

Stubborn Credulity

Volume 2:

***The Stubborn Credulity* Blog**

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"Infinity and the Past" Diagram

March 6, 2019

<https://jmgardi.wixsite.com/stubborncredulity/post/infinity-and-the-past-diagram>

On pp. 68 & 69 of Quentin Smith's article "Infinity and the Past" (*Philosophy of Science*, Vol. 54, No. 1, Mar., 1987, pp. 63-75) he wrote,

[Re: The possibility of an infinite past] The second argument is the one upon which [William Lane] Craig relies most heavily: if all possible negative numbers have been matched with past events, no new past events can be assigned to this collection. However, new assignments can be made if with the arrival of each new event in the past, each negative number is reassigned by being matched with the event immediately earlier than the event to which it had been assigned; such that, -3 is reassigned to the event to which -2 formerly had been assigned, and -2 to the event to which -1 had been assigned, and so on for all the

negative numbers greater than -3 . This leaves -1 free to be matched with the event that has newly become past.... $[\aleph_0]$ plus 1 equals \aleph_0 . Consequently, since there are \aleph_0 past events at both times, and since there are \aleph_0 negative numbers, there is no past event at either time that is unmatched with a negative number.

Craig usually illustrated his argument by using a library analogy. That is why the figure refers to books, not events.

J	I	H	G	F	E	D	C	B	A
9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	

...

J	I	H	G	F	E	D	C	B	A
10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1

...

Is this possible?

J	I	H	G	F	E	D	C	B	A
9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	

...

→ → → → → → → → → →

If we move the infinite shelf over, it's clear that there are enough numbers for all the books. Relabel A as 1...

Rethinking the Criterion of Dissimilarity

March 10, 2019

<https://imgiardi.wixsite.com/stubborncredulity/post/rethinking-the-criterion-of-dissimilarity>

Commenting on the Bible verse "But of that day and hour [of the Apocalypse] knoweth no man, no, not the angels which are in heaven, neither the Son, but the Father," (Matthew 24:36) C. S. Lewis wrote, "Unless the reporter were perfectly honest he would never have recorded the confession of ignorance at all; he could have had no motive for doing so except a desire to tell the whole truth" (*The World's Last Night*, Boston: Mariner-Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012, p. 98). Lewis is applying a conventional Bible scholar tool known as the criterion of dissimilarity to the Bible verse. According to the criterion, if a saying would have been offensive to the early church, then no one would have had a reason to make the saying up. Certainly, if we take the verse out of context and on its own merits, it could be offensive to Christians who

believed that the Son (Jesus) was aware of his Father's (God's) plans. The verse, however, closely follows another verse that has been even more threatening to Christianity. Lewis referred to it as "the most embarrassing verse in the Bible" (*The World's Last Night* p. 98). The verse: "this generation shall not pass till all these things be done." In *Stubborn Credulity*, I explained why the verse is problematic:

[Norman] Geisler ... insists that "there is no reason to assume that Jesus made the obviously false assertion that the world would come to an end within the lifetime of his contemporaries" (*The Big Book of Christian Apologetics* p. 463). Preceding this comment, Geisler explains away Matthew 24:34 ("Verily I say unto you, This generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled"). Presumably, Jesus is saying that before all his immediate hearers die the end of the world will come. Certainly the Son of Man didn't come "in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory" prior to the third century (Matthew 24:30). Geisler, of course, knows this history and tries to reinterpret

"generation"—it can mean "race" like the Jewish race.

Unlike John R. Rice (see below) and Norman Geisler, Lewis heeded the words of Albert Schweitzer who taught, "There is no justification for twisting this [Matthew 16:28] about or explaining it away. It simply means that Jesus promises the fulfilment of all Messianic hopes before the end of the existing generation" (*The Quest of the Historical Jesus* p. 20). What Lewis did was summed up well by S. T. Joshi: "Lewis tries to dodge this issue by first quoting another verse that is not quite so explicit on the matter [Matthew 24:34], then by quoting Jesus' subsequent comment: 'But of that day and hour knoweth no man...'" (*God's Defenders*, Amherst: Prometheus, 2003, p. 119). I speculated elsewhere that an inconvenient story "could have been concocted to cover up an even more inconvenient fact." Here, it appears that a saying was concocted in order to change the subject. If Lewis, in the twentieth century, could find Matthew 24:36 to be amenable, then it's plausible that Christians in the first century could have found the saying to

