

MUST THE BEGINNING OF THE UNIVERSE HAVE A PERSONAL CAUSE?: A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF THE KALAM COSMOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

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The aim of this paper is to take a close look at some little discussed aspects of the *kalam* cosmological argument, with a view to deciding whether there is any reason to believe the causal principle on which it rests ("Whatever begins to exist must have a cause"), and also with a view to determining what conclusions can be drawn about the nature of the First Cause of the universe (supposing that there is one). I am particularly concerned with the problems that arise when it is assumed (as it often is) that that the First Cause is *timeless* and that it *timelessly* creates *time*. I argue that this forces the defender of the *kalam* argument to analyze the concept of "beginning to exist" in a way that raises serious doubts about its main causal principle, and that it also undercuts the main argument for saying that the cause of the universe must be a person.

At first glance, the *kalam* argument appears to have several advantages over other cosmological arguments. Not only does it support the orthodox contention that the universe was created in time, but the concepts and principles on which it relies are, at least superficially, clearer and more straightforward than those involved in, say, the Leibnizian argument from contingency. Whereas Leibniz's argument depends on the questionable assumption that there must be a *sufficient reason* for anything and everything, the *kalam* argument relies instead on the more modest – and seemingly more plausible – claim that whatever *begins to be* must have been *brought into being* by some cause outside itself. Given this causal principle, the advocate of the *kalam* argument has a simple and obvious response to the beginner's question, "So what caused the First Cause?" Whereas the defender of the Leibnizian argument must appeal to the relatively obscure idea of a self-existent being that somehow "contains the reason of its own existence," the defender of the *kalam* argument can simply say: "God doesn't need a cause, because he is eternal – unlike the universe, God didn't *begin* to be."

The aim of the present paper is to take a close look at the *kalam* argument, with a view to deciding whether the argument is sound, and whether the advantages just mentioned can withstand critical scrutiny. I shall be particularly concerned with the cogency of the causal principle on which the argument rests ("Whatever begins to exist must have a cause"), with the relation that is alleged to hold between the First Cause and the universe, and with the implications for the nature of the First Cause.

Since William Lane Craig has done more than anyone else to bring the



kalam argument to the attention of contemporary philosophers, I will discuss his version of the argument. Craig's argument has a very simple structure.

1. Everything that begins to exist has a cause of its existence.
2. The universe began to exist.
3. Therefore, the universe has a cause of its existence.

As we shall see later, Craig regards the first premise as intuitively obvious. Most of his effort is devoted to the defense of premise (2). Craig gives two main philosophical arguments for saying that the universe has not always existed – one based on the supposed impossibility of an actual infinite, the other based on the claim that even if an actual infinite were possible, it could not be “formed by successive addition.” In addition, Craig offers two “scientific confirmations” of premise (2) – considerations having to do with Big Bang cosmology and with the second law of thermodynamics. Finally, Craig offers a supplementary argument for saying that the cause of the universe is a person.

In the present paper, I shall operate on the assumption that Craig's philosophical arguments for premise (2) are sound, and that an actually infinite series of successive past events is metaphysically impossible. These matters are highly controversial, but in this paper I want to focus attention on the problems that emerge when we ask, “Did the First Cause exist in time prior to creation?” Although Craig's preferred position seems to be that God creates time along with the universe and is *not* in time “prior” to creation, he thinks it does not matter to the success of the *kalam* argument how he answers this question; he thinks he can live with either answer. [See RF 94.] I shall endeavor to show that Craig is mistaken about this, and that a negative answer is not compatible with all the requirements of the *kalam* argument, leaving to another time the question whether the argument fares better on the alternative assumption that God is in time prior to creation.¹

In the first part of the paper, I consider the implications for the *kalam* argument of the suggestion that time is created along with the universe, and that the First Cause is *not* in time prior to creation. I try to show that premise (1) loses much of its plausibility when it is applied to the beginning of time itself. In the second part, I briefly consider Craig's supplementary argument for saying that only a *personal agent* could be the cause of the universe. I try to show that this argument cannot be sustained if (as Craig believes) God's will to create is timeless.

Part I: Must the universe have a cause?

In his earliest presentations of the *kalam* argument, Craig held that God is timeless prior to creation, and this still seems to be his preferred position.

It seems to me that prior to creation God is outside time, or rather there is no time at all. For time cannot exist unless there is change. And prior to creation God would have to be changeless.

... in my opinion, God was timeless prior to creation, and He created time along with the world. From that point on God places himself within time so that He can interact with the world He has created. [PSPC 197-8]

On this view, God has no temporal duration at all “prior” to creation – not even everlasting temporal duration. But in creating the universe God creates time as well, and in so doing puts himself into time “so that he can interact with the world.” *Qua* creator of the temporal universe, God is eternal in the sense of “atemporal.” But now that there is a temporal universe, God exists at every time – past, present, and future.

Difficult questions can be raised about the logical coherence of this picture. What can it mean to say that “prior” to the beginning of the universe God was outside of time? Craig makes it sound as if God “used to be” outside of time, but “then” he created the world and put himself into time. But this can’t be right if there is no time prior to the beginning of the universe.

Ordinarily, when we ascribe logically incompatible properties to something, we do so on the understanding that the thing has them at different times. Since that move is not available here, we seem to be left with the implication that God is – timelessly – both temporal and non-temporal. In order to resolve this tension, advocates of the *kalam* argument must say that God is *causally*, but not *temporally*, prior to the universe. Thus he can be atemporal in one respect – “qua cause of the universe” – and *temporal* in another – “qua acting in human history,” perhaps.

If this is right, then causal priority must not be understood (as it often is) to require temporal priority. Advocates of the *kalam* argument may reject such an account on the ground that it is perfectly intelligible to suppose that causes are sometimes *simultaneous* with their effects. Of course, simultaneity is also a *temporal* relation, and one might still wonder whether the idea of a completely atemporal cause of temporal phenomena makes sense. But rather than pursue that line of thought here, I shall agree to operate on the assumption that causation by an atemporal being is at least intelligible. My main concern lies elsewhere. I shall argue, first, that Craig’s defense of the causal principle on which the *kalam* argument rests – premise (1) – is considerably weakened by this way of understanding God’s relation to time; and second, that his argument for saying that the cause of the universe must be a person lacks cogency if we suppose that the universe is caused by a *timeless* being.

