

Warning: belief system alert!

THE BIG BANG AND AUSCHWITZ

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The cosmological discovery of the Big Bang and the historical horror of Auschwitz are among the most significant events to occur in the 20th century. They are so uniquely significant because of all events of the 20th century and perhaps even in all of Man's entire history, both represent the most extreme possible polar opposites in terms of their deeply conflicting religious implications.

The Big Bang is the scientific theory regarding the Birth of the Universe. Nowadays, most scientists believe this theory is the correct explanation for how the universe came to be. The more one learns about the Big Bang and its related aspects -- such as Einstein's Theory of Relativity, the "Red Shift" discovered by Hubble, "dark" matter and "dark" energy, etc -- the more difficult it becomes to deny that a Supreme Being exists. In effect, the Big Bang and its attendant cosmological wonders arguably represent near-virtual scientific proof of God's existence, and Einstein himself as well as many other physicists have said that to study cosmological physics is to "read the mind of God."

In stark contrast, one can scarcely find more copious and horrific evidence that the God we learn about in Sunday School cannot exist, than in the study of Auschwitz. Its appalling horrors are as compelling as anything in human experience, in terms of being impossible to reconcile with any rational argument that God, at least as configured in conventional religious conceptions, is there and is looking out for us and responsive to our prayers and entreaties.

This essay will attempt to grapple with these conflicting and difficult implications, and produce a resolution, of sorts.

I. The Big Bang

The Big Bang occurred roughly 13.5 billion years ago. Quite simply, it represents the beginning of all space, time and matter. We know not what, if anything, existed prior to the Big Bang, but we can trace the history of the universe back to a micro-second after the Big Bang occurred.

Nowadays, most astronomers and cosmologists believe that 13.5 billion years ago all Matter and Energy was compressed into a tiny, minute point smaller than an atom. (Some astrophysicists at Berkeley and elsewhere think it was about the size of a dime, however). Yet, that mere point (or dime-sized glob) contained all that exists. The full magnitude of this is very difficult to get one's head around, but what is clear is that it seems an impossible wonderment with unavoidable religious implications.

It's no coincidence that Fred Hoyle, a committed atheist, was an equally committed proponent of the competing "Steady State" theory which involved no uncomfortable Moment of Creation. In fact, ironically it was Hoyle himself who in a moment of ill-thought derision, contemptuously referred to this [to him] uncomfortable new theory as the "Big Bang." To Hoyle's lasting regret, his derisive term stuck in the public's mind better than any other explanation up to that point, or since.

We can contemplate huge mountains, massive tidal waves, hurricanes and volcanoes, etc that simply dwarf us both individually and collectively. Yet, all this *matter* is only on one small planet, in one solar system. Jupiter and Saturn are hundreds or thousands of times more massive than the earth, the sun is a million times bigger than earth, and

there are over a billion stars like the Sun in our Milky Way Galaxy, and over a billion galaxies like our Milky Way in the Universe.

Yet according to the Big Bang all this was contained in a tiny point smaller than an atom (or dime, according to some scientists) 13.5 billion years ago. Even *more* inconceivable, all this visible matter is only around **4%** of all the stuff that comprises the universe. The other 96% -- which was also crammed into that amazingly dense, hot tiny point from which the Big Bang exploded -- is matter or energy we can't see, but know is there (how we know it's there will be addressed in upcoming paragraphs).

And somehow, all this was compressed into one tiny, unimaginably dense and hot mass, 13.5 billion years ago. The Big Bang is when all this stuff burst forth, when this inconceivably dense and tiny "cosmic egg" shattered in an explosion of inconceivable power.

The Red Shift

How do we know that there was a Big Bang? Basically we have Edwin Hubble to thank for this, due to his discovery that the Universe was expanding, i.e. that most of the galaxies are moving further and further away from us and from each other. How do we know that the Universe is expanding? Because of the Red Shift which Hubble discovered.

The sound of a train approaching is different than the sound of a train going away. Why? It's because sound is a wave, like a line going forward but with wavy oscillations. As the train approaches, the sound-waves squiggle-up and compress, in effect the oscillations bunch up and thus sound loud and thunderous. In contrast, as the train leaves us, the sound seems thinner and more attenuated, not nearly as loud and thunderous. That's because instead of bunching up on our ear as the train approaches, the sound waves from the train going away get stretched out from us, the exact opposite of the bunching-up of the squiggly waves from an approaching train.

It's the same with light, which also comes in waves, except instead of sounding different if the light is approaching or leaving us, the waves of approaching light are a different color from light waves leaving us. Light waves approaching us are colored blue, whereas those going away from us are red.

