

Three: Returning to the Roots

In this chapter we explore two factors in the emergence of the secular mind: the 'double whammy' of the rise of science, and the legacy of religious cruelty. The analysis works backwards through Western history in a zigzag fashion: starting with the secular world view of today, events are identified in the recent past that led to it, then a jump made further back to show how the events of that period led up to the assumptions of the recent past, and so on, reaching to the very roots of Western thought. This means a slow acclimatisation to the more and more distant past, a little like diving without the 'bends'. Crucially, we use the spiritual typologies developed in the last chapter to expose the historical forces acting on religion. The Enlightenment, its legacy, and events leading up to it are considered, and we ask if its great thinkers were persuaded by the new rationalism and the desire to end superstition and religious cruelty, to actually want the end of religion itself.

3.1 The Twentieth Century

3.1.1 Science and the Century of Alienation

The twentieth century as a whole brought to fruition all the forces of the previous three centuries that were ranged against religion, but to call the twentieth century atheistic would be to ignore the fact of religion's survival, albeit in emasculated form. A better epitaph for the twentieth century would be to call it *the century of alienation*. We identified *control* as the principal pathology of Western religion; we identify *alienation* as the principal pathology of Western secularism. Those for whom control is not the ultimate terror retreat to old religion; those for whom alienation is not the ultimate terror cling to secularism. Between the extremes lies the New Age, with its own set of problems.

A Vocabulary of alienation

The twentieth century was a century of democratic progress that gave each family its 'nuclear' isolation, based on material goods undreamed of by the Victorians, but progressively decoupling citizens from each other through the independence of the motor car, the supermarket and the television set. In the philosophy, psychology and literature of the period we find a groping towards a *vocabulary* of alienation, new words that would serve to name vague feelings of dread, boredom, indifference and uprootedness. The *Encyclopedia Britannica* suggests five meanings for alienation: (1) powerlessness, (2) meaninglessness, (3) normlessness, (4) cultural estrangement, (5) social isolation, and (6) self-estrangement, of which it finds the last to be the hardest to define. Marx used the term alienation in his early work to mean the estrangement of the worker from the means of production, though Marx was also interested in the concept of 'self-estrangement'. It is this last sense of the term alienation that we are pursuing here, though with the much expanded notion of self that our definition of spirituality implies – the self capable of a sacred connectedness with existence, but also facing the possible suffering born of a profound disconnectedness. The 'means of production' – the nature of the workplace – might be boring or exhausting, but its meaninglessness is not the question here, because those who do own the means of production are no less prone to an alienation of the spirit than their workers.

Increased material wealth amplified the whole cluster of 'alienations' and spread them to a far wider population than the effete and wealthy aristocrats of the Romantic age – whole new strata of society had education and time on their hands. Christianity had an ancient term, 'acedia', meaning spiritual torpor, apathy or not caring, but new phrases were emerging. Alienation occupied a prominent role in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* in 1808; Kierkegaard invented the phrase 'sickness unto death', in an 1849 essay; and Durkheim coined the term *anomie* for normlessness in 1893. Heidegger took from Kierkegaard the term *angst*, a German word for fear, redefining it in his 1927 book *Being and Time*; and Sartre used *nausea* and 'iron in the soul' in the 1930s to describe a *new* form of inner suffering that was unknown in previous eras. The developing discipline of psychology had a field day with 'schizophrenic', 'shadow', 'subconscious' and so on. *Ennui*, which is etymologically derived from 'to hate', gained a new usage which suggested listlessness and dissatisfaction rather than the active passion of hatred. The theologian Paul Tillich, writing in 1952 said: 'Today it has become almost a truism to call our time

an 'age of anxiety.'¹⁸⁶ Kierkegaard had anticipated him a hundred years earlier when he talked of an 'age of disintegration, an esthetic, enervating disintegration.'¹⁸⁷ Max Weber, writing around the time of WW1, came up with the term 'disenchantment' (a translation of his German term 'entzauberung') to mean a society abandoned by its gods. Late nineteenth century psychiatrists were called 'alienists', reflecting an insight that the root affliction of mental patients was alienation: we can only speculate that this nomenclature was dropped as alienation became so endemic as to be invisible.

