

‘Uncaused Beginnings’ Revisited

Abstract: Craig (2010) is a sustained critique of Oppy (2010a). I think that the central arguments of Oppy (2010) survive the critique unscathed. In particular, I argue here that Oppy (2010) really does establish that naturalists can coherently maintain that: (a) natural reality has no cause; (b) the initial state of natural reality is the only state of natural reality that has no cause; and (c) the initial state of natural reality is the only state of natural reality that involves anything that has no cause.

1.

In Oppy (2010a)—as in Oppy (2009)—I distinguish four possible models for the causal shape of reality: REGRESS, CIRCLE, NECESSARY INITIAL STATE and CONTINGENT INITIAL STATE. I should, however, have carefully distinguished between two different versions of CONTINGENT INITIAL STATE: CONTINGENT INITIAL STATE INVOLVING NONE BUT CONTINGENT ENTITIES and CONTINGENT INITIAL STATE INVOLVING AT LEAST ONE NECESSARY ENTITY. (Compare Oppy (2010b) (2011) (2012) (2013a), where these two versions of CONTINGENT INITIAL STATE are carefully distinguished.)

As Craig (2010:73) notes, many contemporary theistic philosophers opt for CONTINGENT INITIAL STATE INVOLVING AT LEAST ONE NECESSARY ENTITY.

The initial state prior to all others under the ancestral of the causal relation is taken to be God’s bringing the universe into being. Since God’s so doing is a free action, such a state is contingent, despite the metaphysical necessity of God’s existing.

Those philosophers may grant that CONTINGENT INITIAL STATE INVOLVING NONE BUT CONTINGENT ENTITIES is not more favourable to theism than it is to naturalism; but—with Craig—they are likely to insist that CONTINGENT INITIAL STATE INVOLVING AT LEAST ONE NECESSARY ENTITY is more favourable to theism than to naturalism.

I demur. It is open to naturalists to suppose that causal reality begins with the initial state of a necessarily existing entity: the universe. Moreover, while it is open to naturalists to suppose that the initial state of the universe—‘the initial singularity’—is necessary, it is also open to naturalists to suppose that the initial singularity is contingent. And naturalists can also reasonably judge that CONTINGENT INITIAL STATE INVOLVING AT LEAST ONE NECESSARY ENTITY is not more favourable to theism than it is to naturalism. (See Oppy (2010b) (2011) (2012) (2013a) for detailed defence of this last claim.)

2

Given the distinction between CONTINGENT INITIAL STATE INVOLVING NONE BUT CONTINGENT ENTITIES and CONTINGENT INITIAL STATE INVOLVING AT LEAST ONE NECESSARY ENTITY, we can restate the argument that is the focus of Oppy (2010a) as follows:

1. If it is possible for (causal) reality to have a contingent initial state involving none but contingent entities under the causal relation—i.e. it is possible for (causal) reality to have a contingent initial state involving none but contingent entities that has no cause—then it is possible for other (non-overlapping) parts of (causal) reality to have no cause. (Premise)
2. It is not possible for other (non-overlapping) parts of (causal) reality to have no cause. (Premise)
3. (Hence) It is not possible for (causal) reality to have a contingent initial state involving none but contingent entities under the causal relation. (From 1, 2)

While I am inclined to think that CONTINGENT INITIAL STATE INVOLVING AT LEAST ONE NECESSARY ENTITY is a more attractive option for naturalists, I do not think that there is sufficient reason to rule out CONTINGENT INITIAL STATE INVOLVING NONE BUT CONTINGENT ENTITIES. In particular—as I tried to establish in Oppy (2010a)—I think that the just-stated ‘Edwards/Prior/Craig argument’ is unable to bear this burden.

The ‘Edwards/Prior/Craig argument’ is meant to provide argumentative encapsulation of the claim that naturalists who adopt CONTINGENT INITIAL STATE INVOLVING NONE BUT CONTINGENT ENTITIES cannot provide satisfactory answers to the following two questions: (a) If you deny that it is possible for a raging tiger to ‘suddenly come into existence uncaused out of nothing’ in the room in which you are reading this article, how can you allow that it is possible for the initial state of reality to ‘suddenly come into existence uncaused out of nothing’?; and (b) If you suppose that it is possible for the initial state of reality to ‘suddenly come into existence uncaused out of nothing’, how can you deny that it might have been hydrogen atoms or rabbits that ‘sprang spontaneously from the void’? The main focus of Oppy (2010a)—in section 4 of that paper—is to provide an answer to the first of these two questions, i.e. to (a).

3

Craig claims that, in my response to ‘the Edwards/Prior/Craig argument’, I ‘conflate’ causal order with temporal order and neglect crucial assumptions about the tensed nature of time.

I deny these allegations. My concern in Oppy (2010a) is solely with causal order; I make no substantive assumptions about time, or about how time and cause are connected. True enough, in Part 4 of Oppy (2010a), I do say:

I take it for granted that, at least at the macroscopic level, temporal order and causal order coincide in the part of reality that we inhabit. (66)

If you think that there can be simultaneous causation, then you will think that this assumption is mistaken. However: (a) considerations about simultaneous causation play no role in the argument that I develop in Oppy (2010a); and (b) the same expository convenience would be afforded by the assumption that, *considerations of simultaneous causation aside*, at least at

the macroscopic level, temporal order and causal order coincide in the part of causal reality that we inhabit.

