

Evolution Answers Book?

A review of
The Magic of Reality
by Richard Dawkins
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Richard Dawkins' latest book, *The Magic of Reality* (MOR), is quite unlike his previous works, not least because he would like children to read it. Certainly, there is little doubt that the colourful, eye-catching artwork of his collaborator and illustrator Dave McKean¹ has enhanced its accessibility and considerably extended its reach. So, what kind of book is it? It's a well-written, engaging, wide-ranging romp through all sorts of interesting questions about life and science. But, to borrow the words of nineteenth-century geologist Adam Sedgwick,

"From first to last it is a dish of rank materialism cleverly cooked up And why is this done? For no other reason, I am sure, except to make us independent of a Creator."²

Others have reached a similar conclusion. Writing in London's *Financial Times*, Neville Hawcock writes:

"'Give me the child', the Jesuit maxim is supposed to have run, 'and I will give you the man'. But not if Richard Dawkins gets there first. The arch-atheist's new book, *The Magic of Reality*, is designed to inoculate tender minds once and for all against the supernatural and its apologists."³

Actually, Hawcock considers that "the text is persuasive whatever one's age".³ Unquestionably, unwary readers are very likely to be influenced towards atheism by this book.

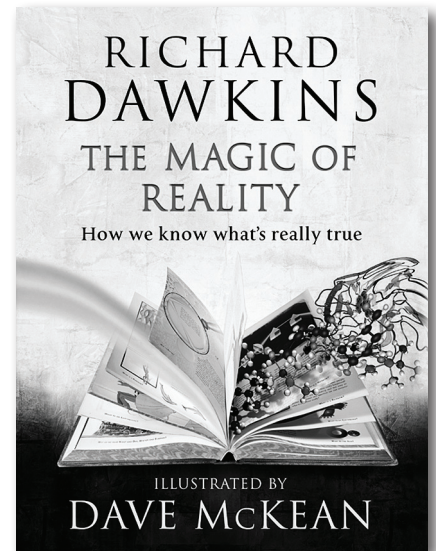
The book is divided into a dozen chapters, the headings of which quickly reveal that this is Dawkins' attempt at a materialist's *Answers book*. For instance: *Who was the first person? Why are there so many different kinds of animals? What is the sun? What is a rainbow? When and how did everything begin? Are we alone? Why do bad things happen? What is a miracle?* This is atheistic-style 'creation apologetics'. However, this latest salvo falls well short. Most chapters begin by recounting various myths and often include a slight of the early chapters of Genesis, treating them as similarly mythological. A notable exception is chapter four, *What are things made of?* In explaining why, Dawkins insinuates that the lack of information about subatomic particles, cancer treatments, explanations of gravity and combustion engines, germs, nuclear fusion, electricity, and anaesthetics—is evidence against the supernatural (p. 95):

"If these 'holy books' really were written, or dictated, or inspired, by all-knowing gods, don't you think it's odd that those gods said nothing about any of these important and useful things?"

Clearly, it is the biblical God that Dawkins is really railing against here. One can sense the embarrassment that such an asinine statement must cause Dawkins' more sophisticated readers, including many of his fellow atheists.⁴

Materialism's cheap thrills

In the first chapter, the author sets out to define his terms. So, 'magic' will be used in this book, he says, to connote 'poetic magic' rather than 'supernatural magic' or 'stage magic'. Poetic magic is to be overcome with exhilaration on viewing a beautiful sunset or listening to a wonderful piece of music. It's to be full of joy



through some remarkable experience, "something that makes us feel more fully alive" (p. 22). This is all well and good, but makes absolutely no sense within the worldview that the author espouses. After all, Dawkins is adamant that we humans are a fortuitous cosmic afterthought—merely the happenstance of random atomic collisions in a purposeless, pitiless, indifferent universe. If so, *feelings* of being 'alive' amount to precisely nothing. They have no intrinsic value. This is the quandary into which all professing atheists place themselves. It is logically impossible to find meaning in life within an atheist paradigm—unless, that is, one deceitfully steals notions of human worth and dignity from a worldview in which people are God's image-bearers.

Likewise, when Dawkins talks about things that are 'beautiful', 'pure magic', 'gorgeous', or 'deeply moving' (p. 22), it is a futile attempt to snatch territory from believers in God. Unsurprisingly, he tries to make out that supernatural explanations are bad because they rule out the possibility of *explaining* something empirically, including the feelings just listed. Thus, talking of emotions like jealousy, joy, happiness, and love, he audaciously claims:

“These emotions are intensely real to those who experience them, but they didn’t exist before brains did” (p. 19).

