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REFLECTIONS PROMPTED BY RICHARD DAWKINS'S THE GOD DELUSION

Most of the 374 pages of *The God Delusion*[1] are mercifully not about God but about religion, specifically the "Three Abrahamic Religions" — Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. More specifically, the book is about Christianity and, most specifically, about American Christian fundamentalism. I found myself in agreement with most of what Richard Dawkins — not without humor and with passion — found wrong with the preposterous sayings and doings of believers and preachers of all sorts. Organized religions, one could conclude, are more concerned with power, domination and money than with God. I also agree with Dawkins that one should not identify children by the religious affiliation of their parents, and I certainly support his opinion that "[a] good case can indeed be made for the educational benefits of teaching comparative religion." [2]

However, I disagree with Dawkins when he equates the follies of religious believers with religion as such, identifies the utterances of some preachers with the notion of God, reduces reality to matter, and postulates the omniscience of science. Dawkins must certainly be aware of the frequent abuse of science, the frauds committed by scientists, and the exaggerated claims made by some; he probably would not identify these with science as such.

Dawkins's main "scientific" argument for rejecting a Creator is that evolution, as he understands it, works from the most simple and primitive to the more complex and advanced, whereas the assumption of a Creator God would place the most complex being at the beginning. "Evolution" is a very ambiguous term that has been interpreted by many theorists in many different ways. If Dawkins sees in the theory of evolution the basis for scientific atheism, Ernst Mayr, arguably the most respected contemporary theorist of biology, thinks that "Virtually all biologists are religious, in the deeper sense of this word, even though it may be a religion without revelation, as it was called by Julian Huxley." [3]

In order to serve as the foundation of a coherent theory of nature, the theory of evolution, as Dawkins presents it, requires the introduction of a metaphysical notion such as chance and the assumption of a transcendent omniscient and omnipotent "selector" performing at every instant simultaneously billions of instances of natural selection. Dawkins expands the range of nonscientific elements by introducing luck as a major factor. Nobody has ever seen or touched chance or luck, and the fact that there exists a probability calculus that is, among other things, helpful in the insurance business does not make chance any more substantial. The probability calculus makes the emergence of the universe and the development of any organisms appear to be extremely improbable. We obviously need something in addition to chance and luck to end up with a real world. Dawkins has made it abundantly clear through many earlier publications that he is not only a confirmed atheist but also an out-and-out materialist for whom spirit/soul does not exist. All those who assume the existence of a Creator agree that she/he/it is Spirit. There are many theories that try to explain the relationship between Creator and creation, from a deistic distancing to a pantheistic amalgamation. Thus, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan held that the evolving universe is identical with its creator:

[T]he God who is responsible for this world, who is the consciousness of the universe, is working through brute matter from which He has to liberate Himself and liberate us. He Himself is suffering in each and all of us. This suffering will be at an end when the spirit which is imprisoned in transitory matter is released, when the potential world-spirit or spirit of the whole becomes the actual consciousness of each part, when God becomes ... "all in all," when the solitary limited God becomes the pantheistic God. [4]

Dawkins, apparently approvingly, quotes Carl Sagan: "[I]f by 'God' one means the set of physical laws that govern the universe, then clearly there is such a God. This God is emotionally unsatisfying ... it does not make much sense to pray to the law of gravity." [5] While the "set of physical laws that govern the universe" is certainly "real" in the sense in which the physical universe is real, it does not cover the entire reality of the universe. Physical laws, as we know them, are a reductionist scientific reconstruction of the world. The language in which these physical laws are presently expressed is a materialistic (mathematical) reduction of more universal philosophical (metaphysical) concepts. "The law of gravity" (so-called) is a secularized (and truncated) version of the Pythagorean-Platonic idea of a universal philia that not only keeps matter together but also includes the psychic and intellectual personal level. One could well imagine praying to philia, to worship (also emotionally) the universal love that is manifest in the visible and invisible cosmos.

Philosophers hold that God is identical with her/his attributes!

