

Although many other women might have left Stephen because of his intolerable attitude toward her, and especially what she represented, she stuck by her husband through everything. It was he who left her for another woman. She tried in vain to reconcile with Stephen—his terms were, he would live at home with his family for part of the week, and the rest of the week he would live ‘with his ladylove’ (p. 574). This was unacceptable to Jane. His selfishness and hedonism had shown through again.

Much of this work is a contrast between a woman deeply conscious of her Christian spirituality, and a man firmly closed to any theistic spirituality. It is also a sober warning against a Christian becoming unequally yoked with an unbeliever in marriage. Jane concluded that faith is the outward expression of one’s spirituality that ‘can make sense of all the wonders of Creation and of all the suffering in the world’ and give ‘substance to all our hopes. However far-reaching our intelligent achievements and however advanced our knowledge of Creation, without faith and a sense of our own spirituality there is only isolation and despair, and the human race is really a lost cause’ (p. 594).

One cannot read this book without truly admiring Jane and feeling the struggle that she faced. It is an important work for all people interested in not only science/religion conflicts, but also the human needs that so many of us possess.

### References

1. As a point comparison, the first American edition of Jonathan Sarfati’s best sellers *Refuting Evolution* and *Refuting Evolution 2* had a press run of 19,472 and 22,494 copies, respectively.

# Designs on the Designer

A Review of  
**Has Science Found  
 God? The Latest  
 Results in the Search  
 for Purpose in the  
 Universe**  
 by Victor J. Stenger  
 Prometheus Books,  
 Amherst, New York, 2003.

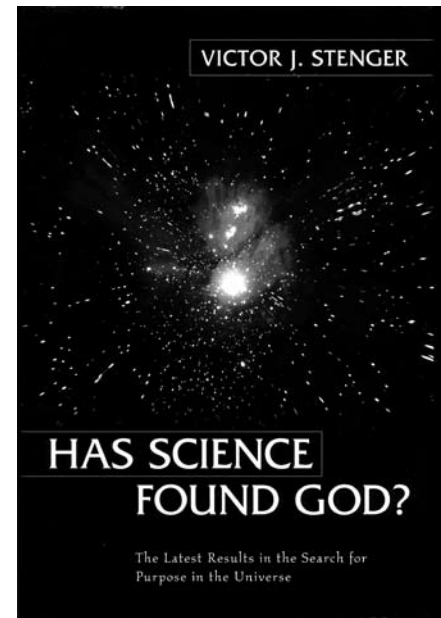
## Lael Weinberger and David Weinberger

Has science found God? With a title like this, you might expect anything, from the ‘God of the big bang’ theology of Hugh Ross to the ‘naturalistic god’ cosmology of Paul Davies. But with Victor Stenger as the author, expect an apologetic for atheism. Victor Stenger is a physicist from the University of Hawaii, who has become known for his energetic promotion of atheism. And this should have been expected from the publisher, Prometheus, that publishes all manner of antitheistic rants and seems to have a monopoly on the absurd ‘Jesus never existed’ thesis.

Not surprisingly, his latest offering answers its title question in the negative. The subtitle is misleading. Stenger is not (and was not) searching for purpose in the universe himself (his purpose in life seems to be to show that there is no purpose). Instead, the book is a string of attacks on various claims for evidence of design, purpose or supernatural involvement in the world.

### What can science prove?

Stenger’s thesis is that if theists are willing to say that science can establish the existence of God ‘to a high degree of certainty’, they must accept the corollary that science can establish ‘to a high degree of certainty’ the non-existence of God (pp. 23, 82). How far Stenger takes



this is indicated by his stated desire to convince agnostics to become atheists (p. 25). Later we will comment on the self-defeating nature of arguments for the non-existence of God. For now, suffice it to say that Stenger has ignored the presuppositional character of the debate. Of course, our position has never been that science ‘proves’ God or the Bible. Rather, we say that it is consistent with and supports God and the Bible.

