper, I contribute to this discussion by arguing that ontologies of time that affirm the concrete existence of past moments are incompatible with the EOE. I also argue that solutions based on theories of hypertime, such as those posited by Tyron Goldschmidt and Samuel Lebens, fail to solve the problems posed to those ontologies of time affirming the concrete existence of the past. I conclude that the ontology of time that best facilitates the EOE is presentism.

Keywords: Eschatology, Problem of evil, Philosophy of time, Presentism, Hypertime

Introduction

All three Abrahamic religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—hold to a grand eschatological hope for the world. According to all three faiths, there will come a day where God will enter into the world he created and pronounce judgment on the entirety of creation, and this day is often referred to as the Day of Judgment or the Day of the Lord. Not only will God judge all moral agents for their actions, whether said actions have been righteous or sinful, but he will bring about an end to all sin and evil. There will be no more sin or evil, and God will reign over his covenant people in eternal bliss. Let us call this eschatological hope the Elimination of Evil (EOE).

The EOE has important implications for how one understands the ontology of time. The ontology of time is that branch of the philosophy of time that discusses which moments of time exist. As philosophers such as William Lane Craig and R. T. Mullins have highlighted, particular theories on the ontology of time, such as eternalism, seem to be inconsistent with the EOE as sin and evil ultimately are not eliminated on these views. Others, such as Samuel Lebens and Tyron Goldschmidt, however, argue that this isn't necessarily the case. In what follows, I aim to contribute to this discussion by arguing that any ontology of time that affirms the concrete existence of past moments, such as the growing-block theory, eternalism, or the moving-spotlight theory, run into serious problems when it comes to the EOE since past evils and sins would "still" exist (for God at least) and would not be truly eliminated. I further argue that, contra the work of Lebens and Goldschmidt, appeals to hyper time do not help these ontologies of time solve this problem. In order for the EOE to obtain, an ontology of time that denies the concrete existence of past moments is needed, namely presentism.

After providing an exposition of the various major theories on the ontology of time and the persistence of objects through time, I evaluate how each ontology of time coheres with the EOE, first evaluating four-dimensionalist theories and then turning to Lebens's and Goldschmidt's hypertime solution, though I focus more on the latter of these. I conclude by discussing the strengths of presentism for facilitating the EOE as compared to these other theories.

Ontologies of Time

As mentioned, there are several theories on the ontology of time. Eternalism is one such theory, and it claims that all moments of time exist equally and concretely. As Power states, "Eternalism just is the position that not only present things are real. Things at other times, both earlier and later than the present, are also real" (Power 2021, 50). Important for eternalism is the denial of an objective and privileged present. Since all moments of time equally exist, one cannot look at any particular moment of time and deem it the privileged objective present. The indexical "now," therefore, does not pick out any metaphysically privileged moment in the world; rather, it only picks out the moment of the term's utterance. Eternalism, along with most of the other theories that follow, is a four-dimensional theory of time, claiming that the universe is a four-dimensional block, and that time is one of these four dimensions.

A particular version of eternalism that deserves to be explicated separately is the moving-spotlight theory. This theory claims that all moments of time exist

concretely and equally. However, unlike typical versions of eternalism, the moving-spotlight theory affirms a privileged, objective present moment (Emery, Markosian, and Sullivan 2020). Typically, on eternalism, there is no metaphysically privileged objective present. For the moving-spotlight theory, however, the present is a metaphysically privileged and objective reality. Some describe this view as a sort of “eternalist A-theory” (Emery, Markosian, and Sullivan 2020).

If varying theories on the ontology of time made up a spectrum, and if eternalism were at one end of the spectrum, then presentism would be at the other end of the spectrum. According to presentism, “everything is present; put another way, it is the claim that that, and only that, which is present exists” (Mozersky 2011, 122). Neither the past nor the future exist; only the present exists. The present, in other words, exhausts reality. Presentists affirm the A-theory of time, which affirms that tense is an objective feature of reality and that there is a genuine passage of time (Power 2020, 42). One can see why this view of the ontology of time would be on the opposite end of the spectrum from eternalism.

Another theory on the ontology of time that has become more popular is the growing-block theory. The growing-block theory is a sort of middle-view between eternalism and presentism. This theory does not affirm that future moments of time exist. The growing block is an A-theory of time in that it affirms the reality of temporal becoming, that the passage of time is an objective feature of reality. Time, on this view, is conceived as a dimension of the four-dimensional block universe that is growing, or changing, from the past to the future. The present, which is an objective feature of reality, is the outermost layer of this block as it continues to grow and move into the future. The past, on this view, concretely exists.

Opposite to the growing-block theory is the shrinking-block theory. Like the growing block, the shrinking block is an A-theory of time; it affirms the objective reality of temporal passage and tense, and it affirms that the present is a privileged moment of time. As Roberto Casati and Giuliano Torrenco state it, “The present is the constantly eroding edge of the future, which thus shrinks incessantly. There is less and less future as the present proceeds” (Casati and Torrenco 2011, 240). The past is not real on this view.

Similar to, yet different from, both the growing and shrinking-block theories is the morphing-block theory. For both the growing and shrinking block theories, time is unidirectional; it grows or shrinks in only one direction. According to morphing-block theorists, however, this isn’t necessarily the case. Time, on this view, can grow and/or shrink from both ends—the past end and the future end (Hudson 2014, 82). On this view, the past can actually change (Hudson 2014, 85).

