

RICHARD DAWKINS

A Reply to Poole

The following comments are in response to an article by Michael Poole entitled 'A critique of aspects of the philosophy and theology of Richard Dawkins', *Science and Christian Belief* (1994) 6, 41–59.

I am grateful to the Editor for inviting me to reply to Michael Poole's interesting article. Authors' replies to criticism predictably rely upon the 'I have been misquoted . . . misunderstood . . . misinterpreted . . .' formula. Poole's collation of my ideas is so thorough, and his representation of them so fair, that I have almost no complaints along these lines. On the contrary, when I see my own views so comprehensively expounded by so fair-minded a critic, I find myself agreeing with them as strongly as ever!

I can fault his scholarship in only one detail, but it is a diverting one. He misattributes 'nothing-buttery' to the religious scientist Donald McKay in 1974. It is a mild irony that in fact the witticism was originally used against a theologian, Teilhard de Chardin, and as early as 1961. Sir Peter Medawar, the Nobel-prizewinning scientist and polymath, coined it in his brilliantly savage review (perhaps the most devastating book review ever written) of *The Phenomenon of Man*:

There is much else in the literary idiom of nature-philosophy: nothing-buttery, for example, always part of the minor symptomatology of the bogus . . . 'the Christogenesis of St Paul and St John is nothing else and nothing less than the extension . . . of that noogenesis in which cosmogenesis . . . culminates.' It would have been a great disappointment to me if Vibration did not somewhere make itself felt, for all scientific mystics either vibrate in person or find themselves resonant with cosmic vibrations; but I am happy to say that on page 266 Teilhard will be found to do so.'

Forgive me, I could not resist running the quotation on. As Medawar himself remarks, with Teilhard, to expound is to expose. Scientists will be incredulous that anyone could get such pretentious obscurantism published. New Age Travellers, of course, will love Teilhard for his vacuous imitation of profundity, but what about theologians—do they find Teilhard par for the course? Is this the kind of thing the Starbridge lecturer will be paid to teach? I hope that doesn't sound like a cheap jibe. It is not intended to be, but is there to make a serious point which is relevant to Poole's article. If the defence is made that Teilhard is bad theology and good

theology is not like that, my reply would be this. By what standards are we to judge good theology from bad? We know how to judge bad science. Bad science is done from time to time and it is weeded out by publicly knowable procedures. But bad theology? How are we to detect that 'Love in all its subtleties is nothing more, and nothing less, than the more or less direct trace marked on the heart of the element by the psychical convergence of the universe upon itself . . .' (Teilhard again) is different from good theology? What would good theology look like? Let's be charitable and assume that it would not look like the article that the Editors of this journal saw fit to publish immediately before Poole's in 'Science and Christian Belief:

'Ironically, the god of the process theologians is very abstract, and in that regard, very much the product of theoretical 'masculine' thought. One of the faults of process theology is that in order to accommodate contemporary scientific cosmology and academic language, it 'depersonalizes' and 'dedivinizes' Christ. Ruether's struggle to find a culturally comfortable divinity by adding feminine identity to the generalities of the physics-oriented philosophers strikes an odd contrast to Gadon's goddess who, as a projection of artistic feminine psyche, is busy dancing through western culture in a flashy costume.' Susan Power Bratton: 'Ecofeminism and the Problem of Divine Immanence'. *Science and Christian Belief*, April 1994.

This passage's reference to the struggle to find a culturally comfortable divinity is a good example of what may be called the 'Argument from Personal Comfort' and I'll return to Poole's usage of the Argument in his concluding remarks. Here, my purpose is to ask whether a piece of theological writing such as this, or the marginally more sensible quotations from Teilhard above, could ever be testable by any standards of evidence: standards that might be respected by scientists or by lawyers or by historians or by common sense? If so, well and good, but would it then be theology at all? Poole appears to be at best equivocal on the role of evidence in evaluating theological truth.

He is right that I pay religions the compliment of regarding them as scientific theories and that I see God as a competing explanation for facts about the universe and life. This is certainly how God has been seen by most theologians of past centuries and by most ordinary religious people today. But Poole is trying to have it both ways. On the one hand he is denying that religions provide explanations in the same sense as science, and trying to shield them from the critical rigours that scientific theories must endure. On the other hand, he tries to rescue the argument from design by suggesting, in the words of the elder Archbishop Temple, that evolution touches

. . . not the evidence of design but the mode in which the design was executed . . . In the one case the Creator made the animals at once such as they now are; in the other case He impressed on certain particles of

matter . . . such inherent powers that in the ordinary course of time living creatures such as the present were developed . . . He did not make the things, we may say; no, but He made them make themselves.