Virtually all terms used by modern sciences have a poetical and/or philosophical antecedent and are intentionally reduced versions of larger concepts. Time, for instance, has been reduced by science to the mechanically measurable clicks of a chronometer (whether the old-fashioned clock-work or the newest atomic oscillation type). For the ancient Greeks, to mention just one instance, Chronos was a mighty power ruling over all living beings: He ate his own children. Time deeply affects us personally; as we grow up and age, our lifetime is much more than the sum-total of clock ticks during a specific period, and the same clock-ticks signify very different events to different people. The awareness of the transience of everything through the passing of time became the trigger for Gautama Buddha's search for enlightenment and eventually for the birth of Buddhism, reaching out for a condition of timelessness. According to the great physicist Erwin Schrödinger (Nobel Prize, 1933), "physical theory in its present stage strongly suggests the indestructibility of Mind by Time." [6]

A dyed-in-the-wool materialist like Dawkins cannot accept the notion of a nonmaterial reality. Consciousness/mind/soul does not figure as "reality" in the vocabulary of a science that recognizes only "objects" as real. Schrödinger bemoaned in his essay "Oneness of Mind" that our Western science "is based on objectivation, whereby it has cut itself off from an adequate understanding of the Subject of Cognizance, of the mind." [7] He concluded his essay with the following memorable passage:

No personal god can form part of a world model that has only become accessible at the cost of removing everything personal from it. We know, when God is experienced, this is an event as real as an immediate sense perception or as one's own personality. Like them he must be missing in the space-time picture. I do not find God anywhere in space and time — that is what the honest naturalist tells you. For this he incurs blame from him in whose catechism is written: God is spirit. [8]

The removal of the Subject from the world picture is the "original sin" of a modern science that claims to be a total explanation of reality. It is, however, the same science that has taught us that what we call "reality" is a construct of our brain based on a very selective input from our senses: We perceive through our eyes only a tiny fraction of the light spectrum, through our ears only a small portion of the sound scale, through our sense of touch only a very filtered notion of matter. These impressions are transformed into something very different in the brain cells and projected back into our consciousness. Science also has taught us that what we commonly consider "solid matter" is composed of atoms whose "substance" is made up of a microscopic nucleus surrounded by distant electrons — the comparison is metaphorical, rather a "nothing" than something solid. Arthur Eddington expressed it well in the parable of the "two tables" on which he wrote: the one "real," the other a "shadow." For science it is the shadow that represents "real" reality, not the "substantial" one of naïve realism. [9]

Dawkins, who does not accept mind/consciousness/soul as "real," cannot be convinced that there is anything other than "matter." His "atheism" is a necessary, logical conclusion. A Creator who evolved according to the laws of material development is unthinkable and cannot be assumed to be real. Atheists are too easily satisfied with the science of their time and day — from Lucretius to Dawkins — not admitting, as Schrödinger said, "that physical theory is at all times relative, in that it depends on certain basic assumptions." [10]

One of the assumptions of science since the time of Galileo and Kepler had been that *quanta sunt archetypa mundi*, that mathematics was the "language of nature." If we are ready to accept the anthropomorphism of a "language of nature," could we not go one step further and assume that nature speaks in many languages, as humankind does? Could it not be that a poet, a painter, a philosopher are able to interpret other languages of nature and that among the archetypes of the world there are not only quantities but also qualities? The third-century philosopher Plotinus suggested that nature speaks to us in silence. The language of philosophy and religion is much older and also subtler and has many more dimensions than that of objectifying science. While it may be easy to find fault with the physics of Plato, Aristotle, Thomas, Sankara, and other ancient thinkers, their main insights with regard to the world remain high above the understanding of reality of the average contemporary scientist.

Dawkins calls the question of the existence of God "a scientific question." [11] It is difficult to see how that could be, if the notion of science a-priori excludes anything nonmaterial and nonevolved. It needs a different concept of science. For Aristotle the question of the existence of God was a "scientific question" in the context of a more comprehensive notion of science that also included non-material realities. He developed a theologike episteme that recognized the reality of forms besides matter. The existence of God cannot be a "scientific question" in the context of a materialistic reductionist science that has thrown out everything that has to do with mind/subject and quality/perception. How can a reductionist epistemology claim to be able to know everything there is, if it systematically excludes everything subjective and mind-related? Erwin Chargaff, a world-renowned bio-chemist, mused:

The great pendulum of birth and death; the darkness and mystery of human destinies; the great concepts that for many thousands of years spoke to the mind and even more to the heart of humanity — reconciliation and charity, redemption and salvation — have they all been pushed aside and annihilated by science? I do not believe so. But if it really were the case, then science would carry a guilt even greater than its most embittered detractors have asserted.[12]

Schrödinger has been even more explicit in rejecting the claims of the competence of science in areas that are of existential interest. Science, he wrote, "gives a lot of factual information, puts all our experience in a magnificently consistent order, but it is ghastly silent about all and sundry that is really near to our heart, that really matters to us. It cannot tell us a word about red and blue, bitter and sweet, physical pain and physical delight; it knows nothing of beautiful and ugly, good or bad, God and eternity." [13] He also had a warning for people who, like Dawkins, declare themselves masters of everything: "Science sometimes pretends to answer questions in these domains, but the answers are very often so silly that we are not inclined to take them seriously." [14]

The purpose of science, according to Dawkins, is "to discover important truths about the real world"; [15] and science is "the honest and systematic endeavour to find out the truth about the real world." [16] Dawkins does not define "truth" or "the real world" but presupposes that what he says is the truth and that the world as he understands it is the real world. I consider this philosophically naive and scientifically presumptuous.

