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A Knack for Bashing Orthodoxy

By MICHAEL POWELL

Richard Dawkins at the Oxford University Museum of Natural History.

OXFORD, England —You walk out of a soft-falling rain into the living room of an Oxford don, with great walls of books, handsome art and, on the far side of the room, graceful windows onto a luxuriant garden.

Does this man, arguably the world's most influential evolutionary biologist, spend most of his time here or in the field? Prof. Richard Dawkins smiles faintly. He did not find fame spending dusty days picking at shale in search of ancient trilobites. Nor has he traipsed the African bush charting the sex life of wildebeests.

He gets little charge from such exertions.

"My interest in biology was pretty much always on the philosophical side," he says, listing the essential questions that drive him. "Why do we exist, why are we here, what is it all about?"

It is in no fashion to diminish Professor Dawkins, a youthful 70, to say that his greatest accomplishment has come as a profoundly original thinker, synthesizer and writer. His epiphanies follow on the heels of long sessions of reading and thought, and a bit of procrastination. He is an elegant stylist with a taste for metaphor. And he has a knack, a predisposition even, for assailing orthodoxy.

In his landmark 1976 book, "The Selfish Gene," he looked at evolution through a novel lens: that of a gene. With this, he built on the work of fellow scientists and flipped the prevailing view of evolution and natural selection on its head.

He has written a string of best sellers, many detailing his view of evolution as progressing toward greater complexity. (His first children's book, "The Magic of Reality," appears this fall.) With an intellectual pugilist's taste for the right cross, he rarely sidesteps debate, least of all with his fellow evolutionary biologists.

Although he is a political liberal, he has taken on more than a few leftists in his writings — particularly those who read his theory of genes as sanctioning rapacious and selfish behavior.

Of late he has taken up the cudgel for atheism, writing "The God Delusion," an international best seller. When Martin Rees, Britain's astronomer royal, recently accepted a prize from the John Templeton Foundation, which promotes a dialogue between science and religion, Professor Dawkins was unforgiving. Dr. Rees, he wrote, is a "compliant quisling," a traitor to science. Dr. Rees declined to counterpunch.

Professor Dawkins often declines to talk in San Francisco and New York; these cities are too gloriously godless, as far as he is concerned. "As an atheistic lecturer, you are rather wasting your time," he says. He prefers the Bible Belt, where controversy is raw.

He insists he frets before each lecture. This is difficult to imagine. He is characteristically English in his fluid command of words written and spoken. (Perhaps this is an evolutionary adaptation — all those cold, clammy English days firing an adjectival and syntactical genius?)

He is gracious without being gregarious. Ask him to explore an idea and he'll rummage happily. But he keeps the door to his private life firmly latched.

(Briefly, he has a daughter, who is a doctor. He is married for the third time, to the actress Lalla Ward. He is on friendly enough terms with his first wife, the zoologist Marian Stamp Dawkins, that she wrote an essay for a 2006 book celebrating her former husband's lifetime of accomplishment.)

African Roots

Clinton Richard Dawkins was born in Kenya, where his father was an agricultural specialist with the colonial service. He later returned with his parents to England and in due course arrived at Oxford, an intelligent enough boy. "I didn't have a very starry school career," he says. "I was medium to above average, nothing special."

He lighted his own intellectual fire at a university peculiarly suited to his temperament. Oxford relies on the tutorial system, in which students burrow into original texts rather than textbooks.

"I loved it; I become easily temporarily obsessed," Professor Dawkins says. "I did not end up as broadly educated as my Cambridge colleagues, but I graduated probably better equipped to write a book on my chosen subject."

(From that experience he drew a dislike of the current establishment insistence — bordering on mania — for standardized tests and curriculums. He views this as antithetical to true learning.)

After graduating in 1962, he studied with Nikolaas Tinbergen, a Nobel-winning scientist, and taught at the University of California, Berkeley. He returned to Oxford in 1971. He was working out his thoughts on sociobiology, which took form a few years later in "The Selfish Gene."

At the time, the predominant popular view of evolution was that animals and insects worked together, albeit unconsciously, and that natural selection acted on individuals to do what was good for their species. Cooperation, again unconscious, seemed woven into nature.

Professor Dawkins's voice slides playfully into High David Attenborough style as he mimics the mellifluous tone of BBC documentaries of the time: "The dung beetle is the refuse collector of the natural system, and where would we be without them? And male deer fight but take care not to kill each other."