This is tantamount to a claim to omniscience on the author’s part—he might as well have said “Materialism rules! Ok?”

Reality is? ... whatever Prof. Dawkins says it is!

‘Reality’ is said to involve the existence of entities that can be verified with our five senses or using scientific instruments. The context of these remarks is the nuts and bolts things in the physical world, although he has subtly ruled out the existence of the metaphysical or supernatural already. Yet, he states that fossils “tell us something about what happened millions of years ago” (p. 14), immediately opting out of his own definition of ‘reality’, for it is quite certain that a ‘millions of years’ age is not the result of the empiricism he claims to advocate.

Dawkins’ view of ‘what reality is’ does encompass “things that exist but that we don’t know about yet” (p. 15) but he forestalls the temptation of some people to indulge in theistic belief by adding “the only good reason to believe that something exists is if there is real evidence that it does” (p. 16). This is reminiscent of the author’s letter to his daughter Juliet (ten years old at the time) in which he warned her “against three bad reasons for believing anything. ... ‘tradition’, ‘authority’ and ‘revelation’”.⁵ He concluded that letter with this advice:

Poetic magic [says Dawkins] is “something that makes us feel more fully alive” [but] Dawkins is adamant that we humans are ... merely the happenchance of random atomic collisions in a purposeless, pitiless, indifferent universe. If so, *feelings* of being ‘alive’ amount to precisely nothing. They have no intrinsic value. This is the quandary into which all professing atheists place themselves.

“And, next time somebody tells you that something is true, why not say to them: ‘What kind of evidence is there for that?’ And if they can’t give you a good answer, I hope you’ll think very carefully before you believe a word they say.”⁶

This would seem to be sound advice, on the face of it, though it is patently self-serving rhetoric.

The slow magic of evolution⁷

Dawkins’ MOR is chock full of ‘facts’ that are anything but:

“... we know, as a fact, that every living thing ... has evolved from other, originally simpler forms” (p. 27).

How do we know that? Dawkins proceeds to outline hypothetical breeding experiments to produce longer-legged frogs (in 20+ generations), then extrapolates this to breeding frogs from newts over thousands of generations. Other examples are added as Dawkins moves seamlessly from artificial (i.e. intelligently guided) selection into *natural* selection. It has all been about non-controversial intrakind variation so far, but now that natural selection has been introduced, the usual bait-and-switch takes place:

“Given enough generations, ... ancestors that look like fish *can* change into descendants that look like monkeys. Given yet more generations, ancestors that look like bacteria *can* change into descendants that look like humans. *And this is exactly what happened [emphases added]*” (p. 30).

Having assured the reader that he was avoiding “chance or luck or anything remotely ‘magical’ at all” (p. 27), one has to admire this master evolutionary magician for his adept sleight of hand.

Definitions, it has been well said, are as slippery as eels. In a discussion of animal survival and selection, Dawkins gives an interesting definition of evolution (repeated in so many words a sentence later):

“Evolution means a change in a gene pool. Change in a gene pool means that some genes become more numerous, others less” (p. 73).

Many biologists would disagree. For instance, does the gene pool change when gene *number* remains constant but allele⁸ number increases or decreases? Manifestly it does, sometimes with radical consequences for the phenotypes of the organisms concerned. This shows how crucial it is for a tight definition of terms to be agreed upon before any meaningful engagement between creationist and evolutionist biologists can take place. Dawkins fallaciously follows this definition with a rather crass statement:

“Why should the numbers of different genes change as the generations go by? Well, you might say it would be surprising if they didn’t, given such immensities of time” (p. 73).

This kind of lazy argumentation merely begs the question.

Unassailable ‘facts’

Dawkins and other evolutionary popularizers are renowned for employing the tactic of equivocation. Once he has warmed up to his favourite theme, and suckered his young (or naïve) readers, he is careful *not* to restrict his message to those pesky facts which are only verifiable by using one’s senses or through scientific instruments. MOR is, after all, very much about inoculating young minds against the supernatural, against God:

“This is Darwin’s great idea, ... one of the most important ideas ever to occur to a human mind. *It explains everything we know* about life on Earth.” ... “Human brains and human hands evolved by natural selection, just as surely as newts’ tails and frogs’ legs did.” ... “Once again, no magic. Once again, no trickery. Once again, everything beautifully and simply explained [emphasis added]” (p. 31).

Dawkins liberally uses such opinionated hyperbole in MOR:

“... mice, buffaloes, iguanas, wallabies, snails, dandelions, golden eagles, mushrooms, whales, wombats and bacteria. All are our cousins. Every last one of them. ... And the most wonderful thing of all is that we know for certain it is literally true” (p. 52).