Hubble discovered that the light from most of the stars is colored red. The only explanation for this is that the universe is expanding, like a balloon being blown up bigger and bigger. It's the most distant stars that generally have the reddest light and these are many, many billions of light years away. That is, they have been speeding away at or near light speed ever since the Big Bang's Moment of Creation 13.5 billion years ago.

Therefore, the light reaching us from those most distant stars is billions of years old. We can see today, in other words, what these most distant stars and galaxies were like billions of years ago, but we'll never know where they are *now*, what they look like *now* or even if they are still there *now*.

The Red Shift and the Big Bang

Once Hubble's Red Shift proved that the universe was expanding, that led directly to the question, expanding from *what?*

Working backwards from today's expanding universe, the scientific community -- particularly cosmological physicists and astronomers -- gradually came to believe (a) that this expansion of the universe began from a single tiny point that burst explosively forth with the Big Bang, and (b) that this expansion has continued ever since, still impelled by the momentum from that inconceivably powerful event.

Indeed, a few decades later some other scientists (named Wilson and Penzias) accidentally discovered that the static we see on our TVs is actually a universe-wide remnant of the Big Bang. This provided additional "smoking gun" physical evidence supplementing Hubble's discovery of the red shift and underscored the cosmological credibility of the Big Bang as the beginning of the known universe. So did the recent discovery of the Big Bang's residual heat that's still detectable, barely, disbursed throughout the universe.

Einstein and Time (perhaps over-simplified so the author could understand it)

Many of us know that time slows down as one approaches the speed of light, but what's less common knowledge is why. But, as per Stephen Hawking's "A Brief History of Time" we do know that time is not constant and is actually directly influenced by gravity. In effect, gravity tugs on time just like it tugs on our bodies. Clocks on airplanes and mountaintops have actually been proven to run a bit faster than they do at sea level!! Why? Because there's more tug from earth's gravity at sea level than a few miles up. Granted, we're talking micro seconds of difference, but we're also talking about a very, very slight difference in gravity. For serious differences in gravity, the tug on time is much more serious too.

Thus, time actually proceeds slower on Jupiter than on Earth, though it would seem the same to someone on earth and on Jupiter since the *relative* passage of time is the same. But, someone returning to earth after a few years on Jupiter will have aged less than the same person on earth, because Jupiter's gravity is greater and thus slows the passage of time more than Earth's gravity.

According to Einstein, as one approaches the speed of light, one begins to assume infinite mass. The more mass, the more gravity and the slower time flows, although it won't seem that way to you since it's all relative (as per the Theory of *Relativity*). But, if you went into space at or near the speed of light for only a few minutes from your perspective, when you returned everyone else -- who had not been moving anywhere near so fast and thus had not acquired the huge increase in mass (and consequent gravity) which derives from such speed -- would have aged decades or centuries or more.

This is because time, which would have slowed down so much for you while you were traveling at or near light speed, would have progressed at a much faster clip for everyone else who lacked your immense (albeit temporary) mass and time-slowng gravity.

Thus, GPS satellites must include in their programming two partially offsetting "clock adjustments" to equalize their time with our time here on earth's surface: (a) for the

faster pace of time which results from the satellite's having *less gravity from earth* (due to the satellite's being miles above earth's surface) and (b) for the *slower* pace of time which results from the satellite's having *additional gravity of its own*, which the satellite acquires as the inevitable result of the high speed (roughly 8,700 miles per hour) that most GPS satellites must maintain in order to stay in orbit.

E=MC² (also simplified for the author's easy intellectual digestion)

Einstein's famous equation is essentially, the formula for the atom bomb. That is, "E" is the Energy produced from splitting an atom. It's calculated by multiplying a teeny, tiny number -- "M" or the "Mass" of an atom -- times a huge, giant number -- i.e. the speed of light squared since the "C" or "Constant" in Einstein's equation is the speed of light, and the "C²" is thus the speed of light times itself. It's due to the difference in the "M" or Mass of an atom of Hydrogen versus the much greater "M" of an atom of Plutonium that the modern Plutonium nuclear bomb is so many times more powerful (i.e. more "E") than the Hydrogen nuclear bomb, which involved light Hydrogen instead of heavy Plutonium.

What seems to me to be most amazing about Einstein's famous equation E=MC² is that it proves that the speed of light is inextricably enmeshed in the very fabric of matter. This seems counter-intuitive in the extreme, there seems to be no connection whatsoever between the speed of light and one's leg or one's food. Yet, Einstein proved that the speed of light is part of the atoms that form our being, and form all things.

