

# Mind of a Materialist

## –inside the godless philosophy of Francis Crick

*Jeffrey Stueber*

Francis Crick won a 1962 Nobel prize (along with James Watson and Maurice Wilkins) for the 1953 discovery of the 3-dimensional double helix structure of DNA. Crick later wrote, *The Astonishing Hypothesis – The Scientific Search for the Soul*. This book begins with these remarkable words,

The astonishing hypothesis is that “You,” your joys and your sorrows, your memories and your ambitions, your sense of personal identity and free will<sup>1</sup>, are in fact no more than behavior of a vast assembly of nerve cells and their associated molecules. As Lewis Carroll’s Alice might have phrased it: “You’re nothing but a pack of neurons.” This hypothesis is so alien to the ideas of most people alive today that it can truly be called astonishing.”<sup>2</sup>

The reason he says this hypothesis is astonishing is because most people cannot fathom that their thoughts are entirely dependent on nothing more than neurons.<sup>3</sup> I claim all people – even Crick, though he says otherwise – accept that each of us has some type of conscious awareness of self and decision-making ability that is not entirely dependent on brain chemistry. Crick’s reason for embracing his “astonishing hypothesis” is his anti-religious bias, and this bias leads him to adopt poor arguments.

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<sup>1</sup> *Editor’s Note: Here, and elsewhere in this article, the concept of “free will” is used in this sense: that fallen man is a rational being and therefore has freedom of choice in external matters (e.g. freedom of choice in government, sociology, science, art, etc.). That being said, Lutheran theologians, echoing the truths of Scripture, correctly teach that fallen mankind has no free will whatsoever with respect to spiritual matters (e.g., the natural human will is in opposition to God’s will; natural human will is completely unable to seek or cooperate with God’s grace in conversion; being a slave to sin, fallen mankind delights in sin and is free to choose which sins he/she will commit).*

<sup>2</sup> Francis Crick, *The Astonishing Hypothesis: The Scientific Search for The Soul*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 3.

<sup>3</sup> *Neurons are nerve cells such as those in your brain.*

Before proceeding, I should explain that Crick is not the originator of this idea nor the sole spokesman for it. Richard Dawkins, for instance, ascribes human intention to genes.

The argument of this book is that we, and all other animals, are machines created by our genes. Like successful Chicago gangsters, our genes have survived, in some cases for millions of years, in a highly competitive world. This entitles us to expect certain qualities in our genes. I shall argue that a predominant quality to be expected in a successful gene is ruthless selfishness. This gene selfishness will usually give rise to selfishness in individual behavior.<sup>4</sup>

Susan Blackmore ascribes intention to memes (ideas in our head), and those thoughts that emerge in conscious awareness are the ones that survive in competition with other thoughts.

If the brain really is a Darwin machine then the thoughts, perceptions, ideas, memories, and so on, that go on inside it must all be competing for the brain's limited processing resources. Natural selection will have ensured that the brain's attention mechanisms generally devote most resources to the processing that helps the genes that made it. Within those constraints, all the thoughts and ideas will compete for attention and the chance to get copied. However, they are limited to one brain and subject to the pressures of natural selection.<sup>5</sup>

She also gives her explanation why she thinks religious beliefs continue to dominate our minds despite secular humanist suggestions that they should be dying out.<sup>6</sup> Blackmore postulates,

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<sup>4</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford, 1989), 2.

<sup>5</sup> Susan Blackmore, *The Meme Machine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 40.

<sup>6</sup> For instance, see Paul Kurtz, ed., *Humanist Manifestos I and II* (New York: Prometheus, 1973). Paul Kurtz and Edwin Wilson, in their preface to the sec-

When we look at religions from a meme's eye view we can understand why they have been so successful. These religious memes did not set out with an intention to succeed. They were just behaviors, ideas, and stories that were copied from one person to another in the long history of human attempts to understand the world. They were successful because they happened to come together into mutually supportive gangs that included all the right tricks to keep them safely stored in millions of brains, books, and buildings, and repeatedly passed on to more. They evoked strong emotions and strange experiences. They provided myths to answer real questions and the myths were protected by untestability, threats and promises. They created and then reduced fear to create compliance, and they used the beauty, truth, and altruism tricks to help their spread. That is why they are still with us, and why millions of people's behavior is routinely controlled by ideas that are either false or completely untestable. No one designed these great faiths with all their clever tricks. Rather, they evolved gradually by memetic selection.<sup>7</sup>

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Crick's theory is that the neuron is the basis for human thoughts and decisions, not memes or selfish genes. Regardless of what causes human thought, to materialists like Crick, Dawkins, and Blackmore, free will and human consciousness are myths because, in their minds, we are robots controlled by either neurons, memes, or selfish genes.

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*ond manifesto, say that "humanists still believe that traditional theism, especially faith in the prayer-hearing God . . . is an unproved and outmoded faith. Salvationism, based on mere affirmation, still appears harmful, diverting people with false hopes of heaven hereafter. Reasonable minds look to other means for survival."*  
7 Blackmore, 192-193.

