The Hapless Watchmaker **[1]**

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On Wednesday, renowned evolutionary biologist and new atheist Richard Dawkins sparked outrage [2] by stating that foetuses diagnosed with Down Syndrome should summarily be aborted1. In this article I argue that while Dawkins is being consistent with his beliefs and views of how the world works, he needs to take care when pronouncing value judgements on individuals. I do this primarily by pointing out an awkward truth about naturalistic evolution.

Richard Dawkins has been at the centre of controversy at an increasingly frequent rate. Recently, also on Twitter2 he caused a furore [3] by distinguishing between "bad rape" and "worse rape" [4], thereby implying that there are degrees of rape and, as a logical conclusion, "better" kinds of rape than others. Of course, Christians have been use to bizarre and offensive statements from him for years. As one commentator noted [5], "now that he is attacking Muslims and feminists, the atheist left suddenly discover that he is a bigot".

I must admit that I have not read any of his books, nor his works as a scientist. Anything that I say about that needs to carry that disclaimer. That said, I am going to go on the assumption that he is a good evolutionary biologist and that, on that topic, he knows what he is talking about. I also believe that I have a fair synoptic understanding of his book "The Blind Watchmaker". From what I understand, this book is not primarily an attack on faith and religion3, but explores the beauty and intricacies of biological evolution. Evolution is not like a watchmaker, working on a delicate yet impressively complicated machine, but is a *blind* watchmaker: unable to see what is there and where he is going with his work.

It is in the context of this book that I want to make the main point of this article. I feel that (naturalistic) biologists actually do not do enough to distance themselves from the "design" analogy. I have observed that they sometimes unintentionally stray into using this terminology4. They would correct themselves if it is pointed out, but otherwise would subtly hint at the design of life. To me this is especially jarring when they speak of the driving factors of evolution: survival and reproduction. Everything in a living organism stems from one or more genes. This includes the instincts of survival and reproduction. These are not inherent of any living organism: it is conceivable to think of an organism which does not have the motivation to reproduce, or even sustain itself to survive. Realising this has huge implications, as we now need to admit that the first living organism needed not just any random ordering of very specific molecules, but an ordering of very specific in such a way that the organism *desired* to survive, *could actuate* its own survival, *wanted* to reproduce, and finally, *could* reproduce through some biological process. Having this perspective

should drive home the realisation how staggeringly improbable it is for life to be viable on top of the improbability of it occurring at all. It could very well be that Mars or a planet around Proxima Centaury did at some point produce life, but if it lacked any of the above four things (on top of a host of other vital biological components), that organism would simply have laid in its primordial soup until its quickening left it as suddenly as it had entered it.

When one's entire context and frame of reference is a biosphere in which the senses of self-preservation and reproduction is universal (with, I suppose, the possible exception of pandas), then it is easy to take this fact for granted.

Evolution is not some noble, disabled (blind) person working diligently without (despite) (fore)sight. Rather, the force of evolution is a hunk of flesh, without sight, taste, smell or proprioception; it is deaf and has no nociception; coupled with a lack of equilibrioception and thermoception. It is a mass of biological matter which simply exists and lies on the ground, flailing its limbs around with a lack of understand that it is doing it and what it achieves, knocking over and breaking everything around it. It is from this mess that we get all our biological diversity at which we marvel and say, look at all that beauty and complexity! In short, if we were to compare the process of evolution to a person, it would be exactly the kind of person whose abortion Richard Dawkins would advocate, or whose infanticide Peter Singer would advocate.

So what is the point of all of this? Apart from a new perspective on the improbability of life appearing spontaneously without the intervention of some grand designer, my appeal is for the scientific naturalists to keep their terminology in check. They might argue that they were poisoned during their upbringing by a culture which believed in "design", but the duty of exposing the harsh and unpalatable reality for what it is, is theirs. The fact that any beauty could arise from this hapless "watchmaker" is not something to marvel at: we are to be pitied to think such random arrangements of atoms are beautiful or meaningful in any way. Also, I feel I need to point out that the commonly held standard for "fitness" is, at some level, arbitrary. It therefore is tricky to make a value judgement on an individual member of a species if you bring to the table your preconceptions of what that individual should look like.

Consider two people: Alice and Bob. Alice has a dog who gives birth to a litter of puppies. One of these puppies is born blind. Alice decides that the puppy would have a horrible, unfulfilled life, and that raising a blind puppy would be too much hard work. She decides to euthanise the blind puppy. But when Bob hears about this, he offers to rather adopt the puppy himself. It is hard work for Bob to raise the blind puppy, and it sometimes seems as if other puppies are more active and energetic than his puppy. However, he also knows that his puppy is not *without* energy: the puppy loves sleeping in the afternoon sun, he gets excited with anticipation when he smells his food being prepared, he enjoys walkies (after learning to walk closely behind his master, where he is safe from not walking into obstacles), and he even enjoys playing fetch (with a ball which has a bell inside of it). If one considers that the puppy *can* and *does* find pleasure and enjoyment in many of the things which the other puppies do, then one realises that the argument that the puppy would have a bad life is false. Rather, it is speculation on the *degree* to which it would enjoy life, *measured against a standard held by some* "*other*". But when Bob's puppy contently snuggles underneath his arm, he finds it hard to imagine that it would have been better in any way (whether for him or for the puppy) for the puppy to have been euthanised. In the end, the blind puppy was still essentially good at being a puppy and, upon closer reflection, it turns out the Alice's decision to euthanise the puppy was more about her inconvenience than the actual welfare of the puppy. This simple analogy is easy to extrapolate to the case of a human foetus diagnosed with autism, some physical disability—"even" Down Syndrome.

By advocating the abortion of foetuses diagnosed with Down Syndrome, Dawkins is judging himself to be the "fitter" individual which (motivated by individual and communal survival) can—and should—devour the weaker individual. However, this flies directly in the face of human morality: arguably the most important thing which separates us from "the animals" (even our simian cousins).

With all his ranting and his vitriol, it is becoming increasingly difficult—for me at least—to love Richard Dawkins as a Christian should; he is a sinner in need of Christ, and no more deserving of condemnation than any other person who rejects Jesus. He needs our prayers and kindness and

patience. One thing where Dawkins should be commended, though, is that he is consistent with his worldview: we need to realise that he is being honest about the implications of his atheism (mostly, at least), while other scientific naturalists try to dress up the ugly implications of their worldview. In that sense we need to admire him more than the self-professed Christians who attack him, who belittle him and even threaten him. Whilst God extends His common grace to Richard Dawkins, we are Christians are not to give up on him.

- 1. He later "clarified [6]" that people with Down Syndrome should be killed only before they are born.
- 2. One might think that by now he has released that a medium which only allows communication of 140 characters at once is not the best way to engage in debate and serious discussion.
- 3. Although the premise of that book is essentially to counter the argument of intelligent design in nature.
- 4. I would argue that this betrays exactly how strong the apparent design of life and the universe is.

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