“Next time you see an animal—any animal—or any plant, look at it and say to yourself: ... I’m looking at a survival machine for genes. Next time you look in a mirror, just think: that is what you are too” (pp. 74–75).

“The more you think about it, the more you realize that the very idea of a supernatural miracle is nonsense” (p. 264).

“It is a beautiful fact that many of the different radioactive clocks have overlapping timescales, so we can use them to check up on each other. And they always agree” (p. 44).

But Dawkins is either very ignorant or is lying here, as different dating methods *frequently* give discordant results.⁹

Meet your ancestors?

Dawkins recounts some Australian Aboriginal and Norse legends of human creation, arguing that Genesis is one such *story*. He scoffs at those who believe it—and even more at those who



Figure 1. “You have arrived at Station stop 185-million-years ago. Leave the time-machine here to meet your great-great-grand-fish-parents!” Evolution according to Dawkins, Hans Christian Andersen-style.

disbelieve it while reluctant to release hold of its theological message:

“To this day, the story of Adam’s and Eve’s terrible disobedience is still taken seriously by many people under the name of ‘original sin’. Some people even believe we have all inherited this ‘original sin’ from Adam (although many of them admit that Adam never actually existed!), and share in his guilt” (p. 35).

Who was the first person? Dawkins answers: “This may surprise you, but there never was a first person—because every person had to have parents and those parents had to be people too! Same with rabbits” (p. 38).

He then asks his readers to take part in various thought experiments, an imaginary 3-mile stack of photos of ancestors going back into time or a series of ‘station stop’ visits to meet distant relatives using a time-machine (pp. 40–49). What, then, did your very distant relative look like?

“Your 185-million-greats-grandfather was a fish. So was your 185-million-greats-grandmother, which is just as well or they wouldn’t have mated with each other and you wouldn’t be here” (p. 40).

Keep in mind that this is written neither as fairy tale nor comedy—Dawkins is quite serious, albeit he does acknowledge that it’s “hard for some people to appreciate” these claims (p. 46)! His point is that adjacent pictures look very similar, the change taking place in *tiny* steps. A deceptive analogy follows, the gist of which is that, during development from baby to adult, you wake up as a slightly different person each day; “the change happens so gradually that there never is a day when you can say, ‘This person has suddenly stopped being a baby and become a toddler’” (p. 40). The flaw, of course, is that human development is an entelechy, not a phylogeny—a person’s growth and development actualizes the potency (i.e. the genetic program and epigenetic factors) that *already exists* in its entirety *from conception*. It has nothing to do with alleged novel evolutionary changes over deep time, which would necessitate *incremental increases* in specified genetic information.

Nineteenth-century Danish author Hans Christian Andersen is reputed to have said, “Life itself is the most wonderful fairy tale” and Richard Dawkins does him proud:

“On we go, back and back, ten thousand years at a time Let’s pause to see who greets us when we reach Station Sixty-Three Million Years Ago. Here we can shake hands (paws?) with our seven-million-greats-grand-parents. They look something like lemurs or bushbabies Let’s welcome them aboard the time machine, and speed on backwards” (p. 47) (figure 1).

This section of the book is a summary of Dawkins’ fuller treatment in *The Ancestor’s Tale*.¹⁰ As evidence for his Kiplingesque story, Dawkins cites fossils and DNA. Regarding fossils, he confidently asserts the reliability of their assigned mega-

annum ages on the authority of radioactive dating methods, but nowhere acknowledges their inherent assumptions. His discussion of DNA is the tired argument of relatedness by virtue of similarities in the nucleotide letter sequence of genes. As effective propaganda, it scores highly—objective science writing it is not. The fallacies of such arguments from homology (whether anatomical or genetic) are readily refuted.¹¹

Animals and tongues after their kind

Dawkins dispels the Tower of Babel as myth. Yet, having acknowledged that Genesis claims to account for “why there are so many different languages”, he says something of interest to creationists:

“... there is a resemblance between language evolution and animal evolution But there doesn't seem to be any myth that specifically tackles the sheer *number of different kinds* of animals [emphasis in original]” (p. 55).

Dawkins then sets out to explain biology's marvellous variety. Predictably, the deliberate straw man fallacy of equating the Genesis kinds to species¹² is foisted on vulnerable readers (setting the stage for his ‘rational’ argument that follows):

“Adam's task of naming all the animals was a tough one It's been estimated that about 2 million species have so far been given scientific names ...” (p. 58).

