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'Creator' (or not?) Transcript

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'Creator' (or not?)

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Don't make the mistake of thinking that religious philosophical accounts of creation are rival accounts to science. There are two easy but false assumptions that people make:

1. To think that people invented religious views because they didn't realise that there could be purely scientific views, and they had to invent a god to explain the existence of the universe. In both ancient India and ancient Greece, there were purely materialist, non-theistic explanations for the origin of the universe; accounts which tried to explain its origin and existence in purely material terms (what we might call now 'scientific' terms). In India, the Carvaka tradition and the Presocratic philosophers often called the Milesians naturalists are two examples of early attempts to give a purely 'scientific', or purely 'natural' origin to the universe.
2. To think that scientific accounts necessarily conflict with and therefore replace religious ones. Many, perhaps most religious believers in the West, for example, accept theories of the big bang (or the rival steady state theory) for the origin of the universe, and Darwin for the origin of species.

In ancient times, people forged their religious accounts because for some, at least, purely material accounts were intellectually unsatisfying; or could answer only certain questions ³/₄ 'how', perhaps, but not 'why'; 'through which mechanisms' but not 'why this exists to function in the first place'.

Tonight's lecture will not go into the long and complex area of theistic vs. atheistic arguments about the origin of the universe. The topic for tonight is to survey different accounts of the relationship of the divine to the cosmos at its origin, following on from our earlier question of the identity or the difference between the divine and the world. There are in particular two questions we can consider: when and whence?

When is the universe eternal, or did it have a beginning?

Whence how did it come to be? Was it created in a conscious act by the deity? Did it emanate or evolve from the boundless Absolute? Or does it not have a divine origin?

By pairing the principal answers to these questions, we can get six categories of answers.

The world was created by God from nothing [ex nihilo]; giving us two different view, of a creation that has a beginning, or one that is eternally created by God.

The second pair of views: the world was not created by a God; either it is eternal, or it has a beginning, but that beginning was not a divine act.

The third pair of views, that world emanated from God, either from eternity or from a certain starting point.

NB: any of these views can be theistic – including the views that the world is 'uncreated'. Not a 'God of the gaps' issue necessarily (having to have God as an explanation of the universe, so that if another explanation possible, no need for God). Question of relation. Thus 'uncreated' answers can still have a God; 'eternal' answers can still have 'creation'.

Of course, it is also possible to refuse to accept the opposition between two views, such as 'either the world has a beginning or it is eternal'. Indian philosophy finds a way of saying both, as we shall see. And there are of course pantheist views ³/₄ though not many of them, as I indicated at the first lecture this year. But there is the Stoic view that sees spirit and matter as two aspects of the same thing.

I. CREATION

Creation in Time

In the Semitic monotheistic religions the mainstream concept of the creation is that the universe was created out of nothing, or 'ex nihilo'. This means that there was not some pre-existing substance or matter on which God acted to bring about creation. There was nothing; then God brought something into existence. Thus the existence of what is, is totally dependent on God. The reasons they insist on creation ex nihilo are these: matter is finite and needs a source; the transcendence of God means nothing can be equal, so there can be no other 'source' for the universe but God; but God is not material so if he is the source of the universe he must have made it out of nothing rather than out of himself. Monotheists of this persuasion also usually stress the freedom of God in creating; that this was not somehow necessary or unconscious. They also often emphasise that creation continues to be dependent on God; that God conserves all things in being continually.

To consider Aquinas' account of God as the cause of the universe, we must quickly take a look at Aristotle's four ways of speaking about 'causes'. These are not all what we in ordinary English would consider 'causes'; but thinking about 'source' might be a good alternative. There is the 'material cause'; that is the stuff from which the thing is made. Bronze is the material cause [or source] of a bronze statue. There is the 'formal cause' - the source of the form of a thing. A woman's figure, or the image of the goddess Athena, is the formal cause of a bronze statue of Athena. The 'efficient cause' is 'the source of the first beginning of the change'. The mother is the efficient cause of the son; the sculptor is the efficient cause of the statue. The 'final cause' is the purpose of the thing, 'that for the sake of which something is done'; the 'end', as Thomas sometimes says.

Many would take 'creation ex nihilo' as being God is just the efficient cause of universe - universe not made of God, in God's form, or made for the purpose of God somehow. But...? Let's look at Aquinas.