This seems to me to have profound religious implications because although there is no apparent connection here whatsoever, somehow that connection does exist, and at the deepest possible level. In other words, the fastest thing in the universe -- the speed of light -- which travels over 650,000,000 miles per hour and is used to measure distances between stars and galaxies, is also somehow mathematically embedded within the fabric of the atom, which is at the opposite end of the universe's size spectrum.

Not to be sacrilegious, but this seems to me to be a miracle vastly more miraculous than any in the Bible. (So does, for that matter, the fact that all the Matter and Energy in all the universe was once contained in a tiny point smaller than an atom [or, maybe, dime-sized glob]).

The Historical Relationship Between Science and Religion

Historically, Science and Religion have seemed locked in conflict.

Copernicus only published his helio-centric (i.e. sun-centered) theories of the configuration of the heavens on his death-bed, since he knew the Church (and in particular it's enforcement arm called the Inquisition) would not look favorably on his new ideas, which conflicted with the Church's preferred Ptolemaic earth-centric views. Likewise Galileo was persuaded to abandon dissemination of his equally heretical findings, for the same reason (i.e. his scientific findings conflicted with Church dogma). Even nowadays conflict exists between so-called Creation Science and the scientific findings of Darwin and his proven theories of Natural Selection, and geologists who use rocks to date the age of the earth instead of "the Rock of Ages."

Yet now, things are coming full-circle such that scientific findings -- especially in Cosmology -- are beginning to "prove" or at least powerfully suggest the existence of a

Supreme Being. The fact that the speed of light is embedded within the very fabric of all matter seems to me to suggest this, as does the fact that all we can see was once compressed into a tiny point smaller than an atom (or, small as a dime per some physicists).

But, what is perhaps the most eerie for an atheist (or like me, a one-time “closet atheist” calling himself an agnostic) is the extreme similarity between the Bible’s Book of Genesis and the Big Bang.

Genesis

“And God said, ‘Let there be Light.’” This famous biblical statement seems, in its essence, to be an exact summary of the Big Bang. Both Genesis and the Big Bang emphasize that there actually was a Moment of Creation. The Pope understood full well the huge implications of the Big Bang, and as that theory was emerging in scientific circles he assigned one of his priests, Georges Lemaitre, who also happened to be one of the world’s most accomplished cosmological physicists, to work full time on the Big Bang’s early “scientific team.”

The Pope, in other words, understood fully that this new scientific theory represented “proof” of a Moment of Creation.

And, if there is a scientifically-proven “Moment of Creation” that sure seems to suggest (albeit not actually prove) the existence of a Creator to affect that Moment of Creation.

Dark Matter

Dark Matter consists of about 22% of the total matter and energy in the universe (remember that all the stars and galaxies, of which there are more than all the grains of sand on earth, add up to only 4%). And never forget, all this plus the other 74% was once contained in a single tiny point (or dime-sized glob according to some physicists).

We can’t see Dark Matter, but we know it’s there because without it, the galaxies would fly apart. That is, the galaxies are spinning too fast to hold themselves together, without something we can’t see that’s doing the holding. We’ve recently discovered, for example, that in the center of each galaxy is a “super-massive” black hole that may be many, many millions, or in some cases (per the science writers at The Economist) up to 50 billion, times the mass of our sun.

We can’t see such super-massive Black Holes (or any Black Holes for that matter) because they are so unimaginably dense and massive that light cannot escape the immense gravity-well of these tiny but simultaneously massive-beyond-belief objects. But, we know they are there by their effect on the galaxy around them, and on the light that’s actually “bent” by the extreme gravity of the Black Hole. This is light emanating from stars behind the Black Hole which should travel to us in a straight line, and would do so if the Black Hole’s immense gravity didn’t actually bend the light first along the way.

In fact, we now know that there’s a mathematically direct correlation between the size of the super-massive black hole at the heart of each galaxy, and the size of that galaxy. And of course, Black Holes are clearly a form of Dark Matter, but comprise only a tiny

fraction of its total. Indeed, the Nucor Group of astrophysicists has determined that the super-massive Black Hole at the heart of each galaxy is .5% of that galaxy's mass. (Since the total amount of Dark Matter is over 5 times the universe's visible matter, thus even all these super-massive Black Holes added together comprise less than .1% of all Dark Matter!).

That is, we think there's *lots* of additional Dark Matter within and around the outside of galaxies, which also effectively holds them in place. According to the astrophysicists, mathematically the super-massive Black Hole at each galaxy's center is not nearly enough to hold them together, a lot more is needed. Because the galaxies aren't flying apart, we know this additional unseen matter is there, but we can only infer its existence from its manifest gravitational effect, even if we can't detect such "dark matter" directly. (After all, that's why it's "dark").

