

# Zande magic and the Dawkins delusion

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## *Abstract*

This paper considers some logical errors in the analysis of belief systems, adopting the analytic methods of two Wittgensteinian thinkers, Peter Winch and Wes Sharrock. Examining the different analyses of Zande magic provided by E. E. Evans-Pritchard and Alasdair MacIntyre, we suggest that these methods can be characterised by their identification of ‘moments’, places where such analyses go catastrophically wrong. A Winch moment is the point in an account where something not required in the analysis is smuggled in to facilitate the making of unnecessary and unwarranted claims. A Sharrock moment is an incoherent or nonsensical premise or assumption made to get an account off the ground in the first place, without which little of the account remains. Some of Richard Dawkins’ accounts of religious belief are examined to show where both Winch and Sharrock moments can be found in his arguments.

## INTRODUCTION

We all know that there are absurd beliefs in Soviet Russia. If we are Protestants, we know that there are absurd beliefs among Catholics. If we are Catholics, we know that there are absurd beliefs among Protestants. If we are Conservatives, we are amazed by the superstitions found in the Labour Party. If we are Socialists, we are aghast at the credulity of Conservatives. I do not know, dear reader, what your beliefs may be, but whatever they may be, you must concede that nine-tenths of mankind are totally irrational. The beliefs in question are, of course, those which you do not hold (Russell 1952: 547).

The purpose of this paper is to examine some logical errors in the analysis of belief systems. In order to do this, we adopt analytic methods characteristic of two

thinkers, Peter Winch and Wes Sharrock. We call the errors that these methods reveal Winch and Sharrock moments<sup>1</sup> respectively.

We begin by examining Winch's critique of social science, before looking more closely at his debate with Evans-Pritchard and MacIntyre. We conclude that while these two share a false premise, this is a far more serious problem for MacIntyre's work than it is for Evans-Pritchard's.

We go on to apply the notion of a Sharrock moment to Richard Dawkins' critique of religion. This analysis is in three parts. First, we examine Dawkins' *The God Delusion* to identify Dawkins' Sharrock moment. Secondly, we seek further confirmation of Dawkins' error by examining his argument in the light of Wittgenstein's remarks on religious belief. Finally, we analyse a transcript of Dawkins debating with a Muslim believer in order to show how Dawkins' argument works to perpetuate misunderstanding in the process of debate.

## WINCH MOMENTS

A characteristic of Peter Winch's reading of social theory is to find something that either goes beyond the remit of the premises of an argument, introducing either a logical contradiction, or the kind of indeterminacy that undermines the coherence of the argument. In Winch's analysis of Pareto, for instance, such an indeterminacy appears when two separate concepts—the illogical and the non-logical—are blurred together. Illogical acts are those which involve a *mistake in logic*, such as a misunderstanding, a prejudiced assessment, a false assumption, and so on. These acts are illogical because they practically contradict what is ostensibly being aimed for. Someone trying to assemble a piece of furniture but refusing to look at the instructions would be doing something illogical in this sense: *if* the aim is to put the furniture together properly *then* refusing to look at the instructions is illogical. Non-logical acts, on the other hand, are those to which no criteria of logic apply at all. These can neither be logical nor illogical, simply because it makes no sense to consider them in that way. A child jumping for joy, for example, is neither doing something logical nor something illogical, but rather doing something that—while readily understandable—has nothing to do with the logic of, for instance, means-ends relationships, tactics, strategy, and so on.

Winch does not attack Pareto's distinction (although that is not to say he would agree with its utility), but rather *expects Pareto to follow through on its conclusions*. This means that, while one could criticise illogical acts as incompatible with their apparent aims, it makes no sense to criticise or otherwise evaluate non-logical

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<sup>1</sup> The idea of a 'moment' is borrowed from the concept of a Minsky moment in economics, referring to the point at which members of a financial market realise that the bubble is about to burst. A post-war radical Keynesian, Hyman Minsky was at odds with both conventional interpretations of Keynes and the emerging Chicago School of economics. He sadly died in 1996, a year before the first in a series of financial market crashes brought his theories to prominence.

acts on the same basis. As they are neither logical nor illogical by definition, it is difficult to see what kinds of criteria could be used to evaluate them—or, indeed, whether they are capable of being evaluated at all. Pareto, however, does attempt such an evaluation, and Winch's verdict is damning:

...it does not make sense to say of non-logical conduct that it is either logical or illogical, just as it does not make sense to say of something non-spatial (such as virtue) that it is either big or small. But Pareto does not follow through the implications of this. For instance, he tries to use the term 'non-logical' in a logically pejorative sense, which is like concluding from the fact that virtue is not big that it must be small. (Winch 1990: 100)

We would like to name this point in the argument the *Winch moment*, the point at which the critical reader recognises that something has gone terribly wrong. The Winch moment in Pareto is the point where Pareto tries to apply criteria which can be used to assess a narrow range of acts (those capable of being evaluated for their logic) in areas where such criteria are inapplicable. What *counts* as logical depends on the area of human life being considered—so, for instance, one can act illogically in Christianity by supposing one 'could pit one's own strength against God's' (Winch 1990: 100–101), just as one can act illogically in a science by refusing 'to be bound by the results of a properly carried out experiment (Winch 1990: 100). One should not, however, use the criteria for evaluating whether or not something is logical from one practice to evaluate something from a different one: that is not *evaluating the logic of an act* but rather *denying the applicability of the socially situated criteria* by which appropriate evaluations can be made *in situ* (cf. Sacks 1992). Instead of criticising an act, one is criticising a 'mode of social life as such' (Winch 1990: 100). This, of course, has consequences.

## EVANS-PRITCHARD ON THE AZANDE

Winch's critique of Evans-Pritchard's analysis of Zande magic is, similarly, an identification of a particular problem—and its consequences—rather than a comprehensive examination of Evans-Pritchard's book as a whole. Evans-Pritchard 'goes a very great deal further than most of his predecessors in trying to present the sense of the institutions he is discussing as it presents itself to the Azande themselves' (Winch 1964: 307). It is, therefore, perhaps worth restating just what Evans-Pritchard's work entailed.

