



God and Richard Dawkins

by Michael Poole

Richard Dawkins is well known in the biological sciences. He is also well-known through the media for his persistent efforts to disseminate the view that science and religion are in conflict. Some of his claims are examined below, although reference needs to be made to our published debate¹ for the detailed arguments.

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Dawkins' understanding of theology

God

Dawkins asks, 'who designed the divine creator?' [CLSG, p.11 — key at end] as though Christian theology portrayed God as a created being, rather than eternal. On that count alone, the 'god' in whom Dawkins disbelieves is a 'god' in whom Christians do not believe either. Dawkins also expects that, 'if God set the Universe in motion ...there might be traces — evidence of His involvement in the shape or functioning of the universe' [RTP, p.47]. But the *whole universe* is the 'traces', not some little part. To think otherwise bears some similarities to searching the components of a jet engine for traces of Frank Whittle. His signature will not be found on any individual part; the whole engine owes its being to Whittle's creativity.

Miracles

... events that we commonly call miracles are not supernatural, but are part of a spectrum of more-or-less improbable natural events. A miracle, in other words, if it occurs at all, is a tremendous stroke of luck. [BWM, p.139]

To regard miracles simply as 'more-or-less improbable natural events' may reflect one popular use of the word 'miracle' as a wonder — to describe for example the unlikely event of somebody surviving a mid-air collision. But apart from the rarity aspect, it has little to do with any biblical concept of miracle, which usually associates such events with God's actions, intended as signs.

Faith

Faith is the great cop-out, the great excuse to evade the need to think and evaluate evidence. Faith is belief in spite of, even perhaps because of, the lack of evidence ... Faith is not allowed to justify itself by argument. [SCAG]

Religious faith is assumed by Dawkins to be *unevidenced belief*. But Christian faith is grounded on a combination of evidence, including that drawn from history, personal experience and the world around. The justification for such belief is in the nature of a cumulative case. Like the clues in a detective story, no single item of evidence may be totally compelling on its own, but together they may build up a convincing case, sufficient for trust and action.

On each of these three issues of God, miracles and faith, Dawkins betrays a misunderstanding of basic Christian theology.

What keeps religion going?

Dawkins accounts for the persistence of religion by invoking the ideas of 'memes', 'mental viruses' and the 'gullibility of the young'. But many of his arguments boomerang. They are potentially just as lethal to the user as to the intended victim. I shall indicate such instances by the symbol ▄

¹ Science and Christian Belief, 6 (1) 41-59 & 7 (1) 45-50; 51-58; available as a reprint 'The Poole-Dawkins Debate' from Christians in Science, 16 Walter Road, Wokingham, Berkshire, RG41 3JA [£1]

Memes

Dawkins introduces his interesting concept of a 'meme':

I think that a new kind of replicator has recently emerged on this very planet ... We need a name for the new replicator ... *meme*...

Examples of memes are tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches. Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperm or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain ... [SG, p.192]



Most of Dawkins' developed examples of memes on pp 192-9 SG are ones which are used to convey highly negative images of religion:

[i] The survival value of the god meme in the meme pool results from its great psychological appeal. It provides a superficially plausible answer to deep and troubling questions about existence. It suggests that injustices in this world may be rectified in the next. The 'everlasting arms' hold out a cushion against our own inadequacies which, like a doctor's placebo, is none the less effective for being imaginary. [SG, p.193]

[ii] We have even used words like 'selfish' and 'ruthless' of genes, knowing full well it is only a figure of speech. Can we, in exactly the same spirit, look for selfish or ruthless memes?... To take a particular example, an aspect of doctrine that has been very effective in enforcing religious observance is the threat of hell fire ... [SG, p.196f]

[iii] [faith] means blind trust, in the absence of evidence, even in the teeth of evidence ... The meme for blind faith secures its own perpetuation by the simple unconscious expedient of discouraging rational enquiry. [SG, p.198]

The simile of a doctor's placebo suits Dawkins' purpose, but it is employed without any attempt at justification, illustrating how language can be used to bewitch as well as clarify.

