Darwin, Mind and Meaning

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According to the English philosopher John Lucas, *philosophical naturalism* is now the orthodoxy of the Western intellectual world. This is plausible; it is at any rate one of the current academic orthodoxies (another, perhaps, is the sort of creative anti-realism and relativism with respect to truth associated with certain brands of post modernism). Perhaps the easiest way to understand naturalism to see it as the view that there no such person as God (no all powerful, all knowing and wholly good person who has created the world and has created human beings in his image), nor anything at all *like* God. The naturalist--the contemporary naturalist, at any rate--typically adds a high view of science, seeing it as the only possible source of our salvation.

Daniel Dennett's *Darwin's Dangerous Idea* is a big (very big), bright exploration and defense of naturalism--or at least of one aspect of it. In several areas it is authoritative; it is written with passion and power; I wouldn't be at all surprised if this book acquires the status of a minor (or maybe major) classic among statements of naturalism. Dennett tries to do at least three things: (1) explain Darwin's dangerous idea and show how the world looks if you take it really seriously, (2) *argue* for this idea, or perhaps *defend* it, or perhaps argue that it is at any rate *possibly* true, or perhaps *persuade* us that it is true, or possibly true (it is hard to tell which), and (3) buck up and admonish timid, half-hearted naturalists who are unwilling to accept the full implications of their position, thus falling into false consciousness.

Dennett doesn't confine himself to matters just of theoretical interest. He sees serious religion as steadily dwindling with the progress of science, but suggests that we should keep a few Baptists and other fundamentalists around in something like cultural zoos (no doubt with sizable moats to protect the rest of us right-thinking nonfundamentalists). We should preserve a few Baptists for the sake of posterity--but not, he says, at just any cost. "Save the Baptists", says he, "but not *by all means* [Dennett's emphasis]. Not if it means tolerating the deliberate misinforming of children about the natural world." Save the Baptists, all right, but only if they promise not to misinform their children by teaching them "that 'Man' is not a product of evolution by natural selection" and other blatantly objectionably views. But what if they *do* insist on teaching these heresies to their children? (Baptists will be Baptists, after all.) Will we be obliged to remove Baptist children from their parents' noxious influence? Should we put barbed wire around those zoos, and check to see if perhaps there is room for them in northern Siberia? [1] Dennett doesn't say, but it would be interesting to hear his answer.

There is much to be said for Dennett's book. It contains a wealth of enthusiastic information about Darwinian thinking generally, as well as many detailed explanations of particular Darwinian theories. There is an excellent explanation

and development of the central notion of Design Space--the space of all possible organic designs--and some of the notions (adaptive topology) in its neighborhood. There is also a wealth of detail on topics only tangentially connected with the main lines of the argument: an excursion into spandrels and medieval architecture, a fair number of etymologies, accounts of things Dennett has thought and said, anecdotes about famous figures in the evolution of evolutionary thought, and much more. The book is well written, if a bit windy. It is fun to read, although some may be put off by its prolixity (no classical restraint and economy here), by frequent and sometimes inexplicable digressions, and by a certain pervasive tendentiousness, or perhaps a certain list towards demagoguery. [2] There is also something to be said *against* the book. In particular, although Dennett purveys his wares with religious fervor (and in fact his wares *are*, from an Augustinian point of view, broadly religious), his forays into philosophical theology and philosophy of religion are at best underwhelming. To say that they do not inspire confidence would be colossal understatement.

The Idea Itself

First, then, what *is* Darwin's Dangerous Idea and why is it dangerous? As we'd expect, it includes the notion that all of the world's creatures came into being by way of evolution--descent with modification. All contemporary creatures are linked by genealogical ties, so that any two living creatures you pick--you and the summer squash in your garden, for example--are really cousins under the skin (rind). But it involves much more than that. Dennett begins the book by recalling the words of one of his favorite childhood camp fire songs, "Tell me Why":

> Tell me why the stars do shine,
> Tell me why the ivy twines,
> Tell my why the sky's so blue.
> Then I will tell you why I love you.