I.A. What is it for something to “begin to exist?”

It will be recalled that premise (1) says that whatever *begins to exist* must have a cause. But what, exactly, is it for something to “begin to exist?” Philosophers as diverse as Grünbaum and Swinburne have suggested that a thing does not begin to exist unless there is an earlier time at which it did not exist. If they are right, then the absence of time prior to the beginning of the universe would entail that it did not *begin* to exist, in which case Craig’s premise (1) would not require that the universe have a cause.

Craig is not impressed by this objection. Responding to Grünbaum, he writes:

Imagine that the temporal instants prior to a performance of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony were non-existent. Should we say that the symphony concert then fails to have a beginning, even though it is precisely the same concert as that which is contingently preceded

by temporal moments? ... The fact that x begins to exist ought to leave the question of existents prior to x altogether open. [SCA 237]

Craig then offers the following definition:

' x begins to exist' =_{def} ' x exists at t and there is no time immediately prior to t at which x exists.' [SCA 238]

If this analysis is accepted, it will of course follow that the universe "begins to exist" even if there is no time prior to that beginning. But is it true that whatever "begins to exist" in this broader sense must have a cause?

I.B. Could something come from nothing?

Craig says that premise (1) is "based on the metaphysical intuition that something cannot come out of nothing" – a principle that he believes no reasonable person could reject.

Does anyone in his right mind really believe that, say, a raging tiger could suddenly come into existence uncaused, out of nothing, in this room right now? The same applies to the universe: if *prior to* the existence of the universe, there was absolutely nothing – no God, no space, no time – how could the universe possibly have come to exist? [RF 93, my emphasis]

... if *originally* there were absolutely nothing – no God, no space, no time –, then how could the universe possibly come to exist? The truth of the principle *ex nihilo, nihil fit* is so obvious that I think we are justified in foregoing an elaborate defense of the argument's first premiss. [EGBU, my emphasis]

Unfortunately, it is difficult either to formulate a clear statement of this principle, or to see exactly how it is supposed to support premise (1).

Let us begin our investigation of this principle by asking what Craig means by the words "originally" and "prior to" in the passages quoted above. He can hardly mean "once upon a time before the beginning of the universe," since on the view he is defending, there is no time prior to the beginning of the universe. Sometimes Craig formulates his "metaphysical intuition" without the temporal sounding word, "originally."

... if nothing existed – no matter, no energy, no space, no time, no deity – if there were absolutely nothing, then it seems unintelligible to say that something should spring into existence. [TABBC 146]

Since there is no time in the "nothing" under consideration, the phrase "springing into existence" must be understood in such a way that it does not entail a *change* in some *already* existing situation. But stripped of all temporal sounding language, Craig's "metaphysical intuition" says only this:

If nothing existed, then nothing could exist.

Presumably the “could” in question is the “could” of logical or metaphysical necessity. But where does the necessity operator go? Does it have wide scope or narrow scope? Does Craig’s principle say this?

Necessarily, if nothing existed then nothing would exist.

Or this?

If nothing existed, then necessarily nothing would exist.

On the wide scope interpretation, Craig’s principle is a trivial analytic truth, from which nothing of interest follows. If nothing at all existed, then there would indeed be nothing at all – not even a “springing into existence.” But this would be so even if the beginning of the universe lacked a cause. It therefore provides no support for premise (1) of the *kalam* argument.

What about the narrow scope interpretation? On this reading, the principle is difficult to interpret. It speaks of nothingness almost as if it were a “condition” of something. In the unimaginable situation in which there was absolutely nothing, it would be impossible for anything to exist. But this is nonsense. Nothingness is not a “condition” of anything. It has no power to “prevent” things from “springing into existence.” What we are talking about here, after all, is *nothing at all* – “no matter, no energy, no space, no time, no deity.” And *nothing at all* has no power at all, not even the power to prevent things from existing. One wants to ask Craig, “If there were nothing at all, what would *make it true* that nothing could come into existence?”

It is not surprising, therefore, that Craig sometimes slips back into talking as if the issue were whether something could “spring into existence” out of a *temporally prior* nothing. For example, in the following passage, Craig appeals to the Maimonidean-Thomist principle that “if *in the past* nothing existed then nothing would exist now.”

. . . for example, in the Maimonidean-Thomist argument that a necessary being must exist or else given infinite time nothing would exist, virtually no one ever challenges the premiss that if *in the past* nothing existed then nothing would exist now. That something should spring into existence out of nothing is so counter-intuitive that to attack Maimonides and Aquinas at this point seems to colour one’s intellectual integrity. The old principle *ex nihilo nihil fit* appears to be so manifestly true that a sincere denial of this axiom is well-nigh impossible. [TABBC 58-59, my emphasis]

Since there can hardly be a *past* state of affairs in which *there is no time*, it might look as if Craig here understands the principle, *ex nihilo nihil fit*, to mean something like the following.

(WT) If, at a given time, there were nothing at all (apart from time itself), then at no later time could anything begin to exist.

I am not sure whether it is “metaphysically” possible for time to be the only “thing” in existence. But even if it isn’t possible, (WT) might still be true in an interesting way. Someone might think it plausible to say that if – *per impossible* – there were a time at which there was absolutely nothing

else, then *in that case*, nothing could “begin to exist.” That is probably how Maimonides and Thomas are to be understood.

Unfortunately, *this* “metaphysical intuition” – even if we have it – does not force us to accept premise (1) of the *kalam* argument.² To see why, recall that on Craig’s account, a thing begins to exist at a time *t* if there is no time prior to *t* at which it exists. Recall too that there are two different ways in which this might be so:

1. *x* exists at a time *t*, and there is a time prior to *t* at which *x* does not exist.
2. *x* exists at a time *t*, and *there is no time* prior to *t*.

I shall refer to the first of these possibilities as *intra-temporal* “coming to be,” and to the second as *extra-temporal* “coming to be.” In order to provide what is needed for the *kalam* argument, premise (1) must be understood to claim that anything that comes to be in *either* of these senses must have a cause. But principle (WT) entails only that whatever comes to be *within* time must have a cause, leaving open the question what is to be said about the beginning of time itself.

