

§ 8. Doctrine of Creation
Lecture 6
Objections to *creatio ex nihilo*

Today we want to consider objections to the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. Objections to this doctrine may take the form of either objections to the *ex nihilo* part of the formula or to the *creatio* part of the formula. Objections to the *ex nihilo* part say that creation cannot be *ex nihilo*. It is impossible to create something *ex nihilo*. While objections to the *creatio* part of the formula contend that coming into being *ex nihilo* is easy and therefore there's no need for *creatio*. So these objections are polar opposites, and yet you find both of them pressed against *creatio ex nihilo*.

Before we look at these objections, I want to clear up a possible misunderstanding that was evident on our Reasonable Faith Facebook page this past week in response to last week's lesson. One person objected that the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* is incompatible with the principle that “out of nothing, nothing comes.” If “out of nothing, nothing comes” then you can't have a *creatio ex nihilo*. What this fails to understand is the meaning of the principle *ex nihilo nihil fit*. *Ex nihilo nihil fit* is the Latin for “out of nothing, nothing comes.” What this principle means is that something cannot come into being uncaused. Being only comes from being, and therefore it's impossible for something to come into being from non-being – to come into being without a cause. And of course that doesn't contradict *creatio ex nihilo* because *creatio ex nihilo* precisely affirms that there is a cause which brings something into being from nothing like the universe. So these principles actually are quite distinct from each other and don't contradict each other. On the contrary, people who hold to *creatio ex nihilo* do so because they think that it's impossible for something to come into being without a cause.

Let's turn first to objections to the *ex nihilo* part of the formula. The first objection we'll consider comes from Question of the Week number 216 on our website ReasonableFaith.org.¹ The reader there said, “We've never seen something which doesn't exist caused to begin existing. Things which don't exist can't be caused to 'do' anything, since they aren't *there* to be influenced by a cause.” Therefore creation from nothing is impossible. This objection is nothing but a rehearsal of the fallacious assumption that causing something to begin to exist involves acting upon a non-existent object and bringing it into existence. But as we've seen, creation is not a type of change because there is no subsisting object which endures from one state to another. In creation, an object does not move from a state of non-existence to a state of existence. Rather, it simply begins to exist at the moment that it is created. So this first objection is fallacious.

¹ See <https://www.reasonablefaith.org/writings/question-answer/must-everything-that-begins-to-exist-have-a-material-cause/> (accessed July 1, 2018).

I was asked to repeat the last line. In creation an object doesn't move from a state of non-existence to existence. Rather, it simply begins to exist at the moment of its creation. In other words, creation is not a type of change as this objection assumes.

Let's go to the second objection. This comes from Question of the Week number 240 at ReasonableFaith.org.² This reader says,

For a casual event to occur, you would need potentiality and an agent . . . to actualize it.

For example, a block of wood has the potentiality to be carved into a wooden train, and a skilled worker would be the agent which actualizes the possibility of a wooden train carved from said block of wood.

However . . . God's initial act of causation was different . . . as it did not involve a material cause, but only an efficient cause. But here comes the problem, by taking out the material cause from the initial act of creation, aren't you taking out the potentiality of God creating anything. The material cause seems to be the carrier of the potential in the act of causation. So when you rule out a material cause, you are simultaneously ruling out the potentiality of an agent causing anything. . . .

Therefore, since creation *ex-nihilo* tries to bring an object/agent out of nothing (with no potentiality), it is logically impossible.

In response to this objection, I agree that a causal event requires an agent to actualize the event and the potentiality of the event to occur. Moreover, I also agree that “nothingness” (in quotation marks) contains no potentiality or else it would be something. But it doesn't follow from that that *creatio ex nihilo* is impossible. That inference assumes that in *creatio ex nihilo* the potentiality of the universe's existence must lie (impossibly) in the nothingness that preceded it. But, as Thomas Aquinas pointed out, in *creatio ex nihilo* the potentiality of the universe lay in the power of God to create it. Since God has the power to create the universe, then even in the state of affairs of God existing alone, there is the potential for the universe to exist. That potential resides, not in some non-existent object or in nothing, but rather it lies in God himself and his ability to cause the universe.

START DISCUSSION

Student: If God exists, isn't *ex nihilo* by definition untrue?