be useful, at least in the "In Case of Emergency Break Glass" sense. If a saying that should pass the criterion of dissimilarity test in fact doesn't, then one can wonder if any pass the test. My doubts about the criterion of dissimilarity caused me to recall the words of the radical Bible scholar Robert M. Price, who is outside the mainstream on several issues. When it comes to the criterion of dissimilarity, I find his views to be difficult to dismiss. In perhaps his best known book, he wrote,

"[T]he early Christians passed down nothing they did not find usable. Indeed, the material was passed down via the usage. This means that every individual saying or anecdote represents some aspect of the early Christian movement. None is simply an objective datum. Every single one thus fails, and must fail, the criterion of dissimilarity. Even a saying that offended later orthodoxy ... must have been amenable to some rival faction or at some earlier, less sophisticated stage—or we would not have it." (*The Incredible Shrinking Son of Man*, Amherst: Prometheus, 2003, p. 17 & 18)

Lewis evidently found Matthew 24:36 amenable. He wrote, "The facts, then, are these: that Jesus professed himself (in some sense) ignorant, and within a moment showed that he really was so" (*The World's Last Night* p. 98). Never mind that he showed that he was ignorant a moment *before* professing himself ignorant *of the details*. As Joshi observed, "In any case, even if we assume that Jesus was uncertain of the 'day and hour' of his second coming, that uncertainty seems to apply, in context, within the 'this generation' remark two verses earlier; Jesus is still maintaining here that he will return within the lifetime of those who hear him, but that the exact date of that return is unclear. So it is not the case that Jesus is merely 'ignorant'; he is still mistaken, in that he clearly did *not* return within 'this generation'" (*God's Defenders* p. 120). We'll ignore the apologists who even try to explain away verses like Matthew 16:28 (John R. Rice, *The King of the Jews*, 1955, p. 251 & 252). Presumably, that wasn't a "live option" for Christians in the first century. We'll also ignore the people who think that "generation" meant "race". I've already

explained in *Stubborn Credulity* why those people are probably wrong (See the chapter "Well Lied!"). If we want to honestly assess what could or could not have been made up, we need to acknowledge that the first century Christian had to admit that his Messiah was probably "a failed apocalyptic prophet" (Taner Edis, *The Ghost in the Universe* p. 167). That person, as opposed to the twentieth century American Christian (who can get away with almost anything if it's in defense of the faith), would have had to "grasp at straws". Under extraordinary conditions, it's conceivable that an embarrassing fact could still be usable, and despite what I may have insinuated elsewhere, "usable" does not imply "made up".

Lest anyone misunderstand, I consider the criterion of dissimilarity to be a way to *confirm* sayings, not to reject them. Because the criterion is a tool for verification, I fear that apologists have an incentive to overuse it. How clever then is Robert Price to point out that "embarrassing" doesn't imply "not usable". We don't have to accept all of his conclusions in order to accept that sayings that we find

embarrassing today must have been usable to the early church. "Usable" doesn't mean "made up," but if one wanted to maintain that the anecdotes and sayings in the Gospels are legendary, one would have to say that none are verified. I don't have a strong opinion on whether all the Gospels are legendary. I am, however, more skeptical now when someone argues that something in the Gospels passes the criterion of dissimilarity test. Scrutiny is warranted here: even a mainstream Bible scholar, Bart Ehrman, recanted after teaching that an anecdote was verified by the criterion of embarrassment. He wrote, "Christian apologists often argue that no one would make up the story of the discovery of the empty tomb precisely because according to these stories, it was *women* who found the tomb.... I used to hold this view as well, and so I see its force. But now that I've gone more deeply into the matter, I see its real flaw. It suffers, in short, from a poverty of imagination" (*How Jesus Became God*, HarperOne, 2014, p.166). Ehrman still believes that the criterion of dissimilarity is useful (Ibid, 96 & 97). That being said, the list of

sayings and anecdotes that are genuinely dissimilar appears to be shrinking. Revision and caution are appropriate.

