"Sublimely non-tendentious," that's the phrase I've always attributed to Alfred North Whitehead -- a man who began his career as a Cambridge mathematician collaborating with Bertrand Russell and ended that career as a Harvard philosopher and metaphysician. Two things you can count on when reading Whitehead. First, he will look at the big picture. Second, he will generously give to all historical players the credit due to them. I make these points to contrast Whitehead's modus operandi with the scattershot pettiness that pervades Richard Dawkins' book, The God Delusion (Houghton Mifflin, 416 pages, $27).

Here's a sample taken from Whitehead's Science and the Modern World -- a stunningly insightful text based on the Lowell Lectures of 1925:

"The Reformation and the scientific movement were two aspects of the [historical] revolt which was the dominant intellectual movement of the later Renaissance. The appeal to the origins of Christianity, and Francis Bacon's appeal to efficient causes as against final causes, were two sides of one movement of thought."

And again:

"I do not think...that I have even yet brought out the greatest contribution of medievalism to the formation of the scientific movement. I mean the inexpugnable belief that every detailed occurrence can be correlated with its antecedents in a perfectly definite manner, exemplifying general principles. Without this belief the incredible labours of scientists would be without hope.... My explanation is that the faith in the possibility of science, generated antecedently to the development of modern scientific theory, is an unconscious derivation from medieval theology."

To simplify, both the Reformation and modern science arose out of a "movement of thought" that, in the case of science, rebelled against final causes. Yet, ironically, the confidence that modern science displays in its intellectual project rests upon an unconscious faith in the universe's detailed rationality that was derived from medieval theology.

Don't look for anything like this kind of subtle analysis in The God Delusion. What you'll find, instead, is page after sarcastic page of attacks against any foe Dawkins considers an easy target: Pat Robertson, Pastor Ted Haggard, Ann Coulter, a small fundamentalist school in Northeast England (to which 7 of Dawkins' 374 pages are devoted), Pastor Fred "God Hates Fags" Phelps, Dr. James Dobson, and, of course, G. W. Bush -- who supposedly invaded Iraq because he was told to do so by God. Even poor Carl Jung is made into a kook by Dawkins for believing "that particular books on his shelf spontaneously exploded." (I've read a number of works written by Freud's unfaithful protege and have yet to encounter the concept of spontaneous book combustion. Dawkins, however, as with the comment about President Bush and Iraq, doesn't bother to provide references for these claims.)

When it comes to magnanimity, here's a sample of the author's generosity: "To be fair, much of the Bible is not systematically evil but just plain weird." This comment shows the contempt Dawkins consistently displays for ideas that don't conform to his own -- a bio-creed that includes the following affirmations: life emerged on earth due to random interactions of material elements; life evolved from its primitive forms to its current complexity because of natural selection; no god is needed to make sense of these (or any other) phenomena.
In truth, Dawkins' entire book is an exercise in contempt -- summarily dismissing Thomas Aquinas' theological arguments and devoting less than 100 breezy pages to the whole issue of God's existence. The rest of Dawkins' book discusses -- with the jaundiced eye of an H. L. Mencken in biological drag -- how religious beliefs are given undue social deference, why Einstein's references to God aren't religious, why eastern religions aren't religions, why religion developed (socio-biologically), how the Bible is a jumble of historical trash, how religion promotes intolerance and undermines science, how Hitler may have been Catholic, why Stalin's atheism doesn't matter, why society doesn't need religion to be moral, why Jefferson was probably an atheist (the non-mentioned God-statements on the Jefferson Memorial to the contrary notwithstanding), why studying religion to understand literary references is okay, and why parents indoctrinating their children with religious beliefs are guilty of child abuse. (The depth of Dawkins' political thought is shown by his failure to ponder for one second the implications of a government that can tell parents what beliefs they can and cannot transmit to their offspring.)

