

## MICHAEL POOLE

# A Response to Dawkins

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I am pleased that Richard Dawkins judges my critique of his views as fair. I shall endeavour to keep these additional remarks the same. However, I now wish to press home my points a little harder, for I see no way that my paper can encourage Dawkins to hold his views 'as strongly as ever', if he has taken the full force of the criticisms on board. I shall respond to his main points.<sup>1</sup>

### What constitutes a scientific theory?

Although Dawkins sees our 'central disagreement' as being over his idea of the probability of God, there is a more far-reaching point of disagreement. This concerns Dawkins' key thesis, his puzzling claim that 'religion is a scientific theory' which obliterates the philosophical distinction between science and metaphysics. Furthermore, he uses the phrase, 'not a religious theory', of one particular speculation about the origin of the universe.<sup>2</sup> But, while using the terms 'scientific theory', 'religion' and 'religious theory', he offers no explication of, or demarcation criteria for, scientific or religious theories, which would enable us to evaluate his assertions.

There is a vast body of literature on the philosophy of science.<sup>3</sup> On a realist view of science, scientific theories attempt to explain the physical properties of the world. Consequently a scientific journal is not dedicated to the publication of poetry, music, novels, art or history, because they are not considered to be science, even though each may take science as their subject material. The price of constructing a body of reliable scientific knowledge is a restriction on the types of questions which are addressed, although none of these other aspects of human experience are thereby discounted.

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Further correspondence concerning the topics raised in this exchange of views would be welcomed—editor.

1 The minor point about 'Nothing-buttery' is nevertheless worth putting straight for the record. MacKay *did* coin the term and was using it at least by 1953. Written confirmation that his employment of the term predates Medawar's review (1961) of Teilhard's *Phenomenon of Man* comes from MacKay, D. M. (1960) 'Man as a Mechanism', *Faith and Thought*, 91 (3) 149 where he refers to 'what I like to call "nothing buttery" '.

2 'Natural selection among randomly varying universes'.

3 A recent book which is germane to our discussion is Trigg, R. (1993) *Rationality and Science: Can Science Explain Everything?*, Oxford: Blackwell [reviewed in this issue—ed.].

There is also an extensive philosophical literature concerned with identifying the universe of discourse<sup>4</sup> of religion. One fairly standard approach is to say that the universe of discourse of religion is constituted by the concept of God, understood as 'transcendent conscious agency', coupled with explanations of those three terms. The approach is not entirely adequate since it does not embrace non-theistic religions; but it goes some way towards clarifying a dominant view.

The common demand, 'prove to me scientifically that God exists', misunderstands both the nature of science and the nature of religion. Science is an inappropriate tool for adjudicating upon the existence of God. At the risk of over-simplifying, science is concerned with studying the natural world, the world of nature. Questions about God's existence are about whether there is anything other than nature to which nature owes its existence; and it is no use going to science, the study of nature, to determine whether there is anything other than nature.

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' both caricature a serious matter and coerce into an unnecessary either/or. It is perfectly possible both to reject the notion that 'God is a scientific hypothesis' and to reject the claim that God's 'status is no higher than that of fairies and river sprites'. I find it difficult to conceive how a serious—or even a superficial reading of, say, the New Testament gospels could lead to equate their value with stories about fairies and river sprites!

If we are to find Dawkins' key thesis persuasive, he must spell out his criteria for judging theories as 'scientific'. If religion is admitted as a scientific theory, are aesthetics or history allowed in? If not, on what grounds are they excluded? We need to be provided with demarcation criteria for judging what are not scientific theories, criteria for differentiating between science and non-science. Furthermore, his statement that 'natural selection among randomly varying universes . . . is not a religious theory', presupposes he has demarcation criteria in mind for distinguishing between religious and non-religious theories. These, too, need explicating if we are to evaluate his key thesis.

### **The meaning of God as creator in Christian theology**

God is not portrayed by Christian theology as a created being, something which Dawkins *still* has not taken on board. In responding to my observation that he appears to have moved by an analogical argument from 'material objects have beginnings' to the assumption that God had a beginning—a type of argument he has rightly eschewed about design—Dawkins again asks 'who designed God?' He follows this with a lengthy passage on 'three ways in which statistically improbable entities can come

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<sup>4</sup> 'A system of concepts and entities related to a particular topic or area of interest, within which certain terms and expressions acquire their own meaning or significance'.

into being.' But this passage does not contribute to the discussion, because it is predicated upon a 'when-did-you-stop-beating-your-wife' assumption about God. No one is pretending the idea that God is eternal is easy for time-dependent creatures like ourselves to grasp, any more than the allied one, presented by modern physics, that time itself comes into being with the universe. But it still has to be taken into account.

