

# Can God stop being God?

A review of  
*Dawkins' God: Genes,  
Memes, and the  
Meaning of Life*  
by Alister McGrath  
Blackwell Publishing,  
Oxford, 2005

Marc Kay

When I was provided the opportunity to review this book I experienced a genuine *frisson*: here was a book which potentially, judging by its cover, was a very long nail into Richard Dawkins' coffin. Having been awarded a doctorate in biophysics and an honours degree in theology from Oxford (Dawkins' own university), Alister McGrath certainly possesses the academic qualifications to provide a robust critique of Dawkins' ideas; yet, despite this, by the time I was less than a quarter of the way through, I had realised that the author's theology was effete and had acquiesced to the materialistic *Zeitgeist*. McGrath's book fails, and fails spectacularly, because he declines to engage fully with the atheist mind-set and, more importantly, misunderstands God's nature.

## The good

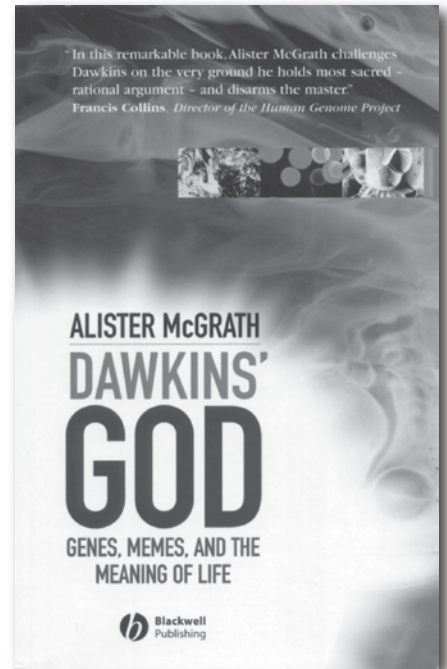
The book is not entirely without merit. The first chapter contains an interesting biographical sketch of Dawkins, though this dwells far too long on the details of his doctorate thesis while disappointingly merely alluding to the potentially more fertile aspects pertaining to his Anglican religious upbringing and youthful attraction to Teilhard de Chardin's apostatic Hegelian marriage of evolution and Christianity. Elsewhere McGrath critiques Dawkins' anemically misrepresentative definition of 'faith' (Dawkins views it as 'a kind of mental illness'), pointing out that

his much touted claim of faith being 'unjustified belief' is itself without warrant. Theologians well before Dawkins, McGrath notes, have tackled this straw-man by demonstrating that faith is inextricably associated with the intellect and is conviction supported by adequate evidence.

Far and away the most effective counter-argument in the book is McGrath's analysis of 'memes', Dawkins' fanciful and unempirical 'units' which serve as cultural replicators and ideas (pp. 119–138). McGrath handles this comprehensively, for he astutely recognises this as an Achilles' heel. The intangible products of the mind's activity, namely ideas and culture, require explanation. But the genetic reductionism of evolutionary atheism, even for a hardened materialist like Dawkins, is not entirely satisfactory. The meme is putatively analogous to the gene, passing on culture and the like from generation to generation. Its existence would apotheosize Darwinism by raising it from mere explicator of phenotypes to that of a panacean meta-theory.

As it turns out this is somewhat misleading because his case isn't a forthright capitulation to a dualist vision of reality, for he returns rather quickly to his customary monolithic materialist view of the world: 'A meme', Dawkins proposes in his *The Extended Phenotype*, 'should be regarded as a unit of information residing in a brain ... [and] has a definite structure' (p. 123).

'But why bother', you may ask, 'proposing an unsighted, quasi-metaphysical construct to explain ideas and the like?' Well, there is one 'idea' that Dawkins asserts runs not just counter-intuitively to the whole Darwinian demand of maximising survival, but is outright inimical to human existence. It is, of course, belief in God ('All those religious wars!' of course overlooking the far greater death toll from atheistic Marxist and evolution-based fascist régimes).



Nevertheless, Dawkins understands that even awkward or false ideas must address the Principle of Sufficient Reason: everything that is, has a reason why it is so and not otherwise. The impasse is ostensibly removed when belief in God is understood to be an infecting 'God meme' and that theism specifically is a 'parasitic virus of the mind' (p. 121). It is at this point that McGrath excels in rebuttal. What's good for the goose is good for the gander: if theism can be reduced to a meme, so must atheism!