Dr. Craig: No, because that goes back to the misunderstanding at the very beginning. When it is said *ex nihilo nihil fit* – that out of nothing, nothing comes – what that means is that something can't come into being without a cause. But in *creatio ex nihilo* there is a cause. The universe doesn't come into being from nothing; it's caused to come into being

² See <https://www.reasonablefaith.org/writings/question-answer/must-the-universe-have-a-material-cause/> (accessed July 1, 2018).

by God. There is an efficient cause, but as the reader just pointed out, there is no material cause. So don't think that because there is no material cause that means that the existence of the universe is uncaused.

Student: I've noticed that in a lot of these objections the objector tends to reify "nothing" in a sense. Do you think what's really going on in some of these objections is that they're implicitly assuming (and this goes to your work on abstract objects) this criterion of ontological commitment? So if I speak of nothing, nothing must exist?

Dr. Craig: Okay, this is a very perceptive question. Let me give a little background because it's a little technical. I think the short answer is yes. We use expressions which are called singular terms to refer to things. Singular terms are things like definite descriptions, like "the man in the pink shirt," "the fellow wearing the American flag shirt," and things of that sort. Definite descriptions that pick out a certain thing. Or they include proper names like Jim or Bill or Susan. Or they include what are called indexical terms like "that table," "this chair." These are called singular terms because they have referents. They refer to things. As I'll comment later on, the people who often press these objections think that because the word "nothing" is a pronoun and can be used as the subject of a sentence or the direct object of a sentence that therefore it's a singular term that refers to something. By taking it as a singular term, as you put it they reify "nothing" into something thinking that this word "nothing" refers to some thing. That's simply that they've been misled by language. The word "nothing" – and I'll give some other examples later – are actually not singular terms; they're quantifier terms. They are words like "every," "all," "none," and "no." They quantify how many things there are. So "nothing" is really a quantifier term meaning "not anything." So it isn't a singular term. It doesn't refer to anything. You are right, I think, that a lot of these objections think that the word "nothing" in English is a singular term referring to something which is just utterly misconceived.

Student: Would you consider the Christian idealist to view God to play the role of the material in carrying the property – the potentiality? He says it has to be true if you consider it's continuous all the way back to his creation.

Dr. Craig: It depends on what you mean by Christian idealism, but I would take a Christian idealist to be someone who denies the reality of space and time and physical matter and energy. Rather, he thinks of things as rather like ideas in the mind of God. In that case, God isn't the material cause of these things because these things aren't made out of God. That would be pantheism. Rather, I think he would also say that God is the efficient cause of these things, and there just is no material cause. Indeed, I would say the Christian idealist has an easy time with these objections to *creatio ex nihilo* because for him it just means that God has mentally thought of these things just as I can dream or

envison something in my mind and bring all sorts of things into existence in that way. This is a very recondite debate between those who believe in physical objects and space and time and those who think, no, in fact all reality is ultimately mental in nature.

Student: With regard to the proposition that “out of nothing, nothing comes,” I actually, out of curiosity, did a search for this in the philosophical literature and didn't find any references.

Dr. Craig: You did not?

Student: I didn't. I found two papers on Aquinas that really seemed to me to be irrelevant. So while it's possible that I'm missing a literature on this, I wonder if you are framing as more uncontroversial than it is that principle, or if perhaps it's something you take to be obvious but other philosophers . . .

Dr. Craig: No, no. I can give you references. The principle *ex nihilo nihil fit* – look that up perhaps in Latin. This is a standard metaphysical principle, and it goes all the way back to Plato and Parmenides. I can show you texts in Plato's *Timaeus* where he talks about the impossibility of being coming from non-being. This was the whole point of Parmenides – that being only comes from being. Parmenides took that to mean that therefore there is no change. He took it in a very radical direction. But the fundamental principle that being arises only from being is as ancient as philosophy itself.

END DISCUSSION

Let's move on to our third objection which is, I think, a more serious objection. This one comes from the philosopher Wes Morriston. He enunciates another empirical generalization that he thinks enjoys comparable support to the causal principle that everything that begins to exist has a cause. Namely, his principle is everything that begins to exist has a material cause. Notice that Morriston's principle is not incompatible with the causal principle that is enunciated in the argument for the beginning of the universe which is that everything that begins to exist has a cause. That's not incompatible with saying everything that begins to exist has a material cause. But Morriston's principle would require that the universe has a material cause and therefore *creatio ex nihilo* is impossible.