Is there some other way of reading the traditional formula that *nothing comes from nothing* on which it *does* entail premise (1)? Perhaps there is. If we read “from” as “caused by,” and “comes” as “begins to exist,” and do a little creative rewording, “nothing comes from nothing” amounts to something like this:

- (c) Nothing begins to exist if nothing causes it to exist.

(c) does indeed entail premise (1). But that is only because it just is a variant premise (1). If this is all that Craig means by *ex nihilo nihil fit*, then dragging this traditional formula into the discussion merely increases the likelihood of confusion without providing any legitimate support for the causal principle required by the argument. If we have to appeal to premise (1) to explain what it *means* to say that “nothing comes from nothing,” then surely it would be better to drop the traditional formula altogether, and stick with the simple assertion that we have a “metaphysical intuition” of the truth of the proposition that whatever begins to be – either in the *intra-temporal* or in the *extra-temporal* sense – must have a cause.

At a later point, I will raise serious questions about the claim that there is a strong “metaphysical intuition” favoring even the claim that what “comes to be” *within* time necessarily has a cause. But first I want to attend to a couple of other small, but significant, points.

I.C. Did God “begin to exist” when he created the world?

The questionable character of Craig’s premise (1) becomes even more obvious when we take note of the fact that on the definition of “begins to exist” that we have been working with, God himself begins to exist. For in creating the world, Craig thinks, God both creates time and puts himself into time. It follows that God, no less than the universe, exists at a time prior to which there is no time. But then it seems that, on Craig’s princi-

ples, God is as much in need of a cause as the universe.

In order to get around this problem, Craig introduces yet another complication into his analysis of “begins to exist.” As amended, it says:

x exists at *t*; there is no time immediately *prior* to *t* at which *x* exists; and the actual world contains no state of affairs involving *x*’s timeless existence. [EGBU, 237 fn]

It will be recalled that on the present proposal, God is timeless “prior” to the creation of the universe. If this is what it means to “begin to exist,” then Craig can consistently deny that God “begins to exist.” If God is timeless prior to creation, then the actual world does contain “a state of affairs involving God’s timeless existence.” But now premise (1) must be understood to mean that everything satisfying this new, elaborate definition of “begins to exist” must have a cause. Such a claim is not obviously supported by any widely shared metaphysical intuition.

I.D. Creation *ex nihilo* and the appeal to “metaphysical intuition”

Another problem with the appeal to “metaphysical intuition” is that different intuitions pull us in different directions. Some may support the traditional theistic picture of creation, but others don’t. In particular, I think that *creation out of nothing* is at least as counterintuitive as is *beginning to exist without a cause*.

When I try to conjure up a picture of something – a house, say – “popping into existence” without a cause, it does seem pretty absurd. It may not be *logically* impossible, but it is inconsistent with everything I know of the world in which I live. Houses don’t just materialize out of nothing. They have to be *built*.

So far, so good. But I don’t see how considerations of this sort can be appealed to by someone who believes in *creation ex nihilo*. After all, a house “popping into existence out of nowhere” doesn’t seem any less absurd just because somebody says (or thinks), “Let there be a house where there was no house.”

To say that this is unproblematic when the “somebody” in question is an omnipotent God is to beg the question against those who doubt that *creation ex nihilo* is metaphysically possible. The reason is that on standard assumptions about the nature of omnipotence, God is not supposed to be able to do what is *metaphysically* impossible. If someone insists it is just “obvious” that God could create a world without any preexisting material stuff to work with, on the ground that there is no *logical* contradiction in the idea of such a feat, then the proper reply is that there is *also* no *logical* contradiction in the idea of the universe beginning without a cause.

This point can be expressed quite precisely in terms of Aristotle’s distinction between efficient and material causes. When I do the relevant “thought experiments,” I find the absence of a *material* cause at least as troubling as the absence of an *efficient* cause. At the level of raw, untutored, intuition, the idea of something “beginning to be” without an efficient cause does not seem *more* absurd than that of somebody “making” a universe out of absolutely nothing.

I hope it is clear that I am not suggesting that creation *ex nihilo* is either logically incoherent or otherwise impossible.³ Nevertheless, I think the “intuitive” absurdity of making something “out of” nothing is a near neighbor of the intuition that something can’t “come from” nothing, and this raises a doubt about the wisdom of relying so heavily on such “intuitions” for the defense of premise (1). Craig may perhaps not unreasonably be accused of emphasizing “intuitions” that support the picture of creation he wishes to defend, and neglecting those that don’t.

I.E. Is it an *a priori* intuition?

How are we supposed to evaluate this alleged “metaphysical intuition?” How can we tell whether premise (1) is necessarily true? Craig says we should not think of it as an empirical generalization, although he also says that it would fare quite well if we did think of it that way. (More on this in a bit.) Clearly it is not an analytic truth. The negation of (1) does not appear to be logically inconsistent – we can conceive tigers and the like popping into existence uncaused without any obvious contradiction. But Craig says this has no tendency to show that such things are “really” possible. On the contrary, he claims that we can “see” that it is *metaphysically impossible* for anything at all to begin to exist without a cause.

It would seem, then, that “metaphysical intuition,” as Craig conceives it, is a source of knowledge that is both synthetic and *a priori*. In this paper, I will not challenge the claim that there are *some* synthetic *a priori* intuitions. I will ask only whether, assuming that there are, it is plausible to believe that premise (1) of the *kalam* argument is among them.

Do we have an *a priori* intuition of either of the following claims?

- (IT) It is metaphysically impossible for anything to “come to be” *within* time without a cause. (*Intratemporal* coming to be.)
- (ET) It is metaphysically impossible for *time itself* to “come to be” without a cause. (*Extratemporal* coming to be.)

The position I wish to defend is not that either (IT) or (ET) is false. Rather, I shall contend that that they are not known *a priori* to be true.

