



Atheism and Child Abuse

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I woke up this morning to a radio news item about the continuing scandal of child abuse carried out by some Catholic priests during the 1980s and 1990s. In a recent editorial for the secular humanist magazine *Free Inquiry*, entitled 'Religion's Real Child Abuse', Richard Dawkins opined that:

'Odious as the physical abuse of children by priests undoubtedly is, I suspect that it may do them less lasting damage than the mental abuse of having been brought up Catholic in the first place.' [1]

Dawkins was himself the victim of a Latin master who 'fondled' him in the squash court: 'a disagreeable sensation for a nineteen-year-old, a mixture of embarrassment and skin-crawling revulsion . . .'[2] However, says Dawkins, this 'was certainly not in the same league as being led to believe that I, or someone I knew, might go to everlasting fire.' [3]

Dawkins has in his sights the fact that the Catholic Church has traditionally taught children that unbelievers (even, in some cases, Protestant Christians) will spend eternity in a fiery Hell:

'The mental abuse constituted by an unsubstantiated threat of violence and terrible pain, if sincerely believed by the child, could easily be more damaging than the physical actuality of sexual abuse. An extreme threat of violence and pain is precisely what the doctrine of hell is.' [4]

For Dawkins, 'The threat of eternal hell is an extreme example of mental abuse, just as violent

sodomy is an extreme example of physical abuse.' [5]

Of course, one could reply that the doctrine of Hell should not be understood as a threat of violence and terrible pain, but as a loving warning about the intrinsic consequences of rejecting Jesus. Warning children not to stick their fingers in electricity sockets does not constitute child abuse; neither does warning children about the consequences of rejecting Jesus.

However, there are ways and ways of framing such a warning. The warning about the consequences of sticking one's fingers in electricity sockets could be given in lurid '18' certificate detail, and might thereby constitute mental abuse. Likewise, the doctrine of Hell can be dwelt upon in a similarly lurid manner, and might thereby constitute mental abuse. In this sense then, I think Dawkins is right to point out the dangers of unnecessarily traumatising children about the harsh truths of reality. Christians should speak the truth, even about Hell, but they should speak the truth in love.

Then again, some Christians would question the literal content of the 'traditional' doctrine of Hell. [6] Dawkins takes this point on board:

It will be said that the Catholic Church no longer preaches Hellfire in its full horror. That depends on how upmarket is your area and how progressive your priest. But eternal punishment certainly was the normal doctrine dished out to congregations, including terrified children, back in the time when many of the priests now facing expulsion or prosecution committed their physical abuses. [7]

With the 'traditional' Hell-fire doctrine specifically in his sights, Dawkins laments, 'there is no doubt at all that many children sincerely believe it, often continuing right through to adulthood and old age, until death finally releases them.' [8] But, as Hamlet said, there's the rub. Concessions about how the doctrine is taught, and even what doctrine of Hell is taught, aside, Dawkins' critique crucially assumes that the doctrine of Hell is false.

What if death does not release people from the fear of Hell, as Dawkins assumes, but delivers them into Hell (or Heaven), as the church

assumes? To paraphrase Pascal, we should be much more afraid of being wrong and discovering that Hell is real than of being wrong and discovering that Hell is not real. Even the remote chance of a catastrophic event justifies a serious warning about the possible dangers. Even if there is room for an in-house theological dispute over the precise content of the doctrine of Hell, there is little room for doubt over the basic facts that there is a real, and best-avoided, flip-side to the possibility of Heaven. Granted, if there is no Hell, then teaching its existence (and doing so in an insensitive manner) might result in unnecessary mental anguish. But if Hell is real . . .

On the other hand, doesn't Dawkins' psychological criticism of religion cut both ways? Dawkins' own brand of atheistic scientism can result in its fair share of mental anguish:

A foreign publisher of my first book confessed the he could not sleep for three nights after reading it, so troubled was he by what he saw as its cold, bleak message. Others have asked me how I can bear to get up in the mornings. A teacher from a distant country wrote to me reproachfully that a pupil had come to him in tears after reading the same book, because it had persuaded her that life was empty and purposeless. He advised her not to show the book to any of her friends, for fear of contaminating them with the same nihilistic pessimism.[9]

That first book of his was *The Selfish Gene*, in which Dawkins argued that 'we are survival machines – robot vehicles blindly programmed to preserve the selfish molecules known as genes.'[10] On Dawkins' materialistic worldview there may be no Hell to fear, but there is no Heaven either – everything begins and ends in nothingness.

Dawkins acknowledges that 'accusations of barren desolation, of promoting an arid and joyless message, are frequently flung at science in general, and it is easy for scientists to play up to them.'[11] In *Unweaving the Rainbow* he quotes from Peter Atkins' book, *The Second Law* (1984):

We are children of chaos, and the deep structure of change is decay. At root, there is only corruption, and the unstemmable tide of chaos.

Gone is purpose; all that is left is direction. This is the bleakness we have to accept as we peer deeply and dispassionately into the heart of the Universe.[12]

Dawkins calls this 'a very proper purging of saccharine false purpose'[13], a 'laudable tough-mindedness in the debunking of cosmic sentimentality'.[14] He does not point out that Atkins' assertions are philosophical and not scientific. He simply says that questions about the ultimate nature of reality are irrelevant to questions about personal meaning: 'Presumably there is indeed no purpose in the ultimate fate of the cosmos, but do any of us really tie our life's hopes to the ultimate fate of the cosmos anyway?'[15]

As a philosophical reply to his critics this is deeply flawed, because questions about the ultimate nature of reality are of crucial relevance to questions about personal meaning. Dawkins' focus on the ultimate fate of the cosmos overlooks the issue of cosmic purpose raised by Atkins. Both Atkins and Dawkins agree that, on a cosmic scale, the idea of purpose must give way to the idea of mere direction; a direction that results from the unintended chance interplay of physical cause and effect. There is no purpose behind our existence, no goal towards which our existence is launched and at which it can successfully arrive or tragically fail to arrive. Dawkins thinks, as Shakespeare wrote, that life is 'a tale told by an idiot, filled with sound and fury, signifying nothing.' But on a personal level he says, 'I want to guard against . . . people therefore getting nihilistic in their personal lives.'[16] Isn't this a case of trying to have it both ways?

