

Chapter 10 – A Much Needed Gap?

This chapter serves as a kind of summary of the book – not so much to revisit the arguments, but to approach the God Hypothesis from one final avenue. He claims that:

*'Religion has at one time or another been thought to fill four main roles in life: explanation, exhortation, consolation and inspiration.'*¹

His hope is that Chapter 4 dealt with Religion's role to explain, and chapters 6 and 7 its role to exhort. In this final chapter, he seeks to dispell its requirement as consolation or inspiration.

Binker

The chapter starts by comparing Binker, of A.A. Milne's poem, 'Now We Are Six' to God, describing the nature of an imaginary friend. He says,

*'I suspect that the Binker phenomenon of childhood may be a good model for understanding belief in adults.'*²

The rhetorical desire of this whole chunk is to liken God to an imaginary friend. The following points are highlighted:

1. Imaginary friends are for children
2. Imaginary friends are not real
3. Children should grow out of them

By implication, Dawkins seems to say, the idea of God should be treated likewise – childish, unreal, to be grown out of. The childhood propensity to have imaginary friends 'grows up' into a God-relationship. It doesn't need pointed out that this is scientifically non-rigorous, and simply fanciful rhetoric.

Consolation

Dawkins seeks to argue that the idea of God (or, more accurately, given his rhetoric, religion) is not necessary to provide bone fide consolation – whether that be physical consolation, or consolation in the revelation of facts previously unknown.

His main thesis is that 'whatever religion can do, I can do better.' Physical consolation is given more effectively by medicine than by an imaginary God and

¹ Dawkins, p347, 'A Much Needed Gap'

² Ibid, p347, 'A Much Needed Gap?', Binker

non-religious belief gives equal consolation in the face of disaster as religious belief does.

The point is, Religion in the proper sense is not something which is designed primarily to be a consoler (even although it does that as a by-product in many ways) – it is a proper expression of a worship-ful relationship between a creature and his creator. Proving consolational agnosticism as Dawkins does doesn't undermine the necessity of true religion in the eyes of eternity.

Dawkins is also careful in this section to paint one-dimensional Christians – Christians who do not mourn (rather than mourning but with real hope as per 1 Thessalonians 4), and who are cowardly in their beliefs and in the process of dying. The clever rhetorical technique makes his own position seem more plausible and attractive.

Also in this chunk, we see Dawkins deal with the doctrine of purgatory, and the paying of indulgences – just under 500 years after Luther and the Reformers – and presents this as a universal, orthodox Christian doctrine!

Inspiration

In dealing with this section, Dawkins makes one of the best revelations of the book so far:

*'[Inspiration as a reason why religion is necessary] is a matter of taste or private judgement, which has the slightly unfortunate effect that the method of argument I must employ is rhetoric rather than logic. I've done it before...'*³

The purpose of this section is to show that the atheist world-view can be fulfilling.

*'As many atheists have said better than me, the knowledge that we have only one life should make it all the more precious. The atheist view is correspondingly life-affirming and life-enhancing, whilst at the same time never being tainted with self-delusion, wishful thinking, or the whingeing self-pity of those who feel that life owes them something.'*⁴

Dawkins aims in this section to remove 'the Mother of all Burkas' – to use science to show the awesomeness and immensity of the world. J.B.S. Haldane once wrote:

³ Ibid, p360, 'A Much Needed Gap?', Inspiration

⁴ Ibid, p361, 'A Much Needed Gap?', Inspiration

*'Now, my own suspicion is that the universe is not only queerer than we suppose, but queerer than we can suppose...'*⁵

Dawkins' own take is that:

*'Laughter is arguably the best response to some of the stranger paradoxes of modern physics. The alternative, I sometimes think, is to cry.'*⁶

Despite a few missteps when explaining concepts in physics (which we are all allowed now and again!), he manages to give one of the most poignant and yet simultaneously tragic renditions of the beauty of the universe and the science that explains it. He describes our presence in 'middle world' – the world where things aren't big enough or small enough or fast enough for strange effects to be seen, and how exotic the world outside 'middle world' looks to us.

*'Evolution in Middle World has ill equipped us to handle very improbable events. But in the vastness of astronomical space, or geological time, events that seem impossible in Middle World turn out to be inevitable.'*⁷

The saddest part of this picture is that the beauty that he describes – the wonder of what science can open up for us – is earthed in humans, in us. The ultimate desire of it is how much more wonder we can uncover to make us cleverer.

*'I genuinely don't know the answer, but I am thrilled to be alive at a time when humanity is pushing against the limits of understanding. Even better, we may eventually discover that there are no limits.'*⁸

Dawkins had commented in chapter 1 that we are effectively 'hard-wired for wonder', to use my earlier phrase. However, we see clearly that this is the centre of his world – that the wonder is for our benefit. A Christian ought to marvel at science – at the incredible phenomena that Dawkins describes – and then give praise to the one who made it, and who calls us into relationship with Himself. Dawkins himself points out that

*'If the demise of God leaves a gap, different people will fill it in different ways.'*⁹

⁵ J.B.S. Haldane, 'Possible Worlds' (1927)

⁶ Dawkins, p364, 'A Much Needed Gap?', Inspiration

⁷ Ibid, p374, 'A Much Needed Gap?', The Mother of All Burkas

⁸ Ibid, p374, 'A Much Needed Gap?', The Mother of All Burkas

⁹ Ibid, p361, 'A Much Needed Gap?', Inspiration

How true this is of humans – we so often substitute worship of the creator for the worship of created things (Romans 1:25). But, as one of my atheist classmates in my Masters class observed:

'If I were a Christian, I couldn't help myself but look at the universe – at the complexity of how a star works, of the power in a supernova, of the size of a galaxy, at the intricacy of an atom – and worship God more. It seems to me that's the natural thing to do.'

And so, in the light of this Chapter, I want to encourage you not to be dismissive of science due to the work of the likes of Dawkins, but be excited by it as a chance to delve into the wonder of God's creation. But never at any stage should we substitute the worship of the creator for the worship of the things He has made.