

Games Richard Dawkins Plays

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It's football season. As I type this essay, I watch a familiar subplot play itself out on the field: the quarterback attempts to complete a pass in the end zone to a receiver with a history of dropping important passes. He's been a clutch receiver before, but this season he fails – continuously. However, his teammates have faith in him that someday, hopefully, he'll come through for them again. Despite his mistakes, there's truly nobody better to throw the ball to.

Dawkins apparently suffers from the same malady. He isn't throwing footballs around, of course, but he does have his favored arguments he continuously returns to hoping they will bear fruit while many casual readers miss the intellectual games he's playing.

First, I'll establish a bit of history. In 1986, Dawkins explained that “Natural selection is the blind watchmaker, blind because it does not see ahead, does not plan consequences, has no purpose in view.”¹ By using the phrase “blind watchmaker,” Dawkins alludes to an idea from 18th century theologian William Paley who explained that we can observe and infer God's creation in much the same way we can infer a watch's creator.² However, natural selection, Dawkins says, is as creative as a watchmaker, but blind and purposeless. Dawkins' argument later became the bedrock of Phillip Johnson's critique of evolution as a “blind watchmaker theory” —the theory that all life came about from a purposeless process.³

¹ Richard Dawkins, *The Blind Watchmaker*, 3rd ed. (New York: Norton, 2006), 29. [This sentence is at the start of chapter 2. The 1986 edition has different page numbers.]

² Kenneth Einar Himma, “1.c. Paley's Watchmaker Argument,” chapter of “Design Arguments for the Existence of God,” *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy – A Peer Reviewed Academic Resource*. www.iep.utm.edu/design/#SH1c (accessed Jan 3, 2018)

³ Phillip Johnson is a Christian lawyer who took to critiquing evolution in his book *Darwin on Trial*.

Nature often appears to be intelligently created, but Dawkins claims that inference is an illusion. Evolutionists cannot admit that life is the result of any kind of design, due to their anti-god philosophy. They must, instead, cling to believing life is the result of a mindless process. The challenge for them, then, is to explain how life came about. They sneak intelligent design into their arguments without being obvious about it, and without admitting what they are doing—a trick that might be as difficult to pull off as, say, a game-winning pass to a pass-dropping receiver in the corner of the end zone.

In his more recent book, *The Greatest Show on Earth*, Dawkins continues to push his evolutionist ideas, but often what he denies with one hand he affirms with the other. Dawkins quotes a very telling paragraph from Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species*.

It may be said that natural selection is daily and hourly scrutinizing, throughout the world, every variation, even the slightest; rejecting that which is bad, preserving and adding up all that is good; silently and insensibly working, whenever and wherever opportunity offers, at the improvement of each organic being in relation to its organic and inorganic conditions of life. We see nothing of these slow changes in progress, until the hand of time has marked the long lapse of ages, and then so imperfect is our view into long past geological ages, that we see only that the forms of life are now different from what they formerly were.⁴

Dawkins informs us that in later editions of *The Origin of Species*, like mine, the word “metaphorically” was added to the above paragraph to rephrase the first sentence to say that natural selection *metaphorically* daily and hourly scrutinizes. Apparently, some critics believed that it wasn't clear whether Darwin thought natural selection acted with some type of intelligence. Dawkins quotes a French author named Janet, as reproduced

⁴ Richard Dawkins, quoting Darwin, *The Greatest Show on Earth*, (New York: Free Press, 2009), 64.

by fellow evolutionist Alfred Wallace, as complaining that Darwin too often compared natural selection to the type of selection humans employ. Dawkins seems sensitive to this as occasionally putting the word “chosen” in quotes to indicate the choosing natural selection does is metaphorical when, for instance, he argues that those individuals that are “chosen” because they possess superior equipment necessary to survive are the most likely to reproduce and pass on genes for possessing superior equipment.⁵

If Dawkins wants to be consistent in making a distinction between a *purposeful* process and *purposeless* process, then he must stop arguing that natural selection has intelligent planning abilities.

Yet, Dawkins cannot stop himself from granting intelligence to natural selection [*italics in original*],

Darwin’s special genius realized that nature could play the role of selecting agent. ...But it was Darwin who first spotted that you don’t have to have a choosing *agent*. The choice can be made automatically by survival—or failure to survive.⁶

This is strange language, because we normally attribute the act of making a choice to an intelligent agent. A rainstorm does not select what lands it will drench, and neither does an earthquake select what cities to destroy. However, a bird selects what branch to sit on, ants select where to build ant hills, and humans select where to build a house or what car to buy. If you read what Dawkins says at this point in the book with what he says elsewhere, it appears he wants to convince us that natural selection only metaphorically “selects” while at other times wants to argue that natural selection actually does the kind of selecting humans do. This is obvious at this point in his book because he’s essentially saying that natural selection is taking the place of an intelligent selecting agent.

Let me cement my complaint using an analogy apart from evo-

⁵ Dawkins, *Blind Watchmaker*, 63, 65.