Dawkins also says, '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 or functioning of the universe.' Again, here are ideas which betray how deeply entrenched is Dawkins' misunderstanding of the orthodox Christian concept of God:

First, the idea of a God who creates and then sits back is not the God of biblical theism; it is the Cosmic Clockmaker of eighteenth century deism—the Retired Architect, the Absentee Landlord. Biblical theism presents a God who is immanent as well as transcendent, actively at work moment by moment in his world. That is one reason why it is ironic that evolutionary theory which, on one interpretation, reemphasised God's continuing activity after deism had lost sight of it, should be regarded as atheistic!

Second, there is the idea that the universe should contain 'traces—evidence of His involvement'. Dawkins questions whether the apparent 'fine-tuning' of the universe for life is one of those 'traces'.<sup>5</sup> He also asks what it would be like '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'. But Christian theology does not envisage the universe as being different from what it might have been if God did not exist, rather that there would be no universe. It is the whole universe that is the 'traces', not some little piece tacked on by way of a signature. To think otherwise bears certain similarities to searching the components of a jet engine for traces of Frank Whittle. The search is in vain; it is the whole engine which owes its being to Whittle's creativity, rather than any individual part bearing his

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<sup>5</sup> He says this is an interesting argument he would 'like to see spelled out and dissected thoroughly. But this will not happen if it is ruled out of bounds to critical argument . . . [claiming] a kind of diplomatic immunity'. But his comment implies that no academics are engaged in such debates! The substantial volume, *Who's Who in Theology and Science* (Winthrop Publishing Co. 1992) lists 1,500 academics throughout the world working on these kinds of issues, as well as 72 journals, organisations and institutions specialising in the area. All the while the talk is of 'river sprites', 'fairies and Father Christmas' rather than serious debate, we shall just be talking past each other. Space does not permit a discussion of possible theological implications of the Anthropic Cosmological Principle in reply, although I have offered some comments in Chapter 5 of *Beliefs and Values in Science Education*, Open University Press, [in press]. See also Polkinghorne, J. (1986) *One World*, London: SPCK. Clifton, R. K. (1990) 'John D. Barrow and Frank J. Tipler: The Anthropic Cosmological Principle', *Science and Christian Belief* 2 (1) 41–6 and Osborn, L. H. (1990) 'A theological perspective on Barrow and Tipler's: The Anthropic Cosmological Principle', *Science and Christian Belief* 2 (1) 47–52.

signature. Furthermore, to expect the existence of God to be open to scientific tests is like trying to treat the existence of Whittle as an engineering question!

Dawkins' statement, 'Darwinism . . . renders God unnecessary as an explanatory device' makes me think I have not explained myself very well in my paper; for I have already given qualified agreement with this view.<sup>6</sup> God is no more necessary in a scientific explanation of the world than Whittle is in a scientific explanation of the jet engine. But that does not justify denying the existence of God or Whittle! How could scientific explanations of the mechanisms of a creation conceivably offer any kind of competition to the existence of a creator? It would be nonsense, in a situation having a similar logical structure to regard the creator, Whittle, as a competing explanation to the mechanisms of the jet engine.

Creation, according to Dawkins in his reply, 'really does amount to something complicated springing spontaneously into existence'. In saying this I believe he is falling into the same mistake as some 'creationists', who think that to assert 'creation' necessitates holding the view that everything sprang into existence 'ready-made'. 'Creation', expresses God's relationship to the world, asserting that everything depends upon God for its existence. Creation, in its theological usage, is 'bringing-into-being-by-God' and is independent of any particular physical processes. To try to contrast the act of creation with the processes of, say, evolution by natural selection is to commit some kind of category mistake.

### **'Good theology' or 'bad theology'?**

Dawkins' comments about Teilhard, whose views I am not concerned to defend, lead him to ask 'By what standards are we to judge good theology from bad?' Two criteria for judging good (Christian) theology are that it takes adequate account of (i) biblical material and (ii) extra-biblical material, such as evidence drawn from secular history. One of the criticisms I expressed in my paper concerned Dawkins' misinterpretation of what Christian theology says about God, miracles and faith. While no-one claims to be an expert on 'life, the universe and everything' the misconceptions to which I have referred are very basic ones about Christian theology, which even a cursory reading of the source documents could have avoided.

