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AN AGNOSTIC'S BRIEF GUIDE TO THE UNIVERSE

Version 2.1

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Introduction

In recent years, the controversy over God, religion, Creationism, Intelligent Design and evolution has reached fever pitch. Where once the teaching of evolution caused an outcry, now voices are raised in protest at the teaching of Creationism; and while new cults spring up in Africa and America, vast swathes of the western world have either turned their backs on religion or, at best, regard it as irrelevant. The atrocities committed by atheist societies such as Soviet Russia and Red China are echoed by those of the crusading past and the fundamentalist present, and there is no difference in the colour of the blood shed by a Communist Stalin, a voodoo-loving Papa Doc, a Christian George W. Bush, and a Muslim Saddam Hussein. It has become impossible to tell where authority lies, since all political, social and religious systems have been thrown into disrepute by their followers, and no faith has a monopoly on truth. The world, to quote the immortal words of Captain Boyle in Sean O' Casey's masterpiece *Juno and the Paycock*, is in "a terrible state o' chassis".

What caused the mess? St Augustine traced it all back to Adam and Eve. Siddhartha Gotama (the Buddha) attributed it to human cravings. And according to a recent TV programme, *The Root of All Evil* is religion.

In fairness to the author of that programme, Richard Dawkins, the title was followed by a question mark. However, in his book *The God Delusion*, Professor Dawkins launches the fiercest attack on religion since Nero unleashed his lions on the Christians. With a mixture of scientific fact, breadth of learning, in-depth analysis, demolition of soft targets, lop-sided reasoning and sheer enthusiasm for his self-imposed task of destroying other people's beliefs, he proves to his own satisfaction that God "almost certainly" does not exist.

Inevitably with such a fundamentalist creed, Dawkins is forced to take a great leap of faith, although he seems strangely unaware that his own quite frequent expressions of hope and belief are indeed a matter of faith and not of science. Agnosticism, in contrast to atheist assumption and religious dogma, only believes what is known, and admits to ignorance of the rest. By doing so, and thereby acknowledging the *possibility* of a conscious designer, it opens up the fascinating areas of speculation which Professor Dawkins is so anxious to close down. These include the motives and nature of such a designer, and the existence of a world and of beings beyond the scope

of our perception.

The following essay begins with a direct response to the apotheosis of atheism as represented in *The God Delusion*. I should like to stress, however, that although I am unable to embrace atheism mainly because I am not convinced that chance could simultaneously assemble the four factors listed in the section entitled "Evolution", the fact that someone cannot believe one thing does not automatically mean that he believes the opposite. I simply do not know what to believe, and that is why I am an agnostic.

The essay goes on to examine gaps in both the atheist and the theist arguments, together with the implications of those gaps. It cannot of course offer answers to the deep questions, for the simple reason that the human brain has not reached a point where answers can be given - and perhaps it never will reach such a point. This does not mean that we should give up the search, but it most certainly does mean that we should give due respect to other people's beliefs. The world's "state o' chassis" will never be resolved so long as humans seek to impose their suspect truths on the no more and no less suspect truths of their fellows.

1. The Atheist Delusion

In the beginning, we are told, was the Big Bang. After aeons, everything calmed down, cooled down, settled down, until conditions were just right for life. Next, various inanimate globules of matter became animate and, at the same time, managed to reproduce themselves. They were very simple and very primitive, you understand, so you needn't think too hard about them. A flash of lightning, perhaps, or maybe a long, slow awakening, and eventually the little bits of what's-it came alive and straight away knew how to produce new generations of living what's-its. These simple, primitive life forms, which were totally unconscious and mindless, managed (over aeons) to combine themselves into new forms, and out of the blue developed sensitivity to light (= sight), sound, touch, smell, taste, organs that enabled them to eat, drink, move, and even reproduce in new ways. "Out of the blue" because these things had never existed before. The very concepts were totally new. Pick up a pebble, and ask yourself how you would make it see. Where would you, conscious though you are, even begin the process? And "out of the blue" also because if they hadn't worked straight away, in their most primitive form, they wouldn't have survived. What is the use of something that doesn't work?

But we are told that these unprecedented organs and concepts in their original form were the products of total blindness, deafness, unconsciousness etc. Eventually, out of all this spontaneous creativity, we humans arrived, and we've been investigating ever since. And although we don't actually understand how the simple, primitive forms of life came alive or managed to reproduce themselves, and we can't even replicate the process whereby the inanimate becomes animate, we are so clever that one day we'll do it, and our cleverness will prove that you don't have to be clever to do it. It can happen all by itself.

The bottom line, then, for the militant atheist is that anyone who doesn't believe in the ability of chance to create all these hitherto non-existent, hugely complex (even in their most primitive form) organisms – which require all the dazzling talents of human consciousness merely to unravel and comprehend – is deluded. And is also unscientific. Because belief in a conscious creator is irrational and unprovable and untestable. Whereas belief in the creative genius of unconscious chance is...ah! Well, maybe not rational. Maybe not provable. Maybe not testable. But you don't *need* a conscious creator to explain life. All you have to do is believe in chance. Besides – trump card coming up – if you believe in a conscious creator, who created him? You see, you only replace one mystery with another.

