

The big bang is Spackman's God

The Ant and the Ferrari: Lifting the Hood on Truth, Society, and the Universe

Dr Kerry Spackman

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Kerry Spackman (1956–) is a New Zealand-born neuroscientist and author who has won numerous awards and honours for his thinking and creativity. He has also taught Olympic athletes how to overcome their mental hurdles so that they could win. His book is a curious mix of very well thought out and very superficial statements.

Much of what Spackman writes is common sense. In fact, the title of the book refers to the fact that we are aware of only a small portion of reality, in much the same way that an ant crawling on the surface of a Ferrari would only be aware of its immediate surroundings. In addition, optical illusions show how our brain fools us. Finally, people tend to cling to their beliefs despite contrary evidence and, to reduce the dissonance, tend to discount the evidence.

Spackman then goes on to attack belief in God and belief in life after death. He does this in several chapters. His book is somewhat unfocused. Oddly enough, he ends on a totally unrelated matter—sustainability in modern capitalistic societies.

Truth does exist, and it does matter

One striking feature of this work is Spackman's realization that there is such a thing as truth. This flies in

the face of today's moral relativism and post-modernism, wherein we hear such things as, 'there are many truths' or 'all religions are basically the same'. He stresses the fact that sincerely held beliefs can be wrong. For instance, he notes the situation where one boxer in a match sincerely prays to God, while his opponent sincerely prays to Allah. They can both be wrong, but they cannot both be right.

According to Spackman, conflicting religions 'work' for their adherents owing to the placebo effect. Is it really that simple?

Most theists would probably agree with Spackman about certain aspects of religious beliefs. Such beliefs should be based on knowledge and reflection, and not simply upbringing, personal wishes, or cultural habits. Of course, Christians believe that theirs is the only fully-true religion, and have good reasons, notwithstanding the unpopularity of this position and Spackman's fact-free dismissal, for having this conviction.

Spackman is a militant atheist. He indicates that he was brought up in a devout Christian home, and that he developed a strong interest in science early on (p. 102). Evidently, he had become thoroughly evolutionized, as this book makes abundantly clear. His statements relative to evolution are without so much as a glimmer of questioning or doubt.

Some egregious statements

For a man of his intelligence and high regard, Spackman makes some rather irresponsible statements. He would have the reader believe that the account of the rainbow after the Noachian Deluge exists because the ancients could not explain the existence of rainbows (p. 88). He repeats the

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argument that demon possession was believed because the ancients did not understand epilepsy. Amazingly, he states that the surgical repair of a cleft palate in a child is as much a thwarting of God's will as is the Roman Catholic position on what contraception does (p. 110).

The author makes quite a few hagiographic assertions about evolution. For instance, he shows a graph that displays a nearly exact linear correspondence between the number of mutational changes in genes, and various times since the evolutionary divergence of life-forms ranging from protists to humans (p. 120). This is egregious in the extreme. Actually, 'molecular clocks' commonly contradict ones based on the geologic timescale, and evolutionists are frequently scrambling to explain away or massage away the contradictions. He would have the reader believe that fossils appear in the exact same order everywhere in the world. This is, at best, an oversimplification. 'Chains' of evolutionary development (such as the mammal-like reptiles¹) are actually a composite of the fossils found in different locations on earth. In addition, some fossils actually overlap many geologic periods, and unexpected

stratigraphic-range extensions occur all the time.²

Life after death

The author attacks beliefs in life after death. To ‘prove’ that there is no such thing as a ‘self’, he cites exceptional cases of people who have undergone massive personality changes as a result of such things as drug addiction, brain tumors, brain injuries, etc. Spackman is confusing normal function with abnormal function. Since long ago, humans have recognized the difference between rational behaviour and coerced behaviour (as occurs, for instance, as part of mental illness.) Thus, for instance, a psychotic man who murders somebody is absolved of moral and legal consequences. The rational murderer is not.

To use Spackman’s favourite analogy—that of the functioning motorcycle—he is, for practical purposes, saying that essential motorcycle function does not exist because motorcycle engines sometimes malfunction (or stop working at all). In addition, personality does not solely define the Self.

Spackman notes that, during anaesthesia, the person experiences nothing at all. Therefore, according to his reasoning, the decedent also experiences nothing at all. Other atheists have asked, “If the Self cannot survive severe brain damage, how can it possibly survive death?”

Realizing that the immortal Self may in no way be comparable to what happens during anaesthesia, Spackman changes his argument. He turns around and asks for evidence that there is life after death, apparently believing that (to him) absence of evidence is evidence of absence. This is a revival of radical empiricism: If we cannot perceive it with our five senses, it does not exist or is a meaningless consideration. Misotheists like Spackman are blind to the self-refuting nature of this claim:

the doctrine of empiricism can’t be perceived with the five senses, hence it is itself meaningless.