According to Aquinas, God is the 'efficient cause' of the universe - God is the one who did it or made it. Matter itself is made by God. Now interestingly the word that Thomas uses here, along with the word 'creation', is emanation. 'But here we are speaking of things according to their emanation from the universal principle of being; from which emanation matter itself is not excluded'.

Thomas also considers that God is the 'first exemplar cause of all things', even material or natural things:

Now it is manifest that things made by nature receive determinate forms. This determination of forms must be reduced to the divine wisdom as its first principle, for divine wisdom devised the order of the universe, which order consists in the variety of things. And therefore we must say that in the divine wisdom are the types of all things, which types we have called ideas $\frac{3}{4}$ i.e. exemplar forms existing in the divine mind. And these ideas, though multiplied by their relations to things, in reality are not apart from the divine essence, according as the likeness to that essence can be shared diversely by different things. In this manner therefore God Himself is the first exemplar of all things. Moreover, in things created one may be called the exemplar of another by the reason of its likeness thereto, either in species, or by the analogy of some kind of imitation. [trim]

So God is also the formal cause of all things. God is also the final cause of things, Aquinas argues [article 4]. This may seem unlikely. God does not need anything; so God does not need to act for a purpose in creating the universe [objection 1]. Aquinas replies that God 'intends only to communicate His perfection, which is His goodness; while every creature intends to acquire its own perfection, which is the likeness of the divine perfection and goodness. Therefore the divine goodness is the end of all things.' He concludes then that 'God is the efficient, the exemplar and the final cause of all things, and since primary matter is from Him, it follows that the first principle of all things is one in reality.'

Al-Ghazali makes an interesting comparison here. Without specific reference to the Aristotelian divisions, he provides his own distinctions but anchors them to specific 'divine names' taken from the Qur'an. Thus he seeks to articulate the meanings for calling God (or rather, God calling himself) Al-Khaliq - the Creator, Al-Bari' - the Producer, and Al-Musawwir - the Fashioner. These, as he said, might casually be taken as synonymous but need not be. 'Rather, everything which comes forth from nothing to existence needs first of all to be planned; secondly, to be originated according to the plan' and thirdly to be formed after being originated. God may be praised and exalted $\frac{3}{4}$ is creator [khaliq] inasmuch as He is the planner, producer [bari'] inasmuch as He initiates existence, and fashioner [musawwir] inasmuch as He arranges the forms of things invented in the finest way.'

Eternal Creation

Stephen Hawking famously suggested in his bestseller that the universe was eternal and therefore not created by God, and consequently there was 'nothing for a God to do'. Well, as great minds some centuries before have made clear, this doesn't necessarily follow. Just because the universe is eternal, if it is, does not mean that God did not create it.

The suggestion that the universe is eternal is nothing new. This was a view found in ancient Greece, in Aristotle's time, and indeed still earlier this was the majority view among India's religious philosophers. In Udayana's Nyayakusumanjali, an opponent says that as the universe is eternal³/₄you see, he can take this for granted³/₄ and continues in process without a break, there is no scope for creation and therefore a creator. Hawking's point exactly. Udayana finds a series of ways to argue against the idea, not against the idea that the universe is eternal, which he accepts, but that its eternity means that it is self-sufficient and self-explanatory.

We find this large and complex debate in Islamic thought as well. Some Islamic philosophers, though a minority, did actually believe that the universe must be eternal, the eternal creative process of God. So the idea material universe is eternal does not do away with the thought that God created it. All that changes is the timing, or lack of 'time', in God's creative activity.

One reason for arguing this is that, if God is eternal and unchanging, no particular moment could have been selected as the right moment for creating the universe. Why did God choose this moment of nothingness rather than that moment of nothingness in order to create the universe? The simplest response perhaps is simply to say a moment was selected by God's will, albeit in a somewhat arbitrary fashion; or to put it another way, to say that with the universe, space and time were also created. To paraphrase an argument from Aquinas, asking why God creates the universe at that time rather than another is like asking why God created the universe in exactly this spot rather than slightly to the left. Before the creation of the universe there was neither time nor space, so the objection doesn't make sense.

Still, eternal-creationists (to give them a name) have a number of other arguments. If God is unchanging, he could not have created the universe, because that implies that at one point he did not create a universe, at another he did, and at another he ceased doing so — these are all changes, which are impossible for the divine nature. This point was maintained by Ibn Sina and Ibn Rushd, amongst its most distinguished proponents.