But the trump card doesn't work if it's in the wrong game, and the game here is Seeking the Truth. If you find it difficult to believe in the ingenious and hugely complex inventiveness of unconscious chance, you have to consider other explanations, regardless of where they lead. The question concerning the creator of the creator is akin to a computer announcing that it put itself together, because if it didn't, who created Man? The answer to both questions is: we don't know. It is highly unlikely that we shall ever know – at least in this life. But in any case, since we do not know now, it is arrogance for *anyone* – believer or non-believer in a god or in chance – to claim that they have a monopoly on truth.

This, however, is the pivotal point of Richard Dawkins' argument. Again and again in *The God Delusion*, he comes back to the fact that: “A designer God cannot be used to explain organized complexity because any God capable of designing anything would have to be complex enough to demand the same kind of explanation in his own right” (p. 109). In other words, something cannot have been designed if we cannot explain the existence of the designer. To the suggestion that “there must be a cosmic intelligence who deliberately did the tuning” [of the universe], he responds: “I have

already dismissed all such suggestions as raising bigger problems than they solve” (p. 147). But who says that different, unsolved (possibly insoluble) problems invalidate a proposition? I have difficulty working out how to operate certain computer programmes. An expert’s explanation is not invalidated by the fact that I still don’t understand the “bigger problem” of how computers work generally, or how they came to be invented, or how the inventor evolved from, let’s say, an amoeba. For a renowned scientist to argue that an explanation can’t be true because it leads to further problems which he can’t explain is – to take Dawkins back into his own specialized field – like saying that the theory of natural selection can’t be true because we don’t know how life originated.

The fact is that sooner or later, despite the atheist's faith that science will one day reveal all, we come up against a complete blockage. All we can do now is speculate: either there is/was a designer, or we are the product of chance. That is the point we have reached in our quest for knowledge. Speculation is allowed, experimentation and research will continue, but it is an abnegation of scientific objectivity for anyone to “dismiss” the suggestion that there may be/have been a designer on the grounds that such a suggestion raises bigger problems.

2. Agnosticism

In a chapter disparagingly entitled 'The poverty of agnosticism', Dawkins identifies two categories (p. 47): 1) Temporary Agnosticism in Practice, or TAP, which denotes that there “is a truth out there and one day we hope to know it, though for the moment we don’t.” 2) Permanent Agnosticism in Principle, or PAP, for questions that can never be answered. Some people assign the question of God’s existence to PAP, which means that they “cannot say anything, one way or the other, about whether or not God exists” (p. 51). He, however, believes that “the God question is not in principle and forever outside the remit of science” (p. 71).

It is true that the inventor of the term "agnosticism", T.H. Huxley, intended it to mean the impossibility of knowing whether God exists or not (= PAP), but the fact that one cannot answer a question most certainly does not mean that one cannot say anything either way about the subject of that question. Even a PAP can explain his reasons for regarding the question as unanswerable, while a TAP remains open-minded, and is thus able to consider *all* arguments about whether God exists or not. Wherein, then, lies the "poverty" at least of TAP agnosticism, i.e. of open-

mindedness? In any case, all human states are temporary, and even a committed Christian like Darwin can change into an agnostic, while a committed opponent of the church like St Paul can suddenly have a revelation and become its leading apostle. Dawkins, astonishingly, maintains that “atheists do not have faith” (p. 51), and yet it is his belief that science will one day come up with the answer, and the answer will be “no God”. Since this entails the miracles of life (we shall discuss these later) having come into existence by sheer chance, he believes in the miraculous powers of chance as well as the ability of science to answer all the questions. If that is not “faith”, what is?

Again typical of this blinkered approach is his selective quotation of results from a study in America, in which he pinpoints the fact that only 7% of members of the National Academy of Sciences believed in a personal God. This he describes as an “overwhelming preponderance of atheists” (p. 102). An agnostic, by definition, cannot believe in a personal God, but by verbal sleight of hand, Dawkins has removed agnostics from the scene. Either you are a believer, or you are an atheist.

In any case, the argument is specious. Science examines the physical world. Religious people believe in a non-physical world. In an earlier chapter, Dawkins quotes the response of an Oxford astronomer who, when asked the “deep questions”, said: “Ah, now we move beyond the realm of science. This is where I have to hand over to our good friend the chaplain” (p. 56). Dawkins’ comment is worth quoting in full: “But why the chaplain? Why not the gardener or the chef? Why are scientists so cravenly respectful towards the ambitions of theologians, over questions that theologians are certainly no more qualified to answer than scientists themselves?” In relation to the poll taken among scientists, one can only ask: “Why scientists? Why are atheists so cravenly respectful towards the ambitions of scientists, over questions that scientists are certainly no more qualified to answer than theologians?” But atheists such as Dawkins are convinced that the world is exclusively physical, scientists examine the physical world, and therefore scientists will one day discover the truth, and the truth is that there is nothing but the physical world. The perfect circle. Theologians, who believe in a spiritual world, are wrong, and agnostics, who are unable to step into either camp, are left out of the equation because they “cannot say anything” either way. His faith, prejudice and self-contradiction are encapsulated in an extraordinary paragraph quite early on in his thesis:

“Human thoughts and emotions *emerge* from exceedingly complex interconnections

of physical entities within the brain. An atheist in this sense of philosophical naturalist is someone who believes there is nothing beyond the natural physical world, no *supernatural* creative intelligence lurking behind the observable universe, no soul that outlasts the body, and no miracles – except in the sense of natural phenomena that we don't yet understand. If there is something that appears to lie beyond the natural world as it is now imperfectly understood, we hope eventually to understand it and embrace it within the natural” (p. 14).