If this alienation has its roots in the three pillars of secularism: the social, the scientific and the psychological, then it is also mirrored and reinforced in Western cultural production: the arts. We have suggested that the arts, where they reflect or reinforce this alienation, instead of providing as they do at times a re-enchanted vision of humanity, can be thought of as producing a kind of cultural autism.

Scientism

We suggested in section 1.1 that scientism underpins the assumptions of today's secular outlook. Scientism may be populist in the sense of it being widely held but poorly articulated, as is often shown in optimistic television documentaries on science, or it may have a scholarly underpinning, particularly from Logical Positivism. This philosophy was put forward by the group known as the Vienna Circle between the wars, and stated that not only was scientific knowledge the *only* legitimate form of knowledge, but that metaphysical questions could not be answered from personal experience: *they were meaningless questions*. In fact philosophy had increasingly focussed its attack on metaphysics, a closer inspection of which suggests that this is really an attack on religion. The contemporary philosopher Brian Magee puzzles, as many have done, on how Wittgenstein – whose writings are often rather mystical – came to be so closely allied to the Vienna Circle. What is clear is that a mutual and instinctive dislike for metaphysics forged this temporary alliance.⁸⁸ To attack religion directly during the first part of the twentieth century was 'old hat' for the philosopher, but metaphysics – questions of being, divinity and eternity – seems to have been a legitimate target.

Logical Positivism appears to be the natural end product of the Enlightenment project, a massive shift from the religious worldview to an emasculated rationalism. It is also a reaction to the overblown rhetoric of German Idealism. Because the emphasis on the scientific method gives results that are quantifiable, and hence carry the argument against all expressions of 'emotionalism', other voices

went unheeded. Questions of spirit are meaningless, says Logical Positivism, creating the atmosphere in which the great minds of the twentieth century ignored those questions, allowing our interiority to be claimed by psychology, or shallow New Age romanticism, or a turn to the dark philosophies of Nationalism and Fascism (possibly via German Idealism), or the interminable circumlocution of postmodernism. The grip of Logical Positivism on the universities of the West in the second half of the twentieth century set the agenda for education and research which shaped its culture.

Scientism on the one hand and the 'linguistic turn' on the other kept the popular pundits and the scholars busy explaining to the general public that subjective world of personal experience and feelings was no conceivable resort for making sense of the world. If one broke down under the meaninglessness of this twin onslaught, then there was psychiatry – perhaps your relationship with your father or mother was at fault – or, as the last resort, there were anti-depressants. Tragically the last resort has become increasingly the first resort, and, thanks to the Internet, dangerous anti-depressants are now often self-prescribed, in isolation even from a doctor, and avoiding regulatory frameworks.

Antidepressants as Indicator of Alienation

Whereas 'melancholy' (a disposition supposedly caused by an excess of 'black bile') was more often considered a personality trait than a mood, 'depression' was the new mental condition for the century of alienation. Melancholy had good cause: to take just one example, no parent in earlier times could automatically expect all their children to survive into adulthood. For example, both Charles Darwin and Thomas Huxley were devastated by the early deaths of their daughter and son respectively,⁸⁹ as was Marx devastated by the loss of his daughter. Disease and accident could take any person in their prime without warning, life was far more unpredictable, and a natural melancholy might be the response to any such loss. Only the tiny aristocratic and leisured classes could afford to dwell on their melancholy however (and Romanticism gave voice to that), but in the twentieth century with dramatically increasing wealth and the securities offered by science and technology, an uncaused 'iron in the soul' became a large-scale phenomenon and required a new name: 'depression' or even 'clinical depression'. Psychotherapy is of course the preferred treatment, but the cost of the 'talking cure' and its thousand derivatives is prohibitive, not in a material sense, but in the time of highly-paid professionals. Drugs

have stepped into the breach for the family doctor, now prescribing anti-depressants on a massive scale, and, even more alarmingly, increasingly to children.

Anti-depressants are entirely consistent as a materialist solution to a problem: depression, say the materialists, is caused by chemical imbalances in the brain, and these can be chemically fixed. The idea of 'downward' causation, that the soul or will can affect a material system like brain and body, is anathema to science. This means that science cannot tolerate the idea that the 'self' as a non-material entity is experiencing an unhappiness that *subsequently* appears as a measurable imbalance in brain chemistry. For science, the imbalance is the cause, not the effect (as neuroscientist Thomas Damasio would probably say). At best the scientific world might permit the psychoanalyst or cognitive-behavioural therapist their reductionist language of interiority, and give them a shot at 'curing' the patient, but, for a busy family doctor, with scarce State resources, the easy route is to write out a prescription for drugs.

