



## THE GOD DELUSION

### I. ON UNDERSTANDING THINGS

We often hear it said that philosophical inquiry is largely rooted in the misuse of words. Unfortunately such a viewpoint has the effect of trivializing philosophical inquiry, which takes it upon itself to examine the most serious life issues we face. Yes, philosophical discussion is invariably conducted by means of words. But when we ask ourselves what “loyalty” or “spirit” or “beauty” is, we’re not merely examining words, we’re exploring some of the most interesting and problematic aspects of living.

One word that we often use and largely take for granted, yet which harbors an array of meanings that might profitably be explored, is the verb “understanding.” What do we mean when we say that we “understand” something?

[Pause here for a moment’s reflection.]

Of the top of my head, I can think of four or five somewhat different meanings.

1) It may be that we understand something when we see how the various parts function, how they contribute to the overall process or effect. We understand something when we see how it works.

I understand a little of how an internal combustion engine works—the gasoline, the compression, the spark, the piston, the camshaft, etc. I understand a little of how a phonograph works—the grooves, the needle, the electric impulses, the amplifier, the woofers and tweeters, etc. I do not understand how a CD player works, though I know that there is a laser bouncing off the vinyl at some point in the process.

2) We sometime say that we understand an event

when we feel we’ve unearthed what caused it. The bridge collapsed because the metal was cracked. The metal cracked because it was corrode by the salt. etc. etc

3) This same sense of “understanding” might also be applied to people, as reflected in the phrase that we have discovered what “makes someone tick.” We understand someone when we can pinpoint the motivation that drives their actions. Yet this equation, character = motivation, is limited in its range of application. Salespeople perhaps make use of it in closing a deal, and we also find ourselves resorting to it when attempting to explain the actions of people we know only slightly but have come to dislike. “He is driven by sheer vanity. Her ambition knows no bounds. All they care about is their stupid little poodle.”

With people we know well, our understanding goes deeper, but also less easy to describe. We celebrate those novelists who can bring a character to life, but most of us would be hard pressed to summons words adequate to describe the affection, stimulation, and wise counsel we receive from our friends, or their endearing quirks, their admirable dedication to their chosen causes and interests, or the brio with which they tackle a challenge or enliven a social event.

Can we be said to understand these people? I think we can.

These types of understanding are not mutually exclusive. It’s possible that we might develop a familiarity with a Haydn string quartet, and come to know how the parts relate to one another—to understand how it “works” as a piece of music. We may feel that with some works of art, our understanding is enhanced by bits of biographical scuttlebutt. We learn what drove the artist to use the images in just that way—we come to understand his or her motives, and therefore, in a sense, what “caused” the work to be shaped the way it is.

But neither of these two ways of looking at a piece will bring us to the heart of a great piece of music. We can arrive at that point only by listening, and sensing, and understanding the “rightness” of the arrangement. Matters of compositional technique fall by the wayside, as do all thought of

“motive” or “cause.” Those who appreciate beauty most fully tap into the same source of energy as did those who created those forms in the first place. At that point we are no longer asking what, how, or why. As we listen we are moved, and we come to appreciate, not conceptually—not in a way we could pass on to others—but viscerally, in way that’s mysterious and deep.

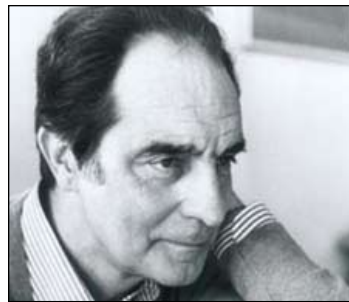
In other words, we understand art in so far as we appreciate it, and feel the rightness of it. All of aesthetics is an attempt to share that feeling with others, to draw a map to the treasure. Lectures are given, TV shows are produced, attempting to put the pieces together, to flesh out the background, to relate the parts to the whole. Although the effort is certainly worthwhile, it is often in vain. We may “get it.” We may not. If we try harder, if we renew our acquaintance with a painting or a film, it may “grow” on us. Then again, maybe not.

Can we say, then, that in appreciating something, we understand it? If we truly appreciate something, do we really need to understand it in any other way?

We have no difficulty accepting the physicist’s idea of dimensions—length, width, height, and duration—and we may be pleasantly stupefied by the thought that there are several more dimensions lurking in the recesses of time and space, dimly intimated by the logical requirements of mathematical equations that lie beyond our ken to fathom. Yet the word “dimension,” used as a singular but all-encompassing adjective, also refers to something a good deal more subtle. When we say that a wine has great “dimension,” we aren’t referring to its width, length, or height. Similarly, when we call an actor’s performance “one-dimensional,” we are referring not to the space the performance has taken up on the stage (which would be a straight line, if the performance were truly one-dimensional), but to depths of character which the actor has somehow failed to plumb. I picked up the weight of this common expression, “dimension,” from a crusty old priest named Father Stockel at a Catholic retreat, who used it to differentiate between flighty, inconsequential people, and those other people who were somehow engaged in life in a serious way.