Last, I need briefly to discuss hypertime. Imagine that the universe is a four-dimensional block and imagine that time is one of these dimensions; as such, time could be a growing block, a shrinking block, or even a morphing block. Hypertime would be like a sort of temporal container that contains the growing, shrinking, or morphing block and would be needed to make sense of change. One might think of this as a time containing time, or, as Lebens puts it, “a quasi-temporal dimension, external to time itself, in which time itself can change” (Lebens 2020, 242). One is able to choose from the variety of ontologies of time discussed above as the basis for their theory of hypertime, but within reason of course. One could posit a hyper presentism, a hyper shrinking block, or a hyper growing block.¹ A growing block, for example, would exist within this hypertime dimension. According to Lebens, “The idea would be that the block of spacetime is such-and-such a size at hypertime₀ and is *bigger* at hypertime₁. The duration of the growth of time itself is measured, not in time, because it’s time that we’re measuring, but in *hypertime*. Time grows over the course of hypertime” (Lebens 2020, 242). Lebens also provides a useful heuristic language for hyper-tenses.

The hyper-past-tense = df. What hyper-was the case is what is the case in the hyper-past.

The hyper-present tense = df. What hyper-is the case is what is the case in the hyper-present.

The hyper-future-tense =df. What hyper-will be the case is what is the case in the hyper-future. (Lebens 2020, 243)

In addition to providing an allegedly more helpful explanation of change (at least if time itself is thought to change), hypertime can also posit a plausible way for explaining how it could be metaphysically possible to change the past.

Before evaluating how each of these ontologies of time coheres with the EOE, I need to describe the two major theories of how objects persist through time, as these have important implications for this discussion. These theories are perdurantism and endurantism.² Most four-dimensionalist theories of time favor perdurantism, though it is not necessary that they do so.³ According to perdurantism, objects are

¹ Hud Hudson, for example, posits a hyper morphing block (Hudson 2014).

² For a helpful summary of endurantism and perdurantism, see (Mullins 2016, 25–30). For a more detailed and technical summary and discussion on these, see (Balashov 2011, 13–40).

³ Samuel Lebens is helpful here. According to him, “You might think that you extend through time in the way that God is sometimes thought to extend through space, such that all of God is located

four-dimensional and are composed of temporal parts, much like how physical objects have spatial parts.⁴ Take my hand, for example. If I place my hand on a table, this part of my hand is located at this point in space, and another part of my hand is located at a different part of space; these are spatial parts. Temporal parts function in a similar way. Consider myself as an example. Part of me exists now, but another part of me exists earlier than now, say yesterday. Yesterday-me and today-me are different temporal parts of me, and together they make up a larger temporal portion of me. All of my temporal parts together—earlier than now, now, and later than now—make up my temporal whole. I persist, or extend, through time via these different temporal parts (Hawley 2020).⁵

Endurantism is the rival theory to perdurantism, and most three-dimensionalists, namely presentists, prefer endurantism—however, it is not necessary that three-dimensionalists affirm endurantism. According to endurantism, objects are three-dimensional and are wholly present at each moment of time at which they exist. Objects, on this view, do not have temporal parts; rather, they possess the totality of their being at each moment of time as they persist through time (Hawley 2020). Enduring objects have or lack certain properties at a time t_1 , and they have or lack different properties at t_2 . However, said object is wholly present both at t_1 and t_2 . Such a view of persistence works well with presentism, as well as other A-theories of time.

One may see here why many B-theorists and eternalists prefer perdurantism—it offers the most straightforward explanation of change and persistence on B-theories of time.⁶ Change, on perdurantism, is explained via an object’s distinct temporal

at every region in which God is located (including sub-regions). Perhaps all of you is located at every time at which you exist (including sub-regions). It’s a weird view. But not incoherent. All of you is lit up by the spotlight relative to time t , but none of you is lit up by the spotlight relative to earlier or later times” (Lebens 2022), personal correspondence via email). See also (Cameron 2015).

⁴ From this point forward, by *four-dimensionalism*, I simply mean the doctrine of temporal parts. This is not a unique use of the term. For an example, see (Rea 2003, 246–80).

⁵ It is worth noting that not all eternalists are committed to perdurantism, though most are. For an example of an eternalist who affirms endurantism, see (Mellor 1981).

⁶ Some eternalists and growing-block theorists take another view on the persistence of objects through time known as stage theory. According to stage theory, objects are composed of different temporal stages (Hawley 2020). On perdurantism, objects are analogous to worms stretched out over space: this “slice” of the worm is located at this point and that “slice” of the worm is located at that point. Suppose I exist from t_1 to t_5 . On stage theory, there are five of me, one existing at t_1 , one at t_2 , one at t_3 , one at t_4 , and one at t_5 . The difference between this and perdurantism is where one places the proper name (Mullins 2016, 28). On perdurantism, “the proper name applies to the spacetime worm, whereas the stage theorist says the proper name applies to each temporal counterpart or stage (Mullins 2016, 28).

parts as the object extends through time. One should also see why many A-theorists, particularly presentists, prefer endurantism for a similar reason: it offers the best explanation of change and persistence on A-theories of time. I will talk more about perdurantism and endurantism and their implications for eschatology further below. Their importance for the EOE will be seen in due time.