In response, the causal premise of the cosmological argument (namely, “everything that begins to exist has a cause”) leaves it an open question whether that cause is an efficient cause or a material cause. Therefore, that principle is actually much more modest than Morriston's principle. It's the objector then who has the burden of proof to show that every instance of efficient causation must also be coincident with an instance of material causation as well. He has to show that his more radical principle is true in addition to the principle in the *kalam* cosmological argument.

I think we would all admit that the inductive evidence for Morrison's principle that everything that begins to exist has a material cause is indeed very impressive. But it's not of comparable force to the arguments that I present in favor of the causal premise of the cosmological argument. I present three arguments for the premise that everything that begins to exist has a cause. Namely, number one: something cannot come from nothing. Two: if something can come into being from nothing then it becomes inexplicable why just anything and everything doesn't come into being from nothing. Then number three: common experience and scientific evidence confirm the truth of this causal principle. Notice only the third of those reasons is an inductive argument based on experience. This is the only one of the three that you might think could be matched by the inductive evidence in support of Morrison's principle that everything that begins to exist has a material cause, though in a moment I'm going to explain how contemporary cosmogony, I think, provides an apparently powerful counter-example to Morrison's principle. But the main point that I want to make here is that the main grounds for affirming the causal principle are not inductive but rather they are metaphysical arguments for the first premise, not inductive evidence. These are not matched by comparable metaphysical grounds for Morrison's principle that everything that begins to exist has to have a material cause.

Moreover, and here I come to the point I alluded to, the empirical evidence for Morrison's principle can be overridden. He has good inductive evidence for the principle, but it can be overridden. Once we reach the conclusion of the *kalam* cosmological argument – namely, “therefore the universe has a cause” – once you reach that conclusion, we must now inquire as to the nature of that cause. Is it, or can it be, a material object? Both the philosophical arguments and the scientific confirmations of the premise that the universe began to exist preclude that the cause of the universe is a material object. For, in the first place, if there cannot be an infinite regress of events then it is physically impossible that the cause of the universe be a material object. Because material objects are always in constant change at least on the molecular and atomic levels so there would be an infinite regress of events. Likewise, secondly, the scientific evidence supports the conclusion that the origin of the universe was absolute in the sense that all matter and energy, indeed even physical space and time themselves, came into being a finite time ago. So I think we have really good grounds both philosophically and scientifically for affirming the immateriality of the first cause.

So the origin of the universe, I think, requires an efficient cause of enormous power which created physical time, space, matter, and energy. It is an instance of efficient, but not material, causation. If this is thought to be somehow metaphysically impossible then some compelling overriding argument needs to be given for that conclusion, and I have yet to encounter any such argument.

START DISCUSSION

Student: Couldn't you say that Wes Morriston is confusing an accidental property of things in the universe with an essential property?

Dr. Craig: I think so. Up until 1968 it was an inductively well-established principle that all human beings have lived on the face of the earth. Right? Until we sent a man to the moon. But that was just an inductive accidental generalization about human beings. There wasn't anything essential to human beings that made them earthbound. I suspect that it's very much the same here. Yes, inductively all of the physical objects that we see come into being have material causes, but that could just be an accidental quality of these objects. Indeed, if *creatio ex nihilo*, as Christian theologians have traditionally believed, is a prerogative that belongs to God alone then we shouldn't be surprised to see that the inductive evidence for material causation is so powerful.

Student: Going back to your 1996 debate with Quentin Smith, he argued that the *kalam* cosmological argument is an argument for atheism in that the universe requires a cause but if we analyze what a cause is, it's something that brings something else about, but it does not logically entail its effect. Whereas God willing something as a function of him being omnipotent must occur logically unless he were somehow to will something logically impossible which is probably incoherent. So, again, Smith argues that in every single case of causation the cause gives rise to the effect but it's logically possible for that thing which happened to be the cause to occur without the effect. Therefore, yes, the universe needs a cause – that cannot be God because God is inconsistent with being able to cause anything.

