

12A The Gospel According to Carl Sagan

(by Bill)

I love science fiction. Sometime during junior high school, I discovered science fiction magazines and began to devour them. My love for science fiction motivated me to learn math and science, and, eventually, to become an electrical engineer (because, I figured, if I was going to discover anti-gravity, I would probably have to learn about electromagnetic fields).

Between my junior and senior years at Purdue, however, I discovered that Jesus Christ died for my sins (which were many), and my life was turned upside down. I had to rethink everything. I took a class in modern physics, talked with lots of people, both Christian and non-Christian, discovered the writings of Francis Schaeffer and Josh McDowell, and discovered that miracles actually do happen.

I discovered that there are three basic worldviews: theism, naturalism, and pantheism. Why are so many people enamored with a naturalistic (humanist) or pantheist worldview? The media is saturated with these worldviews, and most books and movies present an unreal picture of the world.

Star Trek is high tech humanism, a very happy humanism. There are beings so high on the evolutionary scale that they are essentially gods, very much like Mormonism. Yet the deep philosophers of humanism (men like Sartre, Camus, Jaspers and Heidegger) saw the depressing side of humanism. It took an existential leap to generate love, significance, beauty, and morality from a totally physical world. The novelist Hemingway blew his brains out as the only way he could be in control. The flow of history is from humanism to pantheism, from science fiction to science fantasy. The Star Wars movies are high tech pantheism, with the impersonal Force and recycling of lives.

So, how does all this information fit together? I still love science fiction; I also developed a love for teaching electrical engineering, and eventually wound up teaching in a Christian university, where I taught for many years.

Eventually, I watched "Contact", a movie based on Carl Sagan's book of the same name. I loved the movie, so I got the book and read it. I was amazed to find that this die-hard proponent of humanistic thought ("The Cosmos is all there is...") hinted at intelligent design! Let me explain.

In the movie, Ellie, played by Jody Foster, is the only passenger to travel, in a machine directed by aliens, to a distant star system. In the book, there are five passengers, but the focus is still on Ellie. The basic concepts are the same in both the book and the film versions. The book, however expands the discussion, which is the point of the story, of how the universe began.

Carl Sagan was a great scientist and a deep thinker, and my father (also an engineer) adored him. He mentioned him more than once in our vehement theological discussions.

However, what a person writes in fiction reveals what he really thinks about life, death, and the universe; and in the book, more was revealed than what was in the movie. Many naturalists believe that it is possible to build a robot complicated enough to house a person's consciousness, so that a person could transfer himself into that robot and live forever. The time for this technological breakthrough is hoped to be in the near future. The event at which a machine eventually becomes conscious is called "The Singularity". A whole issue of a respected scientific journal, the *IEEE Spectrum* (June, 2008), was devoted to this concept, called by one author "The Rapture of the Geeks".

One version of the "Singularity" suggests that at death one's entire memory may be uploaded to a computer while the body decays permanently. (This is clearly contrary to the Judeo-Christian concept of a soul that survives death and is rejoined to a resurrected body.) Other options suggested after death: wandering around as a disembodied spirit - a ghost- with or without memory, because the existence of Alzheimer's disease gives reason to think there are those two options. If you believe that after death you simply cease to exist, then your attitude toward morality (if you think logically) may eventually be that morals are simply a construct to keep the society orderly, so that you might as well do anything for your own benefit that you can get away with while you're alive. It all depends on which of the three Basic Worldview Categories is actually true. One is, and the other two are not. The engineer understands the principle that only one is really true, because he is trained to deal with real systems and make them work. In each case, the options are as follows.

- (1) There is no supernatural realm, no spirit, and no soul. When you die, you simply cease to exist; it is as if you went to sleep, and there are no dreams. This is the conclusion of Naturalism.
- (2) There is a self-awareness, or soul, or spirit, and this is transferred after death to another living being; a human, animal, or spirit being. This is Pantheism.
- (3) In Theism there is a self-awareness that survives death, but there is a judgement, so that the soul experiences justice: reward and/or punishment for moral actions performed in his/her life.

In Pantheism justice may come during reincarnation, but the source of any justice standard is impersonal and vague. (Actually, the latter two of these worldviews have more options, depending upon whether or not the memory is retained.)

Science fiction stories have been written about this dilemma as early as the 1950's. What if you developed a matter transmitter and the soul did not follow? What if Spock was beamed down to a planet and he simply ceased to exist (if Naturalism were true), and another being with his memory appeared on the planet? Or, he might find himself in an animal, or being born as a baby somewhere, with no memory of his previous existence (if Pantheism were true).

If Theism turns out to be true, he might either be standing before God to be judged, or have gone on, in a soul-less body, to do whatever soul-less things do.

If Sagan's book reflects his conclusions, he believes that the "rapture of the Geeks" is possible, that the universe is teeming with life, and that many species have been "raptured" in this way, and have been living for perhaps billions of years, so that they have achieved nearly godlike characteristics. But, in the discussion with our heroine, Ellie (Jody Foster in the movie), something is revealed in the book that was not portrayed in the movie.

The ages-old alien tells her to go back and check pi, the ratio of the circumference to the diameter of a circle. He says there's a message hidden in it. After she returns to earth, she puts her computers to work in order to calculate pi to an extent never before attempted, and finds the message.

What has Sagan done, here? He has, maybe without realizing it, revealed that, in spite of his declaration that "the Cosmos is all there is", and all has come into being through random processes, there is more. He has been driven to conclude that the fundamental constants of the universe must have been engineered by Someone. He basically is stating a case for "intelligent design."

I am reminded of the astrophysicist Sir Fred Hoyle's statement:

"A common sense interpretation of the facts suggests that a superintellect has monkeyed with physics, as well as with chemistry and biology, and that there are no blind forces worth speaking about in nature. The numbers one calculates from the facts seem to me so overwhelming as to put this conclusion almost beyond question" [1]

Reference:

1. Heeren, Fred, *Show Me God!* , Day Star Publications, 1997.