

**FEATURE: Explanations versus Non-Explanations
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VOICE: Professor, I've been reading Richard Dawkins again. He says religion makes people "satisfied with non-explanations for things as though they were explanations."

PROF.: Let's discuss how to discern the difference between an explanation and a "non-explanation."

FORMAT: THEME AND ANNOUNCEMENT

VOICE: In 1976, Oxford University professor Dr. Richard Dawkins invented a new concept, which he called a "meme" [pronounced MEEM]. He defines a meme as a unit of cultural information, the building block of cultural evolution or diffusion.

In simpler words, he thinks a meme is an idea that passes from one mind to other minds.

PROF.: Dawkins speculates that a meme passes in a manner similar to the way a gene propagates from one organism to another. He illustrates his idea by claiming that tunes, catch-phrases,¹ beliefs, and fashions in clothing, are memes.

He claims that memes evolve by natural selection through variation, mutation, competition, and inheritance influencing an individual entity's reproductive success.

VOICE: Dawkins insists that memes make some ideas survive, spread, and mutate widely, while others propagate less successfully and become extinct. But he claims that "survival of the fittest" doesn't always pertain to memes. He says some *very unfit ideas* have survived for centuries. He thinks one idea that doesn't deserve to survive, is religion.

¹ Slogans, ideas simple enough to be printed on "bumper stickers" and placed on the back of a car.

- PROF.: That's a good summary of what Dawkins means by "meme." Let's evaluate the idea.
- Roger Steer begins chapter 9 of his book, *Letter to an Influential Atheist*, by telling Dawkins, "You coined the word 'meme' to describe cultural entities which replicate in rather the same way that DNA does. ...[Y]ou...say... 'the survival of the god meme...results from its great psychological appeal. It provides a superficially plausible answer to deep and troubling questions about existence.'"
- VOICE: The idea of a God who is just and fair suggests that injustices in this world may be corrected in the next world. The "everlasting arms" of God hold out a cushion against our own inadequacies."
- PROF.: He compares religion to a doctor's placebo, a pill with no medicinal value, but that makes a patient feel better by making him imagine that he's being helped.
- VOICE: But is there such a thing as a meme? Does it exist anywhere except in Dawkins' imagination?
- PROF.: No one has ever detected one in the laboratory. And, in the thirty years since Dawkins invented the idea, most scholars have not accepted it.
- For example, British scholar Denis Alexander analyzes what similarity there might be between genes and the hypothetical memes. In his words, "It is simply not the case that ideas or beliefs are transmitted in a way similar to genes. Genes are transmitted as DNA sequences incorporated into chromosomes. The communication of ideas and beliefs is made by verbal, pictorial or written communication and is nothing like DNA replication..."
- VOICE: We can't control what genes we inherit, but we can choose what beliefs we accept.
- PROF.: Dawkins argues that a "God-meme" makes people believe in God. Oxford University professor Alister McGrath disputes that it exists. But he says if it does, "Isn't atheism also the result of a meme?"

- VOICE: If belief in God is something we inherit from someone else, *dis-belief* would originate the same way!
- PROF.: When Dawkins was interviewed in 2002 by the British Humanist Association, he said, “Religion teaches you to be satisfied with non-explanations for things as though they were explanations and, in some cases even [teaches] that belief without evidence is a positive virtue. It stifles the sort of investigative approach to the world which I think is an unequivocally good thing and which has led to most of the progress which humanity has made.”
He thinks that religion is actively harmful to genuine education.
- VOICE: That is partly true – in some religions, and even in a few isolated instances of Christianity.
- PROF.: But as a generalization – a “blanket statement”² spoken about all religion – Steer calls it “monstrously unfair.”
Oxford professor Alister McGrath writes, “One of the most characteristic features of Dawkins' atheistic polemic is to present the pathological as if it were normal, the fringe as if it were the center, and crackpots³ as if they were mainstream.”
- VOICE: Dawkins distorts religion by presenting the abnormal as if it were normal, “the fringe as if it were the center, crackpots as if they were mainstream.”
- PROF.: It generally works well for his intended audience, who know little about religion... But it's certainly not scientific.
Steer points out that genuine Christianity is more intellectually solid than atheistic propagandists such as Dawkins want to admit. He quotes a phrase from an eleventh-century archbishop, “faith seeking understanding.” That formula became a rallying cry for Christians who pursued serious scholarship.
- VOICE: “Faith seeking understanding.” I like that phrase.
- PROF.: Because people have been endowed with reason, they have an urge to express their experience of faith intellectually and to formulate beliefs and a systematic understanding of the correlation between God, humankind and creation. Justin Martyr, a professional philosopher, saw Christian revelation as the fulfillment, not the elimination, of philosophical understanding.

2 A statement that the person speaking it claims is universally true in all situations.

3 People who are either crazy or at least eccentric.

VOICE: We discovered in a previous discussion that, in the western world, a belief that God had created the world motivated people to analyze and understand what they considered God's creation. That resulted in the beginning of modern science.

PROF.: And by the sixteenth century, religious leaders encouraged the idea that everyone should be taught to read and write, so that they could read the Bible. This was the beginning of universal public education. So in reality, the Christian religion advanced scientific discovery, and made education more widely available.

VOICE: In an interview on British television, Dawkins said that any Creator who either made the universe or set up the laws of physics so that life would form, would have to be some sort of super-intelligence, some sort of mega-mind.

PROF.: So far he's right. The God who reveals Himself in the Bible, tells us humans, "My thoughts and my ways are not like yours. Just as the heavens are higher than the earth, my thoughts and my ways are higher than yours." (Isaiah 55:9).

VOICE: So God claims that he really is the super-intelligence, the mega-mind.

PROF.: Yes, the One who planned, designed, and built the universe.

VOICE: Dawkins added, "That mega-mind would have had to be present right at the start of the universe."

PROF.: He's right again. God inspired one Bible writer to write this statement to God the Creator: "Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, *even from everlasting to everlasting*, You are God." (Psalm 90:2).

So yes, God the "mega-mind" was "present right at the start of the universe."

VOICE: But here's where Dawkins *disagrees with* the Bible's explanation. He told that same interviewer, "The whole message of evolution is that complexity and intelligence and all the things that would go with being a creative force *come late*. They come as a consequence of hundreds of millions of years of natural selection. There was no intelligence early on in the universe."

PROF.: That's *his interpretation*. But there is no testable evidence to support his statement.

VOICE: Do you mean Dawkins has moved into the kind of activity he accuses Christians of doing – providing “non-explanations for things as though they were explanations”?

PROF.: Yes. Another way of saying it would be “providing *speculations* instead of explanations.”

He continues, “Intelligence arose – it's arisen here, maybe it's arisen on lots of other places in the universe. Maybe somewhere in some other galaxy there is a super-intelligence so colossal that from our point of view it would be a god. But it cannot have been the sort of God that we need to explain the origin of the universe, because it cannot have been there that early.”

Dawkins speculates that an intelligent God couldn't have created the universe, because there would be no intelligence until the universe had evolved for billions of years to create intelligence.

VOICE: What irony! A man who wasn't born until the twentieth century, thinks he knows when the God he doesn't believe in, could have come into existence.

PROF.: Well, the Bible presents a logical alternative. “In the beginning was the Word.” The intelligent, personal God – who thought of what he wanted to make – and then made it!

VOICE: When we look at the marvelous engineering that's so obvious throughout all of nature, it's logical to believe that God – the “mega-mind” – was “present right at the start of the universe.” It's equally logical to believe that he is still in control of the universe he created.

FORMAT: THEME AND ANNOUNCEMENT

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