



LAURENCE KRAUSS, OR THE "INCESTUOUS" UNIVERSE

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There is something extraordinary about astrophysicists. They have a rare gift of writing about very complicated problems in language intelligible to a general audience. Laurence Krauss, author of the best-selling *A Universe from Nothing*, is no exception. Just like his colleagues, he has a gift for clarity and gives his readers true pleasure in expanding their scientific horizons. However, what makes Krauss stand out from the crowd of his fellow physicists is his openly anti-religious fervor and rudeness.

Rudeness is, so to speak, his *carte de visite*, the way Krauss is. It is customary for him to preface his public appearances to religious audiences with, "I am sorry if I will offend someone...", and, with the joy of a spoiled child who thinks because he is bright he will be excused for being rude, he prepares to spit on his audience for being ignorant, stupid or ridiculous. ["I will ridicule nonsense wherever I find it."](#) And, since religion is, in his view, the biggest "non-sense," Krauss travels the world to engage in debates with religious people of all stripes to expose religion for being what it is.

Physics is Krauss' weapon in this crusade against Anti-Rationalism. And he uses it well against Christians and Muslims, who stubbornly wave at him the fairy-tale about creation of the world as it is presented in their Holy Books. Exclamatory phrases, such as "You do not know anything," "I am sorry but you are ignorant," "what you said is nonsense," are in Krauss' mouth like saliva dripping from an angry bulldog's jaw. Watching him, one cannot help feel sad seeing his opponents beaten to the ground and humiliated.

Is Krauss really as bright as he believes himself to be, and are his arguments as strong as he thinks? All I can say is that apart from his truly informative exposés about the universe, what Krauss says is non-sense, and what he thinks are arguments are banalities, worn-out PC clichés which are more dangerous than the nonsense he is trying to combat in the name of "rationality" and "humanity's dignity."

Here is an example of Krauss' nonsense. In Australia, where he came upon the invitation of a Muslim organization, he entered the lecture hall for a debate, and when, upon seeing men and women separated, he became truly hysterical and refused to speak before "the order" of mixing the sexes was introduced.

When Krauss' debater, Hamza Tzortzis, a well-disposed young Muslim scholar, whom Krauss "debated" by humiliating him, asked in desperation: if you do not believe in absolute grounding for moral values, can you tell us "why is incest wrong?" this is what [Krauss responded:](#)

"It is not clear to me that it is wrong... The point is, most societies have a taboo on incest and it is an empirical one. Generally, incest produces genetic defects. So, in general, there is a physiological reason and a societal one, why incest is wrong. But, if you ask me the question, and this is an interesting question... it is because societies want to persist. But if you ask me a priori, for example, the question, if a brother and sister love each other and use contraception, is there something absolutely morally wrong about that, and, by the way, they did it once and it did not affect anything else... I do not think there is any absolute condemnation at that. In fact, if they love each other, and they go off and it does not affect anything else... would I recommend it? No. Would I be particularly happy about it? No. But would I would be willing to listen to arguments that are rational, maybe."

Let me take apart what Professor Krauss said to help him understand consequences of what he said since he does not seem to, and the consequences are not trivial for a moral fabric of a society to ignore them.

The traditional argument, according to which incest as taboo was established in all societies because it causes genetic defects, is highly implausible. First, we have no evidence – written records, legislation, and such -- that would tell us that incest had stopped because primitive societies discovered that it led to genetic complications. First, the discovery of such defects would not have been immediately obvious, and, second, would have to be discovered and accounted for by scientific methods which did not exist in pre-homo sapiens. What the traditional argument does is inscribe our Modern scientific world-view onto the constitutions of societies that by no stretch of imagination could think along scientific lines. There is as much evidence for Krauss' claim as for the existence of Amazons.

Be that as it may, there are many other potential illnesses and defects much more obvious to the eye that could have been forbidden on account of a danger to survival of societies, and yet, they were not interdicted. No society, as far as I know, has forbidden schizophrenics, or epileptics, or lepers, or dwarfs to have children (Nor do we!) despite the fact that they do contribute to the deterioration of the gene pool. Furthermore, neither schizophrenia nor epilepsy nor autism, for instance, is considered taboo while incest is. And the question is, why? Before I answer this question, let me raise a few more points that Krauss' answer addresses.

Krauss' second argument that societies want to survive is weak, too. In the grand scheme of things, all species want to survive and incest is not uncommon among animals, but among humans it is a taboo. "Infidelity" to one's mate in the animal kingdom is normal but among humans it is hardly tolerated by one's mate and considered morally unacceptable. In short, animal behavior and thus science is hardly a

guide to human social and moral life. If Krauss is convinced that survival is behind taboos, he must accept the corollary to his claim that says that since homosexuals cannot have children, incest interdiction would not apply to them.

Third, the literary style of the Biblical Ten Commandments, for instance, would easily lend itself to incest interdiction (Thou shall not commit incest), and yet, incest is not mentioned there. It is a puzzling omission given the fact that adultery, theft, coveting, inconsequential for defects, play a prominent role in the Commandments. We can assume that incest was a taboo which people instinctively understood but which did not require a special interdiction.

