

Letter to Richard Dawkins

Error in the First Chapter of 'The God Delusion'?

Zahir Ebrahim

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To: Mr. Richard Dawkins,

Subject: Error in The First Chapter of: The God Delusion(?)
(<http://richarddawkins.net/firstChapter,1>)

Dated: February 18, 2008

Dear Mr. Dawkins,

While reading the first few paragraphs of the first chapter of this interestingly titled book, I came across the following assertion in the very first passages:

There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved.

Carl Sagan, in *Pale Blue Dot*, wrote:

How is it that hardly any major religion has looked at science and concluded, 'This is better than we thought! The Universe is much bigger than our prophets said, grander, more

subtle, more elegant'? Instead they say, 'No, no, no! My god is a little god, and I want him to stay that way.' A religion, old or new, that stressed the magnificence of the Universe as revealed by modern science might be able to draw forth reserves of reverence and awe hardly tapped by the conventional faiths.

All Sagan's books touch the nerve-endings of transcendent wonder that religion monopolized in past centuries. My own books have the same aspiration.

The underlined assertion in question is one attributed to Carl Sagan above. And since Mr. Dawkins claims “My own books have the same aspiration”, and also, further on quotes “The Nobel Prize-winning physicist (and atheist) Steven Weinberg”, I thought it à propos to draw Mr. Dawkins' kind attention to what the sharer of the same Nobel Prize in Physics, the same year for the same topic, stated in the 'Banquet speech' after accepting his one-third of that much wonted glory as rationalists par excellence

(http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/physics/laureates/1979/salam-speech.html):

On behalf of my colleagues, Professor Glashow and Weinberg, I thank the Nobel Foundation and the Royal Academy of Sciences for the great honour and the courtesies extended to us, including the courtesy to me of being addressed in my language Urdu.

پاکستان اس کے لیے آپ کے مشکور ہے۔

Pakistan is deeply indebted to you for this.

The creation of Physics is the shared heritage of all mankind. East and West, North and South have equally participated in it. In the Holy Book of Islam, Allah says

مَا تَرَى فِي
خَلْقِ الرَّحْمٰنِ مِنْ تَفْوِیْٓتٍ فَاَرْجِعِ الْبَصَرَ
تَرَى مِنْ نُطُوْرٍ ۝
ثُمَّ اَرْجِعِ الْبَصَرَ كَرَّتَيْنِ يَنْقَلِبْ اِلَيْكَ الْبَصَرُ
خَائِسًا ذَلُوْمًا حَسِيْرًا ۝

“Thou seest not, in the creation of the All-merciful any imperfection, Return thy gaze, seest thou any fissure. Then Return thy gaze, again and again. Thy gaze, Comes back to thee dazzled, awery.”

This in effect is, the faith of all physicists; the deeper we seek, the more is our wonder excited, the more is the dazzlement for our gaze.

The point being, the quoted verses (in bold) of the Qur'an above (67:3-4) do exactly what Carl Sagan presumably lamented and what Dawkins ostensibly shares in [Sagan's lament], by his own admission. I have also seen similar expressions of wonderment in the Vedas and the Bhagvat Gita (though I am unable to cite them off the top of my head at the moment).

It might help Mr. Dawkins argue his case better - if his sole intent is not to preach to the choir, or push an agenda whatever its merit, but to be a genuine 'truth' seeker, a scientist, a discoverer, before he can be an exponent – if he also became a bit knowledgeable of the subject matter in which he pontificates.

Most of Mr. Dawkins' objections, it appears, are drawn from the Judeo-Christian history and narrative of the subject matter, and as the above example from the Qur'an sufficiently proves, does not necessarily extrapolate (easily) to the Eastern conceptions of the subject matter (in their original exposition minus their cultural distortions and colored-manifestations due to which, in order to acquire sufficient credible expertise, one has to be minimally fluent in their original languages, in this case Arabic and Sanskrit, and read the original works).

Comprehension, as in all matters, and as in physics and biology, comes much later, and deepest comprehension comes, and certainly only after at least acquiring accurate factual knowledge of the subject matter that can be had, through much reflection. Deep comprehension is far more precious and contributory to human knowledge and understanding of 'how it all happened' than mere recitation of imposing data and voluminous facts and figures (which, as every good scientist knows, is often quite ephemeral and continually evolving in 'what it means').

