

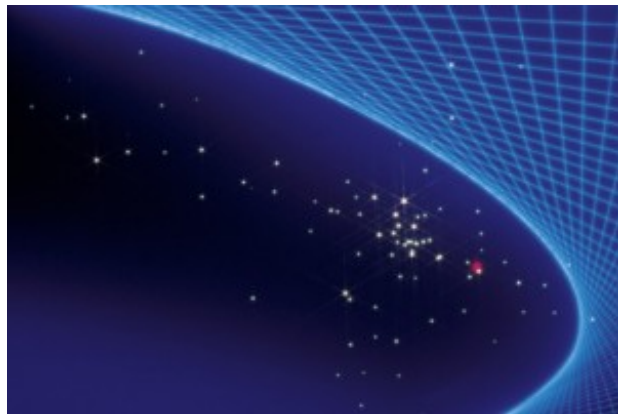
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## What Breathes Fire into the Equations? Professor Stephen Hawking at 70



Monday, January 9, 2012

Stephen Hawking celebrated his 70th birthday yesterday, though he was not able to attend the symposium held in Cambridge in his honor. Professor Sir Leszek Borysiewicz, vice-chancellor of Cambridge University, made the announcement that Hawking, the guest of honor, would not be present.



The very fact that Stephen Hawking has reached his 70th birthday is an astounding fact in itself. Hawking, perhaps the world's most famous scientist, was diagnosed with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis [ALS], more commonly known as Lou Gehrig's disease, at age 21. That disease usually leads to death within three years of diagnosis, making Hawking's almost half-century experience with ALS all the more amazing.

Add to this the remarkable productivity of Hawking's work as a scientist and public intellectual. Confined to a wheelchair most of those years, he has been dependent upon a breathing tube for years now. No longer able to speak, he has communicated for several years through a special computer device that allows him to choose words as the machine follows his cues. Most recently, those cues are communicated only through voluntary

twitches of his cheek. It can take him up to ten minutes to compose a single sentence.

This has not kept him from writing or co-authoring several best-selling books, including his most famous work, *A Brief History of Time*. That book has sold over 10 million copies worldwide, though it is widely assumed that the book was more often purchased than read.

His brilliance and scientific ability were not so evident in his childhood and early education, but he came into his own in the intellectual hothouses of Oxford and Cambridge Universities. Nevertheless, his chosen field of cosmology was not then held in high regard by other scientists. His doctoral supervisor at Cambridge, Dennis Sciama, commented that cosmology was “a highly controversial subject, which contains little or no agreed body of doctrine.”

Hawking was elected as Lucasian Professor of Mathematics at Cambridge in 1979. The second individual to hold that distinction was none other than Sir Isaac Newton. Hawking held the post for thirty years, retiring in 2009 and taking up a new role as director of research at the Center for Theoretical Cosmology at Cambridge — an institute created primarily to house his research.

Though absent from the symposium yesterday, Hawking prepared a speech entitled, appropriately, “A Brief History of Mine.” He described the last several decades as “a glorious time to be alive, and doing research in theoretical physics.” He then stated:

“Our picture of the universe has changed a great deal in the last 40 years and I am happy to have made a small contribution. . . . The fact that we humans who are ourselves mere collections of fundamental particles of nature have been able to come this close to an understanding of the laws governing us and our universe is a great triumph.”

That last sentence is especially revealing, for Hawking’s worldview is almost thoroughly naturalistic. His stated sense of wonder is directed to the fact that we humans, “mere collections of fundamental particles of nature,” have come to discover so much about ourselves and our world.

In her new biography of Hawking, *Stephen Hawking: An Unfettered Mind*, Kitty Ferguson traces Hawking’s intellectual directions, while making clear that Hawking denies the reality of a personal God. Unlike Richard Dawkins, another famous scientist, Hawking does not prefer to refer to himself as an atheist. Instead, he refers to God as “the embodiment of the laws of physics.”