- ➡ It could equally well be asserted that the 'everlasting arms' are none the less real for being effective.
- ➡ According to 'meme-theory', *disbelief* in God, *disbelief* in hell, and *unbelief* are also memes which could perhaps be accounted for as desires to live precisely as one chooses and to escape any responsibility of a non-temporal kind!

Mental viruses

Dawkins' allied comparison of *belief in God* to computer viruses again suits his world-view because 'virus' conveys an unfavourable image.

- ➡ According to 'meme-theory', *disbelief* in God, *disbelief* in hell, and *unbelief* are also memes which can equally well be compared to a computer virus.

Are young people gullible?

In his 1991 Royal Institution Christmas Lectures Dawkins assured his youthful audience that

Growing up in the universe ... also means growing out of parochial and supernatural views of the universe ... not coping out with superstitious ideas ... [CL 1]

The use of an educational series on *science* as a vehicle for promoting the view that science forced one into atheism was improper and is a view with which many scientists disagree. No indication was given that an opposite view could rationally be held — which amounts to propaganda. Blame for children retaining 'superstitious' ideas about God was laid upon schools and parents:

Most people, I believe, think that you need a god to explain the existence of the world, and especially the existence of life. They are wrong, but our education system is such that many people don't know it. [SCAG] Children of a certain age believe what they're told. Father Christmas and tooth fairies are harmless enough. But a mind that's capable of believing in fairies is a mind that's vulnerable to all manner of other stuff. [CL 5] How much of what we believe about our world is the result of what we have been conditioned or told to think? To what extent are we influenced by our parents and our surroundings? Or do we believe what we believe because we have actually and quite independently thought it through? [CLSG, p.27]

- ➡ Would Dawkins direct such criticisms against parents who taught their children that there is no God?
- ➡ Would he commend children who, although reared by atheist parents, came to believe in God after having 'quite independently thought it through'?
- ➡ If young people are as easily taken in as Dawkins thinks, then the persistence of *atheism* could also owe much to the gullibility of young people.

Consistency of argument

In Dawkins' writings there appear to be some discrepancies between the reasoning and assertions which are made in one place and those which appear in others:

1. Arguing from analogy

Dawkins' constantly assumes that, since material objects have beginnings, God would also have had to have had an origin. But he vehemently rejects (rightly) the similar argument from analogy that, since everyday objects have designers, the universe must have a designer.

2. Design or designoid?

Dawkins claims that, since the evolutionary mechanism of *chance variations* + *natural selection* can account for the outcome of complexity, intelligent (God's) activity **cannot** be involved:

...there is another way and, once you have understood it, a far more plausible way, for complex 'design' to arise out of primeval simplicity. [BWM, p.xii]

Living objects...look designed, they look overwhelmingly as though they're designed. But it's terribly, terribly tempting to use the word designed...But I've told you that they are not designed and coined the special word 'designoid' ... [CL 2]

But in an almost throw-away comment in the second of his Christmas Lectures he appeared to undermine his position. He refers to a German designer who 'designs windmills and he claims that he designs his windmills by a kind of natural selection.' [CL 2] In the TV programme, *The Blind Watchmaker*, Dawkins calls this process 'Darwinian design'.

➡ Dawkins has a fascinating computer programme, *Biomorphs*, to illustrate evolution by natural selection. He uses the double process of *chance* + *selection*. So the claim that *chance variations* + *selection* is incompatible with the actions of an intelligent agent, human or divine, is rebutted by these two examples. Perhaps this is what a certain commentator on *The Blind Watchmaker* had in mind when he referred to Dawkins as *The Blind Biomorphmaker*.

