

Craig on the Resurrection: A Defense

Stephen T. Davis,
Claremont McKenna College

Abstract: *This article is a rebuttal to Robert G. Cavin and Carlos A. Colombetti’s article, “Assessing the Resurrection Hypothesis: Problems with Craig’s Inference to the Best Explanation,” which argues that the Standard Model of current particle physics entails that non-physical things (like a supernatural God or a supernaturally resurrected body) can have no causal contact with the physical universe. As such, they argue that William Lane Craig’s resurrection hypothesis is not only incompatible with the notion of Jesus physically appearing to the disciples, but the resurrection hypothesis is significantly limited in both its explanatory scope and explanatory power. This article seeks to demonstrate why their use of the Standard Model does not logically entail a rejection of the physical resurrection of Jesus when considering the scope and limitations of science itself.*

Keywords: Resurrection Hypothesis, Standard Model, Particle Physics, William Lane Craig, Explanatory Power, Explanatory Scope, Robert Greg Cavin, Carlos A. Colombetti

Introduction

RECENTLY, ROBERT G. CAVIN and Carlos A. Colombetti have criticized the case that William Lane Craig has made in favor of the resurrection of Jesus.¹ Craig argues that the claim “God supernaturally raised Jesus from the dead” (which we can call *R*) is more probable than any other competing hypothesis given the evidence of the empty tomb, the appearances of the risen Jesus, and the origin of the Christian church (we will call this evidence *E*).² In presenting his “inference to the best explanation” argument, Craig makes use of seven criteria developed by philosopher of history, C. Behan McCullagh, for determining which hypothesis of several is the best. They include the ability to imply further statements about observable data, explanatory scope,

¹ Robert Greg Cavin and Carlos A. Colombetti, “Assessing the Resurrection Hypothesis: Problems with Craig’s Inference to the Best Explanation,” *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 11, no. 2 (Summer 2019): 205–28, [dx.doi.org/10.24204/ejpr.v11i2.2836](https://doi.org/10.24204/ejpr.v11i2.2836).

² Craig has written about the resurrection of Jesus on several occasions; Cavin and Colombetti concentrate on just two of his texts, viz., William Lane Craig, *Assessing the New Testament Evidence for the Historicity of the Resurrection of Jesus*, Studies in the Bible and Early Christianity 16 (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1989) and *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, 3rd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2008).



explanatory power, plausibility, whether the hypothesis is *ad hoc*, whether the hypothesis is disconfirmed by fewer accepted beliefs, and whether the hypothesis exceeds its rivals in fulfilling the first six criteria.

Cavin and Colombetti raise several objections to the case that Crag makes. Some of them are, if not relatively trivial, at least insufficient to overthrow Craig's overall thesis. For example, I think the two critics are right about prior probability being crucial in determining plausibility, but that does little to damage Craig's overall case. I will comment on just a few of what I take to be their more important objections.

First, they argue that simply showing that the competing naturalistic explanations of *E* (e.g. conspiracy, wrong tomb, hallucination, legend, etc.) are probabilistically inferior to *R* does not by itself show that *R* is probable. *R* may still be highly improbable. What Craig needs, they say, is an additional hypothesis to the effect that "the set of rival hypotheses being considered is jointly exhaustive of all possible alternatives."³

This is largely true, but it amounts to a feeble objection to Craig's argument.⁴ Nonbelievers in *R* have been raising objections to *R* for almost two thousand years; suppose that Craig (or anybody) has shown that all the available naturalistic hypotheses are less probable than *R*. Then believers in *R* would be within their intellectual rights in saying, "Unless and until somebody comes up with a new competing explanation of the evidence (one that we have not already disposed of), the most probable explanation of the evidence is *R*." That is, believers in *R* are within a believer's rights in holding that the available alternative explanations of the evidence are indeed jointly exhaustive of all at least minimally plausible alternatives.

I say "minimally plausible" because in fact we *can* think of alternative explanations that have not yet been disposed of. For instance, someone could argue that just after Jesus was buried, astronauts from the planet Tralfalmdore secretly stole and disposed of the body; one of their number, cleverly disguised as Jesus, convinced certain people that he was Christ risen from the dead; and the story spread from there. But of course, that hypothesis is not minimally plausible and can safely be ignored.