Dr. Craig: I responded to that in our book that we did together, *Theism, Atheism and Big Bang Cosmology*. I respond to that objection. I don't think it's a good objection at all because basically what it's saying is that it's impossible for God to be omnipotent. An omnipotent cause will infallibly produce the things that it wills to be. There's just no obvious incoherence in such a thing. I see absolutely no reason to think that you can't have an omnipotent being whose causal effects are infallibly produced and it's logically impossible for him not to produce those effects. So it's really just a denial of omnipotence, and there is no reason to think that that's a plausible denial.

Student: Wouldn't material cause also lack agency?

Dr. Craig: Yes. Yes, that's a very good point. I think you're quite right. What he is saying is that the ultimate cause would need to have some sort of agency but material doesn't exhibit agency. Part of the argument that I give about the nature of the first cause is not only that it's immaterial since it produced time and space, but I also argue that it had to be personal because of the need for agency. Apart from personal agency it's really hard to see how there could be a first cause that would bring the universe into being. Thank you.

I think that that's a double line of confirmation or defense for the fact that we're not dealing here with just a material cause. It needs to be an efficient cause – an agent – and not just an impersonal material sort of thing.

END DISCUSSION

Let's now turn from objections to *ex nihilo* to objections to the *creatio* part of the formula. These objections are just the opposite of the objections that we just looked at. They maintain that coming into being *ex nihilo* is easy. No cause is needed for the universe's beginning to exist. So these objections challenge the principle *ex nihilo nihil fit*. They claim that things can come into being from nothing without any sort of cause. How might they defend this?

Consider this objection. If the universe began to exist then it must have come from nothing. But that's quite plausible since there are no constraints on nothing, and so nothing can do anything including producing the universe. Yes, this objection is really out there on the Internet. How might we respond to that? This objection, I think, is hopelessly confused about the use of the word “nothing.” Here I want to pick up on what we said in response to an earlier question. When it is rightly said that nothing preceded the universe, one doesn't mean that something preceded it and that was nothing. We mean that it was not preceded by anything. Taking these negative terms and reifying them has been the butt of jokes as old as Homer's story of the Cyclops and Odysseus when Odysseus tells the Cyclops his name is “No Man.” Imagine then the following dialogue between two people who are discussing the Second World War:

Nothing stopped the German advance from sweeping across Belgium.

Oh, that's good. I'm glad it was stopped.

But they weren't stopped!

But you said nothing stopped them.

That's right.

So they were stopped.

No, nothing stopped them.

That's what I said – they were stopped, and it was nothing that stopped them.

No, no, no. I meant that they weren't stopped by anything.

Well, then, why didn't you say so in the first place?

Here the objector in thinking of nothing seems to be guilty of reifying this term into an actual thing. Nothingness has no properties and no powers because it isn't even anything, and therefore it is wholly misconceived to say that it produced the universe. To say the

universe was caused by nothing is to say that the universe had no cause. It wasn't caused by anything. That, I think, is metaphysically absurd, and that's why the causal principle (which is the first premise of the cosmological argument) is one of the oldest and most widely recognized truths of metaphysics.

Next objection: Quantum physics shows that things can come from nothing. Quantum physics proves that things can come from nothing. Lawrence Krauss, who is a prominent quantum physicist, in our debate in April of 2011 said the following,

In fact, one of the things about quantum mechanics is, nothing—not only can nothing become something, nothing always becomes something. Nothing is unstable. Nothing will always produce something in quantum mechanics. And if you apply quantum mechanics to gravity, you can show that it's possible that space and time themselves can come into existence when nothing existed before. So that's not a problem.³

How might we respond to this objection? Scientists who contend that physics can explain the origin of the universe from nothing seem to have an outrageously naive grasp of the English language. As I indicated, the term “nothing” is a term of universal negation. It is not a referring term. It's not a singular term. It means “not anything.” So, for example, if I say, *I had nothing for lunch today*, I mean I did not have anything for lunch today. If the theologian says that God created the universe from nothing, he means that God's creation of the universe was not out of anything. The word “nothing” is, to repeat, simply a term of universal negation meaning “not anything.” There's a whole series of similar words in English of universal negation. “Nobody” means “not anybody.” “None” means “not one.” “Nowhere” means “not anywhere.” “Never” means “not ever.” But because the word “nothing” is grammatically a pronoun we can use it as the subject or direct object of a sentence. By taking these words not as terms of universal negation but rather as words referring to something we can generate all kinds of funny situations. If you say, *I saw nobody in the hall*, the wiseacre says, *Oh yeah. He's been hanging around there a lot lately*. Or if you say, *I had nothing for lunch today*, the wiseacre says, *Really? How did it taste?* And as I mentioned, these sorts of jokes are as old as literature itself. In Homer's story of Odysseus, Odysseus introduces himself to the Cyclops as “Nobody.” One night Odysseus puts out the Cyclops' eye. His fellow Cyclopes hear him screaming in pain and they yelled to him, *What's the matter with you, making so much noise that we can't*

