

Book reviews

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The God Delusion. By R. Dawkins. (Pp. 406; £20.00; ISBN 9780593055489 hb.) Bantam Press: London. 2006.

Richard Dawkins is passionate about scientific truth and sees this book as a way of raising consciousness in the conflict between superstition and reason. He does not use the word 'delusion' in its stricter psychiatric sense, but why should he? His meaning is clear enough and he delivers a characteristically lucid and comprehensive case against the existence of God. He argues that an understandable sense of mystical awe, to which he himself would subscribe, in the face of the beauty and grandeur of the universe, is not a form of belief in God and to label it as such is to confuse the issue.

If the case for God's existence is so thin, why then have we evolved to believe in God in the face of the evidence. He believes this has occurred as a consequence of misfiring of evolved brain modules. Our tendency to gullibility would be advantageous in encouraging us to believe everything our parents tell us, as a way of maintaining our safety in a dangerous environment. Our tendency to develop an intentional stance, to assign purpose to events in the world, could have survival value by speeding decision-making in dangerous situations. Our tendency to irrationality could be a manifestation of our predilection for falling in love, which also has presumed genetic advantages in helping the partners to stick together to promote the survival of their children.

These inbuilt tendencies allow the religion or blind faith 'meme', the cultural equivalent of the gene, to parasitize the brains of humans, and to secure its own perpetuation by discouraging rational enquiry, a process that is adaptive for the idea or meme, but not for the believers who effectively become robot vehicles.

An alternative explanation, which he does not much pursue, is that religion may have achieved its ubiquitous nature by conferring evolutionary advantage to the believers themselves. He does concede theoretically that if belief in God were essential to emotional wellbeing, it might be evidence in favour of the desirability of convincing yourself that God exists, even though it would not make the belief true. He doubts the significance of any relationship between happiness and belief, but what evidence we do have suggests that religious belief is indeed associated with happiness.

It seems to me that religious belief may be a specific example of the positive cognitive bias that exists in normal individuals. Unrealistically positive views about the self, exaggerated beliefs about personal control and unrealistic optimism are the hallmarks of normal thought and are absent in mild depression. In addition to happiness and contentment, these biased beliefs are associated with other aspects of mental health such as the ability to care for and about others, the capacity for productive and creative work, and the ability to develop in response to a changing and sometimes threatening environment. This self-serving attributional bias is probably an intrinsic quality of the brain as it is present in an enhanced form in children. A mildly positive cognitive bias may be evolutionarily important because having a mood and self-assessment that are just slightly higher than the situation merits may enable us to have the self-confidence and optimism to take on new challenges.

There may be further insights from psychiatry, particularly from bipolar disorder. In the early stages of mania, positive cognitive bias becomes exaggerated, and the enhanced self-confidence and elevated mood may be associated with increased creativity and productivity, heightened sexuality, and increased intensity of spiritual experience and religious belief. Bipolar disorder is a predominantly polygenic condition which creates a

vulnerability to unstable mood in sufferers, but this is a vulnerability that exists on a continuum with normality. It was no coincidence that Stephen Fry's recent TV series on bipolar disorder largely featured creative people like himself, because people with the genetic loading for bipolar disorder, and this includes first-degree relatives of sufferers with bipolar disorder, also inherit a potential for creativity.

Darwin realized that although natural selection for survival is essential for evolutionary success, sexual selection for reproduction is also necessary to ensure that descendants bearing the genetic inheritance are left. As Geoffrey Miller has pointed out in his book *The Mating Mind*, natural selection for survival will have ensured we have a crudely accurate model of the world but sexual selection will have been indifferent to the accuracy of our more complex belief systems and may favour ideologies that are entertaining or comforting, like religious conviction, political idealism and pseudo-science. The sexual selection theory explains why higher levels of the genetic traits for creativity and bipolar disorder are found in the population than are necessary for purely functional reasons, because they are selected unconsciously by potential mates as signs of mental fitness.

Overall, the idea that to function optimally it is helpful to be mildly self-deluding, contains an element of paradox that seems to me to be an essential component of any convincing theory of mental function. It seems obvious that it is not just religious belief *per se*, but extremities of belief generally, such as those displayed by Hitler or Stalin, which can be devastating. Richard Dawkins feels passionately that he would like to replace God with the science of a rational, enlightened, liberal humanist. He is fortunate that he excels both as a scientist and a writer, which presumably helps provide engagement and meaning in life for him. Less fortunate others, and this is much of the world's population, are likely continue to turn to religion for help with this. Nevertheless, for those who rate truth at least as highly as emotion, this excellent book is well worth reading.

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Psychiatry in the Scientific Image. By D. Murphy. (Pp. 405; \$35.00, ISBN 0-262-13455-1.) The MIT Press. 2006.

Spanning 400 pages this was no doubt a difficult book to write. It is also a difficult book to read. Many worthwhile things are difficult and *Psychiatry in the Scientific Image* is one of them. Drawing from work in the philosophy of science and the philosophy of mind, Murphy argues that psychiatry should be a branch of medicine which studies brain diseases. As in other areas of medicine, these diseases should be validated etiologically.

Murphy does not accept the biological reductionism that is usually associated with the defense of the medical model. He believes that reducing explanations of psychiatric disorders to genetic and lower level physiological events would not provide the explanations that a 'mature' scientific psychiatry would seek. What would it seek? It would seek to understand *why* people become schizophrenic, depressed, manic, autistic, etc. Answering the 'why' question will require knowing what has gone wrong with the brain, how it got to be that way, and what makes it stay that way. That kind of explanation, says Murphy, is to be found in cognitive neuroscience.

There is also some drama here. For example, Murphy claims that a properly scientific psychiatry, called *clinical cognitive neuroscience*, would not find any use for the conventional distinction between neurology/neuropsychology and psychiatry. Related to his call for a merger, Murphy claims that cases of blindness and diabetic coma should be considered mental illnesses. He declares that psychiatry should adopt the same notions of the mental as used in the cognitive sciences where visual experiences and consciousness are paradigmatic mental events. Like many philosophers, Murphy believes that common-sense assumptions about psychology have been mistakenly allowed to play a regulative role in both psychiatry and clinical psychology.

According to Murphy, something is a mental disorder if it has the right sort of causal history. Aberrant genes and lowered level of serotonin offer unsatisfying explanations of depression,