3. Language & metaphor

Dawkins says —

Natural selection,...has no purpose in mind. It has no mind and no mind's eye. It does not plan for the future. It has no vision, no foresight, no sight at all. If it can be said to play the role of watchmaker in nature, it is the *blind* watchmaker. [BWM, p.5]



— yet in other places he invests concepts like *nature*, *evolution*, *natural selection* and *chance* with the abilities to 'choose', 'build', 'manufacture' and 'create':

Natural selection is like artificial selection, except that, instead of humans doing the choosing, *nature* does the *choosing* ... *Natural selection, nature*, is constantly *choosing* which individuals shall live, which individuals shall breed [CL 2] [italics mine]

So am I really trying to persuade you that a blind, unconscious process, *evolution*, can *build* animal optics that rival human technology?...but *evolution*, the blind designer, using cumulative trial and error, can *search* the vast space of possible structures ... blind *chance* on its own is no kind of watchmaker. But *chance with* natural selection, *chance* smeared out into innumerable tiny steps over aeons of time *is* powerful enough to *manufacture*

miracles like dinosaurs and ourselves...yet we evolutionists seem to be saying that it [the eye] was *created* by blind *chance* ... [BWM TV]

This is a misleading way to talk.

➡ Such use of these words degenerates into nonsense if a creating God is denied while a *creating chance* (+ *natural selection*) is affirmed.

Dawkins' *selfish gene* is also misleading, as it seems to oscillate between being treated as a metaphor and not being so treated. In one place he refers to 'The metaphor of the intelligent gene' [EP, p.15], but in another place he responds to criticism of the term 'selfish' by saying:

When biologists talk about 'selfishness' or 'altruism' we...do not even mean the words in a metaphorical sense. We define altruism and selfishness in purely behaviouristic ways...[IDSG p.557]

But despite the disclaimer, the phrase 'selfish gene' is metaphorical since 'a word or phrase denoting one kind of object or action is used in place of another to suggest a likeness or analogy between them'.

4. Wishful thinking

Dawkins depicts faith as simply reflecting the 'will to believe'. So he dismisses certain Creationists' claims that the Paluxy River 'footprints' show humans and dinosaurs were around at the same time, claiming

they saw it because they wanted to see it. They believed it because it fitted with their world-view. They were blind to the truth that was staring them in the face. [BWM TV]

But this a bad reason for rejecting anyone's views, as it tells us nothing about the truth or falsity of what they believe. One can *both* want to believe something and it *can* be true. The *grounds* for rejecting this particular claim (since withdrawn) are provided by geological and other evidence, not by whether anyone wished to believe it or not.

➡ The charge of wishful thinking can equally well be laid against those who believe there is *no* God.

5. Meaning & purpose

In the first of his Christmas Lectures, Dawkins says that

Some of life must be devoted to living itself; some of life must be devoted to doing something worthwhile with one's life, not just to perpetuating it [CL 1]

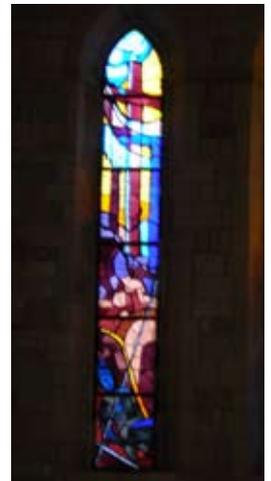
But this stands in complete contradiction to his other assertion that 'propagating DNA ... is every living object's sole reason for living' [CLSG, p.21].

Is religion a scientific theory?

... until recently one of religion's main functions was scientific; the explanation of existence, of the universe, of life ... So the most basic claims of religion *are* scientific. Religion *is* a scientific theory. [SCAG]

Dawkins' puzzling claim that 'religion is a scientific theory' underpins assertions like, 'I see God as a competing explanation for facts about the universe and life' [RTP, p.46] and 'God and natural selection are, after all, the only two workable theories we have of why we exist.' [EP, p.181]. However, while Dawkins uses the terms 'scientific theory', 'religion' and 'religious theory', he offers no demarcation criteria for scientific *or* religious theories which would enable us to evaluate his assertions.