I would argue that if Craig has shown that the alternative explanations that are out there in the literature are all improbable, that is an epistemologically significant achievement. At one point, Cavin and Colombetti hint that Craig does not argue against the "legend" hypothesis. But he does, in

³ Cavin and Colombetti, "Assessing the Resurrection Hypothesis," 208.

⁴ In my opinion, the statement is true except for the phrase, "all possible alternatives," which is far too large a claim. See the next paragraph.

fact, argue against it. He argues that the earliest Christians started preaching the resurrection almost immediately; accordingly, there was insufficient time for a legend to develop.⁵ Moreover, the idea that the resurrection of Jesus is a legend is in fact part of, or a sub-set of, alternative hypotheses that he considers in some detail (i.e. it is not a separate hypothesis). In any case, the claim that Craig does not argue against the legend hypothesis is false.

Second, Cavin and Colombetti criticize Craig for not ranking the seven criteria that he employs. That is, he never says which of his criteria are more weighty or important than others.⁶ Is plausibility the most important criterion (as Michael Licona, another defender of *R*, says), or something else? Cavin and Colombetti go on to state, “Thus it remains unclear how to deal with inevitable cases in which rival theories satisfy different subsets of the criteria to varying degrees—*e.g.*, high plausibility and low power versus low plausibility and high power.”⁷ This seems to be a fair point, but it amounts to a serious problem for Craig’s argument only if this sort of variation happens in evaluating *R*, which has yet to be shown. My own opinion is that Craig should endorse Licona’s view that plausibility is the most important criterion. Despite the fact that implausible reports are sometimes true (e.g. Russell’s paradox), we should reject implausible theories even if they satisfy other criteria.

Third, Cavin and Colombetti criticize Craig’s arguments that *R* is superior to the alternative explanations of *E* in terms of each of Craig’s seven criteria. I will deal only with one of the points that they make in this context, but I should note here that Cavin and Colombetti opt for using Bayes’ Theorem in the current debate, which Craig does not. I have no problem with this approach; using Bayesian methods and prior probability in investigating *R* is perfectly acceptable. On the other hand, while the formalism of Bayesian methods can certainly improve clarity, I think they add nothing substantive over non-Bayesian methods in this debate.

The point that I want to discuss is Cavin and Colombetti’s critique of Craig’s argument about the explanatory scope of *R* versus the naturalistic explanations of *E*. The superior scope of a hypothesis is its ability to imply a greater variety of observable data than its rival hypotheses. They argue: 1) that Craig mainly criticizes the scope of the alternative explanations and says little about the scope of *R* itself, which is an accurate observation; and 2) that *R*

⁵ I will not try to evaluate here whether Craig’s arguments against the legend hypothesis are convincing.

⁶ This is not quite true. Craig cites McCullagh to the effect that explanatory scope and power are the most important criteria.

⁷ Cavin and Colombetti, “Assessing the Resurrection Hypothesis,” 212.

explains *none* of the points in *E*. In fact, they argue that *R* is *inconsistent* with *E*. And here I confess that I am maximally puzzled.

It is true that Craig does not say much in support of the scope of *R*; he just asserts that *R* can explain all three parts of *E* (the empty tomb, the appearances, and the origin of Christianity) while each of the natural alternatives to *R* explain, at most, one or two of them. I agree with Craig on that point. It is also true that in their details, the stories of the empty tomb and the appearances of the risen Jesus in the New Testament go far beyond the simple claim that we are calling *R*. But why might that constitute a problem?

Cavin and Colombetti correctly note that Craig will reply by appealing to certain auxiliary hypotheses regarding post-resurrection activities of Jesus, hypotheses that correspond in content to the New Testament accounts of the discovery of the empty tomb and the experiences of the risen Jesus. But then Cavin and Colombetti argue that *R* is “*incompatible* with these supplementary hypotheses.” They continue, “The scope of *R* is, thus, necessarily limited to the discovery of the empty tomb (or cross or grave) and thus must exclude, ironically, the experiences of the risen Jesus had by the witnesses.”⁸ This is, of course, so far a complete *non sequitur*, except that Cavin and Colombetti go on to explain what they mean in terms of the next point that I will consider, a point about physicality and the resurrection.