In his words: “We are such insignificant creatures on a minor planet of a very average star on the outer suburbs of one of a hundred thousand million galaxies. So it is difficult to believe in a God that would care about us or even notice our existence.”

That makes perfect sense, if one operates intellectually within the closed box of nature. Given the expanse of the cosmos, it would certainly seem that we are, indeed, radically insignificant. Indeed, Hawking's point underlines the sheer audacity of the Christian truth claim — the claim that the entire cosmos was created as the theater of God's glory for the purpose of displaying his glory through the redemption of sinful human beings through the atonement accomplished by his Son.

As a matter of fact, Hawking's argument makes one truth very clear. This cosmos is either entirely purposeful, as is held by Christians, or it is entirely purposeless. There is no viable option of some limited purpose. Quite clearly, it is all or nothing.

As the late Carl Sagan said of Hawking's theoretical work, there was just nothing left for God to do. Hawking understands the cosmos to be entirely explainable in terms of physical laws. God may exist, he has allowed, but not as an active agent with anything to do.

Hawking has been known as a major (perhaps *the* major) proponent of a "Theory of Everything" — a theory of the cosmos that would explain everything in terms of physical laws. At one point, he expressed confidence that such a theory would emerge by the end of the twentieth century. He later revised that prediction somewhat, but the trajectory of this thought remains determined that such a theory is attainable.

He asks the right questions, such as: "Why does the universe go to all the bother of existing?" He has also stated that, if these questions were ever to be answered, "then we would know the mind of God."

In a more recent book, *The Grand Design*, written with Leonard Mlodinow, Hawking has been a bit more confrontational. About the questions of the meaning and origin of the universe, they wrote:

"Some would claim the answer to these questions is that there is a God who chose to create the universe that way. It is reasonable to ask who or what created the universe, but if the answer is God, then the question has merely been deflected to that of who created God. In this view it is accepted that some entity exists that needs no creator, and that entity is called God. This is known as the first-cause argument for the existence of God. We claim, however, that it is possible to answer these questions purely within the realm of science, and without invoking any divine beings."

Once again, there is simply nothing left for God to do. A far more personal and poignant word came from Hawking last year in the course of an interview with *The Guardian* [London]. Hawking stated:

“I have lived with the prospect of an early death for the last 49 years. I’m not afraid of death, but I’m in no hurry to die. I have so much I want to do first. I regard the brain as a computer which will stop working when its components fail. There is no heaven or afterlife for broken down computers; that is a fairy story for people afraid of the dark.”

Hawking’s mother, Isobel Hawking, is still alive and approaching 100 years of age. She has commented:

“Not all the things Stephen says probably are to be taken as gospel truth. He’s a searcher, he is looking for things. And if sometimes he may talk nonsense, well, don’t we all? The point is, people must think, they must go on thinking, they must try to extend the boundaries of knowledge; yet they don’t sometimes even know where to start. You don’t know where the boundaries are, do you?”

Stephen Hawking is a complex thinker and a man of tremendous personal courage. He has changed the way many scientists look at the world, and he has been a sharp critic of what he sees as inadequate scientific work. His life and thought deserve the close attention of thinking Christians precisely because of his stature and the intellectual and theological challenge posed by his thought. Hawking’s writings and lectures make clear the pretensions of modern naturalistic science. God is simply ruled out of bounds, and there is no place for a personal God within the materialistic universe.

Thus, in Hawking’s view, heaven is just a fairy story and our flickering and brief lives are just accidents of cosmology.

We can only hope that this is not Stephen Hawking’s final judgment on these questions. Hawking’s worldview leaves no room for a personal God, but Christians firmly believe and know that a personal God indeed knows Stephen Hawking.

Hawking once asked, “What is it that breathes fire into the equations and makes a universe for them to describe?” There is no *what* that can be the answer to that question, only a *Who* — the God who created the cosmos and gives it its meaning, who created Stephen Hawking and put within him such a hunger for knowledge. The God, we might say, who breathed fire into the equations.

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