

Mark Cartledge, Resource Guide 4

Science and Theology Profile 4: David Wilkinson

David Wilkinson is both a scientist and a theologian. He has two Ph.D. degrees both from the University of Durham in the UK. His first one was in the subject of theoretical astrophysics and his second in the subject of theology. He writes as a committed Evangelical Christian and as an ordained minister in the Methodist church. He has held church and academic posts, and he is currently the Principal of St John's College, which is a Church of England foundation and a constituent College of the Durham University, UK.

His most famous popular book was entitled: *God, The Big Bang and Stephen Hawking* (1993, revised in 2001 under a slightly different name). In this book he takes a serious look at cosmological theory and responds as an Evangelical Christian. The Foreword to this book, written by Professor Arnold Wolfendale, a former Astronomer Royal, commends the book by saying it is 'an informed overview'. This is because it intends to give the lay reader in science and religion a basic understanding of the issues around the beginning of the universe.

Using Stephen Hawking's work as foil, he explores the key questions of when and how the universe came into being from a scientific perspective and how this raises important theological questions. He helpfully discusses the nature of the Big Bang, which he described more in terms of "the blooming of a flower, that is something that gives rise to order and beauty" (2001: 47). However, because it happened so long ago, Wilkinson argues that scientists are functioning like detectives in a crime story, trying to put together the various bits of evidence and making them fit into a coherent whole. This task of reconstruction is not without its challenges.

One of the most helpful discussions in the book is about the nature of science. He describes how most scientists are naïve realists, assuming that their theories actually describe the reality 'out there'. But, of course, theories change, as they adapt to new data and understandings of the data. Scientists often assume that their theories should be taken 'literally'. Rather, Wilkinson argues, science provides models (based on analogical thinking) that make sense of the information available and provide the best 'scientific' way of understanding material reality. When new data or theoretical ways of reading the data become available, then the theories change and adapt accordingly.

Thus, he argues for a critical realist approach to knowledge, whereby science holds to an objective reality outside and beyond observations and what the instruments designed to measure aspects of reality actually tell us. It also supports the idea that theories as descriptions and explanations are partial and provisional, open to revision in the light of new information or insight. Models are constructed by individuals using their own personal judgments, as well as through data gathering processes. Creative thinking contributes to theoretical accounts and, although this aspect is often played down by scientists, the history and philosophy of science allows us to identify such moments of creative and imaginative insight.

He asks the question whether cosmological discoveries strengthen the claims of Christianity and, if so, how? He answers the question in relation to four areas. First, the anthropic balance

suggests that the universe is “finely tuned to the existence of life” (2001: 139). If it were different, life on earth would not exist. There are many other types of balance in nature, for example conditions for carbon to be formed. Wilkinson argues that these balances create the possibility for life but do not in themselves point to God directly. Nevertheless, it does suggest that there is more to the universe than science can explain.

Second, it can be stated that humanity can begin to comprehend the incomprehensible. This fact suggests that the human ability to think and reason about itself, its world, and the universe is not a trivial reflection. It suggests that humanity is meant to be here. The human need to explore the physical world and its curiosity about its environment goes well beyond what is required for its survival.

Third, scientists report a sense of awe at the nature of the universe. The beauty, vastness, and complexity of the universe provoke statements of wonder and humility. This basic response echoes the ancient response of the Hebrew tradition (Psalm 8.3-4). Its vastness displays the extravagance of God and his grace to his creatures.

Fourth, cosmologists see two possible futures for the universe: either it will collapse into itself due to the force of gravity, often called the Big Crunch, or it will expand into eternity and become a cold lifeless place full of dead stars, the so-called heat death. Both of these futures are futile and pessimistic (see his *Christian Eschatology and the Physical Universe*). The Christian response argues that the purposes of a good God are greater than the scientific predictions of its demise, since the promise of the good Creator is a new heaven and new earth, both in continuity and discontinuity with the present universe. This expectation and promise parallels the expectation surrounding the resurrection of the dead. The resurrection body of Jesus Christ as the first fruit of the resurrection of life for those united to Him indicates the substance of the Christian hope that participates in eternal reality.

Select Bibliography

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