Science as it has developed since Democritus must explain the natural world through natural causes. However, the definition of "natural causes" depends on presuppositions resting on cultural conventions. For a nineteenth-century physicist an explanation of physical phenomena through relativity or quantum effects would not have been a scientific explanation by way of "natural causes." [17] As the physicist-philosopher Ernst Mach's attacks on Ludwig Boltzmann, Albert Einstein, and Max Planck show, the mechanistic understanding of science defended by nineteenth-century physicists did not accept the findings of these founders of the "new physics" as an explanation of nature by "natural causes." Mach — at the beginning of the twentieth century — considered the assumption of the real existence of atoms a belief in metaphysics. He wrote: "If belief in the reality of atoms is for you so essential, I will separate myself from the way of thinking appropriate for physics, I will be no true physicist., I will renounce every scientific claim — such in short is my 'thanks' to the community of believers. Freedom of thought is dearer to me." [18] Schrödinger, in his essay "The Principle of Objectivation," [19] offers some pertinent observations. While objectivation has led to the discovery of many wonderful natural processes and relationships, it has failed to explore the source of all these discoveries, namely, the mind. Schrödinger pleads for a "blood-transfusion from Eastern thought" [20] — because the East (he specifically mentions the Indian Vedanta tradition) had focused its search on mind and consciousness and thus discovered important aspects about the other side of reality.

All that Dawkins proves in the end is that his kind of science cannot prove the existence of a Creator. It reminds one of the "news" that Soviet-Russian astronaut Yuri Gagarin brought back to earth from his space-trip in the 1970's: He had seen no God out there. Nobody ever expected that he would, and probably nobody accepted that observation as proof for the nonexistence of God. The kind of science that Dawkins advocates could not even prove the existence of another human person besides the collection of some numerical data.

Dawkins's main battle is with the "Creationists," more precisely with a rather odd sub-caste of these who deny evolution. Accepting evolution (as a theory and as an at-least-partially-proved fact), one can accept a Creator or a "Supreme Being," as many do. Dawkins claims that the great majority of scientists are atheists. Science, as defined by Dawkins, does not need God. Its intention is to explain the world through mechanical processes. What cannot be explained through these is outside science, as understood today (in the Anglo-Saxon world). However, what is outside science (in the above-defined way) need not be outside reality. Dawkins's example of illusionists Penn and Teller [21] may well be turned against him: Admitting that their performance was a trick and not a miracle, the enumeration of their physical components is not enough for a full explanation of the tricks, as it requires a mind to pull off a trick. The mind cannot be explained through the trick — but the trick through the mind.

Whereas the evolution of organisms can be explained by "natural selection," the origin of life is outside natural selection and requires, according to Dawkins, an "initial stroke of luck." [22] Charles Darwin, however, whom Dawkins constantly invokes as the originator of the (supposedly) materialistic-atheistic theory of evolution, had written: "I imagine that probably all organic beings that ever lived on this earth descended from some primitive form, which was first called into life by the Creator." [23] Other "strokes of luck," apparently unexplainable through "natural selection," are the origin of eukaryotic cells and of consciousness. Why call it "luck"?

"Natural selection" is the "crane" [explanatory device] that explains everything. The "crane," however, does not have to be created by natural selection. [24] Evolution seems to be purposeful, not only on the small scale of the economy of

nature in manufacturing individual organisms but also in the development of species from algae to human beings (and beyond?). If evolution "selects" and thereby advances complexity, could it not be called a super-person, a Creator?

I agree with Dawkins that we do not need a "God of the gaps"[25] and that what science cannot explain today it may be able to explain tomorrow. Science itself is constantly changing to such a degree that what today is called scientific would have been considered crazy fifty years ago. The community of scientists not only embraces people like Mach and Dawkins but also those like Schrödinger and Mayr. For most people science and what it has to say about the world is not enough. They also need philosophy, poetry, art, music, ideas, and ideals — creations of the mind.