⁶ Dawkins, *Blind Watchmaker*, 62-63.

lutionary biology. Assume for a moment that I had argued that a football *only metaphorically* chooses to go out of bounds or drift towards a receiver and, yet, had made it the hallmark of my arguments not just once but in many publications that a football can choose which way it wants to go. You, of course, may suspect that I really do think a football can consciously decide which direction to go, even as I claim I don't really believe it.

Now at this point, some readers may be thinking, "Evolutionists often speak metaphorically when suggesting natural selection makes choices just like people make choices, so what's the big deal about that?" My response is that evolutionists go way beyond speaking metaphorically, they actually grant intelligence to natural selection in their scientific models and in the way they describe those models.

For instance, in chapter 3 of *The Blind Watchmaker*, Dawkins proposes several "computer models" to demonstrate how natural selection works.⁷ One model is a computer program which reproduces the output of a monkey typing on a computer trying to produce the phrase "Methinks it is like a weasel." The chance of producing this phrase from random typing, an example of what he calls "single-step selection of random variation,"⁸ is, according to Dawkins, $1/27$ multiplied by itself 28 times.⁹ Dawkins realizes that is so unlikely that it would never happen, even in the supposed 14 billion years the universe has existed. He has a solution though; he changes the program a bit. This time the program begins with a random phrase, which is then duplicated many times with errors. The resulting phrase which most closely resembles the "Methinks it is like a weasel" target phrase is kept as the new starting phrase. Each time the program runs, it breeds off a new phrase closer to the desired target phrase. After 43 generations of a phrase duplications, the computer was able to recreate the target phrase. This is what Dawkins calls "cumulative selection,"¹⁰ and is supposed to replicate the type of selection Darwinian evolution builds upon. Dawkins thinks that natural selection builds upon mutations in the

⁷ Dawkins, *Blind Watchmaker*, 61-105.

⁸ Dawkins, *Blind Watchmaker*, 68.

⁹ Dawkins, *Blind Watchmaker*, 67.

¹⁰ Dawkins, *Blind Watchmaker*, 68.

same way this computer program builds upon reproductions, until it produces the required phrase. *Natural selection has a desired creature in mind and saves mutations which lead to that target creature.*

Are these just random occurrences of Dawkins' mistakes popping up like a Darwinian mutation? No, Dawkins was still making these same arguments decades later. Dawkins' *The Blind Watchmaker* was first published in 1986, and in it he proposed many computer models to simulate natural selection, such as the "Methinks" model described above. Decades later, Dawkins was still making these same arguments, where he sneaks intelligence into his natural selection models. He devoted many pages in each of several chapters in his 2009 book, *The Greatest Show on Earth*, to the computer models he proposed so many years before. Dawkins writes,

About 25 years ago I developed a computer simulation to illustrate the power of artificial selection: a kind of computer game equivalent to breeding prize roses or dogs or cattle. ...Although the Blind Watchmaker program starts off with a simple branching tree, it rapidly wanders off into a wonderland of evolved forms, many with strange beauty, and some—depending on the intentions of the human player—coming to resemble familiar creatures such as insects, spiders, or starfish.¹¹

Again, Dawkins is sneaking intelligence into his models of natural selection. This computer model of natural selection features human interaction. Dawkins reveals that "the intentions of the human player" lead the natural selection computer model to produce a line drawing somewhat resembling a desired animal such as an insect, spider, or starfish. Several dozen such creatures or "biomorphs" are shown on page 40 of *The Greatest Show*.

What Dawkins must believe when using such examples, is that natural selection knows what type of animal it will produce and what genetic sequences it must preserve. However, this type of knowledge and planning for the future are traits of an intelligent being and not an un-

¹¹ Dawkins, *Greatest Show*, 39, 41.

intelligent process. A quarterback will select what receiver he wants to throw the ball to and a coach will preserve those receivers most capable of catching the ball. However, natural processes don't do this, because they are *unintelligent* and *purposeless*.

Dawkins has found his substitute god—a god of natural selection that creates, plans, and preserves.

If we take Dawkins' arguments in their entirety, we get a good picture of how Dawkins thinks. It's obvious he must believe that natural selection is some nebulously intelligent agent that has knowledge of the future path of evolution and selects the proper genetic sequences it needs.

Each random mutation could be taken as a biological event, and the survival of the fittest in each instance of struggle for life are separate events in the history of life. You could say the mouse not getting eaten by the cat, the fish not getting caught by the fisherman, and the soldier surviving a battle are examples of natural selection in action. However, it would be a mistake to attribute some type of planning capabilities to a personified natural selection that builds adaptations in each of these examples. Yet, Dawkins appears to be claiming that is what happens.

Dawkins said, "Darwin made it possible to be an intellectually fulfilled atheist."¹² Dawkins is certainly that. Here we see the reason Dawkins is intellectually fulfilled. He has found his substitute god that replaces the God of Christianity—a god of natural selection that creates, plans, and preserves. While a football team might eventually give up on a receiver who drops too many balls, Dawkins can never give up on his atheist philosophy, even if he has to make a god out of natural selection.

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¹² Dawkins, *Blind Watchmaker*, 10.