He goes on to quote the last verse "Because God made the stars to shine , . . . Because God made you, that's why I love you." (He even goes so far as to provide the music in an appendix, helpfully adding that "The harmony line is usually sung by the higher voices an octave above the melody"). The image of the young Dan Dennett singing "Tell Me Why", moistened eyes rapturously closed, is no doubt sweet and touching, but what is his point?

As follows. Darwin's dangerous idea, says Dennett, is really the idea that the living world with all of its beauty and wonder, all of its marvelous and ingenious design, was not created by God or anything at all like God, but produced by blind, unconscious, mechanical, algorithmic processes such as natural selection--a process, he says, which creates "design out of chaos without the aid of Mind." The idea is that mind, intelligence, foresight, planning, design are all latecomers in the universe, themselves created by the mindless process of natural selection. The idea is that human beings are the outcome of a mindless process; they are not designed or planned for by God or anyone else. And this idea is dangerous, he thinks, because if we accept it, we are forced to reconsider all our childhood and childish ideas about God, morality, value, the meaning of life, and the like.

Christians, of course, believe that God has always existed; so mind has always existed, and was involved in the production and planning of whatever there is. In fact many have thought it *impossible* that mind should be produced just from unthinking matter; as John Locke puts it, ". . . it is as impossible to conceive that ever pure incogitative matter should produce a thinking intelligent Being, as that nothing should of itself produce Matter." [3] Darwin's dangerous idea is that this notion is not merely not impossible; it is the sober truth of the matter.

What we have so far is really just an endorsement of perennial naturalism or atheism; Democritus and Lucretius would have agreed. What is new or special about Dennett's version? First, Dennett sees that Darwin's evolutionary ideas (in particular natural selection) give the naturalist a genuine suggestion as to how it could be that all the wonders of the living world should arise without divine creative activity or guidance and orchestration. Prior to the advent and development of Darwinism, the naturalist (Hume, e.g.,) had no answer to the question "Well then, how *did* all this enormous variety of flora and fauna, with all its apparent design, get here? Where did all that design and variety come from?" But after Darwin there was an answer to the question--not a satisfactory answer, perhaps, but at least a viable story. According to Richard Dawkins, "Darwin made it possible to be an intellectually fulfilled atheist." [4] I doubt that it is possible to be an intellectually fulfilled atheist, but Darwinism does confer upon the naturalist a possible answer to an otherwise embarrassing question. As Dennett puts it, "Here, then, is Darwin's dangerous idea: the algorithmic level [the level of natural selection] *is* the level that best accounts for the speed of the antelope, the wing of the eagle, the shape of the orchid, the diversity of species, and all the other occasions for wonder in the world of nature." He might have added as well: our moral sense, our religious sensibilities, our artistic strivings, and our ability to do science. Much of the book is an effort to show just how well this algorithmic level of explanation does in fact work, and what a fine answer to the above question Darwin has put into the naturalist's hands.

Well, how does Dennett try to show that this is indeed a fine answer? First he insists that all of life *really has* been produced by evolution. Indeed, he adds that if you so much as doubt this, you are inexcusably ignorant: "To put it bluntly but fairly, anyone today who doubts that the variety of life on this planet was produced by a process of evolution is simply ignorant--inexcusably ignorant . . . ." Note that you don't have to *reject* evolution in order to qualify as inexcusably ignorant: all you have to do is harbor a doubt or two. You study the evidence with great care, but are finally doubtful that God did it that way: according to Dennett, you are then inexcusably ignorant. Here Dennett is stealing a march on Richard Dawkins, who wrote in a *New York Times* book review that, "It is absolutely safe to say that if you meet someone who claims not to believe in evolution, that person is ignorant, stupid or insane (or wicked, but I'd rather not consider that)". I say Dennett goes Dawkins one better here, because at least Dawkins gives us skeptics a *choice*. We could be ignorant, *or* stupid, *or* insane or maybe even wicked. But Dennett is made of sterner stuff: he gives us no options at all, and in fact plumps for *two* of Dawkins' possibilities: we evolutionary skeptics are *both* ignorant *and* wicked (inexcusable). Apparently evolution is like the law:

ignorance of it is no excuse. Here Dennett and Dawkins remind one of a certain kind of religious personality with which we are all too familiar: if you disagree with them, you are not only wrong, but wicked, and should be punished, if not in this world then certainly in the next.