Some have it, obviously, and quite enduringly, like Newton and Darwin, both scientist par excellence in their respective fields with an enviable factual mastery over their domains of articulation some of which still holds centuries later, leaving a lasting impact on others by their deeper insights; while others, mere chimps and wannabes, pick on populist themes in the culture du jour merely chasing the glory and notoriety their entire lives, and are mercifully forgotten the moment they are six feet under and food for the 'same' maggots. What perhaps distinguishes one from the other, minimally, is at least the former cannot be caught by a simple layman (like this humble plebeian) in such glaring ignorance of the subject matter in which one is so expertly pontificating.

As Abdus Salam quoted Einstein in the Nobel Lecture (http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/physics/laureates/1979/salam-lecture.pdf): *'I believe, however, that the following quote from Einstein's Herbert Spencer lecture of 1933 expresses his, my colleagues' and my own views more accurately. "Pure logical thinking cannot yield us any knowledge of the empirical world; all knowledge of reality starts from experience and ends in it." ' And surely, even on such a subject matter as 'God', and 'how it all came about', of which at least the latter pertains to empirical world, 'all knowledge of reality starts from experience and ends in it.'* Other than that, one's 'virtuous' speculations, either side of the divide, are as good as another's! **Most call that 'beliefs'.**

Unfortunately, since Mr. Dawkins 'speculations' fall short in the very first passages of the very first chapter that he has so generously made available for free on his website to whet the appetite of prospective readers, I fear I would have to pass this otherwise fantastically titled book and perhaps wait for his next, hopefully more carefully researched one that more

accurately captures the factual reality of the domain over which he so authoritatively writes.

I am genuinely looking forward to seeing the world from a real rationalist's lens – being of considerably limited capabilities myself – if only I can find one (a teacher) who is genuinely knowledgeable, non-agendist, non-indoctrinated, and non-fundamentalist truth seeker. I define a 'fundamentalist' as one who has unexamined axioms - in any field. And I find that science, interestingly enough, is as populated by them as any other 'religion'. I hope Mr. Dawkins isn't among them.

And I further hope that Mr. Dawkins can recognize that the only strict scientifically tenable position on the subject matter – unless one claims to be the 'all knowing', 'perfect' in knowledge 'god' – is agnostic. That was the argument of Bertrand Russell (in his conversation with a priest broadcast on radio in New York, and reproduced in his essay compilation titled 'why I am not a Christian', where he conceded that his position can no more be 'proved' than his antagonists', and in that sense he was agnostic). The rest is a matter of personal beliefs, no differently for a theist, than for an a-theist. Unless one commences from Bertrand Russell's strictly scientific proposition – agnosticism – and compelling demonstrates either swing, one is as vacuous as any 'pir' in any 'religion'.

May I further, and lastly, humbly indicate a personal bias, that I don't perceive any Earthly 'orchestra' unable to play Mozart or Beethoven faithfully, being a compelling evidence for a super-rational Martian, of the non-brilliance or non-existence of Mozart or Beethoven. I hope that captures, and singularly refutes, the essence of many of the 'utilitarian' style arguments that I normally see agendist atheists propose in disfavor of religion. An honest atheist is an agnostic – and commences his discovery mission from that position with an open mind – and upon encountering such dismal 'orchestras' and abuse of 'music', instead of concluding that humanbeings don't know how to construct beautiful music, might rationally conclude that perhaps the fault might be with the Neanderthal 'orchestras' and that there is no way of asserting anything about the composer using 'orchestra's' cacophonies as evidence. Conversely, I found Richard Feynman's 'out of body' experiment in a sensory deprivation tank quite illuminating and insightful of his open mindedness to experiment in alternate forms of knowledge exploration/acquisition as a scientific paradigm, and its informal acceptance by the scientific world upon the mere word of a credible name in its field, with none dare calling him a 'lunatic', a 'fringe', or diminishing his stature as the foremost scientist of his era, illustrative. When Feynman finally noted his success by actually 'seeing himself float' in the unusual series of experiments, with these words *“no known laws of physics were violated”*, and almost every scientist I have ever met accepted it as a reality of Feynman's 'scientific' experience, then if that was a criteria of the most stellar scientific mind of the twentieth century to not invalidate a personal experience that no one else can 'scientifically' reproduce (as is normally understood by repeatability and reproducibility if known variables are similarly controlled), then I see little reason not to apply the same subjective yardstick to others with similar (or higher) credibility in their own domains as well. This is the realm claimed by 'prophets'. I don't, a priori, necessarily find any reason to deny subjective experience just because I can't experience it myself,