According to *IMS Health*, a company providing pharmaceutical market intelligence to the US administration and industry, new prescriptions written for six of the most widely prescribed antidepressants during 2000 were:

Sertraline (Zoloft) 10.7 million
 Paroxetine (Paxil) 10.49 million
 Fluoxetine (Prozac) 10 million
 Citalopram (Celexa) 5.29 million
 Venlafaxine (Effexor) 4.2 million
 Nefazodone (Serzone) 2.34 million.⁹⁰

This is a staggering total of 43 million *new* prescriptions in the year 2000. The drugs prescribed to children in the US include all of the above, often despite lack of licensing for paediatric use. Other studies show antidepressants to be firstly no better than placebos, and secondly to cause suicide. The UK has banned prescription of a number of antidepressants to children, but still there were 50,000 children as young as six on antidepressants in the UK in 2003.⁹¹ A study by the UK health authorities suggested that Paxil (known as Seroxat in the UK) increases suicidal tendencies in the under-18s by 1.5 to 3.2 times that over receiving a placebo.⁹² Paxil has six month sales figures of a billion dollars, indicating the enormous financial temptations to steamroller clinical trials, and the resources available for marketing. Paxil produces intense and emotionally painful withdrawal symptoms, but the company is allowed to claim that it is

not addictive because it does not produce all the medically-defined aspects of addiction, including the necessity for continually increased dosage for the same effect. In a TV interview a family doctor, when confronted with the ordeal of a young woman attempting to get off the Paxil he had prescribed, explained pleasantly that the withdrawal symptoms were useful because it reminded the patient to go on taking the drug.

A jury in the US found GlaxoSmithKline guilty of negligence and awarded \$6.4 million compensation after a man who took Paxil for just two days shot and killed his family,⁹³ but the drug has not been withdrawn, and field trials went ahead on children. Parents were induced to put their children forward for free trials by an advert that asked: 'Do your children suffer from Social Anxiety Disorder?' This so-called condition has well-meaning web sites devoted to it, in which the reader finds that Paxil has received approval from the US Food and Drug Administration as a treatment: it is an easy leap to then order the drug over the Internet. The enormous sales, according to the defenders of antidepressants, are due to their effectiveness, though some studies contradict this.

Prozac: for the 'Worried Well'

The best-known antidepressant of the SSRI class is Prozac (its name now stands in effect for the whole class of selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors), and a considerable literature has grown out of its status as a social phenomenon. This includes psychiatrist Peter Kramer's ground-breaking survey *Listening to Prozac* (1993), Elizabeth Wurtzel's autobiographical account *Prozac Nation* (1995), and a collection of essays called *Prozac as a Way of Life*, edited by Carl Elliott and Tod Chambers (2004). The latter volume expresses the near-consensus amongst healthcare professionals and commentators that the use of antidepressants in cases of 'clinical depression' is more than justified because it can be a life-threatening condition. (At the same time they also acknowledge trials which suggest that SSRIs have no impact over placebos.) But as Elliott argues in his introduction to *Prozac as a Way of Life*, the real debate is over the term that Kramer coined: 'cosmetic psychopharmacology' – the prescription of Prozac as an enhancement technology, a drug for the 'worried well', a drug to make the client 'better than well'. It is Kramer's essay in *Prozac as a Way of Life* that perhaps best approaches the *spiritual* implications of Prozac, argued in terms of alienation. He says:

Imagine we have defined possible elements of existential alienation, such as spleen, anomie, angst, acedia, vertigo,

malaise, emptiness and the like. . . . Elliott's worry is precisely that if a medication replaces pessimism with optimism, anxiety with assertiveness, and diffidence with gregariousness, it will have robbed us of a tendency to remain at a critical distance from our own existence. . . .

