

The Simple Answer - *Richard Dawkins*

(Nick Pollard talks to Dr. Richard Dawkins)

Since 1993, *Third Way* has been talking in depth to men and women who help to shape our society or set the tone of our culture. We spoke to Richard Dawkins, the distinguished zoologist (and, one might add, fervent atheist) who is now the Charles Simonyi Professor of the Public Understanding of Science at Oxford University, on the 28th February 1995. This interview was conducted in Richard Dawkins's rooms near New College and published in [Third Way](#) in the April 1995 edition (vol 18 no. 3).

<http://www.thirdway.org.uk/past/showpage.asp?page=58>

You've been described as 'an evangelical atheist'. Is that a title you'd be happy to adopt, or is it a label you dislike?

It sounds too negative to me, because atheism, after all, is a negative thing. I occasionally feel a bit evangelical when I notice what I think of as the evils of theism, where people have such strong beliefs that they feel that they are entitled to impose them, or their consequences on other people.

The other thing that does make me feel a bit evangelical is that I'd say I have a very positive, I'd almost say poetic, vision of the universe from a scientific point of view. I feel people are missing something if they content themselves with what I think of as an outdated, medieval view of the world, when they could be latching on to something much more exciting.

Awe and wonder are things which religious people undoubtedly feel, but I get a bit irritated when they imply they have a monopoly of them. I think I can feel wonder at least as well as the next man, and I am stimulated to do so by contemplating the huge size and age of the universe, the immense range of sizes of things, from fundamental particles to galaxies, and the awe-inspiring consequences of evolution, starting from simple beginnings and working up to prodigies of complexity like ourselves.

That, I think, ought to inspire in people a kind of poetic sense of wonder - it does in me, and I try to convey it to other people. I find the alternative, religious vision smaller, less imaginative and less exciting by comparison.

Was there ever a time when you believed in God?

As a child I did. I had a normal Anglican upbringing and, yes, I believed what I was told.

What kind of a god was he?

Pretty much Anglican: creator of the world, looks after it, knows what is going on in everybody's mind. Occasionally intervenes in the world; makes you survive death.

And then, at 16, you began to question this?

I suppose, by then, of all the classical arguments for the existence of God, only the argument from design seemed to me to carry any weight, and I finally toppled that in my mind when I learned about evolution.

In *The Selfish Gene*, you say that the theory of evolution is about as open to doubt as the theory that the Earth goes around the Sun. Can you elaborate?

People sometimes try to score debating points by saying, "Evolution is only a theory." That is correct, but it's important to understand what that means. It is also only a theory that the world goes round the Sun - it's just a theory for which there is an immense amount of evidence.

There are many scientific theories that are in doubt. Even within evolution, there is some room for controversy. But that we are cousins of apes and jackals and starfish, let's say, that is a fact in the ordinary sense of the word.

How do you believe life itself began?

The origin of life has got to be something self-replicating. We don't know what it was, but whatever it was, it was self-replicating.

That is the big leap for evolutionary theory, isn't it? How do we get that first self-replicating system?

It is a big leap; I don't think it's the biggest. The step from a molecule to a man seems to me to be rather bigger.

If you look at the sorts of self-replicating systems that chemists have produced in the test-tube, the difference is relatively trivial. You have some sort of molecule much the same as any of the others that chemists are fooling around with, and they do some little things and they've got a self-replicating molecule. It looks much the same as any other: it's no bigger, it's no more fancy, it just has a particular shape.

What do you mean exactly by 'self-replicating'?

It has to grow and then split, so that it produces daughter units like itself. You can make small, pretty ordinary organic molecules which just have the property that something about their shape forms a mould or template into which the constituent sub-molecules slot in just such a way that they produce a new composite molecule just like the original.

So, then you've got two and each of those forms a template and then you've got four and then eight, and then 16, and so you get the exponential increase you require.

You even get mutations, and therefore two different kinds of self-replicating molecule in a state of primitive Darwinian competition.

You say in *The Blind Watchmaker* that you don't need to postulate the idea of God to explain how the world is. What do you mean by that?

The whole scientific enterprise is aimed at explaining the world in terms of simple principles. We live in a world which is breathtakingly complicated, and we have a scientific theory - we have several - which enables us to see how that world could have come into being from very simple beginnings.