Einstein and Dark Matter

Einstein effectively predicted the existence of Dark Matter, sort of, in the sense that his equations "pre-fit" the formation and existence of Black Holes. (Note to Reader: the author makes no pretense to understanding Einstein's equations, but can parrot others who do). Indeed, Einstein perceived Space and Time as being a single inter-woven fabric -- "SpaceTime" -- and that Black Holes could occur when that very fabric was so malformed or even torn by an object of near-infinite density, so dense as to prevent light from escaping and to stop the passage of time itself, within that object's immediate gravitational field.

He also predicted, in effect, that such an object would be so inconceivably dense and heavy, like a huge star collapsing inward upon itself, that its inconceivable mass would effectively crush all the volume of matter it consumed into a point of near-infinite smallness as well as near-infinite density. In effect, Black Holes are miniature versions of the "cosmic egg" which was all the Matter and Energy in the universe packed into an unbelievably dense and hot tiny spot at the time of the Big Bang, and which Einstein's equations effectively presaged.

Dark Energy

So much for 26% of all the matter and energy in the universe. But, what about the other 74%??!!

"Dark Energy" is a fairly recent discovery, made only in the last decade or two. A bunch of cosmologists and other astrophysicists got together to see if the rate of the expansion of the universe presaged by Einstein and discovered by Hubble during the early half of the twentieth century, was slowing down. (It was logically expected that the expansion of the universe would be slowing down due to the mutual gravitational attraction among all the universe's objects. Indeed, gravity was expected to eventually reverse the expansion of the universe such that there would ultimately be a "Big Crunch" when everything would fly -- or fall -- back together, i.e. a "Big Bang in Reverse").

But, upon measurement after measurement it turned out that not only was the rate of the universe's expansion not slowing down, *it was (and is) accelerating !!*

In other words, beginning (we think) about 6 billion years ago, *something* caused the universe's rate of expansion to begin to increase, and it's still increasing. We have no idea whatsoever is causing this. And, it's not as though the distance between ourselves and the sun is increasing, nor apparently is the size of our galaxy increasing. Rather, the increase in the rate of expansion seems to be taking place primarily between galaxies. That is, most of the galaxies are getting further and further apart from each other, and the rate at which they are doing so is picking up steam all the time.

It's as if there's some mysterious repulsive force, an anti-gravity as it were, compelling the galaxies to fly apart faster and faster and thereby increase the breadth of the universe at the same time. In effect, the expansion of space itself is speeding up. The energy causing this is the other 74% of everything.

Indeed, cosmologists used to think the furthest edges of the universe were around 13.5 billion light years away from us (i.e. a distance from us equal to the speed of light times the age of the universe since the moment of the Big Bang). Due to Dark Energy and its actual accelerating expansion of space itself, some cosmologists now theorize that this figure is more like 46.5 billion light years!! (Thus, it appears that the only thing which can in fact exceed the speed of light is the expansion of space itself, impelled by Dark Energy).

Einstein and Dark Energy

Almost a century ago before the actual discovery of Dark Energy, Einstein predicted its existence, sort of. He correctly perceived that some mysterious force would be needed to offset the perpetual tug of gravity that otherwise would cause everything to crash back together.

Einstein firmly believed that "God does not play dice" and thus, came up with his infamous "Cosmological Constant." This was essentially an unknown force postulated by Einstein to prevent such an eventual, otherwise seemingly inevitable Big Crunch.

Later in life Einstein came to regard his Cosmological Constant as "his greatest blunder" but with hind-sight and the benefit of this recent discovery of Dark Energy, Einstein's "blunder" can in fact now be seen as an early, prescient forecast of this very discovery.

Star Wars Names?

The scientists who discovered Dark Energy and Dark Matter were likely fans of "Star Wars" inasmuch as the names they came up with to coin these Wonders are highly (but most oddly) reminiscent of Darth Vader. In point of fact, we have no idea what this stuff is, especially the Dark Energy which represents the vast bulk of everything that's in the universe.

But, Luke, it would be equally accurate (or equally inaccurate) to call Dark Matter "God's Hand" and Dark Energy "God's Breath." Indeed, to think of God's Hand as the force holding the universe in its proper place, and God's Breath as the force preventing a Big Crunch that would otherwise be impelled by gravity, actually seems far more logical and intellectually satisfying than reliance on some mysterious "*dark side of the force.*"

While (as will be discussed soon) sometimes here on Earth God can indeed seem like Darth Vader, in the Heavens he's doubtless more like Yoda.