Our sensibility has been largely formed by melancholics. Much of philosophy is written, and much art has been created, by melancholics or the outright depressed as a response to their substantial vulnerabilities. . . . If loss were less painful, the good life might be characterised not by ataraxia [serenity] but by gusto.⁹⁴

Kramer's argument is that society has valorised the melancholic over the sanguine, and that this is the only source of the moral anxiety over Prozac. This is a quintessentially American viewpoint, a context within which the masculine heroic model of individuality would naturally find the intellectual and melancholic personality a little suspect. If Prozac helps the alienated individual live a life of 'gusto', what could be wrong in that? Kramer says: 'If Prozac induces conformity, it is to an ideal of assertiveness, but assertiveness can be in the service of social reform of the sort ordinarily understood as nonconformity or rebellion.'⁹⁵ This is the secular American ideal to which Prozac helps the 'worried well' conform. It is true that for the Romantics, their alienation was almost elevated to the erotic, that suicide was noble, and that melancholy was the only natural response to existence. But for the great spiritual thinkers we have been drawing on, the indulgence in either gusto or melancholy misses the point. It is precisely the issues which confront one with one's own alienation that can also lead to its overcoming in the spiritual life. Susan Squier, in her essay in *Prozac as a Way of Life*, confirms this. She had taken Prozac after a depression:

But even with the depression under control, I told my psychiatrist, I still felt a hollowness at the core of life: a loss. A Quaker, she understood what I was describing. She knew that this was an experience I needed not to control or to defend against, but to encounter. Had I ever tried meditation, she asked?⁹⁶

Squier was lucky to be treated by a psychiatrist who was also grounded in the spiritual life, who recommended meditation as the spiritual path of *encounter* with the roots of her alienation. (Squier reports that she has now stopped Prozac but continues with Zen meditation.) Antidepressants may or may not help in cases of

clinical depression, but on their own, and particularly when used as 'cosmetic psychopharmacology' merely shift the client from melancholy to gusto, escaping any meaningful confrontation with the roots of alienation. If alienation is understood in the first place as a spiritual issue then there is no need either to insist that 'gusto' is unspiritual. Kramer's American model of 'self-reliance' is ultimately a false model however, because the successful individual operating out of this worldview merely ignores the hollow premise of this individualism, that one is separate. Alienation exists because the ultimate connectedness of self to existence has not been discovered, whereas in that connectedness lies *real* gusto, along, of course, with the acceptance of *real* loss. Prozac as a *philosophy*, just as much as a treatment, removes responsibility from the individual for spiritual enquiry and examination of the real nature of self.

We can use the phenomenon of depression as an indicator of a spiritual loss, a loss of meaning or connectedness, and the attempt to use chemistry to alleviate it as indicating the response of scientism. Writers on science who extol the prevailing scientism include Daniel Dennett (who sees Darwinism as a universal acid that eats away all competing explanations), Francis Crick (who sees us as 'nothing but a pack of neurons'), Richard Dawkins (introduced earlier), and Richard Atkins (who believes in religious intolerance – that is an intolerance of religion on scientific grounds). We will look at three of these figures, whose writings appear on the popular science shelves around the world.

Daniel Dennett and the Argument from Design

Daniel Dennett is a philosopher and author of many books and articles including *Consciousness Explained* (1991) and *Darwin's Dangerous Idea* (1995). He co-edited *The Mind's I* with Douglas Hofstadter in 1981 (a book that is surprisingly open to the 'metaphysical'). His thinking as a materialist philosopher in respect of the spiritual could be characterised as 'benign dismissive', rather than 'vituperative atheist'. Nevertheless his approach is instructive regarding a broad strand of scientific secularism which makes contact with religion at the level of 'explanation'. Once he has shown, as it is easy to do, that religion's power of explanation with regard to natural phenomena is flawed, there is no further interest. He doesn't seem to be incensed, as Dawkins is, that religious fundamentalists ignore all demonstrations of religious fallibility.