Of course Dennett's claim is not just that all the marvels of contemporary life have been produced by descent with modification, but that this has happened without the aid of God or anyone (or anything) at all like God; it all happened just by the grace of mindless natural selection. Life itself originated just by way of the regularities of physics and chemistry (through a sort of extension of natural selection); and natural selection has produced language and mind, including our artistic, moral, religious and intellectual proclivities. Many have found this claim at least extremely doubtful; is it really so much as possible that language, say, or consciousness should have been produced by processes of this sort? One of the most striking characteristics of thought is intentionality, *aboutness*. We can think about things of all sorts, some very far removed from us. We can think about ancient Sparta, the Big Bang, the angel Gabriel, logical theorems, moral principles, possible states of affairs, God himself and much else: could this ability really have come about (starting from bacteria, say) just by way of mindless natural selection? Dennett doesn't really show, of course, that this *did* happen, or even that it is possible that he did. His basic ploy is just to assert (loudly and slowly, as it were) that these things *must have* happened, providing an accompanying blizzard of scientific hypotheses and speculations (e.g., about what happens in various parts of the brain when you remember, speak, perceive, etc.). This rich brew of contemporary evolutionary thought and hypothesis on these topic is very interesting, and Dennett has a first rate grasp of the vast relevant literature. But (for example) none of his suggestions (drawn from cognitive science and elsewhere) really addresses the question whether it is even *possible* that mind and intention should have arisen in this way; they just *assume* that it is. [5] These parts of the book contain a good deal of unbridled speculation as well as much very energetic hand waving.

A second project of the book, as I said, is to buck up flagging naturalists. Dennett distinguishes what he calls *cranes* from *skyhooks*:

> Let us understand that a *skyhook* is a "mind-first" force or power or process, an exception to the principle that all design, and apparent design, is ultimately the result of mindless, motiveless mechanicity. A *crane*, in contrast, is a subprocess or special feature of a design process that can be demonstrated to permit the local speeding up of the basic, slow process of natural selection, *and* that can be demonstrated to be itself the predictable (or retrospectively explicable) product of the basic process.

An example of a crane would be *sexual reproduction*, by virtue of which, says Dennett, organisms "can move through Design Space at a much greater speed than that achieved by organisms that reproduce asexually." On the other hand, God's specially creating life, or mind, or human beings, or sparrows, or whatever would be a skyhook, as would be any unspecified or unknown process (*elan vital*, e.g.) that takes up the slack left by alleged deficiencies in Darwinian evolution.

Now Dennett thinks there are many who have quite properly given up childhood religion and reject the idea that there is such a person as God, who endorse the idea that all living things including ourselves have somehow arisen by way of evolution, who pay at least lip service to Darwin's dangerous idea, but who nonetheless don't or can't embrace its full implications. They find themselves doubting that Darwinian evolution can really explain or account for such things as the development of the human brain, for example, or language, or consciousness. They don't necessarily doubt that we have somehow evolved, but they doubt or deny that Darwinian mechanisms are sufficient; there must have been something else. Such people, Dennett thinks, should be ashamed of themselves. They are soft on religion, or at least lust after skyhooks; and in so doing they display a sort of failure of nerve, a false consciousness. Lusting after skyhooks is a bad thing, and much of the book is devoted to disapproving discussion of those who (he thinks) do--Noam Chomsky, Roger Penrose, John Searle, and especially Stephen Gould. [6] (Of course the ambivalence of these thinkers may be due to something other than bad faith or faint-heartedness; perhaps they are inclined to accept Darwin's dangerous idea, but also see some of its implications as giving serious occasion for pause, rather than as new discoveries to be enthusiastically embraced.)

