

Craig and His Concept of Eternity:
A Critique from the Standpoint of the Kālām
Author: Engin Erdem

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Patricia Hanna

The International Conference on Philosophy sponsored by the Athens Institute for Research and Education (ATINER) has now been held for three years. Each year, we have worked to make it better, and this volume, the third that has been produced in connection with the conferences, shows the results of these efforts.

We now have a five member Editorial Board which works closely with the Editor in putting together the final volume. More importantly, however, we have now established a pool of reviewers which allows us to send each paper to at least two reviewers for their recommendations on the suitability of the papers for publication. It is our aim to treat the papers in a manner which parallels the review standards for professional journals in philosophy; while blind reviewing is not entirely possible, we take this as our model. Starting with Volume II (2007 Conference), we have asked reviewers to base their recommendations on the same standards they would use for reviewing papers for professional journals; for the past two years, approximately 35% of the papers presented at the conference have been accepted for inclusion in these proceedings.

One of the strongest motivations for raising the level of expectation is that this conference is one of a vanishing breed: a small international philosophy conference which is open to all areas of philosophy. It provides an almost unique opportunity for philosophers from all over the world to get together and share ideas with the aim of expanding our understanding of our discipline, and to do so in a venue which allows all of the participants to get to know one another. It is the hope of the Editor and the Editorial Board that the conference will flourish in future years, and that it will draw the best philosophers from every country, regardless of their area or the specific approach or methodology they follow.

The world faces new challenges in terms of shrinking oil supplies, climate change and an uncertain political and economic future. Now, more than ever, bringing philosophers from around the world together to address the most fundamental questions confronting us as a species is needed. At the 2008 conference, held from 2—5 June 2008, 71 philosophers from over 20 countries (including, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Cyprus, Finland, Germany, Greece, Iran, Italy, Japan, Lebanon, The Netherlands, Portugal, Romania, Singapore, South Africa, Taiwan, Turkey, Uzbekistan, United Kingdom and the USA) met and talked with one another about the human condition in the shadow of the Parthenon.

We have chosen to organize the volume along traditional lines. This should not, however, mislead a reader into supposing that the topics or approaches to problems fall neatly into traditional categories. The selection of papers chosen

for inclusion here gives some sense of the variety of topics addressed at the conference. However, it would be impossible in an edited volume to ensure coverage of the full breadth and variety of subject matter or the issues brought to the conference itself by the participants, some of whom could not travel to one another's home countries without enormous difficulty.

Chapter Thirteen:

Craig and His Concept of Eternity: A Critique from the Standpoint of the Kālām

Engin Erdem

The issue of divine eternity which was dominant in medieval philosophy and theology also has a very important place in the debates of modern philosophy of religion. Looking at the views of the medieval philosophers and theologians such as Ibn Sina (d. 1037), St Anselm (d. 1109), and St Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274), we see that they interpret divine eternity as timelessness, being outside of time. According to these philosophers there is a sharp distinction between God's mode of being and that of the creatures. A created being has its life in a succession; past, present and future are real parts of its life. However, because of the fact that God is a perfect, simple, necessary and an immutable being, there is no change and succession in His life. So Boethius (d. 524) defines eternity, as having an illimitable life all at once. (1981, 430) Here the term 'all at once' means not a moment of time but the absence of temporal succession. (Helm, 2007) Also, Anselm depicts God's relation to time as follows:

Thou wast not, then, yesterday, nor wilt thou be to-morrow; but yesterday and to-day and to-morrow thou art; or, rather, neither yesterday nor to-day nor to-morrow thou art; but simply, thou art, outside all time. For yesterday and to-day and to-morrow have no existence, except in time; but thou, although nothing exist without thee, nevertheless dost not exist in space or time, but all things exist in thee. For nothing contains thee, but thou containest all. (1962, 71)

For the medieval philosophers, whatever is in time is bounded by it; it cannot stop the process of change and of time; so, it is subject to time not its master. (Helm, 2007) Therefore, God must be timeless.