## The bad

McGrath apparently wants to distance himself from the proponents of the Argument from Design because he views its use in Christian philosophy, principally Paley's version, as a failure (pp. 70–72). It was swept away, according to McGrath, because of the counter-argument that claimed the existence of pain and suffering in the world was a foil to the existence of a benevolent and intelligent God, despite the intellectual vitality of Paley's idea. But more importantly, McGrath insists, Darwinism eventually gave clear evidence and argument that nature itself (though God, McGrath stresses, is present but once removed from the products of nature) could provide

sufficient mechanism, in the form of mutations and natural selection, for the diversity and intricateness of nature. However, McGrath attacks Dawkins for incorrectly assuming that this argument traditionally provided substantial buttress to Christianity's claims, and, *ad nauseam*, rebukes Dawkins for his insistence that the truth of evolution in no way necessarily eliminates God's existence.

Momentarily leaving aside the problematic point that evolution does not requisitely banish God, McGrath nevertheless displays very poor form at this point; for in some measure it *is* normative for Christianity, specifically, and theism, generally, to propose the Design Argument because creation is the first act of God. McGrath seems to be unaware of, *inter alia*,

- Cicero's statement of it (1<sup>st</sup> century BC) in his *De Natura Deorum*
- Minucius Felix's and Gregory of Nazianzus' use (3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries respectively) of the argument
- Sir Isaac Newton's clear statements about how the order in the solar system points to an all-wise Παντοκράτορ (pantôkrator) or 'Universal Ruler'
- Kant's attack on the idea, prior to Paley, in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, thus implying its well-established existence
- the 18<sup>th</sup> century Scottish philosopher Thomas Reid's address of Hume's scepticism and who argued for 'marks of intelligence' in nature, and
- Paul's seminal use of the argument in Romans 1.

One further wonders why McGrath would disparage Paley so much given that the atheist philosopher of biology Elliott Sober wrote the following concerning its formulation: 'Before Darwin's time, some of the best and brightest in both philosophy and science argued that the adaptedness of organisms can be explained only by the hypothesis that organisms are the product of intelligent design. This line of reasoning—the *design argument*—is worth considering

as an object of real intellectual beauty. It was not the fantasy of crackpots but the fruits of creative genius.'<sup>1</sup>

Another disappointment was the repetitive inclusion that Darwin was, at some stage, an orthodox Christian, and that his incredulity concerning God's existence didn't arise until well after the 1840s. This too is problematic because Darwin, when he did attend church consistently, spent his early married life at the Unitarian Chapel, London, and, from his great-great-grandson's account, Charles' own family was Unitarian. Furthermore, before his 1839 marriage, he had concluded that since the earth was unimaginably old, the Genesis account of creation was untrustworthy, thus impugning the other historical episodes of the Old Testament, and, *ipso facto*, the New Testament was to be rejected because the Christian claim of truth rested on the historical veracity of the earlier Testament. He also informed his future wife Emma of this, contrary to his father's advice, in 1838.<sup>2</sup> Also, his own grandfather, Erasmus Darwin, wrote a book on evolution.<sup>3</sup>

### ... and the ugly

McGrath believes that Dawkins' syllogism 'If evolution is true, theism is false' is a *non sequitur* and thus chastises him for tacking his 'atheism ... onto his evolutionary biology with intellectual velcro'. This is the book's single worst intellectual oversight because McGrath, as an unapologetic evolutionist, offers no argument as to why he believes that 'Darwinism can be held to be consistent with conventional religious beliefs, agnosticism, and atheism' (p. 80). Unsurprisingly, he follows this jejune assertion with an equally beggarly '[i]t all depends on how these terms are defined'. What McGrath means is, I suspect, since atheism and agnosticism are unambiguous terms, it all depends on how Christianity is defined. Theistic evolutionists, just when they should, serially fail to bring substance to this assertion. The best McGrath does is to lamely rely on an argument from

authority by listing some well-known theistic evolutionists followed up by a quote from Stephen Jay Gould that makes the same vague point. McGrath, apparently, holds that Darwinism, to echo Dawkins' own claim, *mutatis mutandis*, has enabled him to be an intellectually fulfilled Christian.

This 'real issue', as McGrath labels it, of Dawkins not establishing a bridge between the existence of evolutionary biology and the necessary elimination of God is identified quite early (p. 10). McGrath, from this point onwards, is clearly apoplectically frozen in the shadowland of word magic, a pagan world where it is believed that to speak about a thing, can actually, somehow, reify that thing. This is the chimeric realm where immovable objects clash with irresistible forces and square-circles lurk side-by-side with supra-logical gods. It is also an affliction of mind which strikes Christians whenever they insist that God, a teleological being, is able to, and does, utilise non-teleology (chance) in order to bring life and the cosmos into existence.

One can very well imagine, as Frederick Copleston told Bertrand Russell in their 1948 debate on BBC radio, anything and everything, but imagination is neither a promissory note nor a substitute for robust argument or ontological reality. Notwithstanding that the mere syntactical grafting of teleology onto non-teleology is oxymoronic, I can't even begin to bring to understanding how non-teleology can be manipulated purposively and still remain loyal to its definition, that of non-purposiveness and non-direction. Alternatively, what exactly is this teleological being existing for when it stops doing what it necessarily exists for?