Craig claims that, in order to rule out the possibility that all of the states ordered under the causal relation are simultaneous, I must 'assume that causal directionality entails temporal ordering of cause and effect' (72-3). I disagree.

I think that it is an open question whether the manifold of natural reality is everywhere temporal, or whether it has parts that are not temporal. However, I think that the manifold of natural reality is everywhere causal. Plainly, then, I deny that causal directionality entails temporal ordering of cause and effect. (I hold that time is essentially metrical: no metric, no time. But it is impossible to generate a metric from merely directional causal relations.)

How, then, do I rule out the alleged possibility that all of the states under the causal relation are simultaneous? By appeal to observation! If we play pool, keeping one eye on the clock, and the other on causal interactions on the pool table, we can see that some causes are temporally prior to some effects. If some causes are temporally prior to some effects, then it is not true that all of the states under the causal relation are simultaneous.

Do I allow that it *might* have been the case that all of the states ordered under the causal relation are simultaneous? No. While I hold that it is an open question whether the manifold of natural reality is everywhere temporal, or whether it has parts that are not temporal, I hold that it is not an open question whether the manifold of natural reality is everywhere causal. Wherever there are temporal relations, there are causal relations. However, it is impossible that there be just one moment of time: if there are temporal relations then there are distinct moments of time that are related by those relations. So it could not have been the case that all of the states ordered under the causal relation are simultaneous.

4

Craig claims that the first premise in my formulation of the argument under consideration neglects a crucial assumption that is made by proponents of kalām cosmological arguments, viz. that time is tensed and temporal becoming is an objective feature of reality. He insists that my argument should be reformulated as follows:

1. If it is possible for something to come into being without a cause at a first moment of time, then it is possible for things to come into being without a cause at later moments of time. (Premise)
2. It is not possible for things to come into being without a cause at later moments of time. (Premise)
3. (Hence) It is not possible for something to come into being without a cause at a first moment of time. (From 1, 2)

Craig writes:

On a tenseless view of time, it is far less obvious that parts of reality which exist later than the initial state must have causes and that the things existing tenselessly at the

initial state cannot exist without a cause, since they do not come into being at that time.
(74)

This just seems wrong to me. On any view of time—tensed or tenseless—I am born in 1960 and I do not exist in any year prior to 1960. Moreover, whether I adopt a tensed or tenseless theory of time makes no difference to my certitude that my parents are the cause of my existence and that I would not have existed had my parents never met. If there is a state that is both temporally and causally first, then the things that exist in that state do come into being uncaused in that state, whether time is tensed or tenseless.

I anticipate that some theists—including Craig—will object that, while God exists in the state that is both temporally and causally first, God does not come into existence in that state. But such objectors face hard questions. Could there be states prior to the state that is both temporally and causally first? That seems incoherent. Could something exist prior to the state that is both temporally and causally first even though there is no state that that thing occupies? Again, that seems incoherent. But if there is no state that God occupies prior to the state that is both temporally and causally first, then—*a fortiori*—God comes into existence with the state that is temporally and causally first.

Of course, these theists will want to insist that it is necessary that God exists in the state that is both temporally and causally first—or, if the initial causal state is not also temporal, in the state that is causally first—but this insistence is perfectly consistent with the claim that God comes into existence in that state.

5

I claim that naturalists who opt for CONTINGENT INITIAL STATE INVOLVING NONE BUT CONTINGENT ENTITIES should suppose: (a) that a contingent initial state of reality and the contingent things that feature therein are the only kinds of contingent things that can have no cause; (b) that anything that is or can be a contingent initial state of reality cannot be anything other than a contingent initial state of reality; (c) that anything that is or can be a non-initial state of reality cannot be anything other than a non-initial state of reality; (d) that anything that features in a contingent initial state of reality can only come into existence as a feature of a contingent initial state of reality; and (e) that anything that comes into existence as a feature of a non-initial state of reality can only come into existence as a feature of a non-initial state of reality.

Craig says that these suppositions are ‘simply fantastic’:

Why is it that only a certain kind of particle ... can come into being uncaused at the first moment of time? ... It is baffling ... to see why, say, a bottle of root beer might not have featured in the initial state of reality. ... Equally baffling is the claim that it is impossible that particles which sprang into being uncaused at the first moment of time should do so later on. Since no causes govern their coming into being, one would think when they do so is wholly arbitrary. (75)

My answer to Craig is in several parts. First, the only thing that can exist unaccompanied is natural reality. Second, the only uncaused state that natural reality can have is its initial state. Third, the only things that have no cause of their existence are things that are present in the initial state of natural reality. Fourth, the only states of things that have no cause of their obtaining are states that things have in the initial state of natural reality.