In other words, even if only hypothetically one re-labels such "dark" things as "God's Hand" and "God's Breath," two "conceptual improvements" occur. First the inappropriate Darth Vader aspect is removed. Second – and at least for me – this re-labeling links these new discoveries that comprise 96% of all matter and energy with the wonderment of the speed of light being embedded in the fabric of matter, with the idea that time is controlled by gravity and especially with the idea of the Big Bang as the Moment of Creation, initiated by a Creator.

In short, all these scientific discoveries make it impossible to be a "closet atheist" because they all come far, far closer to scientifically proving God's existence than they do to proving the reverse.

Thus, science has come full circle and now supports much that's more typically characteristic of religion. The 20th Century's cosmological discoveries, in other words, now actually complement a belief in a Supreme Being, in reverse to the historically antithetical relationship between science and religion.

And Maybe Even Greater Wonderments.....

To delve a bit further into the realm of the inconceivable and wondrous, contemplate the similarities in configuration between (a) a solar system and an atom and (b) a galaxy and a complex molecule or cluster of molecules.

The nucleus of an atom is clearly akin to a sun, and the protons and electrons orbiting the nucleus are clearly akin to that sun's orbiting planets. Moreover, the distances between stars and their respective planets, and the nucleus and its similarly orbiting bodies, are more-or-less proportionate as well (in contrast to false and disproportionate depiction of the atom in most public school textbooks). And, just as complex molecules consist of multiple atoms, so does a galaxy consist of multiple stars and (as we are now discovering too) their own accompanying planets.

Quantum Mechanics versus Relativity

Currently, our mathematical understanding of the physics of the very small – Quantum Mechanics – is incompatible with the mathematics of the physics of the very big, i.e. Relativity. Both are mutually-exclusive and produce nonsensical answers when the two separate systems are forced to work together (i.e. they *don't* work together). In other words, here are two separate Laws of Physics and they don't get along at all.

Reconciling the currently disputatious relationship between the known physical laws of the very big and the known physical laws of the very small is the Holy Grail of modern physics.

Interestingly, Black Holes – which represent the closest thing out there to the "cosmic egg" which gave birth to the universe when it exploded – also represent a convergence of both sets of mutually exclusive physics. A Black Hole (specifically, the "Singularity" at its heart) is (*we think*) tinier than an atom, but more massive than millions or in some

cases, *many billions* of suns. The Singularity at the center of every Black Hole may well represent a point of convergence where the impossible is also the norm.....

A Wild Speculation

Imagine, in other words, that atoms are miniature solar systems, that galaxies are basically large molecules, and that Black Holes are the nexus where one dimensional "size level" becomes akin to the other, linked together by the speed of light which measures the size of the universe but is also somehow embedded in the very fabric of every atom. Perhaps "infinity" exists in infinite dimensional levels of size, such that our Milky Way is but a molecule in the next dimensional level "up." And thus just maybe, when we split an atom we destroy a solar system that's in the next dimensional level "down." And on and on in both directions.....

I cannot quite grasp this, but I do sense God winking and laughing at me (and the rest of us) while impishly hiding behind a galaxy (or is that a molecule).....

II. Auschwitz

While science now actually complements a belief in God, the utterly appalling horror that was Auschwitz has probably done more than anything else in history to make acceptance of a conventional God that's looking out for us and responsive to our most fervent prayers difficult, and for some of us, impossible.

The Holocaust represented the extermination of approximately 6 million Jews, several hundred thousand Gypsies, and innumerable Poles, Russians and others along the way. According to the Nuremberg testimony of Rudolph Hoess, creator and commandant of Auschwitz, almost half of these murders were accomplished at Auschwitz.

Most of the deaths at Auschwitz took place in its high-tech, high-volume gas chambers. The suffering of the individuals so condemned was awful, but not protracted since, although the Nazis were often sadistic in the extreme, they were nonetheless usually more interested in volume of killings than in maximizing the degree of pain inflicted in the process. At least, that seems *generally* to have been the case, particularly if the infliction of maximum pain would have impeded the maximum rate of extermination.

But, not by any means was this universal. That is, one of the most disturbing aspects of Auschwitz (and most of the other Camps as well) is that within its electrified wire fence, many, many instances of horrific torture-to-death and other inconceivable events did regularly and frequently occur. These are so horrendous as to effectively conspire to make a conventional Sunday School conception of God that's looking out for us and responsive to our prayers and entreaties most intellectually problematic, to say the least.

That is, the extreme and particularly awful nature of only just a few of these unbelievable events cannot help but make one wonder how a Supreme Being with any direct involvement in the happenings here on Earth could possibly permit such things to occur.

My apologies if I disturb the sleep and/or appetite of the reader.....