FAR FROM BEING A SERIOUS philosophical book, this ill-edited and garrulous diatribe contains just about anything that crosses the author's mind -- including numerous quotes from that popular author, atheist, and graduate student, Sam Harris. What one won't find in The God Delusion is serious curiosity about the essential nature of the universe. The billions upon billions of stars and galaxies that Carl Sagan invoked with semi-mystical awe, become, for Dawkins, a mere premise for his theoretical conceit that random interactions could have produced the phenomenon of life on earth. (With so many planets, it had to have happened somewhere!) Never mind the fact that scientists endowed with that mysterious chemical characteristic known as consciousness can't, with purposeful intent, replicate that vital accident. And never mind that scientists like DNA-theorist Francis Crick were so baffled by the complexity of early life forms that they toyed with a panspermia hypothesis according to which space aliens brought life-seeds to earth. And finally, never mind the embarrassing fossil-record confession by the late Harvard biologist, Stephen Jay Gould, that "most species exhibit no directional change during their tenure on earth" and that in any local area, "a species does not arise gradually by the steady transformation of its ancestors; it appears all at once and 'fully formed.'"

Dawkins' treatment of that mathematical genius and 17th century philosopher, Blaise Pascal, is typical of his general approach. Dawkins seizes on Pascal's weakest argument, the wager, and ridicules its obvious flaws. Ignored are the well-known passages that ground Pascal's (oft-wavering) faith in the inadequacy of the human mind to deal with the enormity of the universe -- both the infinitely large and the infinitely small. In Pascal's words, "The whole visible world is only an imperceptible atom in the ample bosom of nature. No idea approaches it. We may enlarge our conceptions beyond all imaginable space; we only produce atoms in comparison with the reality of things. It is an infinite sphere, the center of which is everywhere, the circumference nowhere. In short, it is the greatest sensible mark of the almighty power of God that imagination loses itself in that thought."

Had Dawkins bothered to cite this assertion, he would doubtless have countered it with replies that recur throughout his book. First, the awe that Pascal discusses has nothing to do with religion. Rather, it's the kind of atheistic wonder that's typical in scientists like Einstein. Second, this "God of the gaps" argument simply fills in the blanks of our ignorance with a destructive, curiosity-impeding concept. Third -- and this is Dawkins' favorite argument -- the complexity of a God who created the world requires explanation. Put simply: Who made God?

Worshipful humility in the face of mind-boggling (possibly parallel) universes is an emotion foreign to Dawkins -- though the academic pugilist does admit to feeling very lucky. As for the "Who made God?" argument, this retort (convincing to any skeptical freshman who hasn't read Aristotle or Kant) ignores the fact that philosophical explanations, as Wittgenstein and others have noted, have to end somewhere. The real question is whether one's explanation terminates with a
meaningless cosmos or with a being who provides a reason for things. Dawkins, without further ado, assumes that the former alternative is the only rational choice. In this way he gives tacit expression to the point of view that Whitehead criticized some 80 years ago:

"There persists...throughout the whole [modern] period the fixed scientific cosmology which presupposes the ultimate fact of an irreducible brute matter, or material, spread throughout space in a flux of configurations. It itself, such a material is senseless, valueless, purposeless. It just does what it does do, following a fixed routine imposed by external relations which do not spring from the nature of its being. It is this assumption that I call "scientific materialism." Also, it is an assumption which I shall challenge as being entirely unsuited to the scientific situation at which we have now arrived."

Whitehead continues, displaying the non-tendentiousness to which I previously referred,

"It [scientific materialism] is not wrong, if properly construed. If we confine ourselves to certain types of facts, abstracted from the complete circumstances in which they occur, the materialistic assumption expresses these facts to perfection. But when we pass beyond the abstraction, either by more subtle employment of our senses, or by the request for meanings and for coherence of thoughts, the scheme breaks down at once."

In other words, once we look for a rational ground for complex development, self-consciousness, aesthetics, morality, and the universe itself, Dawkins' brute facts (which in the world of quantum physics are neither brutish nor facts) look extremely lame. This lameness, I should add, comports nicely with the pleasure-based ethical system to which Dawkins appeals with no particular rigor.

Overall, Dawkins' "philosophy" amounts to little more than this unintentionally humorous observation by Dr. Edward Tryon that was quoted in a Time-Life book on cosmology, "Our universe is simply one of those things that happens from time to time." That's reason according to Dawkins -- a man whose cultural and philosophical observations are predictably au courant, consistently dogmatic, and largely unreflective. He is the un-Whitehead, a man who will never (barring divine intervention) appreciate this sublime comment by my philosophical mentor: "In the study of ideas, it is necessary to remember that insistence on hard-headed clarity issues from sentimental feeling, as it were a mist, cloaking the perplexities of fact. Insistence on clarity at all costs is based on sheer superstition as to the mode in which human intelligence functions. Our reasonings grasp at straws for premises and float on gossamers for deductions."

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