As for the modern philosophers of religion, their approach is radically different from the medieval philosophers. These philosophers oppose the classical view of eternity, saying that a timeless being cannot be God of religion, especially 'the Christian God'. (Davies, 1983, 11) According to many of them, God, in scripture, is described as a loving, suffering, redeeming being, in brief, an acting being. But if God is unchangeable and immutable he cannot do such activities; thus, a being that is not changeable cannot be an agent. Hence, it is necessary to ascribe change and temporal properties to God and God must be temporal. What does God's being temporal mean? Almost all of modern philosophers of religion answer this question in different ways. For example, Swinburne, one of the leading defender of divine temporality, holds that eternity means to have an everlasting life in time. He says that God exists throughout all periods of time; God exists now, he has existed at each period of past time and he will exist at each period of future time. (1994, 137) God exists in time but there is no beginning or end for Him; so 'a being who is both backwardly and forwardly eternal we may term an eternal being.' (1993, 218) Similarly, Wolterstorff maintains that God exists in time and he does have a history like the creature. (2001, 211) Although modern philosophers of religion have

relatively different views on the nature of divine temporality, they all share the same opinion: God cannot be a timeless being.

As it is seen, there are mainly two views about the nature of divine eternity: divine timelessness and divine temporality. But we see that there is also a third way which is held by William Lane Craig. Craig has a distinguished place among modern religious philosophers. According to him, God is neither timeless nor temporal; God's life has two stages: the first is timeless and the second is temporal. It seems that, as we shall see below, the turning point in his view of eternity is creation. For he claims that God is timeless without creation and then becomes temporal with creation. (2000, 152; 2001, 236) Why is God timeless; more importantly why did he become temporal when he created the universe? In what follows I shall deal with these questions in turn.

Let me begin with the first question. I think the answer of this question is closely connected with Craig's concept of creation *ex nihilo*; because, according to him a robust/strong doctrine of creation implies that God is the Creator of everything except Himself and the universe was created a finite time ago in the past. (2004, 161) To prove such an idea of beginning for the universe he utilizes many scientific and metaphysical arguments. Especially the cosmological argument plays a key role in his thought. According to him, some Muslim thinkers such as al-Kindi and al-Ghazali introduced a different version of the cosmological argument, which he calls 'The Kalām Cosmological Argument' (2000). According to this argument, God is not only ontologically prior to the universe but also He temporally precedes it. The argument can be formulated as follows:

- 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. (2000, 48-49)

For Craig, the crucial premise in this argument is the second one. He asserts that the impossibility of actual infinity, The Big Bang Theory, Thermodynamics and other many scientific evidences show that the universe has a beginning. (2004, 219-248) Introducing those arguments in detail he tackles the question whether the beginning of the universe also entails the beginning of time. According to him, on the relational theory of time the universe was created not in time but with time. (1979) The view that there was an empty time before the beginning of the universe gives rise to an old metaphysical question: 'Why did not God create the world sooner?' (2001, 21) Craig argues that this question is unanswerable in the absolute theory of time. (2001, 31) So there is no time 'before' the beginning of the universe; the first event, that is, the creation of the universe also indicates to the first moment of time. (2001, 31; 1979) 'When the first event occurred, the first moment of time began.' (1979) Craig concludes that time did start with the beginning of the universe and without creation there was no time but God only; therefore, in the first stage, that is without creation God is timeless. (2001, 31)

Now, we are coming to the second question, 'Why God becomes temporal with creation?' According to Craig, as I said above, God is timeless without creation and if God did not will to create the world he

would exist timelessly. (2000, 152) In other words, God could have never stood in temporal relations with a temporal world had he not willed to create the world. But Craig says that God has willed from eternity to create and to become temporal at that moment. (2000, 152) Because of the fact that with creation God enters into a new real relation which he did not have before He changes and becomes temporal. (2000, 152) Craig summarizes his view as follows:

- 4- God is creatively active in the temporal world.
- 5- If God is creatively active in the temporal world, God is really related to the temporal world.
- 6- If God is really related to the temporal world, God is temporal.
- 7- Therefore, God is temporal. (2001, 141)

Thus, for Craig, 'the first event is the event of creation, the moment at which the temporal phase of God's life begins.' (2001, 31) I think what has been said so far outlines sufficiently Craig's main thesis of eternity. Now, in light of the discussions between the classical and modern philosophers on the nature of divine eternity, we can say that Craig holds a hybrid view of eternity, partly timeless and partly temporal. It is a well known fact that, taken separately, each of the classical and modern interpretations of eternity brings about different kinds of problems, either philosophical or theological. But it seems that a mixed type of eternity held by Craig gives rise to further difficulties.

