



The Dawkins Letters - 8. The Roots of Morality: why are we good?

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Dear Dr Dawkins,

As a young boy I watched with fascination as *The World at War* was broadcast on our TV screens (thankfully the whole series is now available on DVD and is regularly repeated on the History Channel). One scene in particular has stuck in my mind. A group of French Jewish men, women and children were herded into a large barn by Nazi soldiers. The barn was set on fire and the Jews were given a simple choice – they could come out of the barn and be shot or they could stay in and be burnt to death. It horrified me then and it horrifies me now. In fact it so disturbed me that when I took the opportunity to take my Sixth Year Studies I determined to look at Weimar Germany and then went on to study history at the University of Edinburgh in order to try and answer the question 'why?'. The same question that was displayed on the poster hanging in my bed-sit, superimposed over the soldier being shot in the back and the young naked girl running across a bridge screaming as napalm burned into her flesh. This question of morality is thus of great importance – not only for me but I suspect for most people.

You address this issue of morality in chapter six and in particular the question as to why we are good. As far as I can understand it your case seems to be as follows. You define goodness as altruism and therefore point out that we tend to be altruistic towards those of our own kin because we are genetically programmed to care for those who are most likely to have copies of the same genes that are in us. In addition to this there is reciprocal altruism – the 'you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours' theory. Kinship and reciprocal altruism are the twin pillars on which a Darwinian explanation of morality is based. To these you add reputation (we want to be seen to be 'good') and then the notion that altruistic giving may be seen as a form of superiority – a way of buying self-advertising. You also explain 'kindness' or sympathy as a blessed Darwinian mistake. And that's it. That is the Darwinian explanation of morality. There are so many problems with this approach.

Firstly, it does not seem much of a morality. It is still primarily focused on the *Selfish Gene*. It is all about me, me and me. As a Christian I believe that the Bible teaches that human beings are fundamentally selfish and self-centred – however the Bible is not content to leave us there. There is something better. Christ came to challenge and to deliver us from the self-centeredness which you glorify as the basis of morality.

Secondly, it is deterministic. We are only 'good' because we are programmed to be that way. What ever happened to free will? If my will is not free then you cannot blame me if I only do what I am genetically programmed to do. What would you say to a rapist who used that argument? On the other hand if I am free and responsible for what I do then I cannot be genetically programmed. I do not doubt that there are genetic factors in all aspects of human behaviour but I cannot believe that every human being and their actions are governed by such determinism. A crucial part of being human is having the ability to choose.

Thirdly, your secular morality is not as you admit, absolute – "fortunately however morals do not have to be absolute". As you indicate it is changeable according to the whims of society. Indeed if we are, as your favourite philosopher Bertrand Russell puts it, "tiny lumps of impure carbon and

water crawling about for a few years, until they are dissolved again into the elements of which they are compounded”, then seems to be no basis for absolute morality. You recognise this - “it is pretty hard to defend absolute morals on grounds other than religious ones”.

And finally your absolute Darwinian philosophy cannot logically and consistently argue for morality because to put it bluntly there is no good or evil. As you so brilliantly describe it in *The Blind Watchmaker*:

In a universe of blind physical forces and genetic replication, some people are going to get hurt, other people are going to get lucky, and you won't find any rhyme or reason in it, nor any justice. The universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but blind pitiless indifference.

That then is the atheist basis of morality – no justice, no rhyme nor reason, no purpose, no evil, no good, just blind pitiless indifference. It is little wonder that atheist philosophers have been desperately hunting round to try and establish some basis for a godless morality. Despite the best efforts of E. O. Wilson and Peter Singer, this basis is severely lacking, being little more than a utilitarian ‘greatest good for the greatest number’ without ever defining what ‘good’ is.

I think you recognise this and so you go on the attack – ridiculing Christian morality. It has to be admitted that there are many things that have been done in the name of religion, including Christianity, which are inexcusable, and that the behaviour of many professing Christians leaves a great deal to be desired. However you should be careful before denouncing the whole of Christianity on the basis of the behaviour of those who are Christians and fail to be perfect, or of those who whilst claiming the label Christian, have no more faith than yourself.

Your major case against Christian morality is the Bible itself (we will come on to that in your next chapter) but in this one you throw up a couple of red herrings. Firstly, at the beginning of the chapter you cite a number of letters which you have received from people you say are Christians. These contain expletives, threats of

violence and grotesque language. Why did you cite these at the beginning of a chapter about morality? Because it is again your favourite *ad hominem* tactic. Look how stupid / ignorant / violent / immoral these Christians are and therefore Christian morality is the same. There are two easy counters to that. Firstly, by definition these people cannot be Christians – followers of the one who told his disciples to turn the other cheek, not to threaten violence, not to use foul language and to love our enemies. Secondly, what would you think if I cited the following from your own website:

XXX David Robertson is a self-righteous narrow minded, up his own XXX thick as pig XXX moronic retard! Watch out David, the sky fairy is late for his second coming and will be angry with you. Why is anyone debateing with this moron? He doesn't know how to! He has the intellectual capacity of road kill.

