

CRAIG'S KALAM COSMOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

Stewart C. Goetz

In his book *The Kalam Cosmological Argument*,¹ William Craig attempts to prove that the universe was caused to exist *ex nihilo* by a personal Creator. That the universe had a personal Creator is supposed to follow either from the fact that an actual infinite cannot exist and a beginningless temporal series of events is an actual infinite, or from the fact that it is impossible to traverse an actual infinite by successive addition and, because the temporal series of past events has been formed by successive addition, it cannot be actually infinite.

I will not review the philosophical arguments adduced by Craig to support both the impossibility of an actual infinite and the impossibility of traversing an actual infinite. I find Craig's arguments quite persuasive. However, I do not think that these impossibilities support the conclusion that the universe was caused to exist *ex nihilo* by a personal Creator. In Section I, I both state an objection to Craig's proof and the response he has given to it. Section II consists of my explanation of why Craig's response is inadequate and the objection is sound.

I

The objection to Craig's proof is fairly straightforward. From the fact that an actual infinite temporal sequence of events cannot exist, it does not immediately follow that the universe was caused to exist *ex nihilo*. Consistent with the impossibility of an actual infinite sequence of events is the possibility that the temporal sequence of events had a beginning but the universe did not. That is, it is possible that there is a finite temporal series of events preceded by an eternal quiescent or eventless universe. According to this possibility, the temporal series of events in the universe was initiated by a distinct personal agent but this agent did not create the universe *ex nihilo*. In other words, the first event caused by the agent was not the coming into being of the universe but an event in the already existing but previously quiescent universe.

In response to this objection, Craig constructs the following dilemma: either the first event to arise in the quiescent universe was caused or it was not. Consider the first alternative, that it was caused.

Either the necessary and sufficient conditions giving rise to this first event were eternally present or not. But if these determinate conditions



were eternally present, then their effect would also be eternally present, which makes the occurrence of a *first* event impossible. On the other hand, if the necessary and sufficient conditions for the first event were not eternally present in the universe, then these determinate conditions themselves had to arise in the universe, and we have only succeeded in pushing the temporal regress of events back one more event into the past. But we have already proved that the temporal regress of events cannot be actually infinite because an actual infinite cannot exist. So one must stop at a first event whose determinate conditions did not themselves arise but already existed. But this has already been shown to be impossible. Therefore, the first event to arise in the universe could not be caused.²

If the first event could not be caused, then it must be uncaused. That the first event is uncaused is the other horn of the dilemma. Craig asserts that, while it is logically possible that the first event is uncaused, this does not seem very reasonable. It is inherently implausible because the first event would arise inexplicably without any conditions whatsoever. In conclusion,

if the necessary and sufficient conditions for the occurrence of the first event did not exist from eternity, the first event would never occur; but if the necessary and sufficient conditions for the first event did exist from eternity, then . . . there would have been no first event. Had the universe once been eternally and absolutely quiescent, then it never would have awakened from its sleep of death. But since it obviously is not quiescent, we may conclude that the finite temporal regress of events was not preceded by an eternal, absolutely quiescent universe.³

II

In explaining why Craig's response to the objection that the impossibility of an actual infinite sequence of events does not entail that the universe was caused to exist *ex nihilo* is mistaken, it is helpful first to point out that a cause is not a set of necessary and sufficient conditions, as Craig assumes.⁴ To understand why a cause is not a set of necessary and sufficient conditions, consider two interlocking gears A and B. In a situation where both are simultaneously moving, the movement of A is necessary and sufficient for the movement of B, and the movement of B is necessary and sufficient for the movement of A. However, only one of the moving gears is causing the movement of the other. The fact that one gear is causing the movement of the other cannot be explained in terms of the relations of necessity and sufficiency, for these are identical both ways.

The gear which is causing the movement of the other is the one which is *exercising its causal power* on the other. Thus, the exercise of causal power is the fundamental concept in causation.

Given the concept of the exercise of a causal power, the following question now presents itself: why is it impossible that a personal agent exercise its causal power to bring about a first event in a previously existent but quiescent universe? In response to this suggestion, Craig would probably both point out that the exercise of a causal power is an event and that either it was caused or it was not. On the one hand, if it (the initial exercise of causal power) was caused, then either it was caused by a second exercise of causal power which was exercised from eternity or it was not. If the second exercise of causal power was exercised from eternity, then the effect (the initial exercise of causal power) would be eternal and there would be no first event. On the other hand, if the second exercise of causal power was not eternal but arose in the universe, then what was the cause of that exercise of causal power? Presumably, another exercise of causal power by the same or a different agent. But what caused that exercise of causal power? Craig would claim that by maintaining that the second exercise of causal power was not exercised from eternity, we end up pushing the regress of events back step by step into the past. But it has already been proved that the temporal regress of events cannot be actually infinite because an actual infinite cannot exist. In short, the objector seems to be impaled on one of the horns of a dilemma like that originally constructed by Craig.

What about the other horn of this dilemma? Why is it not open to the objector to maintain that the personal agent's initial exercise of causal power was either uncaused or caused by the agent (agent-causation)? Craig would probably respond that an uncaused exercising of a causal power (or an uncaused agent-causing of an exercising of a causal power) is an inexplicable event, an event which occurs without any conditions. However, the objector can claim that the personal agent exercises its causal power for a reason (or causes its exercising of its causal power for a reason), where a reason is a condition but not a causal condition of the exercising of the causal power.⁵ After all, the objector might continue, Craig himself concludes his argument for a personal Creator by affirming that the creation of the universe was "the action of a personal agent who *freely* (emphasis mine) chooses" to create the universe.⁶ A personal agent which freely creates the universe is an agent which is not caused to exercise its causal power to produce its effect (or, if it caused its exercise of its causal power, then it was not caused to cause its exercise of causal power). Now, either the Creator's creative free act occurred without any conditions whatsoever, in which case, by his own standard, Craig would have to concede that his proof has an implausible conclusion, or the Creator's free act was performed for a reason, in which case Craig must concede that there is nothing implausible in the idea of a personal

agent which does not create the universe but freely exercises its causal power to start a finite event sequence in an already existing but quiescent universe.

In conclusion, Craig has not proved that the universe was caused to exist *ex nihilo* by a personal Creator. If his arguments for the impossibility of an actual infinite or the impossibility of traversing an actual infinite are sound, what he has proved is either that the universe was caused to exist *ex nihilo* by a personal Creator or that the universe always existed and was quiescent until some personal agent initiated a finite chain of events in it. As of now, I know of no philosophical argument that proves the truth of one or the other of these disjuncts.

Ursinus College

NOTES

1. William Lane Craig, *The Kalam Cosmological Argument*, New York: Barnes & Noble, 1979.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 100.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 101.
4. Richard Taylor has emphasized this point in many places. For example, see his *Action and Purpose*, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1966, Chapters 2 and 3; and "Causation," in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. 1, New York: Macmillan, 1967, pp. 56-66.
5. A reason for acting can explain why an agent acts, and an agent acts to bring about or realize some goal or end. This is a teleological, not a causal, concept. Cf. Taylor, *Action and Purpose*, Chapters 10 through 17.
6. Craig, *The Kalam Cosmological Argument*, p. 151.