

DAWKINS' GOD, CHANCE

Statue of Limitations

We're going to begin with an exposure of Richard Dawkins' faith in a particularly strange anti-deity, which for Dawkins functions as his god, the object of his faith, hope, and dare we say, if not love, considerable devotion. If the reader is to understand Dawkins' unwavering confidence in the non-existence of God, he must first of all become acquainted with his irrational faith in "Chance."

What would be the rational reaction to our seeing, in broad daylight, a marble statue of the Virgin Mary suddenly wave at us?

-
- a. Complete astonishment, and overwhelming belief that one had witnessed a miracle.
 - b. Complete astonishment, and nearly overwhelming belief that one had witnessed a miracle coupled with the conviction that a thorough investigation should be made into another possible cause.
 - c. Uttering, "That sure was lucky," and going about one's business.
-

If your response is "a," you would be considered quite normal and rational, but perhaps a bit hasty. If your response is "b," you would be quite normal and rational, but also skeptical enough to allow reason to

further investigate. And “c”? You’d be Richard Dawkins—or at least, so it would seem from his arguments.

Why bring up this seemingly absurd scenario? Dawkins brought it up first in a previous bestseller, *The Blind Watchmaker* (and adverts to it once again in his *God Delusion*¹). While it may be interesting evidence of his irrational belief in the impossibility of miracles, it is hard evidence for his irrational belief in the powers of chance, a belief that has its origins in his intense desire that God not exist.

So let us lay aside for the moment the question of whether miracles do in fact happen. Our concern for now is whether Dawkins’ unconquerable faith in the powers of chance is rational. For Dawkins, whatever God could do, chance can do better, and that means that any event, no matter how seemingly miraculous, can be explained as good luck. As we shall see, this directly affects Dawkins’ ability to assess the latest scientific evidence that points to the existence of an Intelligent Creator. Before we get to the implications, let’s allow Mr. Dawkins’ inestimable faith in the powers of chance to speak for itself.

In *The Blind Watchmaker* Dawkins states that “A miracle is something that happens, but which is exceedingly surprising. If a marble statue of the Virgin Mary suddenly waved its hand at us we should treat it as a miracle, because all our experience and knowledge tells us that marble doesn’t behave like that.” However, he goes on to assure the reader, science would not judge this occurrence as “utterly impossible,” but only “very improbable.”²

This is a fundamental confusion that runs throughout Dawkins, the confusion of improbability with impossibility. “Coincidence,” Dawkins assures the reader, “means multiplied improbability.” That is

1 Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 373–374.

2 Richard Dawkins, *The Blind Watchmaker: Why the Evidence of Evolution Reveals a Universe without Design* (New York: Norton, 1996), 159.

a fancy way of saying that anything can happen. Since anything is possible, then anything is probable, even if that probability is astronomically small. Back to the waving statue.

In the case of the marble statue, molecules in solid marble are continuously jostling against one another in random directions. The jostlings of the different molecules cancel one another out, so the whole hand of the statue stays still. But if, by sheer coincidence, all the molecules just happened to move in the same direction at the same moment, the hand would move. If they then all reversed direction at the same moment the hand would move back. In this way it is *possible* for a marble statue to wave at us. It could happen. The odds against such a coincidence are unimaginably great but they are not incalculably great. A physicist colleague has kindly calculated them for me. The number is so large that the entire age of the universe so far is too short a time to write out all the noughts! It is theoretically possible for a cow to jump over the moon with something like the same improbability. The conclusion to this part of the argument is that we can *calculate* our way into regions of miraculous improbability far greater than we can *imagine* as plausible.³

We quote this entire paragraph because if we merely reported it, no sane person would believe that Dawkins had written it, or we would be accused of misrepresenting his words or taking them out of context. But there it is, word for word. In stating it this way, Dawkins has gone far beyond the important insight that many things that have an extremely small possibility of happening do have *some* possibility of happening. For some reason, he wants his reader to assume that the impossible is really only extremely improbable.