Ibn Rushd defended himself against what we might call the Hawking Implication objection ³/₄ if the world is eternal, it cannot have been created by God. In his case, of course, his opponent is not Stephen Hawking but his rough contemporary al-Ghazali. Ibn Rushd concedes that if the world existed eternally of itself, then it would not need a creator. 'But if the meaning of 'eternal' is that it is in everlasting production and that this production has neither beginning nor end, certainly the term 'production' is more truly applied to him who brings about an everlasting production than to him who procures a limited production. 'The philosophers' theory, indeed, is that the world has [a creator] acting from eternity and everlasting, i.e. converting the world eternally from non-being into being.' [Ibn Rushd observes that this very question proved to be a point of disagreement between those who followed Plato vs. those who followed Aristotle.] The world, Ibn Rushd says, is not eternal because it has eternal constituents, for the world consists of movement. 'Therefore the term 'eternal becoming' is more appropriate to the world than the term 'eternity'.' 'Therefore the world is during the time of its existence in need of the presence of its agent for both reasons together, namely, because the substance of the world is continually in motion and because its form, through which it has its subsistence and existence, is of the nature of a relation, not of the nature of a quality....'

II. AN UNCREATED COSMOS

Eternal Matter

Plato believed that there was a pre-existent matter on which the 'Demiurge' (a second-class God) acted to shape the world. In process theology, God is in a mutually dependent and co-eternal relation with the world. The world is in evolution and God is involved in this process. God's uniqueness from the world lies principally in contributing the initial aim of the universe. Thereafter, each occasion involves its own creative synthesis of what it 'prehends of the divine', as David Pailin puts it, which includes the possibilities God envisages, as well as its own aim. God does not act in a coercive way but as a 'lure', to attract or persuade creation in his direction, which is not a material goal but the situation of greatest aesthetic satisfaction. His influence does not strictly and exclusively determine events. In each situation there is a range of states possible to actualise, graded in importance. Creation uses its freedom on each occasion to actualise God's goal or another. Pailin writes:

God thus influences each momentary event. But while God's ordering of the structure of reality ensures that to a massive extent each condescending occasion conforms to its immediate predecessor, the divine presentation of alternative possibilities provides the ground for minute changes in each occasion's self-creation. Each actual occasion composing the enduring object which is a DNA molecule is thus able to contribute to the evolutionary development of that molecule (and so to the creature

genetically produced by that molecule) by its own particular synthesis of what it prehends of what Whitehead refers to as the “consequent” and “primordial” aspects of the divine reality.

This ‘luring’ depends on a ‘panpsychic’ view of the constituents of reality: that is, that there is a mental or psychic aspects to every entity, whether conscious or not. Whitehead suggests that we overcome mind-matter dualism in this way, by realizing that each entity has both a mental and physical aspect; it ‘feels’ its environment. There is no such thing as ‘pure matter’. In this way, it becomes possible for process theologians to speak of choices and decisions made by molecules. For many, however, the notion of a DNA molecule making a decision is still a difficult one to accept as anything but a metaphor.

Evolving Matter

The Hawaiian creation chant, the Kumulipo, speaks of the beginning of the world as deepest darkness, intense heat as the heavens turn inside out, and thereafter a long evolution of the species of the earth, described in 2,000 verses. In this chant, the creation of the universe is not described as the act of a god.

At the time when the earth became hot
At the time when the heavens turned about
At the time when the sun was darkened
To cause the moon to shine
The time of the rise of the Pleiades
The slime, this was the source of the earth
The source of the darkness that made darkness
The source of the night that made night
The intense darkness, the deep darkness
Darkness of the sun, darkness of the night
Nothing but night.

The source of life on earth Hawaiians felt to be the slimy stuff at the bottom of the sea. Interestingly, last week scientists in Dusseldorf and Glasgow suggested that life on earth began in tiny metal spheres, formed in total darkness on the ocean floor, near hydrothermal vents.