Having discussed some of the competing theories of the ontology of time on offer, we are now in a position to ask the following question: Do the eschatological hopes of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam for the EOE prefer a particular ontology of time? I will consider how the four-dimensionalist theories might work with the EOE first. Then, I will give a closer examination of how Samuel Lebens's and Tyron Goldschmidt's hypertime theory coheres with the EOE. I will then provide a brief argument for why presentism is the best option for facilitating the EOE.

Eschatology and Four-Dimensionalism

The EOE creates a problem for four-dimensionalist theories of the ontology of time (Mullins 2014, 132-37). Let's first take up eternalism. On eternalism, it is only at the eschatological kingdom of God that the EOE obtains. Since all past moments of time exist equally and concretely, it is the case that all of the sin and evil in the past concretely exist.⁷ All of the atrocities of the past—wars, genocides, chattel slavery, rapes, tortures, etc.—exist and are happening.⁸ On eternalism, it seems that the EOE is only beneficial for those souls who participate in God's eschatological kingdom at the time of said participation. While it may be true, for example, that Ignatius of Antioch enjoys the EOE and God's eternal peaceful kingdom at the eschaton, it is also true that Ignatius "still" concretely endures the torturous death of being mauled by lions. The eschaton, per eternalism, only benefits future Ignatius; past Ignatius is "still" having a rough go of it. Not only this but suppose that God is atemporal and is "outside of" time. All of the past evils exist "before, or in front of," him in eternity. Sin never really ceases to exist from God's point of view. Supposing that God is temporal, however, does not help matters since God would still be present to all of the moments in the past in virtue of his omnipresence. Sin and evil, on eternalism,

⁷ For the endurantist who affirms the existence of the past, this problem would remain as well. While all of a person is enjoying the eschaton relative to that part of the timeline, all of them would be suffering in the past relative to that part of the timeline.

⁸ The same entailment obtains for stage-theorist accounts of four-dimentionalism. See (Mullins 2021, 105–09).

never truly cease to exist. Such a state of affairs is inconsistent with God's eschatological promises (Craig 2001b, 214).⁹

The moving-spotlight and growing-block theories suffer the same problems as does eternalism, though the growing block does not affirm that time is static. Since the past exists along with all the objects and events therein, past evils exist, and they never truly cease to exist. Also, whether or not God is atemporal or temporal does nothing to alleviate the problem. It seems to be the case that, on theories of the ontology of time wherein the past enjoys concrete existence, evil never ceases to exist, and such a reality is incompatible with what God has promised concerning the eschaton (Mullins 2021, 99–111). This is in large part due to these ontologies of time typically relying on a theory of perdurantism to explain how objects persist through time. While it is true that some who affirm eternalism, the moving-spotlight, or the growing-block theories attempt to posit endurantism, such a move is difficult to sustain.¹⁰ As R. T. Mullins notes, "most think that a problem arises from intrinsic properties and change if endurantism is combined with either of these ontologies of time. This is because the same object would have contradictory intrinsic properties" (Mullins 2016, 28).¹¹

However, there might be some hope for some four-dimensionalist accounts. As mentioned previously, philosophers such as Hud Hudson, Tyron Goldschmidt, and Samuel Lebens posit a hypertime solution and argue that, in virtue of hypertime, God is able to change the past so that it is 1) as though sin and evil never happened, and 2) this changing of the past does not completely disrupt the continuity of time and objects persisting through time. Though Hudson's contributions to the subject are noteworthy and have merited a special section of an issue of the *Journal of Analytic Theology* devoted to it,¹² I will focus primarily on the hypertime account of Lebens since his account builds off of Hudson's, as well as his past work with Goldschmidt.

⁹ Craig also notes other problems that the tenseless theory of time seems to pose for Christian theology, namely the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*. See (Craig 2001a, 247–55).

¹⁰ Suppose, however, that such a move is plausible. If this were the case, then the problem would be even worse on endurantism since it is not only a temporal part of a person that suffers in the past but the entire person, even though that person in the future might be having a great time of it. However, I am still not convinced that endurantism works with any block view of time and the universe.

¹¹ See also (Crisp 2003, 220) and (Sider 2001, ch. 4).

¹² See (Crisp and Rea 2017, 600–59).

Eschatology and Hypertime

In his recent monograph, *The Principles of Judaism*, Lebens notes that certain Jewish rabbis, namely Rabbi Tzadok Hakohen, argue that “God will one day erase from history the sins of the penitent. Once God erases them, they never will have occurred” (Lebens 2020, 240). Lebens refers to this view as “Ultimate Forgiveness (UF)” (Lebens 2020, 240). This raises an age-old question that has been debated by many philosophers: Can God change the past? While many have argued that God cannot change the past, Lebens argues the opposite. But wouldn’t this muddle up the entirety of the history of creation? In short, Yes, and that is precisely the point. At minimum, in the eschaton, there will be no more memories of sin and suffering. However, it is not that God will simply erase those events from persons’ memories. Rather, they will not remember them because they will have never happened. Not only this, but God will not remember them either (Lebens 2020, 240–41). This obviously raises certain issues pertaining to God’s omniscience: How can an omniscient being forget? Well, he can’t, hence the need to erase sin and evil from the past: God “won’t remember them because he will have *erased* them (Lebens 2020, 241 (*italics original*)).