In *Darwin's Dangerous Idea: Evolution and the Meanings of Life*, Dennett devotes brief sections to the philosophers John Locke and

David Hume, in order to introduce the distinction between 'revealed religion', i.e. a religion based on divine revelation, and 'natural religion', which he defines as a religion based on rational deductions from evidence (this is a narrow way of describing what is known as 'Deism'). This is useful for our discussion because it flags up a stage in the development of Christianity that made it so vulnerable to attacks from scientism: reliance on the proofs of the existence of 'God'. The key proof in the emerging age of science in the eighteenth century was the Argument from Design, an appeal to behold the exquisite order in the natural world as evidence of the hand of 'God'. Dennett quotes a passage from Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* as an eloquent expression of the Argument from Design, finishing with this line: 'By this argument a posteriori, and by this argument alone, do we prove at once the existence of a Deity, and his similarity to human mind and intelligence.'⁹⁷ Dennett is anxious to establish that the protagonists in Hume's *Dialogues* demolish the Argument from Design, through the imagination and reasoning power of both sides as they put forward argument and counter-argument. Indeed the *potential* flaws in the argument are exposed from every conceivable angle. The fact that in the end the Argument from Design is *agreed on* in the *Dialogues* is seen by Dennett as a caving in by Hume,⁹⁸ but this is a perverse deduction, as a reading of Hume's *The Natural History of Religion* would confirm. For example Hume writes in the introduction to that book: 'The whole frame of nature bespeaks an intelligent author; and no rational enquirer can, after serious reflection, suspend his belief a moment with regard to the primary principles of genuine Theism and Religion.'⁹⁹ But Dennett, following popular prejudice, concludes that the *Dialogues* cave in to the Argument from Design because Hume lived prior to the discoveries of Darwin. Dennett chooses this passage to mark Hume's capitulation:

From this enquiry, the legitimate conclusion is, that the causes have also an analogy: and if we are not contented with calling the first and supreme cause a GOD or DEITY, but desire to vary the expression; what can we call him but MIND or THOUGHT, to which he is justly supposed to bear a considerable resemblance?¹⁰⁰

Dennett has read the *Dialogues* as an attack on religion, but which failed to carry through because Hume could not imagine another *explanation* for the design of the natural world. Dennett does not comment on the fact that Hume offers alternative terms for the 'deity'

such as MIND or THOUGHT, but is convinced instead that Hume has attempted and failed in an exercise in cosmogony (an account of the origins of the universe). It is true that cosmogony features largely in sections of the *Dialogues*, but what Dennett's philosophical scientism fails to spot is that Hume is engaged, not with a dispute against religion, but a dispute *within* religion: Hume is arguing for natural religion (Deism) against revealed religion. In other words Dennett applies a secular bracketing out of the spiritual content of the *Dialogues*, as is often exercised against all the philosophers of the early Enlightenment.

Dennett concedes that the *Dialogues*, which Hume prevented publication of in his own lifetime, was written without devices to hide its meaning. Hence we can take seriously Hume's interesting suggestion that the 'first and supreme cause' might be given a name other than 'God'. We will see later on that this is the natural instinct of the pre-modern philosopher, who had for centuries offered the 'God of the Philosophers' as an alternative to the anthropomorphic 'God' of the devotional impulse. MIND and THOUGHT are typical terms arising from the *jñani* impulse (which philosophers generally exhibit), avoiding the anthropomorphism that Hume rails against in the *Dialogues*. Dennett, inheritor of the mainstream anthropomorphic Christian tradition that he is anxious to discredit, believes that once the Argument from Design of natural religion is disproved, then religion is done for. However, as Hume puts it: 'The question is not concerning the BEING of God, but the NATURE of God.'¹⁰¹ How could this possibly be the thinking of an atheist? But both religionists of the time and secularists of the modern age promote Hume's atheism as an indisputable fact, effectively denying the possibility that Hume's clear engagement with the Argument from Design is a valid religiosity.

We will return to Hume and the issue of natural religion later, but for now it is interesting to note that by the end of the eighteenth century it was increasingly common to understand the natural world as a mechanism. This raised serious questions about the meaning of life, and was the origin of the alienation that eventually became endemic in the twentieth century. Dennett attempts to bridge the gap caused by the loss of the spiritual with an *evolutionary* account of meaning, but in both *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*, and the subsequent book, *Freedom Evolves*, his secular scientism seems to offer cold comfort. As a philosopher he may try to add purpose or meaning to evolution, but the biology as a science is clear: mutations are random and purposeless.

