



Stephen Hawking *and* Atheism

BISHOP ROBERT BARRON

WORD  on FIRE.

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Transcript taken from a talk given by
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In 2012, Steven Hawking, who was probably the best-known scientist in the world at the time, weighed in on the question of God. In his book, *The Grand Design*, he argued that the universe requires no creator.

I must confess, something in me always tightens when a scientist pontificates about matters properly philosophical or religious because there is a qualitative difference between science and philosophy. Science seeks after events and objects and phenomena within the empirically observable and measurable universe, while philosophy and religion seek after ultimate and final causes. Science as such simply cannot adjudicate questions that lie outside of its proper purview, which is precisely why scientists end up saying a lot of silly things when they talk about philosophy and religion.

Here is a good example. I was reading a lot of the articles that have appeared about this book, and they gave some excerpts. Here is one of them from Hawking himself: “Because there’s a law such as gravity, the universe can and will create itself from nothing.” The confusion, in my mind, is this: Which is it? Is it gravity or is it nothing? There is quite a difference between the two. If he means, as many have said, that the universe just spontaneously creates itself out of nothing, I can only throw up my hands. To look at the universe in all

of its wild and radical wonder, in all of its stunning mathematical complexity: to say simply all of that came spontaneously from nothing strikes me as ludicrous.

There is an adage from the classical philosophical tradition, which is actually hard to improve upon, that says, *Ex nihilo nihil fit*: “From nothing comes nothing.” If a teacher heard a student who was trying to explain some phenomenon within nature say, “It just happened. It just spontaneously popped into being,” I would be willing to bet that teacher would be pretty unhappy with that answer. Yet when it comes to the most compelling and the most fascinating question of all, “Why is there something rather than nothing?” we are expected to find that answer rationally satisfying.

I come up against this a lot in my dialogues with atheists. When you really press the question “Where does the universe come from?” almost inevitably, you will come to this point where they say, “Well, it just happened. Something”—meaning the whole of the universe—“just came from nothing.” Of course, I smile because I am supposed to be the avatar of medieval superstition. I am supposed to be the one defending old, prescientific views of the world, and yet it seems to take a greater leap of faith to say there is a God than to say something came from nothing. The latter proposition strikes me as unreasonable, rather than the first.

Let's say Hawking means the other side of it, that gravity is the ultimate cause of the universe. Some force within nature is identified as the ultimate cause of all things, of the being of the universe. Now, this does have a long philosophical pedigree going back to the pre-Socratic philosophers who were trying to find the building block of reality, and they would say things like, "It was earth," "It was water," "It was fire," and "It was prime matter that gave rise to all things."

But as philosophy moved forward and as the influence of the religions was felt, the question became more refined, because this question about the universe—"Why is there something rather than nothing?"—is not a quest for something within the universe, not a quest after one particular cause: it is asking after the very being of the universe. "Why is there something and rather not nothing?" is the way Heidegger put it.

Here, we have to look along this line: What explains the contingency of the world? This is a technical philosophical way of stating the fact that the world and things in the world do not explain themselves. You and I are contingent. We had parents, we eat and drink, we breathe; all signs that we do not contain within ourselves the reason for our own existence. We are not self-explanatory. So we have to look for extrinsic causes. Now, what if these extrinsic causes are also

contingent, if they too depend on something outside themselves? Then we haven't found our answer yet, so we appeal further and further and further.

What we cannot do is appeal infinitely or indefinitely to other contingent things, because then we have not found what we are looking for, which is to explain our own existence or the existence of the universe today. What we have to come to, Catholic philosophy says, is some reality that is noncontingent, which carries within itself the very reason for its own existence, that whose very nature is to be. This is precisely what Catholic philosophy identifies as God. God is the noncontingent ground of contingency.

One more step. That reality whose very nature is 'to be' cannot be limited or imperfect in its being, because its very nature is 'to be,' to exist. It must, therefore, be the fullness of existence, nothing but existence. And now, again, you see why we identify it with God. It must be that which is properly unlimited in its being. What it cannot be is some finite and finally contingent force within the Universe.

Gravity is indeed an impressive force, but gravity is finite. Gravity is variable. Gravity in itself is not that which exists through the power of its own essence, and it is ludicrous to suggest that anything like it within the universe is itself the cause of the being of the universe.

There is a line that came across in one of the articles about Hawking's book, and it was illuminating, maybe despite itself. Here is what the author said: "In his new book, *The Grand Design*, Hawking sets out a comprehensive thesis that the scientific framework leaves no room for a deity." I am sure he meant that to imply that science proves there is no God.

But I would say that is quite right. The scientific framework means that epistemological purview that takes in the world of our experience, the world that we can measure, that we can observe. It is indeed right to say, within that framework, no one is going to find a deity. Why? Because God is not a being. God is not one reality among many. God is not a force within the observable measurable cosmos, so it is quite correct to say science *qua* science is not going to find God.

Think of that famous cosmonaut that went up into outer space back in the late 50s. I'm up here in the heavens, he said, and there's no God. Well, God is not a being you are going to discover or a force you are going to find within the universe. The problem here is something I have pointed to before, which is scientism, the tendency to reduce all legitimate knowledge to the scientific form of knowledge. If science cannot prove it, it is not real. That tendency is problematic. You see it very clearly on display in the so-called New Atheists. Look at Christopher Hitchens, Daniel Dennett, and

Sam Harris. You will find it over and over again: the reduction of knowledge to scientific knowledge.

What I found actually disappointing and disconcerting is that Steven Hawking, maybe the greatest scientist in the world at the time, succumbed precisely to this problem.

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