Evans-Pritchard is clear, for example, that there are many cases of misfortune where witchcraft is explicitly not regarded as a relevant cause of that misfortune. These include, for example: 'any error in agriculture, hunting, crafts, which might have been avoided if the person concerned had had more knowledge and experience, is put down to incompetence'; where witchcraft is used as an excuse 'in

defence of lying, adultery, and disloyalty'; or where an undertaking fails because of a 'breach of taboo' (Evans-Pritchard 1935: 419). Furthermore, 'vengeance' for witchcraft is enacted in a strictly prescribed manner:

To-day the whole procedure of vengeance is carried out to everybody's satisfaction on a mystical plane. A man is killed by witchcraft; magic is made to avenge him; some one else in the neighbourhood dies and the oracles declare that he has died as a result of the magic. The relatives of this man in their turn make magic, and so it goes on. Everyone is satisfied at avenging his kin and nobody is any the worse off. (Evans-Pritchard 1935: 420)

Evans-Pritchard, in short, shows that witchcraft is a *socially situated* phenomenon, which can only be invoked in particular circumstances and which is subject to particular socially-warranted sanctions. Furthermore, this way of doing things *makes sense* to the Azande. Again, Evans-Pritchard:

I never found great difficulty in observing oracle consultations. I found that in such matters the best way of gaining confidence was to enact the same procedure as Azande and to take oracular verdicts as seriously as they take them. I always kept a supply of poison for the use of my household and neighbours and we regulated our affairs in accordance with the oracles' decisions. I may remark that I found this as satisfactory a way of running my home and affairs as any other I know of. Among Azande it is the only satisfactory way of life because it is the only way of life they understand, and it furnishes the only arguments by which they are wholly convinced and silenced. (Evans-Pritchard 1937: 269–70)

Evans-Pritchard's approach is to try to understand how witchcraft, oracles and magic form part of Zande life, what their logic is, how they are practiced, and how they operate together as a system. His questions are 'How' rather than 'Why' (Evans-Pritchard 1937: 5), based on a deep immersion in the field, and in this sense his work is an attempt to move social anthropology beyond the limits of its earlier theorists. These theorists tended to ask 'Why' rather than 'How', and so framed 'superstition' as something which required explanation rather than description. In three remarkable papers which preceded the publication of his monograph, Evans-Pritchard systematically examined three of these theories.

The first such theory was the 'English' or 'intellectualist' approach, dominated by Tylor and Fraser. In this account, 'primitive man had reached his conclusions about the efficacy of magic from rational observation and deduction in much the same way as men of science reach their conclusions about natural laws'. These conclusions are wrong because they are based on subjective rather than objective connections: '[w]here the magician goes wrong is in inferring that because two things are alike in one or more respects they have a mystical link between them

whereas in fact the link is not a real link but an ideal connexion in the mind of the magician' (Evans-Pritchard 1933: 283). This means magical beliefs are fundamentally symbolic rather than empirical and are incapable of being disproved. Evans-Pritchard was prepared to accept much from this approach, in particular its emphasis on societies going through stages of development, but he was suspicious of its psychologism.

The second approach, most closely associated with Lévy-Bruhl, takes a more Durkheimian approach to belief. This overcomes much of the psychologism of Tylor and Fraser by emphasizing the ways in which mystical beliefs fit together as a system of thought. As Seligman and Seligman point out, '[o]n this subject (of magic) the black man and the white regard each other with amazement; each considers the behaviour of the other incomprehensible, totally unrelated to everyday experience, and entirely disregarding the known laws of cause and effect' (Seligman and Seligman 1932: 25, quoted in Evans-Pritchard 1934: 14). Representations of the world, including magic, are *collective* rather than individual, and are held together as a system of thought rather than a set of particular judgements about particular things. Belief in magic is perfectly logical in its own terms: this does not mean it is *right*, but rather that it is not wrong because it is illogical: 'ignorance, like knowledge, is often socially determined and that primitive thought is unscientific because it is mystical and not mystical because of an inherent incapacity to reason logically' (Evans-Pritchard 1934: 36).

The third approach, Pareto's, emphasises the non-logical and self-interested aspects of conduct as we have seen in Winch's critique above. Evans-Pritchard recognises its incoherence but is able to take from it a sense of how 'rational' and 'irrational' elements can co-exist in systems of thought and practice:

Much confusion that has arisen by use of such terms as non-logical and pre-logical will be avoided by maintaining a distinction between logical and scientific. In making pots all grit must be removed from the clay or the pots will break. A pot has broken during firing. This is probably due to grit. Let us examine the pot and see if this is the cause. That is logical and scientific thought. Sickness is due to witchcraft. A man is sick. Let us consult the oracles to discover who is the witch responsible. That is logical and unscientific thought. (Evans-Pritchard 1936: 188)

This approach is useful insofar as it allows for a less-rigid distinction between the 'primitive' and the 'modern' (both include both logical, illogical and non-logical elements), and it allows one to construe different kinds of beliefs and practices in a more nuanced manner (subject to Pareto's rather incoherent system being repaired).

The point of these critical readings is that they provide Evans-Pritchard with a strong rationale for examining Zande witchcraft with a more open mind than his predecessors. There are individual differences in beliefs, for instance, as shown by

the fact that different kinds of magic are given different weight by the Zande: witch-doctors are understood to be less reliable than the operators of the poison oracle, for instance, and the poison oracle is more powerful than other forms of oracular divination. As we have seen, too, there are significant differences between how blame and responsibility are allocated: venal or illegal actions cannot be attributed to witchcraft, for instance, and a failure to show due diligence in conduct is understood to be the reason that conduct ‘fails’ without the need for any supernatural explanation. Why, then, does Winch have a problem with Evans-Pritchard’s account?

#### WINCH, MACINTYRE AND SHARROCK

We would now like to introduce the notion of a *Sharrock moment* and contrast it with that of the Winch moment defined above. If the latter comes late in an argument, the Sharrock moment comes early, at the opening stages where we are invited to accept unexamined premises, or unstated assumptions—and at times, as suggested with respect to Winch above, via the identification of a particular problem, rather than in terms of a comprehensive examination, for example in Wes’s discussion of the misleading (pre-)notion of situation in Goffman’s *Frame Analysis* (Sharrock 1999).

