

## Delusions of faith as a science

□ Dawkins's attempt to test the existence of God is as silly as using logic to tear down Santa Claus in the eyes of a child, says Henry Gee.

Henry Gee

In his book *Unweaving The Rainbow*, Richard Dawkins boasts (boasts!) that he told a six-year-old that Father Christmas doesn't exist. His logic was purely scientific - there wouldn't be time for Santa to reach the homes of all the good children in the world in one night.

A few years ago I lampooned this idea with a similarly scientific rebuttal<sup>1</sup>: Santa can do everything he claims provided he is a macroscopic quantum object. In this way he can be in as many places as he likes, provided that he remains extremely cold, and nobody is watching. Not only does this trounce Dawkins' objections, it also works better as a scientific hypothesis, because it accounts for more of the evidence: we now know why Santa is traditionally associated with cold places, and why he does his work while everyone is asleep.

My intention was to show that Dawkins' use of science to question the existence of Santa is nonsense. The reason is that science and belief are two quite different things, and a child's conviction that Santa exists lies firmly in the latter camp.

None of this has stopped Dawkins making the same categorical error in his latest book *The God Delusion* (in which my Santa theory does not, strangely, rate a mention). However, this is not the place for a full review (see [Sermons and straw men](#)). But I would like to take a moment to contest his central assumption, that the existence of God (or, if you like, Santa) is a hypothesis that can be tested scientifically.

### Without proof

The whole point about faith is that it should not be subject to scientific investigation or attempts of proof. Douglas Adams (Dawkins' late friend and author of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*) said, in the voice of God: "I refuse to prove that I exist, for proof denies faith, and without faith I am nothing." Given Dawkins' frequent quotation from Adams, it is odd that this most apposite of statements does not appear in *The God Delusion*.

Dawkins points out that either you believe in God or you don't. But he then proposes that this is wrong; that all either-or statements should be subject to degrees of probability. This assertion does not bear too much investigation, and leads Dawkins into an unintelligible slough about something called 'memplexes' (don't ask) and, interestingly, in a discussion on the anthropic principle, the idea of multiverses — a concept perhaps only marginally less stubborn to scientific falsification than the existence of God.

Yes, the scientific process is not a parade of absolutes. Science is relative. Faith, however, is absolute.

Logical argument doesn't really help to support or refute such propositions. I suspect Dawkins is quite frustrated by that, as he reserves his greatest invective for those such as the late Stephen Jay Gould, who proposed that science and faith are simply mutually exclusive domains of knowledge<sup>3,4</sup>.

### Believe this, think that

I suspect that the whole argument (or lack of it) turns on what we mean by 'belief', a word that Dawkins uses a great deal: On page 282, for example, he writes, "Books about evolution are believed not because they are holy. They are believed because they present overwhelming quantities of mutually buttressed evidence."

To use the word 'belief' in this context is to invite a mass of difficulties. It is seized on by creationists, who ask why one should 'believe' in evolution (which is, as they say, 'only a theory') rather than God? The creationists are right to ask such a question, because they have identified the error at the core of Dawkins' argument — that he regards science and religion as competitors for belief, when it is quite evident that they are not.

**"The most intriguing section is his damnation of religion as a kind of child-abuse, which seems a bit rich from one who counts the shattering of a six-year-old's Christmas dreams as a victory for rational thought."**

I 'believe' in God, but also 'subscribe' to evolution. The first matter is purely personal — the latter quite properly a matter of science, in which one's personal 'belief' is neither here nor there.

Dawkins then turns on to the manifest abuses of religion. He is right to do so, but to use these as a critique of religious faith is like saying that the Internet is bad because some people use it to send malicious viruses. The most intriguing section is his damnation of religion as a kind of child abuse, which seems a bit rich from one who counts the shattering of a six-year-old's Christmas dreams as a victory for rational thought.

### Evolution of faith

Why does religious faith persist? Scientists who profess faith — such as Robert Winston — suspect that belief in God persists because it has selective value<sup>3</sup>. Dawkins, self-elected grand panjandrum of natural selection that he is, squirms on this idea and tries hard to find some way of isolating faith as some maladaptive consequence of something else. Scientists will legitimately debate which of the two arguments falls to

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## Occam's razor.

I am one of those people for whom Dawkins would no doubt reserve his most trenchant criticism. Dawkins thinks that science itself provides sufficient awe and wonder to replace an instinct for the supernatural. I don't. Religion, for all its ills and inequities, is one of the few things that makes us human: I am with the scientists of an earlier age, who found that their motivation in advancing the cause of knowledge was to magnify the name of the Creator.

For me, Dawkins' single good point — the only one in 374 pages of secular sermonizing — is that the creation of the Creator is itself inexplicable. As a person of faith, I feel myself sufficiently humble to accept this, and just leave it at that. Science is meant to be humbler still, to bend its findings with the evidence. So why does Dawkins, the scientist, continue to rail against something that no amount of evidence, no amount of investigation, will ever decide?

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