He stops. "That sort of thinking was pretty dominant in the culture." Artful pause. "And it's plain wrong. I wanted to correct that ubiquitous misunderstanding."

Genes, he says, try to maximize their chance of survival. The successful ones crawl down through the generations. The losers, and their hosts, die off. A gene for helping the group could not persist if it endangered the survival of the individual.

Such insights were in the intellectual air by the mid-1960s. But Professor Dawkins grasped the power of metaphor — that selfish gene — and so made the idea come alive. Andrew Read, a professor of natural history at Penn State, recalls reading "The Selfish Gene" and feeling his world change.

"Gone in a stroke was the intellectually barren 'it just is' hypothesis," he wrote in an essay. " 'The Selfish Gene' crystallized it and made it impossible to ignore."

Not everyone bought the argument. The moral implications proved deeply troubling, suggesting that altruism disguised selfish, gene-driven behavior. "Many readers experienced the book as a psychic trauma," wrote Dr. Randolph Nesse, a professor of psychiatry at the University of Michigan. "It turned their moral worlds upside down."

Prominent scientists and intellectuals cast Professor Dawkins as the herald angel of a selfish culture, accusing him and his fellow sociobiologists of setting the cultural stage for the "I got mine" age of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher. The evolutionary biologistRichard Lewontin, a man of the political left, painted a picture out of a George Orwell novel. "If biological determinism is a weapon in the struggle between classes," he wrote with two other scientists, "then the universities are weapons factories, and their teaching and research faculties are the engineers, designers."

To Professor Dawkins, this badly distorted his science and his political leanings, which are resolutely liberal. (He opposed the Vietnam and Iraq wars, admires President Obama and votes most often with Labor. More recently, he voted for the Liberal Party in his district, as he admired the fact that the member of Parliament was insistently secular. The member lost in 2010, to an evangelical Conservative.) He was writing about the behavior of genes, not about psychological and emotional states.

Our glory as a species is that we can overcome our genetic impulses, he says, acknowledging that the book's title "perhaps lent itself to misunderstanding."

"It's not the selfish individual, and certainly not the selfish species," he says. "My book could have just as easily been called 'The Altruistic Individual.' "

But true to himself, he does not stop at this concession. "What would our critics have had us do, falsify the algebra?" he asks, and says of the criticism, "It was irritatingly stupid, actually."

Progressive Evolution?

Professor Dawkins's great intellectual conviction is that evolution is progressive, and tends to lead to more and more complexity. Species, in his view, often arrive at similar solutions to evolutionary puzzles — the need for ears, eyes, arms or an octopus's tentacle. And, often although not invariably, bigger brains. So the saber-toothed tiger shows up as a cat in Europe and Asia, and as a marsupial in South America. Different species seized on the same carnivorous solution. (He most certainly does not, however, view evolution as progressing toward us, that is humans — were we to disappear, some other species most likely would fill our evolutionary niche.)

"There are endless progressions in evolution," he says. "When the ancestors of the cheetah first began pursuing the ancestors of the gazelle, neither of them could run as fast as they can today.

"What you are looking at is the progressive evolutionary product of an arms race."

So it would be no great surprise if the interior lives of animals turned out to be rather complex. Do dogs, for example, experience consciousness? Are they aware of themselves as autonomous animals in their surroundings?

"Consciousness has to be there, hasn't it?" Professor Dawkins replies. "It's an evolved, emergent quality of brains. It's very likely that most mammals have consciousness, and probably birds, too."

(He has embraced the Princeton University philosopher Peter Singer's Great Ape Project, which would accord legal rights to apes, including a prohibition against torture.)

His theory of progressive evolution, it should be said, is controversial. Professor Dawkins had a single great rival in writing about evolutionary biology: Stephen Jay Gould of Harvard.

Professor Gould, who died in 2002, was adamant that evolution was contingent — that while a species might progress in leaps and bounds, it was equally likely that it might reach a dead end, or regress. If a meteorite hit Earth and destroyed all intelligent life, he argued, the chances are vanishingly small that complex, intelligent life would evolve again.

As the writer Scott Rosenberg put it, Professor Gould saw our species as "simply a tiny accident occurring on a minor side-branch of the evolutionary tree."

The two evolutionary biologists had well-armored egos, their intellectual battles were spectacular, and they did not share laughs over pints afterward. Professor Dawkins acknowledged their prickly relationship in writing an appreciation of his rival, who died of cancer: "Gould and I did not tire the sun with talking and send him down in the sky."