Fourth, even if we leave the Judeo-Christian universe with its God which in Krauss' mind is responsible for much of our morally defective outlook, we do not enter Krauss' universe but we bump into the same moral dilemma. Let's take a literary record from a different tradition that tackled incest in an explicit way – the Greek tradition during Classical period. Sophocles' story of Oedipus tackles the incestuous relationship of son and mother, which, to remind professor Krauss, took place in the absence of any knowledge of what their true relationship was.

The play ends with the mother Jocasta's self-inflicted death and Oedipus' blinding himself. Neither he nor she knew that they were related, and yet Sophocles makes them atone for being in such a relationship. Why did Sophocles think Jocasta should kill herself and Oedipus should take out his eyes? There is only one reason: the Greeks thought the Universe is a moral fabric which no individual can violate, even unknowingly. The point is all the more interesting given the fact that the Greek religion did not have a God who is the source of moral values, the way Judaism, Christianity and Islam have.

The instinctive understanding of the play is testified by its timeless popularity. Oedipus Rex is one of the seven tragedies, out of over the one hundred and twenty that Sophocles wrote, that survived the passage of twenty five centuries. Why? The Greek and later audiences understood the play because, unlike Laurence Krauss, they shared the same human moral disposition.

I can easily imagine professor Krauss standing up from his seat in the fifth century Athenian theater screaming in his typical hysterical style: the end of the play is stupid ; don't you see that what Oedipus and Jocasta did is crazy; they should have stayed married and happily rule their kingdom.

Should we assume that Krauss condones incest? Granted, he was speaking spontaneously and had little time to think about it. When his opponent looked for his last argument like a drowning man looking for a straw, and threw incest in his way, Krauss was taken by surprise. But Krauss' distinguishes between traditional and a priori arguments. While the first one is not necessarily what he believes, he is clear that he sees nothing absolutely wrong with it. He says that he would not recommend it, but it is like saying that I would not eat this particular dish because I am not fond of it but I do not mind if someone else orders it. True, *de gustibus non disputandum* but there are certain kinds of food humans do not eat, just like we do not do certain things the Nazis did: lampshades of human skin, for example.

Krauss' rumbling about "genetics," "survival" and "love" is a desperate way out of a rationally hopeless situation but is consistent with his other pronouncements on [other occasions](#): "You will make bad policies if your policies are based on [religious] fairy-tales that are untrue. You will put women in bags, you will kill homosexuals or you might not allow them to marry, you will do that on the basis of ideas that are clearly ridiculous." Accordingly, we should assume that because all or almost all policies informed by religious or theological considerations are dangerous or pernicious for societies, policies based on Krauss' rational world-view must by definition be good for society.

Let's see. Krauss' third argument, about love between members of the same family is a piece of sentimental demagoguery. It says that "love" between members of one's own family is a reason "to consider" incest as a legitimate form of sexual relationship, provided that we do not procreate. What Krauss says in effect is that as long as we do not lower the quality of our species' genetic pool, any kind of love, and implicitly any kind of relationship, should be considered as legitimate – and, therefore, implicitly embraced by society (the opposite would be a sign of a lack of openness) and consequently legalized by the state. The only conclusion one can reach is that in Krauss' "rational" universe anything goes.

Consistent with his suppositions, future societies might embrace sexual and marital relationships based on incest, polygamy, bestiality, or all of them in different configurations, and all based on Krauss' conviction that individual choice by definition is rational since no form of interdiction is a priori possible. The opposite would be a sign of intolerance and religious bigotry.

What is troubling about Krauss' nonsense is that the only criterion against incest is genetic defects. And if so, it would be only prudent to protect the species against all forms of genetic aberrations. What it comes down to in practice is empowering the state with supervision regarding sexual reproduction among its members. In short, it would be a totalitarian nightmare based on rational calculation of the

genetic pool. Kraussian rationality comes awfully close to the Nazi form of rationality, which allowed for sterilization of genetically defective people and the Spartan idea of throwing off the cliff the weaklings.

Because Professor Krauss failed to come up with an argument against incest, one can construct such an argument for him. It says that family relationships are based on piety and hierarchy that require respect. Love among family members is more like agape or philia, which connotes affection, not eros that abrogates hierarchy. Incest interdiction is unlikely to stem from society's fear for survival, while the destruction of hierarchy between parents, children, siblings, the elderly and the young, is a sure way of destroying society in the name of individual choice and equality which underlie Krauss' crusade.

Hierarchy, like respect, is not contractual and can neither be renounced nor can be broken at will; it is based on unwritten but implied obligations (or piety, if you will) that we have towards each other as members of family and human community, which transcends animalistic needs. This is what religion is about, and this is what Laurence Krauss fails to understand.

Krauss' Anti-Nonsense crusade, the implications of which he clearly does not understand, does not augment the realm of rationality in public realm but, contrary to his own belief, increases the amount of nonsense since it grants every individual's whim the status of the equally rational choices, the supposition which clearly is truly non-nonsensical.