Craig claims that these answers are ‘explanatorily vacuous reiterations’ of the naturalist’s commitments:

What we want to know is why the entities have these odd essential properties, which are, after all, not qualities of the entities in question but more like arbitrarily asserted predications masquerading as qualities. (75)

I disagree. The properties in question are qualities of the things in question; there are not ‘arbitrarily asserted predications masquerading as qualities’. Note, in particular, that Craig’s answers to related questions about his own view—e.g. Why is it that only God exists uncaused in the initial causal state?—take exactly the same form: the only thing that can exist unaccompanied is God; the only uncaused state that God can have is God’s initial state; the only thing that has no cause of its existence is God; the only state of anything that has no cause of its obtaining is God’s initial state. Accusation of explanatory vacuity fits just as well—or ill—in this case, too.

6

Craig suggests that it is a fundamental failing of my argument that I assume that ‘the things which feature in an initial state of reality must be capable of persisting’ (75). I demur. Natural reality is not merely capable of persisting; it persists of necessity unless it is impossible for it so to persist. It is impossible that natural reality should cease existing unless it reaches an essentially final state: a state that is necessarily such that it has no successor state. So: rather than being a fundamental failing of my argument, the assumption that Craig identifies is just one more feature of the naturalistic worldview that is being held up for comparison with theism.

It is worth nothing that Craig thinks that God persists of necessity: it cannot be that God ceases to exist. So there is, yet again, an assumption in his own view that parallels an assumption that he insists should not be allowed to naturalists.

7

Craig claims that it is just *ad hoc* conjecture to suppose that all possible worlds have the same initial state as the actual world. However, Craig cannot claim that it is just *ad hoc* conjecture to suppose that all possible worlds have an initial state constituted entirely by the contingent state of a necessarily existing entity—because that’s exactly the theory of modality that he himself accepts! So he is in no position to claim that the naturalistic version of CONTINGENT INITIAL STATE INVOLVING AT LEAST ONE NECESSARILY EXISTING ENTITY involves *ad hoc* conjecture about the nature of modality. Moreover—and consequently—he is in no better position to claim that naturalistic versions of

NECESSARY INITIAL STATE and CONTINGENT INITIAL STATE INVOLVING NONE BUT CONTINGENT ENTITIES involve *ad hoc* conjecture about the nature of modality.

8

Craig says that the central idea of my paper—that things cannot ‘pop into existence’ uncaused within natural reality because there is no place that they can occupy uncaused—is ‘perverse’. On my view, a thing that does not exist cannot bring about the non-existence of something that does exist; and a natural entity cannot exist except as an occupant of a location in the manifold of natural reality. In the causal order, the displacing activity of the displacing object—the object ‘popping into existence’—would have to be both (causally) prior to the displacement of the displaced object (in order to cause the displacement) and (causally) posterior to the displacement of the displaced object (in order that the displacing object exists and hence is able to bring about the displacement). But that’s impossible: it cannot be that the displacing activity of the displacing object is both (causally) prior to and (causally) posterior to the displacement of the displacing object.

Craig says: ‘In the causal order, the new object’s coming into being as some place causes the former occupant to vacate the space’ (76). As I have just argued, if there is a view here that is ‘perverse’ it is surely Craig’s, since his view would have non-existent objects making a causal contribution to their own coming into existence.

I also argue that, if—*per impossible*—something did ‘pop into existence’ at a particular location, we would properly regard the vacation of the space now occupied by the thing that comes into existence by the thing(s) that previously occupied that space as a cause—i.e. a necessary causal condition—of the existence of the new occupant of that space. Thus, even in this case, we would not have something popping into existence *uncaused*.

About this case, Craig comments:

On Oppy’s view the current occupant’s vacating the space causes the new object to come into being, which is clearly wrong-headed. Indeed, on Oppy’s view, we are left wondering why an object of precisely the same shape and size did not come into being as a result of the evacuation of a certain spatial region by an object. Why would the movement of a table cause a tiger to pop into being?

I do not accept this. Given that the table is not tiger-shaped, the mere ‘popping out of existence’ of the table would not create a space into which a tiger could fit. What is needed for that is an appropriate tiger-shaped space. In order to make such a space overlapping where the table now is, the table would have to go: but, on its own, the ‘popping out of existence’ of the table would not even suffice for the creation of an appropriate tiger-shaped space, let alone for the ‘popping into existence’ of a tiger.

In truth, I no more think that things can ‘pop out of existence within natural reality’ uncaused than I think that things can ‘pop into existence within natural reality’ uncaused. My *central* argument is independent of my further argument for the claim that, if it were possible for

things to ‘pop into existence within natural reality’ and to ‘pop out of existence within natural reality’, then ‘poppings into existence’ would always have ‘poppings out of existence’ as causes.

9

At the end of his paper, Craig expresses dismay at my:

... general strategy to forestall indefinitely acceptance of cosmological arguments of natural theology by so overloading their proponents with a multitude of profound philosophical conundrums before such arguments can be considered to be good arguments that a kind of paralysis is induced. (77)

I deny that I have ever adopted such a strategy. True enough, I have made lots of different kinds of objections to cosmological arguments. But that’s because there are lots of objections properly to be made against them!

I encourage readers who are interested in the general strategy that I *do* adopt to have a look at Oppy (2013b).

References

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