Now, if God set the Universe in motion and then sat back to watch evolution happen, a scientist should hope that there might be traces—evidence of His involvement in the shape of functioning of the universe. Some physicists, for example, have suggested that the fundamental constants of the universe are ‘too good’: that the laws of physics look as if they have been designed to make carbon chemistry and hence the evolution of life possible. Here we have an interesting argument and one which I should like to see spelled out and dissected thoroughly. But this will not happen if it is ruled out of bounds to critical argument. It must not be allowed to claim a kind of spurious diplomatic immunity by flashing its religious safe-conduct at us.

If, on the other hand, there are no traces of God’s involvement in the universe; if God did indeed set things up so that life would evolve, but covered His tracks so brilliantly that no clues remain; if He made the universe look *exactly as it would be expected to look* if He did not exist, then what we have is not an argument from design at all. There can be no argument from design if the universe is expertly designed to look undesignated. All we are left with, in this case, is the feeble, though strictly valid, argument that just because we can’t find any evidence for a God, this doesn’t prove that there isn’t one. Of course we can’t prove that there isn’t a God but, as has been said sufficiently often before, exactly the same can be said of fairies and Father Christmas.

Once again, this is not intended as cheap mockery but is making a point. If God really has a more solid basis than fairies, then let us hear it. If evidence is not forthcoming, then how can you answer a Fairy-worshipper who claims that his religion is as securely founded as yours? Not just a fairy-worshipper, note, for we could substitute an infinite variety of strictly undisprovable godlings and hobgodlings. Either admit that God is a scientific hypothesis and let him submit to the same judgement as any other scientific hypothesis. Or admit that his status is no higher than that of fairies and river sprites.

We now arrive at what, in various shapes and forms, amounts to the central disagreement that Poole has with me. He quotes me:

Any god worthy of the name must have been a being of colossal intelligence, a supermind, an entity of enormous sophistication and complexity. In other words, an entity of extremely low statistical probability—a very improbable being.

I must apologise for the repetitive style (this is not from a written source but is a verbatim transcript of a dialogue with the Archbishop of York) but I stand by the sentiment.

Parenthetically, Poole is confused about probability. He rightly says

that probability is the ratio of the number of ways in which something happens to the number of ways in which something could happen. He wrongly goes on to say that this definition is not applicable to amazing, spooky coincidences because these are unique events. Yes, if a letter to a newspaper reports that the writer dreamed of an old friend and then woke up to discover that the friend had died in the night, this is, in a trivial sense, a unique event. But there is nothing to stop us estimating frequencies of relevant classes of events. How many readers of our newspapers are there; in other words what is the catchment area of the coincidence from the point of view of our hearing about it? How many of them dream and how often? How many friends do they typically have and what is the likelihood of one of their friends' dying per unit time? When this kind of calculation has been done, the conclusion is startling. There are likely to be hundreds of people experiencing coincidences at least as eerie as this one every day. You can't do the calculation as precisely as you can when cards or coloured balls are involved. But everybody does an intuitive calculation of this kind in order to recognize a spooky coincidence in the first place. My point was that they usually are not trained to calculate it properly, and therefore conclude that the coincidence is more spooky than it is. The same kind of intuitive calculation lies behind the claim that the vertebrate eye is too improbable to have arisen by chance (in how many ways could the bits of an eye have been arranged, and how many of them would see?) and it lies behind my similar claim about God.

Poole, in his reply to that claim, appears to think that he has hoist me with my own petard:

Dawkins' constant assumption, echoing the popular demand, 'who made God?' is that since our common experience indicates that material objects have beginnings, God would also have had to have had an originator . . . His assumption is a particularly interesting one from the point of view of consistency of argument, since it is precisely this kind of analogical argument that he so vehemently rejects if applied to the world having a designer by comparison with everyday artefacts having designers.