3 Richard Dawkins, *The Blind Watchmaker*, 159–160.

The first, most obvious objection to this kind of reasoning is this: What *would* be impossible if *anything*—or at least any physical event of the kind described—is possible? And if such impossible things are possible, why isn't it possible that the waving statue was indeed a miraculous occurrence? Why isn't the miraculous itself a possibility?

The answer is quite simple. Dawkins believes that *anything but* a miracle is possible, and that leads him to believe that the impossible, no matter how absurd, is possible. The moon, over which the cow really could jump, truly might—just for a few moments, due to random molecular restructuring—be made of green cheese.

This leads to a second point. Quite obviously, Dawkins' presentation of the miraculous and impossible is only a manifestation of his atheism. What kind of an atheist is he? In his *God Delusion*, Dawkins classifies himself as a *de facto* atheist ("I cannot know for certain but I think God is very improbable, and I live my life on the assumption that he is not there"⁴). He adds that "I am agnostic only to the extent that I am agnostic about fairies at the bottom of the garden."⁵

But here is the problem. Since he has reclassified impossible things to be only highly improbable, it is unclear what the difference would be in his assessment of (1) a waving Virgin Mary statue, (2) a cow suddenly jumping approximately 240,000 miles in the air, calculating its ascent so as to take into account the effect of the earth's rotation and the drag of the atmosphere (and somehow avoiding combustion by atmospheric friction), (3) fairies at the bottom of the garden, and (4) the existence of God. In short, if God is only highly improbable, could His existence be any *less* probable than an event of such mind-numbing improbability that one couldn't write down the calculated improbability in 13 ½ billion years? Given the outrageous-

4 Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 51.

5 Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 51.

ly enormous improbability, how could one even calculate accurately *which* was more probable? If on Dawkins' reckoning God is at least as probable as the sudden waving of a marble statue, then according to his own reasoning God causing the miraculous waving of the Virgin Mary statue is at least as probable as random atomic jostling.

We also might well ask at this point what it means to say that the existence of God is probable. Dawkins gives only this thin explanation: "reason alone could not propel one to total conviction that anything definitely does not exist."⁶ Whatever the merits or intention of this proviso, we would like to propose a correction that will come into play when we examine Dawkins' attempts at demonstrations that allegedly propel one to almost total conviction that God does not exist. Simply put, God's existence is not a matter of probability. Either He does exist or He doesn't exist. Things that enter the realm of probability are contingent; they are the *kind* of things that don't necessarily have to be. By contrast, God is eternal by definition; by definition, if He exists, He exists of necessity outside of time.

We say "if He exists" and "by definition" so that this distinction doesn't depend at this point on our actually having proven that God does exist, and we also want to make clear that we are not, like St. Anselm, permitting a proof of God's existence by definition. We can have a definition of something that doesn't exist, like a horned horse. But having a horn and being a horse must of *necessity* go together when we are examining the question of whether a unicorn exists, in much the same way that having eternal existence and being God go together when we are examining the question of whether or not God exists. We cannot ask, "What is the probability that God exists?" for the same reason we cannot ask, "What is the probability that a unicorn has a horn in the middle of its forehead?"

6 Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 51.

We submit, then, that God's existence isn't probable. But again, saying that doesn't decide the case for God. We would still have to demonstrate that a necessary Being, God, does in fact exist. Probability does enter in, but only with regard to our arguments falling short of being entirely demonstrable. We may have probable arguments for His necessary existence or against it, in the same way that we can have probable arguments about the current existence of liquid water on a certain planet outside our solar system. In both cases, the fact exists—either God does or doesn't exist; either there is or is not liquid water—and the probability has to do with the type and caliber of *our* arguments given what we happen to know at the point we make them. We'll come back to this point.

For now, let's return to Dawkins' seemingly limitless faith in chance. Given what we've said, we would like to offer a reformulation of famed atheist philosopher David Hume's maxim in regard to the miraculous:⁷ *No event that is more miraculous than the miracle that it seeks to discredit can be used as an explanation to deny that a miracle actually occurred.* To any sane person who witnessed a marble statue of the Virgin Mary waving to him (and who then eliminated all possibility of there being some kind of trickery, illusion, or delusion), the possibility that it was indeed miraculous would be less miraculous than the possibility that it was the result of randomly synchronized subatomic jostling.