Special Actions

“Special Action” was the Nazi’s Orwellian term for a particularly brutal execution, which regularly took place at many of the Concentration Camps in order to harden the SS guards to their murderous work, and to wipe out the last vestiges of sympathy and decency that the guards might otherwise have felt toward their victims.

Each Camp evidently had its preferred method. For example, if I recall correctly it was at Belsen that the favored technique was a straightforward beat-down, where half a dozen or so of the SS guards would simply stomp an inmate to death. Likewise, at Buchenwald unnecessary lower-abdominal surgery without anesthetic was said to be the favored method.

But Auschwitz took the cake, as usual. The favored “Special Actions” there involved mass burnings. Specifically, the guards would have inmates dig a large pit, and partially fill that pit with lots of gasoline-soaked wood. Then they would load up the pit the rest of the way with a hundred or more weak inmates (often starving women and children) and fire it up.

Once you participated in a “special action” your previous moral ethos was broken forever, and your conception of right and wrong was warped forever, too. Indeed, the Nazis’ “Special Actions” can be accurately seen as horrific experimental confirmation of Festinger’s brilliant and penetrating psychological theory of Cognitive Dissonance, which correctly predicts that dissonance between one’s actions and beliefs will lead to a change in beliefs, thereby producing one’s eventual calm acceptance of previously unthinkable behavior.

In Robert Waite’s outstanding book on Hitler entitled “The Psychopathic God,” early in the book one will encounter excerpts from an SS officer’s diary describing a series of such Auschwitz “special action” events. The first one was shattering to the young officer, described as a horrific scene from Dante’s worst nightmare. But after a few months of various such “special actions” he is more powerfully affected by his excellent roast-salmon lunch than by the mass people-roast which preceded it.

Standing Cells

Auschwitz inmates who committed an offense or annoyed one of the guards, were often punished by insertion into that claustrophobic nightmare called the Standing Cells. As documented in the excellent series of historical essays entitled “The Day the Universe Ended” and elsewhere, the horrific “Standing Cells” were too narrow to sit down in and too short to stand up in. Often the Nazis would simply leave you there to die an unbelievably awful, slow and agonizing death.

If the infamous guard Wilhelm Boger was on duty, you might be treated immediately before internment in a Standing Cell to a “Boger Salad” of pickled herring. This would ratchet up the torture, since it would (a) increase one’s sense of thirst and (b) enable one to die slower by virtue of the last-minute sustenance.

The Boger Swing, etc

Boger, incidentally, enjoyed the distinction of creating a “question and answer” device called the “Boger Swing” that was actually illegal to use even in Auschwitz. It reputedly

involved one's being splayed out and then being struck repeatedly by a club, on the groin. People actually died from this, in agony so extreme as to boggle the mind. (During the "Frankfurt trial" in the early 1960's in Germany, according to the "Encyclopedia of the Third Reich" Boger was sentenced to Life with five years at hard labor; if he had been tried earlier, he'd doubtless have been hung, for he was known as "the tiger of Auschwitz" for good reason).

While Boger was called Auschwitz' "tiger," Joseph Mengele -- who supervised the "life or death" selection process for new Auschwitz inmates immediately upon arrival and who also performed grisly experiments on twin children and women's breasts -- was called Auschwitz' "angel of death." Mengele's lover Irma Grese, called Auschwitz' "blonde angel of death," would evidently look on in rapt fascination while her lover performed his horrific deeds.

Grese (who was a vicious camp guard in her own right and was certainly not a mere rapt Auschwitz spectator) was the only one of the three to be hung at Nuremburg, and she is said to have met death screaming, as she was forcibly led to the gallows. Mengele escaped to South America and after a decade or two of hiding, eventually drowned in a boating accident -- one of the least painful ways to expire, I might point out.

Running Out of Gas

Many of the Concentration Camps were assigned a minimum quota of extermination, as the Holocaust began to pick up steam. Auschwitz had the highest quota by far, so logistical problems such as temporarily running out of poison gas (Zyklon B) were dealt with sternly.

During the Nuremburg Trials, Marie Vaillant-Couturier, who was an Auschwitz inmate who survived and after the war became a Deputy in the French constituent assembly, testified as follows, as per Joseph Persico's outstanding book "Nuremburg -- Infamy on Trial":

"....One night, we were awakened by horrible cries. The next day we learned that the Nazis had run out of gas and the children had been hurled into the Furnaces alive."

I first read this passage while on vacation at the beach with my family, when my own daughter and son were about the same age as these less fortunate children burned alive in Auschwitz' furnaces. I could scarcely look upon them for several days without thinking of anything else but how utterly, horribly and unspeakably evil and awful this was.

