



Creation and the God of Abraham

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CHAPTER 7

Four conceptions of creatio ex nihilo and the compatibility questions

Pirooz Fatoorchi

INTRODUCTION

The notion of *creatio ex nihilo* has become a doctrine firmly established in the three Abrahamic religions (i.e., Christianity, Judaism and Islam). Almost all groups of Islamic thinkers accept the truth of the createdness (*creatio*) of the universe, and that it is preceded by its “non-existence” (*ex nihilo*). However, there is a diversity of opinions as to whether the concept of *creatio ex nihilo* is compatible with alternative accounts of the origin of the physical world, and this diversity is particularly marked between Islamic philosophers and *kalam* theologians (*Mutakallimun*). Three major factors, independently or together, play a fundamental role on how Islamic scholars deal with this very issue: (a) their views of the physical world; (b) their approaches to the divine attributes; and (c) their understandings of the teachings of their religion. The aim of this chapter is to investigate whether four different notions of *creatio ex nihilo* espoused by different Islamic thinkers are compatible with seven alternative accounts of the origins of the universe (five philosophical/theological doctrines – first level of compatibility; and two possible interpretations of a modern scientific theory – second level of compatibility).

FOUR CONCEPTIONS OF *CREATIO EX NIHILO* AND THE FIRST LEVEL OF COMPATIBILITY QUESTIONS

To provide an appropriate setting for the debate about *creatio ex nihilo* (hereafter CEN) and to prevent any confusion it might be useful to classify

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some of the most important Islamic views on CEN into four conceptions: (a) temporal-historical (TH); (b) essential non-temporal (ENT); (c) objective meta-temporal (OMT); and (d) substantive temporal non-historical (STNH). After a very brief sketch of the main relevant features, I will consider whether each of these conceptions is compatible with five alternative philosophical/theological accounts of the origins of the universe. The first-level compatibility questions I will then answer are the following:

- CQ.1 Is CEN compatible with the pre-eternal¹ universe?
 CQ.2 Is CEN compatible with the beginningless infinite past events?²
 CQ.3 Is CEN compatible with the temporal beginning of the universe at an initial instant?
 CQ.4 Is CEN compatible with a series of finite past events without a specifiable initial instant?
 CQ.5 Is CEN compatible with the eternal divine creative act?

(a.1) *Temporal-historical conception (TH) of CEN*

The advocates of this position, who are mostly among the early *kalam* theologians, have presented a strictly temporal picture of CEN and have taken the religious scriptures to support their reading of the act of creation. This conception is based on a notion of *temporal origination* which means “coming into existence” out of something that previously did not exist. This implies being preceded by a “temporal non-existence” which is opposed to its “existence” and does not cohabit with it. Metaphysically, this group of early *kalam* theologians holds that the temporal origin of something is the criterion of the need for a cause. In other words, “temporal origination” – and not contingency *per se* – is exactly what makes a “contingent being” require a cause. By taking this criterion seriously, they first try to argue for a temporal beginning of the world³ and then try to derive the existence of a divine cause.

¹ Pre-eternity (*azal*) is a theological/philosophical term meaning “eternity *a parte ante*,” i.e., eternity without beginning as opposite to “eternity *a parte post*,” i.e., eternity without end. These two terms represent two aspects or two directions of eternity.

² The distinction between CQ.1 and CQ.2 will become clear in our discussion about STNH.

³ According to the most important proof that could be found in many *kalam* theologians’ authoritative books, their argument for the origination of the universe can be briefly presented as follows. The universe is a finite collection of physical bodies, the parts of which, due to their “movement” and “rest,” are all temporally originated. So the universe is also a temporally originated entity. See for example Fakhr ad-Din Razi, *al-Matalib al-‘Aliah*, 9 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-‘Arabī, 1987), vol. iv, pp. 209–210. Also Nasir ad-Din Tusi, *Tajrid al-Itiqad*, with comments by Helli (Qum: Maktab al-‘Ilām al-Islāmī, 1986), p. 170.

Since (1) creation is the divine origination rather than origination *simpliciter*, and (2) *ex nihilo* implies a *temporal* transition from non-being into being, CEN is therefore God's bringing the universe into existence initially at a point, a finite number of years ago. The *historicity* of creation is then one of the main features of this interpretation.

(a.2) Responses

According to the above position, it seems clear that the TH would favor the temporal beginning of the universe and is not compatible with pre-eternal past events. Therefore the responses to CQ.1 and CQ.2 will be negative but regarding CQ.3 the answer must be affirmative. As to CQ.4 we must note that it has been stressed by many *kalam* theologians who directly or indirectly supported TH that the past temporal finitude of the universe entails an initial instant of origination which is specifiable at the beginning of the physical world. Therefore the adherents of TH should reply to CQ.4 negatively. Concerning CQ.5, it should be noted that the proponents of TH have argued extensively against the eternity of the "divine creative act," mainly because they believe that this kind of agency would imply that God is bereft of free will. Hence their answer to CQ.5 will be negative.

(b.1) Essential non-temporal conception (ENT) of CEN

There is a plausible sense of CEN, held by Avicenna and his followers, that implies an ontological and non-temporal dependence of the universe upon the Creator. In this view, the foundation of CEN is not the "temporal origination" but rather a deeper kind of "coming-into-being," called *essential origination*, which is based on *essential contingency*.

Essential contingency is an analytic concept⁴ which means that every existent, except for God, when we consider it in itself, without taking into account anything else, is found not to possess the logical necessity of its existence. This lack of logical necessity means that each thing is inhabited by an essential and innate non-being that is prior to its existence, which is brought to it by an external cause. As Avicenna says: "That which belongs to a thing-in-itself is prior *for the mind*, essentially but not temporally, to that which belongs to it from something else."⁵

⁴ In this context, an analytic concept is a concept which is acquired through an analyzing process by our mind when we consider some "thing" or "entity."

⁵ Avicenna (Ibn-Sina), *ash-Shifa: Metaphysics*, ed. G. C. Anawati and S. Zayid (Cairo: Organisme Général des Imprimeries Gouvernementales, 1960), p. 266.