

Interview with professor. Michael Ruse

Objections to New Atheists; Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett

Interviewer: Masoume Shahgordi

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Hi, can you hear me?

Can you hear me?

- yes,

all right, let me sit up

, okay I am using my wife's phone

, so we'll have to work with this. okay

- yes

yeah thank you very much right so why don't you ask me?

start writing and give me the questions you want me to answer and that sort of thing okay.

yes, about Richard Dawkins's opinions, professor.

my opinion of Richard Dawkins?

okay I think there's two parts to that question

one is Richard Dawkins as a scientist

and the other is Richard Dawkins as an atheist. you know philosopher, theologian, or whatever it is.

let's start with the scientist.

In 1977 Richard Dawkins published the selfish gene and this was a, if you like a popular account of what was going on in sociobiology. The evolution of social behavior, and I think everybody certainly agree with me in saying that this is just a brilliant book.

It's clearly written, it's interesting but it also although it wasn't formal science, it made us think about the issues of you know what it means to be a selfish gene. it doesn't mean to say that humans are selfish. it means that everything we're doing though has to rebound in some way to our benefit. so i mean for instance, you know, you and your husband working together. you give your husband a lot, he gives you things, but ultimately the point is you're having children, and although they're his children they're your children, and you're not going to have children unless you and your husband cooperate. so that's what it means by being a selfish gene.

i mean i suspect you may be a very loving wife and give your husband a lot but ultimately the name of the game in evolution is reproducing.

and by doing all of this, you're reproducing, so your genes are selfish but it doesn't mean to say that you're selfish.

And I think Dawkins explained this to us using metaphors I mean obviously the selfish gene, in a way that no one else had done, and really gave us a sort of an insight into the nature of social behavior ever and how it works and so I would say that, that is one of the most brilliant books of the, let's say the last 50 years. and I don't think my opinion is in any sense strange I think most people almost everybody would say yes! that's absolutely true.

And of course Dawkins published some other books which were interesting but nothing like as groundbreaking as that one and then in 2006 Dawkins changed direction a bit and wrote the book about atheism: The God Delusion.

yes, and this was a very fiery argument for atheism now.

he wasn't the only person doing this. there was the philosopher Daniel Dennett and Sam Harris who was a student but now is a neurobiologist or something else and also the journalist whose name escapes me at the moment but anyway. of course Dawkins has this brilliant ability to write and to write clearly and to write in vivid terms and this.

so in other words in many respects Dawkins wasn't saying anything that others hadn't said before

I mean Bertrand Russell, for instance.

uh when I was growing up, Bertram Russell was doing this sort of thing. so it but Dawkins sort of rephrased it like you did the selfish gene. I mean you could say that Dawkins wasn't the original scientist with the selfish gene but he made us think about it in perhaps in different ways or clearer ways.

and I think most people would say the same about The God Delusion.

now let me put it this way as far as the science of selfish gene are concerned, and I don't think I'm alone in this, I think I would say I very much agree with the agenda what Dawkins is doing and I think you'd find that 90 percent of evolutionary biologists would say yes. I mean then obviously 50 years later, there's going to be arguments about details and things like that. but that's the nature of that's the nature of argumentation so, as I say, I think we would all say that pretty much the selfish gene was an unqualified success.

Now obviously Christians and other believers Muslims for instance, aren't going to like the message of the god delusion. they're going to say no; we think there must be something wrong. but what i think is interesting is a number of philosophers and theologians who aren't necessarily Christians or even believers, they're not they may be atheists or like me, they may be agnostics and what they want to say is at serious levels too often Dawkins trivializes the argument and gets away with things because he doesn't do them sufficiently carefully.

for instance, the problem of evil.

now you know why do bad things happen to nice people?

uh and I mean a lot's been written about this. I'm not saying that everything is good but I think if you're going to argue against the existence of god, then it's up to you to have a look at this and see what people

have said rather than Dawkins is rather given to thinking that because he's had the thought, it must be right.

you know, we've all, I mean I suspect your children have been like that. you know or perhaps your husband you say oh my god no! simply because you think this, it doesn't automatically make it right!