This second notion of “dimension” may be said to be metaphorical, I suppose, in so far as the reality to which it refers cannot be measured—although the word dimension derives from the word for measurement. Similarly, we often describe something as having body, fiber, atmosphere, texture, gravity, or resonance, without thinking carefully about what it is we’re referring to.

Let me suggest that it would be well worth our while to think about more carefully about these things, which are the qualities that bring character and dimension to things. Such an exercise will free us from the unpleasant apprehension that understanding must be equated with that morose and weighty type of depth that is often more distressing than illuminating.



One of my favorite treatises on aesthetics is *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, by Italo Calvino. In these lectures Calvino examines five qualities—lightness,

quickness, exactitude, visibility, and multiplicity—attempting to show what part they play in artistic creation. His claims for these qualities is not exclusive. For example, he begins his first essay with the comment:

*I will devote my first lecture to the opposition between lightness and weight, and will uphold the value of lightness. This does not mean that I consider the virtues of weight any less compelling, but simply that I have more to say about lightness.*

In point of fact, Calvino is not a weighty writer, and the book itself is perhaps more frothy than profound. But it has the great merit of being clear and quick, and Calvino’s efforts to focus our intently on particular qualities, one by one, is both admirable and rare, in an age when so many efforts are directed to plumbing the depths and unearthing a single overarching cause, motive, formula or equation for everything.

We do not understand things, or people, by viewing them in the light of simple-minded concepts that strip them of their character and dimension.

It seems to me, on the contrary, that understanding takes us in the opposite direction, drawing us toward the appreciation of nuance, detail, and the relations between things, a pursuit which may lead us on its time to a sort of inarticulate love field, wherein we come to feel comfortable, and perhaps might even wish to abide.

It appears I'm getting carried away, yet what I am describing is the opposite of mysticism. I suppose a theological component might be unearthed in it somewhere.

## II. The God Delusion

I began to think seriously about this question, "What does it mean to understand something?" as a result of reading Christopher Dawkins's book *The God Delusion*.

Dawkins makes a number of valid points about the pretensions and inconsistencies of organized religions in the course of his critique, and he also has some interesting things to say about recent discoveries in scientific fields, yet I finished reading the book with the idea that he simply doesn't understand things very well.

This is made evident by the pseudo-scientific way he has set up his analysis. He proposes to examine the hypothesis that

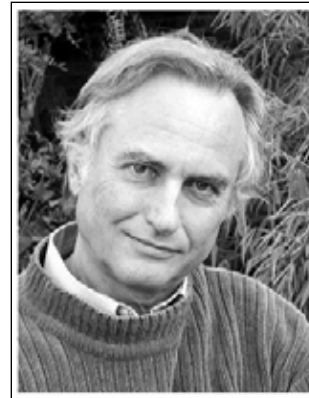
*There exists a superhuman, supernatural intelligence who deliberately designed and created the universe and everything in it, including us.*

And he comes to the conclusion that the evidence cannot support such a hypothesis. He goes on to suggest, following this line of reasoning, that anyone who finds the concept "God" useful in fleshing out a worldview must be delusional. Hence the title of his book.

But it seems to me that Dawkins has not given us a very sophisticated definition of who or what God is. There are other ways of defining "God," and this fact rendered his final conclusion a bit premature. He himself must be dimly aware of how narrowly he

has set his sights, for he dismisses both Confucianism and Buddhism as perhaps not religions at all, but "ethical systems or philosophies of life." Clearly, to a man whose guiding purpose is merely to dismiss the "designer God" that lies at the root of much religion, those religions and philosophies that do not have a "designer God" will be of little interest. More than that, they will ruin his case.

Dawkins is a well-known atheist, and he has met up with more than his share of Bible-thumping crackpots in his day. This may explain why his understanding of religious belief is so superficial. (Many adult who have liberated themselves from the rigors or orthodoxy find themselves in the same boat.) And there is both entertainment and illumination galore in his analysis of the theological arguments



for God's existence set out by Aquinas, Anselm, and other famous clerics of the Middle Ages. Among other fascinating asides with which the book is laced, he reminds us that recent experimental studies on the efficacy of prayer have failed to expose

the slightest benefit to be gotten from it, and offers a humorous suggestion of how comedian Bob Newhart might have discussed this prayer-research with his maker. Occasionally his desire to come up with zingers carries him too far, and at one point, after highlighting the numerous character defects of the Hebrew God in shopping-list fashion, he refers to him as "arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction."

At one point Dawkins defines his own belief, rather unimpressively, in the following terms: "I cannot know for certain but I think God is very improbable, and I live my life on the assumption that he is not there."