Speculations on Time

July 3, 2019

Note: I think Engels was incorrect about the possibility of the unchanging transitioning from an unchanging state to a changing state. We can conceive of it; so it's not, strictly speaking, impossible. As I quote Graham Oppy in Stubborn Credulity, "'The universe exists changelessly and timelessly with an eternal determination to become a temporal world.' Sounds fine to me!" (52). I don't know how well such a rebuttal would be received by the general public. Also, professional philosophers would probably disagree with Engels about a "motionless state of matter [being] ... one of the most ridiculous of ideas..." Why ridiculous? There are no logical contradictions involved. As Michael Martin argued, "One possibility is that the creator or creators of the universe created it out of something that existed in some timeless realm" (Atheism: A Philosophical Introduction, Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1990, 104). When confronting the "man in the street," I don't recommend bringing up such an idea, even as a

fallback position. I strongly recommend reading Engels's words quoted here as well as Oppy and Martin.

For the remainder of this post, visit:

<https://jmgardi.wixsite.com/stubborncredulity/post/speculations-on-time>

Notes on the Soul

July 8, 2019

Note: According to Bertrand Russell, "Beyond its importance for natural science, atomism also gave rise to a new theory of the soul. Like everything else the soul is made up of atoms. These constituents of the soul are more refined than other atoms, and are distributed throughout the body. On such a view death means disintegration and personal immortality does not exist..." (Wisdom of the West, Crescent Books, 1959, 45). It's common for a skeptic to say that "disembodied minds" are as nonsensical as "disembodied digestion". Hobbes apparently agreed. In Leviathan, he wrote, "The world [the universe]... is corporeal, that is to say, body; and hath the dimensions of magnitude, namely, length, breadth, and depth: also every part of body is likewise body, and hath the like dimensions; and consequently every part of the universe is body, and that which is not body is no part of the universe: and because the universe is all, that which is no part of it is nothing, and consequently nowhere."

Thomas Jefferson reportedly wrote, "To talk of immaterial existences is to talk of nothings. To say that the human soul, angels, god, are immaterial, is to say they are nothings, or that there is no god, no angels, no soul." I find it amazing that long ago—long before Christ—there were thinkers who rejected the notion of disembodied spirits. Without such a notion, religion is weakened greatly, as I noticed in these seven-year-old notes:

For the remainder of this post, visit:

<https://jmgardi.wixsite.com/stubborncredulity/post/notes-on-the-soul>

Whack-a-Mole Apologetics

July 10, 2019

<https://imgiardi.wixsite.com/stubborncredulity/post/whack-a-mole-apologetics>

If you are an American, you are probably familiar with the game "Whack a Mole". Going on Facebook Atheist pages, I am reminded of the game because theists and Christian apologists trot out the same arguments over and over again. Although the book is over fifty years old now, people on Facebook still use many of the fallacious arguments for God's existence found in Paul E. Little's *Know Why You Believe*. Most of the arguments were debunked in *Stubborn Credulity*. For example,

1. "... recent anthropological research has indicated that among the farthest and most remote primitive peoples, today, there is a universal belief in God."

As I pointed out in my book, although universal belief may have been the case in the mid-twentieth century, it was not the case in the nineteenth century. Even if there was

agreement, so what? As Bakunin argued, "Until the days of Copernicus and Galileo everybody believed that the sun revolved about the earth. Was not everybody mistaken?"

2. Little then proceeded to conflate complexity with design: "No one would think a wrist watch could come into being without an intelligent designer. How much more incredible is it to believe that the universe, in its infinite complexity, could have happened by chance?" No one would think a wrist watch could come into being without an intelligent designer not because it is complex, but because we know how wrist watches come into being. If complexity implied design, then one would be justified in asking "Who made God?" God or at least God's mind would be complex. The complexity would require a designer of the complexity, and we would have an infinite regress.