One of Wes’s metaphors is that of the magician who distracts the attention of the audience while surreptitiously doing what is necessary to set up the trick. This metaphor is particularly relevant to Richard Dawkins’ approach, as we will see. One of the resources successful magicians draw on is the willingness of their audience to be fooled. Dawkins writes that his book, *The God Delusion*, is for those who are ‘unhappy’ with religion, ‘feel vague yearnings to leave [...] but don’t realise that leaving is an option’ (Dawkins 2006: 1). We think it more likely that his vast readership consists of already convinced atheists who moreover share his derogatory attitude to religion and are looking for ammunition with which to attack it. For them, his book is no disappointment.

A second metaphor that Wes uses to explain the Sharrock moment is that of a sumo wrestling match. In such matches, he asserts, the critical moves happen early in the game, once one of the players has gained the early advantage, the outcome is inevitable. In a similar way, philosophical errors are introduced as unquestioned premises which set the direction in which the argument is then bound to follow.

For example, Dawkins (2006: 84) recounts the tale of the alleged refutation of Diderot’s atheism by the mathematician Euler: ‘Monsieur,  $(a + b^n)/n = x$ , therefore God exists. Reply!’ Dawkins argues that Diderot’s failure to counter Euler’s demonstration was the consequence of his being ‘blinded by science’. This is unlikely as Diderot was himself a gifted mathematician. We suggest that on this occasion, Dawkins is missing Euler’s Sharrock moment, when he smuggles into the argument an assumption that the existence of God is a question for mathematics.

We will now argue that while Winch's critique of Evans-Pritchard identifies a point at which the latter's argument goes beyond what is logically tenable, his critique of MacIntyre is more devastating because MacIntyre's argument is based entirely on a Sharrock moment.

Evans-Pritchard's ethnographic practice is exemplary. He lived among the people of whom he wrote and learned their ways before putting pen to paper. This practice is supported by a theoretical perspective which he calls the intellectualist tradition. His methodological orientation may be reduced to a set of three premises:

1. Cultures are logical (that is to say that language and behaviour follow rules);
2. The rules of a culture (and thus, its concepts) can be learned through extended participant observation; and
3. Beliefs and practices may, nonetheless, be based in error, which can be revealed by comparing them to the tenets of modern science.

A corollary (A) of the first two premises is that learning the rules of a culture in this way constitutes an understanding of that culture.

It is the adoption of the third premise that constitutes Evans-Pritchard's Sharrock moment. The first two support his fieldwork and give significance to his findings. They provide the basis for his critique of Levy-Bruhl's theory of pre-logical thought (Evans-Pritchard 1934) and Pareto's empty comparisons (Evans-Pritchard 1936).

The third premise allows insights into the human capacity for self-deceit, but it is irrelevant to the question of how a way of life can be understood. While such insights might usefully be employed by all of us in the examination of our own lives, they merely act as obstacles when engaged in trying to understand the lives of others.

Thus, allowing this third premise to stand alongside the other two is a category error (Ryle 2009). A contradiction is set up between two irreconcilable aims: on the one hand to understand Zande culture; on the other, to explain it as a series of errors. Evans-Pritchard's intention is to understand the cultures he studies according to the first two premises. His third premise creates some methodological difficulties for him, but as he never develops it fully, it is not fatal to his project; the category error is not revealed.

However, MacIntyre's critique of Evans-Pritchard uses an argument based on the third premise to challenge corollary A (Winch 1964). He identifies a corollary (B) of the third premise: that there must be a general norm for intelligibility. He shows that corollary A entails a further corollary (C): Winch's (1990) position that there is no such norm available. This is the step that Evans-Pritchard did not take,

which reveals the contradiction in his methodology. Either corollary B or corollaries A and C must be abandoned.

MacIntyre's further argument, based on premises 1, 2 and 3, has been comprehensively debunked (Winch 1964; Sharrock and Anderson 1985) and will not concern us much here. Rather, we will focus on how the entire debate rests on the contradiction inherent in the above premises and the category error that constitutes the Sharrock moment.

The contradiction in Evans-Pritchard's thinking is never fatal to his work, because he does not develop the third premise into a thoroughgoing critique of the cultures that he studies. Where contradictions occur, he addresses them as puzzles and refrains from attempting a definitive integration of the three premises.

In contrast, MacIntyre describes a blank wall of incomprehension that we encounter when attempting to understand the practice of 'aborigines' who 'carry around a stick or a stone which is treated *as if* it is or embodies the soul of the person who carries it' (1966: 122). He concludes 'there are cases where we cannot rest content with describing the user's criteria for an expression, but we can criticise what he does'. Of course, there are many questions we would want to ask about MacIntyre's example, before we accepted the impossibility of understanding it, but allowing for the sake of argument that such is the case, does the need for critique necessarily follow? 'We can criticise', he observes, but does that mean that we *should*?

Winch recognises the contradiction in Evans-Pritchard's thinking, but argues that MacIntyre has failed to resolve it. In preserving premise 3, MacIntyre maintains the incommensurability between method and theory. The method specified in premise 2 is designed to deliver the understanding specified in the corollary, not that specified in premise 3, while premises 1 and 3 stand in direct contradiction to each other.

The continued existence of two separate language games operating in MacIntyre's argument is demonstrated by Winch in his focus on the former's use of the term 'intelligible'. Winch makes clear, as MacIntyre does not, that the meaning of the term differs on the occasion of its use in MacIntyre's argument:

The task MacIntyre says we must undertake is to make intelligible (a) (to us) why it is that members of S think that certain of their practices are intelligible (b) (to them), when in fact they are not. (Winch 1964: 317)

As long as this contradiction remains unrecognised, it cannot be addressed. The solution to this dilemma is, of course, to reject premise 3 and treat our own and Azande beliefs as equivalent. This is precisely the kind of knowledge indicated by the unique adequacy requirement of methods (Garfinkel 2002).

Evans-Pritchard is crucially wrong, in his attempt to characterise the scientific in terms of that which is 'in accord with objective reality' (Winch 1964: 308).