In section I.B. above, I pointed out that (IT) does not logically entail (ET), and suggested that when it is split off from (IT), it may not be at all obvious what to say about (ET). We may well feel that we just don’t know what to say about *extratemporal* coming to be. Now I want to go further and suggest that we do not have a clear *a priori* intuition even with regard to *intratemporal* coming to be.

One mark of a genuine *a priori* intuition of a proposition would seem to be this. If a person clearly understands it, then he “sees” that it must be true. The proposition has a kind of “luminosity” that makes it impossible for him not to believe it. A standard example of a non-analytic proposition that might plausibly be thought to be knowable in this way is:

- (RG) “The surface of an object cannot be both red all over and partly green at one and the same time.”

Let us suppose that we do indeed know that propositions like (RG) are “metaphysically necessary.” And let us suppose further that the source of this knowledge lies in an *a priori* intuition. We just “see” that (RG) cannot be false. If somebody doesn’t “see” it, we will conclude that he hasn’t paid proper attention to proposition (RG). He doesn’t understand it yet. When he does, we will expect him to “see” it too.

A second mark of a genuine *a priori* intuition would seem to be this. The *better* we are acquainted with the “intuited” proposition, the more fully we see what it says and just what is involved in asserting it, the clearer it will be to us that the proposition must be true. It shouldn’t be the case that as we make the distinctions necessary to understand precisely what is being said, the issue becomes more and more obscure and we become less and less sure of our judgment.

How does proposition (IT) above fare when we apply these “tests” of an *a priori* intuition to it? Is it the case that when we properly attend to it, we “see” that it is necessarily true? Is it the case that the better we understand what it says, the clearer it is that it cannot be false? Should we join Craig in refusing to believe that anyone in his right mind could fail to see that (IT) is true?

At this point we encounter a familiar difficulty. There isn’t nearly as much agreement about (IT) as there is about (RG). Almost everybody who thinks about it “sees” that (RG) has to be true, whereas some people, many of them philosophers, report no such intuition of the truth of (IT). Inspired perhaps by the imagination of David Hume, they have no trouble conceiving a world in which bizarre and unpredictable things happen, a world in which things pop into existence without their usual causes. They conclude (perhaps too quickly) that such a world is “metaphysically possible.”

Naturally, Craig would insist that such philosophers have mistaken views about various matters. They may have failed to distinguish clearly between “what we can conceive without apparent contradiction” and what is “really or “metaphysically possible.” They may also be in the grip of a false Humean “picture” of what it is for something to have a cause. (In his book length exchange with Quentin Smith, for example, Craig accuses Smith of assuming “uncritically” the “positivistic equation between predictability in principle and causation.” [TABBC 145])

With regard to the first point, I agree that there is a distinction between metaphysical possibility and “what we can conceive without apparent contradiction,” and that something might be – really – impossible even if we seem to be able to conceive it without contradiction. Nevertheless, I believe that the ability to conceive something without apparent contradiction is *evidence* – albeit defeasible evidence – for its metaphysical possibility. Like most philosophers since Hume, I have no trouble conceiving a world in which things occasionally pop into existence without cause. (As long as it doesn’t happen too often, it could be a world much like the one that actually exists.) Such a world may *be* metaphysically impossible, but the fact that we do not “see” any contradiction in it must be given some weight. Unless there is a *defeater* for this evidence, those who take it at face value are perfectly within their epistemic rights.

As for the second of these charges, it is perfectly true that if one thinks

that causes must precede their effects in time, or if one thinks that effects must be at least in principle predictable from antecedent conditions, then one will not be able to make much sense of the sort of causation that Craig thinks is involved in the creation of the universe, and in consequence one will have grave doubts about the truth of premise (1). What is *not* true is that only a characteristically Humean view of causation would produce doubt about (IT). I myself am inclined to think that our best and clearest (if not further analyzable!) idea of causation comes from the awareness of our own exercise of our power to *act* – a most *un*-Humean thought! Nevertheless, I have no clear intuition telling me that “whatever begins to be” must be caused by something – whether by another event or by an exercise of “agency.”

It is true that the ordinary sized objects of everyday experience do not pop into or out of existence without causes. But it does not follow that we know this by way of an *a priori* intuition that entitles us to generalize about the way things are in situations utterly dissimilar to those of which we have experience. For example, I have no intuitions – *a priori* or otherwise – about the behavior of subatomic particles, and if the “experts” tell me that the best theory is one in which chance reigns, then I shall (however provisionally) operate on the assumption that they are right about this. It is possible, of course, that the experts are wrong, and that quantum indeterminacy reflects nothing more than the limits of our ability to take the relevant measurements without disturbing the systems whose properties are being measured. Nevertheless, I do not think we know *a priori* that this *must* be so.

Craig’s response to the quantum indeterminacy objection is interesting. He points out that the events in question have *necessary* causal conditions, even if those conditions are not jointly *sufficient* to produce the effect.

The appearance of a particle in a quantum vacuum may thus be said to be spontaneous, but cannot properly be said to be absolutely uncaused, since it has many physically necessary conditions. To be uncaused in the relevant sense of an absolute beginning, an existent must lack any non-logical necessary or sufficient conditions whatsoever. [TABBC 146]

This is a somewhat surprising line for Craig to take. One wonders what he thinks makes a *cause* out of a bunch of merely *necessary* conditions. Apparently *not* that they are jointly *sufficient* to *produce* the effect. What, then? Some explanation is surely called for. Craig will not want to settle for so little by way of a cause when he is considering the beginning of the universe. Why is he willing to do it here?

But even if we accept Craig’s suggestion that quantum events are not “uncaused” in the “relevant sense,” this will require a fresh qualification of premise (1). It will now have to be understood in such a way that it does not entail that for every beginning there is something *sufficient* to *produce* it, but only that for every beginning there is some “non-logically necessary condition” without which it could not happen. This makes the question I am raising now about the supposed *a priori* status of premise (1) all the more pressing. If a principle must be qualified on the basis of *empirical* evi-

dence, how seriously can we take the claim that it is known by way of an *a priori* intuition? (Also, as we shall see later, it considerably weakens the case Craig makes for saying that the First Cause can only be a person.)