I am not clear why Dawkins says I appear 'to be at best equivocal on the role of evidence in evaluating theological truth.' I should have thought my quotation of Bruce<sup>7</sup> made it abundantly clear that I count evidence as of fundamental importance, evidence which to use Dawkins' own words,

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6 Following my analysis of the idea of explanation. I actually said, 'the scientific enterprise is based on a belief that gaps can be filled—but with scientific explanations, not with talk-about-God. So there is a restricted sense in which it is true to say that science has no need for God, that talk about God is unnecessary in science—which is parallel to what Dawkins is saying, ostensibly to correct me; but I am not disagreeing!

7 Foot of p. 46 and the top of p. 47.

'might be respected by scientists or by lawyers or by historians'. His 'common sense' requirement is more contentious. It is the central thesis of a recent book by Prof. Lewis Wolpert that science has only developed in so far as it has departed from the dictates of common sense.<sup>8</sup> Common sense is based on precedent and may therefore be an inadequate guide to something entirely novel, such as that central claim of Christianity, the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

In bad theology, people have cited selected parts of the 'Book of Nature' as if they were evidence for a creator's design, leaving the rest of the natural order in an implied state of 'non-created ambiguity'. This is rather like treating an author as the creator of one part of a book more than another. However, my comments on design were not, as Dawkins thinks, an attempt 'to rescue the argument from design'. His use of the definite article suggests that Paley's argument was the only form in which design could be envisaged, which it is not. I was simply concerned to spell out reasons for rejecting Dawkins' frequent assertions that *chance plus selection* rules out any idea of design in the universe and justifies coining a new 'deny-word', *designoid*. Furthermore, it is necessary to differentiate the scientific use of 'chance', which has no metaphysical overtones, from its popular use to assert the absence of purpose or plan. I am surprised that Dawkins, with his apparent antipathy towards metaphysics, should assign metaphysical meanings to the concept 'chance' as used in science.

To say, 'If God has a more solid basis than fairies, then let us hear it' conveys the impression that 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 at the bottom of the garden on a summer's night!

Grand theories, be they metaphysical ones like theism or atheism, or physical ones like stellar and organic evolution, can be judged against such criteria as

- (i) comprehensiveness—taking into account all known data, deemed relevant;
- (ii) consistency—freedom from internal contradictions;
- (iii) coherence—holding together as a whole;
- (iv) congruence—corresponding, coinciding with experience.

### **Probability**

I suspect that part of our disagreement about probability arises over what constitutes a unique event. Dawkins considers someone dreaming that a friend has died, and finding they have, as a unique event. He then argues about the frequency of such dreams and the probability of deaths per unit time. But once there are other examples of such events, so that talk of

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<sup>8</sup> L. Wolpert, *The Unnatural Nature of Science* Faber & Faber, 1992.

frequencies becomes meaningful, the events cease to be unique. Indeed, the event, 'a person dreams that a friend dies when they do', is arguably unlikely to be unique in history. What is unique is that Sue Smith dreams that Bill Bloggs dies when he does.

Although I stand by my statement, 'There is no way of assigning mathematical probabilities to unique events', I agree with Dawkins that 'there is nothing to stop us estimating frequencies of relevant classes of events', even 'spooky events' reported in newspapers, *provided* there can be some kind of agreement about what constitutes the class of 'spooky events'. However, I was criticising Dawkins' use of the concept of probability in the precise calculus of coin-tossing to argue for the *meaninglessness* of what he calls 'uncanny, spooky, telepathic, experiences', which I assumed, and which he has not denied, would include claims about answered prayer. To say, 'when people write into the papers with uncanny experiences, it's just like that . . . and it means absolutely nothing', is a *non sequitur*. Dawkins would have to have some privileged insight into the world in order to know that all reported uncanny experiences meant 'absolutely nothing'. Suppose for the sake of argument that there is a God who answers prayers and that these answers give rise to what Dawkins calls uncanny experiences. The occurrence of these experiences owes nothing whatever to the calculus of coin-tossing but occurs *if and only if* there is a God who answers prayer.

