

Isn't science more rational than faith?

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In our series examining frequently asked questions about the Christian faith, Alister McGrath answers...

One of the core arguments of Richard Dawkins' book *The God Delusion* is that religious faith is irrational. "Dyed-in-the-wool faith-heads are immune to argument," he opines. Faith is a "process of non-thinking", which is "evil precisely because it requires no justification, and brooks no argument". This is typical of Dawkins' swashbuckling style, which mingles overheated rhetoric with a scant regard for evidence and accuracy. So let's look at things in a little more detail.

Everyone agrees that science is one of the most secure forms of knowledge we possess. How do we know that the chemical formula for water is H₂O? How do we know the structure of DNA? The answer is simple: because that's what the scientific evidence tells us. I don't think anyone will quibble with this.

Dawkins is right to praise the sciences for their ability to give clear, reliable answers to some important questions, such as "how is genetic information transmitted?" So far, so good. But look at another question: "What is the meaning of life?" This is clearly an important question. But can science answer it? Dawkins' answer is that science discloses no meaning to life – and therefore that there is no meaning to life. But is he right?

Let's look at some wise words written by Peter Medawar, one of Oxford's most brilliant scientists, who won the Nobel Prize in Medicine for his work on immunology. In a book titled, *Reflections on the Scope of Science*, Medawar reflects on the question of how the scope of science was limited by the nature of reality.

Emphasising that "science is incomparably the most successful enterprise human beings have ever engaged upon", he distinguishes between what he calls "transcendent" questions, which have to be answered by religion and metaphysics, and questions about the organisation and structure of the material universe.

With regard to the latter, he argues, there are no limits to the possibilities of scientific achievement. He thus agrees with Dawkins – but only by defining and limiting the domain within which the sciences possess such competency.

The limits of science

So what of other questions? What about the question of God? Or of whether there is purpose within the universe? As if pre-empting Dawkins' brash and simplistic take on the sciences, Medawar suggests that scientists need to be cautious about their pronouncements on these matters, lest they lose the trust of the public by confident and dogmatic overstatements.

Though a self-confessed rationalist, Medawar is clear on this matter: "That there is indeed a limit upon science is made very likely by the existence of questions that science cannot answer, and that no conceivable advance of science would empower it to answer.... I have in mind such questions as: How did everything begin? What are we all here for? What is the point of living?"

"Doctrinaire positivism – now something of a period piece – dismissed all such questions as nonquestions or pseudoquestions such as only simpletons ask and only charlatans profess to be able to answer."

Perhaps *The God Delusion* might have taken Sir Peter by surprise, on account of its late flowering of precisely that doctrinaire positivism which he had happily, yet apparently prematurely, believed to be dead.

The point is obvious and important: Science cannot tell us whether there is a God. It cannot tell us why we are here (although it may have some very interesting insights in how that happened). When it comes to questions of meaning, purpose and value, science is blind. And that is no criticism of science – it is simply about recognizing and respecting its limits.

Dawkins is not typical of science at this point, as most scientists are aware of the limits of their discipline, and see no problems in seeking answers elsewhere when it comes to the really big issues of life.

Leading research

The God Delusion was published in 2006. In that same year, some other notable books were published by leading research scientists. Owen Gingerich, professor of astronomy at Harvard, published his *God's Universe*; Francis Collins, director of the famous Human Genome Project, came out with *The Language of God*.

Both of these top scientists argued passionately and persuasively that their Christian faith gave them a way of making sense of the world, which

resonated strongly with their scientific careers and research. It was, they argued, deeply satisfying intellectually.

Now this doesn't resonate with Dawkins' somewhat simplistic take on things at all. But it does make the fundamental point that thinking people can be outstanding research scientists, enjoying the respect and admiration of their peers, while believing in God.

Belief in God is not irrational, but possesses its own distinct and robust rationality. It represents a superb way of making sense of things. "I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen – not only because I see it, but because by it, I see everything else," said CS Lewis.

To use the language of philosophy, God is the "best explanation" of the way things are. We can't prove that God is there, any more than an atheist can prove that there is no God. But all of us, whether Christians or atheists, base our lives on at least some fundamental beliefs that we know we cannot prove. That's just the way things are.

For more information, read Alister McGrath's books *The Dawkins Delusion?* (SPCK, 2007) or *Dawkins' God* (Blackwell, 2004).

Further material is available from Christians In Science at: www.cis.org.uk