

Metaphysical Subjectivism and Christianity's Cartoon Universe, Pt. 2

Steve Hays of Triablogue has repeatedly attempted to exonerate the Christian worldview of its cartoonish implications. In addition to outright denying the striking similarities between Christianity's conception of the world and the fictional realm of a cartoon, Steve has attempted to weaken the analogy by misconstruing the points which are being related by the analogy. I have shown both how this procedure fails, and how the analogy is in fact strengthened by Christianity's own affirmations and the declarations of its own defenders. In the meantime, Steve has admitted to viewing himself as a puppet in a made up world (he claims it is an honor to believe this about himself), and has in fact [made use of a very similar analogy](#) in distinguishing his view from the non-believer's view. In this posting I will respond to more of Hays' attempts to neutralize the cartoon universe analogy.

I wrote:

On my view, the frustration he projects does not exist; at least, not for me. I can, for instance, direct my own movements; my metaphysical viewpoint in no way contends against this fact. And through my physical movements, I can move other physical things. Steve cited the example of typing words out on a computer keyboard. I can direct my fingers to depress the buttons on my keyboard. If the keyboard and the computer to which it is connected are functioning properly, it is possible for me to type the words that I want to type by using the hardware to transmit my intentions.

To which Steve responded:

At the risk of stating the obvious, this is exactly how a cartoonist operates. He expresses his intentions through a physical medium, such as computer animation.

Now Steve says:

If a real live cartoonist does exactly what he described above, then, by Dawson's own definition, he subscribes to a cartoon universe. Sorry if Dawson is unable to connect his own dots.

What I described in my own quote above is the *non*-cartoon universe of atheism, not the cartoon universe of theism. What Steve is missing here, is the point that an actual cartoonist in fact exists in the non-cartoon universe of atheism, not in the fictional realm that he creates. What distinguishes a cartoon universe from a non-cartoon universe is the former's dependence of all its contents and events on the will of some conscious determining agent that does not itself originate in that universe. This is the universe as Christians imagine it: all things and all events are "controlled" by a conscious being which designs everything which exists in the universe it creates and "controls whatsoever comes to pass" in it. The non-cartoon universe of atheism has no conscious determining agent originating from outside it which "controls whatsoever comes to pass" in it.

The cartoon universe analogy is not pointing out similarities between the universe as Christianity characterizes it and the non-cartoon universe of atheism. On the contrary, the cartoon universe analogy points out the similarities between the universe as Christianity characterizes it and the fictional realm of a cartoon. The cartoonist does in fact need to use materials to create his cartoons according to their nature, just as a carpenter uses wood to build cabinets according to wood's nature. But that is because both the cartoonist and the carpenter live in a universe where the objects of their awareness do not conform to wishes - i.e., a non-cartoon universe. In the non-cartoon universe, cartoonists and carpenters are *autonomous agents* - that is, they control themselves independently of each other, and they are not being controlled by some mystical personality which has choreographed all of history's events according to a mystical "plan."

In contrast to the non-cartoon universe of atheism, the universe that Christianity affirms is a universe where the things which constitute it conform to whatever a supernatural personality wishes. As John Frame puts it, "we are never free from divine control." (*Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought*, p. 80.) Similarly, the fictional realm of a cartoon is a realm where the images look and act just as the cartoonist who creates it wants them to look and act. Likewise to Christianity, a cartoon character is never free from the cartoonist's control. In a non-cartoon universe, the *objects* hold metaphysical primacy over the subject of awareness, while a cartoon universe presupposes that the *subject* holds metaphysical primacy over the objects of awareness.

Someone existing in a cartoon universe wouldn't "have to" use a keyboard to write what he wants to write, for in a

cartoon universe there is nothing beyond the control of the all-determining agent. The very concept of necessity is strictly a non-cartoon universe idea borrowed by the cartoon universe worldview and used without understanding of its genetic roots. In a cartoon universe, everything is a wild card; there are no constraints independent of the supreme determiner's will which define the limits of possibility within the cartoon realm itself. In a cartoon universe, the supreme determiner could, for instance, send a giant detached hand writing on the side of a large wall with its index finger. If the supreme determiner wanted to do this in the realm it creates, nothing would be able to stop it. This is precisely the kind of universe that Christianity affirms.