Francis Crick

Francis Crick (1916-2004) was the British biophysicist, who, with James Watson and Maurice Wilkins, received the 1962 Nobel Prize for Physiology or Medicine for the discovery of the molecular structure of DNA, a great twentieth-century scientific breakthrough. After the triumph of the DNA discovery Crick sought a comparable scientific challenge in the field of consciousness research. He published his early findings in 1994, as 'work in progress', in a book called *The Astonishing Hypothesis*, which opens with the following statement:

The Astonishing Hypothesis is that 'You', your joys and your sorrows, your memories and your ambitions, your sense of personal identity and free will, are in fact no more than the behaviour of a vast assembly of nerve cells and their associated molecules. As Lewis Carroll's Alice might have phrased it: 'You're nothing but a pack of neurons.'¹⁰²

Crick has unconsciously used the very phrase that many thinkers have adopted to criticise the type of analysis presented in his book: 'nothing buttery'. Yet Crick's work is representative of an essential component of twentieth-century alienation, the idea that one is 'nothing but' something, where that 'something' is variously a pack of neurons, a collection of atoms, a cellular collective for the propagation of the selfish gene, peptides, and so on. Hence both his work and his stance regarding religion are instructive.

Crick is outspokenly anti-religious. He says: 'I went into science because of these religious reasons, there's no doubt about that. I asked myself what were the two things that appear inexplicable and are used to support religious beliefs: the difference between living and nonliving things, and the phenomenon of consciousness.'¹⁰³ In 1961, Crick resigned his fellowship of Churchill College, Cambridge, over its proposal to build a chapel. Sir Winston Churchill, in whose honour the college was founded, wrote to him, pointing out that 'none need enter [the chapel] unless they wish', Crick replied that, on those grounds, the college should build a brothel; he enclosed a cheque for ten guineas towards its construction.¹⁰⁴

Like Dennett, Crick tends to approach religion at the level of *explanation*. Crick is explicit about this:

The record of religious beliefs in explaining scientific phenomena has been so poor in the past that there is little reason to believe that conventional religions will do much better in the future.¹⁰⁵

For a scientist this point is meaningful, and supported by

overwhelming historical evidence. However from the spiritual point of view, religion is, in the first place, nothing to do with explanation, and certainly not about explanation of 'scientific phenomena' which, by definition are observed from the *outside*. Crick's neurologising of self is both the expression of alienation and contributes to it, making of man a (biological) machine.

Richard Dawkins

If Dennett is mildly dismissive of religion and Crick merely outspoken, then we must turn to Richard Dawkins as the most truly vituperative of the scientific atheists today. He is the Salk Professor for the Public Understanding of Science at Oxford. His commitment to this role is exemplary, and his energy and imagination in making science come to life is a great service to it. However he has also taken upon himself to publicly attack religion at every opportunity. Whether it is his scientific writings alone, or whether his anti-religionist stance has greatly contributed to it, *Prospect* magazine voted him its top intellectual in 2004.¹⁰⁶

Dawkins's first book *The Selfish Gene* went to the best-seller lists after its publication in 1976 and its thesis remains controversial and hotly debated to this day. It is a starkly reductionist vision where Darwinian survival is no longer understood at the level of individual or species, but at the level of gene. The life of a human being is determined by genes that have no investment in either the individual human or the human race, but only in ensuring their replication in new carriers. Dawkins also coined the term 'meme' – meaning an idea or cluster of ideas that persevere in human culture – by way of analogy with gene, and suggested that memes replicate and survive in a similar way. The 1976 edition of the *Selfish Gene* made little direct reference to religion, other than to give 'God' as an example of a cluster of memes which survive tenaciously. Dawkins writes: 'Another member of the religious meme complex is called faith. It means blind trust, in the absence of evidence, even in the teeth of evidence.'¹⁰⁷ In the second edition, which is expanded with Endnotes to each chapter, Dawkins responds to readers who objected to his characterisation of faith, by repeating his claim that faith is a belief without evidence.¹⁰⁸

Dawkins's second book, also a best seller, is called *The Blind Watchmaker*, and the title itself is a reference to the science-religion debate, though the book makes even less direct reference to religion than the *Selfish Gene*. Dawkins explains that the 'blind watchmaker' refers to the illustration given by the eighteenth-century theologian William Paley for the Argument from Design.¹⁰⁹ Paley sets forth in

his *Natural Theology* a series of arguments for the existence of 'God', including the idea that both the natural world and a watch imply the existence of a maker. Dawkins disagrees in the case of the natural world (just as Dennett does): no 'God' is required, but merely the workings of Darwinian evolution.

