

Sean Carroll's Sleight-of-Hand Evasion of the Creator

"See to it that no one makes a prey of you by philosophy or empty deceit..." (Colossians 2:8)

Christian philosopher Dr. William Lane Craig recently went head-to-head with theoretical physicist, Dr. Sean Carroll of Cal Tech in a public debate over the question, "*Is God's Existence More Probable Given Cosmology Data?*" This data broadly pertains to the expansion of the universe from its very first moment. The 2 and 1/2 hour contest can be viewed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5-H6hdjpRRw>. Craig, of course argued the affirmative position while Carroll correspondingly challenged it. However a more surprising and, I will argue dubious, aspect of Carroll's presentation was his bolder contention that the "evidence" employed by Christians is worse than false or weak; it is, as he says, entirely irrelevant to the scientific data because religion uses the wrong vocabulary and naively seeks to address the wrong questions.

This posting does not challenge Carroll's level of knowledge within his *own* field (though I hasten to add that the question at hand required his crossover from science into the other intellectual fields of philosophy and theology). He posed a vigorous and thought-provoking challenge to Craig. My atheist friend, Jim (we two, too, have dueled each other twice in a similar debate) recently goaded me over coffee by suggesting this video would be painful for me to watch because, as he cautioned, "*Carroll demolishes your favorite apologist!*" The contest is anonymously labelled, "*Sean Carroll Completely Dominates Billionaire William Lane Craig in Lopsided Debate.*" Let us first of all dispose as garbage the poster's ludicrous assertion that Craig is wealthy. Now, turning to serious matters, over the course of my having watched the debate several times I have noticed that the list of related videos featured along the right hand border on my screen all parade the same propagandistic theme in their titles, as though Craig routinely gets beat up every time he debates. Oh, to the contrary! I wonder what lies behind such a pathetic level of insecurity that compels people to post such nonsense. I advise every reader (on either side) who is interested in this topic to witness this exchange and critically analyze the arguments yourself. In undertaking this assessment it is important to consider two matters: First it is necessary to distinguish between the three fields of inquiry (referenced above) in the context of this exchange. Second, it is crucial to ask whether each contestant's treatment of these respective fields was managed correctly according to the rules of logic (e.g. *scientific* assertions supported by *scientifically*-valid evidence, with the expectation that philosophical and theological issues will be cogently framed).

By what authority, readers may ask, do I as a non-scientist pastor presume to challenge a Cal Tec scientist on these matters? I reply that I do so by noting discrepancies between the scientific claims Carroll alleged against creation and the faulty logical status of that battery of "evidence" that he offered in support of them (a philosophical matter). I also highlight incidents where his *theological* objections (a religious matter) against the claim that the God of the Bible made the heavens and the earth fail to achieve their intended goal of dethroning God as the creative agent. To cite here one example in service of that aim, Carroll spent considerable time (1:15) hypothesizing on how a *truly reasonable* god, if such were to actually exist, *would* have created a more "successful" product than what scientists find in the natural order. His consequent pitting of the actuality of nature against the witness of the God of the Bible, in a manner similar to Charles Darwin (*On the Origin of Species*, 1st ed. (Harvard, 1859), p.435)), leaves the field of *scientific* discourse behind by entering into the realm of religious matters. Hence the necessity of a pastor/theologian *competently* applying religious insight in a critique of Carroll's anti-theological case.

Like Craig, I too found many things to dispute in Carroll's arguments. Yet for the purpose of this posting I will take agonizing pains to limit my attention to three critical

objections. Summarized in a single statement, the tactic Carroll employed in attempting to delegitimize arguments for a Creator involved, as my title describes, a philosophical *sleight of hand*. How so? Firstly, in spite of both his *own* credentials as a physicist, and the reservoir of authority from his allegedly near-unanimous roster of cosmologists (whom he claims refuse consideration of the “god hypothesis”), he failed to present actual raw data of a kind which he had stated alone qualifies as *scientific*. So Carroll never *produced* such relevant facts as would *demonstrate* his god-dismissive program. Rather, in his reference to the existence of numerous “plausible self-contained models,” he neglected altogether to delve into their actual details (37:00). But hypothetical models, especially under the vague conditions elaborated on below, are not empirical evidence. Consequently they do not constitute damaging facts.

For example, Dr. Carroll’s reference to the existence of seventeen separate “plausible” theoretical models (41:30) which, he stated, support an eternal universe without a beginning, falls far short of demonstration for several reasons. For one, while Carroll lauds these models because they are self-contained so as to involve no intervention from a supernatural realm (37:00), ironically, neither do they significantly connect with the natural world either! Following naturally into the second reason, it is central to my purpose to highlight Carroll’s hastily added concession: “*I don’t claim that any of these models is the right answer... maybe none are*” (42:27). Indeed not once did he ever produce an unambiguous model that withstood Craig’s scrutiny. In reply, Craig brought heightened clarity to the bleakness and consequent impotency of Carroll’s list of models (44:00) by pointing out that in fact none of them were actually successful in supporting his own contention, not even in theory. Instead, Craig noted of every single one of them that they are “*not successful*” (55:10). Indeed, he judged them to be either “*untenable*” or to “*fail to avert a beginning*” (57:00). Thirdly, Craig noted that mere “*logical possibility*” is never sufficient in itself for raising any model to the level of plausibility (2:06). He further stated the obvious that absolute nothingness has neither properties nor potentiality to accomplish anything at all. Near the close of the debate (2:15) Craig summarized the whole stark reality by stating categorically, “*There is no evidence at all that the universe is beginning-less.*” Ironically, Carroll’s bold initial challenge to the biblical concept of a beginning, becomes severely moderated by the closing minutes of the event, as will be made clear at the close of my blog. So, in summary, Carroll first of all committed the logical fallacy of the *bait and switch* on the audience by presenting less than a bone fide *scientific* case for the sufficiency of natural causes to account for the existence of the universe.