Firstly, I think the main problem arising from a hybrid view of eternity is the question that how the relationship between the timeless and temporal parts of divine eternity can be explained. As Leftow said, the expression that 'God becomes temporal' (1997, 259) means that God is timeless first and later becomes temporal. So God's timeless phase comes earlier than His temporal phase, but the term 'earlier' or 'before' shows that there was a time before God's becoming temporal and He did exist in that time. (1997, 259) And this means that God had been already temporal before having become temporal. Another problem is related to the state in which God decided to become temporal. If God, as Craig argued, did decide to become temporal, it might be asked: when did he do so. 'He could not', says Leftow, 'have done so timelessly, for then He would have had to become temporal... If He did so at any time it was then too late. As He was already at that time, He was already temporal.' (1997, 259-260) It is seen that Craig's idea that God decided to become temporal requires a time in which God already has been.

The second problem I would like to discuss concerning Craig's view of eternity is the question that whether the act of creation really requires God's becoming temporal. I think it might be helpful on this issue to look at the views of the defenders of divine timeless eternity, especially to whom Craig refers in order to support his concept of creation ex nihilo, such as al-Kindi (d. 873) and al-Ghazali (d. 1111). We see that those thinkers never approve of the view that God changes and becomes temporal with creation. To these philosophers, God, as a necessary, simple, and an immutable being by definition is timeless and there cannot be any change in Him, before or after creation. Let us take al-Ghazali as an example. He criticizes the Muslim Aristotelian philosophers, al-Farabi (d. 950) and Ibn Sina, from a religious

point of view and objects to their view of eternal creation which implies that God is only ontologically prior to the universe. (1997, 31) He maintains that without creation there was only God and then the universe began to exist in accordance with God's timeless will. (1997, 31) But he also argues that the inception of the universe does not require God's becoming temporal. (1962, 104) For, according to him, only a timeless being can create temporal beings and can have an absolute control over them.

In order to better understand his approach to this issue I would like to touch upon his views on the relationship between God and time. He defines time, like Aristotle, as the measure of motion in terms of before and after. (1990, 172) In view of the fact that he sees an essential relation between time and motion, a question as to divine eternity might be, basically, answered in accordance with the answer given to the question of whether God has been subjected to a change or not. (Erdem, 2006, 3) Al-Ghazali tries to give an answer to this question by pointing out the radical difference between God's mode of being and those of the created beings. (2006, 3) For him all the creatures are temporally created (*hadith*), which means that they came into existence after they had not existed previously. (1962, 25; 1997, 61) The coming into existence of the temporally created is either possible or impossible; its being impossible is not possible, because what is impossible cannot come into existence. (1962, 25) Hence it is necessary for a temporally created to be possible before it exists; a possible being is at the same of level with regard to existence and non-existence. (1962, 25) So, it needs a cause/decider that would prefer its existence to its non-existence. (1962, 25-26) But, since the chain of causes cannot continue infinitely, there must be a first cause which does not require any other cause but itself. (1962, 35) Thus, this first cause, with regard to its mode of being does not need to any other cause, is said to be a necessary being. A necessary being is different from a temporally created being, not only because it does not require any cause except itself but also it is not subjected to any motion or change. (2006, 3) Because, for him, motion is the actualization of a potentiality; in order for a motion take place an agent is required to actualize the potentiality. (1990, 172) So if a change and a motion were to happen in God, this would mean that God had a potentiality and thus God would need an agent apart from Himself to put this potentiality into actuality. (2006, 3-4) In another words, if God changes, He would be at the same level of being with the created and He cannot be regarded as a First Cause. However, according to al-Ghazali since God is a necessary being, there cannot be any potentiality and any change in Him and therefore He must be timeless. (2006, 4) He expresses his view thus:

God, just like He was in eternity, in the infinite pasts, is always the same today. Just like He was before He created the universe and heavens, He would be exactly the same in the infinite future, too. Because change and alteration can not be ascribed neither to His being nor to His attributes. If one of His attributes were to change, He would be imperfect or flawed; therefore, be imperfect and would be in need of perfection and excellence. He who is in need can not be God. (1969, 112)

For al-Ghazali, God's essence and all of His attributes, as well as His will, are timelessly eternal. (1962, 142) God decides timelessly to create the world in eternity. (1962, 104) God's contemplation of unactualized

possibilities and His decision to actualize one of them is one timeless act. 'This does not mean that different phases of that act cannot be distinguished, but such a distinction can only be a conceptual, not a temporal distinction. Consideration of possibilities is logically prior to actualizing one of them, but both contemplation and actualization are one eternal act of the divine nature, if God is timelessly eternal.' (Helm, 1988, 179) To al-Ghazali, even though God's decision to create is a timeless act, the effects of this decision come into being temporally. But the temporality of the effects does not require the temporality of the cause. For, God's act of creation is a different kind of causation, it is a timeless causation. Timeless causation is a relation of a cause and an effect between the Creator and the creation. (Markus, 2004, 32-33) To understand timeless causation, I think it might be helpful to compare, as Davies does, the relation between the cause and the effect with the relationship between a teacher and a student. When the student learns some truth he changes from a state of ignorance to state of having knowledge. It is a real change for her/him. But the learning of the student does not require a change in the teacher. Similarly, it might be coherently thought that God's creation does not necessarily imply a change in Him but only a change in the creature. (Davies, 1993, 147)

At this point it might be asked that why al-Ghazali and other medieval philosophers insist so much on God's immutability and timelessness and why they do not accept the view of God's becoming temporal. To these philosophers, the attributes of necessity and timelessness are the marks of the Creator and the contingency and the temporality are the signs of the creature. For that reason, any explanation which implies God's being temporal, in fact, is not a philosophically coherent explanation. Because in such a case, it would be nearly impossible to make any distinction between God and His creature and this would lead to an anthropomorphic conception of God. So from al-Ghazalian point of view, Craig's idea that God created the universe and became temporal with creation, in fact, means that God created the universe at the expense of His perfection. Craig might reply to this, saying that God 'willingly' did decide to become temporal at the moment of creation. (2000, 152) But such a response also seems questionable. Because questions such as follows always reasonably be asked: 'Is it really possible that a being can change his mode of being by her/his own will?' and more importantly, 'For what reason did a perfect and a timeless being abandon His mode of being?' I think it is very difficult to find any philosophically coherent answer to these questions in Craig's view of eternity.

Lastly, I would like to add one point. Metaphysically thinking, an effect is ontologically dependent on its cause, not vice versa. In the classical view of eternity, God is conceived as a First Cause and everything apart from Himself wholly dependent on Him. Accordingly, the classical philosophers argue that the act of creation does not imply a real change in God but only in the creature. But in Craig's conception of eternity, the effect is so much powerful that it can change the mode of being of its cause substantially. I think such a view brings about the question: 'Which one, in fact, is the real cause, God or the universe?'

In conclusion, in the classical philosophy and theology God is conceived as an ultimate principle. In this view, God is the First Cause and everything except him came into being thanks to His act of creation. The fact that God is the First Cause means that there is a radical, sharp distinction between God and his creatures in terms of mode of being. For that reason, medieval philosophers never approve of the idea of God's becoming temporal and try to explain God's relationship with the temporal world in accordance with this metaphysical framework. But in Craig's view of eternity, because he concedes that God becomes temporal with creation, it is very difficult to explain, at least after creation, the difference between the Creator and the creature. Likewise, his idea that God became temporal because of His relation with temporal beings is controversial. For, if God, as Craig claims, becomes temporal due to His relations with temporal beings it might also be thought that He becomes spatial due to His relations with spatial things. Of course, God might be conceived as a temporal and even a spatial being but it is clear that such a conception of God is more anthropomorphic than the timeless one.

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