Things become even less clear when we turn from the limited principle (IT) back to premise (1) of the *kalam* argument – to the claim that all beginnings to be – whether of the *intra-* or of the *extra-temporal* variety – must have causes. What I have already said about (IT) is true *a fortiori* for premise (1). I have no experience of the “origins of worlds,” or of times prior to which there are no other times, and I have no intuitions about what causal principles would have to hold in a situation so remote from everyday life. When I compare the beginning of time itself to the particular beginnings within time of which I have experience, I can only say, “God knows – I don’t.”

Thus it is that the more fully I understand and appreciate what is involved in the causal principle on which Craig’s argument rests, the less obvious it is to me that this principle is a necessary truth. By contrast, nothing like this happens to me when I examine the claim that something can’t be red all over but somewhere green. The more carefully I consider that proposition, the clearer it is to me that it must be true. Thus it seems that (IT) fails our second test for being a genuine *a priori* intuition.

Add to this the history of discarded *a priori* intuitions – of propositions that once were “clearly and distinctly perceived” to be true, but are now hardly intelligible, much less “seen” to be true, and the case becomes even clearer. Anyone who has ever tried explain to students how Descartes could have “seen” – not merely that there is always a cause – but that the cause must have as much reality “formally or eminently” in it as the effect has “objectively” in it, will know what I mean.

I conclude that anyone who claims to have an *a priori* intuition of premise (1) must be prepared to explain why other equally well informed and intelligent persons who have attended closely to (1), made all the relevant distinctions, and clearly understood what it says, nevertheless fail to “see” that it is true. If it is so obvious, how can they fail to “see” it?⁴

How might Craig deal with this problem? To judge from his very brief statements on the subject, he appears to think that no one *sincerely* believes that the beginning of the universe might not have had a cause.

The old principle *ex nihilo nihil fit* appears to be so manifestly true that a *sincere* denial of this axiom is well-nigh impossible. [TABBC 59, my emphasis]

The idea that anything, especially the whole universe, could just pop into existence uncaused is so repugnant that most thinkers intuitively recognize that the universe’s beginning to exist entirely uncaused out of nothing is incapable of *sincere* affirmation. [TABBC 57, my emphasis]

It is true that if a person is confused by loose talk of things “popping into existence out of nothing,” she may be tempted to suppose that we have something like an *a priori* intuition of premise (1). But once the relevant distinctions have been made, many philosophers would deny that

they “intuitively recognize” anything of the sort. Craig, however, seems to think that such persons are (i) in a minority and (ii) insincere. Taking issue with John Mackie, for example, he rhetorically asks: “Does Mackie *sincerely* believe that things can pop into existence uncaused, out of nothing?” [RF 93, my emphasis]

I don’t suppose that Craig thinks Mackie was *lying* when he questioned the first premise of the *kalam* argument. But perhaps he thinks that Mackie was self-deceived – that he had talked himself into affirming something that, “deep down,” he knew to be false. If so, we have a new question: How could the likes of John Mackie talk themselves into denying a self-evident principle? Craig’s answer appears to be that such persons deny premise (1) in order to avoid having to believe in a Creator.

Nevertheless, some thinkers, exercised to avoid the theism implicit in this premiss within the present context, have felt driven to deny its truth in order to avoid its theistic implications. [EGBU]

One might suppose that such statements are mere rhetorical excess on Craig’s part, and do not reflect his real position. This would probably be a mistake. Many Christian intellectuals – taking their cue from the first chapter of Paul’s letter to the Romans – hold that God has made his existence so “plain” in the works of nature that we are completely “without excuse” if we do not believe in him. Craig himself apparently thinks that one of the goals of Christian apologetics is to deprive unbelievers of any excuse by inviting them to see just how “plain” God’s existence is in the things he has made.

Christian apologist E. J. Carnell pointed out that one of the purposes of apologetics is to remove from the unbeliever any just excuse for his not repenting before God. That objective is achieved so long as the unbeliever is presented sound theistic arguments with substantiated premises for which he has no adequately warranted defeater, even if he refuses to believe those premises. [IDKA 238]

If, after listening carefully to all of Craig’s arguments, an intelligent and well-informed person still doesn’t believe, Craig apparently thinks it is clear that the fault lies, not with his arguments, but with those who have “refused” to be convinced by them.

Dialectical success in natural theology cannot be equated with convincing one’s opponent (or even forcing him to revise his beliefs); after all, many will simply refuse to be convinced. All sorts of psychological and spiritual factors come into play here for which a philosopher cannot be held responsible. [IDKA 238]

It is not hard to guess what “psychological and spiritual factors” Craig likely has in mind. Proudful rebellion against God – a sinful desire to run one’s own life without divine guidance or assistance – is often alleged to be the wellspring of unbelief.

This is not the place for a full dress review of the claim that all unbelievers have dishonest and unworthy motives. I will limit myself to two brief comments.

First, it is worth noting such an "explanation" could be accepted *only* by someone who was *already* convinced that God exists, and of a lot of other things as well. From *outside* the evangelical Christian world view, this is bound to look like an *ad hoc* hypothesis that merely adds to the implausibility of an already top-heavy theory. No matter how much "scriptural support" is cited in its favor, the *outsider*, who does not yet accept this kind of "support," is perfectly justified, from his own point of view, in seeing this attack on his integrity as little more than a lame attempt to reassure believers in the face of recalcitrant data.

While it is true that the remarks quoted above are not *addressed* to outsiders, the *kalam* argument is offered to them as one reason (among others) for "coming inside." So the facts to which I have called attention remain a serious problem for the *apologetic* use of that argument. Whatever the *insider* may think, the *outsider* still needs to understand how it is that intelligent and well-informed people can disagree about matters that are supposed to be intuitively self-evident.

My second comment is that my own experience – of both unbelief and unbelievers – suggests that the proposed "explanation" is false. It tells me that there are lots and lots of perfectly honest unbelievers who are quite sincerely troubled by what they see as a lack of evidence. They would *like* to believe in God, but *can't* because they think the evidence does not support it.