Let me be clear, there are things that Krauss is very good at and should be commended for, and this is bringing the science of the universe to a general audience. Everyone who wants to learn about new theories of how the universe works should read his books. However, what he has to say about religion, social matters and morality is secular bigotry in disguise of a rational argument. His concept of rationality looks to me like a piece of Swiss cheese through which one can drive a truck.

The question is, of course, why is Krauss so vocal and active in his anti-Nonsense crusade and why do religionists debate him? Like many scientists, Krauss truly cares about science and displays a genuine zeal in bringing physics to "the people." In this he reminds one of his fellow traveler Richard Dawkins, author of *The Selfish Gene* and, more recently, his anti-religious manifesto *God's Delusion*. Like Dawkins, he truly believes that religion is a problem to the propagation of science among young people keeping them intolerant. In this Krauss is a faithful follower of Voltaire, D'Alembert and Jefferson, who also saw it as their duty to ridicule religion in the name of Reason.

This was over two hundred years ago, and the Enlightenment thinkers can be excused for cherishing

the sweet dream of the unlimited power of Reason as a beacon and tool in politics and morality. Over two hundred years later, after numerous and desperate attempts to come up with morality independent of religion, states based on rational ideologies, all we've got is Professor Krauss, a man who repeats almost verbatim eighteenth-century banalities believing in his own originality.

Why is Krauss listened to by large audiences? Partly because he is a good entertainer and passionate about his message; partly because he fulfills a social need among skeptical public with arguments that bear the semblance of objectivity. Even though he does not say anything new, they listen to him because he expresses their sentiments in language of "openness." But there is another explanation. Each generation has public skeptics, agnostics, and atheists, who, armed with a hammer of Rationality, pound religionists in the hope that if they keep pounding them harder the latter will eventually change their minds.

This is not so and is unlikely to bring about the desired effect. Those who know the history of disbelief since the Enlightenment know that it is an embarrassingly uneventful history and it used only two arguments in a few hundred years. Neither of each advanced the debate, or destroyed the opponent. The first argument comes from science (mainly physics of the universe and evolutionary biology). Newer arguments did not advance much, perhaps with the exception of astrophysics which got to the point of claiming that we do not need the Cause (sic. Creator) to "create" the universe; the second argument is one that attacks the persona and the teaching of Jesus, which Dawkins favors. It comes down to Jesus' story of redemption as being "appalling" to him on moral grounds. In this respect, Dawkins' attitude reminds one of the long-forgotten Bertrand Russell's *Why I am not a Christian* (1927) where he offers a somewhat similar argument against Jesus.

Be that as it may, the list of agnostics and atheists abounds in examples of people like the philosopher Sir Alfred Ayer who also fought "nonsense," but who underwent clinical death, from which he emerged less certain that this life is all there is, and Anthony Flew, who spent his life fighting religion but in his late years became religion's good friend.

There is also the question as to why religionists engage in a debate with Krauss and his friends. I have no explanation for why anyone would like to debate someone who spits on them. Nor do I grasp why Krauss wastes his time debating people he clearly despises and who, one needs to say, are too ignorant about science to offer a remotely reasonable argument that could not be used by Krauss to embarrass them. I suspect that Christians and some Muslims living in the Western world are fixated on

the idea of dialogue, ecumenism, openness so much that they are willing to sit at the same table with someone who has nothing but contempt for them only in order to prove how "open" they are. The viewer of Krauss' debates can feel nothing but pity seeing how they are ripped apart by a vicious lion.

Watching Krauss is like watching sadistic Professor Higgins in *My Fair Lady* tormenting poor Liza Doolittle. However, unlike Krauss' religious debaters, Liza is willing to learn and knows her limits. "Just you wait, Henry Higgins..." goes a memorable line from the movie. And she gets her revenge by learning how to speak Higgins' language. I cannot see the religiously minded crowd doing anything as remotely ingenious as she did, that is, learn to speak Krauss' language and sing: "Just you wait, Professor Krauss." I suspect that they are too afraid that if they learned science, they would have to abandon their faith in the Book of Genesis and thus would have to declare Krauss as victorious.

But there is also a question for Krauss: is he so naïve to think that he, like Higgins, would ever be able to say, "By George, they've got it!" The only explanation I have is that there is a kind of sado-masochistic dialectic that links the professor and the religiously minded debaters.

The latter are also too shy and intimidated by him to get him even when Krauss falls into his own trap, as he did with the incest question. What surprised me the most was that no one -- neither the debater nor the audience -- found the courage to throw Professor Krauss to the lions or call him the names he calls them. They listened to Krauss' non-sense displaying restraint and politeness. Perhaps religion taught them to forgive him because he knows not what he says.

[Zbigniew Janowski](#) is a frequent contributor to *The Postil*. [His latest book is Homo Americanus.](#)

The [featured image](#) shows, "Talking Nonsense," by Alice Wellinger.