We'll find our maxim very handy when we turn to Dawkins' attempt to convince readers of the materialistic miracle of life's origin—for that is the real goal of all his talk about miracles. Before doing this,

7 Hume's maxim is as follows: "No testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle, unless the testimony be of such a kind, that its falsehood would be more miraculous, than the fact, which it endeavours to establish." David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1981), chap. 10, p. 77. In setting out this maxim, Hume was trying to set forth a final refutation of the miraculous in Scripture. Since the miracles in Scripture are only reported to us by other alleged witnesses—that is, we didn't witness them ourselves—then it is far more likely that the alleged witnesses were liars or fools.

however, we need to make even more clear the difference between the impossible and the improbable, a distinction of which Dawkins seems to have lost sight. Here is a simple illustration in the form of two questions.

-
1. What is the probability of "a perfect deal in bridge, where each of the four players receives a complete suite of cards"⁸?
 2. What is the probability of throwing a deck of cards up in the air during a hurricane and having the cards land as a four-story card house, where each story is made up of a "complete suite of cards"?
-

We can calculate the first, and Dawkins has done it: "The odds against this happening are 2,235,197,406,895,366,368,301,559,999 to 1."⁹ And the card house in the hurricane? The odds against it happening aren't really big; or even really, really big. There are no odds at all. It can't happen. It is physically impossible—just like random jostling of a statue's marble hands or cows jumping over the moon. This is a different kind of impossibility, than the impossibility of dealing a poker hand of five aces with a standard deck where there are only four (unless, to be tiresome, we allow the Dawkinsian possibility of the atomic reconfiguration of a joker into another ace).

What do we learn from this about Dawkins' argument? Again, a sign of the weakness of Dawkins' position is that he is forced to treat the impossible as possible so that he can eliminate any possibility of the miraculous (which is the only thing that he rules out, *a priori*, as impossible). "My thesis," he tells readers, is "that events that we commonly call miracles are not supernatural, but are part of a spectrum of more-or-less improbable natural events. A miracle, in other words, if it occurs at

8 An example used by Dawkins himself, so we can't be accused of stacking the deck. *The Blind Watchmaker*, 161.

9 Richard Dawkins, *The Blind Watchmaker*, 161.

all, is a tremendous stroke of luck. Events don't fall neatly into natural events *versus* miracles....Given infinite time, or infinite opportunities, anything is possible."¹⁰ Anything but the miraculous, that is.

Strictly speaking, however, a miracle *is* possible for Dawkins, but it just cannot really be miraculous. Jesus Christ rising from the dead is possible in just exactly the same way that random jostlings of marble molecules could make a statue wave or a cow jump over the moon. In fact, *all* the miracles in the Old and New Testaments could actually have happened just as reported, the only difference being that they were highly improbable molecular events.

Of course, we do not mean that Dawkins himself *really* thinks that everything, no matter how loony or absurd or "miraculous," is possible. Rather, he is using this type of argument for a purpose. He uses his unbounded faith in chance as a means to establish purely materialistic explanations for events that would seem to any sane person to require a supernatural cause.

To be more pointed, Dawkins manifests a *selective* confusion of the possible and the impossible when it suits his purposes, and sometimes the confusion amounts to an intellectual slight-of-hand that has fooled many of Dawkins' readers (and, we assume, even Dawkins himself). Let's look at a particularly interesting example from his *God Delusion* about the "miracle" of life's appearance on earth, for this is how Dawkins purports to show that a Creator God is unnecessary.

