

The Despair of Stephen Hawking's Inconsistencies

Stephen Hawking's own personal brief history of time is up. But he left as he lived, feisty, modern and... depressing. And without finding the Grand Unified theory he was famous for being about to discover.

Hawking was once equivocal about the meaning of life or lack thereof. In his popular 1988 book [*A Brief History of Time*](#) he didn't just say a complete theory of the universe would let us "know the mind of God" – which takes some doing if no such thing exists.

He asked the crucial question: "Even if there is only one possible unified theory, it is just a set of rules and equations. What is it that breathes fire into the equations and makes a universe for them to describe? The usual approach of science of constructing a mathematical model cannot answer the questions of why there should be a universe for the model to describe. Why does the universe go to all the bother of existing?"

Alas, in his final book, [*Brief Answers to the Big Questions*](#), he puts out the fire. There's no God, afterlife, heaven or point. No, wait. There is a point. It's really exciting to contemplate the great mystery of ... um... nothing very much.

Brief Answers addresses the 10 basic questions readers had been asking since *A Brief History of Time* appeared, including such chestnuts as "Is time travel possible?" and "Should we colonize space?" But it's a pretty weak nuclear force he offers us.

He says time travel could not currently be ruled out. But of course it can, through the familiar paradox of going back and altering the timeline so you don't (or can't) go back. As for

colonizing space, "I expect within the next hundred years we will be able to travel to anywhere in the Solar System." But why would you want to? Nowhere else is remotely hospitable, we'll never reach the stars, and we're as far from God on Titan as on Earth.

Even life on Mars, if we find it, is liable to be a drab affair especially if whatever organic molecules may be self-organizing there, or may once have, never got to the point of photosynthesis where things get a bit interesting. Where they really get interesting, of course, is with self-awareness.

Life without mind, not mere calculating power but reflection, is barely more interesting than rock. Especially to itself. It only gets interesting when we wonder why we're born, why we die, and why we spend so much time in between wearing digital watches. And 42 isn't much of an answer.

Unfortunately it's all Hawking has in his cold, soulless, material universe. In response to "How do we shape the future?" he says, "Remember to look up at the stars and not down at your feet." See, they're these giant balls of nuclear-fusion gas, inaccessible and pointless. They don't even sparkle. Next?

OK. God. In a speech shortly before his death he said "We are each free to believe what we want, 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 me to a profound realisation: there is probably no heaven and afterlife either. I think belief in the afterlife is just wishful thinking. There is no reliable evidence for it, and it flies in the face of everything we know in science. I think that when we die we return to dust. But there is a sense we live on, in our influence, and in the genes we pass to our children."

Talk about clutching at straws. The genes we pass on to our

children aren't immortality. They're just more dust. Like our fast-fading influence. Who now remembers your great-grandmother's pixie laugh? All dust and ashes. Wheeee! In what conceivable sense is that "living on"? It literally makes no sense.

Indeed, the odd thing is just how unscientific his sentiments are. Especially "We are each free to believe what we want". Oh really? Can I believe the Earth is flat? Well no. Logic and evidence prove it's round. OK. Can I believe there's no God? Sure. If you want.

I don't. If I'm free to believe, I will. As Puddleglum says in C.S. Lewis's fantasy novel *The Silver Chair*, "Suppose this black pit of a kingdom of yours is the only world. Well, it strikes me as a pretty poor one... four babies playing a game can make a play-world which licks your real world hollow". If you want an attitude of heroic resistance to a pointless universe, be "on Aslan's side even if there isn't any Aslan to lead it". Which in a weird way Hawking was because we're not free to believe what we like.

Our moral choices matter and at some level we all know it. And no Grand Unified Theory of life, the universe and everything is worth a load of dingoes' kidneys if it can't say why.

At the book launch for *Brief Answers*, Hawking's daughter Lucy said despite his atheism her father would be happy to be buried at Westminster Abbey because "He never liked to be alone... and I like to think that he would find his final resting place between Isaac Newton and Charles Darwin and he would never be alone again."

But dust can't keep dust company or be kept company.

He's smuggling in immortality, albeit a grimly unsatisfying kind. But in the process he seems to me fatally to beg his own big question: "What breathes fire into the equations?"

Something does. It won't do to say, as he does, it all began "In a hot Big Bang." Oh really? The universe started itself? Time came from nowhere at no time for no reason, and with it not just length, width and depth but causality itself, all the physical laws and some ineffable thing for them to be about? I think not.

That God said "Let there be light" I can buy. But not this explosion in a non-existent junkyard. The universe exists. But it not only doesn't have to. It can't "go to all the bother of existing" unless it already does. So something must have caused the Big Bang that does not itself need to be caused, some "self-grounding" creator whose existence is inherent, that is causation and truth and being all at once. God is not an empirical proposition. He's more like a logical necessity. It can't just be turtles all the way down.

Hawking is also inconsistent in saying life does not matter but does. Even in his position about other intelligent life, the dogmatic "There are forms of intelligent life out there. We need to be wary of answering back until we have developed a bit further." No evidence of the afterlife, but no doubt about aliens? And why should we be wary of answering, not that it matters since we've been beaming "I Love Lucy" and "The Three Stooges" at them for decades so they know we're fools if they're listening?

He also worries that "A super-intelligent AI will be extremely good at accomplishing goals and if those goals aren't aligned with ours we're in trouble." But how does it matter if robots or aliens wipe us out, for food, as pests, or just on a whim? Also, developed a bit further into what? Smarter beings? More dangerous ones? Nicer ones? What does it matter? And by what standard? Is there some moral code being smuggled in here?

As to "Will we survive on Earth?" his deep thought is "The present world order has a future but it will be a very different one." Which is a bit of a bait and switch. We'll

stay by leaving, apparently. And how shall we know if this different future is better? Or are we in an evolutionary, materialist, heartless universe where might makes right *faute de mieux*?

In the speech quoted above Hawking urged people to “Shape the future.” But he has given no useable blueprint. Nor could he, as he’s basically echoing Max Quordlepleen from [*The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*](#), whose comedy routine at the Restaurant at the End of the Universe (time travel being possible) includes “So many of you come time and time again to watch this final end of everything, which I think is really wonderful, and then to return home to your own eras and raise families, and strive for new and better societies and fight terrible wars for what you know is right, it gives one real hope for the whole future of lifekind... Except of course we know it hasn’t got one.”

Hawking says “It matters that you don’t give up.” But what else can you do with no God, no morality, dangerous aliens, hostile AI and no inherent point to anything?

Well, you can start by wanting to be buried in a church with other immortals. And you can end by praying to the God who breathed fire into the equations and still does.

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