3. Little brought up the law of entropy. He quoted a Christian source which read, "What the law asserts can be illustrated from a plastic oleomargarine bag which contains white margarine and a small capsule filled with yellow coloring..." Instead of repeating the entire

argument, I'll just paraphrase what I wrote in my book: It's not necessarily legitimate to take what we know about a bag and to then apply it to the entire universe. Here is an excerpt:

According to Heinz Pagels, the "law of entropy increase *may* apply to the universe as a whole because the universe *may* be a closed system. Eventually it too *may* fall into ruin, a 'heat death' in which the stars burn out and matter is scattered over the endless reaches of space—a mess with no one to straighten it out" (*The Cosmic Code*, 1982, 123 & 124, emphasis added). Another scientist, Carl Sagan, reinforced Pagels when, during a lecture, he said, "It's by no means clear, by the way, that the Second Law of Thermodynamics applies to the universe as whole, because it is an experiential law, and we don't have experience with the universe as a whole" ("Gifford Lectures," 1985, *The Varieties of Scientific Experience* by Carl Sagan & Ann Druyan, ed., [2006] 2007, 157 & 158)... E. A. Milne cast doubt on the validity of the apologist's argument when he pointed out that "we have no means for assessing change of entropy for the whole universe. ... [W]e can calculate such a

change for 'closed systems' with something outside them but the universe *ex hypothesi* has nothing (physical) outside it" (quoted in G. J. Whitrow, *The Natural Philosophy of Time*, [1961] 1963, 7).

I hope that these points alone are enough to lay the entropy argument to rest.

4. Little then accused the scientists of being unscientific. The charge should be familiar. To paraphrase, Pasteur debunked the theory of so-called "spontaneous generation". According to a scientist, "it became an accepted doctrine that life never arises except from life." The same scientist, however, observed that "most scientific men prefer to believe that life arose, in some way not yet understood, from inorganic matter in accordance with the laws of physics and chemistry." I don't see a contradiction here. To say that life *presently* only arises from life is not to say anything about what must have been the case under early Earth conditions. Related to this talking point is the quote from DuNoüy which says that "the chance formulations of a typical protein molecule ... is of the order of one of [extremely large number], or practically nil." As I asked in my book in a different context,

"How do they [the apologists] know that the probability of the supernatural event is higher?"

5. Little's final argument for the existence of God isn't, to my knowledge, used as much as the others. He wrote, "Other evidence for the reality of God's existence is His Clear presence in the lives of men and women today. Where Jesus Christ is believed and trusted a profound change takes place in the individual—and ultimately the community." If Christians wish to take the argument seriously, they will have to consider polytheism. Believers in at least one rival religion have been known to turn their lives around. To cite a rather famous example, in James Baldwin's famous essay "Letter from a Region in My Mind," he wrote, "Elijah Muhammad has been able to do what generations of welfare workers and committees and resolutions and reports and housing projects and playgrounds have failed to do: to heal and redeem drunkards and junkies, to convert people who have come out of prison and to keep them out, to make men chaste and women virtuous.... *He has done all these things, which our Christian church has spectacularly failed to do*" (emphasis added,

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1962/11/17/letter-from-a-region-in-my-mind>>). What are we to make of Little's argument? Do changes in a person point to something Divine? What if Islam changes a community? And what if it succeeds where Christianity has failed? Just based on what Baldwin reported, the Christian would have to, at the very least, believe that Allah was real. Whether he would have to be a monotheist as well is a different issue. The Christian would be wise to just avoid Little's argument at the outset.

Unreasonable Faith?

July 20, 2019

<https://jmgardi.wixsite.com/stubborncredulity/post/unreasonable-faith>

Since the Kalam Cosmological Argument is being shared on social media by “everyday people,” it’s time to inquire into how the argument became so widely known. Although it does appear in Dinesh D’Souza’s book *What’s So Great Christianity*, D’Souza, if I recall correctly, completely ignored philosophical reasons for why the universe had a beginning. He based his argument for the finitude of the universe on a Big Bang model that is, from what I gather, obsolete. We have to, ironically, look to a book by a Christian publisher to conjecture why the Kalam argument has become so mainstream. I am hesitant to even bring up arguments found in a book written for a popular audience, but in this case, you can count the a priori arguments on one hand; so why not?