The argument between Dawkins and established Christian religion has developed over a number of years, to the point where Dawkins is now seen as the principle opponent of the 'creationists', those who insist on a literal Biblical account of the origins of the natural world. Yet Dawkins himself tells us again and again of his wonder and awe for the natural world, feelings such that he finds himself with more in common with Paley than with some secular atheists. Dawkins counts himself as an atheist of course, but says that: 'although it might have been *logically* tenable to be an atheist before Darwin, Darwin made it possible to be an intellectually fulfilled atheist.'¹¹⁰ Dawkins explains that Hume's attack on natural religion was logically correct, but that Hume was unable to provide any suitable account for the miraculous complexity and coherence of the natural world. It was Charles Darwin who eventually provided that intellectual fulfilment. Because Hume is assumed in contemporary culture to be an atheist, Dawkins is able to suggest that Hume would have agreed with him, and would have been 'intellectually fulfilled' by Darwinism. That is debatable, because of Hume's profound scepticism towards science, but not the point here: the real point is that to be intellectually fulfilled is not what makes a complete human being.

Dawkins has become the standard bearer of scientific objection to religion, being willing to offer an opinion on any perceived defect of mainstream religion, and finding publishers and news media ever willing to convey his views. After the September 11 attacks on New York and Washington in 2001, the British newspaper *The Guardian* published a response from Dawkins, which was effectively an attack on Islam.¹¹¹ To the secular mind Dawkins' stance is rational and reasonable, and the vitriol of his attacks on religion is simply consistent with his passion for science and his gifts as orator and writer. Crucial to the thesis of this book is the opposite view however, that Dawkins's stance is contradictory and only made possible by the accidents of the development of the *Christian* religion, not religion per se.

We assessed Dawkins in section 2.3 as a person with a nascent or undeveloped spirituality – according to our Two-Fold Model – with these characteristics: transcendent, *jnani*, *via positiva*, and social. We can now apply the *jnani/bhakti* checklist of section 2.6 in support of

that assessment. Of the eight *bhakti* characteristics we enumerated, he demonstrates a leaning to only one: **unlikely to be drawn to the esoteric**. Of the seven *jnani* characteristics we enumerated he falls in with four of them, which include: (2) **an impulse towards knowing, 'seeing', knowledge, wisdom, learning**; (3) **enquiry, even doubt, as core behaviour**; (4) **an emphasis on the will**; (5) **instinctively anti-anthropomorphic**. All of these indications must be considered in the recognition that a nascent spirituality obscures clear manifestations of personal spiritual impulses. Yet a clear *jnani* transcendent *via positiva* portrait emerges. Secularists could argue that, far from a spiritual sense of the transcendent, Dawkins is merely a competent scientist who happens to have a poetic, even rhapsodical streak in him. But the historical development of the Western mind out of medieval Christianity and through the Enlightenment (elaborated fully in following sections) places Dawkins in a specific context. If we read his anti-religionist stance in the direct lineage of Hume, and understand it as expressing the same anti-anthropomorphism, then everything changes. Dawkins' argument – like Hume's – becomes an argument *within* religion, not against it. In fact he is most usefully attacking a product of religion's core pathology, control, though culturally lacking the intellectual tools to understand that his own version of the Argument from Design – which his writings represent – would support a non-theistic, *jnani*, *via positiva*, socially-oriented religion. He is in fact brought to consider the possibility that 'scientific awe' is the same as religion in a series of published exchanges, but dismisses it on the grounds that it would make for a very 'flabby' definition of the word 'religion'.¹¹² What Dawkins calls a 'flabby' definition of religion is what we are calling spiritual pluralism, and in its articulation we can find a reconciliation that his scientism forces him to reject. When Dawkins uses the word 'religion' he means only monotheism, and only its worst aspects at that. If he were to attend a synagogue, church, or mosque – one which had any religious vitality – for a period of time, he would discover what is not easily obvious to the non-participant: the everyday operation of what we are calling the Kierkegaard Corrective. An attack on religion made in complete unawareness of this corrective, which acts both as a moderating principle on the majority and as a very genuine source of happiness, is like the non-musical attacking music, or the non-sporting attacking sport.