### Many opponents to Stenger’s antitheism

In Stenger’s desire to defend a purely materialist universe from all angles of attack, he deals with five main groups: young-earth creationists (YECs), old-earth creationists (Hugh Ross *et al.*), Intelligent Design (ID) advocates, mainstream evolutionist Christians, and New Age supernatural phenomena advocates. Obviously, that last group is the ‘odd man’ in the list. The truth or falsity of their claims does not bear directly on the issues of the existence of God or the accuracy of the Bible, and it is not our intent to deal with Stenger’s section on psychic phenomena.

### Occam's Razor

Amidst his varied arguments, one of Stenger's prominent themes is parsimony. The principle of parsimony, or Occam's razor, states that 'a hypothesis should not be asserted, or an entity postulated, if it is not needed to explain anything'.<sup>1</sup> Stenger argues that God is an entity or hypothesis that should only be postulated if a material, natural explanation is completely impossible; in all other events, God is eliminated by the application of Occam's razor. (Ironic that the eponymous William of Ockham (ca. 1285–1349) was a devout Christian!)

It would be nice to know what it would take for Stenger to say that this point is reached. As it is, Stenger is willing to continually multiply naturalistic hypotheses, some of which he admits may be unverifiable (pp. 159, 188), to show that science can someday expect to explain the problem, and thus avoid the introduction of a supernatural entity. Why these hypotheses are to be preferred to the introduction of God is simply that Stenger's hypotheses agree with his naturalistic presupposition.

He appears oblivious to the fact that his reasoning operates from the *premise* of naturalism; it does not *prove* naturalism. And it may be worth noting the obvious: Occam's razor only works on hypothetical entities.<sup>2</sup> For example, if someone called the Battle of Hastings a myth, and provided a more parsimonious means by which the Normans could have dominated Saxon England (not requiring a battle), they have certainly not disproved the reality of the battle. Likewise, Stenger cannot expect to make a very powerful argument against the existence of God by simply proposing scientific 'just-so' stories that are more parsimonious in his own eyes. (We must also note that there is a difference between the way science can be applied to historical events and the way it can be applied to repeatable observations.) And of course, whether any of Stenger's stories are plausible to begin with is a question we shall examine shortly.

### Fanatics?

Before Stenger's readers get to more serious discussions, they must read Stenger's vehement *ad hominem* attack on creationists themselves. In laying an 'historical' foundation, Stenger regurgitates the discredited atheist version of the Galileo affair,<sup>3,4</sup> and references Andrew White's discredited<sup>5</sup> *History of the Warfare of Science With Theology* as a 'monumental' work on the issue (pp. 44–45). Not a promising beginning to the chapter.

In this chapter (the only one in which young-earth creationists are 'seriously' mentioned) Stenger does not seriously consider any scientific arguments. This is the chapter of assertion, not argument. First, he parrots some standard 'proofs' of evolution: evolution = change, so fruit flies evolve and bacteria evolve; DNA shows everything is related; evolution informs medicine (pp. 48–49). Nothing that creationists haven't already refuted (multiple times).<sup>6</sup>

Incidentally, Stenger appears unfamiliar with young-earth creationist literature more recent than 1979 (the date of the most recent YEC book in his footnotes, pp. 72–75). From this, Stenger sounds the fanfare to introduce the creationists: 'those who regard these scientific facts as a threat to faith have chosen to distort and misrepresent them to the public' (p. 51). What would he say to such notable YECs as Copernicus, Galileo, Kepler or Newton?

He calls the young earth a typical 'outrageous or easily falsified' statement of creationists (p. 63). His theme is that creation science is more of a political movement than anything else, trying to impose Christianity on the populace. He introduces Intelligent Design as a more sophisticated 'stealth creationism' with the same political agenda (pp. 62–63). In summary, both groups, Stenger says, are scared of evolution, and are willing to fight it 'by every means at their disposal, even when those means are less than scrupulous' (p. 68). In character with the rest of the chapter, this is

another assertion without argument or documentation.

### God of the big bang?

The next chapter is cleverly titled 'No Reason to Believe' (from Hugh Ross's organization, *Reasons to Believe*). Stenger's critique of Ross highlights two points that young-earth creationists have raised as well. First, Ross's use of the big bang as a quick and easy proof of God is naïve. (It is not viewed as such by most cosmologists, contrary to the impression often given by Ross.) Second, Ross's scholarship is sloppy (pp. 84–85).<sup>7</sup> In a later chapter Stenger deals with Gerald Schroeder, a Jewish physicist who uses the big bang for apologetics purposes similar to Ross, but for the sake of topicality it can be mentioned here. Again, Stenger's main point has been noted by the creationists as well:<sup>8</sup> the big bang, contrary to Schroeder, does not fit with Genesis, even in Schroeder's stretched timescale (pp. 165–169).