especially when such experience is preceded with a lifetime of established credibility that has been amazingly documented. (Again, there is more to the world, and its history, and to its civilizations, and to its cumulative heritage and wisdom, than the Judeo-Christian world of Europe and its legatees in the North postulate, and is entirely evidenced in the assumptions and presuppositions that seem to have gone into constructing the thesis by Dawkins given his unfamiliarity with the subject matter from other civilizations). If I were to deny all personal testimonies and evidences, then, apart from the world's judicial system and eye-witnesses ending up in trouble, I would (if I were a physician) also end up denying others' headaches as well – and be sued up the wazoo – for I am reliably informed by my medical scientist and doctor friends that diagnosing a patient's headache remains an objective headache of the medical profession to this very day! The medical profession throughout the world takes it seriously when someone 'credibly' (i.e., non-hypochondriacally) complains of one – without there being any non-subjective, non-personal, diagnostic evidence for it. Just some food for thought that needs to be taken into consideration when forwarding arguments for non-existence and 'God Delusion' as genuine scientists rather than as exponents of personal agendas. Taken to its extreme of course, every 'Napoleon' in a mental hospital ought to be set free and sent to Corsica – which is why the notion of established 'credibility' of the 'testifier' is noted explicitly here. The evidence of a testifier is treated as 'valid' unless his or her 'credibility' can be convincingly demolished first – and those demolishing it are also put to the scrutiny to examine their hidden-agendas, manipulations, and objectivity – that is the civilizational norm and fair-play expected by any plaintiff in any fair court of law , or so I am told.

Since the harbingers of these 'religions' that preached the existence of 'god' in antiquity aren't here today, the least fair-play [in order to discredit their teachings in modernity du jour] would be to accurately know what is it that they have factually conveyed, in letter, in spirit, and in context in their own lingua franca of the times. A tall order, to say the least. [Examining their credibility in antiquity, and how such credibility might hold up with today's norms and yardsticks would obviously be the next step in order to adjudicate quackhood from sagehood.]

This is of course quite a different line of reasoning. Apart from it being relevant (as noted above, and only a fanatic would deny the truism that commanding detailed knowledge and understanding of the subject matter that one is choosing to refute is always useful in any discourse), it is also most useful (unless one's audience is one's own choir) for illuminating us poor plebeians who aren't endowed with huge 'scientific' minds and are often victims of upbringing, culture, indoctrination, innate need for a 'big brother' watching over us, or equally innate susceptibility to search for 'VJ' (Start-Trek) – the 'god' gene – and unable to know all the modalities and nuances of the subject matter. To teach us of what we know not, as self-proclaimed experts, bring credibility as a 'testifier'. Show us that you even know of what you purport to refute – one humanbeing to another. Forget the 'ubermensch' scientist inside you and come down to our level to teach us – as did the exponents who taught the contrary – if you wish to credibly refute their legacy!

Feel free to carry this letter on your website if you deem it appropriate, or even mildly useful. I

look forward to a more accurate, and perhaps also enlightened book in the future.

Kind Regards,

Zahir Ebrahim

the plebeian,

founder, [project humanbeingsfirst.org](http://project.humanbeingsfirst.org)

The author, an ordinary researcher and writer on contemporary geopolitics, a minor justice activist, grew up in Pakistan, studied EECS at MIT, engineered for a while in high-tech Silicon Valley (patents [here](#)), and retired early to pursue other responsible interests. His maiden 2003 book was rejected by six publishers and can be read on the web at <http://PrisonersoftheCave.org>. He may be reached at <http://Humanbeingsfirst.org>.

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