Religious happiness is like no other, having a source beyond all external factors. But it is not known to all, particularly in the

modern age, or perhaps some people have always been 'tone-deaf' to religion and spirituality. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, writing in 1762, thought that the difficulty of trying to explain the deep source of religion within personal experience was like trying to convince the deaf of the existence of sound.¹¹³ In his analogy the deaf were the materialists who denied the evidence of their own unbounded inner life, and equated themselves only with the bound material of their bodies.

Explanation, proof, control, power

Atheistic scientists attack religion, as we have seen, at the level of explanatory power, unlike say, Gore Vidal or Polly Toynbee, whose atheism starts at a social or cultural level and is a protest at the oppressive character of old religion. The attack on religion on the basis of explanatory power resonates widely with a Western secular audience, and very little defence seems to be mounted using the argument that religion *isn't* primarily about explanation. (After all people enjoy art with no expectation that it will explain anything: so why should religion?) Could it be because the Western mind has learned a profound lesson since the seventeenth century: that scientific explanations, however impenetrable or counter-intuitive they may be to the lay person, have the power of accurate *prediction*? And that accurate prediction means control of the environment, and that control means protection from the forces of Nature, and the acquisition of power and wealth? This surely is the unconscious equation that drives such widespread acceptance of the views of scientists like Dawkins, Crick and Dennett. Francis Bacon is the originator of the saying 'Knowledge is power', appropriate for the man credited with kick-starting the empirical revolution in science. It is perfectly natural to want control or power over one's circumstances, but the secular mind has internalised this stance in a way never seen before.

It has become impossible for the atheistic mind to conceive that surrender to the will of 'God' is a metaphor with a genuine reality behind it, or that seeking harmony could be more important than seeking power (as in Taoism). Westerners are just as baffled when encountering the non-devotional (*jnani*) equivalent of surrender to 'God' in the Eastern religions: recognition of the emptiness of 'self', *shunyata* in Buddhism, for example. To exist in a state which the materialists have characterised as fatalist appears as a self-abnegation with only a pathological reading. Free will, the will to power, choice, freedom, self-expression, self-determination, are all

attributes of self that are central to the secular mind (and if not, prescribe Prozac). Science can underpin their fulfilment; religion can only underpin their denial.

The argument here isn't that the manipulation of Nature through science may lead to an ecological catastrophe (though it might). Instead it is suggested that an attack against religion on the basis that its 'explanations' are inferior to that of science rings true to the uninformed because 'explanations' have become highly valued. The link between scientific explanations and mastery of the natural world is proven a million times. The benefits of technology are everywhere apparent to the Western secular mind, but the negative and insidious corollary is rarely perceived: that the world has therefore become a machine. If all natural phenomena are to yield to scientific explanation and technological manipulation, then all natural phenomena are mechanisms, and so, eventually, is the self. We even have a specific science that tells us so, psychology. And if self is a mechanism, *then self is alienated from itself*. William Blake understood this well when he said: 'the bounded is loathed by its possessor.'¹¹⁴ A machine cannot do more than repeat the 'same dull round', and even the entire universe would soon become 'a mill with complicated wheels'. Blake was truly prophetic of the sickness of the modern era.

The very word 'explanation' has an etymology meaning 'to flatten out'. The scientific worldview removes the mystery from the world, disenchants it, and provides a safe, technologically mastered environment; gated communities emerge within which individuals are safe from hunger, the elements, disease, ageing – and other people. An insidious cocoon grows up around the technologically rich to protect them from the technologically poor, and, once this alienation from Nature and others produces the inevitable psychopathologies, the ultimate technological intervention is to hand: the anti-depressant. If the self is also a mechanism, then it can be fixed like any other machine, or at least patched up to some cultural criteria of normalcy. Love, which many would argue is the only true restorative, is scientifically understood as neuronal, hormonal, or a side effect of the selfish gene. It is an emergent property of the psychologised, neurologised, peptidised, genetic self. The love of 'God' is a superstition, surrender to his 'will' a fatalist delusion, mastery of the elements is everything. But how much Prozac, Ritaxil, Valium, Mogadon, Miltown – the brand names come and go, making depression as datable as hairstyles – does it take to hold that sense of alienation at bay?