Craig would undoubtedly disagree me here. In another context, he says that the Holy Spirit reveals the truth to the unbeliever, convicting him "of his own sin, of God's righteousness, and of his condemnation before God. The unbeliever so convicted can therefore be said to know such truths as 'God exists,' 'I am guilty before God,' and so forth." [RF 35] And lest we should suppose that Craig is speaking only of *some* unbelievers, he goes on to say:

. . . when a person refuses to come to Christ it is *never* just because of lack of evidence or because of intellectual difficulties: at root, he refuses to come because he willingly ignores and rejects the drawing of God's Spirit on his heart. No one in the final analysis really fails to become a Christian because of a lack of arguments; he fails to become a Christian because he loves darkness rather than light and wants nothing to do with God. [RF 35-6, my emphasis]

This simply does not square with my own observation of unbelievers, many of whom appear to have very real intellectual difficulties with Christianity. Even if Craig's arguments are better than they (and I) suppose, it is preposterous to suggest that their judgment has been clouded by a "love of darkness" or by a deep unwillingness to believe in God. Some of them are exceptionally honest, clear-headed, and humble. Some of them actually *hope* that God exists.

I.F. Can it be justified empirically?

If premise (1) isn't known by *a priori* intuition, perhaps it is known in some other way. Craig sometimes suggests that even if we treat it as an empirical claim, the evidence strongly supports it.

The causal proposition could be defended as an empirical generalization based on the widest sampling of experience. The empirical evidence in support of the proposition is absolutely overwhelming, so much so that Humean empiricists could demand no stronger evidence in support of any synthetic statement. . . . Constantly verified and never falsified, the causal proposition may be taken as an empirical generalization enjoying the strongest support experience affords. [TABBC p 61]

I'm not sure what Craig would be prepared to count as a genuine "falsification" of premise (1). Presumably "looking hard and failing to discover a cause" would not do the trick. If *no* conceivable observation would refute the principle, the absence of falsification does nothing to establish the empirical credentials of this principle.

What about the "constant verification" of premise (1)? What does it consist in? Is it that we always see what the cause of something is? Presumably not. We don't always know what the cause of something is. Is it that we always find causes when we look for them? Hardly. Sometimes we fail. Is it that we often find causes when we look for them? This is certainly true, but at best it supports a claim considerably weaker than the one Craig wants to make.

An even more serious problem with this way of defending premise (1) is that the "observed cases" may not be a representative sample of the whole territory. After all, the only "comings to be" of which we have *experience* involve *intratemporal* coming to be, whereas the sweeping generalization Craig wants us to draw from this evidence concerns *all* comings to be – whether of the *intratemporal* or of the *extramundane* sort. Is the "coming to be" of a mushroom, say, relevantly similar to the "coming to be" of time? Is it likely that a metaphysical principle that holds for former holds for the latter? Is the presence or absence of a temporal context completely irrelevant to the need for a cause? It is far from obvious that the answers to these questions will be the ones required by the *kalam* argument.

Finally, it should be noted how "two-edged" the empirical argument for premise (1) is. *Lots* of empirical generalizations are *prima facie* at least as well established as the one Craig endorses, and some of them are incompatible with the requirements of the *kalam* argument. Consider the following:

- EG1. In our experience, something isn't be made out of nothing. Whenever something comes into existence, some previously existing "stuff" has been given a new "shape." Therefore something is never made of nothing.

- EG2. In our experience, causes always bear a temporal relation to their effects. They are either temporally prior to, or perhaps simultaneous with, their effects. Therefore causes always bear a temporal relation to their effects.

Surely the conclusions of EG1 and EG2 are “constantly confirmed,” and “never falsified,” by empirical observation? But if the conclusion of EG1 is true, the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* is false; and if the conclusion of EG2 is true, God must be in time in order to cause the beginning of the universe. Presumably Craig would want to say that EG1 and EG2 are bad arguments. But how are they bad? If we say that the relation of God to the created world is not relevantly analogous to intramundane causation, this will be an equally strong objection to the “empirical” case for premise (1) of the *kalam* argument.

Part II

Must the cause of the universe be a person?

Craig believes, not only that the *kalam* argument establishes that the universe has a cause, but also that there is a strong argument for the saying that this cause must be a person. Here are two representative passages in which Craig states this argument.

. . . In fact, I think that it can be plausibly argued that the cause of the universe must be a personal Creator. For how else could a temporal effect arise from an eternal cause? If the cause were simply a mechanically operating set of necessary and sufficient conditions existing from eternity, then why would not the effect also exist from eternity? For example, if the cause of water’s being frozen is the temperature’s being below zero degrees, then if the temperature were below zero degrees from eternity, then any water present would be frozen from eternity. *The only way to have an eternal cause but a temporal effect would seem to be if the cause is a personal agent who freely chooses to create an effect in time.* For example, a man sitting from eternity may will to stand up; hence, a temporal effect may arise from an eternally existing agent. Indeed, the agent may will from eternity to create a temporal effect, so that no change in the agent need be conceived. Thus, we are brought not merely to the first cause of the universe, but to its personal Creator. [EGBU, my emphasis]

. . . The cause is in some sense eternal and yet the effect which it produced is not eternal, but began to exist a finite time ago. How can this be? If the necessary and sufficient conditions for the production of the effect are eternal, then why isn’t the effect eternal? *How can all the causal conditions sufficient for the production of the effect be changelessly existent and yet the effect not also be existent along with the cause?* How can the cause exist without the effect? ... How can a first event come to exist if the cause of that event exists changelessly and eternally? Why isn’t the effect as coeternal as the cause? ... It seems that *there is only one way out of this dilemma*, and that is to infer that the cause of the universe is a personal agent who chooses to create a universe in time. [RF 117, my emphasis]

Craig seems to be thinking along the following lines. There are just two kinds of cause – personal causes and non-personal ones. Non-personal

causes are causally sufficient for their effects. A temperature below freezing is Craig's example of a non-personal cause. It cannot fail to freeze whatever water happens to be around. Personal causes, on the other hand, are individual persons who freely decide to bring about this or that state of affairs. A man freely choosing to stand up at a certain time is an example of a personal cause. If the *man* (rather than some state of the man) is the cause of his standing up, then obviously the cause can exist without producing its effect.