The Calvinist notion of a distinction between primary and secondary causation, where primary causation refers to the all-controlling sovereignty of the Christian god, and secondary causation refers to the incidental causes within the universe, is illustrative of just how integral the cartoon universe premise is to the Christian worldview. In describing the relationship between these two types of causation, John Frame makes use of an analogy not unlike mine. He writes:

Perhaps the best illustration... is this: In a well-crafted novel, the author creates a world in which events take place in meaningful causal relationships to one another. Each event has an intelligible cause within the world of the novel. But of course each event also has a higher cause, in the author's mind. Normally, such an author will try to maintain the orderly causal structure of his created universe. He may, of course, also work "without, above, and against" that causal order when he is pleased to do so. Usually, however, when an author disrupts the causal order of his novel, the narrative becomes less satisfying. Critics accuse such an author of bringing things about by a *deus ex machina*. (Cornelius Van Til: *An Analysis of His Thought*, p. 82)

Frame mentions that he got this analogy from his associate, Vern Poythress. So some of Christianity's own head honchos think such analogies offer wholesome representation of their worldview. In the analogy he offers Frame explicitly likens the universe as Christianity conceives of it to a work of fiction, pointing out that, as in a work of fiction, the players may appear to the reader to be acting autonomously on their own volition, but actually they are merely being pushed and pulled to and fro according to the intentions of the author. The author sets the rules, and breaks them when he wants. The author is in no way compelled to create his fictional realm one way as opposed to another. He could create a realm where gravity reverses its direction every seven minutes if he wanted to. The author can have his characters say magic prayers while objects alter themselves in immediate obedience, such as the parting of an inland sea when it suits their "needs." The author can choose to create a villain who savagely murders other characters. The author can even try to make himself feel better about creating such a character in his novel by saying he has "a morally sufficient reason to allow" this evil, [as Bahnsen claims](#) on behalf of his god.

Frame refers to his novel analogy as "perhaps the best illustration" of the "personalistic" determinism that lies at the foundation of his worldview. However, the advantage that a cartoon has over a novel is the graphic form in which a cartoon presents its invented realm. Where a novel leaves all the visuals and soundtracks up to the reader's imagination, a cartoon allows us to *see* and *hear* the invented realm. And while a novel can only be enjoyed at the pace of reader's reading rate, a cartoon proceeds on its own pace, since it actually portrays the action of the invented realm rather than merely describing it.

I had written:

What has broken down here is Steve's own confused analysis. Essentially, Steve has confused the ink, paper, celluloid, or other technology with which a cartoonist works, with the imaginary realm that he uses these materials to create, a fake environment that is analogous to a universe created by a supernatural consciousness which determines its contents and events. The cartoon universe analogy in no way requires that cartoonists 'merely wish cartoon characters into existence,' nor is this what it is intended to illustrate. And Steve nowhere provides an argument to validate the supposition that the analogy requires this.

Steve responded:

I don't have to provide my own argument since I'm playing off of Dawson's argument. He is using the cartoon analogy to illustrate metaphysical subjectivism. But on that thesis, the ink, paper, celluloid, or software/hardware would be as much of a psychological projection as the imaginary realm of the cartoon itself.

I had pointed out that Steve's earlier attempt to rebut the cartoon universe analogy traded on a confusion between the physical materials with which the cartoonist works and the fictional realm which he uses those materials to create. We saw above that this confusion still persists, and after repeated attempts to correct him, he remains unteachable on this point. In response to his contention, I pointed out this confusion on his part and explained that "the cartoon universe analogy in no way requires that cartoonists 'merely wish cartoon characters into existence',"

and that the analogy is in no way intended to illustrate this. But Steve's contention against the cartoon universe analogy does in fact require the analogy to mean that cartoonists, who exist in the non-cartoon universe of atheism, actually wish their cartoons into place. He nowhere provided an argument to validate his assumption that the analogy does in fact mean this, and now he comes back with a roundabout admission to the fact that he does not actually have an argument to support it, or that he needs one. He says he's simply "playing off" my argument. But is he? No, he's distorting it expressly to make it appear weak, even after he has been corrected. But as we have seen, even John Frame makes use of a very similar analogy himself, as have other Christians, including Steve himself.