Due to a noticeable dearth of detail one can only speculate at what McGrath really believes God does. However he does mention John Polkinghorne who, like McGrath, is a theistic evolutionist but, unlike him, isn't so reticent, and who, elsewhere, confidently invokes a neo-Platonic theodicy. Polkinghorne's feckless rejoinder to the creationist young-earth model is marked by

a god who surrenders his wisdom and creative capacity and allows an interplay of chance and necessity to produce physical suffering in the world. This, Polkinghorne believes, is a 'great good' and its necessity is further denoted by a fecundity of death and extinction that enabled the world to produce us.<sup>4</sup>

Theistic evolutionists have little wiggle room. The consequences of McGrath's belief that God can, and did, use evolution can be read from Polkinghorne's writings. This entails a ubiquity of death, struggle and misery, and is a Mephistophelian barter that says goodbye, forever, to a revelation of the God who is love and who would use wisdom over happenstance.

McGrath's book is a veiled apologetic for a very pagan and paralogical idea. It also wants the Christian to believe that an atheistic pseudo-scientific explanation of a cosmos emptied of God can somehow be shanghaied into the service of Christianity, without providing an iota of argument as to how it is possible to accomplish this act. In the very least it hubristically implies that atheism doesn't even understand its own ideas.

### References

1. Sober, E., *Philosophy of Biology*, Westview, Boulder, CO, p. 29, 1993. Quoted in: Dembski, W., *Intelligent Design*, IVP, Downers Grove, IL, p. 71, 1999.
2. See Keynes, R., *Darwin, His Daughter, and Human Evolution*, Riverland Books, NY, pp. 47–48, 54, 59, 2002.
3. Grigg, R., Darwinism: it was all in the family: Erasmus Darwin's famous grandson learned early about evolution, *Creation* 26(1):16–18, 2003; <www.answersingenesis.com.au/erasmus>.
4. Polkinghorne, J. *Science and Creation: The Search for Understanding*, SPCK, London, p. 63–64, 1988. Also see: Lovejoy, A.O., *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, pp. 242–287, 1936; Pepper, D., *The Roots of Modern Environmentalism*, Croom Helm, London, p. 71, 1984.

## Paley: still relevant

A review of  
*Natural Theology or the  
Evidences of the Existence  
and Attributes of a Deity*  
by William Paley  
Coachwhip Publications  
Landisville, PA

Jerry Bergman

As Darwin's *Origin of Species* is considered the bible of evolutionary naturalism, likewise William Paley's *Natural Theology* is considered the bible of both Creationism and Intelligent Design. Once required reading in British Universities for several decades, it was a highly influential work for generations.<sup>1</sup> First published in 1802, it has been out of print for many years. Now available in rare book shops only, a copy typically costs hundreds of dollars (if one can be located). Many printings and editions of Paley exist. My copy is the 1835 edition, and is too expensive (and fragile) to study. A 1997 edition, edited by Bill Cooper, was abridged and the language updated.<sup>2</sup> The edition reviewed here is a low-cost, newly-typeset, paper-bound reprint that allows this classic to again be read (and appreciated) in its original form by modern readers. This edition contains a list of print resources that support design arguments grouped by subject (pp. 283–290). It also contains many line drawings and provides an excellent conclusion.

### The importance of Paley

Often attacked by atheists and Darwin supporters alike, few of whom have read the book, Paley's masterpiece is as relevant today as it was 200 years ago. This is in marked contrast to Darwin's work, which is now widely recognized as full of errors, such as his pangenesis claim and Lamarckian



teaching.

Paley's *Natural Theology* inspired a set of eight treatises (10 volumes) published in the 1830s.<sup>3</sup> The set was commissioned in accordance with the Last Will and Testament of the eighth Earl of Bridgewater to illustrate 'the Power, Wisdom, and Goodness of God, as Manifested in the Creation'. The main goal of these volumes, collectively known as the *Bridgewater Treatises*, was to demonstrate God's existence from a careful detailed study of nature.<sup>4</sup> Several of the volumes were 'written by leading scientists of the period, including William Whewell (who coined the term scientist) and William Buckland (one of the period's foremost geologists)'.<sup>4</sup>

It was Paley's *Natural Theology* that greatly impressed Darwin when he was a student at Cambridge. Darwin respected these arguments to the 'highest degree', and even claimed that his study of Paley was the only part of his university training that was of use to educate the mind. He was 'charmed and convinced by the long line of argumentation'. Paley's was also one of the few books that Darwin took with him on his five-year-long voyage aboard the *Beagle*, and Paley's work had, according to Proctor,

'... exercised a profound influence on the early development of his