Dawkins says he sees no contradiction here: 'You can have a very happy and fulfilled personal life even if you think the universe at large is a tale told by an idiot. You can still set up goals and have a very worthwhile life and not be nihilistic about it at a personal level.'[17] Thus Dawkins attempts to launch an unsinkable ship of personal meaning on the pointless cosmic ocean. However, in Dawkins' universe, 'purpose' is nothing but a euphemism for the contingent outworkings of chance and necessity. Dawkins may try to compartmentalise 'personal meaning' from 'cosmic meaning', but he smashes through this artificial dichotomy with the giant iceberg of

naturalistic evolution, reducing the personal to the impersonal, the free to the determined, and so sinking his supposedly unsinkable ship of 'personal meaning' in the icy depths of meaninglessness. Dawkins is quite right when he says that:

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 . . . [18]

However, the crucial point is that Dawkins' naturalistic philosophy gives him no grounds for saying that someone who takes the opposite point of view is in any sense wrong to do so - 'There is no logical connection between what is and what ought'; it's all just a matter of choice:

If somebody used my views to justify a completely self-centred lifestyle, which involved trampling all over other people in any way they chose . . . I think I would be fairly hard put to it to argue on purely intellectual grounds. . . 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.[19]

In other words, in the final analysis 'might makes right' and the Darwinian 'law of the jungle' rules. Dawkins' atheistic worldview doesn't justify 'a completely self-centred lifestyle', but then, it doesn't justify any lifestyle. The choice between lifestyles, including the choice between a life that includes abusing children and a life trying to prevent that abuse, is nothing but a non-rational manifestation of a Neitzchian 'will to power'. As the agnostic philosopher Anthony O'Hear says of Dawkins, 'this particular Darwinian is quite unable to explain why we have an obligation to act against our 'selfish' genes.'[20]

Even Dawkins admits: 'I realise this is very weak . . . But I still think it's a separate issue from beliefs in cosmic truths.'[21] It is a separate issue in that truths about an amoral reality can never discredit Dawkins' moral choice not to condone child abuse (of the physical or mental variety). But it is far from being a separate issue in that truths about

an amoral reality can never condemn child abuse either.

The doctrine of Hell is the flip side of the doctrine of Heaven[22], and both doctrines testify that life is not only meaningful, it's serious. Christians should give some serious thought to how (and what) they teach about Hell, especially to children; but atheists should give some serious thought to the fact that without Heaven and Hell, their worldview offers neither justice nor hope, in a Godless universe that fails to provide any moral grounds for the condemnation of child-abuse.[23]

Footnotes § Richard Dawkins, 'Religion's Real Child Abuse', Free Inquiry, Fall 2002, Vol. 22, No. 4., p. 9 back

§ *ibid*, p. 9 back

§ *ibid*, p. 9 back

§ *ibid*, p. 9-12 back

§ *ibid*, p. 12 back

§ On the doctrine of Hell, see Edward W. Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes: A Biblical and Historical Study of the Doctrine of Final Punishment*, (Universal Publishers, 2000); Edward W. Fudge & Robert A Peterson, *Two Views of Hell: A Biblical and Theological Dialogue*, (IVP, 2000); C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, (Fount); Jerry L. Walls, *Hell: the Logic of Damnation*, (University of Notre Dame, 1992) back

§ Richard Dawkins, *op cit*, p. 12 back

§ *ibid*, p. 12 back

§ Richard Dawkins, *Unweaving the Rainbow*, (London: Allen Lane/The Penguin Press, 1998), p. ix back

§ Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, (1976), Preface back

§ Richard Dawkins, *Unweaving the Rainbow*, (London: Allen Lane/The Penguin Press, 1998), p. ix back

§ Peter Atkins, quoted by Richard Dawkins in *Unweaving the Rainbow*, p. ix back

§ Richard Dawkins, *Unweaving the Rainbow*, (London: Allen Lane/The Penguin Press, 1998), p. ix back

§ *ibid*, p. ix back

§ *ibid*, p. ix-x back

§ Dawkins, Frank Miele, 'Darwin's Dangerous disciple - An Interview with Richard Dawkins', *The Skeptic* vol. 3, no. 4, 1995 back

§ *ibid* back

§ Richard Dawkins, 'The Simple Answer: Nick Pollard talks to Dr. Richard Dawkins', *Third Way*,

April 1995, vol 18, no 3 back

§ *ibid* back

§ Anthony O'Hear, *Beyond Evolution*, (Oxford), p. 103 back

§ Richard Dawkins, 'The Simple Answer: Nick Pollard talks to Dr. Richard Dawkins', *Thirdway*, April 1995, vol 18, no 3 back

§ On Heaven see Peter Kreeft, *Heaven - the heart's deepest longing*, (Ignatius); C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, (Fount) back

§ On the collapse of morality in a Godless universe, cf: Paul Copan, 'Can Michael Martin be a Moral Realist?'; William Lane Craig, 'The Indispensability of Theological Meta-Ethical Foundations for Morality'; J.P. Moreland, 'The Ethical Inadequacy of Naturalism'; Peter S. Williams, 'Terror From the Skies and the Existence of God' back

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