To which the believer might reply, "Perhaps he is not there. Perhaps he is here." If we keep in mind the differences outlined about between understanding the causes of things, and getting to know the nature and reality of things, this remark might have

somewhat more meaning.

Though Dawkins himself is obsessed with causes, his own thought is heavily laden with spiritual import of a different kind.

Let me give you a few examples.

His “political” argument may be summarized in a single principle: in mature societies, respect for persons, whatever their beliefs (or lack of belief), must stand above the respect we grant to religious doctrines themselves. This is a sound and admirable principle, but it happens to rest on the doctrine of the sanctity of the individual soul. This is a religious principle. You won’t find many references to it in *The Origin of Species*.

In an attempt to explain how the mind, and even religious sentiment itself, has contributed to our evolution, he writes, “Each of us builds, inside our head, a model of the world in which we find ourselves.” He goes on to acknowledge that this Model may well contain some means of addressing and coping with our sense of beauty and fellow-feeling. The “software” we use to create this model “was constructed and debugged by Natural Selection...” he asserts. Yet lo and behold, he adds, “As an added bonus, our brains turn out to be powerful enough to accommodate a much richer world model than the mediocre utilitarian one that our ancestors needed in order to survive. Art and science are runaway manifestations of this bonus.”

This “added bonus”—the vast disparities between the utilitarian faculties we need to survive and the bountiful energies and imagination we have at our disposal—is rather difficult to account for by reference to successive adaptations to the environment.

Am I suggesting that God “gave us” these gifts? Not in so many words—although many people find that it’s the only way to adequately describe how lucky they feel to be exuberantly alive. I am making the more modest suggestion that biological theories can take us only so far in our inquiry into life’s mysteries, because, and Dawkins own analysis makes plain, they are incapable of accounting for the most unusual and important pieces of evidence. Call it The Natural Selection Delusion.

It might even be argued that Dawkins himself is suggesting that these gifts were give to us

by a God—the God called Natural Selection. This phrase—Natural Selection—refers to a process by which a God (the one we’re referring to as Nature) selects organisms that have the best design features, and grants to them greater reproductive success than their less sophisticated fellows. But does this God called Nature exist? I don’t think so. It seems to me, in fact, that the idea that Nature differentiates between creatures on an individual level, with the goal in mind of preserving only the best of the bunch, is more absurd than anything you’ll find in the Old Testament.

Exasperated readers may exclaim, “It’s just a manner of speaking!” Of course. Yet in many cases God-talk is also just a manner of speaking. We need to be precise in our choice of expressions. The concept of Natural Selection, by placing the organism in a passive role with regard to evolution, misrepresents what actually takes place.

What really happens is that individual organisms enjoy living, and wish to keep on living, and to extend and expand their lives, albeit at the expense of other organisms. Those who have been endowed with superior energy or some other attribute that contributes to their well-being, are likely to be more successful at passing on those sterling qualities to future generations. Such qualities eventually come to define a norm in the species that is more complex, more well-developed, than the typical member of that species had been hitherto.

Individuals are not given much emphasis in evolutionary biology, where it is the “species” that dominates discussions, but the active agent in the development of life in the universe has always been the individual creature striving to prosper, to advance, to develop.

The mythological character of Natural Selection crops up repeatedly in *The God Delusion*. In the passage quoted above he refers to the human software that “was constructed and debugged by Natural Selection.” At another point he refers to “the irrationality mechanisms that were originally built into the brain by selection...” Those are Dawkins’s words, not mine. But selection doesn’t build things into the brain, any more than God tinkers at his workbench crafting frogs and leeches.

Biologists know a good deal less than they would care to admit about how life develops. This shortcoming doesn't necessitate a return to the Biblical God of our ancestors. Ever since Plato's time a good portion of philosophical speculation has been focused on the issue of limning the commonly-felt indwelling surge of energy—call it love, emotion, idealism, a vital spark. Indeed, this zone of experience can be felt throughout the exuberant pages of *The God Delusion*, though Dawkins has never really come to grips with it. Never understood it. Never understood himself.