The author dismisses near-death experiences as hallucinations, and the effects of a shortage of oxygen to the brain. Those who have studied near-death experiences have long addressed this trivial objection.³ (In saying this, I am not necessarily endorsing these experiences.)

He then repeats all the familiar arguments. Belief in life after death is a wish fulfillment, an inability or unwillingness to face the end of one’s existence, a need for solace for the brevity of life, the desire to see the righteous finally rewarded and the wicked finally punished, etc.

Spackman’s contentions are flawed. For instance, many beliefs of the afterlife are not particularly attractive. This contradicts the premise that such beliefs are a form of escapism. In addition, just because someone wants there to be life after death does not mean that there is no life after death. In addition, what of those who do *not* want there to be life after death? One can think of atheists who discount life after death because they are repelled by the prospect of facing God in Judgment for their sinful lives. Perhaps this applies to Spackman himself, as he was brought up as a devout Christian in his childhood (p. 102).

Does Self equal functioning brain? Even if the Self is entirely reducible to the function of the brain, it does not necessarily mean that the end of one’s brain function means the end of one’s Self. The potential ability of the Self to survive the death of the brain can be likened to the ability of an electronic file to survive the shutting down, or even destruction, of the computer that had made it. Finally, just as a file on a disk or in cyberspace can be read by a computer other than the one that made it, so it is possible for the Self to be implanted into a new brain. (Christians believe that

this will happen when they get their resurrected bodies in heaven.)

The question of life after death is not limited to issues surrounding religion, personal psychology, or personal preference. Some branches of biophysics are seriously addressing this question. (Again, my mentioning this does not necessarily mean that I am endorsing it.)

The best proof of the fact of life after death is the teaching of Jesus Christ. He was there, and He rose from the dead. He tells us that there is life after death. He should know, and His words carry absolute authority. In fact, nowhere in this book does Spackman come to grips with the historically-verified miracles and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and their implications not only for the existence of God, but for Jesus as God.

The big bang as virtual certainty

To introduce the reader to the subject, Spackman describes a video recording that shows a car exploding. Pieces are flying in all directions. Now, run the video backwards. All the pieces converge into one spot, and restore the car. This is what he claims stars do when their motions are run backwards, thereby proving the big bang.

The author’s reasoning is oversimplified at best. The ‘red shift’ does not have to imply motion away from a centre.⁴ Moreover, the analogy of the big bang with the exploded car breaks down completely once one realizes the challenges of explaining the ‘lumpiness’ of the universe. Finally, while some leading creationist models have a centre (e.g. galactocentric), the standard big bang has *no* centre!

Spackman realizes that absolute certainty is impossible. However, he introduces the concept of FAPP (For All Practical Purposes), in which the big bang can essentially be treated as a certainty (pp. 40, 75, 79). Other evolutionists have adopted a similar stance towards evolution: questioning

evolution is akin to questioning the existence of gravity.

The author does not like the term ‘big bang theory’ because, to the layman, ‘theory’ erroneously implies a guess. The point is granted. However, note that scientists use the term ‘big bang theory’ but not ‘gravity theory’ or ‘sphericity of earth theory’.

Spackman’s dogmatism is egregious. The big bang is *not* a virtual certainty. There are astronomers who question the big bang, whereas there are no physicists who question the existence of gravity. So Spackman does not believe in any deities. This is incorrect. Spackman does believe in a deity. The big bang is his god.

A lesson for Hugh Ross

Both Kerry Spackman and the evangelical speaker and astronomer Hugh Ross have something in common. They both emphasize the big bang. Here they part ways. Hugh Ross would have us believe that the big bang is a beautiful reconciliation of science with Genesis.

Spackman realizes the fact that the exact opposite is the case (pp. 70–79). He, of course, rejects a literal Genesis and the young universe. Although Spackman does not mention Hugh Ross, he thus comments on the

‘reconciliation’ effected by the big bang as follows,

“But no matter how it is interpreted, the belief ‘God created the world in seven days’ is irreconcilable with the Big Bang ... the timescale and order don’t match” (p. 79).

What about Genesis teaching not the ‘how’ but the ‘who’ of Creation, as compromising evangelicals are fond of saying? Spackman wisely comments:

“The first requirement of any allegory is that we should know it is an allegory and it wasn’t meant to represent a description of something that actually happened. In the Bible this is usually made very clear and we’re normally told when a story is an allegory. ... This is in direct contrast to Genesis where it’s told as a ‘factual’ account of the creation of the Universe. This is further evidenced by the fact that for 2000 years the Christian Church always interpreted it as being a factual account. It was only when Genesis came into conflict with Science that believers began to claim that it was an allegory” (pp. 76–77).

The author also rejects the Genesis-as-allegory position because its description about what happened matches poorly with that of the big bang. This makes it a poor, confusing,

and misleading allegory. It is the exact opposite of what a good allegory should do.