That's what I call understanding. If I want to understand how a machine works, I want an explanation in terms of sub-units and even smaller sub-units, and finally I would get down to fundamental particles. That's the kind of explanation which science aspires to give and is well on the way to giving.

That is a very reductionist approach.

That is precisely what it is; that is what's good about it. Reductionist explanations are true explanations.

You really feel you've understood how a motor car works if you've been told how each of its bits work and how the bits move together to make the car work. Then you feel you've really got somewhere. But if

somebody tried to explain the car in terms of - well, Julian Huxley satirized it as explaining a railway train by force locomotive - you would feel you had understood absolutely nothing.

Are there not other levels of explanation? There's the classic story of the man on the cliff who sees a light, and analyses it in terms of its frequency, intensity and so on. But the point is, the light is a message in morse and it's saying the cliff is about to collapse.

Well, that anecdote certainly makes sense; but it doesn't stand for anything. The message is presumably coming from another human, and of course, messages from other humans are very complicated things; but they, too, can be explained. The explanation in terms of the wavelength of light is not the only reductive explanation.

What you seem to say in *The Blind Watchmaker* is that because we don't need to postulate the idea of God, therefore we can reject it.

Yes. I don't think God is an explanation at all. It's simply redescribing the problem.

We are trying to understand how we have got a complicated world, and we have an explanation in terms of a slightly simpler world, and we explain that in terms of a slightly simpler world and it all hangs together down to an ultimately simple world.

Now, God is not an explanation of that kind. God himself cannot be simple if he has power to do all the things he is supposed to do.

That assumes that the only good explanation is a reductionist one.

I'm not sure if it's just an assumption. The very least I can say is that it's the only kind of explanation I find satisfying. I wish I could persuade you that it's the only kind of explanation that is satisfying.

I think I can with respect to Huxley's force locomotive. If you watch a railway engine and you ask me how it works, there's a hierarchy of reductive explanations. You begin by explaining it in terms of a boiler and a piston, and then you go down to the level of classical physics and you talk about what pressure means in terms of molecules. Then you go down to quantum physics, and the whole thing hangs together as an explanation of big and complicated things in terms of small and simple things.

That's satisfying. Force locomotive is not satisfying to me, and I don't believe it's satisfying to you.

No. But if I asked, "Why is that kettle boiling?" we could talk in terms of the processes or we could consider another meaning of 'why', which is to do with purpose. The reason it's boiling is because your wife Lalla put the kettle on to make a cup of tea.

Yes. I'm not impressed, because the explanation that somebody switched on the kettle and had a purpose in doing so simply is not a different kind of explanation. It's just a more complicated problem that we now have to solve.

We now have to go and look at her brain and ask what it is that made her want to switch the kettle on. And that takes us back to the workings of her brain, to why she has a brain in the first place, which gets us back to evolution. There's a whole cascade of similar explanations.

Aren't you explaining your wife away? Who is she?

Well, that's a more profound question. What is a human? What is a human self, a human individual? That's more difficult. It's not a question I can answer - it's not a question any scientist can answer at present, though I think they will.

I believe it will turn out that what a human is some manifestation of brain stuff and its workings.

Susan Blackmore said recently in *The Skeptic*: 'I think the idea we exist is an illusion... The idea that there is a self in there that decides things, acts and is responsible... is a whopping great illusion. The self we construct is just an illusion because actually there's only brains and chemicals and this "self" doesn't exist - it never did and there's nobody to die.'

Would you agree with that kind of reductionist explanation of who your wife is, who you are?

Yes. I mean, Susan is sticking her neck out for one particular view of what a self is, and it's one that I am inclined to think is probably right; but I don't think we are yet in a position to substantiate that.

What makes it seem plausible to me is various things. One is that brains have come into the world by a gradual process of evolution and we have a continuum from ourselves through all the other animals to animals that have very simple brains, to animals that have no brains at all, to plants.

Certainly, the prediction that we don't survive death seems to me to be overwhelmingly probable. That would be a good operational test - not that we can actually test it, but in principle: if a self is something other than brain stuff, then it should survive when the brain rots - and I'd place a very heavy bet (which I realize I could never actually win) that when my brain rots my self will not in any sense exist.

Do you believe that the idea that I exist is an illusion?

Well, I'm certainly happy that we are a product of brains and that when our brains die, we disappear.

