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Book Review

Richard Dawkins (2006). *The God Delusion*. Bantam Press, London.

Richard Dawkins' book length treatise on religion, *The God Delusion*, is long overdue. Indeed, given how concerned Dawkins has been about this domain of human behaviour, one may wonder why it hasn't seen the light of day sooner. Hot off the press, *The God Delusion* bears the hallmarks of Dawkins' previous works – it is as readable as it is clearly stated, a testament to its author's honesty, lucidity and utter disregard for compromise in any shape and form. *The God Delusion* is a valuable and timely work, for here, for the first time, Dawkins assembles his thoughts on religion in a single *magnum opus*. However, like any one of us mortals, he is not above taking winding back routes leading to obscure places on the explanatory map. All his penchant for coherence notwithstanding, his account of the roots of religion is, in my view, highly problematic.

Spandrels and Blank Slates

In the fifth chapter of *The God Delusion*, which is dedicated to the roots of religion, Dawkins makes the case that religion is not an adaptation in itself but a by-product (Daniel Dennett made a not too dissimilar case in his *Breaking the Spell*, 2006). More precisely, Dawkins endorses the basic premise of the recent field of the cognitive science of religion (here after CSR), viz. that religion is a by-product of the workings of normal, cognitive mechanisms – mechanisms that have evolved for reasons unrelated to religion *per se* (e.g., Boyer, 2001; Atran, 2002; McCauley and Lawson, 2002; Pyysiäinen and Anttonen, 2002; Barrett, 2004; Whitehouse, 2004; Slone, 2006). This move is not the least interesting given the history of public debate in biological circles during the last decades of the 20th Century – in effect, Dawkins, a staunch advocate of adaptationism, echoes Stephen J. Gould's and Richard Lewontin's notion of spandrels, inspired by cathedral architecture: "the tapering triangular spaces formed by the intersection of two rounded arches at right angles [...] necessary architectural by-products of mounting a dome on rounded arches" (Gould and Lewontin, 1979, p. 581). Gould's and Lewontin's point, issued as a blow to adaptationism, was that while these spaces, with their intricate ornaments, might appear as being created for an ornate function (adaptation), they were in reality accidental by-products of architectural constraints. In light of this debate it is interesting to note that many of the insights of evolutionary psychology, a significant influence on the CSR and a stronghold of adaptationism, turn on spandrels (for a review of by-product and adaptationist approaches in the CSR and other evolutionary approaches to religion, cf., Bulbulia, 2004; Sjöblom, 2007; also, Bering *et al.*, 2005).

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Advocating the by-product position, Dawkins says:

[R]eligious behaviour may be [...] an unfortunate by-product of an underlying psychological propensity which in other circumstances is, or once was, useful. On this view, the propensity that was naturally selected in our ancestors was not religion *per se*; it had some other benefit, and it only incidentally manifests itself as religious behaviour (p. 174).

This quotation, with clarity characteristic of Dawkins, could serve as a passage in any introductory course to the dominant stance within the CSR (with the possible exception of the qualifier “unfortunate”). However, when Dawkins moves on to illustrate what he means by the notion of by-product, we find ourselves in muddier waters:

More than any other species, we survive by the accumulated experience of previous generations, and that experience needs to be passed on to children for their protection and well-being. Theoretically, children might learn from personal experience not to go too near a cliff edge, not to eat untried red berries, not to swim in crocodile-infested waters. But, to say the least, there will be a selective advantage to child brains that possess the rule of thumb: *believe, without question, whatever your grown-ups tell you* (p.174, emphasis added).

Further:

Natural selection builds child brains with a *tendency to believe whatever their parents and tribal elders tell them*. Such trusting obedience is valuable for survival [...] But the flip side of trusting obedience is *slavish gullibility*. The inevitable by-product is vulnerability to infection by mind viruses. [...] And, very likely, when the child grows up and has children of her own, she will naturally pass the whole lot on to her own children – nonsense as well as sense [...] (p. 176, emphasis added).

And the mind virus par excellence, contagiously galloping from host to host down the generations, taking advantage of parental admonitions and childish gullibility, is religion. There is no arguing that Dawkins illustrates, in general terms, what is meant by the notion of “by-product”. The problem is that his illustration is incompatible with what it is meant to illustrate. Further, as an explanation of religion it is inadequate.

The basic premise of the CSR, which resonates with evolutionary psychology, rests on the notion that the mind is not, in Steven Pinker’s words, a blank slate (2002). To the contrary, it is a multimodal entity, crafted by natural selection to deal with specific aspects of our ancestors’ past. Consequently, due to evolved psychological dispositions, the human mind is not a general purpose learning device equally likely to pick up and pass on just any odd idea it may come across. Religious ideas are apt to excite our cognitive apparatus in specific ways and are, thus, particularly likely to be acquired, remembered and passed on (Boyer, 2001). All of this is contrary to Dawkins’ portrayal of children’s minds and the roots of religion. According to his suggestion, children’s minds are general purpose copy machines that will pick up anything their parents and elders tell them. This is, of course, not surprising given Dawkins’, and more recently, Susan Blackmore’s, notion of memes (Dawkins, 1976; Blackmore, 1999) which has led to a “mind-blind” theory of culture (Atran, 2002).