First causes and quantum mechanics

Spackman elaborates on chains of causality. He compares them to the notion that the earth rests on the back of a turtle, which in turn must rest on another turtle, and so on ad infinitum. He stresses necessary causes. He contends that, once it is accepted that God is the Uncaused Cause, *anything* can just as easily serve as an uncaused cause, including any pagan deity. His contention is ridiculous. The ability of God, owing to His omnipotence, to be the Uncaused Cause, is clear. On the other hand, it is not evident than any other entity (e.g. eternal universe, big bang, bubble universe, ‘froth’ of bubble universes, etc.) is an adequate uncaused cause. His theology is as deficient as his logic. The biblical God identifies Himself as the Uncaused Cause and First Cause, and He has manifested Himself through direct acts in history. None of the pagan deities have done so. Therefore, the biblical God is the One who is the First Cause, and the Uncaused Cause, and not any pagan deity.

The author then launches into a good tutorial on quantum mechanics. He ends this tutorial with pictures of a rectangular semiconductor that is divided in half, left and right, by a barrier that is impermeable to electrons. Even so, electrons, originally found to the left of the barrier, disappear and then reappear on the other side of the impenetrable barrier. This is called ‘quantum mechanical tunnelling’, but an electron is never observed in an act of movement, and the disappearance and reappearance of the electron is not governed by any force. The movement of an individual electron is largely unpredictable.



Figure 1. A modern car, notably a race car, is pointed. However, there is much, much more to such a high-performance, modern car than its streamlined shape.

Photo: Wikimedia/Redsmith4

Instant universes

Spackman then takes this discussion to particles and antiparticles coming out of nowhere, and, from there, he goes into universes popping into existence out of nothing. He suggests that our universe is just one of many countless universes, only some of which are similar to our own. Resorting to evolutionistic triumphalism, Spackman proclaims that our universe needs no first cause.

Has a universe ever been seen popping into existence? So much for his professed empiricism. If our universe popped into existence, why has it not popped back out of existence in the many billions of years since? Why has not some other universe popped into existence within our own, and devoured it? Are we just lucky? Or are there universes within our own which—conveniently—operate according to different ‘rules’ from the laws of physics of our universe, thereby sparing our universe any harm (or even noticeable effect)?

The imaginary self-evolving car

Spackman tries to dismiss objections to organic evolution, based on the complexity of living things, through the following trivial but seemingly-impressive exercise. He describes a computer program he made that shows how the Model T automobile could evolve, from its stocky shape, to the streamlined shape exemplified by the E-type Jaguar (figure 1). All he did was let nine items, governing body shape (p. 113), to vary by ‘mutation’, and then for the computer (mimicking natural selection) to select the cars that were the most aerodynamic, step-by-step.

Is Spackman’s reasoning valid? There is an old saying about computers: GIGO (garbage in, garbage out). Computers do not think: They simply execute the programs that humans

had made for them. Just because a computer program shows something happening does not mean that it corresponds to reality. Spackman’s imaginative scenario (stress the word *imaginative*) is reminiscent of the computer program that ‘proved’ that the eye can evolve in stages. The stages bore little resemblance to the actual function of the eye.

To begin with, just because the right mutations can theoretically happen does not mean that they ever will. In view of the tendency of evolutionists to see evolution more as the outcome of the right mutations happening, and less the outcome of natural-selection ‘sculpting’ processes, this takes on further significance.

Does the acquisition of a sleek shape transform a Model T into a race car? (figure 1) Hardly! Spackman merely focuses on the aerodynamics of the car-body shape, which is perhaps the *least* important overall factor in terms of high-speed performance. The nine items varied by Spackman are all outward and superficial. They include the height of the chassis off the ground, the length and front and rear heights of the cabin, the height of the engine compartment, and not much more (p. 113).

Just because simulated natural selection makes something more ‘pointy’ is hardly a significant demonstration of evolution. A more realistic test of the ‘evolvability’ of cars would involve those mechanical items that are crucial to improved performance and speed. All of these substantive potential improvements, necessary for the eventual transformation of a Model T into a modern racing car, crash into (pardon the pun) the insurmountable problem of the required simultaneous improvements.

Consider what would actually happen in an ‘evolving’ car. A mutation makes the car more streamlined, but without a simultaneous improvement in its driving speed, natural selection

would not favour the slightly more streamlined car, and this car with its ‘genome’ would be lost to the equivalent of genetic drift. Other car-improving mutations would fail to persist, as described in the next paragraph.