³ For a video of this debate see <https://www.reasonablefaith.org/videos/interviews-panels/craig-vs.-krauss-north-carolina-state-university/> specifically at the 38 minute, 43 second mark. A transcript of this debate can be found at <https://www.reasonablefaith.org/media/debates/the-craig-krauss-debate-at-north-carolina-state-university/> (links accessed July 1, 2018).

sleep? The Cyclops says, Nobody is killing me! Nobody is killing me! And they say, If nobody is attacking you then you must be sick, and there's nothing we can do about it!

In Euripides' version of the story, we have a sort of Abbott and Costello *Who's On First?* routine:

They say, *Why are you crying out, Cyclops?*

Nobody has undone me!

Then there is no one hurting you after all.

Nobody is blinding me!

Then you're not blind.

As blind as you!

But how could nobody have made you blind?

You're mocking me. Where is this Nobody?

Nowhere, Cyclops!

The use of these words like “nothing,” “nobody,” and so on as substantive terms referring to something is a joke. How astonishing then it is to find that some physicists whose native tongue is English have used these terms precisely as substantive terms referring to something. For example, Lawrence Krauss, again, has said with a straight face,

“There are a variety of forms of nothing . . . and they all have physical definitions.”⁴

“The laws of quantum mechanics tell us that nothing is unstable.”⁵

“70% [of] the dominant stuff in the universe is nothing.”⁶

“There's nothing there, but it has energy.”⁷

⁴ American Museum of Natural History, “2013 Isaac Asimov Memorial Debate: The Existence of Nothing.” YouTube. Flash Video File. <http://youtu.be/1OLz6uUuMp8?t=1h20m25s> (accessed July 1, 2018). Quote is at 1:20:25.

⁵ “Lawrence Krauss - Why There is Something Rather Than Nothing.” YouTube. Flash Video File. http://youtu.be/u9Fi-BqS_Fw?t=26m17s (accessed July 1, 2018). Quote is at 26:17.

⁶ Lawrence Krauss, Richard Fidler interview. May 23, 2013. See <http://www.abc.net.au/local/stories/2013/05/23/3765778.htm> (accessed July 1, 2018). Quote is at 24:54.

⁷ Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science, “Something From Nothing - a conversation w/ Richard Dawkins & Lawrence Krauss - ASU Feb 4, 2012.” YouTube. Flash Video file. <http://youtu.be/gH9UvnrARf8?t=37m19s> (accessed July 1, 2018) Quote is at 37:20

“Nothing weighs something.”⁸

“Nothing is almost everything.”⁹

All of those direct quotations and all of these claims take the word “nothing” to be a substantive or singular term referring to something such as the quantum vacuum or quantum mechanical fields. These are physical realities and therefore clearly something. To call these realities “nothing” is at least misleading, and it is guaranteed to confuse laypeople. At worst, it is a deliberate misrepresentation of science. Such statements do not even begin to address, much less answer, the question of why the universe exists rather than nothing.

I'll continue to share some more about this next time we meet. There's a devastating critique of Krauss's book, *A Universe From Nothing*, by David Albert that I want to share with you but we're out of time.¹⁰

⁸ ANUChannel, “Richard Dawkins & Lawrence Krauss: Something from Nothing” YouTube. Flash Video file. <http://youtu.be/q0mljE9K-gY?t=18m59s> (accessed July 1, 2018). Quote is at 18:59.

⁹ “Lawrence Krauss on the Universe Stockholm 2013.” YouTube. Flash video file. <https://youtu.be/68I4pnZha0k#t=46m38s> (accessed July 1, 2018). Quote is at 46:30.

¹⁰ Total Running Time: 34:55 (Copyright © 2018 William Lane Craig)