

## Supplementary Book Review for CSSR 651, Spring 2016

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Richard Dawkins. *The Greatest Show on Earth: The Evidence for Evolution*. (Free Press, 2009), 439 pages.

### The Author's Qualifications

Richard Dawkins is certainly the most widely-known and outspoken figure in the debate on evolution and the question of the existence of God. He received a B.A. in Biology in 1962, and then both an M.A. and a D. Phil. in 1966 from Oxford University. He was Assistant Professor of Zoology at the University of California Berkeley from 1967 to 1969. He was a Lecturer of Zoology from 1970 to 1990, and then a Reader in Zoology from 1990 to 1995 at Oxford University.<sup>1</sup> David Klinghoffer of the Discovery Institute notes that “*Dawkins retired in 2008 as Professor for Public Understanding of Science at Oxford University, a position he held from 1995, by which time he had effectively discontinued his career as a publishing research scientist. His curriculum vitae gives **no record of original, peer reviewed scientific publications since 1994***” (boldface mine).<sup>2</sup> It is apparent to me, both from his teaching positions and the absence of recent peer-reviewed publications, that while Dawkins may be regarded as an authority on evolutionary development in the *broad* sense, he is not a specialist in the *narrower* branches of science which are fundamental to the Darwinian paradigm, namely cellular and molecular biology.

### The Author's Motivations

With respect to what lies at the center of Dawkins' thinking, Klinghoffer poses the following question: “*To what degree [Dawkins'] will to disbelieve in religion drives [his] scientific thought, as opposed to atheism's being the product of scientific inquiry as he himself maintains.*”<sup>3</sup> Dawkins in fact specifies both his passion and intellectual commitments on his webpage where he states, “*The **mission** of the Richard Dawkins Foundation is to promote scientific literacy and a secular world-view. Some might see this as two distinct missions: 1) Teaching the value of science, and 2) Advancing secularism. But permit me to trace the connection between science and the other preoccupation of my foundation,*

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<sup>1</sup> [www.biographybase.com/biography/dawkins\\_richard.html](http://www.biographybase.com/biography/dawkins_richard.html)

<sup>2</sup> David Klinghoffer. *The Discovery Institute*. May 1, 2009. [www.discovery.org/a/10291](http://www.discovery.org/a/10291)

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

the advancement of secularism. I see those goals as **interrelated and mutually reinforcing**" (boldface mine).<sup>4</sup> It is clearly Dawkins' driving intention to discredit and deconstruct Christian belief.<sup>5</sup>

### Brief Summary

Dawkins is both up-front and bold about his main thesis. He states at the beginning, "*I shall show the irrefragable power of the inference that evolution is a fact...Nowadays it is no longer possible to dispute the fact of evolution itself – it has graduated to become a theorem or obviously supported fact*" (pp. 16, 17). It is striking that on the very first page of the Preface he conceded that his previous books "*did not present the actual evidence that evolution is a fact*" for the reason that in them "*the evidence for evolution was nowhere explicitly set out*" (p. XIII – boldface mine). This leads to my first criticism of the work before us, namely, that in spite of the fact that Dawkins lauds the a-teleological world-view of Charles Darwin, he nevertheless fails to distinguish carefully between the broader term "evolution" and the bolder term "Darwinism", which insists on a mechanistic mechanism to drive the alleged evolutionary change. The importance of this distinction was recently heightened in my thinking as I read Michael Denton's book, *Evolution: Still a Theory in Crisis*.<sup>6</sup> Although Denton, like Dawkins, embraces *amoeba-to-man* evolution, the former argues vigorously that the scientific evidence utterly refutes Darwin's a-teleological assertions. Since Dawkins effectively mocks theistic evolutionists (p. 6), for the purpose of this critique I will henceforth distinguish these two terms by identifying Dawkins' paradigm as "Darwinism."