Thus, although Evans-Pritchard realises that Western scientists and Azande magicians have different conceptions of reality, he wishes to assert that the former are more accurate in their conception than the latter. Winch points out that, if he is to do this, he needs a concept of reality which is ‘intelligible and applicable outside the context of scientific reasoning itself’ (Winch 1964: 308).

Of course, Evans-Pritchard’s concept of objective reality is identical to the scientific one. While we need to check our conceptions against an independent reality, the nature of that independent reality is itself determined by our beliefs. These beliefs are inherent in our use of language:

Reality is not what gives language sense. What is real and what is unreal shows itself *in* the sense that language has. Further, both the distinction between the real and the unreal and the concept of agreement with reality themselves belong to our language. [...] we could not in fact distinguish the real from the unreal without understanding the way this distinction operates in our language. If then we wish to understand the significance of these concepts, we must examine the use they actually do have in our language. [...] the general nature of the data revealed by the experiment can only be specified in terms of criteria built into the methods of experiment employed. (Winch 1964: 309)

In order to argue that scientific ideas are more real than Zande magical ones, it is necessary to have a conception of reality that does not owe its inception to either science or magic. Since such a conception is not available to him, Evans-Pritchard is forced into a circular argument: scientific reality is more real than magical reality because it conforms to our conception of scientific reality.

#### THE SHARROCK MOMENT IN *THE GOD DELUSION*

The Sharrock moment occurs as early in *The God Delusion* as it does in MacIntyre’s critique of Evans-Pritchard, but in a less sophisticated manner. It is prepared for in Dawkins’ preface. Here we are asked to imagine a world without religion and how much better it would be. The suggestion is accompanied by a list of crimes carried out in the name of religion:

Imagine no suicide bombers, no 9/11, no 7/7, no Crusades, no witch-hunts, no Gunpowder Plot, no Indian partition, no Israeli/Palestinian wars, no Serb/Croat/Muslim massacres, no persecution of Jews as ‘Christ-killers’, no Northern Ireland ‘troubles’, no ‘honour killings’, no shiny-suited bouffant-haired televangelists fleecing gullible people of their money (‘God wants you to give till it hurts’). Imagine no Taliban to blow up ancient statues, no public beheadings of blasphemers, no flogging of female skin for the crime of showing an inch of it. (Dawkins 2006: 1)

We are not asked to question whether these happy absences would be the actual consequences of a world without religion. Indeed, to do so would probably involve writing a whole other book; and that is not the book that Dawkins wants to write. Counterfactual arguments are prone to difficulty. The ‘what if?’ question may be useful in stimulating our imaginations to identify the agencies and conditions which determine historical events, but they can never be treated as definitive. In historical debate it is most sensibly restricted to tracing the effects of a singular occurrence: what if Henry VIII had accepted the authority of the Pope? or what if Hitler had successfully invaded Britain? Even then, the outcome of such speculation can hardly be regarded as proof.

To propose imagining the absence of an institution like religion, which has been so central to human history is to beg many questions. Would the West’s dependence on oil have still led to military intervention in the Middle East, and what form of resistance might have emerged? Would there have been no central authority in Western Europe in the Middle Ages, without the Christian Church? And if so, would there have been no struggle for power between competing interest groups? Can we even imagine what such interest groups might look like? Would German National Socialists have refrained from persecuting scapegoats in reaction to the humiliation of military defeat and economic collapse, if there were no easily identifiable religious minority which they could target? (The evidence indicates that they would not; the Nazis were remarkably efficient at finding victims, including non-religiously defined ethnic minorities, labour organisers, political opponents, disabled and LGBT+ people.) Would confidence tricksters be less effective in fleecing the gullible? Would there, indeed, be any statues for the Taliban to blow up?

Dawkins is not interested in any of these questions. He does not wish to claim that religion is ‘the root of *all* evil’ (Dawkins 2006: 1) and we must be content with that. As far as he is concerned, that religion does more harm than good is an unquestionable fact. He intends to do us a service by proving to us that it is also based on error, and so free its adherents from their false beliefs, and the rest of us from the need to treat those beliefs with respect.

That the fact is pragmatically unquestionable in the course of a live argument is also demonstrated below. There is an inconsistency here, much like the one in *The Selfish Gene*, only here it is explicit. In *The Selfish Gene* Dawkins strongly implies a moral dimension to his argument, which he later denies. In *The God Delusion* this dimension is made explicit. *The value of the latter book is that it makes manifest a type of logical error that has always existed in Dawkins’ thinking, but up to this point has been deniable.*

Dawkins develops his line of thinking in Chapter 1, where he extols the virtues of atheism, while dividing theists into two categories: the acceptable ‘metaphorical’ theists, who deserve respect and the unacceptable literal theists who do not.

Dawkins' Sharrock moment occurs in Chapter 2, 'The God Hypothesis'. He states that his intention in that Chapter is to persuade us 'that "the God hypothesis" is a scientific hypothesis about the universe, which should be analysed as sceptically as any other' (Dawkins 2006: 3). In fact, this claim is never established, or even significantly discussed. Anyone familiar with the Wittgensteinian literature will immediately doubt its veracity. The interest in the rest of this paper is to examine how Dawkins manages the transition from claim to assumption.

It is not until page 48 that Dawkins gets around to addressing a serious argument against the God Hypothesis. Interestingly, he chooses to address the arguments of agnostics, rather than theists. This is not as odd as it might seem, it is, after all, agnostics who argue that the existence of God can be neither proven, nor disproven. If true, this is fatal to the idea of God's existence as a scientific (and therefore testable) hypothesis.

Dawkins' first target is the evolutionary biologist T. H. Huxley, whom he quotes to the effect that 'others':

were quite sure they had attained a certain 'gnosis' – had, more or less successfully, solved the problem of existence; while I was quite sure I had not, and had a pretty strong conviction that the problem was insoluble. And, with Hume and Kant on my side, I could not think myself presumptuous in holding fast by that opinion. (Huxley 1889, quoted in Dawkins 2006: 50)

Dawkins argues that, in rejecting the idea that the existence of God is a disprovable hypothesis, T. H. Huxley ignored the 'shading of *probability*' (Dawkins 2006: 49, his emphasis). In doing so he was 'bending over backwards to concede a point, in the interests of securing another one' (Dawkins 2006: 50).