To call us an illusion is possibly a good way to express it. But I wouldn't wish to commit myself to saying that our sense of self is an illusion. It depends what you mean. I certainly feel that there's a me.

Perhaps what you would need to test that would be to see if somebody could die and come back to life.

Yes, I suppose that's right.

As a Christian I believe that has happened.

I know you do. But I don't.

But are you not open to exploring that possibility?

I'm open to exploring any possibility where there is some evidence. I don't wish to sound frivolous, but there is an infinity of possible things that one might believe - unicorns, fairies, millions of things - and just because you can't disprove them it doesn't mean there is anything plausible about them.

But there is no evidence for fairies is there? And yet there is solid evidence for the resurrection of Jesus.

I think you are on dangerous ground. There have been many people who allege that they see fairies. The fact is that we just don't believe them. We think they're hallucinating, or lying.

Now, I don't know where the story of Jesus rising from the dead comes from. The actual documentary evidence is very bad as historical evidence goes, and so, given its enormous inherent implausibility, I'd be much more inclined to suspect it. You needn't go as far as to say 'hoax' - it's just that when very, very charismatic people die, legends grow up about them in a very mysterious way.

There are all sorts of legends knocking around the world now of Elvis Presley having risen from the dead. Numerous eye-witnesses. And you don't believe them, I presume. I don't. I don't want to say these people are lying - maybe some of them are, maybe they are just a bit crazy.

Elvis Presley has only been dead for about 15 years and already these legends are rife.

You could ask someone who believes that Elvis has come back from the dead if they were prepared to die for that belief. The people who believed Jesus had risen from the dead were prepared to die.

Yes. That actually doesn't impress me very much. I know there are a lot of people who are prepared to die for all sorts of odd things. It's clearly evidence for some sort of sincerity, I don't doubt that, but it doesn't seem to me to be evidence of what they believed.

It's not a very fruitful line of questioning as far as I'm concerned, because I'm not impressed by the historical evidence and you are.

In the study guide for your 1991 *Christmas Lectures for Young People*, you wrote: 'We are machines built by DNA whose purpose is to make more copies of the same DNA... It is every living object's sole reason for living.'

That's correct. 'Purpose', of course, doesn't mean purpose in the same way that the purpose of switching on a kettle is to make a cup of tea.

What is the distinction?

Well, that is a feeling of a goal in mind. I want a cup of tea, so I'm going to put the kettle on.

The purpose of a bird's wing is to keep the bird aloft. It's a different kind of purpose, because it's not cognitively thought out. What it really means is that the bird's ancestors that had wings did, in fact, stay aloft. It was a good thing to do, so they had more children and so their descendants inherited the same wings.

More fundamentally, to say that the purpose of all life is to pass on their DNA means that all living things are descended from a long line of successful ancestors, where success means they have passed on their DNA. So, they are all very good at passing on their DNA and they all contain organs, apparatus, which can best be understood as fulfilling a purpose of propagating DNA. It doesn't mean that anybody actually sat down and thought that purpose out.

But there is no purpose other than that?

There is no purpose other than that.

I sat once with an old man whose children had left home and no longer needed him. If you like, he had nothing more to do to continue his genes. And he broke down in tears and said, "What is the purpose of my life?" What would you say to him?

A brain like ours has a kind of overkill of complexity. Natural selection has given us the brains we needed to pass on our DNA in a particularly human way. On the African plains, those brains became big and they developed the capacity to set up purposes.

Originally, the purposes they were set up for would have been useful ones like catching buffalo or finding water or developing fire. But it's a consequence of building a brain that can have mundane purposes that if you make it sufficiently good, it will incidentally have the capacity to set up other purposes which have nothing to do with mundane goals.

So, my purpose in writing, any of our purposes in doing any of the things we normally do, makes use of our brains' capacity to set up goals and follow them. You can set up exceedingly worthwhile goals that give great satisfaction in your brain and you can devote your life to following them, where those goals have no connection with passing on DNA.

This old man could have been childless but he could have been a brilliant composer, and his purpose in life would have been to compose music. That's a perfectly good purpose.

But the purpose we feel is an incidental by-product?

When you have a purpose of finishing a symphony, if you are a composer, from a DNA point of view that is a by-product. When computers were first invented, they were invented as calculating machines; but it didn't take any substantial modification to turn them into word processors. It so happens that if you build a really efficient programmable computer, it will, willy-nilly, also be good at word-processing.