A mutation happens to make the engine burn gasoline more efficiently. However, the pistons blow out, and the car and its ‘genes’ come to the end, as does the mutational ‘improvement’. Alternatively, the mutated engine functions, and does so with greater power, but the transmission is unable to transmit the extra power to the axles. Consequently, the car does not run appreciably faster than before, and thus acquires no survival advantage for itself, and the genes it bears, relative to other cars. Alternatively, the car engine functions more powerfully because of the mutation, and the transmission and wheels react accordingly, but the tyres cannot handle the stress, and they rupture, killing the car and removing the mutation from the gene pool. Alternatively, the more powerful engine successfully and consistently moves the car at greater speeds, but the steering wheel cannot handle the increased speed, and the greater survival advantage of the faster car is cancelled by its greater likelihood of crashing and death. Alternatively, everything mentioned so far works well, but the brakes cannot deal with the increased speed of the car, and the car crashes, eliminating the engine-improving mutation from the gene pool. And so on.

Of course, to try to get around the problem of simultaneously-required improvements in multiple automobile systems, the evolutionist can invoke neutral mutations. He hopes that particular neutral mutations happen to accumulate within a car ‘genome’ fortuitously, and in multiple automobile systems, until there comes a point where they can cause a sudden and collective improvement

in car performance, and thereby to be favoured by natural selection. However, such explanations are obviously speculative and very unlikely. They also thoroughly partake of special pleading.

The evolutionist can also invoke simultaneously-occurring mutations in the same individual car, and hope for a hopeful monster 'breakthrough'. However, the more traits are varied simultaneously, the greater the degree of certainty that the hopeful monster will lack fitness, and will thereby be removed by natural selection.

Finally, Spackman's program *begins* with a fully functional car, and does not explain how the car is supposed to have evolved from a non-moving machine. A partly evolved car would not move, and hence would not be favoured by natural selection. This is just one manifestation of the irreducible complexity problem. Of course, the evolutionist can invoke exaptations—items that gave survival advantage to the proto-car before the evolutionary processes 'recruited' them to make the car self-moving, but such explanations are *ad hoc*, and speculative at best.

Life without God

The author is clearly an evangelist of atheism. He not only rejects God, but wants to teach people how to live fulfilled lives without Him. He essentially falls back on the 'religion is a crutch' mentality, and wants people to believe that they can create their own meaning and happiness without belief in either God or an afterlife.

Spackman makes silly statements about eternal life. He would have his reader believe that no one should want it anyway, because a perfect everlasting existence would soon become extremely boring.

The problem with his entire thinking about God is that it is solely in terms of what God means to people. Why do people think they need to believe in God, and why can't people

face life without God? He never entertains the notion that we exist to please God, and have duties towards Him. At a minimum, Pascal's wager does not enter into this thinking.

A godless morality

Spackman has a curious chapter on the decline of morality in Western societies. Much of what he writes could have been lifted from a publication by the much-maligned 'new religious right' in the USA. He notes how societies have coarsened in the past few decades, and how the crime rate in Western countries has increased six-fold in the past 50 years (p. 168). Much as a conservative Christian would, Spackman faults the social media, television, the 'me first' or 'me only' ethos of modern Western societies, etc. He also realizes that religious teachings, in the past, had tended to constrain bad behaviour, but these teachings have greatly declined.

More laws and punishments are not the answer. We already have high incarceration rates in the West, and criminality is as rampant as ever. In addition, teaching some form of secular morality in schools is not enough.

Spackman contends that active government intervention is necessary to promote a (secular) morality. As a model, he cites the global warming debate. For a long time, it was an academic and abstract matter, and it scarcely mattered to most people. Then governments began practical financial incentives to push the agenda, including carbon tax and carbon credits, fines for highly-polluting vehicles, etc. The media impacted public opinion by showing such things as polar bears clinging to melting icebergs.

The author would have governments promote ethical behaviour with advertisements. If celebrities engaged in antisocial or unsocial behaviour, they would have their public relations and media attention shut off (p. 181).

Obviously, Spackman's proposals would not sit well with his hedonistic and 'anything goes' atheist colleagues! Also, a government powerful enough to do what Spackman wants could easily be hijacked by evil men who lust after the power for themselves. Indeed, this is just what happened with Stalin and Mao.

In the past, atheists such as Friedrich Nietzsche doubted if morality was possible without some form of belief in God who rewards and punishes behaviour. Nowadays, atheists commonly think that it can. Let us suppose that Spackman's proposal worked, and societies became more ethical. However, the underlying reasoning is flawed. Even if it were possible to develop a highly ethical secular society in an individualistic Western setting, perhaps reminiscent of that once found in the conformity-oriented ethical but secular traditional Asian societies, this would only be a man-towards-man morality. It would leave out *the* most important aspect of morality—the First Commandment, which is devotion towards God.

Conclusion

At first glance, this book seems attractive owing to the lucidity by which the author makes his points. However, the deeper one reads, the more obvious becomes the superficiality and slavish evolutionism of this work. Considering especially the high intelligence and high regard with which the author is held, it is hoped that he rethinks his positions.

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