However, Dawkins has omitted the context to the Huxley quote, the passage immediately preceding it, which shows that Huxley's critique is aimed squarely at atheists as well as Christians:

When I reached intellectual maturity and began to ask myself whether I was an atheist, a theist, or a pantheist; a materialist or an idealist; a Christian or a free-thinker—I found that the more I learned and reflected, the less ready was the answer; until, at last, I came to the conclusion that I had neither art nor part with any of these denominations, except the last. The one thing in which most of these good people were agreed was the one thing in which I differed from them. (Huxley 1889)

Huxley's tone is not one of a person bending over backward, but of someone firmly convinced in his stance. Nor does he ignore probability in his argument, as even a cursory reading of his essay will show. On the contrary, it is a central feature when he evaluates the veracity of historical texts, or the nature of events claimed

as miracles. On the more fundamental difference between atheism and theism, he rejects it as a method.

It is, of course, perfectly reasonable to argue that probability *is* relevant: '[t]he fact that we can neither prove nor disprove something does not put existence and non-existence on an even footing' (Dawkins 2006: 49). Quite. If belief in God is a hypothesis that we are setting out to test, then that is a very pertinent observation. But *the hypothetical nature of belief in God is what Dawkins is setting out to prove*. He has not yet done so. He asserts 'God's existence or non-existence is a scientific fact about the universe, discoverable in principle if not in practice' (Dawkins 2006: 50). But if assertion were proof, the existence of God could easily be established.

He suggests '[i]f he existed and chose to reveal it God could clinch the argument, noisily and unequivocally, in his favour'. Perhaps. But what if he didn't? Or couldn't? Or does? What would such a proof look like? The kind of Old Testament demonstration of wrathful vengeance that Dawkins so despises? And would we then be convinced? None of these questions are explored.

Instead, Dawkins presents us with a spectrum of seven probabilities, ranging from 'strong theist', to 'strong atheist'. While most of the positions outlined are at least feasible, it is difficult to imagine how anyone could adopt the 'exactly 50% completely impartial agnostic' position. How would one actually live with the belief that the existence of God is an even possibility? It would seem to be essential to come down on one side of the debate, or the other. Crucially, though, this is not the same as having proof, still less 'scientific proof'. This is not apparent to Dawkins, as he never stops to seriously consider the meaning of either theism or agnosticism as personal beliefs.

Significantly, the 'strong atheist' position is one that he deprecates: 'atheists do not have faith; and reason alone could not propel one to total conviction that anything definitely does not exist' (Dawkins 2006: 51). According to Dawkins, then, the correct position is position six: 'very low probability, *de facto* atheist'. (But what really differentiates a *de facto* atheist from a 'strong' atheist? Not much apparently.)

The point of all this is to demonstrate the difference between 'temporary agnosticism in practice', which is deemed appropriate to the scientific attitude and 'permanent agnosticism in principle', which, as Dawkins points out, does not correspond to any of the probability positions.

Dawkins compares another philosophical problem: do we see colours in the same way? He concludes correctly:

The fact that I cannot know whether your red is the same as my green doesn't make the probability 50 per cent. [...] Nevertheless, it is a common error, which we will meet again, to leap from the premise that the question of God's existence is in

principle unanswerable to the conclusion that his existence and his non-existence are equiprobable. (Dawkins 2006: 51)

Fine, but what about Huxley's principled atheism? This, it seems, is already forgotten. For Dawkins, to have demonstrate a viable alternative to it is to have disproved it. (Perhaps, if asked, he would argue that he has shown that it is *probably* false?)

Thus, Dawkins moves from a consideration of whether or not the existence of God is a hypothesis, to an argument about probability. Along the way, he misappropriates an argument of Bertrand Russell (1952). This is Russell's infamous 'teapot proof', beloved of internet atheists (perhaps Dawkins' second most important contribution to popular culture, only less ubiquitous than 'memes'). However, Russell's teapot is not a proof, at least not a proof of atheism. Russell writes:

If I were to suggest that between the Earth and Mars there is a china teapot revolving about the sun in an elliptical orbit, nobody would be able to disprove my assertion provided I were careful to add that the teapot is too small to be revealed even by our most powerful telescopes. (Russell 1952, quoted in Dawkins 2006: 52)

Russell's argument clearly does invite us to consider beliefs in the light of probability, but does it prove that the existence of God is such a hypothesis? Dawkins fails to mention that Russell also was an agnostic, and if the quotation with which we commenced this paper is indicative, realistic, if not necessarily approving about the variety of belief that pertains in human society. His strongest point is in the sentence following the one just quoted: 'But if I were to go on to say that, since my assertion cannot be disproved, it is intolerable presumption on the part of human reason to doubt it, I should rightly be thought to be talking nonsense' (Russell 1952: 547).

Russell was presenting an argument for doubt, not an argument for certainty. For that, Dawkins must look to lesser thinkers who provide pastiches of Russell's Teapot, the 'tooth fairy agnostic', the 'Mother Goose agnostic' and the combative 'Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster'.

Dawkins addresses one more argument from agnosticism, that of Stephen Jay Gould, this time an argument directly aimed at his militant atheism. Unfortunately, Gould is already half-way to accepting Dawkins' premise. While he denies that the existence of God is a scientific hypothesis, he nevertheless concedes that it is somehow equivalent to one. Thus, he says plainly that 'science simply cannot (by its legitimate methods) adjudicate the issue of God's possible superintendence of nature. We neither affirm nor deny it; we simply can't comment on it as scientists' (Gould, quoted in Dawkins 2006: 55). Gould uses the concept of 'non-overlapping magisteria' to argue that while 'science covers the empirical realm [...] religion

extends over questions of ultimate meaning and moral value' (Gould, quoted in Dawkins 2006: 55).

