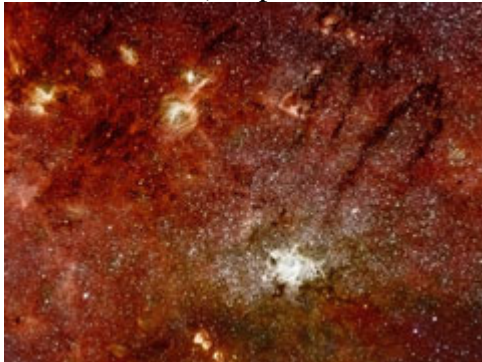


The universe's communion of subjects

Rich Heffern | Sep. 18, 2010



Infrared image of the Milky Way Galaxy (NASA)

My wife and I went out recently to an observatory site run by the local astronomy society to gaze at the universe, which was making big news headlines at the time, thanks to scientists Nikodem Poplawski and Stephen Hawking. With our telescope we joined a dozen others to observe the area around the constellation Sagittarius, located above the southern horizon in the summer and early autumn.

Sagittarius, of course, is a zodiac sign, one of the 12 constellations the sun passes through in its circumnavigation of the celestial sphere. The brightest stars in the constellation form a shape that looks amazingly like a teapot, complete with a spout at one end.

That region is one of the richest in the night skies. As we look into the bright star clouds above the spout of Sagittarius' teapot, we are looking directly toward the nucleus, the center, of our galaxy.

Huge clouds of interstellar gas, open clusters of stars and distant globular clusters sprinkle the area. A stream of these nebulae seems to rise like steam from the teapot's spout, but it's a steam cloud stretching across hundreds of thousands of light years (the distance light travels in a year at the speed of 700 million miles an hour).

The globular clusters that populate the sky there are gargantuan balls or cities of stars -- sometimes millions of them -- that look like glittering diamonds sprinkled across inky black velvet, one of the most splendiferously delicious sites eyes can gaze upon, I think.

J.R.R. Tolkien in his fantasy *The Hobbit* unwittingly devised an exquisite description of a globular cluster when he described the fabulous jewel called the "Arkenstone of Thrain": "It was as if a globe had been filled with moonlight and hung before them in a net woven of the glint of frosty stars."

There was a 12-year-old boy next to us, Cameron, who knew the sky better than we did. He pointed out objects with his own telescope then we would find them in ours. His enthusiasm was contagious and infected everyone. He was a kid who knew exactly where he was -- namely, on the third planet of a star off on the outskirts of the great Milky Way galaxy.

The actual galactic center is best observed with radio telescopes. So dense are the clouds of dust and gas in the galactic plane that our view of the central region is almost totally obscured. Radio telescopes have revealed a powerful source of radio energy there; smaller even than our solar system. Astronomers suspect the existence of a massive black hole.

In the headlines, Poplawski of Indiana University, using an adaptation of Einstein's general theory of relativity, analyzed the theoretical motion of particles entering a black hole. He concluded that it was possible for a whole new universe to exist inside every black hole, which could mean that our own universe may exist inside a black hole as well. Poplawski described a cosmic nesting egg configuration that is wonderfully mind-boggling.

"Maybe the huge black holes at the center of the Milky Way and other galaxies are bridges to different universes," he said in an interview.

Then with poignant timing, just days before the arrival of Pope Benedict XVI in Britain, eminent scientist Stephen Hawking's new book was released. The creation of the universe, he said, did not need a divine force; it was the inevitable consequence of the laws of physics. God was written out of physics, just as Darwin had written God out of biology.

"Spontaneous creation is the reason there is something rather than nothing, why the universe exists, why we exist," he said, adding, "It is not necessary to invoke God to light the blue touch paper and set the universe going."


Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams responded that "physics on its own will not settle the question of why there is something rather than nothing."

He added: "Belief in God is not about plugging a gap in explaining how one thing relates to another within the universe. It is the belief that there is an intelligent, living agent on whose activity everything ultimately depends for its existence. Science provides us with a wonderful narrative as to how existence may happen but theology addresses the meaning of the narrative."

Hawking and others of the current crop of scientist-atheists make the same mistake that Christian fundamentalists are guilty of -- regarding creation as a collection of objects rather than a communion of subjects.

The meaning that Williams alludes to avoids that trap and necessarily includes and tries to account for the jaw-dropping beauty we all saw that night above Sagittarius, together with the infectious enthusiasm of a 12-year-old boy, eyes wide with wonder -- plus the gratitude and appreciation we all felt for a seventh-grader who gawked at and knew the neighborhood so well.

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