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Champagne for the brain

Is Richard Dawkins Still

Evolving?

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On Tuesday evening I attended the debate between Richard Dawkins and John Lennox at Oxford's Natural History Museum. This was the second public encounter between the two men, but it turned out to be very different from the first. Lennox is the Oxford mathematics professor whose book, *God's Undertaker: Has Science Buried God?* is to my mind an excoriating demolition of Dawkins's overreach from biology into religion as expressed in his book *The God Delusion* -- all the more devastating because Lennox attacks him on the basis of science itself. In the first debate, which can be seen on video on this [website](#), Dawkins was badly caught off-balance by Lennox's argument precisely because, possibly for the first time, he was being challenged on his own chosen scientific ground.

This week's debate, however, was different because from the off Dawkins moved it onto safer territory-- and at the very beginning made a most startling admission. He said:

A serious case could be made for a deistic God.

This was surely remarkable. Here was the arch-apostle of atheism, whose whole case is based on the assertion that believing in a creator of the universe is no different from believing in fairies at the bottom of the garden, saying that a serious case can be made for the idea that the universe was brought into being by some kind of purposeful force. A creator. True, he was not saying he was now a deist; on the contrary, he still didn't believe in such a purposeful founding intelligence, and he was certainly still saying that belief in the personal God of the Bible was just like believing in fairies. Nevertheless, to acknowledge that 'a serious case could be made for a deistic god' is to undermine his previous categorical assertion that

...all life, all intelligence, all creativity and all 'design' anywhere in the universe is the direct or indirect product of Darwinian natural selection...Design cannot precede evolution and therefore cannot underlie the universe.

In Oxford on Tuesday night, however, virtually the first thing he said was that a serious case could be made for believing that it *could*.

Anthony Flew, the celebrated philosopher and former high priest of atheism, spectacularly changed his mind and concluded -- as set out in his book *There Is A God* -- that life had indeed been created by a governing and purposeful intelligence, a change of mind that occurred *because he followed where the scientific evidence led him*. The conversion of Flew, whose book contains a cutting critique of Dawkins's thinking, has been dismissed with unbridled scorn by Dawkins -- who now says there is a serious case for the position that Flew now adopts!

Unfortunately, so stunning was this declaration it was not pursued on Tuesday evening. Instead, Dawkins was able to move the debate onto a specific attack on Christian belief in the divinity of Jesus, which is a very different argument and obscured the central point of contention -- the claim that science had buried God. The fact that Dawkins now appears to be so reluctant publicly to defend his own position on his own territory of scientific rationalism -- and indeed, even to have shifted his ground -- is a tribute above all to the man he was debating once again on Tuesday evening.

Afterwards, I asked Dawkins whether he had indeed changed his position and become more open to ideas which lay outside the scientific paradigm. He vehemently denied this and expressed horror that he might have given this impression. But he also said other things which suggested to me that some of his own views simply don't meet the criteria of empirical evidence that he insists must govern all our thinking.

For example, I put to him that, since he is prepared to believe that the origin of all matter was an entirely spontaneous event, he therefore believes that something can be created out of nothing -- and that since such a belief runs counter to the very scientific principles of verifiable evidence which he tells us should govern all our thinking, this is itself precisely the kind of irrationality, or 'magic', which he scorns. In reply he said that, although he agreed this was a problematic position, he did indeed believe that the first particle arose spontaneously from nothing, because the alternative explanation -- God -- was more incredible. Later, he amplified this by saying that physics was coming up with theories to show how matter could spontaneously be created from nothing. But as far as I can see -- and as Anthony Flew elaborates -- these theories cannot answer the crucial question of how the purpose-carrying codes which gave rise to self-reproduction in life-forms arose out of matter from which any sense of purpose was totally absent. So such a belief, whether adduced by physicists or anyone else, does not rest upon rational foundations.

Even more jaw-droppingly, Dawkins told me that, rather than believing in God, he was more receptive to the theory that life on earth had indeed been created by a governing intelligence -- but one which had resided on another planet. Leave aside the question of where that extra-terrestrial intelligence had itself come from, is it not remarkable that the arch-apostle of reason finds the concept of God *more* unlikely as an explanation of the universe than the existence and plenipotentiary power of extra-terrestrial little green men?

The other thing that jumped out at me from this debate was that, although Dawkins insisted over and over again that all he was concerned with was whether or not something was true, he himself seems to be pretty careless with historical evidence. Anthony Flew, for example, points out in his own book that Dawkins's claim in *The God Delusion* that Einstein was an atheist is manifestly false, since Einstein had specifically denied that he was either a pantheist or an atheist. In the debate, under pressure from Lennox Dawkins was actually forced to retract his previous claim that Jesus had probably 'never existed'. And in a revealing aside, when Lennox remarked that the Natural History Museum in which they were debating -- in front of dinosaur skeletons -- had been founded for the glory of God, Dawkins scoffed that of course this was absolutely untrue.

But it was true. Construction of the museum was instigated between 1855 and 1860 by the Regius Professor of Medicine, Sir Henry Acland. According to [Keith Thomson](#) of the Sigma XI Scientific Research Society, the funds for the project came from the surplus in the University Press's Bible account as this was deemed only appropriate for a building dedicated to science as a glorification of God's works. Giving his reasons for building the museum, [Acland himself said](#) that it would provide the opportunity to obtain the

knowledge of the great material design of which the Supreme Master-Worker has made us a constituent part...The student of life, bearing in mind the more general laws which in the several departments above named he will have sought to appreciate, will find in the collections of Zoology, combined with the Geological specimens and the dissections of the Anatomist, a boundless field of interest and of inquiry, to which almost every other science lends its aid : from each Science he borrows a special light to guide him through the ranges of extinct and existing animal forms, from the lowest up to the highest type, which; last and most perfect, but pre-shadowed in previous ages, is seen in Man. By the aid of physiological illustrations he begins to understand how hard to unravel are the complex mechanisms and prescient intentions of the Maker of all; and he slowly learns to appreciate what exquisite care is needed for discovering the real action of even an apparently comprehended machine.

Truth is indeed the crux of the matter – but Dawkins seems to understand the word rather differently from the rest of us. The great question, however, is whether his own theory is now in the process of further evolution -- and whether it might even jump the species barrier into what is vulgarly known by lesser mortals as faith.

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