Why Believe it?

One question that naturally occurs to a reader of the book: why does Dennett think we should *accept* Darwin's dangerous idea? Concede that it is audacious, revolutionary, anti-medieval, quintessentially contemporary, with it, and has that nobly stoical hair shirt quality Bertrand Russell said he liked in his beliefs: still, why should we believe it? I *think* Dennett means to attempt an answer to this question (and isn't merely preaching to the naturalistic choir). He repeats several times that believing in an "anthropomorphic" God is childish, or irrational, or anyway nowadays out of the question. What he sees as an anthropomorphic God, furthermore, is precisely what traditional Christians believe in--a God whom we human beings resemble by virtue of being *persons*, the sorts of beings who are capable of belief and knowledge, who have aims and ends, and who act on their beliefs in such a way as to try to accomplish those aims.

Well, why is this childish? Dennett's answer, as far as I can make it out, is that the traditional arguments for the existence of God don't work. He mentions only *one* argument, the so-called argument from design: the universe and many of its parts give the appearance of having been designed by an extraordinarily knowledgeable and powerful designer, so probably there is an Intelligent Designer. Dennett thinks Darwinian considerations suffice to dispose of this argument; they show how it could be that all this apparent design in the living world arises without the aid of an intelligent Designer. Nowadays, however, the most popular version of the argument from design involves the exquisite fine tuning of the laws or regularities of nature. The fundamental constants of physics--the speed of light, the gravitational constant, the strength of the weak and strong nuclear forces--must apparently have values that fall within an extremely narrow range for life to be so much as possible. If these values had been even minutely different (if, for

example, the gravitational constant had been different in even the most minuscule degree) habitable planets would not have developed and life (at least life at all like ours) would not have been possible. This suggests or makes plausible the thought that the world was designed or created by a Designer who intended the existence of living creatures and eventually rational, intelligent, morally significant creatures. Like its 17th and 18th century predecessors, this version of the argument is probabilistic rather than deductive: given the nature of the world, it is likely that it was fashioned by an intelligent Designer. The premises don't *entail* the conclusion, but are supposed to give you some reason to accept it.

Dennett's rejoinder to the argument is that *possibly*, "there has been an evolution of worlds (in the sense of whole universes) and the world we find ourselves in is simply one among countless others that have existed throughout all eternity." And given infinitely many universes, Dennett thinks, all the possible distributions of values over the cosmological constants would have been tried out; [7] as it happens, we find ourselves in one of those universes where the constants are such as to allow for the development of intelligent life (where else?).

Well, perhaps all this is logically possible (and then again perhaps not). As a response to a probabilistic argument, however, it's pretty anemic. How would this kind of reply play in Tombstone, or Dodge City? "Waal, shore, Tex, I *know* it's a leetle mite suspicious that every time I deal I git four aces and a wild card, but have you considered the following? Possibly there is an infinite succession of universes, so that for any possible distribution of possible poker hands, there is a universe in which that possibility is realized; we just happen to find ourselves in one where someone like me always deals himself only aces and wild cards without ever cheating. So put up that shootin' arn and set down 'n shet yore yap, ya dumb galoot." Dennett's reply shows at most ('at most', because that story about infinitely many universes is doubtfully coherent) what was never in question: that the premises of this argument from apparent design do not entail its conclusion. But of course that was conceded from the beginning: it is presented as a *probabilistic* argument, not one that is deductive valid. Furthermore, since an argument can be good even if it is not deductively valid, you can't refute it just by pointing out that it isn't deductively valid. You might as well reject the argument for evolution by pointing out that the evidence for evolution doesn't *entail* that it ever took place, but only makes that fact likely. You might as well reject the evidence for the earth's being round by pointing out that there are possible worlds in which we have all the evidence we *do* have for the earth's being round, but in fact the earth is flat. Whatever the worth of this argument from design, Dennett really fails to address it.