Such a magisterium constitutes, 'a domain of authority in teaching' under which we 'debate and hold dialogue' (Gould 1999: 9–10). Unfortunately, then, Gould implies that there may be a method for determining the existence of God, but its exercise lies outside of science, in the realm of religion.

Dawkins has two methods for dismissing this argument. First, it is Gould this time who is 'bending over backwards' (Dawkins, 2006: 55–61, *passim*). The argument is a 'Neville Chamberlain' tactic of attempting to appease religious believers, to avert attacks on science (Dawkins has apparently never heard of Godwin's Law, or if he has, misunderstands it as a scientific hypothesis).

Second, he asks rhetorically, 'What expertise can theologians bring to deep cosmological questions that scientists cannot?' (Dawkins 2006: 56). We might, without endorsing theology, answer that theologians have spent their careers examining such questions, while Dawkins clearly hasn't. On the other hand, it is as well to recognise that most believers are not theologians. In any event, answers to religious questions, whether theological, atheistic, or otherwise, are not scientific hypotheses.

## WITTGENSTEIN ON BELIEF IN MIRACLES AND GOD

Dawkins never fulfils the promise made in his preface. Instead, he builds on his first Sharrock moment to pile on further accusations against religion, as a source of evil. When challenged on this, for instance with examples of the good religion has achieved, he will shift his ground to argue that he is not interested in good and evil, but in truth. We will consider an example of this tactic in the next section. We have shown here that this 'concern for truth' is largely illusory, based on the unsupported assumption that belief in God can be treated as a scientific hypothesis.

Dawkins uses miracles as an example of how this 'hypothesis' is capable of disproof: something 'impossible' cannot be squared with 'science' and so what rests on it must be 'wrong'. Disbelief in miracles, but belief in God, makes someone a 'respectable theist'—wrong, but not to be derided. Wittgenstein would be 'respectable' in this sense, but his views are more subtle than Dawkins is able to contemplate.

Wittgenstein believed that the world's existence was itself a miracle, but an *aesthetic* one (Wittgenstein 1979: 86). This could be construed as an argument that existence is 'improbable', but to do this would require 'probability' fulfilling formal requirements to be adequately scientific. To determine the probability of an occurrence, we must count events over a period of time and calculate the chances of a *particular* event occurring over a different period. Alternatively, we may have a strong theoretical reason for expecting an event to occur, based on previously determined causal laws. None of this thinking is applicable to the

question of the probability of the world coming into existence, which is a singularity. It is a question completely beyond the scope of science. Of course, neither is any of this relevant to aesthetic considerations, which are very different to this kind of argument: ‘art discloses the miracles of nature to us’ (Wittgenstein 1979: 64). Dawkins would dismiss this, arguing that one can appreciate beauty without believing in God. For Wittgenstein, however, beauty is a manifestation of God. Thus God is perceived directly, there is nothing more to say: you either see it or you don’t, and our spade is turned.

For Wittgenstein, then, there is no ‘choice’ to be made between atheism and traditional religion. The ‘moderns’ believe the ‘so-called laws of nature are explanations of natural phenomena’ (Wittgenstein 1979: 6.371), just as ‘men of former times’ believed God was ‘impregnable’. ‘Both are right and wrong’ in different ways. Believers acknowledge a ‘clear terminus’, while non-believers think ‘everything [has] a foundation’ (Wittgenstein 1979: 6.372): neither position is wholly satisfactory (or philosophically defensible), but each is at least reasonable. They are certainly not competitors in the ways Dawkins might want. Our inquiry must end somewhere. Where we choose to end it is surely a matter of personal feeling. Perhaps this is what is meant by faith. The error is to assume that because we are satisfied to end it here or there, then no other decision can be rational.

Wittgenstein’s few comments about God and faith are made in a spirit of inquiry, but not all inquiries have to be scientific. For him, belief in God is tied to life having meaning, and ‘being happy’ is tied to doing God’s will (Wittgenstein 1979: 74). These matters are beyond the scope of science, and are fundamentally ethical concerns. Wittgenstein’s position might be compared to that of the Nepalese anthropologist Rajendra Pradhan’s examination of Dutch culture, as reported in Hofstede (2003: 159). Pradhan found that on religious matters Dutch people always wanted to know what he believed. This seems to be a characteristic that is somewhat peculiar to Western culture:

Where I come from, what counts is the ritual, in which only the priest and the head of the family participate. The others watch and make their offerings. Over here so much is *mandatory*. Hindus will never ask ‘Do you believe in God?’ Of course one should believe, but the important thing is what one *does*.

If belief in God is an ethical matter, one *should* believe in God. Dawkins attacks this aspect in his argument that the effects of religion are ethically repugnant. That argument has been dealt with above—but it is not fundamental. Belief in God is not justified by its ethical effects, it is in *itself* a value. Furthermore, Dawkins is ready to abandon his ethical argument when pressed, as we will show.

## DEBATING ATHEISM AND ISLAM

Thinkers like Wittgenstein are not Dawkins' prime target, if only because he misunderstands what they are saying. The prime target of his 'God Hypothesis' formulation is the believer in a supernatural God who can perform miracles. Here, his argument might appear to have some purchase. If the believer accepts the hypothetical nature of belief, and to be fair to Dawkins, many Christian fundamentalists make the same mistake, then scientific arguments become relevant. Dawkins would then appear to be on safe ground, miracles, as he indicates at one point in the transcript below, contravene the laws of physics.

But as we pointed out above, the weakness of Dawkins' argument is his failure to establish this hypothetical nature of belief.

The transcript is taken from a longer discussion between Dawkins and Mehdi Hasan, sponsored by *Al Jazeera* and reproduced on Youtube.<sup>2</sup> It is probably worth watching the full discussion, if only for reassurance that the transcript below does not misrepresent the intellectual quality of the argument.