But our sense of purpose is illusory?

In Susan Blackmore's sense, it probably is, yes - but that's not a point I want to emphasise. When I have a purpose, like finishing a book, illusion or not, it certainly feels like a purpose.

Jesus said that love is the purpose of life. Does that sound nonsense to you?

It sounds like something grafted on, a superfluous excrescence on life, which I feel I understand better.

But it doesn't surprise me that, brains being what they are, they have a capacity to invent spurious purposes of the universe which –

You would say that love is a spurious purpose?

Well, love is not a purpose, love is an emotion (which I certainly feel) which is another of those properties of brains.

A by-product?

Well, it's probably more than just a by-product. It's probably a very important product for gene survival. Certainly, sexual love would be, and so would parental love and various other sorts of love.

But to say that love is the purpose of life doesn't in any way chime in with the understanding of life which I feel we have achieved.

A feature in *The Independent on Sunday* a while ago said that when you and Lalla met, it was love at first sight. What does that mean? What does the "I" in "I love you" mean? What does "love" mean?

Well, we've been into that before. It's an emotion which is a manifestation of brain stuff.

It's not possible to argue against that point of view simply by multiplying examples of words like 'love' or 'hate' or 'fear'. We use these words all the time; nobody denies that we use them. I have already said, and Susan Blackmore said it in slightly different terms, that we don't think that that corresponds to anything other than the manifestation of brains.

You don't gain anything by asking the same question again but substituting a new word.

Nietzsche talked contemptuously of people who rejected Christianity but still held on to Judaeo-Christian ideas. Is that not what you have done?

Well, there is a sense in which we are prisoners of the language that we use, and the language that we use in our culture is a language that has been shaped by the history of our culture.

I think it's anthropologically interesting to know whether the phrase "I love you" means something totally different to somebody from an utterly different culture, like a Trobriand Islander, and anthropologists seem to differ a bit about that. This seems to me to be something you really could look at. I could be persuaded that there are cultures for whom the phrase "I love you" doesn't mean anything at all; and maybe it does mean something to me because of my Judaeo-Christian history. That's an interesting historical, sociological, psychological question.

But if "I love you" has meaning because of your Judaeo-Christian history, when you rejected God shouldn't you also have rejected love?

I don't think so. We have now switched from what we think is true about the universe to talking about psychology and sociology.

Isn't it a matter of living with the consequences? Someone has said that atheism is a faith which takes great courage to live out wholeheartedly.

Well, I think there are two separate questions. To take an analogy: it's sometimes said the Darwinian theory of natural selection had to wait for the nineteenth century because that was the right economic and political climate: 'the survival of the fittest' was in the air. Well, that may or may not be true - but it doesn't bear at all on the truth of Darwinism.

I mean, Darwinism is actually true of the world of nature even if it had to wait until the 19th century for people to think of it. So, it's one thing to say that Darwin was a child of his time...

I may say "I love you" and mean what I mean by it because I'm a child of a Judaeo-Christian culture, and that's an interesting historical point; but it doesn't mean the Judaeo-Christian worldview is true. I can reject the worldview while still remaining a child of the culture.

But shouldn't you also reject that meaning?

Not necessarily. Well, I do reject the metaphysical meaning, that there is an 'I' and a 'you' that are going to survive death. I do reject that.

And that love is something more than "Let's get together and continue our genes."?

I do reject that at an intellectual level.

But just as Darwin could be said to have been a product of the economics of the time, yet what he believed about nature was true for all time, always has been true, similarly I am a product of a Judaeo-Christian culture. My language is absolutely laced with biblical references, proverbs, poetry, metaphor. I can't talk to other people in my culture without using it. But it doesn't mean that the view of the cosmos with that biblical culture is true or that I should believe it. Because I don't.

In *The Selfish Gene*, you distinguish between a statement of what is and the advocacy of what ought to be. We are born selfish but we need to teach generosity. Why ought we to? You talk of altruism but fail to explain why we should have the capacity for it. Doesn't consistency require you to reject all that?

My main concern is to argue against people who quite wrongly think that because you have shown that something is, therefore it ought.