According to Dawkins, we can safely estimate that there are, somewhere in the vast universe, a "billion billion" planets that would be suitable for life. He then supposes what he takes to be long odds of one in a billion of life arising by chance (although he really doesn't mean life, but merely "the spontaneous arising of something equivalent to DNA.") Well, then, concludes Dawkins, "even with such absurdly long odds, *life*

¹⁰ Richard Dawkins, *The Blind Watchmaker*, 139.

will still have arisen on a billion planets—of which Earth, of course, is one." This is such a surprising conclusion, Dawkins remarks, "I'll say it again. If the odds of life originating spontaneously on a planet were a billion to one against, nevertheless that stupefyingly improbable event would still happen on a billion planets."¹¹

It is such a surprising conclusion precisely because it doesn't follow. The entire argument is faulty. We'll get to more particular questions in regard to physics and chemistry in the next chapter but, at this point, we call attention to a problem in Dawkins' reasoning that is a matter of logic. You cannot assume what you have to prove; that is called "begging the question" or more elegantly, the fallacy of *petitio principii*. He falls into the fallacy because he assumes without argument that the spontaneous assembly of DNA is like getting a perfect deal in bridge rather than being like tossing a perfect cardhouse in a hurricane. That is what he would have to *prove* rather than assume.

The real question, the prior question, is one of possibility and impossibility, not greater or lesser probability. If tossing a perfect cardhouse in a hurricane is impossible because the cards would keep blowing away, then it wouldn't become possible by adding into the calculation a billion billion available planets, or even a trillion trillion. If the spontaneous arising of DNA is simply impossible, then it wouldn't matter how many billions or trillions of planets there were. It couldn't and wouldn't happen. Thus, we have to be very wary that Dawkins is not assuming that what is impossible is just very, very unlikely.

Even admitting the possibility of "the spontaneous arising of something equivalent to DNA," it is grossly misleading merely to assume such an easy probability as a billion to one. If the odds were really that good, then there wouldn't be significant skepticism among scientists about origin of life scenarios. We'll see in the next chapter why

11 Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 137–138. Emphasis added.

that skepticism is well-founded. But for now, we can at least note that it wouldn't take much to worsen the odds so that Dawkins' "proof" would fail. That is because of the way probabilities "grow." The probability of rolling a five with a normal six-sided die is one in six. But the probability of rolling two fives in a row is $\frac{1}{6} \times \frac{1}{6}$ or one in thirty-six. Ten in a row: one in 60,466,176. Twenty in a row: one in 3,656,158,440,062,976. Twenty-five in a row: 28,430,288,029,929,701,376. It doesn't take long to climb above one in a billion odds, nor even to climb above one in a billion billion odds. As a consequence, the introduction of even a relatively small number of adverse factors would affect Dawkins' generous assignation of a billion and one odds of the spontaneous production of DNA and soon enough eliminate his easy-going conclusion that "life will still have arisen on a billion planets—of which Earth, of course, is one." And so, we cannot allow ourselves to think that Dawkins can settle the question merely by assigning a billion to one odds. He must first show that it is possible and then give a reasonable conjecture in regard to the odds.

Of course, that is a matter of scientific detail. Before we do enter into the scientific details in the next chapter, let us close with several observations. We think it is fair to say that Dawkins' faith in the powers of chance is at least as strong, if not stronger, than most people's faith in God. We are justified in calling it faith for two reasons. First, Dawkins himself admits that the existence of God "is very improbable," rather than absolutely, demonstrably impossible. We assume that he is not agnostic about the existence of a four-angled triangle.

Clearly, Dawkins would not appreciate our categorizing his *de facto* atheism as a kind of faith. "Atheists do not have faith," he assures the reader; it is just that "reason alone could not propel one to total conviction that anything definitely does not exist."¹² But if not reason alone,

¹² Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 51.

then reason and what? Is he not saying "I *believe* God does not exist even though by reason alone I cannot demonstrate it"?

Obviously Dawkins intends to dodge this by asserting that reason by its very nature cannot "propel one to total conviction that anything definitely does not exist." As he notes, on such grounds, the existence of fairies at the bottom of the garden cannot be definitely disproved.