But there is a more important question here that Dennett completely ignores. As I say, he seems to think one could be a sensible believer in God only on the basis of some *argument*, something like one of the traditional theistic arguments. But why think a thing like that? Why think you need an argument to be rational in believing in God? There are plenty of other things we rationally accept without argument--that there has been a past, for example, or that there are other people, or an external world, or that our cognitive faculties are reasonably reliable. Moreover, one lesson to be learned from the history of modern philosophy from

Descartes to Hume and Reid is that there probably *aren't* any good arguments for these things--but we are still perfectly rational in accepting them. Couldn't the same be true for belief in God? Still further, Christian thinkers such as Aquinas, Calvin, Jonathan Edwards (not to mention St. Paul) and many others have held that belief in God and in the more specific truths of Christianity is rationally justifiable, all right, but need not be accepted on the basis of such arguments. Still further yet, this very question has been at the heart of contemporary philosophy of religion (right here in the US, where Dennett lives) for at least the last 20 years or so. [8] But Dennett totally ignores the question, blithely assuming that belief in God is rationally justifiable only if it is accepted on the basis of argument, or at least only if there *is* good argument for it.

I say Christian thinkers going all the way back have claimed Christian truths need not be accepted on the basis of 'rational argument' in order to be intellectually or rationally justifiable. On what basis then? Suppose we think about the cognitive or intellective faculties involved in science: they would include perception, memory, and what we could call 'rational intuition', the faculty whereby we know mathematical and logical truths. Use the term 'reason' to refer to these faculties (perception, memory, rational intuition, whatever else is employed in science) together; then what Aquinas, Calvin and most of the rest of the Christian tradition have held is that the truths of Christianity don't have to be (and probably can't be) proved on the basis of reason in order to be rationally acceptable. For there are *other* sources of knowledge in addition to reason: there are also (to put things Calvin's way) the *Sensus Divinitatis*, and *faith*, which is a response to the Internal Testimony of the Holy Spirit. It is by virtue of *these* sources of knowledge that one knows the truths of faith, such truths as that God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself. One position a Christian might hold on evolution, then, is that one knows by faith that (contrary to Darwin's dangerous idea) God created the living world in one way or another, and by reason (science) that he might have done it or probably did do it by way of evolution. But what about the origin of life itself? Here the salient fact is the absolutely enormous difficulty in conceiving of some way in which this might possibly have happened just by way of the regularities of physics and chemistry. A Christian or other theist, therefore, might sensibly conclude that God did something out of the ordinary here, specially creating life.

Dennett notes this possibility, but makes a most extraordinary reply. He quotes Richard Dawkins:

> This is a transparently feeble argument, indeed it is self-defeating. Organized complexity is the thing we are having difficulty explaining. Once we are allowed simply to postulate organized complexity, if only the organized complexity of the DNA/protein replicating engine, it is relatively easy to invoke it as a generator of yet more organized complexity . . . . But of course any God capable of intelligently designing something as complex as the DNA/protein replicating machine must have been at least as complex and organized as the machine itself. [9]

Dennett apparently considers this a master stroke: "Dawkins' retort to the theorist who would call on God to jump-start the evolution process is an unrebuttable

refutation, as devastating today as when Philo used it to trounce Cleanthes in Hume's *Dialogues* two centuries earlier." I am sorry to say that it doesn't seem to me to be a masterstroke at all. Dawkins' retort is neither unrebuttable, nor devastating, nor even relevant; it irrelevantly addresses a claim not at issue. Dawkins accuses theists of giving a *circular explanation*. They set out to explain organized complexity (e.g., mind); they then propose as an explanatory hypothesis that there is an uncreated Eternal Mind who created everything else; but they stupidly overlook the fact that this Eternal Mind would be (naturally enough) a mind, and would have to think thoughts complex enough to match the complexity of what it creates. [10] So they set out to *explain* organized complexity, but absently-mindedly just *assume* or postulate it.