One further case in point will have to do. In addressing the issue of aesthetic perception, the crux of Dawkins reasoning is as follows:

*Obviously Beethoven's late quartets are sublime. So are Shakespeare's sonnets. They are sublime if God is there and sublime if he isn't. They do not prove the existence of God; they prove the existence of Beethoven and of Shakespeare.*

Yet Dawkins never addresses the issue of what the experience of the sublime entails. When we use that word, we're referring to a sense of overreaching awe, perhaps tinged with terror. Beauty also shows itself in other, less dramatic guises. We experience such things not only when we're in the presence of a work by Beethoven or Shakespeare, but also when we're watching a sunrise or attending a wedding. Many artists and scientists experience a sense of the sublime in the act of using their creative faculties, and they often describe such experiences in religious terms. If you've ever watched a Country Music Awards ceremony, you'll know just what I mean. And after all, Beethoven's favorite book was *Betrachtungen uber die Werke Gottes in der Natur*, (Observations Concerning God's Works in Nature)

Am I saying that the experience of beauty, or the exercise of creativity, "proves" that God exists. I guess I am, though at this point it might be more fitting simply to assert that the experience of beauty is inexplicable without recourse to value-laden expressions

that carry a spiritual dimension. Dawkins argues that the logic behind such arguments is "never spelled out." In fact many, many books have been written spelling it out at length. Glancing over at the shelf I spot *Real Presences* by the polymath George Steiner, and *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* by the Thomist Jacques Maritain; there we have *A God Within* by the biologist Rene Dubos, and over there I spy the poet Czeslaw Milosz's *Visions from San Francisco Bay*, which contains some trenchant thoughts about aesthetic experience. The science of aesthetics has a long and glorious history, though Dawkins might do well to begin his education with that eighteenth-century landmark, Kant's *Critique of Judgment*.

Perhaps Dawkins might have given closer attention to the theory espoused by the eminent biologist Steven Jay Gould, for whom he obviously has a good deal of respect, of "non-overlapping magisteria." Gould's theory, in brief, is that scientists study particular things and derive suitable explanations for how or why they behave the way they do. Theologians and philosophers probe such issues as why anything exists at all, rather than nothing. The two fields of inquiry, in Gould's view, are categorically distinct.

Faced with this straightforward distinction, we might expect Dawkins to demonstrate, with characteristic scientific brio, that the two spheres are not, in fact, mutually exclusive, or that the difference between the two types of question is in fact illusory. He does no such thing. If he had done, he would have been exercising a command of metaphysics that it's pretty clear he does not possess. Instead, he merely tells a few anecdotes about his undergraduate years at Oxford, muses on whether philosophers would be comfortable being grouped into the same category as theologians, asks a rhetorical question, "What expertise can theologians bring to deep cosmological questions that scientists cannot?" and asks himself why a chaplain would be better able to deal with such questions than a gardener or a chef. Several times in the course of a page or two he baldly questions whether theology can be considered a subject for inquiry at all.

Dawkins own book of a short-course in the *via*

*negativa* of theological thinking. But he lacks the background to pull it off. Not only the background in metaphysics, but also, it would seem, the background in those personal experiences upon which we build our notions of what life, at its best, both demands and promises.

### III

A friend of mine who's going through a troubled patch asked me the other day if I believed in God—not in the sneering or peevish tone, but as if she were actually grappling with these questions and perhaps hoping that I would say Yes. I said Yes. She asked me what kind of God. It was not the moment to enter into an extended disquisition on the niceties of theology, so I simply told her I was a Deist. Perhaps she went home and looked it up in the dictionary. That's what I did.

To call oneself a Deist is not to say much. My understanding is that there are several kinds. Am I a Shaftesbury Deist? Yes. A d'Holbach Deist? No. I believe in a benevolent God whose spirit moves the benevolence in all of us, though a sort of participatory energy that I suspect the neo-Platonists have explored more fully than I ever will, or feel the need to. I also believe in the Navaho Gods that inspired the magnificent prayer that begins "Walk in beauty." Even that little phrase says a lot, I think. When you're browbeating your local librarian because you've received a ten-cent fine for a book you seem to recall having returned, ask yourself if you're walking in beauty. (Probably not.)

On the other hand, I do not believe in that Deist Watchmaker who designed the universe and then sauntered off to the parlor to play whist. No, the universe is a sublime work of art in the making, and there are still plenty of lumps in it. Nor do I believe in a God that watches over us attentively, making sure that we never come to harm—the is far too much evidence to the contrary—though I do find myself addressing such a God occasionally, usually when a friend is in real trouble, or I'm dangling from the end of a rope. I believe that there is quite a bit to be learned on these subjects in the Zen koans of the Old and New Testaments, though

I see no reason that we should limit ourselves to such texts.

As far as science is concerned, I find it easy to see the validity of the positions so admirably established by David Hume in the eighteenth century, that the law of cause and effect is impossible to demonstrate scientifically, and that our knowledge of both ourselves and the world at large is based entirely on faith. This serves to explain why the understanding arrived at by means of scientific hypotheses are very useful, but seldom really illuminating.

I do not believe, as some folks do, that there is a reason for everything. If there were, then it would follow that personal freedom is a delusion. I believe that some events have more value than others, and that some events are mere accidents—and that some have a negative value. They destroy things. Good things. It is our mission to differentiate between these various types of events and try to emulate the best of them, so that we involve ourselves and everyone around us in fewer unfortunate accidents and more nourishing, delightful, and mind-expanding events.