So, for example, I can show that from a Darwinian point of view there is more Darwinian advantage to a male in being promiscuous and a female being faithful, without saying that I therefore think human males are justified in being promiscuous and cheating on their wives. There is no logical connection between what is and what ought.

Now, if you then ask me where I get my 'ought' statements from, that's a more difficult question. Firstly, I don't feel so strongly about them. If I say something is wrong, like killing people, I don't find that nearly such a defensible statement as 'I am a distant cousin of an orangutan'.

The second of those statements is true, I can tell you why it's true, I can bore you to death telling you why it's true. It's definitely true. The statement 'killing people is wrong', to me, is not of that character. I would be quite open to persuasion that killing people is right in some circumstances.

Going back to Nietzsche, in *Beyond Good and Evil* he said: 'When [Christians] gave comfort to the suffering, courage to the oppressed and despairing... they have preserved too much of that which ought to perish... [They have] worked at the preservation of everything sick and suffering, which means... the corruption of the European race.'

Yes. I want to disown that very much. I've just said and I'll say it again: I don't think that following the dictates of Darwinism is necessarily what we ought to be doing. I disagree with Nietzsche.

But I don't understand why. Nietzsche would say the reason is that, although you have rejected God, you haven't rejected your Judaeo-Christian heritage.

Well, that's possible. But now we are back to a question about history and psychology.

Isn't it a question about consistency in life?

When I am trying to explain the way things are, I keep saying, it's nothing to do with the way we ought to be. If I were consistent in the way you want me to be, I wouldn't wear clothes because we didn't evolve with clothes. I wouldn't waste my time writing books, or teaching students; I'd spend all my life trying to have lots of children.

I see absolutely no reason why, understanding the way the world is, you therefore have to promote it. The darwinian world is a very nasty place: the weakest go to the wall. There's no pity, no compassion. All those things I abhor, and I will work in my own life in the interests of thoroughly unDarwinian things like compassion.

In my worldview, you are created in the image of God and that is why you know how you ought to be. I can explain your compassion. I'm wondering how you can.

Well, one way to understand it is that, by accident, we have evolved a brain which is powerful enough to be able to look into the future and evaluate distant consequences. So, I can see that to spend my whole life satisfying selfish whims might make me less happy in the long run than if I spend it doing something else like helping other people.

If you catch me giving money to Oxfam and you say, "Why are you doing that?" and I can't answer you, it doesn't seem to me that I have in any way betrayed my belief in a godless cosmos.

If you challenged me with a fossil rabbit which radioactive dating proved was 2000 million years old, that would really be worrying. That would, at a stroke, disprove evolution. Challenging me with being able to explain why I give money to charity, that doesn't bother me very much.

Is it not a strong argument for the Christian worldview? Where does that sense of 'ought' come from?

Yes, once again, I'm just not impressed. I know that brains are complicated. Like music and mathematics, it's something that was never part of the original survival package, but the brain that produces it is. So, we have brains that are there for Darwinian reasons and those brains have unforeseen consequences.

But the 'ought' is a by-product.

It's a by-product, yes.

Suppose some lads break into an old man's house and kill him. Suppose they say: "Well, we accept the evolutionist worldview. He was old and sick, and he didn't contribute anything to society." How would you show them that what they had done was wrong?

You credit them with rather more rational thought than I suspect the real thugs would have had.

If somebody used my views to justify a completely self-centered lifestyle, which involved trampling all over other people in any way they chose roughly what, I suppose, at a sociological level social Darwinists did - I think I would be fairly hard put to it to argue on purely intellectual grounds.

I think it would be more: "This is not a society in which I wish to live. Without having a rational reason for it necessarily, I'm going to do whatever I can to stop you doing this."

They'll say, "This is the society we want to live in."

I couldn't, ultimately, argue intellectually against somebody who did something I found obnoxious. I think I could finally only say, "Well, in this society you can't get away with it" and call the police.

I realize this is very weak, and I've said I don't feel equipped to produce moral arguments in the way I feel equipped to produce arguments of a cosmological and biological kind. But I still think it's a separate issue from beliefs in cosmic truths.

B I O G R A P H Y

Richard Dawkins is a fellow of New College, Oxford. His publications include two best sellers, *The Selfish Gene* (1976, revised 1989) and *The Blind Watchmaker* (1986). *River out of Eden* was published simultaneously in 27 languages.

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