Like many libertarians, Craig distinguishes between "agent" causes and "event" causes. An "agent" can exist for as long as you please without producing a particular effect that she is nevertheless able to produce at any time. The mere *existence* of the cause (the agent) is not sufficient for its effect. By contrast, a non-personal cause is sufficient for its effect. And a cause (the temperature being below zero centigrade, for example) that is sufficient for an effect cannot exist without producing that effect (frozen water).

If this distinction is accepted, Craig thinks he can show that the cause of the beginning of the universe must be a person. The reason is that a *non-personal cause, existing from eternity, would have produced its effect from eternity*. In which case, the universe would *always have existed*. Since we know that the universe has *not* always existed (it has a beginning), and since we also know that its cause is eternal, Craig thinks it follows that the cause of the universe must be personal. The argument may be outlined as follows:

- a. It has been shown that the universe has not always existed.
- b. The cause of the universe must be eternal. (Otherwise it, too, would have a beginning and would require a cause.)
- c. The cause of the universe must be either a personal agent or a non-personal sufficient condition.
- d. If a "causal condition sufficient for the production" of the universe exists "from eternity," then the universe has always existed.
- e. So the cause of the universe is not a non-personal sufficient condition.
- f. The cause of the universe must therefore be a person.

There are several problems here.

First, it is doubtful that Craig can consistently endorse premise (c) of this argument. When responding to the quantum indeterminacy objection to premise (1) of the *kalam* argument, Craig interprets his causal principle in such a way that it requires only that there be one or more *necessary* conditions for any "coming to be."

The appearance of a particle in a quantum vacuum may thus be said to be spontaneous, but cannot properly be said to be absolutely uncaused, since it has many physically necessary conditions. To be uncaused in the relevant sense of an absolute beginning, an existent must lack any non-logical necessary or sufficient conditions whatsoever. [TABBC 146]

Presumably Craig would have to agree that non-personal conditions

that are only *necessary* for some effect could exist from eternity without producing that effect. So the alternatives – either an eternally sufficient condition or an eternal personal agent – are not (according to Craig’s own position) the only logical possibilities.

Second, it is doubtful that postulating a personal cause will enable Craig to escape the conclusion that the world must be just as eternal as its cause. It will do so only if no eternal *state* of that agent is causally sufficient for the existence of the world. For on Craig’s principles, that should be enough to make the world eternal. That much is entailed by premise (d) of my outline of Craig’s argument.

Now this condition might hold in the case of “a man sitting from eternity” who decides, at some time, to exercise his power to stand. The man, we may suppose, has not always had the intention to stand up. But this easy answer will not do if the first cause is identified with God. God, after all, “knows from eternity” what God is going to do. So it seems that he must “have the intention” of creating the universe “from eternity.” On standard views about God, his will is *causally sufficient* for the existence of the universe. So, one may well ask Craig, why doesn’t it follow that the universe exists “from eternity?”

Craig does not deny that God intention to create is eternal. He explains:

. . . God could exist changelessly and eternally but choose to create the world in time. By “choose” one need not mean that the Creator changes his mind about the decision to create, but that He freely and eternally intends to create a world with a beginning. By exercising his causal power, he therefore brings it about that a world with a beginning comes to exist. So the cause is eternal, but the effect is not. [RF 117]

This is much too easy. God’s *eternal decision* to create a universe must surely be *causally sufficient* for the existence of that world. So if, as Craig indicates in this passage, God’s will to create is eternal, why doesn’t he conclude, in line with principle (d) above, that the universe is eternal?

But doesn’t Craig say that what God “eternally wills” is to create “a world *with a beginning*?” And doesn’t this entail that the world he creates is *not* eternal? Indeed it does, but this merely makes me wonder whether Craig is not committed to an inconsistent set of propositions. To see why, let *alpha* be the world God has chosen to create. From:

- (i) *alpha* has a beginning;
- (ii) God’s willing-to-create-*alpha* is eternal;
- (iii) God’s willing-to-create-*alpha* is causally sufficient for the existence of *alpha*;
- (iv) if a cause is eternal and is sufficient for the existence of some thing, then that thing is also eternal [from principle (d) above];

and

- (v) if a thing is eternal then it does not have a beginning;

it follows that

(vi) *alpha* both does and does not have a beginning.

Something has to give. But what? (i) is a bedrock feature of Craig's position. No theist with standard views about God would want to deny (iii). And however we define "eternity," (v) is an uncontroversial analytic truth.

What about (ii)? Maybe it was a mistake for Craig to say that God's will to create is eternal? I don't think so. On the standard view of creation *ex nihilo*, God creates just by "willing." He says, "let it be so," and it is so. God's will to set time in motion by creating *alpha* is therefore *causally* prior to the existence – and thus to the beginning – of time itself. From this it is a very short step to the conclusion that God's will to create *alpha* is eternal.

But what about (iv)? Perhaps Craig could say that God's eternally-willing-to-create-a-world-with-a-beginning merely makes it *eternally true* that there "is" a world with a beginning, while denying that it makes *the world* eternal. There may be something to this idea, but I do not see how Craig can make use of it in the present context. The reason is that it can just as easily be deployed on behalf of an eternal but *non-personal* cause, whereas the main thrust of Craig's argument is that there is a clear *difference* between the implications of an eternal personal cause and those of an eternal non-personal cause. If an eternal state of a *person* can be causally sufficient for "there being a world with a beginning," why not an eternal state of a *non-person*? If Craig rejects (iv) on these grounds, his rationale for saying that the world would always have existed if it had been caused by an eternal non-person vanishes.

Something has gone very badly wrong. But what? Part of the answer may be that Craig's argument moves back and forth between two opposed conceptions of eternity: eternity as timelessness, and eternity as beginningless and endless temporal duration. When he says that God is "causally prior" to the existence of time itself, he is thinking in terms of a *timeless* First Cause. But when he says that God wills from eternity to produce a world with a beginning in time, he is at least implicitly thinking in terms of beginningless and endless duration. Here's why.

A personal agent *existing in time* can have plans for the future. If God's existence prior to creation is a *temporal* priority, he can *always*, prior to creation, have willed that a world should come into existence *at a later time*. What God wills to create need not lack a beginning just because God has *always* intended to create it. Just as Socrates can sit for a long time, intending to stand up at a certain time, so an everlasting God can have intended "from eternity" to create the universe at a certain time.