This UF view is not the only way that God might accomplish the EOE. According to Hakohen’s teacher, the Izhbitza, God simply will eliminate all traces of sin and evil from the past, what Lebens refers to as the No More Evil view (NME): “God will remove absolutely all traces of evil from the past – moral evil *and* natural evil. It will one day be the case that nothing bad will ever have happened” (Lebens 2020, 241). NME will result in a complete re-writing of history; even the words of scripture will be re-written in order to mirror this new reality (Lebens 2020, 241).¹³ Indeed, the eschaton will result in a very literal “new creation.”

It is at this point that Lebens employs his use of hypertime to make sense of how UF and NME might work. He titles these hypertime theories UF-Hyper and NME-Hyper. Here are his definitions of these views.

UF-Hyper = df. The spacetime block that is hyper-present contains a past in which Gittel sinned. Gittel repents. God hyper-will thus ensure that at some point in the hyper-future (i.e., the eschaton), the spacetime block hyper-will no longer contain Gittel’s sin (the event hyper-will be replaced by a sin-shaped hole in spacetime, so to speak).

¹³ Lebens draws this from (Leiner 1995).

NME-Hyper = df. The spacetime block that is hyper-present contains all sorts of past evils—both natural and moral. At some point in the hyper-future, however, the past hyper-will contain no evils whatsoever. It hyper-will be the case that bad things never happened. (Lebens 2020, 244)

Past evils would only exist in the hyper-past. One may initially wonder, however, if it is any better for evil to exist only in the hyper-past rather than in the past. Lebens here introduces his theory of a “hyper-presentistic moving-spotlight theory of time” (Lebens 2020, 245). He draws from Dean Zimmerman’s notion of “backward-looking” and “forward-looking” properties to help him make his case (Zimmerman 2008) and applies this notion to his theory of a hyper-presentism. As a result, “we can make sense of *hyper*-tenses, without committing ourselves to [the existence of] hypertimes. There doesn’t have to be a hyper-past in order to speak truly in the hyper-past tense. A hyper-presentist can make sense of talking about the hyper-future, and the hyper-past, merely in terms of hyper-backward-looking and hyper-forward-looking properties instantiated in the hyper-present” (Lebens 2020, 246). Though hypertime here is conceived of in terms of a hyper-presentism, time itself is conceived of in terms of the moving-spotlight theory.

Lebens next posits a “Scene-Changing Theory”: “it’s the Moving Spotlight Theory with the addition that the stage crew can hyper-sometimes change the scenery in the dark, the stage crew in this case being God. This theory is coupled with hyper-presentism. There are no hypertimes other than the hyper-present” (Lebens 2020, 247). He then explains how this Scene Changing Theory can help with the EOE. It is worth quoting Lebens at length on this point.

UF-Scene-Change = df. Gittel sinned. Gittel repented. It hyper-was the case that Gittel’s sin was located on the stage (first in the region called the future, then in the spotlight, and then in the region called the past). In virtue of her repentance (or simply in virtue of the coming of the eschaton), God removes the sin from the stage of time. The stage will now only have the hyper-backward-looking property of hyper-having had Gittel sin upon it. But that sin exists nowhere. The sin has been replaced by a property.

NME-Scene-Change = df. As things appear to us, the stage of time contains many evils. At some point in the hyper-future, those evils hyper-will be located nowhere. It hyper-will still be true that they existed in the hyper-past, but that hyper-won’t be made true by the existence of any evil events in some place called the hyper-past, but only by a hyper-backward-looking property. (Lebens 2020, 247–48)

On both of these views, actual sin and evil are replaced by these hyper-backward-looking properties in virtue of the EOE.

Lebens considers various challenges to this scene-changing hyper-presentistic moving-spotlight theory of eschatology and time, such as God's ability to actually change the past, the nature of atonement, and how God actually might go about changing the past, namely theories of "amputation and deletion" (Lebens 2020, 253). For my purposes in this paper, I need not engage his responses to all of these challenges, but only the last of them. Some philosophers have already pointed out certain issues with this scene-changing theory, arguing, for instance, that presentism alone can accomplish what Lebens (and Goldschmidt) want without the additional metaphysical baggage (Faul 2020), that the theory results in unnecessary evils that are incompatible with the goodness of God (Faul 2020), and that deleting certain scenes from the timeline creates various problems (Mullins forthcoming, 211–21).¹⁴ My main critique concerns this last objection issued by Mullins.

Mullins points out, as an example, that it would be very problematic if God, say, decided to "delete the summer of 2012" from the timeline (Mullins forthcoming, 217). The reason for this, he notes, is that "there are all sorts of good person stages that exist during that summer doing good things" (Mullins forthcoming, 217). "Is it," he asks, "morally permissible for God to delete all of those good person stages and good deeds from the timeline" (Mullins forthcoming, 217)? It is not, concludes Mullins. "At the very least," he notes, "it seems like a heavy cost to pay in order to remove certain sins from the world" (Mullins forthcoming, 217).