Stenger tends to ramble, and from Ross he meanders about until launching into an attack on the design (teleological) argument. His response is mostly rhetoric (much less sophisticated than that of Michael Ruse<sup>9</sup>). He confidently asserts that if you believe that God did not have to be created, it would be better to just accept the universe did not need to be created (pp. 93–95). He mentions the analogy used by creationists of a tornado assembling a Boeing 747 airplane.

"How ridiculous!" they shout ... [but] they never bother to try to describe the kinds of cosmic winds by which something infinitely more complex—God himself [*sic*—was assembled' (p. 94).

This rhetorical jibe supposes that God has a beginning. But God is eternal; He cannot have a beginning, and hence cannot have a cause.<sup>10</sup> Stenger does not want to bring up the issue of eternity, because without an eternal God, the alternative is an eternal universe. This does not sound

so convincing, even to those who don't know the philosophical arguments against an eternal universe.<sup>11</sup> Stenger cannot accept a god and a universe that are fundamentally different. He either posits a created universe and a created god, or an uncreated eternal universe and no God. Also, God is not complex but *simple*, because He is not composed of parts.

### Information and complexity

Next, Stenger comes to a more serious discussion of the Intelligent Design movement's scientific arguments. Even here, Stenger cannot resist making it personal by starting with an account of Baylor University's internal commotion over ID studies. Baylor, which has been called a 'BINO' (Baptist In Name Only) university, dismissed Dembski in 2000, fearing that Dembski's denial of naturalism would lose the academic respectability they desire.<sup>12</sup> Naturally atheists like Stenger remain contemptuous anyway.

Then Stenger takes an extended look at ID mathematician William Dembski's probability filters and measures of information, with which Dembski has tried to distinguish design from chance. Stenger devotes a long and technical discussion to whether or not Dembski's information equation is the standard Shannon definition or not. In doing so, Stenger leads the reader away from the larger issue, the semantic aspects of information. Shannon information is a quantitative measure of information. As Shannon himself pointed out,

'Frequently the messages have *meaning*; that is they refer to or are correlated according to some system with certain physical or conceptual entities. These semantic aspects of communication are irrelevant to the engineering problem.'<sup>13</sup>

Shannon's concern was with engineering, not semantics. But since meaning is central to the debate in the field of information science and origins,<sup>14</sup> Shannon's purely quantitative measure of information is largely irrelevant.<sup>15</sup> Stenger's technical

exposition of information theory may impress readers, but it misses the issue of semantics entirely.

Stenger's example of increasing information by chance is very odd as well: magnets being blown by the wind, so that their new arrangement requires more bits of information to describe. (Similarly, we note that Stenger's book would require more bits of Shannon information to describe it after it has gone through a shredder!) It is hard to see how his example would apply to biological information in any meaningful sense.

### Stenger's creation

Stenger next spends several chapters exploring aspects of his vision of a godless universe. Oddly, after so much talk about the importance of parsimony, Stenger's universe is rife with unobserved and unobservable entities.

Perhaps his most important section is his discussion of the *kalâm* cosmological argument. This argument states (1) everything that has a beginning has a cause; (2) the universe had a beginning; (3) the universe had a cause.<sup>16</sup> Stenger is concerned to do away with a beginning of the universe. First, he briefly criticizes causality in general (of course, taking a very controversial position). Second, he proposes the existence of negative time, which keeps time itself at a sort of equilibrium or symmetry, arguing that 'none of the basic principles of physics includes a preference for one direction in time over the opposite direction' (p. 175). Reworking the concept of time itself is not a new manoeuvre for escaping the implications of the *kalâm* argument,<sup>17</sup> but frankly, we are not sure how seriously we should take a proposal like this. It would seem to be, even in principle, beyond the realm of scientific testing or observation. Occam's razor could easily slice away this imaginary concept. Besides, it does not even solve the ultimate problem, for Stenger ought now to explain the beginning of negative time.