That would be pretty absent-mined, all right, but of course theists do no such thing. For first, they aren't here trying to explain the existence of *organized complexity*, but rather the existence of life on earth. And secondly, they don't *postulate* the existence of God, as if this were a scientific hypothesis of some kind. They don't typically propose the existence of God (let alone other characteristic Christian doctrines, such as Trinity, Incarnation, Atonement) as a kind of *hypothesis*, designed to explain organized complexity or other phenomena. They don't believe in God because God's existence and activity is a good hypothesis , a good explanation of organized complexity in the world. When God spoke to Moses from the burning bush, Moses didn't say, "Hey, look at that weird bush! It's on fire but isn't burning up! And listen to those sounds coming out of it! What's the best explanatory hypothesis I can think of? Perhaps there is an all-knowing, all-powerful wholly good being who created the world, and he is addressing me from that bush. Yes, that must be it, that's a good explanation of the phenomena." Christians do not reason as follows: "What is the best explanation for all that organized complexity and the rest of what we see about us? Well, let's see, perhaps there is an omniscient, omnipotent, wholly good being who created the world. Yes that's it; and perhaps this being is one of three persons, the other two being his divine son and a third person proceeding from the first two (yet there are not three Gods but one); the second person became incarnate, suffered, was crucified, and died, thus atoning for our sins and making it possible for us to have life and have it more abundantly. Right; that's got to be it; that's a dandy explanation of the facts." What Christian would reason like that? Hardly any. Rather, the traditional Christian thinks she knows these things by way of *faith* and its correlate, divine revelation through divinely inspired Scripture and/or the teaching of the church, the body of Christ. She doesn't, of course, claim that these teachings constitute the best scientific *explanation* of some phenomena, anymore than we believe that there has been a past because we think this is a good scientific explanation of such present phenomena as wrinkled faces, dusty books, rusted automobiles and crumbling mountains. (Of course once she knows, as she thinks, that God has created the heavens and the earth she can use that fact to explain what might otherwise be inexplicable.) Dawkins and Dennett make a wholly unjustified, unargued, and implausible assumption about Christian teachings: that they are really proposed and held as a sort of science, an effort to explain such things, e.g., as that there is a great deal of organized complexity and

variety and apparent design in the world. Looked at as a scientific hypothesis designed to explain organized complexity, Christian doctrines are perhaps wanting--perhaps almost as wanting as science is, looked at as religion, as a way of coming to be in the right relationship with God.

Now Dennett notes that believers in God have often claimed that there are sources of knowledge in addition to reason. His riposte, once more, is monumentally inadequate:

> The philosopher Ronald de Sousa once memorably described philosophical theology as "intellectual tennis without a net," and I readily allow that I have indeed been assuming without comment or question up to now that the net of rational judgment was up. We can lower it if you really want to. It's your serve. Whatever you serve, suppose I rudely return service as follows: What you say implies that God is a ham sandwich wrapped in tinfoil. That's not much of a God to worship!"

Well, probably not, but what prompts Dennett to bring up this miserable ham sandwich in the first place? What is his point? It's not easy to tell. The topic is the claim on the part of some (most) Christians that they have a source of knowledge or information about the world in addition to reason. Is Dennett claiming that anyone who makes such a claim is carrying on as irrationally as Dennett would be if he launched that ham sandwich zinger? I think so; further down the same page he says: " . . . think about whether you really want to abandon reason when reason is on your side." Then follows a tale about how you are sightseeing in a foreign land, your loved one is killed, and, at the trial, the judge is swayed more strongly by testimonies (from the killer's kinsmen) to the fine character of the accused than by the testimony of eyewitnesses who saw him commit the crime: that would be unreasonable and you wouldn't like it, would you? He goes on:

> Would you be willing to be operated on by a surgeon who tells you that whenever a little voice in him tells him to disregard his medical training he listens to the little voice? I know it passes in polite company to let people have it both ways. . . . But we're seriously trying to get at the truth here, and if you think that this common but unspoken understanding about faith is anything better than socially useful obfuscation to avoid mutual embarrassment and loss of face, then either you have seen much more deeply into this issue that any philosopher has (for none has come up with a good defense for this) or you are kidding yourself.