My primary objection is similar to this one from Mullins. Let's suppose Lebens's theory to be the case, and let's consider some other implications of God deleting events from the timeline. I will focus primarily on the UF-scene-change theory. Suppose some woman commits the sin of fornication. Let's call this woman Tracy. Tracy commits the sin of fornication and, as a result, gets pregnant and gives birth to a son. Let's also suppose that Tracy raises her son—let's call him James—to be a genuinely penitent believer. As a result of James's penitence, he is promised, by God,

¹⁴ Lebens and Goldschmidt have issued a response to Faul's critiques. See (Goldschmidt and Lebens 2020). Goldschmidt's and Lebens's response is two pronged. First, they address the roles of truth-maker theory in presentism and their scene-changing theory of time, arguing that ultimately it is better for God to be able to change the past, hence their hyper-time theory. The reason for this is because, on presentism, present beings still instantiate backward-looking properties, such properties sometimes being evilness. On their scene-changing theory, Goldschmidt and Lebens argue that they are able to make important distinctions on these backward-looking properties that presentists are unable to make (Goldschmidt and Lebens 2020, 375). Second, they address Faul's charge concerning unnecessary evil, arguing that their use of the free-will defense, coupled with their scene-changing theory of time, is able to avoid this problem (Goldschmidt and Lebens 2020, 376).

that he will enjoy God's eternal presence at the eschaton and that his, James's, sins will have never occurred. As a result of UF, both Tracy's and James's sinful actions are deleted and will only have the hyper-backward-looking property of sin. There seems to be a real problem here for this theory. If Tracy's sin is deleted from the timeline, then how is it the case that James is ever born? If James is never born, then he is never promised eschatological salvation. Perhaps James would simply come into existence via a virginal conception, or perhaps he would just brutally exist. However, both of these possibilities are problematic. In fact, at this point, it seems that Lebens will have to concede that this world no longer is the numerically same world as the one that is being edited since the causal connections that result in James's existence fail to obtain in the new redeemed world.¹⁵ But even if one could make the case that this is the numerically same world, it would seem to be a rather chaotic one wherein all of the repentant persons who originally were born as a result from sinful actions of their parents still exist but by virtue of either virginal conception, brute fact, or something of the like. And this is just the issue of repentant persons who were born as a result of their sinful parents. Most likely, there are other such sinful events and the good things that were caused by said sinful events whose causal connections cannot simply be repaired apart from those ways in which they in fact came about. But even if they could, again, we seem to be left with a chaotic world that doesn't seem much better than it was—due to the chimera of such odd states of affairs and events that have replaced the original sinful events and states of affairs. Such a world at this point, would be altogether undesirable and would border on incoherence—does the world even make good sense at this point? It seems that, in a sense, God has made the world less desirable through such redemptive actions of amputation and deletion.¹⁶

Not only this, but if James is never born, then we are faced with a very peculiar sort of property for God in this scenario. God both has the property of hyper-having promised James eschatological salvation in leu of his penitence and the property of not-having promised James eschatological salvation in leu of his penitence. Can God both have a property P and a property $\sim P$? Typically, metaphysicians are reluctant to say that some substance S has contradictory properties. Perhaps God is the exception to this rule, but this seems very unlikely to me. But if so, it seems here that the implication of God's hyper-having made a promise is that God has now broken that promise. God hyper-had promised James eschatological salvation, but as a result of the UF-scene-change, Tracy never sinned, and James was never born. Thus,

¹⁵ Indeed, one may wonder, altogether, what Lebens conceives to be the essential structure of the world to begin with.

¹⁶ Thanks to the anonymous reviewer who brought this point to my attention.

now it hyper-is the case that God never promised James this eschatological salvation. And James isn't the only child born outside of marriage in the world; there are millions of children born outside of marriage in the history of the world. Can God make it the case that God never performed some action? Not only this, can God break promises? According to all three of the Abrahamic faiths, God is faithful and never reneges on his promises. A God who breaks his promises would not be morally perfect and thus would not be worthy of worship. Via his attempts to eradicate sin from the past, God hyper-will have performed an evil act. Perhaps God simply edits the timeline by removing Tracy's and James's sins and attaching them to a goat or another impenitent sinful person. But this seems especially problematic for the final judgment because God would then be judging that person to whom he attached Tracy's and James's sins for a sin that they never actually committed. This does not seem consistent with God's justice.¹⁷

There's another potential problem for Lebens's hypertime model. Let's suppose that God eliminates Adam's original sin from the timeline. This would not result in a mere redemption or transformation of the timeline; rather, it would result in an entirely new timeline, a very literal new creation. When God eliminates Adam's sin, history is re-written from that moment forward. Most likely, Cain doesn't kill Abel, and the events that result in the flood in Genesis 6 never come about. History will be completely re-written, and it's very plausible, if not very probable, that most of the people who have come to exist in this world never come to exist at all. At this point, it is no longer obvious that this is even the numerically same world as before; it seems to be an altogether new one. Furthermore, Faul's worry about God creating a world with unnecessary evils becomes very real. If God could simply make the world as though sin never existed, then what would have been his purpose for creating such a world with evil to begin with? Could he have not created a world without evil to begin with? This becomes especially confusing when considering that Lebens affirms a version of idealism, which claims that all of reality exists as a divine thought and that human beings are "God's imaginary friends" (Lebens 2014). All perfect-being theists agree that God is perfectly rational, implying that God always has a perfect reason for all his actions. It is unclear, however, what his