The Samkhya philosophers of India did not believe in a God although they accepted the authority of the Scriptures. As far as the universe is concerned, they believed in the ultimate reality of a primal substance which pervades everything, is eternal and indestructible. It is what forms the basis of all that the universe is, despite its variety. They call it prakriti. Sometimes you will find this translated as ‘matter’, but this is misleading; it is not just material substance. It is not conscious or still less personal either. Prakriti is the source of the world; creation is an unfolding of different effects of the original prakriti. It is not so much a stuff as a force, a state of tension between its three constituents. In different proportions, they constitute all things which are the products of prakriti. The different ways in which they interact explains the diversity there is in the world. When they are perfectly balanced, there is no action; but when the equilibrium is upset, the process of evolution begins.

The evolution of unconscious prakriti can only take place through presence of conscious purusa, a Sanskrit word often translated as spirit. This sets the prakriti into activity, upsetting the balance of gunas, and so the process of evolution can begin.

This forms one starting-point of Sankara’s critique of Samkhya. How can unconscious matter give rise to consciousness and spirit? ‘You think that the potential form is independently capable of producing the world, whereas our view is that its capacity is dependent on God’ he argues. The theistic Nyaya school agrees: we need a conscious creator, even if that creator is acting with or through matter. Uddyotakara says that God creates the tool before using it; the Nyaya picture is that God works through material causes.

I said earlier that when you ask the question: ‘Is the world eternal or does it have a beginning?’ there is a sense in which you could answer: ‘Both’. That is what the majority of the classical schools of Indian philosophy do. The universe exists in an eternal cycle of creation, dissolution, and creation again. So the universe is eternal and does not have a beginning, a ‘first moment’. Alternatively you could say the universe has many beginnings, indeed, an infinite number I suppose.

So in the Nyaya theory, God creates the universe again and again, using the eternal atoms left over from the last dissolution. In

discussing this theory, Uddyotakara in the Nyayavarttika creates a dialogue like this [paraphrased]:

Objection: Does God create the world out of something or out of nothing? If God creates the world out of something, then He cannot be the creator of that something. If out of nothing, men's efforts are useless and liberation impossible.

Answer: A man makes an axe out of wood and iron and then with the help of the axe he makes lumber. Just so God makes the instruments with which he creates.

Objection: But what about the first thing He makes? is it made out of nothing?

Answer: There was no first thing.

God creates, dissolves, and creates again endlessly. So although the universe is eternal, you could say it has many beginnings; and yet there was no 'first'.

There are differences among India's six schools of orthodox religious philosophy. While remaining faithful to the Vedas, the scriptures, as we have seen there is a school that does not believe in a divine being who creates the universe. There are, however, areas of agreement. All six disagree with the Buddhist view that the world is simply an endless flux. They believe that the world is objective and not just a mental phenomenon; it has a material base, whether they call it prakriti or atoms, or deriving from maya. They believe that the nature of this universe is better called 'becoming' than 'being' and in that sense its material state is not ultimately real itself. They also believe in this eternal rhythm:

'All the systems accept the view of the great world rhythm. ...Vast periods of creation, maintenance and dissolution follow each other in endless succession. This theory is not inconsistent with belief in progress; for it is not a question of the movement of the world reaching its goal times without number, and being again forced back to its starting-point. Creations and dissolutions do not mean the fresh rise and the total destruction of the cosmos. The new universe forms the next stage of the history of the cosmos, where the unexhausted potencies of good and evil are provided with the opportunities of fulfilment. It means that the race of man enters upon and retravels its ascending path of realisation. This interminable succession of world ages has no beginning.'

So the universe does not start with a creation ex nihilo. In the Nyaya system, as we have seen, we do see something that we can call 'creation' by God $\frac{3}{4}$ a conscious, deliberate act. Other systems do not picture it that way. Creation is not so much a 'making' but a becoming; perhaps an emanation or perhaps a self-projection of the Absolute.

The nondualist school of Advaita Vedanta says that Brahman is what the origin, maintenance, and destruction of the world proceeds from. To use Thomas Aquinas' language, Brahman is both the efficient and the material cause of the universe $\frac{3}{4}$ who causes it, and what from. Brahman is different from His effects; and yet is present within them as their inner controller. 'That omniscient omnipotent cause from which proceed the origin, subsistence and dissolution of this world $\frac{3}{4}$ which world is differentiated by names and forms, contains many agents and enjoyers, is the abode of the fruits of actions, these fruits having their definite places, times and causes, and the nature of whose arrangement cannot even be conceived by the mind, $\frac{3}{4}$ that cause, we say, is Brahman....' [Sankara in his commentary on the Brahminsutras, I. 1. 2.]