But philosophers *have* come up with a good defense of the idea that there can be sources of knowledge in addition to reason (i.e., perception, memory, rational intuition . . .). Furthermore it looks as if Dennett thinks that if there *were* any sources of information and knowledge in addition to reason, the deliverances of those sources would necessarily go *contrary* to reason. But of course that's just a confusion. Christians and other theists may think they know by faith that God created the world and in some way superintends or orchestrates or guides the process of evolution (perhaps by seeing to it that the right mutations arise at the right time, that certain bands of creatures don't suffer untimely extinction, etc.); then they would be claiming to know something in addition to what reason delivers--but not, of course, something that goes *contrary* to reason. (There is

nothing in current evolutionary science to show or even suggest that God did *not* superintend evolution.) It is no part of reason to insist that there can't be any other source of truth; it is perfectly in accord with reason to suppose that there are sources of truth in addition to reason. [11] It looks as if here it is *Dennett* who is conveniently lowering the net a foot or two when he makes his return. (Perhaps a more apt tennis metaphor would have him take a whack at the ball and miss it altogether.)

But what he says also suggests still a third possibility:

> Now if you want to *reason* about faith, and offer a reasoned (and reason responsive) defense of faith as an extra category of belief worthy of special consideration, I'm eager to play. . . . what I want to see is a reasoned ground for taking faith seriously as a *way of getting to the truth*, and not, say, just as a way people comfort themselves and each other . . . . But you must not expect me to go along with your defense of faith as a path to truth if at any point you appeal to the very dispensation you are supposedly trying to justify.

Here Dennett seems to assume that if you can't show by reason that a given proposed source of truth is in fact reliable, then it is improper to accept the deliverances of that source. This assumption goes back to the Lockean, Enlightenment claim that, while there could indeed be such a thing as divine revelation, it would be irrational to accept any belief as divinely revealed unless we could give a good argument from reason that it was. But again, why think a thing like that? Take other sources of knowledge: rational intuition, memory, and perception, for example. Can we show by the first two that the third is in fact reliable--that is, without relying in anyway on the deliverances of the third? No, we can't; nor can we show by the first and third that memory is reliable, nor (of course) by perception and memory that rational intuition is. Nor can we give a decent, non-question-begging rational argument that reason itself is indeed reliable. Does it follow that there is something irrational in trusting these alleged sources, in accepting their deliverances? Certainly not. So why insist that it is irrational to accept, say, the Internal Testimony of the Holy Spirit unless we can give a rationally conclusive argument for the conclusion that there is indeed such a thing, and that what it delivers is the truth? Why treat these alleged sources differently? Is there anything but arbitrariness in insisting that any alleged source of truth must justify itself at the bar of rational intuition, perception and memory? Perhaps God has given us several different sources of knowledge about the world, and none of them can be shown to be reliable using only the resources of the others. Once more, arbitrarily lowering the net (or missing the ball).

Finally, it seems to me that there is one respect Darwin's dangerous idea is vastly more dangerous than Dennett realizes. According to Richard Rorty,

> The idea that one species of organism is, unlike all the others, oriented not just toward its own increated prosperity but toward Truth, is as un-Darwinian as the idea that every human being has a built-in moral compass--a conscience that swings free of both social history and individual luck." [12]

Rorty's pronouncements do not always inspire maximum confidence, but here he seems to be on to something (although like Dennett he fails to see the real danger here). He says that two ideas are unDarwinian: that we have a mind oriented towards the Truth and a conscience that puts us in touch with right and wrong. Now Dennett does try to deal with the second from the Darwinian perspective (although what he really tries to explain is not how there could actually be such a thing as right and wrong, good and bad, from that perspective, but how it is that we think there is such a thing.)

