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Lett, James (2013) Dawkins, Richard. In *Theory in Social and Cultural Anthropology*. R. Jon McGee and Richard L. Warms, eds. Pp. 168-171. Sage Publications.

DAWKINS, RICHARD (1941-)

Richard Dawkins, British evolutionary zoologist, ethologist, atheist, and author is one of the leading evolutionary theorists of the late 20th and early 21st centuries; he is also a staunch supporter of science and reason, and a persistent critic of religion and irrationality.

Biography

Richard Dawkins spent his early childhood in Africa. His father, Clinton Dawkins (1915-2010), was a British agricultural officer working in what is now Malawi (then called Nyasaland). Richard Dawkins was born in Kenya in 1941, where his father was temporarily stationed during World War II. The family returned to Nyasaland in 1943, and remained there until Richard Dawkins was eight years old; at that point, they moved to England to live on a farm in Oxfordshire that had been in the Dawkins family since 1726.

Richard Dawkins received his undergraduate and graduate degrees from Balliol College at Oxford University, earning his doctorate in zoology under the direction of the Nobel Prize-winning ethologist Niko Tinbergen (1907-1988). After a brief stint as an Assistant Professor at the University of California at Berkeley from 1967 to 1969, Dawkins returned to England to take the first of several academic positions at Oxford. In 1995, he was appointed the first Charles Simonyi Professor for the Public Understanding of Science at Oxford University, an endowed chair that was created expressly for him. Dawkins retired from that position in 2008.

Since his retirement, Dawkins has devoted much of his time to running the Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science, a non-profit scientific and educational organization dedicated to supporting critical thinking and to opposing religious fundamentalism, superstition, and intolerance (the Foundation maintains a website at richarddawkins.net).

Dawkins has enjoyed a remarkably successful career. His books have sold millions of copies and been translated into more than thirty languages, and he has garnered a long list of prestigious honors, including election in 2001 as a Fellow of the Royal Society.

With regard to his personal life, Dawkins' first two marriages, to Marian Stamp and Eve Barham, ended in divorce (Dawkins and Barham had a daughter together, Juliet Dawkins, born in 1984). In 1992, Dawkins married his third wife, the British actress and artist Lalla Ward (1951-).

Principal Works

Dawkins' eleven major books can be divided into two somewhat-overlapping categories: those that deal with evolution and those that deal with science, skepticism, and religion.

Evolution

Theodosius Dobzhansky famously observed that nothing in biology makes sense except in the light of evolution. Dawkins would certainly agree. He has acknowledged that many of his books return again and again to the theme of evolution, but he is unapologetic about the continuity, saying that he considers Darwinian evolution to be a large enough subject for a lifetime's work.

The Selfish Gene (1976)

This was Dawkins' first book, and it remains his most important and influential work (subsequent editions with additional material appeared in 1989 and 2006). Beginning in the 1960's, a number of scientists on both sides of the Atlantic developed revolutionary new ideas that constituted a breakthrough in the modern understanding of evolutionary processes. Prominent among these innovative theorists were the British biologists William D. Hamilton (1936-2000) and John Maynard Smith (1920-2004) and the American scientists George Williams (1926-2010) and Robert Trivers (1943-). The new concepts they introduced included kin selection, inclusive fitness, reciprocal altruism, and the application of game theory to evolutionary analyses. Collectively, these ideas provided a corrective to the notion of "group selection" that was common at the time (i.e., the notion that a species may survive at the expense of rival groups if the individuals within that species behave altruistically towards each other). The new theorists maintained that natural selection is a matter of differential survival and reproduction of *individuals*, not groups, populations, or species—and therefore altruistic behavior could be explained at the individual level in terms of kinship (i.e., since individuals and their close kin share many of the same genes, individuals who sacrifice themselves for the sake of their relatives can still propagate their genes, if those relatives survive and reproduce as a consequence).

The concepts of kin selection, inclusive fitness, and reciprocal altruism all entailed or implied a *gene-centered* view of evolution. Dawkins synthesized these ideas in *The Selfish Gene*, and conveyed them in lucid, eloquent language using original and compelling metaphors (for example, he described the body as a mortal throw-away receptacle for the immortal genes). Today the gene-centered view of evolution dominates biology, and Dawkins is primarily responsible for having given the idea wide currency among other scientists (as well as the general public).

The Extended Phenotype (1982)

This book, which is addressed primarily to professional biologists, is essentially a sequel to *The Selfish Gene*. It explores the logical implications of the gene-centered view of evolution: if some genes are favored over others because of their phenotypic effects, those effects would include not just their consequences for the physical attributes of individual organisms, but also their consequences for all their extended effects upon the world (e.g., such things as beaver dams and termite mounds, which alter the ecosystem for other species).

The Blind Watchmaker (1986)

The title of this book alludes to a famous argument for the existence of God by the 18th-century theologian William Paley, who offered an analogy between a watch and living organisms. Paley argued that just as the intricate complexity of a timepiece allows us to infer that it must have been deliberately and consciously designed, so too the complexity of the living world necessarily implies a designer. Dawkins counters that Paley's argument, despite its eloquence and popularity, is utterly wrong. Natural selection is responsible for the illusion of design that we observe in the living world, and natural selection is a blind, automatic process with no conscious awareness or forethought. This book, like most of Dawkins' later work, is aimed primarily at a popular audience. The book's subtitle summarizes its theme: *Why the Evidence of Evolution Reveals A Universe Without Design*.