Does that seem rational? What propels Dawkins to allow for this absurdity? Precisely his desire to demonstrate to the reader that God does not exist—a bit of a paradox, to say the least. Because Dawkins wants to affirm that the miraculous does not require a supernatural cause, he is willing to affirm that *anything* is possible so as to allow that chance can provide a materialist explanation of any apparent miracle, such as a waving Virgin Mary statue or the "spontaneous arising" of something equivalent to DNA on Earth. In that way, he can dispense with a God who performs miracles and a Creator God in one fell blow. But since *anything* is possible, then "reason alone could not propel one to total conviction that anything definitely does not exist."

An interesting trap, isn't it? The desire to eliminate God brings Dawkins to embrace an absurdity—that anything can happen. But having thrown himself into absurdity's embrace, he finds that he cannot entirely eliminate God, the very thing that brought him to leap into the arms of absurdity. At least he is consistent, but this consistency leads him to the position of agnosticism that makes his unbelief a kind of faith.

This brings us to a second reason we may call Dawkins' agnosticism faith. It would be harder to imagine a more fervent faith in the powers of chance than someone who can, with a straight face, speak of the actual possibility of a marble statue waving its hand or a cow jumping over the moon. Such "miraculous improbability" is indistinguishable from the early Christian Tertullian's famous statement of faith (from *De carne Christi*) in regard to the resurrection of Jesus Christ

that *certum est, quia impossibile* (it is certain, because it is impossible). (Tertullian did not say, as it is often reported, *credo quia absurdum est*, “I believe because it is absurd.”) The point of what Tertullian did say was that since the resurrection was an impossible event, it must (as faith maintains) have been a miraculous event. Dawkins changes Tertullian’s statement of faith only to the extent that he believes that an impossible event is certain because it is miraculously improbable. But that is not much different, is it, than the alleged saying of Tertullian, *credo quia absurdum est*? Why such devotion to the great and fickle god, Chance? Quite simple. He would rather believe in *anything* but God.

But who is this god Chance? How can it be such a powerful cause, so powerful that it can replace the need for a living, acting, intelligent Creator God? As Aristotle long ago pointed out to the materialists of his day—who likewise worshiped at the altar of Chance—chance isn’t really a cause because it really isn’t a thing. There is the chance *of* something happening, but the “of” is all important because that tells you what really exists and defines what you can possibly mean by chance. Yet, even here, chance isn’t a thing.

To use a familiar example, there is a one-in-six chance of rolling a five on a six-sided die, but here “chance” isn’t a thing or a cause. What causes the one-in-six chance is fact that there exists in reality a six-sided die, that it is made in such a way that it can be rolled, that it is made so that it can stop rolling, and so on. Thus, a 1/6 chance isn’t a thing in addition to the die, but a short-hand way of describing the actual entities and conditions that allow for six different but roughly equal possibilities of some very particular well-defined event to occur. We can eliminate the 1/6 chance by changing the die or the conditions, say, by filing off the dots of the die or throwing the die into a blast furnace. That cuts the great god Chance down to size, making it not a powerful and primary cause, but a secondary shadow of other beings and

causes. Dawkins himself actually understands this point quite clearly in regard to natural selection. As he remarks in many places, natural selection (insofar as it is a cumulative, step-by-step building up of favorable traits) is the “opposite” of chance. His point is this. If natural selection had to produce an eye in one, giant random set of mutations, we really would be making evolution entirely a matter of chance, and hence next to impossible, because the material parts (the various atoms) have no tendency to spontaneously take on multi-layered, super-complex biological structure. We would be relying on chance to do what only a god could do. But evolution builds the eye by tiny steps, each of which involves only a slight bit of chance acting according to the normal mutation rates in genes. Here, chance is not some kind of miracle-performing god, but something that is understandable in terms of and subordinate to what genes are, how they copy, and what can effect the genetic text of a DNA molecule.

But as we've seen, chance grows to monstrous proportions when Dawkins attempts to explain why *anything* can happen. The reason, as we have seen, is that Dawkins wants to use chance to replace God in regard to the origin of life. Since it must have the powers of the God it displaces, then it grows accordingly, becoming a god that can do anything. Of course, Dawkins doesn't need his god to do everything, but only those things that he surmises natural selection cannot do, and that would seem to require a real God to do: create the first living things. Let us now see how well this god can do.