The popular book I am using is Lee Strobel's *The Case for a Creator*. In its pages, we find the Kalam argument. We are informed by its defender William Lane Craig that it has been around in its current form for hundreds of years. In case you don't know it:

- Whatever begins to exist has a cause
- The universe began to exist
- Therefore, the universe has a cause

I posted some notes about it in an earlier blog: <https://jmgiardi.wixsite.com/stubborncredulity/post/notes-on-the-kalam-argument>

Craig only gave two or three a priori arguments for premise 2 in the popular book. Frankly, that's not bad considering that the mainstream publisher (Regnery) that put out the D'Souza book didn't include any. Part of the first a priori argument was included in my book *Stubborn Credulity*. I'll reproduce the relevant section here:

According to the apologist William Lane Craig, the early Christian and Muslim scholars "pointed out that absurdities would result if you were to have an actually infinite number of

things. ... Since an infinite past would involve an actually infinite number of events, then the past simply can't be infinite." Craig is equivocating here. Although an event may be a thing in the conceptual sense, it's not a thing in the physical sense. For example, he said, "Substitute 'past events' for 'marbles,' and you can see the absurdity that would result." He's assuming that it's legitimate to substitute events for marbles. Is it? Things have properties that events don't have. As one philosopher explained,

[P]ast events are not movable. Unlike the guests in a hotel, who can leave their rooms, past events are absolutely inseparable from their respective temporal locations. Once an event has occurred at a particular time, it can't be "moved" to some other time.

Craig talked about adding and subtracting using infinity ("infinity minus infinity"), but, in this case, arithmetic doesn't make sense. As Paul Davies pointed out, "infinity itself is clearly not a number, or anything like it." If it's not a number, how can we use it for addition and subtraction?

The reason I set out to write this post is that I wanted to scrutinize, in particular, the sentence “[A]n infinite past would involve an actually infinite number of events.” In Craig's more scholarly work, we tend to see the following syllogism:

1. An actual infinite cannot exist.
2. An infinite temporal regress of events is an actual infinite.
3. Therefore an infinite temporal regress of events cannot exist.

See the similarities. "Actually infinite" appears to be implying "an actual infinite". The claim that an infinite past is an *actual* infinite is actually (no pun intended) controversial. Craig had to spend time in his scholarly books defending it. In an early draft of *Stubborn Credulity*, I rejected Craig's claim:

[Craig] conceded that "the collection of all past events prior to any given point is not a collection whose members all co-exist." ... [E]vents aren't things that accumulate in some pile. Craig mistook the *fixity* of the past for the *actuality* of the past. If time has no beginning

then there is an infinity of prior moments. The events are literally countless. If you add the present moment to prior moments it would be like adding one to "countless". The sum, supposedly, is one which would make sense because only one event presently exists - the present one.

My point was that there is at the moment, not an infinite, but a moment. Assuming an infinite past, the infinite part of the timeline is horizontal, not vertical. The upshot: events are not like infinite marbles. In a paper that I recently discovered, Wes Morrision articulated what I was trying to express in my book. Whether Morrision would agree or not, even if the past is "actual," it doesn't exist. As I wrote, only one event presently exists--the present one. A physical infinite, on the other hand, would be undoubtedly real. Craig could have used the word "actual" to describe both types of infinite, but the examples he gave involve not just actual, but real infinities. There is an important distinction:

[I]t does not immediately follow that infinite sets *in general* are impossible. Before drawing so sweeping a conclusion, we need to consider

what it is in the example that produces the (allegedly) absurd implication. The answer, I think, can be found in the way in which the number of elements in the set interacts with other features of the example. A library is a collection of *coexistent* objects (books and shelves) whose physical relationship to one another can be *changed*. It is only when these features are *combined* with the property of having infinitely many elements that we get this particular sort of implication. ("Craig on the Actual Infinite," *Religious Studies*, 38(2), 2002, 148 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20008403>)

I think that we can conclude that both premises of the supporting syllogism are questionable. If we wanted to make concessions for the sake of argument, we would grant that:

1. A *real* infinite cannot exist.
2. An infinite temporal regress of events is an actual infinite.
3. Therefore ... ?

But, if we adopt my initial position, we don't even have to concede all of the above:

1. A *real* infinite cannot exist.

2. An infinite temporal regress of events is a *fixed* infinite.

3. Therefore ... ?

I think that I've said enough about the first a priori argument.