River Out of Eden (1995)

The five chapters in this short book describe life on earth as a river of DNA flowing through geological time (of particular interest to anthropological readers will be Dawkins' discussion of the African Eve hypothesis). Dawkins explains that nature is neither cruel nor kind, but only pitilessly indifferent, and he speculates about the probable similarity of potential evolutionary processes in other planetary systems.

Climbing Mount Improbable (1996)

This book is devoted to the topic of evolutionary design (it is, in essence, a continuation of *The Blind Watchmaker*). *Climbing Mount Improbable* explains such phenomena as the origins of flight and the evolution of various forms of eyes in the animal kingdom. Like *River Out of Eden*, *Climbing Mount Improbable* is illustrated by Dawkins' wife, Lalla Ward.

The Ancestor's Tale (2004)

This book is a comprehensive history of life on earth; Dawkins described as the largest and most demanding writing project of his career. *The Ancestor's Tale* is written in emulation of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, with each individual traveler on the journey having a particular tale to tell—but in this case, each individual traveler is a single species, and the tale it has to tell is the story of its evolution.

The Greatest Show on Earth (2009)

The publication of this book was deliberately timed to coincide with the 200th anniversary of Charles Darwin's birth and the 150th anniversary of Darwin's 1859 book, *On the Origin of Species*. Just as Darwin had done in his magnum opus, Dawkins lays out the evidence for the *fact* of evolution; in the process, he covers much of the same ground that Darwin had previously explored, including plant and animal domestication, comparative embryology, the geographic distribution of species, skeletal homologies, and vestigial organs.

Science, Skepticism, and Religion

Dawkins has remarked that his interest in debunking the supernatural claims of religion is not as detached from his scientific career as many people might imagine. For Dawkins, the scientific principles of evidential reasoning that illuminate the evolution of life on earth can be applied equally well to questions such as the existence of God; furthermore, Dawkins believes that there are compelling intellectual and moral reasons to subject religious claims to scientific scrutiny. In addition, as an evolutionary theorist Dawkins is committed to refuting the pseudoscience of creationism (also known as intelligent design) and other similar forms of non-empirical beliefs.

Unweaving the Rainbow (1998)

Subtitled *Science, Delusion and the Appetite for Wonder*, this book addresses a number of paranormal claims, including astrology, telepathy, precognition, and the Loch Ness Monster. The book's primary title comes from Keats, who believed that Isaac Newton had destroyed the poetry of the rainbow by explaining its optics. Dawkins argues, in rebuttal, that science is or ought to be the *inspiration* for great poetry, not its enemy, because science adds to our sense of wonder and awe at the beauty and majesty of the universe.

A Devil's Chaplain (2003)

This book is a compilation of essays, most of which had been previously published elsewhere over the preceding twenty-five years. *A Devil's Chaplain* touches on a wide range of issues, including science, evolution, religion, morality, and justice. Some of the book, Dawkins admits, is passionate and angry—but, he maintains, there is a lot to be passionate about.

The God Delusion (2006)

This compelling book established Dawkins as one of the preeminent atheists of his time (it has sold well over a million copies worldwide). Dawkins argues that religious belief is both thoroughly irrational and inherently dangerous. He reviews the traditional arguments for the existence of God, exposing their myriad fallacies, and catalogs the many ways in which religion inspires violence, instills bigotry, and abuses children. Dawkins also elucidates the intellectual and moral advantages of atheism for both the individual and society.

The Magic of Reality (2011)

This book is intended primarily for young people, with lavish illustrations on every page. In relatively simple language, Dawkins explains the fundamental epistemology of science (hence the subtitle, *How We Know What's Really True*), and then offers scientific explanations for various natural phenomena. The word “magic” in the book’s title refers not to *supernatural* magic or to *stage* magic, but instead to *poetic* magic, the deeply moving, exhilarating sense of awe and wonder that we experience when we encounter great works of art or sublime scenes of natural beauty.

Influence on Anthropology

For the majority of anthropologists, it is probably fair to say that the influence of Richard Dawkins has been fairly minimal (this is certainly true if measured by the quantity of references to Dawkins in the overall anthropological literature). A recent survey of introductory textbooks, for example, reveals that Dawkins is cited only infrequently in works on biological anthropology, and he is almost never mentioned in works on cultural anthropology. Among anthropologists who are interested in the application of evolutionary theory to the analysis of human nature and human behavior, however, the situation is strikingly different: in works dealing with evolutionary psychology, for instance, references to Dawkins are virtually ubiquitous. The past couple of decades have seen an enhanced interest in evolutionary theory within anthropology, as illustrated by the recent formation of the Evolutionary Anthropology Society, a section of the American Anthropological Association devoted to promoting the application of modern evolutionary theory to the analysis of human behavior and culture. If that trend continues, it is reasonable to presume that the work of Richard Dawkins will become more widely appreciated within anthropology.

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Cross-references: *See also* Darwin, Charles; Ethology; Evolutionary Anthropology; Evolutionary Psychology; Religion

Further Readings

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