There are three ways in which statistically improbable entities can come into being. First, luck. This is, for practical purposes, ruled out if the improbability is sufficiently high. Second, deliberate design which is, of course, how cars and buildings come into being. Third, evolution by gradual, cumulative degrees, guided by natural selection of random variation. This third theory is a genuine alternative to the designer theory, and Poole would not deny that it works for all the living things on this planet. Now, my argument with respect to God goes like this. We first note that a God capable of designing a universe (and incidentally capable of forgiving sins, impregnating virgins etc.) would have to be very sophisticated and complex. This rules out chance as an explanation, in exactly the same kind of way as chance is ruled out as an explanation for the eye. Right

then, we are left with either a (meta) designer or gradual, cumulative evolution. I jumped straight to the familiar rhetorical question—‘But who designed God?’—because no theologian, to my knowledge, has ever proposed that God evolved to his awesome complexity by slow, gradual degrees (it would have to be a population of randomly varying Gods, by the way, if natural selection was the driving force). If any such suggestion were made, I should be intrigued and would give the hypothesis my best attention. But I am not optimistic that the hypothesis has much satisfaction to offer the religious. Evolution takes time and it needs a universe in which to operate. There is, therefore, to say the least, going to be a problem with any attempt to postulate an *evolved* God as the *fons et origo* of the universe. The theory that there might have been a natural selection among randomly varying universes is another matter and is very interesting, but I have no space to deal with it. It is not a religious theory.

The argument that an eye, say, or a backbone is too complicated to have arisen by chance is a good argument because ‘arisen by chance’ is a synonym for ‘sprang spontaneously and instantaneously into existence.’ The irony is that the argument against chance is conventionally used by creationists against evolution. In fact it is the most powerful argument against creation, because creation really *does* amount to something complicated springing spontaneously into existence. Evolution by natural selection offers the only ultimate solution so far suggested to the riddle of how complicated objects can exist, anywhere in the universe. Poole claims to accept the importance of Darwinism, but he fails to do justice to the colossal intellectual work that Darwinism is doing for us. Darwinism not only renders God unnecessary as an explanatory device. Most sophisticated theologians would admit this. God is also shown to be very very improbable indeed, for exactly the same reason as the spontaneous arising of the vertebrate eye is improbable. In the days before we understood how eyes could exist, God had a certain plausibility (illusory as Hume showed it to be). But by explaining eyes, and all other complex objects, Darwin has pulled the rug from under God’s feet.

Poole’s concluding remarks are puzzling. Unless I have misunderstood them, they amount to intellectual cowardice. ‘But if Dawkins’ assertion that “propagating DNA . . . is every living object’s sole reason for living”, then all one is left with are the wistful echoes of his own words, “There’s got to be more to it than that.”’ Why has there got to be more to it than that? Not because of evidence or logic. No, the reason there has got to be more to it than that is simply that the universe would be a kinder and more comfortable place to live in if there were more to it than that! It is the Argument from Personal Comfort yet again. It amounts to saying: ‘If X were so, the universe would be an intolerably bleak and meaningless place. Therefore X cannot be so.’ More succinctly, it is equivalent to ‘Nature abhors the Intolerable.’ Would that it did.

Finally, it is not part of his main article but there is an innuendo in the Abstract which I cannot let pass. Poole fears that undue weight may be

attached to scientists' views 'on matters outside of their own fields of expertise. This possibility seemed to be particularly acute during Richard Dawkins' 1991 Royal Institution Christmas Lectures, both on account of the number of anti-religious assertions and of the youth of the audience.'

'Matters outside their own fields of expertise' implies that the matters concerned are *within* somebody's field of expertise. When the matters concerned are the ultimate questions of existence and purpose, forgive me for hollow laughter at the pretensions of *anybody* to expertise in such a field. If the expertise suggested is 'theology' I am on record as doubting whether it is a subject at all. But the specific innuendo that I must counter lurks in the reference to the youth of the Christmas Lectures television audience. Though not spelled out, the implication rings out loud and clear that I abused a position of trust as an invited lecturer to young and vulnerable minds.

I'd have more sympathy with this accusation, were it not for the overwhelming preponderance of broadcast propaganda in the other direction. After my Christmas Lectures I received letters from the pious saying that they would have no objection if only I had qualified my remarks by saying: 'But I should warn you that many well-informed people think differently . . .' When did you last hear a priest—in the pulpit, on radio, on television, in infants' Sunday School—qualify his statement with 'But I should warn you that many well-informed people don't think God exists at all . . .'?

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