Outlining animal classification, Dawkins weds this to the evolutionary ‘family tree’, with no

acknowledgement that taxonomic nomenclature predated evolution, or that it was in fact developed by creationists. Absent, too, is any mention of the real controversy existing among evolutionists today, as to the validity of the ‘Tree of life’ concept.¹³ Instead, he moves straight into a comparison of animal evolution with the Indo-European language family tree (pp. 61–65). There *are* some parallels between the diversification of languages and of animals (cf. speciation)—as when Dawkins is talking about the influence of biogeographical factors on iguanas (pp. 65–71). However, ever the propagandist, Dawkins presses this much too far,¹⁴ claiming that:

“After enough hundreds of millions of years have passed, the descendants of a single ancestral species can be as different as, say, a cockroach is from a crocodile” (p. 71).

In the last analysis, one should not be surprised by the absence of compelling supporting evidence for such campfire stories.

Things astronomical and meteorological

In chapter six, having used his usual ‘guilt by association’ tactic, allying the sun's creation in Genesis with pagan myths, Dawkins turns to the scientific ‘reality’ of this heavenly body. Perceptive readers should notice that the simple statement (from Genesis 1:16) of God's creation of the sun as “the greater light to rule the day” (p. 123) is entirely compatible with most of what follows, namely the recounting of uncontroversial solar facts. Inevitably, though, the “We are

stardust” mantra makes an appearance (p. 131) as does the formation of the solar system from a spinning dust and gas cloud billions of years ago, with not a whisper of any of the many problems with this notion.¹⁵

In a chapter on rainbows, readers are introduced to the Sumerian ‘Epic of Gilgamesh’. Following the unleashing of a flood upon mankind by the gods, one of them, “Ishtar, created the first rainbow, as a token of the gods' promise to send no more terrible floods.” Ever reliable as a devout misrepresenter of the Bible, Dawkins claims that the latter is “the same as the more recent story of Noah's Ark, with one or two minor differences” (p. 142).¹⁶ The side-swipe at Scripture over, the author turns his attention to the ‘real magic of the rainbow’. The optical experiments of Isaac Newton, “who may well have been the greatest scientist ever” (p. 148) are recounted, studiously avoiding any mention of his belief in those Genesis ‘myths’. This nefarious setting of science against Scripture, chapter after chapter, is especially galling in view of his repeated invocation of great *creationist* scientists like Newton and Kepler.

Home alone?

The ninth chapter of MOR differs from the others in “emphasiz[ing] what we don't know, rather than what we do” (p. 202) and by commencing with a discussion of *modern* myths (in this case relating to UFO cults). All of the issues covered—alien abductions, ‘lost’ memory/false memory syndrome, sleep paralysis, extra-solar planets, appearance of aliens—are comprehensively dealt with in the book *Alien Intrusion*.¹⁷ Arguing that ‘nobody knows’ whether there is life on other planets, Dawkins comments,

“One of the great virtues of science is that scientists know when they don't know the answer to something. They cheerfully admit that they don't know” (p. 188).

Seemingly oblivious to another delicious irony, Dawkins rounds off a section of his book that is replete with wildly implausible stories of ET life by cautioning his readers, “*We don't have to invent wildly implausible stories: we have the joy and excitement of real scientific investigation and discovery to keep our imaginations in line. And in the end that is more exciting than fantasy.*”

The author of MOR is not exactly renowned for such a dispassionate attitude!

Asked on BBC radio¹⁸ “What do you believe to be true but cannot prove?” he confidently replied “Darwinism is the explanation for life on this planet, but *I believe* that all intelligence, all creativity, and all design *anywhere in the universe* is the direct or indirect product of Darwinian natural selection” [emphasis added].¹⁹ No cheerful admission here of his ignorance of extraterrestrial living organisms or whether Darwinian principles operate elsewhere in the universe! Seemingly oblivious to another delicious irony, Dawkins rounds off a section of his book that is replete with wildly implausible stories of ET life by cautioning his readers,

“We don’t have to invent wildly implausible stories: we have the joy and excitement of real scientific investigation and discovery to keep our imaginations in line. And in the end that is more exciting than fantasy [emphasis added]” (p. 202).