¹⁷ The Christian is faced with a pressing question here: But isn't this essentially what happens when Christ serves as the atonement for sins—or at least according to some atonement theories? The difference here is that Christ is a consenting participant in the atonement, whereas those impenitent sinners who might have these additional sins to pay for likely are not. Even if they were, it is not clear that they are even in the position to provide atonement for the sins of others, themselves being sinners. See (Craig 2020, 173–93).

reasons might be for creating a world filled with sin and evil when he obviously is capable of making the world exist without it (Faul 2020, 173).

I imagine that Lebens would respond along the following lines: either by appropriating a free-will defense or a by appropriating a soul-building theodicy. When God changes the timeline, he does so with the cooperation of human beings, and his ability to change the timeline is dependent on said cooperation. In order to be morally responsible for their sins to begin with and to accept redemption, human beings must have free will, and so they must freely choose to cooperate with God to pursue repentance and change the timeline. Or perhaps Lebens will respond with a kind of soul-building theodicy. In order for human beings to truly grow and achieve the *telos* for which God created them, they must live in a world with evil to arrive at this *telos*. However, they must still have free will in order to cooperate with God through evil, eventually edit the timeline, and arrive at God's desired *telos* for them. At this point, however, it is unclear in what sense human beings have free will, especially in light of Lebens's idealism. If humans are no more than "God's imaginary friends," then in what sense do they have free will? It surely doesn't seem to be libertarian freedom that they enjoy. But if this is the case, then responding with either a free-will defense or a soul-building theodicy to these worries will face additional problems to those I've posed.

As a result of these considerations, Lebens's hypertime theodicy does not seem to provide a plausible option for the EOE, or at least not the most plausible option. While it may not enjoy the same problems encountered by the other ontologies of time committed to the existence of the past that I discussed, it creates an entire new set of problems that it has to face. Even if Lebens's hypertime theory of the EOE is an impressive and internally coherent theory, it still seems that the peculiar metaphysical and moral costs that it requires outweigh the goods offered in the trade. I suggest that there is a better way for explaining the EOE, namely presentism.

Eschatology and Presentism

Following Craig, Faul, and Mullins, I conclude that presentism offers the Abrahamic theist the best solution and explanation for the implications of the EOE. Per presentism, the present exhausts reality. When God promises that his coming kingdom entails that there will be no more evil, it means that every moment of time, from the consummation of his kingdom forward, will contain no more sin and no more evil. But what about past sins? Since the past no longer exists, then it is not the case that past sins continue to exist. They have passed out of existence just like everything else in the past. However, this does not mean that the proposition

“Someone sinned in the past” is false. Propositions about the past and the future, though the past and future do not exist, are equally as true as propositions about the present (Merricks 2007, 137–44).¹⁸

At this point, the four-dimensionalist might object to this conclusion, claiming that presentism is inconsistent with what we know to be true concerning physics and relativity theory and thus cannot be true.¹⁹ While space does not permit an in-depth treatment of this challenge, one should note that presentists have offered responses to this challenge. Crisp acknowledges that there is an incompatibility between relativity physics and presentism. His solution is that one could “alter the theoretical hypotheses of special and general relativity, replacing their four-dimensional theoretical hypotheses with a presentist alternative” (Crisp 2003, 233).²⁰ Zimmerman takes a similar approach here and develops a space-time manifold around “an A-theoretically privileged foliation” (Zimmerman 2011). Craig argues that relativity theory as articulated by Einstein is too beholden to verificationist principles in epistemology and should be rejected. He argues that we would be better to adopt a neo-Lorentzian theory of relativity, which satisfies what Einstein was after while also fixing the problems that his theory has (Craig 2001b, 32–66, esp. 54–57). Whether or not one finds these solutions satisfactory, the claim that presentists do not have a way to account for relativity theory is false. The presentist has possible solutions here, though they should give serious consideration to the challenges posed to these solutions.

A bigger problem, however, might present itself for the presentist. If all of the evil and sin from the past no longer exist, then what is atonement doing for them? Atonement is an important concept that is present in all three Abrahamic religions; each claims that sin and evil must be atoned for. On his hyper-time model, Lebens argues that atonement is caught up with his UF thesis.²¹ On his view, atonement plays a role in God’s redemption of the past as he makes it the case that truly penitent sinners never sinned. But what does the presentist do with atonement? First, it depends on how one defines atonement. In his recent treatment on the

¹⁸ For objections against presentists being able to utter true statements about the past or future, see (Mozersky 2011). Mozersky provides some options for the presentist on this problem, though he argues that none are satisfactory. Thomas Crisp discusses similar avenues for the presentist facing this problem, but he favors their likelihood for success (Crisp 2003, 236–42).

¹⁹ See, for example, (Qureshi-Hurst 2022).

²⁰ Crisp acknowledges that this is an unorthodox way of construing Einstein’s theories of relativity and has its costs. See (Crisp 2003, 233–34).