May your XXX come to life an kiss you. I'm impressed that some of the people here bother to debate this Robertson nincompoop. He is clearly out of his mind and beyond reason and logic. If you do debate him, stop respecting his delusions, however eloquent he puts them, and please approach him with the scorn and contempt that he deserves.

Prat. Bigot. Moron. In fact there are pages and pages of this stuff. It is quite clear that your website acts as a kind of therapy centre for some people but do you think it would be fair for me to say that therefore all atheists are as rude, ignorant and angry?

The second argument you use is to point out that Christian morality cannot be up too much if it requires the threat of hell or some kind of punishment in order to make people behave. You cite Einstein: “If people are good only because they fear punishment, and hope for reward, then we are a sorry lot indeed.” Einstein is right in at least one thing. We are a sorry lot. Here is a simple test for you. Would you like the police to be removed from Oxford? Do you think that students at your University should be threatened with punishment if they cheat? Or should be given higher degrees if they do better than their peers? Surely if your students are only studying and not cheating because they fear punishment or have

hope for some reward they are a sorry lot? Of course you see the fallacy of the argument. The Bible recognizes that human beings are complex and that we need a system of checks and balances to help us – but here is the rub, the Bible's teaching is not primarily moralistic. Yes we need the carrot and stick approach but the Bible is much more radical than that. If it were the carrot and stick approach only then the Bible would just be recognizing the situation for what it is – rather than seeking to change it to a better world.

Let us look then at the Christian case for morality and why, for some people, it is the most important proof for God.

§ It explains evil. The question is not 'why are people good?' but rather 'why are people evil?' Your view of morality seems to stem from your nice middle-class English background. It is a hopelessly optimistic and unfounded view of human nature – that human beings are essentially good and indeed are getting better all the time. Remember the question that I went to University to study – how could a decent civilized nation like the German people allow themselves to get into a position where they eradicated six million Jews plus many homosexuals, gypsies and Christians? It is easy in those circumstances, aided by decades of Hollywood conditioning, to believe that the world is divided into the good guys and the bad guys, and to just simply suggest that the Germans were bad, or Hitler was an insane demon. But my studies lead me to the conclusion that the Germans were human and that Hitler was all too human. Indeed there was an enormous fuss a couple of years ago when the film *Downfall* was shown in Germany because it portrayed Hitler as a human being. The Bible tells us what we would already know if only we opened our eyes, that human beings are screwed up. As Freddy Mercury, late of Queen, sang at the first Live Aid, "If there's a God up above, a God of love. Then what must he think, of the mess that we've made, of the world that he created".

§ It explains the universe – Have you ever read C. S. Lewis's *Right and Wrong as a Clue to the Meaning of the Universe* in his *Mere Christianity*? He more than anyone sums up why the moral law is such a powerful proof for the existence of God. Lewis writes "Human beings all over the earth, have this curious idea that they ought to behave in a certain way, and cannot really get rid of it. Secondly they know that they do not in fact

behave in that way. They know the Law of Nature; they break it. These two facts are the foundation of all clear thinking about ourselves and the universe we live in". Lewis points out that there are two clear evidences for God – the first is the universe he has made. The second is the Moral Law which he argues is a better bit of information because it is 'inside information'. One of the major objections that many people will have to the notion that God created the universe is that things seem so cruel and unjust. But as Lewis points out, how do we get the idea of cruel and unjust in the first place? What is there in us that makes us aware of right and wrong?

§ It explains me. In looking at the horror of the Holocaust it was the most humbling and awful experience to realize that not only were the Nazis human but I was too. The same evil that came to such horrendous fruition in the Nazis was also, at least in seed form, present in me. Reading books like Gitta Sereny's excellent *Albert Speer; His Battle with Truth* was a sobering experience. As one letter writer to *The Times* masterfully put it – "What's wrong with the world? I am".

But let us return to the atheistic view of morality. I accept fully that you are not a social Darwinianist. You know that that would be wrong. Although I am intrigued as to how you know. But leaving that aside my fear is that once society as a whole accepts your basic presuppositions (that there are no absolutes in morality, that morality changes and that human nature is genetically determined) then it is a downward slippery slope to the kind of atheistic societies that the world has already seen (such as Stalin's Russia and Mao's China). I am not arguing that all atheists are immoral any more than I am arguing that all professing Christians are moral. All of us live inconsistently with our creeds. However in Christianity there are brakes, checks and balances and it does not appear immediately obvious that this is the case with atheism. If there is no absolute right or wrong then how can we state that anything is right or wrong? Take the case of abortion which you discuss in chapter eight. You point out a fascinating fact that "strong opponents of abortion are almost all deeply religious". This is a fact that has always puzzled me. Surely any scientist would know that there is nothing that the baby has outside the womb which she does not also have inside the womb? Why then is it considered a human right to be allowed to kill a baby in the

womb but not outside it? And there is another question in this debate which fascinates me. In India over 500,000 female fetuses are aborted because they are female. Naturally women's groups are objecting to this form of selective abortion. But why? Why would pro-abortionists want to interfere with a woman's right to choose not to have a girl? Is it not after all the woman's body – besides which it's not a girl but a potential girl. The inconsistencies are ironic.