Presumably it was children who were selected to "meet quota" since they were lighter and weaker than adults, and were thus easier to throw into the flames.

And The Beat Goes On.....

The UN was founded largely in response to the World's gasp of horror when the then-inconceivable events comprising the Holocaust came to light during the Nuremburg Trials. Indeed, in contrast to its failed predecessor the League of Nations, much of the moral imperative behind the UN's successful establishment was to prevent such a horrendous thing from happening again.

Sadly, things have only gotten worse, if that's possible, oftentimes aided and abetted by that very UN. Since the Holocaust we've seen (a) the Cultural Revolution in which perhaps 10 million Chinese were killed; (b) the Great Leap Forward during which another 20 or 30 million Chinese starved; (c) the Cambodian genocide where 2 million Cambodians (almost 20% of the population) were murdered; (d) the Rwandan genocide during which almost 1 million Tutsi and several sympathetic Hutu were slaughtered by other Hutu even as UN blue-helmeted "troops" looked passively on; (e) North Korea, which is basically a country-wide concentration camp in which over 1 million people have perished of starvation; (f) Darfur, Eastern Congo, Southern Sudan, Sierra Leone, etc.

In Sierra Leone the RUF was well known for hacking off people's limbs, and even in some instances tossing the maimed victims into cesspools to drown in the slime while thrashing about ineffectually with freshly amputated limbs. According to the National Geographic, there's evidence in Darfur that when the "Janjaweed" village-marauders enlisted by Sudan's government grew bored with tossing children into wells, instead they'd sometimes slowly boil the children alive in iron cauldrons.

The UN's primary involvement has been (a) to decline to call Darfur a genocide and (b) to make sure that Executive Outcomes, the mercenary force which actually gave the RUF its just deserts, was disbanded.

And, stories emerging from eastern Congo and northwest Uganda of children forced by the despicable LRA to gruesomely murder and then eat their own parents make even these horrendous horrors seem "mild," if that's at all conceivable.

III. The Grand Inquisitor

At one point near the end of Dostoevsky's "The Brothers Karamazov" the protagonist, Alyosha, is engaged in dialogue with the Grand Inquisitor. The Grand Inquisitor attempts to turn Alyosha's faith with various poignant examples of horror and brutality, which Tsarist Russia certainly had plenty of to pick from. Being an allegorical character representing the strength and superiority of heart-based faith over brain-based reason, Dostoevsky's protagonist does not succumb to the Grand Inquisitor's masterful (and heart-wrenching) atheistic (but highly rational) arguments.

But, neither Dostoevsky nor his protagonist Alyosha could really refute the Grand Inquisitor's arguments intellectually. In effect Alyosha can only symbolically represent (and Dostoevsky can only repeatedly attempt to demonstrate) that heart-based feelings and faith trumps brain-based reason and doubt.

Perhaps unfortunately, Dostoevsky is always far, far better at portraying souls tortured by doubt and anomie than he is at portraying the reverse. As a result, Alyosha's "repudiation" of the Grand Inquisitor's arguments is almost as unpersuasive as Raskolnikov's redemption and sudden Nirvana-like "inner peace" at the end of "Crime and Punishment".

Moreover, neither Dostoevsky nor his characters had the depths of the Holocaust's horrors to contend with, and Alyosha's unconvincing rebuttal of the Grand Inquisitor's arguments would have seemed even more tepid and limp had the Inquisitor come armed

with Auschwitz. Adding into the mix some of the horrors Africa has seen over the past several decades would make Alyosha's unpersuasive response even less satisfying.

No Effective Response

In short, when confronted with all the above Dostoevsky's Alyosha -- as well, more importantly, as the conventional Sunday School conception of God -- effectively have little to respond with but the familiar adage that "God Works in Mysterious Ways." But, this is ultimately little different than saying we must somehow accept these horrors, much like one of Big Brother's mindless minions in Orwell's "1984," and never question whether they call into serious doubt the whole framework of convention religion.

That is, each and every individual tossed alive and screaming into the Auschwitz Furnaces and each victim slowly dying of thirst in a Standing Cell, undoubtedly prayed with desperate fervor and passion to God, to prevent this from unfolding (or at least, mercifully speed it up). The victims awaiting immolation in a Special Action certainly knew what would happen, could likely smell the gasoline, and doubtless prayed just as desperately and fervently for deliverance, one way or the other.

But in each and every case, there was no apparent response.....

How to Reconcile?

So, what we have here are two seemingly contradictory realities, "contradictory" from the standpoint that their deep and powerful religious implications seem utterly irreconcilable, like Relativity and Quantum Mechanics.