²¹ In a recent paper presented at the 2022 Helsinki Analytic Theology Workshop, Lebens actually changes the name of his UF theory to “Robust Atonement,” though he maintains the same definition for both. See (Lebens 2022, 5).

subject, William Lane Craig notes the two primary senses that atonement language has in the OT and the NT, namely “reconciliation” and “to purify, to cleanse” (Craig 2020, 1–3). He writes, “We may say, then, somewhat paradoxically, that atonement (in the broad [reconciliation] sense) is achieved through atonement (in the narrow [purification] sense)” (Craig 2020, 3). Though Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all debate *how* purification is made and *how* this purification reconciles sinners to God, they agree that reconciliation is the goal, and that sin is the object of atonement.

Craig further notes that what is expiated is the *guilt* for having committed sinful actions, wherein *guilt* refers to the individual’s liability to punishment for their action. Forgiveness and the removal of sin on this view are understood as a divine pardon in which God, as a result of Christ’s penal-substitutionary death, removes guilt from the sinner and said sinner is no longer liable to punishment for their sin (Craig 2020, 215–35). If Craig is correct in claiming that atonement focuses on reconciling sinful persons to God by means of purifying or cleansing them of the property of the guilt for having sinned, then the presentist can easily explain what atonement does for them. On this view, when a sinful person is redeemed and forgiven, they are pardoned and no longer held liable to punishment for their action(s) because God has eliminated their guilt. When a person sins, they acquire a property, namely the property of guilt. When said person is purified from sin, what is purified is this property of guilt, and the individual now has the property of having been guilty but now no longer is guilty. Perhaps this property is a backward-looking property that “looks back” on the person’s having been guilty of committing some sinful action. Nonetheless, when a penitent believer receives atonement for their sin, they no longer possess the property of being a sinner, i.e., of being guilty of committing some sin. But one may wonder: What makes it true that this individual ever was guilty of sin were there not even a backward-looking property grounding such? Following Trenton Merricks, I think that the reality of tense in presentism is sufficient to ground this (Merricks 2007, 137–44). It *was* the case that the penitent believer was guilty of sin, but now it is not. It *was* the case that the believer had this property. Since this property has been removed, then the believer may enjoy reconciliation with God.²²

One may notice that this explanation presumes a particular type of theory of the atonement, namely the penal-substitutionary theory of atonement. However, this presentist solution is not limited only to this theory of atonement. If what is atoned

²² Craig (2020, 229–33) also briefly notes the significance of tense in legal philosophy concerning the pardoning of guilty persons. It *was* the case that the pardoned party was guilty, i.e., liable to punishment for their actions, but *now* it is not the case that they are guilty.

for is the sinful/guilty status of sinners, i.e., a sinful property, then the presentist has at their disposal the tools necessary to develop an explanation of the atonement for various other atonement theories, such as Anselmian satisfaction theories, moral-governmental theories, or *Christus Victor* theories.²³ The atonement thus poses no challenge to the presentist that cannot be overcome.

Conclusion

In conclusion, God will accomplish the EOE at the eschaton, and presentism offers the most straightforward way of accounting for this. On presentism, since the past no longer exists, then the evils and sinful actions of the past no longer exist. All that would exist would be God's eschatological present. From the consummation of God's kingdom forward, sin and evil would no longer exist. They would only exist as a memory, a memory that has been transformed and redeemed in God's kingdom. While Lebens's hypertime theory might also work to explain the EOE, it seems notably inferior to presentism when it comes to the test of Ockham's razor. Presentism can facilitate the EOE without the additional metaphysical baggage that hypertime theories entail. Presentism thus offers the theist the best account for explaining the eschatological EOE.²⁴

Disclosures and Declarations: Funding and/or Conflicts of Interests/Competing Interests

This paper and its research received no external funding, and it has no financial or non-financial conflicts of interest or competing interests.

Bibliography

Balashov, Yuri. 2011. "Persistence." In *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Time*. Edited by Craig Callendar. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

²³ For more recent treatments on other atonement theories from Christian thinkers, see (Stump 2018), (Todd 2021), and (Crisp 2022).

²⁴ I owe special thanks to the participants of the 2022 Helsinki Analytic Theology Workshop for their helpful feedback on an earlier draft of this paper. In particular, I'm especially thankful for the continued feedback and comments from Sam Lebens, Emily Qureshi-Hurst, Ryan Mullins, and Robin Le Poidevin after the conclusion of the Workshop. Thanks are also owed to the anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments and the editors of *TheoLogica*.