Fourth, Cavin and Colombetti point out that Craig’s account of the resurrection, following the relevant New Testament texts, depicts the resurrected body of Jesus as both physical and non-physical. It is physical in the sense of being capable of being seen, heard, touched, physically located, etc. It is non-physical in the sense of being a “supernatural body,” existing in its own non-physical universe where it can pass through walls, as well as materialize and dematerialize out of the physical universe. This, they flatly say, is impossible. But we then wonder: Why so?

Cavin and Colombetti next introduce the Standard Model of current particle physics (which, like them, we can call *SM*). They are thinking of quantum field theory and general relativity in which physical reality consists of quarks, electrons, and other particles gravitationally and electromagnetically interacting with each other. This theory, they correctly say, is very strongly confirmed; they even cite theoretical physicist Sean Carroll as insisting that *SM* will never be rejected. Naturally, I have no quarrel with *SM*; so far as I know, Carroll may even be correct about its irreplaceability. Of course, given the history of science and the limited longevity of most scientific theories,

⁸ Cavin and Colombetti, “Assessing the Resurrection Hypothesis,” 216.

Carroll's claim seems a bit of a stretch. This is especially true since *SM* has serious limitations, which Cavin and Colombetti acknowledge. But I have no business arguing against *SM* and no desire to do so.

The reason that Cavin and Colombetti say Craig's notion of the resurrection of Jesus is impossible is because *SM* entails that non-physical things "can have absolutely no contact with" the physical universe as described by *SM*.⁹ That is, only those things that are physical can interact causally with things that are physical. As they graphically and baldly put this point, "*SM* entails $\sim R$ and thereby disconfirms *R* to the maximal degree."¹⁰

And I here have to wonder where Cavin and Colombetti learned that non-physical things can have absolutely no contact with physical things. They point out that Craig will protest that the resurrection of Jesus was a supernatural event brought about by God and that, accordingly, *SM* is irrelevant to the event. But, they say, this is confused because according to *SM* *only those things that are physical can interact with things that are physical*. The two critics point out that "one finds no mention of supernatural intervention in connection with the equations of *SM* (and of physics more generally) in the reference works, research journals, and textbooks of physics."¹¹

It sounds as if they believe that science ultimately decides whether or not there is a non-physical realm, or (if there is such a realm) whether it can causally interact with our ordinary physical one. Science apparently decides whether or not an intervening God exists. And I would just ask Cavin and Colombetti to explain what scientist in what lab or in what academic paper has ever proved that there are no miracles (in the sense of God [a non-physical being] bringing about events in the natural world that apart from divine action would not have occurred). Where does that interesting bit of information appear in the equations of *SM*?

Science studies natural events; it confines itself to the physical realm as described by *SM*. Who could quarrel with that? But how does it follow from that point that there is no realm not understood in terms of *SM*, or that that realm (if it exists) cannot causally interact with ordinary physical events? We are still looking at a total *non sequitur*.¹²

⁹ Cavin and Colombetti, "Assessing the Resurrection Hypothesis," 218.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 225–26.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 222.

¹² Actually, Cavin and Colombetti could have used any physical theory (e.g. Newtonian mechanics) to make their point. The only difference is that there are probably no physicists who will argue (as Sean Carroll does for *SM*) that Newtonian mechanics will never be rejected. Or our two critics could have focused just on thermodynamics. There have been people who have argued that thermodynamics rules out any divine intervention in the physical

Consider these arguments: Science only describes physical events; ergo, no non-physical events occur. Or perhaps: science only describes causal interactions among physical events; ergo, there can be no causal interactions between physical events and non-physical events. Does that line of reasoning make sense? I agree, by the way, with Cavin and Colombetti when they deny that *SM* is “naturalistic metaphysics.” I agree because *SM* does *not* entail “only those things that are physical can interact with things that are physical.” That thesis *would be* naturalistic metaphysics, yet it is supplied not by *SM* but only by our two critics.

