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.

I n 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 as if needed 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 as he 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, a frequent speaker on the atheist public speaking circuit, having sprung to fame with his views on nothing. His 2012 book, A Universe from Nothing, suggests that the universe is nothing. He published a preface as an answer to the old conundrum of its subtitle: Why is there 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 double-speak: “Nothing is a physical concept because it’s the absence of something. I have no doubt you say ‘I am here’ and you mean that you are a physical concept.” Now, it doesn’t take a philosopher to point out that saying ‘I am here’ means that you inhabit the world in the way that are not physical. My love for my wife, the number 42 and God himself are all something 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 Krauss. Lawrence Kraus: he rocks both atheists and theists alike.

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 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 case for morality to do unless you know the implications of your actions,’ which scientists 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 the only things that science could comment on. Again his answer revealed his pragmatism as a wall between him and the gallery. Krauss’s reply was, “When Simon speaks of the God he leaves his brain behind.” Krauss is paradoxically pessimistic about human rationality, but serious thinkers, atheists included. When challenged about his shallowness, he obliged me with a memorable quotation: I asked Krauss what he said 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’ve heard of and can do to 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 ‘we can’t prove it’ rather than by what the science tells me about the natural world but I won’t let it interfere with this belief that I have about an imaginary guy in the sky.

This convoluted thinking is why Krauss and many New Atheistshowmen are derided by serious thinkers, atheists included. When challenged about his shallowness, he obliged me with a memorable quotation: I asked Krauss what he said 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’ve heard of and can do to 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 ‘we can’t prove it’ rather than by what the science tells me about the natural world but I won’t let it interfere with this belief that I have about an imaginary guy in the sky.

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Such flippant ignorance casts all religion, all history, all moral discourse and all humanity as irrelevant. After all, there is no ‘empirical evidence’ of the Kraussian sort for the existence of any historical figure, the equality of humans, 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 no God, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but blind, pitiless indifference.

Delusions of belief When asked about those respected scientists who are serious believers Krauss resorted to the extraordinary ruse of suggesting that scientists who are religious are not serious and that you can be a scientist and a Christian, but to do that you have to suspend your disbelief, say ‘I’m going to be guided by the science’, and that ‘science tells me about some things before breakfast. I think that scientists who have a strong belief just put it aside when they are doing their science. They say ‘we can’t prove it’ rather than by what the science tells me about the natural world but I won’t let it interfere with this belief that I have about an imaginary guy in the sky.

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At this point I was tempted to put off the mantle of polemics. 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.

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