



Question for Stephen Hawking: Why Is There Something Rather Than Nothing?

Last week, world-renowned physicist Stephen Hawking addressed legions of enthusiastic students and others at Caltech. According to reports, the gist of his speech was that “general relativity” and “quantum theory” can enable us to account for the origins of the universe *without* positing the existence of God.

According to the U.K.’s *Daily Mail*, Hawking ridiculed the religious position on this topic by likening it to the myth of an obscure African tribe whose God “vomited the Sun, Moon, and stars.” He further mocked the traditional theistic explanation of the world’s beginnings by referring to an exchange that Martin Luther is said to have had with a younger man who ventured to discover what God was doing “before” He decided to create the universe. “Was he preparing Hell for people who asked such questions?” Such questions, Hawking maintained, are nonsense.



As Christians have noted for the better part of 2,000 years, they are indeed nonsensical. Hawking would have known this had he, say, read St. Augustine’s *Confessions* — a Western classic that supplies us with an analysis of time that secular and religious thinkers alike acknowledge remains unrivaled for its insights. Yet this is the problem: Hawking, not unlike most scientists who have made a splash in the popular culture, seems to be almost scandalously ignorant of the philosophical and theological literature that defines his civilization.

Augustine conceded long ago that the question, “What was God doing before He created the world?” is fundamentally misplaced. He knew what Hawking now knows: The world did not come to be *in time*, but, rather, time is an aspect or dimension of the world. Thus, since “before” is a temporal word, there was no “before” God created the world, for there was no time until God created it.

As far as the idea of God “vomiting” the universe is concerned, Christians (along with Jews and Muslims, for that matter) have always found this as primitive and repugnant a conception as does Hawking. Again, it is shameful that he apparently doesn’t know this, for it is elementary.

Unlike, say, Hindus and ancient Greeks, Christians staunchly deny that the universe “emanated” from God, or that God brought it into being from some “stuff” that already existed. And, of course, they just as staunchly deny that God is a physical being, a body. Yet this is all that is implied in Hawking’s metaphor of the god of his African tribe.



Written by [Jack Kerwick, Ph.D.](#) on April 25, 2013

For the Christian, the world is not contemporaneous with God, the way a person is contemporaneous with his shadow, say, or the bile in his stomach. Rather, God is the Supreme Being, immaterial and, thus, invisible, who created the world *out of nothing*.

In fact, ironically, it is precisely because of the belief that the world is the product of an all-good God that science has soared to such heights as it has. In the absence of this Christian doctrine, it is much more likely than not that science itself would have been absent from the West. It is the idea that the material cosmos, by virtue of being the handiwork of the Perfect Architect, is both real and good that the universe was deemed an eminently worthwhile object of investigation.

If not for this “religious position,” there would have been no science — and no Stephen Hawking.

There is a final point. As Christian (and other) thinkers have noted for centuries and centuries, the universe is not self-explanatory. Hawking might agree, which is why, I think, he has theorized that our universe is but one universe among an infinite number of such universes. But this line only pushes the problem back a step.

First, since “the universe” is but a short-hand term for everything or all things, to speak of infinite universes is like speaking of infinite everythings, or limitless all things. Neither logically nor grammatically does it seem to make much sense.

However, the bigger obstacle to Hawking’s view is philosophical or theological. Let’s just suppose that there is more than one universe. So what? The basic question over which atheists and theists have been clashing from time immemorial is: Why is there something rather than nothing?

Hawking never states the question this directly — and for good reason.

Whether there is one universe or an infinite number of universes, nothing composed of parts — the universe is — is self-explanatory. In other words, to explain the universe or universes, we must go beyond them.

Why is X here? Unfortunately, for the Hawkings of the world, it is logically illicit to answer this by pointing to X itself.

Hawking may be a great scientist, but he is a lousy philosopher — and an even worse theologian.



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