Do Cavin and Colombetti not realize that there are lots of scientists—and even particle physicists—who are believing Christians? Such folk affirm *SM*, but believe that God created the universe together with its natural laws and regularities. They believe that God has the ability and occasionally the intention to bring about events in the natural world that would not occur otherwise—events like bringing a dead man back to life in a body that has both natural and supernatural properties. Perhaps some of them would appeal—as some non-scientist apologists do—to the indeterminacy of quantum mechanics to allow a crack through which God could act causally undetected in the physical world. Of course, quantum mechanics is obviously not incompatible with *SM*.

Do our two critics really believe that science has proven that the resurrection of Jesus, as described in the New Testament and as defended by William Lane Craig, did not occur? If so, that belief is, well, rather breathtaking. I conclude that Craig’s defense of the resurrection of Jesus, as well as the resurrection of Jesus itself, still stands. Cavin and Colombetti have done little to overturn them.¹³

world because then there would be new inputs of energy into the system; but that argument would fare no better than the *SM* argument.

¹³ For the rejoinder to this article, see Robert Greg Cavin and Carlos A. Colombetti, “The Implausibility and Low Explanatory Power of the Resurrection Hypothesis—With a Rejoinder to Stephen T. Davis,” *Socio-Historical Examination of Religion and Ministry* 2, no. 1 (Spring 2020): 37–94, <https://doi.org/10.33929/sherm.2020.vol2.no1.04>.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Cavin, Robert Greg, and Carlos A. Colombetti. "Assessing the Resurrection Hypothesis: Problems with Craig's Inference to the Best Explanation." *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 11, no. 2 (Summer 2019): 205–28. <http://dx.doi.org/10.24204/ejpr.v11i2.2836>.
- . "The Implausibility and Low Explanatory Power of the Resurrection Hypothesis—With a Rejoinder to Stephen T. Davis." *Socio-Historical Examination of Religion and Ministry* 2, no. 1 (Spring 2020): 37–94. <https://doi.org/10.33929/sherm.2020.vol2.no1.04>.
- Craig, William Lane. *Assessing the New Testament Evidence for the Historicity of the Resurrection of Jesus*. Studies in the Bible and Early Christianity 16. Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1989.
- . *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*. 3rd ed. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2008.

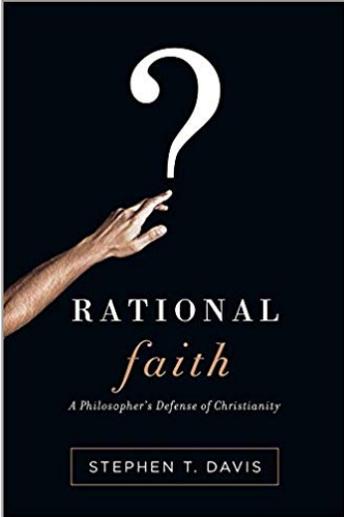
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stephen T. Davis is the Russell K. Pitzer Professor of Philosophy, emeritus, at Claremont McKenna College.

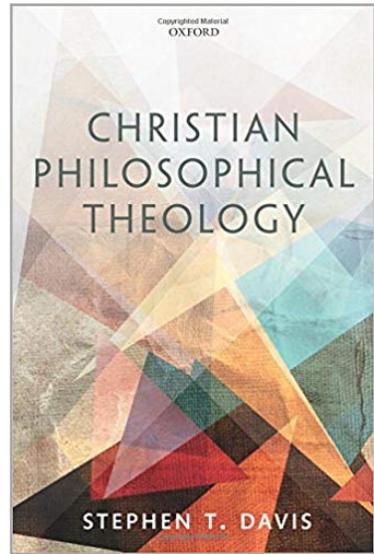
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Eric Yang and Gary Habermas for their helpful comments.

MORE FROM THE AUTHOR



Rational Faith: A Philosopher's Defense of Christianity
InterVarsity Press, 2016



Christian Philosophical Theology
Oxford University Press, 2006