The cartoon universe analogy illustrates Christianity's personalistic determinism, which is an expression of metaphysical subjectivism. By determinism in this sense I mean the view that everything that happens in the universe has been determined according to a "plan" scheme set in motion by a conscious agent which oversees and directs its events. Just as a cartoonist determines whatever happens in the fictional realm he creates in his cartoon, the Christian god is said to determine "whatsoever comes to pass" in the universe it allegedly created.

I recommend that Steve think a little more carefully about his own worldview's affirmations, and what Christians are telling non-believers about the universe they live in. Does he accept the view that his god "controls whatsoever comes to pass," or not? If he does, then whether he wants to admit it or not, he affirms a worldview which characterizes the universe in a manner that is analogous to a cartoon, so therefore the cartoon universe analogy applies to his conception of the world. If he does not think that there is some conscious agent which "controls whatsoever comes to pass," then he's probably not a very conscientious Christian after all. That is not my fault.

I wrote:

Steve is making the same mistake that Tim Hudgins made in response to the cartoon universe analogy over a year ago. He was expecting the analogy to model 'exact similarities' between cartoonists and the god he imagines, even though a strong analogy in no way requires such pervasive exactitude.

Steve responded:

Although an analogy does not need to be (and cannot be) identical at every point, it does need to be identical at the salient point of comparison—otherwise the parallel breaks down.

Actually, an analogy need not be "*identical* at the salient point of comparison," it only needs to be *similar* at the point of comparison. Here I'm simply going by what a standard dictionary indicates. [Merriam-Webster](#) gives the following definition:

resemblance in some particulars between things otherwise unlike : SIMILARITY b : comparison based on such resemblance

From [dictionary.com](#) we have:

Similarity in some respects between things that are otherwise dissimilar. A comparison based on such similarity.

The similarity between a cartoon and the Christian view of the universe should be obvious to any thinker. Does not a cartoonist determine what happens in his cartoon realm according to an overarching plan from beginning to end? Does not the Christian god, according to Christianity, determine what happens in its creation according to an overarching plan from beginning to end? To deny the applicability of the cartoon universe analogy to Christianity, is to deny the sovereignty of the Christian god, and with it all of Christianity's essential teachings.

I wrote:

...while now he catches onto the actual point of the analogy, namely that in the cartoon realm that the cartoonist creates, he calls the shots (just as in the realm that the Christian god is said to have created, the Christian god is thought to call all the shots). Is Steve really unable to see the parallel here?

Steve responded:

The problem lies with the way in which the parallel is deployed. What is it intended to illustrate?

i) If this is parallel to divine creativity, it is also parallel to human creativity. It is parallel to what Dawson does on his keyboard. So does Dawson inhabit a cartoon universe?

As I have pointed out numerous times, the parallel is the determinative sovereignty enjoyed by the cartoonist over

the fictional realm his cartoon vis-à-vis the sovereignty that Christians claim on behalf of their god over the contents of the universe and the events in which they act. A cartoonist can make whatever he wants happen in his fictional cartoon realm, just as the Christian god is said to be able to make whatever it wants happen in the universe it allegedly created. The events we see in a cartoon are determined by the cartoonist who creates it, just as Christianity affirms the view that the events which take place in it are determined by the Christian god which allegedly created it.

Does my own creativity imply that I inhabit a cartoon universe? As I pointed out, no, it does not. For the universe, according to my view, is not analogous to a cartoon because its contents and the events which take place within it are not being controlled by a supreme determiner calling all the shots. My creativity in the universe which I actually inhabit is limited by external constraints which inherently exist in the universe, but which do not inherently exist in a cartoon world. Neither is the Christian god supposed to be limited by such constraints. A cartoon world is constantly subject to revision per the cartoonist's choices. Similarly, on the Christian view,

God may at any time take one *fact* and set it into a new relation to created law. That is, there is no inherent reason in the facts or laws themselves why this should not be done. It is this sort of conception of the relation of facts and laws, of the temporal one and many, imbedded as it is in that idea of God in which we profess to believe, that we need in order to make room for miracles. And miracles are at the heart of the Christian position. (*The Defense of the Faith*, 3rd ed., p. 27)

That "there is no inherent reason in the facts or laws themselves" is not the only reason why the Christian god can "at any time take one fact and set it into a new relation to created law" on the Christian view. On the Christian view, the Christian god has complete sovereignty, giving it *carte blanche* over the universe it allegedly created. Not only are the "facts" of the universe creations which can be revised by the Christian god at will, so are the "laws" which are otherwise thought to govern (as "proximate" or "secondary causation") those "facts." Animals speaking in human language and men walking on water are not contradictions in the Christian worldview any more than they are in a cartoon realm.

