

Chapter Thirty-Six

Angels' Wings and Santa Claus's Sleigh

Consider what an unacceptable answer it would be to explain other alleged supernatural phenomena that seem difficult, if not impossible, to believe by using the same logic used to explain angels' wings. For example, for many Christmas seasons, my young son Julian, and his younger brother, Johnston, believed that during the night of Christmas Eve, Santa Claus would come down our chimney and leave toys for them that were made by elves. Our boys believed that Santa had carried those toys in a magical bag containing a toy or two (or more), for every boy and girl in the world. Santa would fly in his magical sleigh from the North Pole, pulled by flying reindeer from house to house throughout the world in just one night—breaking supersonic travel speed records, not needing protective gear or oxygen, and not needing heat-protection tiles on his sleigh. Obviously, science does not support such a story. To believe that story, one must suspend belief in science and accept a supernatural, nonscientific, logistically impossible explanation of events.

As our sons grew older, my wife and I even took the Santa Claus story a little further. On Christmas Eve, we would leave carrots and lettuce by the fireplace for Santa's obviously tired and cold flying reindeer. Later, my wife and I would sneak downstairs in the middle of the night, distribute the presents allegedly from Santa under the tree, and even nibble a little bit on the carrots and lettuce that had been left for the reindeer. The next morning, our sons would be in complete shock to see all of the Christmas presents that Santa had apparently brought for them during the night. Moreover, their eyes would light up as they saw the additional proof of Santa's visit: partially nibbled carrots and lettuce that the flying reindeer supposedly had eaten the night before. At that point, the boys never questioned why the reindeer would not eat *all* of the carrots and lettuce, nor did they ask why (or how) these gangly reindeer could also fit with Santa down the narrow chimney just to nibble a little bit on some carrots and lettuce and then leave.

I was fully aware that one of the Ten Commandments is "thou shalt not lie" (or "bear false witness"), so I had some trouble rationalizing the fraudulent scheme that we were perpetrating on our sons, but I began thinking about whether I must also take that commandment entirely *literally*, without exception. If we are to take it literally, then I began to wonder whether it would be a sin for an undercover officer to lie about being a DEA agent during a staged drug deal so that he could then arrest the criminal drug dealers. Similarly, was it a sin for the Gentile family who hid Anne Frank's Jewish family from the Nazis during WWII because they told a lie to the Nazi officers when asked whether they were harboring any Jews? Surely these types of lies must be reasonable exceptions to the literal commandment not to lie, but to read in such exceptions requires one to interpret and apply the application of the commandment in light of

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the situation. Wouldn't that be an example of improper private interpretation or, to put it in legal terms, improper judicial activism of someone not just interpreting the commandment but going further by making up exceptions and thereby going beyond what the text of the commandment actually says?

Literalists therefore might say that one cannot read in such exceptions because the text of the commandment contains no explicit exceptions. Reading in exceptions that are not contained in the explicit text, however, would be a personal interpretation rather than a literal application of the text. Others, however, might allow the reading in of such reasonable exceptions as part of the commandment because fighting crime and saving lives of innocents is important and, at a minimum, not antithetical to God's will—or, because the commandment says, "Do not bear false witness," maybe that only means that you cannot lie under oath in court as a witness, but perhaps it is allowable in other circumstances? What about "thou shalt not kill"? Are there no similar exceptions, such as in self-defense, or in war, or must we always be pacifistic conscientious objectors in every situation? There is no "kill or be killed" justification (or "murder or be murdered") if *all* killing is a sin according to the literal text of the commandment?

In the same way that such exceptions might exist despite the literal text, I guess I, less profoundly, found a reasonable exception to the "thou shalt not lie" commandment in creating a special childhood memory of Christmas for our young sons. Still, I felt a little guilty for essentially tricking them, and even for planting and then manipulating evidence, to convince them of what was clearly an elaborate scheme and outright falsehood, even though it made for a nice story. So, I thought about it, felt guilty for a moment or two, and then proceeded to rationalize it all as harmless. Why spoil the innocence of children with the boring truth? Why spoil the joy of the Christmas story and our Christmas traditions with a cynical scientific and logical explanation detailing the obvious implausibility of the story, making the whole beautiful symbolic myth celebrating gift-giving at Christmas fall flat on its face? They would eventually figure it all out on their own someday anyway, and someday soon, so we thought, why not?