The reason for Crick's anti-religious philosophy is, first of all, because he thinks religious claims have proven false in the past. Since the idea of a soul is a religious idea, therefore it too must be false. Crick explains:

Why, then, should this basic concept of the soul be doubted? Surely if almost everyone believed it, this is, in itself, prima facie evidence for it. But then some four thousand years ago almost everyone believed the earth was flat. The main reason for this radical change of opinion is the spectacular advance of modern science.

Crick is brutally honest in his view of the historical use of religious claims,

Not only do the beliefs of most popular religions contradict each other but, by scientific standards, they are based on evidence so flimsy that only an act of blind faith can make them acceptable. ...If revealed religions have revealed anything it is that they are usually wrong.<sup>8</sup>

The first problem with this argument is that in at least one instance, that of Christianity (the largest religion), we can say the Bible does not claim the Earth is flat.<sup>9</sup> In that case, one cannot claim that religions, in general, teach this.

A second point about Crick's assertion that religions "are usually wrong," is that Christianity is unique. While other religions are false religions, Christianity is the one and only true religion. Since Christianity is true, it is not surprising that many of its claims can be investigated using secular history, archeology, paleoethology,<sup>10</sup> and other extra-Biblical

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<sup>8</sup> Crick, 258.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example J. P. Holding, "Does the Bible Say the Earth Is Flat," *Creation Ex Nihilo Technical Journal*, (14)3, 2000, 51-54, (accessed August 3, 2018) <https://www.trueorigin.org/flaearth01.php>. Danny Faulkner, "Does the Bible Teach That the Earth is Flat," <https://answersingenesis.org/astronomy/earth/does-bible-teach-earth-flat/> (accessed August 3, 2018)

<sup>10</sup> "1) The study of the behaviour of extinct species of humans. 2) The study of behavior of organisms in the fossil record." From the online dictionary at:

means. While we believe articles of faith like creation, the Flood, and the resurrection of Jesus through faith alone, Biblical people and events are often corroborated by extra-Biblical sources.<sup>11, 12</sup>

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Unbelievers like Crick behave exactly as you would expect them to behave if Christianity is true; they usually act in ways that keep the truth of Christianity out of their sight, so they don't have to seriously consider that it might be true. They usually refuse to listen the gospel message, the very means by which God brings unbelievers to faith.

It appears that Crick is simply blind to the ramifications of his

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<http://www.yourdictionary.com/paleoethology> (accessed August 3, 2018)

11 *"Archeology can do much to help us understand life in biblical times, and in doing so, it can help provide us with a better understanding of biblical stories. To a limited degree it also provides corroboration of biblical events and persons. We must, however, remember its limitations. It operates with only a part of the evidence, and that evidence must be interpreted. Biases for and against the Bible often come into play in that interpretation."*

John F. Brug, *Digging for Insights -Using Archeology to Study the Bible*, (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2010), 158.

12 *John Jeske spends three pages discussing the many flood accounts from various cultures, and how these secular accounts "confirm" the historicity of the Bible's Flood account. He also provides an estimate of the number of animals aboard Noah's Ark, demonstrating how the Ark could easily contain them all. Regarding that estimate, he states, "The preceding paragraphs are not an attempt to prove in a lawyer-like way the truthfulness of the Genesis flood account or to somehow make it more believable. Our purpose is to try and help the earnest Bible student visualize more clearly this important chapter of world history, and especially of Bible history. Finally, what God says is true whether it seems reasonable or not."*

Carl J. Lawrenz and John C. Jeske, *A Commentary on Genesis 1-11*, (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2004), 253, 279.

beliefs. At one point he is rather flippant in his ideas about it. He asks, “Could it not be that our Will only appears to be free?”<sup>13</sup> Is his choice to write *The Astonishing Hypothesis* a mere artifact of a bunch of neurons? If so, what, if any, confidence can we put in his claims? I have yet to read any material from an atheist who has come to grips with this contradiction within atheist thought or who has even attempted to admit there is a contradiction. Atheists like Crick, so often ignore such problems in their beliefs.

Crick admits there may be things which science cannot explain, but “we have learned to live with such limitations in the past” and “we may have to live with them again.”<sup>14</sup> In other words, when his theory cannot account for everything, we ignore those things it can’t explain in order to save the theory and keep it from being falsified or at least deemed insufficient or incomplete.

Crick’s book is chocked full of useful information regarding neurochemistry. His exploration of the makeup of a neuron is breathtaking reading. However, his philosophical arguments that are motivated by anti-religious bias lead him to conclusions he can’t possibly defend. His lack of knowledge of Christianity adds to the malaise of his writing, and if he could possibly shed his anti-religious bias he might be able to add a wealth of knowledge to the collective knowledge we possess.

Atheists need to explain what is commonly called the human “soul.” They have proposed many explanations. Here Crick proposes our neurons, or nerve cells, as the source of our soul. Scripture reveals the true source of our soul: It is a gift from our Creator.

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<sup>13</sup> Crick, 10.

<sup>14</sup> Crick, 258.