The point is that Dawkins' by-product and that of the CSR are two different things. Religion, on Dawkins' account, is a by-product of the mind as a general purpose, blank slate while Boyer and other proponents of the CSR emphasise religion as a by-product of specific, cognitive mechanisms. Superimposing a blank slate on the multimodal mind in this way makes Dawkins' account of the roots of religion incoherent.

How does the hypothesis that children's minds are general purpose copy machines fare as an explanation of a human universal like religion? What Dawkins says, in effect, is that the particulars of religious beliefs pass from parents to children – here they call the lord “Jesus”, there “Vishnu”, and so on. But this is a trivial point. How else are such local particulars to pass on if not by parents or other authority figures to children? Dawkins is unable to tell us anything about the recurrent features of religious ideas and behaviour, features that transcend local variation, or how such features are passed on through the generations. And this is indeed the crux of the problem: How are we to account for such recurrent features – particular forms of supernatural agents, ritual behaviour, afterlife beliefs, and so forth – if children are disposed to acquire, remember and pass on anything they are told? If that were the case, there should be much more variation in the cultural complexes that we call religions. In fact, the only explanation for these recurrent features on Dawkins' account would be that they are inherited from a hypothetical, ur-religion that existed prior to *homo sapiens'* exodus from Africa. Such a notion, Dawkins would surely agree, is highly unlikely (if that were the case, again, we should find less universal form to religions around the world). In a word, Dawkins' account of the roots of religion is inadequate. At best, it accounts for surface variation, local particulars and idiosyncrasies of belief – thus, it expounds precisely those features that are uninteresting if one's goal is to expose the roots of religion as the global recurrent domain of human behaviour that it is.

In all fairness, it should not leave notice that Dawkins offers his account of children's minds only as a suggestive illustration of what he means by the notion of by-product (p. 174, 177). However, the point remains that it is a misleading illustration as it contradicts the very thing it is meant to illustrate. Further, Dawkins would hardly put forth this notion if he didn't intend for us to consider its implications. It should also be noted in this context that this is not the only occasion that Dawkins has offered this hypothesis of the origins of religion (most recently in his Channel Four programs *The Root of All Evil?*).

Memetic Scaffolding?

Dawkins makes other interesting suggestions in his chapter on the roots of religion. One of those is Dawkins' own brainchild that contagiously has spread in the margins of the literature on cultural evolution, *viz.*, memes. Dawkins advocates memetics akin to Blackmore's *The Meme Machine* (1999), a book largely inspired by his original concept in *The Selfish Gene* (1976; for alternative approaches, *cf.*, Deacon, 1999; Aunger, 2000, 2002). Memes, on Dawkins' account, are self-reinforcing complexes of concepts (say, “believe in God”, “infidels go to Hell”, and so on). As such, memes have a stabilizing effect within the religious systems to which they belong. This may well be the case. However, the explanatory power of memes as self-reinforcing, tightly knitted concepts may be rather meagre when it comes to religion.

While memes might account for the stability of religious systems, they are unable to explain the origins of religious conceptions and the globally recurrent structures that characterise

them (Sjöblom, 2007, makes a similar point). If indeed memes have such stabilizing effects, their effectiveness in this regard might hinge on specific circumstances. A candidate for such scaffolding for memetic stabilizing effects might be what cognitive anthropologist and proponent of the CSR, Harvey Whitehouse, has termed the doctrinal mode of religiosity. The doctrinal mode is characterised by the presence of certain dynamics: Explicit (often complex) doctrines are maintained by frequent repetition of rituals and doctrinal discourse (2004). Such repetitive routines increase the likelihood that complex concepts will be committed to memory and passed on – when that has happened, such doctrinal complexes might start exerting a stabilizing effect of their own as memes. However, if their ability to stabilise depends on the dynamic scaffolding of the doctrinal mode of religiosity, the effectiveness of memes as self-reinforcing complexes of concepts is greatly diminished and only secondary. This is food for further theoretical rumination which is beyond the scope of this short review.

Concluding Remarks

Needless to say, the aspects emphasised above are far from the only one's Dawkins discusses in his treatment of the roots of religion (others include references to group selection, psychological research into young children's intuitions, and cultural evolution akin to genetic drift in biological evolution). However, his endorsement of the by-product position, exemplified by his hypothesis about children's minds being blank slates and his emphasis on memes, are central to his discussion. This, as I have stated above, makes his discussion incoherent and inadequate. Of course, Dawkins treatment of the roots of religion is but one part of his book which is deserving of the attention of a wide range of disciplines and will undoubtedly leave few untouched. Steven Pinker is not exaggerating when he says on the dustcover of *The God Delusion* that its author is "one of the best non-fiction writers alive today" – Dawkins' mastery ensures that even on thin ice he balances perfectly.

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