In **chapter 1** Dawkins lays out the foundations for distinguishing between theorems, scientific facts, and the religious beliefs of young-earth creationists (YEC). He concedes that "*A scientific theorem has not been – cannot be – proved in the way a mathematical theorem is proved. But common sense treats it as a fact in the same sense as the 'theory' that the Earth is round and not flat is a fact ... All are scientific theorems: supported by massive quantities of evidence, accepted by all informed observers, undisputed facts in the ordinary sense of the word*" (p. 13). By Dawkins' employment of this argument he is at the outset equating evidence from two utterly disparate categories. Mathematical theorems are true by definition and discernment of the shape of the earth is attainable by observational data that is accessible on a public level. But the Darwinian assertion, by contrast, that all of life can be accounted for by means of unguided variation coupled with natural selection must be regarded as a belief that can

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<sup>4</sup> <https://richarddawkins.net/aboutus/>

<sup>5</sup> To the extent that Dawkins is committed to *a-teleological* evolution (Darwinism) he is by means of that distinction attacking the first article of the Apostles' Creed: "*I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth.*" While the author here states about *The Greatest Show*, "*It is not intended as an anti-religious book.*" Then he continued, "*I've done that, it's another T shirt, this is not the place to wear it again*" (p. 6).

<sup>6</sup> The Discovery Institute, 2016.

be neither proved nor demonstrated. It indeed runs counter to David Hume's skepticism which insists it is not possible to prove causation, but only to document the succession of events. Since, as he argues, a first billiard ball striking a second ball which in turn moves away can't prove the relationship is causal, how can one expect to prove the present complexity in nature by unguided processes?

In the chapters which soon follow, Dawkins seeks to lay out the grounds for the numerous "proofs" that he promised at the beginning. **Chapter 2** precedes that actual roster of evidence by highlighting and contrasting the two biological-history paradigms of Plato's *essentialism*<sup>7</sup> on the one hand, and the evolutionary view on the other. Dawkins charges that Plato's paradigm inhibited the intellectual receptivity of western civilization to evolutionary thinking. Dawkins defines evolutionary thinking as follows: "*every animal is linked to every other animal, say rabbit to leopard, by a chain of intermediates, each so similar to the next that every link could in principle mate with its neighbors in the chain and produce fertile offspring*" (pp. 23-24). In **chapter 3** Dawkins lists the numerous examples of artificial and natural selection that demonstrate the pliability of the species. He thereby seeks (unsuccessfully) to extrapolate from this factor to the conclusion that macroevolution is achievable through the Darwinian mechanism. In **chapter 4** Dawkins explores the various means of reliably determining the age of the earth. It is one thing, however, for him to discredit the YEC position on this question, but an altogether different question whether Darwinism is capable of fulfilling the claims Dawkins asserts about Darwinism. In **Chapter 5** Dawkins declares with respect to guppies and their survivability, "*It is a spectacular example of evolution before our very eyes*" (p. 139). Yet in truth the examples in this chapter miserably fail to illustrate evolution at a macro-evolutionary level. Dawkins begins **Chapter 6** by stating, "*We don't need fossils in order to demonstrate that evolution is a fact.*" While he asserts that "*the fossil evidence for evolution is wonderfully strong,*" he nonetheless concedes that "*there are, of course, gaps*" (p. 146). Despite his sleight of hand assertion that "*every fossil is an intermediate between something and something else*" (p. 151), Dawkins fails to provide documental evidence that the history of life which he alleges occurred actually happened as he describes. The extensive nature of the contents of *Greatest Show* requires me now to limit my critique to one further section, **Chapter 8**, in which Dawkins ties evolutionary development to the laws of chemistry and physics. He states, "*The important point for evolution – the sequence of amino acids – is itself fully determined...it is a fact that once a mutation has occurred, the resulting change of protein shape will be*

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<sup>7</sup> *Essentialism* is the view that natural entities (globes, boxes, rabbits, ants, etc.) are copies (inferior though they be) from perfect *ideas and forms* whose existence transcends the material world.

*in principle predictable*" (p.237). I find it incomprehensible that one should believe that the laws of physics, by unguided processes, should be imagined to account for systems whose complexity is described in symbiotic relationships.

### **Evaluation and Recommendation**

Richard Dawkins is an engaging writer, but at the same time he utterly fails to prove the effectiveness of the claims of Darwinism. *Greatest Show* ought to be read by Christians in order to clarify that there is in actuality an enormous chasm between the Darwinian assertions and the legitimacy of the foundations on which they rest.