[14.17]

1. Hasan: In your book you cite lots of evidence for the bad things that religion's done. What I wonder is, if you were being fair wouldn't you have included some of the good things that religion's done?
2. Dawkins: My passion is for scientific truth. I don't much care about what's good and evil actually, I care about what's true, erm I mean do you actually believe in your Muslim faith? Do you actually believe that Mohammed split the moon in two? Do you believe that Mohammed flew to heaven on a winged horse, for example? I, I pay you the complement of assuming that you don't.
3. Hasan: No, no, I do. I believe in miracles.
4. Dawkins: You believe that?
5. Hasan: Yes.
6. Dawkins: You believe that Mohammed went to heaven on a winged horse?
7. Hasan: Yes, I believe in God, I believe in miracles, I believe in revelation, I mean the point here is, that let's assume I'm wrong, Richard, I'm wrong
8. Dawkins: Yeh let's
9. [audience laughter]
10. Hasan: Look, let's assume I'm wrong. I'm wrong. I'm happy to concede that Richard. I'm happy to concede it. I'm wrong. All

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<sup>2</sup> At <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UoXn6oZwo3A>; the materials here start at 14.21.

religions are wrong, God does not exist, we're all mad. The issue is, we exist. We've existed for a while, I think even Christopher Hitchens said and you've said in your writings, we're not going anywhere. My question to you is why not acknowledge for example the good things that [religions] do you accept that religion has done good things? Despite all our mad beliefs and our miracles?

11. Dawkins: I accept that individual religious people have done an enormous number of good things.
12. Hasan: Not driven by religion?
13. Dawkins: Well, I mean who knows...
14. Hasan: How mean spirited, you won't give any credit at all...
15. Dawkins: Take, take somebody like erm, er Martin Luther King for example.
16. Hasan: Reverend Martin Luther King.
17. [audience laughter]
18. Dawkins: Obviously he was a cleric so, so erm I imagine that that fed into the good things that he did, plenty of other things did, he was a great admirer of Gandhi, er and erm he was a great admirer of non-violence, he was a brilliant and wonderful great man.
19. Hasan: Would you disconnect MLK's non-violence and Gandhi's non-violence from their very strongly held religious beliefs? They didn't.
20. Dawkins: Well, erm, I think that'ss, it's not a thing that I really care about actually, I mean I, I think they wer...
21. Hasan: You do care about it Richard, you're saying that people carry out violence in the name of God and I cite you an example of very famous people who've done good and non-violence in the name of God and you say 'I'm not interested'
22. Dawkins: If God doesn't exist, then doing something in his name is, it's great that something good gets done, but there's no evidence at all that believing in God makes you more likely to do good things. I can't see any noble logical connection between being religious and doing good things.
23. Hasan: Let's concede that God does not exist. Let's concede that religion is false. My problem here is trying to understand why some of the new atheists are so anti-religion when religious people clearly are doing lots of good things and they're doing it in the name of God.
24. Dawkins: I've never denied that religious people are doing good things and non-religious people are doing good things. I care

about what's true, I'm an educator, I'm a scientist and I want people to understand the truth about the universe in which they live, that's what I care about. And I regard religion as a distraction and in some cases a pernicious distraction from true education, which I love and value in the way you value and love your God.

25. Hasan: Can you not do both?

26. Dawkins: Well, so long as they don't contra

27. Hasan: Where's a divide, Richard, where's the divide?

28. As long as they don't contradict each other, but but if you if you actually believe that Mohammed flew to heaven on a winged horse, that's an anti-scientific belief.

29. Hasan: And that could be wrong, but...

30. Dawkins: That bloody well is wrong.

31. [audience laughter]

32. Hasan: but that doesn't change, that doesn't change. How do you know it's wrong?

33. Dawkins: Oh, come on, you're a man of the 21st Century

34. Hasan: No I'm just asking, it comes back to my original question, the rational position is the agnos...

35. Dawkins: I mean why up there [right arm outstretched, pointing upwards]

36. Hasan: the rational position agnostic position

37. Dawkins: Why up there, I mean

38. Hasan: the rational posit. I didn't say up there, I didn't pick a place, you picked a place

39. Dawkins: Well why would a winged horse be the way to get to heaven if it's not up there

40. Hasan: I asked, I asked a question about, you asked about proof, I'm all for saying I can't prove it, but can you prove he didn't do it

41. Dawkins: Huhf

42. Hasan: I mean this is a

43. Dawkins: Can I prove he didn't fly to heaven on a winged horse?

44. [audience laughter]

45. Hasan: I'm just asking on your criteria. I'm just asking on your criteria.

46. Dawkins: No I can't prove it and I can't prove it wasn't a golden unicorn either

47. [audience laughter]

48. Hasan: But I'm fascinated that you'd rather, I'm fascinated that you'd rather talk about what animals the prophet may or may have

not have used fourteen hundred years ago, rather than talk about what Muslims or Islam is doing in the world today good or bad

49. Dawkins: Well

50. Hasan: That seems to be the distraction, if anyone's distracted it seems to be you

51. Dawkins: Well, tha that's your that's your view. I'm fascinated by how somebody, a respected sophisticated journalist in the 21st Century could believe that a prophet could fly to heaven on a winged horse.

[18.58]

The two themes of Dawkins' book are both rehearsed in this exchange, but here they are seen to be competing, rather than complementary, as a struggle takes place over the proper topic of conversation. The sequence opens with Hasan attempting to engage Dawkins on the ethical character of religion and Dawkins redirecting the conversation to the question of scientific truth. This is a pattern that repeats throughout the sequence (7-10, 20-24, 48-51).

Dawkins' position on the ethical question represents a significant retreat from *The God Delusion*, at least in tone. He makes no attacks on the ethical nature of religion or the behaviour of religious people, and his remarks are defensive, attempting to shift the conversation to his own chosen ground. Turns 11-24 represent the main focus on ethics in the discussion. In turns 11-13, Dawkins acknowledges that good has been done by religious people, while refusing to accept that religion was necessarily their motivation. In turns 14-18, he retreats further, acknowledging the likelihood of a religious motivation. In turn 22, however, he downgrades the status of this motivation, questioning its 'nobility'. (It is interesting to note that he does this in general terms, rather than directly impugning King or Gandhi with ignoble motives.) The argument is no longer that religion is a force for evil, but rather that religious motivations are dishonourable. (He may be referring to the idea that religious motives are instrumental, that religious people are doing good for the rewards they will get, rather than for the intrinsic value of being good.)