There is no logical conflict between reason-giving explanations of *mechanisms*, and reason-giving explanations of the *plans and purposes* of an agent, human or divine. This is a logical point, unaffected by whether one does or does not believe in God oneself. In collapsing the distinction between these two type of explanations and treating them as *alternatives*, Dawkins is committing a *type error* in explanation. In fact this is allied to *the* classic *type-error* — Coulson's 'God-of-the-gaps' — which tries to plug 'god' into the gaps which science is not yet able to fill!



Dawkins' alternatives, 'Either admit that God is a scientific hypothesis ... Or admit that his status is no higher than that of fairies and river sprites' [RTP, p.47] caricature a serious matter and coerce into an unnecessary either/or. It is difficult to conceive how even a superficial reading of, say, the New Testament gospels could lead one to compare their value with stories about fairies and river sprites! To say, 'If God has a more solid basis than fairies, then let us hear it' [RTP, p.47] implies nobody has yet thought or written about Christian evidences! Dawkins has ready access to the whole theological collection of the University of Oxford if he wishes to avail himself of its resources. But evidence for God is not the same as watching intently for little people at the bottom of the garden on a mid-summer's night!

Conclusion

In case it should appear otherwise from this critique, no personal animosity is intended or felt. Richard Dawkins is an excellent communicator and I like his relaxed and clear lecturing style. However, I have criticised the quality of many of his arguments on four main counts:

1. His views of God as a created being, miracles as nothing other than 'more-or-less improbable natural events' and faith as unevidenced belief represent a 'straw' version of Christianity which the orthodox would not wish to defend. Consequently, arguments based on these assumptions do not actually engage with the intended target.
2. Attacks based on meme theory, religion as a 'mental virus' and the supposed gullibility of the young have no anti-Christian mileage in them whatsoever. These are simply theories about how ideas spread — any ideas. They say nothing about the truth or falsity of the beliefs themselves and have the boomerang effect of being equally applicable to the spread of atheism!
3. There appear to be a number of inconsistencies between Dawkins' various claims. These concern arguments from analogy; the use of *chance* + *selection* by intelligent agents; the legitimate use of metaphor; wishful thinking; and the meaning and purpose of life. It is important to distinguish between confident assertions and their justification.
4. Much of Dawkins' world-view depends on his odd claim that 'religion is a scientific theory'. I know of no professional philosopher who makes such an assertion. An attempt to justify such a contentious claim is long overdue if Dawkins' position is to be taken seriously.

Key to works by Richard Dawkins

- IDSG** — 'In Defence of Selfish Genes', *Philosophy* 56 556-573, 1981
EP — *The Extended Phenotype*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982
BWM — *The Blind Watchmaker*, Harlow: Longman, 1986
BWM TV — *The Blind Watchmaker* BBC 2 Horizon, 19 January 1987.
SG — *The Selfish Gene*, (2nd ed.), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989 (identical to 1st ed. + Chs 12 & 13)
CL 1 — 1st 1991 Royal Institution Christmas Lecture — *Waking up in the universe* [series repeated Dec. 1992]
CL 2 — 2nd lecture — *Designed and designoid objects*
CL 5 — 5th lecture — *The genesis of purpose*
CLSG — Christmas lecture study guide, *Growing up in the universe*, BBC Study Guide to the Christmas lectures, London: BBC Education 1991
SCAG — 'A scientist's case against God' — an edited version of Dr Dawkins' speech at the Edinburgh International Science Festival on 15 April 1992, published in *The Independent*, 20 April 1992
RTP — 'A Reply to Poole', *Science and Christian Belief* 7 (1) 1995

Michael Poole was formerly Lecturer in Science Education and is currently Visiting Research Fellow at King's College in the University of London. His research interests are in the interplay between science and religion with special reference to the educational context. He is the author of four books and some seventy articles on this subject and has received one of twelve international awards for *Quality and Excellence in Teaching Science and Religion*.