Carroll’s second *sleight-of-hand* play involved his categorical rejection of *personal agent* causation (God as creator) in favor of *scientific* causality on the grounds that only natural causes “play by the rules” of science. For example, he charged that deity-like causes (Genesis 1:1) belong to the “artist” category instead of the category of physical laws which conform to consistent and predictable patterns of a kind that scientists can study by means of their investigational tools. The problem with this line of argument, however, is that it fundamentally changes the goal of the investigation (“How did the universe come to be?”). Instead of seeking after the actual truth of that matter it instead limits the investigation to the question: “*What are the tools in my ‘kit’ (such as a screwdriver) capable of accomplishing?*” When it comes to the question of the origin of the universe it becomes all the more important to broaden the range of investigational tools to employ in search of the answer to that question. Prejudice in the form of refusal to consider a potential answer (God) because of personal *naturalistic* preferences disqualifies the investigator from claiming adherence to either the scientific spirit or its methods. Imagine a forensic scientist refusing to consider murder as the potential cause of a dead man bleeding at the end of an alley from a knife wound because the former was committed to a *naturalistic-causes* view of events.

Not one of the reasons that Carrol cited in the debate for his disdain of *personal* agent causation stands up to the scrutiny of logic unless one is completely committed to a mechanistic world-view. Aligning himself with that position, Carrol indeed claimed that he has no free will. Yet for a host of reasons, that philosophical position results in an array of self-contradictory absurdities. For example, if it were really true that he (and we) have no free will, that proposition undermines all *logical* reason why even his “arguments” should carry any weight. Scientific explanation rests on the validity of at least four assumptions. The human investigator must be capable of ascertaining the truth about the natural order, must understand the ramifications of that data, must purpose to communicate to others the concepts which rationally follow, and have an audience capable of processing such truths for themselves. The naturalistic view of reality that he espouses effectively underlines every last one of these assumptions.

Now let me be clear, nothing I have said so far demonstrates that Carrol’s naturalistic view is false or that my theistic view is true. What I am specifically challenging is a prejudice on his part which philosophically inhibits a proper openness to the entire array of options on the question of origins. When all is said and done, a personal agent cause of the universe is at the very least a live option. That became the view of former atheist (he died believing in God), Antony Flew when, as he described it, he embraced Socrates’ dictum to “*follow the evidence where it leads*” ([There is a God: How the World’s Most Notorious Atheist Changed his Mind](#). (Harper One, 2007), p.89). Indeed, so persuaded was Flew by the evidence for a beginning of the universe out of nothing, he conceded that it overthrew the premise of his famous essay, “The Presumption of Atheism” (Ibid, ch. 8).

Sean Carroll’s third *sleight-of-hand* ploy involves his ultimate failure not only to provide positive grounds in favor of the position that he so arrogantly asserted, but to *honestly* acknowledge at the close of the debate that the beginning of the universe from nothing remains unexplained by naturalistic means. Notice, for example, that at its close he conceded that the universe had a beginning in time, that the now-existent universe obeys laws, and that he offers not even the slightest hinting of a rational accounting of this reality. Take not my word for this. I invite you to read it for yourself.

Near the very end of the debate a questioner from the audience asked him why we should be forbidden from considering a personal agent (God) as the cause of the universe. Carroll replied as follows (2:22):

“This is the kind of issue that tugs at our ability to make sense of these large cosmic questions given our everyday experience with reality. But I will [also deny] your premise. I do not think that if a universe has a first moment in time that means there is any sort of eternal or preexisting conditions or rules or laws or anything like that. It simply means that our best and maybe the correct description of the cosmos is one that had a first moment in time. The question is, can that be self-contained in the sense that I am using it? ... Which is that if I write down the equations and the conditions and so forth that describe the universe at its earliest moment, am I done? Are there questions that I might have about that universe that cannot be answered by that formalism? I think there is no obstacle whatsoever to coming up with such models. So, I would simply un-ask the question. I would say that, no there aren’t preexisting or eternal rules. There is the universe and the universe has a first moment. And the universe obeys rules during those moments when the universe exists. During those moments when the universe does not exist there are no moments, there is no time, and there are no rules.”

What a closure to a major debate! The initially-arrogant Sean Carrol effectively concludes his case with a refusal to logically follow where the evidence leads by saying instead, “*I won’t talk about it.*”

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