Steve continued:

ii) And, as I've said more than once, now, Dawson uses the cartooning analogy because cartoon characters are imaginary characters. And he trades on this invidious connotation to insinuate that if the Christian worldview is analogous to cartooning, then the Christian worldview is, itself, fictitious.

Steve repeats his earlier complaint, even though he announced at the beginning of his post that he does not intend to repeat himself. I use the cartoon analogy because a cartoon models the determinative sovereignty of an all-controlling agent over its creation in graphic form. It is not my fault that the imaginary realm of a cartoon resembles the Christian conception of the universe. And yet, the resemblance is tremendous. Both the Christian god as creator of the universe, and the cartoonist as the creator of his fictional cartoon realm, enjoy similar determinative sovereignty and freedom from constraint in relation to their respective creations. The Christian god, for instance, "controls whatsoever comes to pass" in the Christian universe, just as the cartoonist "controls whatsoever comes to pass" in his cartoon universe. "God's decree," says John Frame quoting his master Van Til, "is the final and exclusive determining power of whatsoever comes to pass'." (Op. cit., p. 80.) Likewise the cartoonist's decisions are "the final and exclusive determining power of whatsoever comes to pass" in the fictional realm of his cartoons. The Christian god can choose to create man with 16 arms instead of two, and likewise so can the cartoonist. The Christian god can populate the universe it creates with talking snakes and donkeys, ax heads which float on water, men who walk on water and through solid walls, water which turns into wine, etc., all under its overseeing direction. Similarly, the cartoonist can create a realm where these same things can happen. His cartoon universe is as pliant and malleable and responsive to his imagination as the Christian universe is said to be with respect to the Christian god's intentions.

It is not my fault that there are profound similarities between the Christian conception of the universe and the imaginary realm conceived by a cartoonist. Steve will not accomplish anything by getting sore at me for this.

I wrote:

What is essentially similar to both the cartoon realm created by the cartoonist and the 'created realm' of the Christian universe, is the predominating, determining will of the agent responsible for creating each. The objects and events which take place in each are determined by a conscious being outside it.

Steve responded:

The problem with this comparison, as I've said before, is that it's trivially true of almost a creative process. In typing and posting on his blog, the product is determined by a conscious, external agent—Dawson Bethrick. He is responsible for the content. His analogy fails to illustrate metaphysical subjectivism, which is a more radical thesis. And he seizes upon the cartoon analogy because cartoon characters are imaginary. But cartooning is merely one example out of countless others of the creative process.

I have not denied that there are inchoate similarities in other creative formats. However, my composing of a blog article in no way presents a graphic representation of a realm where natural law can be abandoned or revised at will, as Van Til describes, while a cartoon does. While I am responsible for the sentences and paragraphs that I write in an article, I cannot make a donkey speak in human language. Now, I can compose a dialogue between two agents, and assign one of them the role of a talking ass. But it would be up to the reader at this point to imagine it. Of course, this is exactly what the believer does when he reads the story of Balaam and his talking ass in the biblical book of Numbers, or any other story in the bible: as he invests himself in the story as he imagines it, it becomes more and more real to him. We would not expect Steve to trash his \$85.00 theological commentaries given the steep investment he's made in them, and likewise we wouldn't expect an individual who has invested himself in an imaginative worldview like Christianity to allow it to be tarnished by critical thinking. Indeed, Christianity assumes the cartoon universe premise because the bible is a compendium of cartoonish accounts.

The cartoonist, however, can present a graphic representation of a realm where such things happen. His image-making is not bound to the constraints of their actual models, supposing he's using actual things as his models; on the contrary, his imagination can override the constraints we meet in our day to day lives in the context of his cartoon universe, and he can put that imagination into visual, active form. The images he creates in fact conform to his imagination. In this way the fictional realm of a cartoon resembles the universe as it is characterized by Christianity in its obedience to the cartoonist's wishes.