The second argument is found on p. 104 of *The Case for a Creator*:

"In fact, we can go further. Even if you could have an actual infinite number of things, you couldn't form such a collection by adding one member after another. That's because no matter how many you add, you can always add one more before you get to infinity. This is sometimes called the Impossibility of Traversing the Infinite."

In my book I mention that in a debate, Craig's friend J. P. Moreland actually said, "It would be impossible to traverse the [infinite?] past going backward *in your mind*." Notice that Craig keeps saying "you ... you ... you". What we can do isn't relevant. As I wrote in my book, "if we ignore the red herring about whether we can synthesize an infinite series and, instead, focus on whether such a series can be synthesized,

then the answer is clear" (*Stubborn Credulity*, 38). If you disagree, then let's ignore that. Perhaps my analysis wasn't radical enough. It may be absurd to ask, but is it really the case that we can't go through the infinite past in our mind? Couldn't we conceive of going through it? Do you really have to live a century in order to go back one hundred years "in your mind"? Regardless, a general response usually resembles the words found in an article that I recommended in my book: "[I]t is inconsistent to suppose that an infinite series of events elapses in a finite amount of time, but consistent that they elapse in an infinite amount of time" (Quentin Smith, "Reply to Craig: The Possible Infinitude of the Past," *International Philosophical Quarterly*, 33(1), 1993, 113). Anything else I can think to say about the above argument has been said elsewhere.

The next argument is related to the last one. Craig thought that it too demonstrated the impossibility of traversing the infinite. He continued, "But if the past really were infinite, then that would mean we have managed to traverse an infinite past to arrive at today. It

would be as if someone had managed to count down all of the negative numbers and to arrive at zero at the present moment. Such a task is intuitively nonsense." That's how his argument ended. He appealed to intuition. His argument is about as sophisticated as someone saying "It stands to reason!" (Isaac Asimov once quipped, "Never trust an argument *only* because it stands to reason.") I know that I'm quoting from a popular book, but even popular books have arguments. If you have read my book, you would know that I agreed with Quentin Smith, not Craig. Smith wrote, "It may be the case that we must start at - 1 and can only count some ways backwards, but a *logically possible counter* could have been counting at every moment in the past *in the order* in which the past events occurred. And this logically possible counter in relation to any present would have completely counted the negative numbers" ("Infinity and the Past," *Philosophy of Science*, 54 (1), 1987, 74). Of course, one could have misgivings about the last sentence. One might wonder why the counter would finish at this moment and not the previous one. The best answer that I'm aware of was given in the Morrision paper that I just discovered. He wrote, "It is true that at

any moment in the past, the man had already counted off infinitely many numbers, but it does not follow that he had already counted off *all* the numbers or that he had already reached zero. Perhaps that *could* have been the way the man's count went. But it was not..." ("Craig on the Actual Infinite," 150).

Those who have read my book know what mathematicians say about the infinite. According to them, in the case of infinite collections, "a part contains as many terms as the whole" (Bertrand Russell, *Wisdom of the West*, ed. Paul Foulkes, Crescent Books, 1959, 281). As Isaac Asimov put it, "the phrase 'as many' doesn't really have the usual everyday meaning when we're talking about things that are endless" (*The Realm of Numbers*, Fawcett Premier, [1959] 1967, 131 & 132).

Mathematicians use the term "aleph-null" to refer to the infinite that is relevant here. Aleph-null "corresponds to the endlessness of the series of integers" (Ibid, 140). The a priori Kalam argument hinges on the presumption that actual things can be numbered using all of the real numbers (the positive integers). I suspect that the "man on the street" wouldn't have a

problem dropping that presumption. My suspicion would explain why Craig didn't mention it in the popular book and why D'Souza didn't even bother with philosophical justifications for a temporally finite universe. We have no problem conceiving of a timeline with numbers going in reverse order. Ironically, the Christian calendar essentially has years that are labeled with negative integers (for example, 300 B.C.). Even believers may be leery of saying that an actual infinite cannot exist. Wouldn't such a claim put limits on God? As we saw above, even Craig was willing to drop the premise for the sake of argument. If D'Souza's book is an indication, most non-philosophers never accepted the premise to begin with.

