

Lawrence Krauss – taking atheism to a new low

In a recent debate in Melbourne Town Hall, Lawrence Krauss, astrophysicist and polemicist for a rationality that includes nothing but science, clashed with William Lane Craig, a philosopher who promotes Christian faith as the most reasonable worldview on offer. Chris Mulherin, who attended the debate and interviewed both Krauss and Craig beforehand, explains why he found Krauss both arrogant and ignorant.

IN THE CULTURAL BATTLE between New Atheism and faith, how does one act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with God when confronted with the arrogance of people who have no time for charity, humility or other traditional virtues?

Such was my spiritual turmoil recently when two titans of the global 'God wars' crossed swords in Melbourne. The town hall was almost full in August for the Krauss-Craig conversation.

Craig and Krauss are like chalk and cheese in more than their views on the God question. While Craig was respectful and focussed on clarifying the argument, Krauss played the entertainer with little time for serious discussion. He was disparaging, aggressive as he paced the stage and played to the gallery, convinced that there was no substantial argument to be had and secure in his sure knowledge that science had done away with the God hypothesis. When it was his turn to listen, he seemed uncomfortable as he squirmed in his seat with pained impatience or grimaced with defiantly-crossed arms or shook his head in disbelief at what Craig was saying. In a pre-debate interview Krauss tempted me to abandon Christian charity as he compared Jesus to Hitler – see more below – and pompously proclaimed the God question was irrelevant.

Arguments about nothing

Krauss is a recent arrival on the atheist public speaking circuit, having sprung to fame with his views on nothing. His 2012 book, *A Universe from Nothing*, attempts to answer the old conundrum of its subtitle: *Why there is something rather than nothing*. His answer is that physicists can now explain how the universe was brought into existence from nothing plus the laws of nature.

Krauss has riled atheists and theists alike with his ludicrous claims about nothing. The problem is not necessarily his science; it is that Krauss redefines the word 'nothing' so as to include the laws of physics. As the philosophers have been quick to point out, the laws of physics are 'something' and not 'nothing'; Krauss is playing a word game, which, despite his pretensions, has no implications for whether there is a creator.

Here's an example of his doublespeak: "Nothing is a physical concept because it's the absence of something, and something is a physical concept." Now, it doesn't take a philosopher to point out that there are lots of 'somethings' in the world that are not physical. My love for my wife, the number 42 and God himself are all something



Lawrence Krauss: he riles both atheists and theists alike.

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rather than nothing, but none of them are physical concepts. Surely Professor Krauss can't be so green about philosophy and theology as he seems to be? My conversation with him proved otherwise.

Kraussian faith

Krauss's view on faith is the standard New Atheist line that equates all religions to belief in the tooth fairy or Bertrand Russell's 'celestial teapot'. He believes that "religion is dying on its own" and thinks that his contribution to the cause is to "encourage people to replace the kind of things they get from religion with things that are related to the real world and not myths and fairy tales." I asked him what he saw as the role, if any, of Christianity in an increasingly secularised culture. His response was dismissive and pragmatic:

Well, it gets in the way. I think the role is to provide some sense of community and support for people. The point is, do you need religion to do that? Right now the best role Christianity can play is to support systems that try to bring people together, and then get out of the way.

Krauss is unequivocal; there is a fundamental conflict between

science and faith. Religion for him is baloney and the only way he can see the world is through the lens of science.

Science is incompatible with the world's major religions; all of those are, from a scientific perspective, nonsense. God is irrelevant. People seem to think it's an important question; it's not an important question to

This unwitting logical flaw is what philosophers call the naturalistic fallacy; it's the attempt to draw moral conclusions from the facts of nature. It's what lies behind so called 'scientific' programs of genocide and eugenics and it's what you get when science is allowed to rule in every area. Science as a worthy vocation for studying nature becomes scientism, a worldview which proclaims that all that is not empirical is nonsensical.

When I asked how science provides moral foundations, Krauss fell into philosophical gibberish: "There's no doubt if you look at morality in the modern world it's based on science; it's not based on religion." While he tritely said, "you can't make a decision about what to do unless you know the implications of your actions," which science can tell us, he then suggested that science was responsible for ending slavery, the emancipation of women and the end of homophobia.

Turning science into a worldview

I wondered if anything could possibly unsettle Krauss's supreme confidence in only the things that science could comment on. Again his answer revealed his pragmatism as well as an impoverished understanding of what might count as evidence.

My convictions are, if there is empirical evidence for something then I'm willing to accept that fact. Nothing is going to unsettle that because that works. If I looked up tonight and the stars rearrange themselves to say 'I am here' then it would be worth thinking about. But as there has been no single shred of empirical evidence for any deity or any divine intervention in the history of the universe, there's no reason to worry about it.

Such flippant ignorance casts all religion, all history, all moral discussion into the flames. After all, there is no 'empirical evidence' of the Kraussian sort for the existence of any historical figure, the equality of human beings, the wrongness of torture or the meaning of life. In the words of New Atheist guru Richard Dawkins,

In a universe of blind physical forces and genetic replication, some people are going to get hurt, other people are going to get lucky, and you won't find any rhyme or reason in it, nor any justice. The universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but blind, pitiless indifference.

Delusions of belief

When asked about those respected scientists who are also serious believers Krauss resorted to the extraordinary ruse of suggesting that scientists who are religious are mentally deficient. "You can be a scientist and a Christian, but to do that you have to suspend your disbelief," he said. Again he echoes Dawkins' view that "religion poisons your ability to use your brain." (When asked about the faith of



world-ranking palaeontologist Simon Conway Morris, Dawkins' reply was, "When Simon speaks of religion he leaves his brain behind.")

Krauss is paradoxically pessimistic about human rationality, invoking the White Queen's advice to Alice, although not realizing that in doing so he undermines his own thinking, including his convictions on the God question:

People can believe diametrically opposed things at the same time. We're hard-wired to be able to do it; we all do that. I like to say we all believe ten impossible things before breakfast. I think that scientists who have a strong belief just put it aside when they are doing their science. They say 'I'm going to be guided by what the science tells me about the natural world but I won't let it infringe on this belief that I have about an imaginary guy in the sky.'

This convoluted thinking is why Krauss and many New Atheist showmen are derided by serious thinkers, atheists included. When challenged about his shallowness, he obliged me with a memorable quotation; I asked if there was a danger for a physicist wading into the depths of philosophy and theology.

No, because there are no depths of philosophy and theology. They are very shallow. I don't wade into philosophy and theology; I don't need to. You don't need to know anything about philosophy or theology to do physics. Or to understand the universe. I don't wade into the alien abduction literature either because I don't need to.

At this point I was tempted to put off the mantle of politeness. But first, a final question: "What do you make of Jesus?" I asked.

I see him as an important historical figure in the same sense that Muhammad was. But there were other figures that were historically important – like Adolf Hitler. I don't view him any more profoundly than anyone else.

Such is the impoverished worldview and confused thinking of those who lead the New Atheist assault on the gates of heaven.

The full audio and transcripts of the interviews with Lawrence Krauss and William Lane Craig are at: www.skandalon.net/KraussCraig. You can watch their debate at: <http://youtu.be/7xcgjt5s5ks>. Chris Mulherin is an Anglican minister completing a doctorate on science and religion.