Of course once we move away from the simplistic and unscientific 'a woman has a right to choose to kill the baby in her womb but not outside of it', then we can end up with all kinds of difficulties. Peter Singer, Princeton Professor of Bioethics and a leading atheist polemicist argues that "mentally impaired babies have no greater rights than certain animals" (*Independent Extra* Sept 13th 2006). Bill Hamilton, to whom you owed a great deal in the writing of your book *The Selfish Gene* and whose writing you stated was passionate, vivid and informed, was an excellent Darwinian biologist whose views were certainly of a different kind of morality.

He once said that he had more sympathy for a lone fern than he did for a crying child. He argued that males were largely doomed to compete and that the purpose of sex was to clean out the gene pool by filtering out the useless and the weak. The low status male would be better off dead. Everything in nature according to Hamilton could be explained as the outcome of competition between genes. He argued for a radical programme of infanticide, eugenics and euthanasia in order to save the world. He believed that modern medicine was doing harm by allowing the weak to survive and thus preserving their genes. His two concrete examples of these are Caesarean sections and the glasses worn by John Maynard Smith! Spectacles were a symbol of decadence within the gene pool and as for Caesarean sections – women should be allowed one and then only to save the mother's life – after that they should be paid not to have any more children. Hamilton's view of modern medicine was so eugenically-based that he believed that the only acceptable forms of medicine were painkillers and surgery. He declared that genocide was the result of over-breeding and that he grieved more for the death of one giant panda than he would for a 'hundred

unknown Chinese'. He also argued that the handicapped should be killed at birth. In arguing for what he termed 'inclusive happiness' he stated: "I have little doubt that if trying to survive on Robinson Crusoe's island with my wife I would indeed with my own hands kill a defective baby". In this he and Singer would be as one.

It may be that the extreme social and political views of Hamilton are in fact an exception and that it would not be right to tar all biologists with the same brush. That is true. It is not biologists who are the problem but some biologists who also happen to be atheists and who do not accept the notion of an absolute morality. And whilst Hamilton may have been on the extreme there have been plenty others who have worked out the logical conclusion to their atheistic materialism. Some of the leading evolutionary biologists in the 20th century have been people who, because of their atheistic philosophy and misunderstanding of science, adopted extreme political views. Konrad Lorenz was an enthusiastic Nazi. J. B. S. Haldane was a committed Stalinist and R. A. Fisher used to argue that civilisation was threatened because upper class women (i.e. 'quality') did not have enough babies. At this point perhaps someone might point out that I am doing the same thing to you that I accuse you of doing to others – namely picking some extremes and using them to condemn the lot. The difference is this. Whereas you cite people who are on the wacky fringes of Christianity the people I am speaking about are key and central figures. Can you imagine how atheists would have reacted if the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Pope or Billy Graham had come out arguing for infanticide, banning Caesarean sections, or encouraging the 'superior' classes to breed more than the common people?! We would never have heard the end of it. Meanwhile you cite such fringe characters such as Fred Phelps of Westboro Baptist and ignore the substantial history and philosophy within the grounds of atheistic secular biology of those who have advocated such extreme social views. What was most disturbing about Nazism was not whether its main thinkers were 'nice' people but rather its philosophical foundation and the basis and justification it gave for cruelty and injustice. That is the same for Social Darwinianism where the elimination of the weak and the destruction of the handicapped is the very antithesis of Christianity and the real enemy of humanity. I repeat again,

for the umpteenth time, that this is not to state that all evolutionary atheists are *de facto* fascists, but it is to say that the logical consequences of evolutionary atheism can easily lead, and has lead, to such a position.

The Christian view of morality is not, as most people suppose, that the Bible gives us a set of laws to live by. Real Christians are not moralists – thinking that if only we offer a reward here, a bit of punishment there, then ‘decent’ human beings will behave better and somehow earn their own stairway to heaven. We know that we can neither legislate nor use religion to make us good. Real Christians realize that the Bible’s teaching is that there is an absolute morality – which we all fall short of. And no amount of religion, good works or pious acts will ever be able to make us right. That is where grace, salvation, the cross and all the wonderful truths of the acts of God in Christ come into their own. God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself. That is why the Gospel is Good News. Not because it gives us a set of laws to live by, or religious rites to perform but because it deals with the biggest problem in the world – the problem of the human heart. It is for that reason that every year I religiously watch *Schindler’s List* to remind me of why I am a minister of the Christian Gospel. I don’t just want to explain the Darkness. I want to defeat it.

Yours etc

David

Read Part 9.

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