What the Advaitin particularly has to explain to the sceptic are two paradoxes: how you get the many from the undifferentiated one, or the different from the same; and how the world can be in a sense real and unreal at the same time.

For, despite the stereotype, even these so-called 'monists' say the world is real. If it is an illusion, it is not one we make up for ourselves and can swiftly disappear on enlightenment or just be thought away. The snake you wrongly think you see lying on the road is only unreal if the rope that you're actually seeing is real. And yet this analogy, for the Advaita Vedantins, illustrates how we can construct a false world of appearances for ourselves. But it is false not because it is a hallucination or a figment of our imagination, but because it is not ultimately real.

Some of the West's many misunderstandings of the East can be cleared up if you stop to ask what these thinkers mean by 'real'. For these thinkers, if a thing is real this means it exists independently, in its own nature. Anything that exists through dependence on another is unreal. Only Brahman exists entirely of itself, in its own nature. All other things are dependent on God.

This is a quite different criterion for reality than many Western philosophers use, and approaches what Western philosophers mean by 'self-existent'. For theistic philosophers, while we are all real, only God is self-existent. But if 'only Brahman is real' means, in Western terms, 'only God is self-existent', then Western and Eastern metaphysics may not be as different as people

commonly suppose.

Because what they are trying to talk about resists ordinary speech, the Advaitins usually resort to analogies or metaphors to communicate to us intuitively how it can be true.

One venerable analogy is to point to seawater and to the foam that appears on its surface. You are not deluded if you think you perceive foam on the seawater; it can be distinguished in perception from the water itself. And yet it is not something else than that water; it comes from the water and dissolves back into it. So too with Brahman and the world and the many selves that we are.

Advaitins also use the analogy of space and a pot. Space is apparently single, continuous, undifferentiated. Now imagine a pot. Compare the space around a pot with the space enclosed by the empty pot. Once the pot is created, you can differentiate the space inside and outside the pot, but these are not two different 'things' any more than they were before. When a pot is destroyed, the space 'inside' it is simply merged back with the rest of space. Gaudapada uses this image to explain the relation of Brahman and individual selves; when a soul is liberated it simply returns to oneness with Brahman; but even before that, though you can isolate it, it is not really a different 'thing' from Self. Sankara uses the same image to bring out a different aspect of this complex idea. God is limited by bodies, sense organs, etc. and thus apparently creates different things like the different portions of space contained in pots. But this apparent differentiation comes from our inability to discriminate it properly. Finally, Sankara's student Suresvara points out how the pot is originated, exists for a while, and is destroyed, all without 'space itself' being affected. So too with the universe and Brahman.

Some observations

Christian (or Jewish or Islamic) philosophers often sharply distinguish their belief in creation from nothing, from theories of 'emanation' that they think are held by Neoplatonist 'pagans' like Plotinus, or Eastern thinkers like the Advaita Vedantins. But when you dig deeper into the language used by each, some of these absolute differences don't look so very absolute. As I've indicated, Thomas Aquinas himself wants to use the word 'emanation' for how the universe proceeds from God. Of course he does not mean that God oozes or extrudes the universe out of his own 'stuff'. But neither does Sankara or Plotinus mean that. They are all concerned with finding some way of insisting simultaneously that the material universe has no other source, therefore no other dependency, than God. At the same time they want to maintain that it is not just the same as God (as Stoics or pantheists might do). They choose different emphases and images, and they court different dangers of misunderstanding. But they all agree on the core issue. Is the real question in fact the relationship of creation to the divine $\frac{3}{4}$ its ontological difference?

There is a difference between believing in a beginning of the universe or the eternity of the universe that probably cannot be reconciled. Although it can almost be combined, in the manner of Indian philosophy, that combination itself would still be rejected by the others. But whether this is a religious difference worth burning people at the stake for is up to you.

This brief investigation $\frac{3}{4}$ especially the provocative question of how different is the Hindu Sankara from the Catholic Aquinas $\frac{3}{4}$ leads me to wonder what the most important question is. Is the most urgent question the origin of planets, or the end of human selves? The most important difference between the emanation of Brahman and the christian God's creation ex nihilo is not so much the beginning as the end. This is what the pot analogy shows us; the creation of the pot is not so great a source of disagreement as its destruction. Do we merge seamlessly back into, or do we remain eternally separate but very, very intimate, with the Source of all Being?