He also gets into the speculation regarding dark matter and dark energy,

two unobserved entities that can likewise get the razor in absence of further evidence. He says dark matter and dark energy are great solutions to a problem for the big bang (pp. 157–159). We say the problem is still unsolved, and the absence of dark matter and dark energy only highlights another problem for big bang advocates.<sup>18,19</sup>

Yet another totally hypothetical entity supported by Stenger is the existence of multiple universes. Again, this is not a new idea. Once the universe is postulated to have begun as a quantum fluctuation, the question arises why others do not likewise do so. Why would it only happen once? Stenger speaks up for the possibility of other, simultaneously existing universes, which might have different constants (pp. 183–184). Presumably, this would be impossible to observationally verify. Since Stenger has said that reality is 'composed of objects that kick back at you when you kick them' (p. 191), we must wonder how scientists will ever be able to 'kick' one of these universes.

Finally, Stenger spends a chapter attempting to explain physical laws in a godless universe. He 'introduces' an atom into 'the void' and proclaims, lo and behold, that it has no special position, no special direction, and no special moment in time. Thus, Stenger says, it shows symmetry principles that are the foundations of physical laws. The argument is clever, but not particularly convincing. Particularly problematic is his 'void' underlying the 'experiment'.

'The void, as I visualize it, is not "nothing" in the absolute sense . . .

I will define "void" as that minimal arena that permits any experiment at all' (p. 192).

At first glance he appears to be starting with an ontologically real 'void', which he defines in terms of emptiness. If this is the case, obvious questions arise. Where did this void come from? (We do not see how it could have come from the big bang quantum fluctuation, which presumably took place in the 'void'.) Are we to suppose that this vacuous space is an eternally existing entity?

But later, Stenger further confuses the discussion by stating, ‘This does not mean that the void is a real substance or object. It does not kick back when we kick it’ (p. 212). Whatever status Stenger intends for his ‘void’, it leaves much to be desired.

### Not impressed by theistic evolution

Stenger devotes his final chapter to a discussion of theistic evolutionists. Stenger is not impressed with compromises between evolution and creation, such as advocated by John Polkinghorne and Arthur Peacocke. In Stenger’s eyes, theistic evolutionists are in a catch-22: If they accept all of evolution (a naturalistic explanation of everything), they have acknowledged there is no need or evidence for a creator. If they do not accept all of evolution, they are scientifically uninformed or misled. This could serve as a warning for those Christians who believe that theistic evolution makes it easier for atheists to come to Christ.

### Futile endeavour

As we noted at the start, Stenger’s attempt to disprove God rests on the faulty premise that God is capable of being proved or disproved by specific scientific evidences.<sup>20</sup> We have mostly addressed Stenger’s scientific arguments against a Creator, which do not hold up to close scrutiny. Most of his scientific arguments are either old, or disproved, or highly speculative. He repeats numerous old atheistic canards (such as the claim that the Bible teaches a flat earth<sup>21</sup>).

But we would like to point out that on a deeper level, Stenger’s entire approach is a classic case of misunderstanding the nature of presuppositions. We start with God, and interpret nature in light of Him (cf. Hebrews 11:6). Stenger starts without God, and interprets nature without Him. Both are faith commitments. (Stenger’s zeal to convince agnostics to become atheists is very evangelistic.) But Stenger challenges us to prove to

him that God exists based on his own ground rules of a naturalistic faith. Yes, we are convinced that the evidences of science weigh in favour of supernatural creation as described in Genesis. But neither side will convince the other on ‘evidences’ alone; the battle is much deeper than this. It goes down to the philosophical precommitments through which we interpret everything, including the evidences themselves.

Stenger’s book is not easy reading. He makes rapid jumps from popular-level explanations to technical discourses to boisterous rhetorical flights with unsubstantiated accusations. He will probably leave the average reader feeling left in the dust as he gets into esoteric concepts (negative time and the like). This leaves readers willing to accept Stenger’s conclusions as coming from someone who knows a lot. But for those willing to look closely, Stenger has produced much that does not hold up, quite a bit that is irrelevant, and little that is new in his quest to debunk the Designer.

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