There have always been — as far as we know from the literature of all civilizations — materialists/atheists as well as spiritual/religious people. They all had their reasons for entertaining the opinions they held, and none could convince the other. One of Dawkins's hang-ups is his refusal to believe that there could be any reality that is not material: "Consciousness" exists for him only as an attribute of a material organism. However, consciousness as subject does not need a material substratum. God is Subject, not Object!

Dawkins's use of the terms "complexity" and "simplicity" is plainly materialistic; on that level it is true that the complex arises after/from the simple. However, what about a great idea? great art? great music? A great idea is "simple" that is the reason for its power to explain so many complex things. Simple ideas arise both before and after complex ones. The Copernican revolution simplified the complex Ptolemaic astronomical system. Einstein's Theory of Relativity simplified the complex physics of the late nineteenth century. Besides the analytic thinking that Dawkins seems to identify with science, there are other types of thinking, such as what Henryk Skolimowski calls "reverential thinking,"[26] a kind of thinking that we need in order to appreciate the value of what we think about. Dawkins emerges as a pure and simple utilitarian, reducing the meaning of life to "surviving and reproducing."[27] Human life is filled with many other things that give it meaning, over and above survival and reproduction. Even the most primitive human populations developed art and imagination.

I agree that many of the arguments that have been used by theologians and pious scientists to prove the existence of a Creator God from natural evidence can no longer be upheld and that the attributes given to the Creator ought to be revised on the basis of more recent science. Here, too, a great new "simple" idea may replace the complexities of past theologies. The intimation of a reality beyond the world of the senses and the awe and wonder beyond the available explanations of natural phenomena take place in every age according to the level of education of the beholder. There is a transcendent element even in the most naïve wonder of an ordinary person, although the "facts" behind it may have a scientific explanation.

Dawkins takes a surprisingly optimistic and positive view of life: "[0]ur life is as meaningful, as full and as wonderful as we choose to make it. And we can make it very wonderful indeed."[28] He credits science with doing that:

[H]ow lucky we are to be alive, given that the vast majority of people who could potentially be thrown up by the combinatorial lottery of DNA will in fact never be born... . The atheist view is correspondingly life-affirming and life-enhancing, while at the same time never being tainted with self-delusion, wishful thinking, or the whingeing self-pity of those who feel that life owes them something. [29]

Dawkins does succeed in evoking wonder at the improbability of our existence and the strangeness of the world in which we live, the immensity of our ignorance, and the smallness of the range that our senses cover. He does mention the paradoxical nature of quantum theory, quoting biologist J. B. S. Haldane: "Now, my own suspicion is that the universe is not only queerer than we suppose, but queerer than we can suppose ... I suspect that there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of, or can be dreamed of, in any philosophy."[30]

I wonder whether Dawkins does not give himself away when stating: "What we see of the real world is not the unvarnished real world but a model of the real world, regulated and adjusted by sense data — a model that is constructed so that it is useful for dealing with the real world. The nature of that model depends on the kind of animal we are."[31] "Reality" is defined as that which our senses perceive — and they perceive what is useful.

In the last chapter of his book, Dawkins as much as admits that nonmaterial entities, such as physical laws, are of great importance in the "real world" — and probably true. Why not go one step further and admit that there is spirit — not operating under the Darwinian "crane"?

Dawkins also makes a number of questionable apodictic statements, such as: "An early embryo has the sentience as well as the semblance, of a tadpole... . There is no general reason to suppose that human embryos at any age suffer more than cow or sheep embryos at the same developmental stage."[32] Or, "Faith is an evil precisely because it requires no justification and brooks no argument"[33]; and "[Historically, religion aspired to explain our own existence and the

nature of the universe in which we find ourselves. In this role it is now completely superseded by science." [34] Statements like these are too "unscientific" to even merit comment. They betray animus rather than analysis and hubris rather than the humility that has characterized all great scientists, who have always been aware of the mysteriousness of nature. As Mayr, a convinced Darwinian biologist, expressed it: "The unknown and maybe unknowable instills in us a sense of humility and awe." [35]

An afterthought: It is interesting to see how the topic "science and religion" has become ubiquitous. I wonder whether the Templeton initiative — so often derisively mentioned by Dawkins, but supported by many scientists of name and fame — has something to do with it. Christian theology for a long time neglected to deal with nature and then reduced the issue of the tension between the modern sciences and theology to the question of "reason and faith" as Pope John-Paul II did in his encyclical *Fides et ratio* (September 15, 1998). [36] This is too abstract and inadequate an approach. Science requires faith (as Planck already stated), and religion requires reason (as Buddhism and Vedanta have asserted for thousands of years). Dawkins's *God Delusion* should become a stimulus to rethink religion as such and especially Christian theology. Contemporary theologians should have the courage to conceive a new "creed" that can be accepted by educated people. The theologians of the third and fourth Christian centuries did not hesitate to use their world picture to formulate a "creed." If we admit that world pictures change with the change of time, the truly unchanging reality of the eternal spirit would emerge all the more clearly.

1. Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston, MA, and New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2006).
2. *Ibid.*, p. 340.
3. Ernst Mayr, *The Growth of Biological Thought: Diversity, Evolution, and Inheritance* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1982), p. 81.
4. S. Radhakrishnan, *East and West in Religion* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1933), p. 124. 5 Dawkins, *God Delusion*, p. 19, quoting Sagan without citing a source.
5. Erwin Schrödinger, "Science and Religion," in his *What Is Life? The Physical Aspect of the Living Cell and Mind and Matter* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1967 [Mind and Matter was originally published separately in 1958]), p. 165.
6. Erwin Schrödinger, "The Arithmetical Paradox: The Oneness of Mind," in his *What Is Life? and Mind and Matter*, p. 140.

Ibid., p. 140.

- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 150.
- 9 Arthur Eddington, "Introduction" to his *The Nature of the Physical World* (Ann Arbor, MI: Ann Arbor Paperbacks, University of Michigan Press, 1958 [original: A. S. Eddington, *The Nature of the Physical World*, Gifford Lectures, 1927 (New York: The Macmillan Co.; Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1929)], pp. xi-xix.
- 10 Schrödinger, "Science and Religion," p. 165.
- 11 Dawkins, *God Delusion*, p. 48.

12 Erwin Chargaff, *Voices in the Labyrinth: Nature, Man, and Science, A Continuum Book* (New York: Seabury Press, 1977), p. 53.

- 13 Erwin Schrödinger, "Why Not Talk Physics?" in Ken Wilber, ed., with Ann Niehaus, *Quantum Questions: Mystical Writings of the World's Great Physicists*, New Science Library (Boston, MA, and London: Shambala, 1984, p. 81 (reprinted from an unidentified source in Schrödinger's works).
- 14 *Ibid.*
- 15 Dawkins, *God Delusion*, p. 133.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 361.
- 17 See Gerald Holton, "Mach, Einstein, and the Search for Reality," in his *Thematic Origins of Scientific Thought: Kepler to Einstein* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973), pp. 219-259.
- 18 Ernst Mach, "Die Leitfaden meiner naturwissenschaftlichen Erkenntnislehre und ihre Aufnahme durch die Zeitgenossen," *Scientia*, vol. 7 (1910), p. 233; quoted in Stanley L. Jaki, *The Road of Science and the Ways to God*, Gifford Lectures, 1974-75 and 1975-76 (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 178.
- 19 Erwin Schrödinger, "The Principle of Objectivation," in his *What Is Life? and Mind and Matter*, pp. 126-137.
- 20 Schrödinger, "The Arithmetical Paradox," p. 140.
- 21 Dawkins, *God Delusion*, pp. 128-129. 22 *Ibid.*, p. 140.
- 23 Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species, by Means of Natural Selection* (London: Murray, 1859), p. 490.
- 24 Dawkins, *God Delusion*, p. 155. 25 *Ibid.*, pp. 125ff.
- 26 The title of chap. 11 in Henryk Skolimowski, *The Theater of the Mind: Evolution in the Sensitive Cosmos* (Wheaton, IL: Theosophical Publishing House, 1984), pp. 77-79.
- 27 Dawkins, *God Delusion*, p. 163.

- 28 Ibid., p. 360.
- 29 Ibid., p. 361.
- 30 Ibid., p. 364, quoting Haldane without a source.
- 31 Ibid., p. 371, emphasis in original.
- 32 Ibid., p. 297.
- 33 Ibid., p. 308.
- 34 Ibid., p. 347, emphasis in original.
- 35 Mayr, Growth of Biological Thought, p. 81.
- 36 'Available at http://vAvw.vatican.va/holy%5ffather/john%5fpaul%5fi/encyclicals/documents/hfjp-ii_enc_15101998_fides-et-ratio_en.html.

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By Klaus K. Klostermaier, F.R.S.C., University of Manitoba Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada

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