It is just at this point that Craig sees a difference between personal causes and non-personal ones. If the temperature is below zero centigrade, that is *sufficient* to freeze any water that happens to be around. The temperature cannot "wait" to exercise its power to freeze. If the temperature had always been below zero, any water that existed would always have been frozen.

I am not certain how real this difference is. If God can have willed "from eternity" that there be a world with a beginning in time, why couldn't a non-personal cause have been sufficient "from eternity" for the exist-

tence of a world with a beginning in time? Must non-personal sufficient conditions always produce their effects straightaway? Is "action at a distance" in time more difficult to understand than "action at a distance" in space? Why should we think that non-personal causes are different in this respect from sufficient conditions involving the will of a personal agent?

These questions are difficult enough to answer when we are thinking of eternity as beginningless duration. But when we switch over to Craig's preferred understanding of eternity, the alleged difference between a *personal* sufficient condition and a non-personal one disappears completely. A *timeless* personal agent timelessly wills to create a world with a beginning, or else does not so will. There can be no *temporal gap* between the time at which it does the willing and the time at which the thing willed actually happens. In this respect a *timeless* personal cause is no different from a non-personal cause.

To see this, suppose that a timeless and non-personal cause, *s*, is causally sufficient for the existence of a physical universe, *alpha*, having a temporal duration of thirty billion years. Suppose further that the beginning of *alpha* coincides with the beginning of time, so that *alpha* "comes into being" only in the *extratemporal* sense. Craig's argument is supposed to show us that this is impossible. If *s* is really eternal, then *alpha* cannot have a beginning. Why not? Because no matter when *alpha* begins, *s* would *already* have produced it.

It is at just this point that Craig's argument breaks down. Since there is no time in eternity, the argument cannot get a grip on it. *From the point of view of eternity*, there no time at which *alpha* does *not yet* exist. Consequently, there is no time at which *s* has failed to produce *alpha*, and no time at which *s* would *already* have produced *alpha*. In short, we have been given no reason to think that an *atemporal* cause – regardless of whether it involves a person – could not be sufficient for the existence of a universe with a temporal beginning.

I conclude that Craig's argument for saying that the (timeless) cause of the universe is a person must be deemed a failure. It moves back and forth between the two conceptions of eternity – eternity as beginningless and endless temporal duration and eternity as timelessness, helping itself to whichever one suits the needs of his argument at the moment. When Craig wants to show that the cause of the universe cannot be an eternal non-person, he conjures up an image of a cause existing throughout an infinite past and refraining from producing its effect – only a person, he says, could do that –, seemingly forgetting that eternal (atemporal) causes have no temporal duration at all, and thus no past.

Craig may think that all non-personal causes are temporal, and that only a personal cause could be atemporal. But (i) this point has not been *established*; (ii) the idea of an atemporal person is at least as puzzling as that of an atemporal non-person, and it is far from obvious that the personal has any advantage over the non-personal in this respect; and (iii) if Craig is operating on the assumption that only a person could be atemporal, it is hard to see why he bothers with the roundabout argument that he actually gives for saying that the atemporal *cause* of the universe must be person.

Even if it cannot be established that the atemporal first cause *must* be a

person, it might still be thought that the hypothesis of a *personal* cause has certain advantages. It might be said that we have some notion of what an atemporal person might have reason to do, but no idea at all about what an atemporal non-person would or wouldn't do. If there is an atemporal God, then perhaps he would create in order to express his love, or because he loves variety or beauty, or for some other reason. On the other hand, it is hard to know how to think about the non-personal alternative. Who knows what an atemporal non-person would or would not be likely to do?⁵

If this line of thought could be sustained, then perhaps Craig's reasoning could be repackaged as an *inductive* argument. Given that the world has an atemporal cause, we might ask, which is it more likely to be? A personal cause? Or a non-personal one? We have no *experience* of either. But if the idea of an atemporal person capable of bringing the universe into existence is (at least somewhat) more understandable than that of an atemporal non-person – if there is a story that can be told in the former case, but not in the latter, about *why* a powerful atemporal being might create a universe – then perhaps we have some reason to prefer a personal explanation to a non-personal one.

How strong such a reason would be, and whether it would be strong *enough* to warrant the *judgment* that the atemporal cause of the universe is a person, depends on the answers to a number of difficult questions. Is the idea of an atemporal personal cause significantly *more* intelligible than that of an atemporal non-personal cause? Just how *more* likely is it that an atemporal person would bring a universe into being than that an atemporal cause would do so? Is our preference for a *personal* cause based on anything deeper than the fact that we are so much more familiar with the thinkers of the Western theological tradition than with those of the East? With the Bible than with the Upanishads? These are good questions, but they lie beyond the scope of this paper.

Conclusion

Where does all of this leave us? At the very least, I think it must be conceded that the *kalam* argument is not as simple and straightforward as it initially appears to be. Its underpinnings are at least as complicated, and at least as controversial, as those of any other cosmological argument. When applied to the beginning of time, the principle that whatever begins to exist must have a cause is not clearly true. And even if it could be shown that the first event in the history of the universe has a cause it is not at all *obvious* that this cause *must* be a person.⁶

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NOTES

1. Since God has no beginning, it might appear that if God is in time prior to creation, then God exists throughout an actually infinite past. Craig thinks this does not follow. Appealing to the work of Swinburne and Padgett, he suggests that God's life prior to creation could consist in a single beginningless and undifferentiated "moment," in which case there would not be an actual infinity of such moments. I am not persuaded that such a moment could count as a *time*, but that is a topic for another paper.

2. Of course, it might still be evidence for the truth of premise (1), but only if the case for premise (1) is broadly inductive. For more on this possibility, see section I.F. below.

3. I am also well aware that the kalam argument is not an argument for a first material cause, but rather an argument for a first efficient cause. (Notwithstanding the title of one of Craig's articles on the kalam argument!)

4. I stress again that this is not meant to be an argument for the falsity of (1), but only as a reason for thinking that Craig cannot legitimately claim that we know that this is so on the basis of a priori intuition.

5. This line of thought was suggested to me by the editor of *Faith and Philosophy*.

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