In turns 2-10 and 24-47 the focus is on Dawkins chosen ground, the existence of God and miracles. Hasan relies on the agnostic argument (34-40) that these questions are undecidable as matters of logic and evidence. His strategy is to assert his belief (3-7, 32-36) while conceding that he might be wrong (7, 10, 23, 29). It is a strategy that invites Dawkins to rehearse his anti-agnosticism, but this is not what happens.

Initially, Hasan simply asserts his belief in miracles (3). Dawkins' response (3-7) is to do incredulity. While this is a logical consequence of his position that the occurrence of miracles is so unlikely as to be practically impossible, which gains sympathy from the audience (see the reaction to his joke 7-8), it takes the

conversation to a stalemate. A difficulty here is that while Dawkins treats the matter as one of calculating probability, Hasan treats it as one of faith. The concomitant of this latter position is that believing in miracles is a good thing, that it is *wrong* to question them. This is the opposite of Dawkins' espoused conception of science—the questioning of received wisdom. In the face of this contradiction, the conversation falls into a repetitive loop: Hasan asserts his belief three times; on the first two Dawkins questions it; on the third, Hasan concedes that he might be wrong. This sets Dawkins up to deliver his punch line, but allows the discussion to proceed, this time on ground of Hasan's choosing.

At the opening of the second sequence (24) Dawkins resolves his axiological position into the formulation that religion is 'a distraction and in some cases a pernicious distraction from true education'. This represents an apparent retreat from his position in *The God Delusion*, though it should be born in mind that Dawkins is skilled in arguing that he didn't say what he appeared to say (witness the debates over *The Selfish Gene*). Hasan attempts to question the idea that religion distracts from true education (25–29), but appears to lose the thread of the argument and, after Dawkins repeats his joke, takes up his challenge by asking bluntly, 'How do you know it's wrong?' (32).

At 28, Dawkins reintroduces the miracle of Mohammed flying to heaven on a winged horse, he repeats his joke (30–31), then he exhorts Hasan to see things his way (33). Hasan responds by reasserting his 'rational', 'agnostic' position. Dawkins then questions the detail of the miracle. Hasan counters by refusing to accept Dawkins description. He repeats the agnostic position (40). Dawkins employs ridicule (43, 46). The transcript ends with Dawkins and Hasan summarising their positions.

There is no sign here of God as a hypothesis. There can be none, because there is no agreement as to criteria for proof or falsification. In Hasan's view, the miracle does not *contradict* the laws of physics in a scientific sense; on the contrary, it depends upon the laws of physics for its nature as a miracle. God, as all powerful creator, has *suspended* the laws of physics, that is what makes it a miracle. There is simply no place for scientific investigation here.

To summarise, in practice Dawkins argument does not consist in the scientific refutation of a hypothesis. That belief in miracles is wrong is taken as self-evident. Instead, he employs a membership categorization device with two categories: [a] Members of the first category 'understand the truth about the universe in which they live' (24); [b] Members of the second are not explicitly characterised in the transcript, but are glossed in *The God Delusion* as those religious believers who receive 'undeserved respect' (2006: 20, *passim*).

His argument consists in two moves: he demonstrates the lack of respect for members of [b] which he has advertised in his book (e.g. 2–8, 43, 46 and 49), while simultaneously inviting Hasan to associate with category [a] (e.g. 2, 33, 49). Turn 49 encapsulates this this strategy in the form of a contrast structure.

Notwithstanding Smith's (1978) treatment of this device, its use does not in itself undermine Dawkins' argument. On the other hand, it does call into question his characterisation of that argument as scientific. Seen in terms of Aristotelian rhetoric, there is nothing of *logos*, a measure of *ethos* and a great deal of *pathos* in it.

## CONCLUSION

The notion that we have to understand *everything*, where what 'understand' constitutes is not disputed but seldom spelled out explicitly, is truly a modern superstition. MacIntyre, Dawkins and—to a lesser extent—Evans-Pritchard share this superstition, but the logical mistakes it leads them to make differ in nature and extent.

Evans-Pritchard accepts an unexamined premise, but not one that is central to his intellectual endeavour. Ultimately, it leads to the Winch moment in which the clarity of his analysis becomes contaminated by his cultural bias: a need to assert the truth of modern science.

MacIntyre accepts the same premise, that a culture can be understood by evaluating it in comparison to scientific method. In his analysis, however, this constitutes a Sharrock moment, because it becomes the basis of his whole argument.

In Dawkins' *The Selfish Gene* there is a clear Winch moment: the notion that genes can be selfish. This is a category error, in which a human characteristic is attributed to a bio-chemical entity. Crucially, his argument in that book makes sense and holds together *without* the notion of the selfish gene, and the errors that it generates are scattered and ultimately inconsequential.<sup>3</sup> In *The God Delusion*, on the other hand, Dawkins' argument *rests entirely* on a misbegotten formulation of what 'religion', 'belief' or 'God' might be. This is a category error without which there is no argument left. It is a Sharrock moment.

Winch and Sharrock share a Wittgensteinian sensibility, in which the two moments are complementary and mutually congruent. Sharrock's work extends, prolongs and recasts Winch's discussion of philosophy in relation to the social studies, in particular through an articulation of how conceptual analysis and empirical inquiry might relate to one another. This 'analytic mentality' (Schenkein 1978), while as indigestible to contemporary social theory as Winch's arguments were in the 1950s and 1960s, has retained and developed the considerable critical and intellectual powers of Wittgenstein's 'dissolution' of philosophy's 'problems'.

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<sup>3</sup> However, as is the case with many intelligent and sophisticated philosophers, rather than abandon his error, Dawkins doubles down and makes it a feature of his theory, while relying on the vagueness of the notion to protect it from criticism.

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<sup>4</sup> Huxley's essays can be found at [https://infidels.org/library/historical/thomas\\_huxley/huxley\\_wace/](https://infidels.org/library/historical/thomas_huxley/huxley_wace/) (Accessed 31/01/2019). It may be an indication of the general level of intelligence among Dawkins' many followers that before being permitted access, you will be required to acknowledge that Huxley, being long dead, is not obliged to answer email enquiries.

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