I wrote:

But the Christian god is fundamentally analogous to a cartoonist inasmuch as, like a cartoonist with respect to the contents and events that take place in the realms he creates, the Christian god is said to 'control whatsoever comes to pass'. What exists in the Christian god's universe is what the Christian god wanted to exist in it. What we see in a cartoon is what the cartoonist wants us to see.

Steve responded:

Bethrick is also a creative agent. We see on his blog whatever he wants us to see. He's responsible for the content.

See above. It should not surprise Steve to learn that I think that his god is an invention of the human imagination as well.

I wrote:

This is the analogy. The analogy was never 'cartoonists create ex nihilo the physical medium which they use in making their cartoons, just as the Christian god created the universe ex nihilo.' So this is a most obtuse objection.

Steve responded:

Bethrick is now rewriting his own thesis. This is what he originally said in one of those earlier posts with which he thinks I should be "intimately familiar":

Quoting [me](#):

So here are some questions readers might ask themselves to determine whether or not they really do ascribe to the cartoon universe premise of theism. Any "yes" answer to one of these questions affirms endorsement of the cartoon universe premise; a "no" answer affirms either that one is an atheist, or, if he thinks he is a theist, that he thinks his god is impotent.

- Can your god create something ex nihilo (i.e., without using materials that already exist)?

Here Steve thinks he's finally got me. But where do I say that the cartoon universe analogy subsists on the view that "cartoonists create ex nihilo the physical medium which they use in making their cartoons"? For me to be rewriting my

own thesis, there'd have to be at least some alteration of that thesis. (And since when is revising a thesis "wrong"?) Above I simply pointed out that affirmation of Christianity's doctrine of creation ex nihilo affirms a conception of the universe which is analogous to a cartoon. A cartoonist creates a cartoon realm where it did not exist before, just as Frame's novelist writes a novel where it did not exist before. In effect, this is like creating a whole universe. The cartoonist sets the rules of his universe, revises them when it suits him, determines which characters and objects to insert into his cartoon realm, and controls everything that happens in that cartoon realm. The cartoon realm is thus analogous to the universe as Christians conceive of it. Indeed, many Christians have referred to their god as the greatest of all artists.

A cartoon's parallel to Christianity's creation ex nihilo is not difficult to see. As I pointed out, the analogy does not claim that actual cartoonists can or do wish into existence the materials they use to make cartoons. After all, the cartoon universe analogy itself does not assume that the *actual* universe is analogous to a cartoon, since atheism does not affirm the notion that the universe was created by an act of will. Rather, it points out the similarity between the universe as Christianity conceives of it and the realm which a cartoonist creates. In both cases, the creative agent responsible for creating the realm "controls whatsoever comes to pass" in their respective creations. The cartoon world that a cartoonist illustrates in his cartoons does find its source in the cartoonist's consciousness, namely his imagination. The graphic representation in a cartoon is the cartoonist's bringing into existence a fictitious realm which did not previously exist, and in this way it parallels the creation ex nihilo attributed by Christians to their god. There was a time when the cartoon character Bugs Bunny and the Looney Tune world he inhabits did not exist in graphic form. Bugs Bunny is not eternal; according to Christians, neither is the universe. Both are creations of consciousness.

So there you have it. We see that the cartoon universe analogy has more than sufficient backing, both by the striking similarities cartoons share with Christianity's conception of the universe, and by analogies which Christians themselves have used to illustrate their god's determinative sovereignty over the universe they claim it created. It is, [as one commenter recently stated](#), a "perfect" analogy.

by Dawson Bethrick

posted by Bahnsen Burner at [7:00 AM](#)

1 Comments:

[openlyatheist](#) said...

I'm really having trouble understanding Hays' objections. He says the analogy doesn't fully convey the implications of metaphysical subjectivism? Only because cartoonists (and potters) working through physical media that conform to natural laws is a concept stolen from the non-cartoon universe of atheism.

In order to make the analogy any more like the cartoon universe of theism we would have to liken the Christian universe to that of a cartoon DRAWN BY A CARTOON, who is himself Eternally Animated, Infinitely Toonish, and Undrawn by any other being.

[July 07, 2006 1:50 AM](#)