Professor Dawkins feels more than a tinge of regret that he and Professor Gould did not appreciate each other more.

"Gould wanted to downgrade the conceit that it all progressed towards us, towards humans, and I fully approved of that," he says now, even as he makes sure to add, "But evolution most certainly is progressive."

There is a final cosmic joke to be had here.

The two men quarreled about everything save their shared atheism. But Professor Dawkins's closest intellectual ally on progressive evolution and convergence is Simon Conway Morris, the renowned Cambridge evolutionary paleontologist.

And Professor Morris, as it happens, is an Anglican and a fervent believer in a personal God. He sees convergence as hinting at a teleology, or intelligent architecture, in the universe.

Ask Professor Dawkins about his intellectual bedfellow, and his smile thins. "Yes, well, Simon and I have converged on the science," he says. "I should think in the world there are not two evolutionary scientists who could rival each other in their enthusiasm for convergence."

As to Professor Morris's religious faith? "I just don't get it."

Impatience With Religion

Aren't the theologian's questions — Why are we here? Is there something larger than us? Why do we die? — central to the human project?

Professor Dawkins shakes his head before the question is out. His impatience with religion is palpable, almost wriggling alive inside him. Belief in the supernatural strikes him as incurious, which is perhaps the worst insult he can imagine.

"Religion teaches you to be satisfied with nonanswers," he says. "It's a sort of crime against childhood."

And please spare him talk of spiritualism, as if that were the only way to meditate on the wonder of the universe. “If you look up at the Milky Way through the eyes of Carl Sagan, you get a feeling in your chest of something greater than yourself,” he says. “And it is. But it’s not supernatural.”

It is a measure of Britain’s more resolutely secular culture that Professor Dawkins can pursue his atheism and probing, provocative views of Islam and Christianity in several prime-time television documentaries. In one, he interviewed young women in a Muslim school that receives state funds.

“One said her ambition was to be a doctor. But she explicitly said if there is a contradiction between science and the Koran, then the Koran was right,” he says. “They were lovely girls, but utterly brainwashed.”

Critics grow impatient with Professor Dawkins’s atheism. They accuse him of avoiding the great theological debates that enrich religion and philosophy, and so simplifying the complex. He concocts “vulgar caricatures of religious faith that would make a first-year theology student wince,” wrote Terry Eagleton, regarded as one of Britain’s foremost literary critics. “What, one wonders, are Dawkins’s views on the epistemological differences between Aquinas and Duns Scotus?”

Put that charge to Professor Dawkins and he more or less pleads guilty. To suggest he study theology seems akin to suggesting he study fairies. Nor is he convinced that the ecumenical Anglican, the moderate imam, the Catholic priest with the well-developed sense of irony, is religion’s truest representative.

“I’ve had perfectly wonderful conversations with Anglican bishops, and I rather suspect if you asked in a candid moment, they’d say they don’t believe in the virgin birth,” he says. “But for every one of them, four others would tell a child she’ll rot in hell for doubting.”

That, he says, explains why he is writing a book for children. He wants to raise questions — Why is there a sun? What is an earthquake? What about rainbows? — and provide clever, rational answers. He has toyed with opening his own state-sponsored school, though under the British system he would have to come up with matching money.

But it would not be a school for atheists. The idea horrifies him. A child should skip down an idiosyncratic intellectual path. “I am almost pathologically afraid of indoctrinating children,” he says. “It would be a ‘Think for Yourself Academy.’ ”

Human Gods

After two hours of conversation, Professor Dawkins walks far afield. He talks of the possibility that we might co-evolve with computers, a silicon destiny. And he’s intrigued by the playful, even soul-stirring writings of Freeman Dyson, the theoretical physicist.

In one essay, Professor Dyson casts millions of speculative years into the future. Our galaxy is dying and humans have evolved into something like bolts of superpowerful intelligent and moral energy.

Doesn't that description sound an awful lot like God?

"Certainly," Professor Dawkins replies. "It's highly plausible that in the universe there are God-like creatures."

He raises his hand, just in case a reader thinks he's gone around a religious bend. "It's very important to understand that these Gods came into being by an explicable scientific progression of incremental evolution."

Could they be immortal? The professor shrugs.

"Probably not." He smiles and adds, "But I wouldn't want to be too dogmatic about that."