

Craig on the Resurrection: A Defense

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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.

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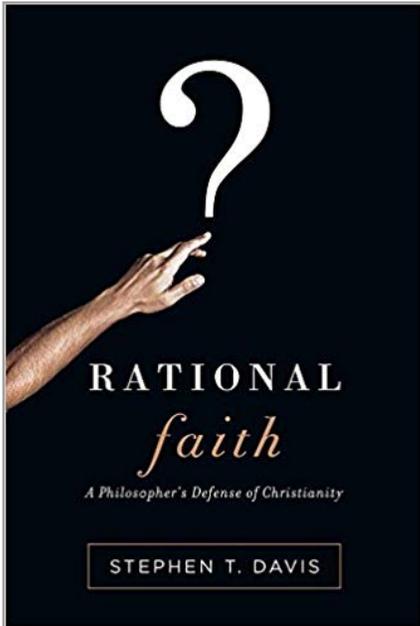
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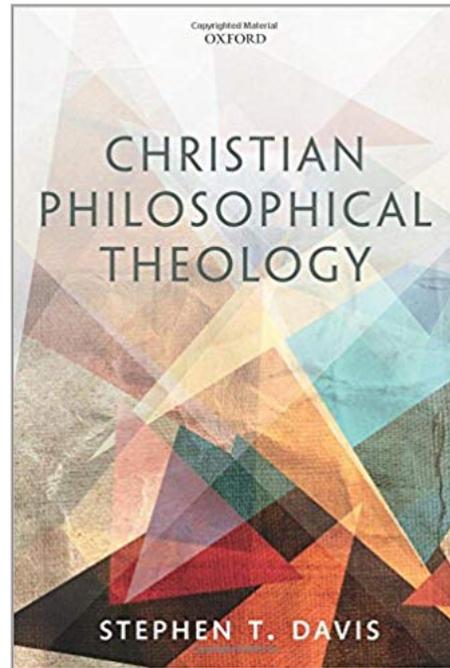
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