- <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199298204.003.0002>.
- Byerly, T. Ryan, ed. 2021. *Death, Immortality and Eternal Life*. New York: Routledge.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003058380>.
- Callender Craig, ed. 2011. *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Time*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199298204.001.0001>.
- Cameron, Ross P. 2015. *The Moving Spotlight: An Essay on Time and Ontology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198713296.001.0001>.
- Casati, Roberto and Giullano Torrenco. 2011. "The Not So Incredible Shrinking Future." *Analysis* 71.2: 240–244. <https://doi.org/10.1093/analys/anr006>.
- Craig, William Lane. 2000a. *The Tensed Theory of Time: A Critical Examination*. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic.
- Craig, William Lane. 2000b. *The Tenseless Theory of Time: A Critical Examination*. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic.
- Craig, William Lane. 2001a. *God, Time, and Eternity*. London: Kluwer Academic Publishers. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-017-1715-1>.
- Craig, William Lane. 2001b. *Time and Eternity: Exploring God's Relationship to Time*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-017-1715-1>.
- Craig, William Lane. 2016. *God over All: Divine Aseity and the Challenge of Platonism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198786887.001.0001>.
- Craig, William Lane. 2020. *Atonement and the Death of Christ: An Exegetical, Historical, and Philosophical Exploration*. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press.
- Crisp, Oliver D. 2022. *Participation and Atonement: An Analytic and Constructive Account*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.
- Crisp, Oliver D. and Michael C. Rea. 2017. *Journal of Analytic Theology* 5.
- Crisp, Thomas M. 2003. "Presentism." In *The Oxford Handbook of Metaphysics*, edited by Michael J. Loux and Dean W. Zimmerman. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Emery, Nina, Ned Markosian, and Meghan Sullivan. 2020. "Time." In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by E. N. Zalta.
<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2020/entries/time/>.
- Faul, Bogdan. 2020. "Can God Promise Us a New Past? A Response to Lebens and Goldschmidt." *Open Theology* 6: 167–174. <https://doi.org/10.1515/opth-2020-0014>.
- Goldschmidt, Tyron and Samuel Lebens. 2017. "An Advertisement of a Promise: God and the Hyper-Past." *Journal of Analytic Theology* 5: 629–636.
<https://doi.org/10.12978/jat.v5i1.180>.

- Goldschmidt, Tyron and Samuel Lebens. 2020. "Hyper-Past Evils: A Reply to Bogdan V. Faul." *Open Theology* 6: 374–377. <https://doi.org/10.1515/opth-2020-0119>.
- Hawley, Katherine. 2020. "Temporal Parts." In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by E. N. Zalta. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2020/entries/time/https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2020/entries/temporal-parts/>.
- Hudson, Hud. 2014. *The Fall and Hypertime*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198712695.001.0001>.
- Lebens, Samuel. 2014. "God and his imaginary friends: a Hassidic metaphysics." *Religious Studies* 51.2: 183–204. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412514000298>.
- Lebens, Samuel. 2020. *The Principles of Judaism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198843252.001.0001>.
- Lebens, Samuel. 2022. "Time for Some Robust Atonement." Paper presented at the Helsinki Analytic Theology Workshop. Helsinki, Finland.
- Lebens, Samuel and Tyron Goldschmidt. 2017. "The Promise of a New Past." *Philosopher's Imprint* 17.18: 1–25.
- Leiner, Mordechai Yosef. 1995. *Mei HaShiloah*. Bnei Brak: Machon lehotzet sifrei rabbanateinu hakadoshim meishbitza radzin.
- Lewis, David. 1992. "Review of D. M. Armstrong, *A Combinatorial Theory of Possibility*." *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 70: 211–224. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00048409212345101>.
- Loux, Michael J. and Dean W. Zimmerman, eds. 2003. *The Oxford Handbook of Metaphysics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Mellor, D. H. 1981. *Real Time*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Merricks, Trenton. 2007 *Truth and Ontology*. Oxford: Clarendon Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199205233.001.0001>.
- Mozersky, M. Joshua. 2011. "Presentism." In *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Time*, edited by Craig Callender. Oxford: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199298204.003.0006>.
- Mullins, R. T. 2014. "Four-Dimensionalism, Evil, and Christian Belief." *Philosophia Christi: The Journal of the Evangelical Philosophical Society* 16.1: 117–137. <https://doi.org/10.5840/pc20141617>.
- Mullins, R. T. 2016. *The End of the Timeless God*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198755180.001.0001>.
- Mullins, R. T. 2021. "Personal Identity over Time and Life after Death." In *Death, Immortality and Eternal Life*, edited by T. Ryan Byerly. New York: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003058380-7>.

- Mullins, R. T. Forthcoming. *From Divine Timemaker to Divine Watchmaker*. Manuscript in Progress.
- Power, Sean Enda. 2021. *Philosophy of Time: A Contemporary Introduction*. New York: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315283616>.
- Qureshi-Hurst, Emily. 2022. *God, Salvation, and the Problem of Spacetime*. Cambridge Elements in the Problems of God. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009269612>.
- Rea, Michael C. 2003. "Four-Dimensionalism." In *The Oxford Handbook of Metaphysics*, edited by Michael J. Loux and Dean W. Zimmerman. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sider, Theodore. 2001. *Four-Dimensionalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/019924443X.001.0001>.
- Stump, Eleonore. 2018. *Atonement*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198813866.001.0001>.
- Todd, Obbie T. 2021. *The Moral Governmental Theory of Atonement: Re-Envisioning Penal Substitution*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books.
- Zimmerman, Dean. 2008. "The Privileged Present: Defending an 'A-Theory' of Time." In *Contemporary Debates in Metaphysics*, edited by Theodore Sider, John Hawthorne, and Dean W. Zimmerman. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Zimmerman, Dean. 2011. "Presentism and the Space-Time Manifold." In *The Oxford Handbook of the Philosophy of Time*, edited by Craig Callender. Oxford: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199298204.003.0008>.