The Big Bang and its attendant cosmological wonders may not constitute actual scientific *proof* of the existence of God, but (a) they certainly constitute strong scientific *support* of this, and (b) come far, far closer to "proving" God's existence than they do to "proving" God's non-existence. And from a simplistic perspective, one can scarcely find a closer connection between Science and Scripture than the Bible's famous "...Let there be Light" Moment of Creation and Cosmology's Big Bang.

On the other hand, it is all too easy to find copious examples of horrors more than sufficient to make belief in a conventional, Sunday School version of God who is looking out for us and responsive to our most fervent prayers and entreaties, seem highly problematic if not utterly impossible. It is, in other words, most difficult to imagine a God that was (a) manifestly *unresponsive* to the fervent prayers for deliverance of these innumerable innocents, which (b) *would be* responsive in the slightest way to anything I might humbly (and hopefully less justifiably) beseech him for.

That is to say, I fervently hope never to be in a position for *my* prayers to be anything near as desperate and justified as the frenzied and desperate entreaties for deliverance (or speedier death) of the innumerable and more-deserving unfortunates cited herein (and yet which, to reiterate, certainly appear not to have been answered).

A Nasty Dialectic Indeed.....

In short, on the one hand contemplation of the Big Bang and its related Wonders is most comforting, because (a) they comprise proof of a Moment of Creation and thus (b) near-proof of a Creator.

But nevertheless, at the risk of the other hand's deep profanity, contemplation of the horrors previously cited make it difficult not to conclude that (a) if God does indeed involve himself in the details of what goes on here on Earth, then (b) he must be akin to a boy playing with the wings of flies.

Or, one can conclude instead that these matters simply can't be dealt with rationally and that faith by definition must be "blind," like a Kierkegaardian "Leap into the Abyss." But, if faith must indeed be blind then one has effectively abdicated use of the intellect that by the grace of God (and Darwin's Natural Selection) we possess. It would take a deep blind faith indeed to think that one's own prayers and entreaties might be answered when these other, far more desperate and deserving ones, evidently went unanswered.

IV. Bacteria to the Rescue

Another relatively recent scientific discovery is that there's a huge amount of life extending for miles under the earth's surface, in the form of Bacteria.

It's undoubtedly been there for hundreds of millions of years, and perhaps billions of years. It may very well be the reason we are here today, since most (and maybe all) of Life on Earth's surface could likely have been extinguished (a) by the large asteroid strikes during Earth's first half of existence, and (b) during the two Global Snowball events that scientists think twice covered the earth's entire surface in a mile or more of ice, first 2 billion years ago and again 650 million years ago.

Indeed, some scientists have estimated that the total biomass of the bacteria living under the Earth's surface exceeds the total biomass of all the life on the surface!

Intellectually Satisfying, but Thin and Malodorous Spiritual Gruel

At least for me, the only possible (and uncomfortably comforting) reconciliation between the deeply conflicting religious implications of (a) the Big Bang, etc versus (b) Auschwitz, etc is to reflect that -- at least on this plane of being -- God's interaction with all of us and our Fate here on earth is likely comparable to our interaction with these bacteria miles below earth's surface. We know this biomass of bacteria is there, but the scales of perception are too far off the charts for us to have any dealings with any of the individual bacteria among the mega-gazillions that are down there.

That is, God exists, we exist and the subterranean bacteria exist, but there seems to be little actual direct interaction, at least on this plane of being, among any the three.

This idea that we are to God as subterranean bacteria are to us is indeed doubly "uncomfortably comforting" in that in addition to resolving -- sort of -- this Nasty Dialectic, it also seems oddly therapeutic in being a refreshing contrast to Mankind's usual "puffed up" sense of cosmic self-importance, such as the idea that Man is made in God's image. As the horrific facts enumerated herein most amply underscore, we had better hope and pray most fervently that God is nothing like us at all.

In short, while God seems to be most manifest indeed in the Creation and Structure of the Universe, he also seems most *un*-manifest in so much of what happens on Earth, and the horrific human behavior cited herein. And it's not just human behavior by any means that's horrific: kids with terminal cancer, people born with grotesquely malformed faces and bodies, the parents of either, etc are ultimately victims of an awful and unjust "godless" fate little less than the victims of the Nazis or the RUF, in the final analysis.

A Cynic's Existential Faith

So, my own personal intellectually satisfying but generally thin, malodorous spiritual gruel is a conception of God as Immanent in the creation and structure of the universe. Thus, looking up to the heavens at night most comfortingly reminds one that there is a God of inconceivable might and grandeur. But, when the rubber hits the road we'd probably best plan to rely solely on ourselves, along with the Bacteria.

Damocles
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