Demythologizing disasters and disease

Dawkins uses the pages of MOR to give his take on natural disasters (earthquakes, tsunamis and hurricanes), predation, disease and illness—not only the how, but *why* they happen. Before outlining the principles of plate tectonics, outlandish earthquake myths from Japan, New Zealand, Siberia and Africa are recounted. These are lumped together with the biblical accounts of the downfall of Sodom and Gomorrah and of Jericho, alleged to be myths that arose *following* destructive earthquakes. Alfred Wegener’s suggestion of the movement of the continents is mentioned (p. 217) but not the fact that he was preceded, by more than half a century (1858), by *creationist* Antonio Snider-Pellegrini. The ‘standard’ uniformitarian story of continental drift is taught as reality. Unsurprisingly, there is no mention of the dissent of

other evolutionary scientists about this theory, nor of the competing scientific model of ‘Catastrophic Plate Tectonics’ advocated by many creationists.²⁰

Regarding bad things in general, Dawkins says, “Lots of peoples believe that their gods intended to created a perfect world but unfortunately something went wrong” and “There are lots of legends about how death came into the world” (p. 227). The obvious insinuation is that there is no factual basis to such beliefs:

“Once, when I was at school, our teacher asked us to think about why diseases happen. One boy put his hand up and suggested that it was because of ‘sin’! There are many people, even today, who think something like that is the cause of bad things generally” (p. 230).

The “mythical crime” of Adam and Eve becomes Exhibit A to show their credulity (figure 2). It is more obvious here than elsewhere in MOR that Dawkins is attempting to give a counter-apologetic to that of creationists. One has to wonder whether he has not, in fact, read something akin to *The Creation Answers Book*.

During a discourse about chance and luck in evolutionary struggles of predator and prey, Dawkins gives natural selection an unusual twist:

“Natural selection, the struggle for existence as Darwin called it, means that every living creature has enemies that are working hard for its downfall” (p. 238).

Not exactly a textbook definition! His point is that animals are ‘out to get’ their prey—or parasites, their hosts—simply because they have been shaped that way by natural selection. Thus death and disease are merely contingencies of the evolutionary process. Yet, at no point does Dawkins really address his question, ‘Why do



Figure 2. Dawkins says, “There are lots of legends about how death came into the world”, insinuating that Adam and Eve’s rebellion was merely a ‘mythical crime’. Instead, he attempts to give his own ‘counter-apologetic’ to Genesis 3.

bad things happen?’ For example, cancers are ‘bad’ and ‘dangerous’, but no explanation is offered as to *how* (let alone *why*) they now exist. This most tantalising chapter of the book fizzles out like a damp fire-cracker with a speculative thought:

“Could it be that the explanation of auto-immune diseases is that they are evidence of evolution’s work-in-progress on an effective weapon against cancer? What do you think?” (p. 245).

Absent is any rationale as to why cancers or auto-immune disease are ‘bad’ if we live in a cosmic-accident-caused universe indifferent to human suffering.

Miracles

Only a few sentences into the last chapter, Dawkins returns for the umpteenth time to a round of Bible-bashing, this time from the New Testament:

“... there is a legend that, about 2,000 years ago, a wandering Jewish preacher called Jesus was at a wedding where they ran out of wine. So he called for some water and used miraculous powers to turn it into wine... People who would laugh at the idea that a pumpkin could turn into a coach ... are quite happy to believe that a prophet turned water into wine ...” (p. 247).

A far as Dawkins is concerned, all miracle stories grow in the telling in much the same manner as ghost stories. He offers three possibilities for the miracle at Cana: it actually happened, it was a ‘clever conjuring trick’, or it was a fictional story. Since a real miracle would violate scientific principles, he claims, he rules that out and he doesn’t think much of option two, “given the lack of evidence that the incident occurred at all” (pp. 262–263). Hey presto, it was a made-up story! Such *ipse dixit* reasoning merely portrays Dawkins’ self-confidence rather than his supposed power of argument.²¹

But this paragon of science lore, biblical history, and theology has not finished stabbing away at Christianity yet, and he manifests his embarrassing ignorance once again:

“As it happens, we know that lots of fiction has been made up about this particular preacher called Jesus.”

and

“All four of the gospels, by the way, were written long after the events that they purport to describe, and not one of them by an eye witness” (p. 262).

A justifiable riposte would be, “we know that lots of fiction has been made up by this particular evolutionary propagandist called Richard.” One doesn’t need a doctorate in biblical studies to know that Matthew and John were both eyewitnesses of the events they describe in their Gospels. Or that Luke is acknowledged, even by secular authors, to have been a careful historian who used both written material and eyewitness testimony. And as to the dates, all four Gospels are typically considered to have been written within a few decades of AD 33.

That you may know the truth ...

Dawkins finishes MOR with a plea that his readers *accept* mysteries,

things we don’t yet understand but which science may one day solve. The truth of science, he argues—not of ‘supernatural’ myth or miracle—has its own magic, that of reality. One hopes that some readers—including youngsters—will realise the intellectual poverty of Dawkins’ bluff and bluster and discover genuinely satisfying answers to life’s big questions in the very Scriptures that he spends so much time attacking.

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