But the other part of Rorty's suggestion is where the real intellectual danger in Darwin's dangerous idea lies (at any rate if Rorty's "Truth" is just ordinary everyday truth). Why so? Here I can only hint at the argument. [13] Darwin's dangerous idea is really two ideas put together: philosophical naturalism together with the claim that our cognitive faculties have originated by way of natural selection working on some form of genetic variation. According to this idea, then, the purpose or function of those faculties (if they have one) is to enable or promote *survival*, or *survival and reproduction*, more exactly, the *maximization of fitness* (the probability of survival and reproduction). Furthermore, the probability that our cognitive faculties are reliable (i.e., furnish us with a preponderance of true beliefs) on Darwin's dangerous idea is either low or inscrutable (i.e., impossible to estimate). But either gives the devotee of evolutionary naturalism a *defeater* for the proposition that his cognitive faculties are reliable, a reason for doubting, giving up, rejecting that natural belief. If so, then it also gives him a reason for doubting any beliefs *produced* by those faculties. This includes, of course, the beliefs involved in science itself. Evolutionary naturalism, therefore, provides one who accepts it with a defeater for scientific beliefs, a reason for doubting that science does in fact get us to the truth, or close to the truth. [14] Darwin himself may perhaps have glimpsed this sinister presence coiled like a worm in the very heart of evolutionary naturalism: "With me," says Darwin,

> the horrid doubt always arises whether the convictions of man's mind, which has been developed from the mind of the lower animals, are of any value or at all trustworthy. Would any one trust in the convictions of a monkey's mind, if there are any convictions in such a mind? [15]

Modern science was conceived, and born, and flourished in the matrix of Christian theism. Only liberal doses of self-deception and double-think, I believe, will permit it to flourish in the context of Darwinian naturalism.

--Alvin Plantinga
May, 1996

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1. Dennett's views here nicely match Richard Rorty's declaration that in the new liberal society, those who believe there is a "chief end of man", as in the Westminster Shorter Catechism, will have to be regarded as "insane" (and perhaps deprived of the vote and confined in gulags pending recovery from the seizure?).

2. As in such suggestions as that we keep a few fundamentalists around in zoos. Dennett just takes it for granted that serious religion is disappearing, despite the fact that there are far more Baptists than believers in Darwin's dangerous idea. He also fails to note that even in academia--and perhaps especially in the hard sciences--there is a sizeable ground swell of classical religion. Indeed, the same is true even in philosophy, Dennett's own subject. The Society of Christian philosophers, founded some 20 years ago, now has more than 1000 members; 40 years ago such a society could have had no more than a tenth as many.

3. *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690) IV, x, 10.

4. *The Blind Watchmaker* (Longmans, 1986).

5. Dennett's *Consciousness Explained* (Little, Brown, 1991) is an extended effort along these lines; the fact is, though, the book doesn't so much explain consciousness as explain it away, trying to show us how we can manage perfectly well without thinking there is any such thing.

6. "I see his [Gould's] antipathy to Darwin's dangerous idea as fundamentally a desire to protect or restore the Mind first, top-down vision of John Locke--at the very least to secure our place in the cosmos with a skyhook" (p. 309).

7. But is that at all obvious? How would one know a thing like that? Further: wouldn't one of the possibilities be that a certain possible set of values just never turns up? If so, the suggestion isn't merely baseless: it's incoherent.

8. See, for example, William Alston's magisterial *Perceiving God* (1991) and Plantinga and Wolterstorff's *Faith and Rationality* (1983).

9. The quotation is from page 141 of Dawkins' *The Blind Watchmaker.*

10. There is also the tradition according to which God, despite the complexity of his creation, is himself wholly simple; but this is a story for another occasion.

11. Indeed, it isn't even part of reason to claim that there couldn't be a source of truth whose deliverances were (to some degree) *contrary* to the teachings of reason.

12. "Untruth and Consequences," *The New Republic,* July 31, 1995, pp. 32-36.

13. For a development of this argument, see my *Warrant and Proper Function* (Oxford University Press, 1993), chap. 12.

14. Indeed, in providing one who accepts it with a defeater for *anything* that person believes, it also provides a defeater for *itself;* evolutionary naturalism is therefore self-defeating.

15. Letter to William Graham, Down, July 3rd, 1881. In *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin Including an Autobiographical Chapter,* ed. Francis Darwin (D. Appleton and Company, 1887), vol. 1, p. 255.

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