I mean often it's a joke and sometimes it's irritating. Well, I think that's the same with Dawkins. He makes these claim no. i think one of the things I think that made Dawkins particularly powerful and the others, was that at this time I don't know whether it's the same in your country but Christianity was a lot of people were worrying about it, particularly the whole question of catholic priests and sexual abuse it was becoming clear at that time that there was a horrendous problem in the catholic church with priests doing awful things to little boys. Now you can understand why they make them be celibate they don't allow them to have wives. you're 18 or 19 and you become a priest because it's all idealistic and then 25 you get to 25 and realize you want to have sex. I mean you know it's not it's not abnormal it's not evil.

and of course these people don't have wives but they're in positions of power. everybody respects this. oh yes if you want to take the boys away on a camping trip, that's just oh you're the priest I don't mind you doing it I'd be worried if it was the you know the plumber or somebody like that but the fact that the priest is spoke that but of course it turned out that these people and not just one but 10 of them were doing this.

well it was terrible, so it wasn't just that and then of course the other thing which was happening was the in America you've got these evangelical protestants these extreme protestants who don't believe that that uh they don't believe in evolution. and they're anti-abortion and they're very much against homosexuality just at the time when the country is starting to say there's absolutely no reason why two people who are a men two men or two women shouldn't live together and have the you know the ties that we're allowed to have if they want to get married then it's you know it's up to us to allow them I mean to say no is religious and in certainly in the west, we don't have a theocratic society. we have a secular society which particularly says no the way that you're going to behave cannot be dictated by the church and so. I love all these evangelicals and of course it's happening now still and so a lot of people were thinking that religion just, organized religion, just isn't a very good thing and so I think that when Dawkins and the others published these books. there was not just an intellectual receptivity to it but also a social receptivity

yeah, people were sick, people were sick of religion and if realism means god, then we're sick of god. I think an awful lot that happened now i mean as i say, you know the one takes it balanced I mean I would not consider myself an atheist, it's been a long time since I believed in god or that Jesus Christ was the son of god. I did when i was your child, but you know from about the age of 20, those beliefs went and that I thought at 80, they'd be back again but they're not.

So certainly this is something which happened but for me i don't know. it seems to me that the world we live in is so mysterious and there are so many questions we can't answer. i mean why is there a world at all? why is there something rather than nothing?

I don't know what is the relationship between the body and the mind? why is it that a bunch of molecules can think? I mean we've got also we can do a lot of things. we can say yes this part of the brain controls speech and that sort of thing but the ultimate question of what is mind and what is its relationship to body? I just I think it's a mystery.

so my personal feeling is almost and of course I come from a Quaker background and Quakers are big into this so my position is more one of mysticism. I just say it's a mysterious world and maybe sometime

we'll learn about it but we don't learn about it now and I'm not even sure we've got the capability to learn understand it even if we were told.

so as I say I'm an agnostic rather than an atheist and I don't think I'm the only person who finds pushing atheism as a kind of secular religion. I don't know it's a little bit vulgar you know come on come on yes I don't but you know come on don't get up on a board and preach it. you know that makes you worse than some of the preachers, the Christian preachers, so I I'm sure I'm not alone in this. I mean starting Charles Darwin would've been one. he would he certainly thought that atheism it wasn't yes that he wasn't an atheist, but he thought that the people were pushing atheism but tended to be a little bit vulgar, a little bit vulgar, it was much more dignified to say I don't know; I'm not a Christian, I can see all sorts of problems there, but I'm not an atheist because the world is mysterious, I'm an agnostic and I think somebody like Charles Darwin and I feel very much like this. I think that this is the humble way. this is shows this this says you know I'm a human being, it's wonderful and we can learn a lot but it doesn't follow that we can learn everything that there may always be mysteries that we don't know. and I think that's I think that's the way to go. so that's my feeling about Richard Dawkins.

- okay, thank you very much professor. Thank you for your time. And have a good time!