

STEPHEN HAWKING'S SIMPLISTIC ATHEISM

Brief Answers to Big Questions is Stephen Hawking's last book. His family finished the manuscript that he started, launching the book six months after the famous physicist died. The media hullabaloo over the book centers mostly on his professed atheism. CNN shouted Hawking's conclusion, "There is no God," calling it a "bombshell."

It is hardly a "bombshell" to learn that a celebrated atheist was an atheist. Hawking never declared himself a religious man, though his atheism was always shaky. Just last year, in a book about him by Kitty Ferguson, he was asked why there is a universe. "If I knew that," he answered, "then I would know everything important." He added, "then we would know the mind of God."

Now we are told that in his new book, at the end of his life, he was more sure of his atheist convictions. "Do I have faith? We are each free to believe what we want," Hawking said, "and it's my view that the simplest explanation is that there is no God...No one created the universe and no one directs our fate. This leads to a profound realisation: there is probably no heaven and afterlife either." Probably. Which means there may be.

Why did Hawking hedge? And why would a brilliant man who supposedly understands elements of the universe that are too complex and difficult for most of us to understand settle the question of God's existence by choosing "the simplest explanation" available?

Would it not be just as simple to adopt Pascal's answer to the wager he proffered? The wager entailed the consequences of believing in God versus not believing. The 17th century French

philosopher said it was wiser to err on the side of caution. "If you gain, you gain all; if you lose, you lose nothing."

A popular reconstruction of Pascal's wager goes like this: "If I believe in God and life after death and you do not, and if there is no God, we both lose when we die. However, if there is a God, you still lose and I gain everything."

This is clearly one of the "simplest" alternatives to Hawking's position. It also has the merit of being more persuasive—to lose the wager is to lose it all.

It is fascinating to learn that while Hawking cannot conceive of a personal God, and doubts there is life after death, he believes in life in outer space. In *Brief Answers to Big Questions*, he confesses his belief in aliens. Great. But for a guy who insists on scientific evidence for everything else, where is the proof?

Why would Hawking believe in aliens? In the book by Ferguson, he says, "We are such insignificant creatures on a minor planet of a very average star in the outer suburbs of one of a hundred thousand million galaxies." He is *entitled* to believe that human beings are "insignificant creatures," but he has no empirical evidence to support it.

It would have helped had Hawking identified who the significant creatures are and where they live. But he never did. More important, why is it rational for him to believe in aliens but irrational for us to believe in God?

Where Hawking fails, as do all atheists, is in responding to the central issue involving the origin of the universe. Saint John Paul II said it best. "Every scientific hypothesis about the origin of the world, such as the one that says that there is a basic atom from which the whole of the physical universe is derived," he said in a 1981 Vatican conference on cosmology, "leaves unanswered the problem concerning the beginning of the universe. By itself, science cannot resolve

this problem....”

How much of Hawking’s atheism was a function of his disability (he suffered from Lou Gehrig’s disease for most of his adult life) is uncertain, but in his last book he makes this an issue. “For centuries,” he said, “it was believed that disabled people like me were living under a curse that was inflicted by God. I prefer to think that everything can be explained another way, by the laws of nature.”

It is true that in the ancient world it was believed that the disabled must have done something wrong to merit their condition. But Hawking should have updated his readings.

Jesus healed the sick, the blind, the lame—everyone in need of help—and the religion he founded does not abandon the disabled. On the contrary, it tends to their suffering. Christians have had a phenomenal record treating the handicapped of every malady, mental and physical alike. So to invoke centuries-old beliefs (many born of paganism for that matter) as a way of indicting religion today is simply wrong.

Christians believe in mysteries, and so did Hawking, albeit of a different kind. Pascal believed in mysteries as well, but he was much more rational than Hawking.