Trusting us, as well as having the story reinforced by the strong traditions of our culture and by the media, our sons fully believed in Santa Claus and his flying reindeer. One year, we added to the story by leaving a note from one of the reindeer, thanking our family for the carrots and lettuce—but a note written by reindeer? It didn't matter. There was no protestation such as "Hey, wait a minute, c'mon, although reindeer may be able to fly, they can't really hold pens in their hooves and write us notes in English, can they?!"

But as our older son, Julian grew from five to eight years old and we kept repeating this elaborate fraudulent ritual every December 24 and 25, he, like all children, eventually began to ask some rather probing questions. "How can Santa carry gifts for everyone in the whole world in just one bag?" he asked.

"Why, it's a Christmas miracle, son!" I proudly proclaimed.

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"How can reindeer fly?"

Maybe I could finesse that one a little—at least he was still willing to believe that reindeer could fly—but I had to decide if I was going to try to come up with some kind of scientific explanation of how it could be possible for reindeer to fly or if I would just rely on "Christmas magic" and Julian's trusting innocence.

Then his question morphed into "How can reindeer fly when they don't even have wings?" I had to come up with something. Would I make up some kind of scientifically plausible argument, or would I just rely on the supernatural "Christmas magic" rationale?

"Son, I am not an expert on flying, but think about how nice Santa's gift-giving is for all the good little boys and girls everywhere in the world on Christmas morning. That's what's important." I was using some creative misdirection (I used to be a lawyer, after all), not really answering his question, and even simultaneously making him feel a little guilty for even asking such a skeptical, doubting question about the mystery of how Santa shares his goodness with all of us.

"But how can Santa travel around the world and drop off all of the toys in just one night?"

This was not good! If he had been more of a math nerd at that point, he would have calculated that Santa could spend only a fraction of a nanosecond in each household if he were to actually drop off hundreds of millions of presents throughout the world (but I suppose not in the Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, or otherwise non-Christian world) in roughly twenty-four hours. I decided to trot out again, "Why, it's a Christmas miracle, son!"

"Can Santa's sleigh really go that fast, faster than a jet engine?"

Ouch! Well, like many typical youngsters, he went through a pesky rocket-and-airplane stage.

"His sleigh must go that fast, son. If it didn't, well, then you wouldn't have all of these nice gifts that Santa brought to you, now would you?" Yes, I used the undeniable existence of the gifts themselves as solid proof that Santa must have been the one to bring them, because "The gifts could not just have appeared out of nowhere, now could they?" Nice. Consider the logic of the argument: If the presents are there, it must be because Santa brought them—what other explanation could there be? The gifts certainly could not have somehow just appeared out of nowhere by random chance, all neatly wrapped up and intelligently designed for my son to enjoy, like the creation itself proving the creator!

I of course acknowledge that this is not really a completely fair analogy because we obviously know for sure that Santa did not deliver the presents under our tree, as my wife and I actually put the presents under the tree. Thus, there is definitive scientific proof that Santa did not bring the presents to my son, while there is no such definitive scientific proof that God did not create

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the universe. *As far as my son was concerned*, however, how the gifts got under the tree was still an open question. My son chose to believe the supernatural explanation that it was Santa Claus because he had been told by us and by our culture that Santa delivered the gifts to him as part of the Christmas story and because he had yet to discover and apply any contrary plausible scientific explanation regarding the gifts. At that point, he *personally* had no proof that Santa did not exist.

Just like my son did not know at the time that there was a non-supernatural scientific explanation as to how the gifts got there (my wife and I) and therefore believed the supernatural, nonscientific explanation (Santa Claus), so too might we humans be too young in our development to fully understand the scientific, non-supernatural reason behind how our universe (the metaphorical Christmas gifts) came into existence. In fairness, however, that argument can also cut the other way. Perhaps our spiritual progress is not developed enough to understand how God might have used science to create the universe, in light of our current superficial understanding of science and our lack of ability to understand God. Thus, it is unclear whether we have to grow up *scientifically* or grow up *spiritually* to understand. Fair enough.

We still need to be careful, however, about simply equating supernatural, nonscientific explanations with natural, scientific explanations as if they are complete logical equivalents, simply because we do not know for sure how the universe came to be. Neither side can definitively say for sure how the universe came to be, but that does not necessarily mean that we have two equal explanations. This is true because not all hypotheses are created equal. Although it is true that there are more-plausible, scientific, and natural-based theories on the one hand, and less-plausible, nonscientific, and supernatural-based theories on the other, it is not intellectually honest simply to treat them as if they are *equally* plausible competing explanations. Why? We'll examine this in the next chapter.