### **No 'Argument from Personal Comfort'**

Dawkins' puzzlement over my closing remarks is quickly resolved. I am afraid he is right about misunderstanding them. I am not making any 'Argument from Personal Comfort'.<sup>9</sup> I am simply quoting *him*. The words, 'There's got to be more to it than that', are *Dawkins'* words, not mine. I have watched the relevant section from the first Christmas lecture several times since reading Dawkins' reply, to check whether he was simply representing Faraday's views, which he had just commented on. But he speaks with great warmth about the idea that there has got to be more to life than just 'to work to go on living' and certainly does not introduce any notion that this might be seen as an 'Argument from Personal Comfort'. Any possible doubts as to whether Dawkins himself holds that 'There's got to be more to it [life] than that' are dispelled by his next words: '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!' So my criticism of inconsistency remains, for this stands in complete contradiction to his other assertion that 'propagating DNA . . . is every living object's sole reason for living'.<sup>10</sup> If he stands by his latter claim, then as I concluded

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<sup>9</sup> It needs to be kept in mind that 'truth' and 'personal comfort' are two independent concepts. Something can be *both* comforting *and* true.

<sup>10</sup> Christmas Lecture Study Guide, p. 21.

my article, Dawkins' own words, 'There's got to be more to it than that', have a wistful ring about them.

### **Education and Propaganda**

Dawkins rightly discerned my innuendo in the Abstract about the impropriety of promoting an atheistic world-view in the name of science in his 1991 Christmas lectures. He has often gone on record as saying that the persistence of religion owes much to the gullibility of young people who will believe anything they are told in their early years. If young people are as easily taken in as he thinks, then the persistence of atheism could also owe much to the gullibility of young people.

My concern about these lectures was that they were intended to be educational ones about science, within which atheistic dogmatism was inappropriate. Dawkins disparagingly refers to 'the pious' who wrote afterwards to say that his remarks should have been qualified. But it was a valid objection. It is no defence for him to say that others have not qualified their remarks. That is only an argument for saying that they should have done so too! His example of 'priests' does not serve his cause, for belief in God is [generally!] an assumption of their position, which those who choose to listen to them take for granted. Similarly, someone who chooses to go to a meeting of the British Humanist Association should not be surprised to hear criticisms of religion and would not expect to be reminded that some people do believe in God. But the school-children who went to the Christmas Lectures went to hear a series on science, which was used as a vehicle for promoting a personal world-view, that science pushed one into atheism. But this is not a necessary consequence of science and the view is one with which many scientists disagree. However, no indication was given that an opposite view could coherently and rationally be held—which amounts to propaganda.

### **Conclusion**

In case it should appear otherwise from this critique, let me add that no personal animosity is intended or felt. I like Richard Dawkins' relaxed and clear lecturing style, enjoyed most of the Christmas lectures, and found the sequence about the baby to which I referred, delightfully sensitive. However, in my original paper and here, I have criticised the quality of many of the arguments which Dawkins has so vigorously sought to employ against Christianity 'in the name of science', through his books, lectures, newspaper articles, letters, and television appearances over many years.

One class of arguments starts from the assumptions of (i) God as a created being (ii) miracles as nothing other than 'more-or-less improbable natural events' and (iii) faith as unevidenced belief. But such assumptions form no part of traditional Christian theology. Consequently, arguments based on these assumptions do not actually engage with the intended

target. They are directed against a 'straw' version of Christianity, one which the orthodox would not wish to defend.

A second class of arguments includes (i) meme theory (ii) the metaphor of religion as a 'mental virus' and (iii) the supposed readiness of the young to believe anything they are told. But these have no anti-Christian mileage in them whatsoever. They are simply theories about the ways in which ideas spread—any ideas. They have nothing to say about the truth or falsity of the beliefs themselves; they are equally applicable to the spread of atheism. To use them is to wield a two-edged sword which can wound the assailant as much as the intended victim.

Much of Dawkins' world-view depends on his central thesis that 'religion is a scientific theory', including his view of 'God as a competing explanation [to science] for facts about the universe and life'. I know of no professional philosopher who makes such a claim. But, conspicuous by its absence, is any attempt to justify such a contentious claim. However, the task has now become an urgent one for, unless Dawkins is able to mount a tightly argued justification of his central claim, much of his position remains poised precariously on insecure foundations.

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## UK Evangelical Environmental Network

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