He acknowledges that thoughts and emotions emerge (it is good that he avoids the word “originate”), summarizes the atheist's beliefs, acknowledges that there are things we do not understand, and expresses the *hope* that one day we will be able to prove that their source is physical. Christians too *hope* that one day their beliefs will be vindicated, but where is the scientific objectivity of either approach? His own amounts to saying: I believe the universe is entirely physical, there are things I don't understand, but one day I hope I'll be proved right. And yet according to Dawkins, atheists have no faith. Agnostics do not impose theories on what they do not understand, and they do not hope that their prejudgments will be proved right.

3. Evolution

A common claim made by the Dawkins school of atheism is that the Theory of Evolution is incompatible with theories of Intelligent Design. It isn't. Who says so? Charles Darwin, for one.

On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection (all quotations from the Collins' Clear-Type Press, London & Glasgow, no date) must surely be one of the most beautiful books ever written. The cogency, lucidity and pure logic of its basic argument make it irresistible. If we follow the example of the eye, Darwin explains how the organ we know today must have developed from far more primitive forms, one tiny step at a time. With certain vital reservations, which we will consider in a moment, there is nothing irrational or unscientific or illogical in the assumption that complex things may evolve out of simpler ones. The principle applies to most areas of life, as one generation builds on the progress of another, and the idea that advantageous changes will survive should not cause too many furrowed brows even among the religious. But that is the limit of Darwin's theory. “How a nerve comes to be sensitive to light, hardly concerns us more than how life itself first originated” (Chapter 6, Difficulties on Theory). Indeed, he might have added “how a nerve comes

to be a nerve.” Darwin’s theory deals with the origin of species, not with the origin of life or of the actual ability to produce new organs, and at no stage does he ever pretend that it does more. He is quite specific on this subject:

“It is no valid objection [to the theory] that science as yet throws no light on the far higher problem of the essence or origin of life” (Chapter XIV, Recapitulation and Conclusion).

It may come as a shock to many so-called Darwinians to read the final sentence of this masterpiece:

“There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed by the Creator into a few forms or into one...”

Dawkins also quotes this magnificent conclusion (p. 12), but takes his quote from the 1859 edition, which did not contain the words "by the Creator". These were a later insertion, but one that is difficult to ignore. (I am indebted to George Jelliss for pointing out the discrepancy between the different editions.)

It is well known that in later years, Darwin lost his faith, but he himself maintained that he had never been an atheist. He was an agnostic. And his open-mindedness manifests itself again and again. Two more examples: “I see no good reason why the views given in this volume should shock the religious feelings of any one.” And “A celebrated author and divine has written to me that ‘he has gradually learnt to see that it is just as noble a conception of the Deity to believe that He created a few original forms capable of self-development into other and needful forms, as to believe that He required a fresh act of creation to supply the voids caused by the action of His laws.’” Again Dawkins omits to mention such clear indications that Darwin himself kept an open mind on the subject of origins. Anyone reading *The God Delusion* would imagine that *The Origin of Species* was Darwin’s proof that there was no designer.

This is not to defend the various concepts attached by different religions to the term ‘Creator’. It is fair enough for atheists to complain if, for instance, Creationists want to teach schoolchildren that the Earth is 6000 years old, and to parade this as a scientific fact. But it is unfair and unscientific to claim that Darwinism enables us to dispense with the notion of a conscious creator.

There are, of course, flaws in the theory – one of which, the “imperfection of the geological record”, Darwin covers in great detail. Another is his belief in the even flow of the process, which modern science has cast doubt on, preferring the concept

of “punctuated equilibrium”. The basis of the theory, though, remains as firm as ever, but since it provides no evidence to confirm or refute the idea of intelligent design, and since the man who formulated it remained open-minded on the subject, it should remain precisely where he left it: as Chapter 2 and not Chapter 1 in the History of Life.

Dawkins is not prepared to leave it there, however. He seizes on the Boeing 747 example attributed to Fred Hoyle (i.e. a hurricane sweeping through a scrapyard would never be able to create the plane, even if all the parts were available), and dismisses it as “an argument that could be made only by somebody who doesn’t understand the first thing about natural selection: somebody who thinks natural selection is a theory of chance whereas – in the relevant sense of chance – it is the opposite” (p. 113). Leaving aside the puzzle of what he means by the “relevant sense”, it is not the process of natural selection that is attributed to chance here, any more than the people who designed the Boeing would have thrown the bits and pieces up in the air and hoped for a happy landing. The chance element lies in the creation and combination of the materials on which natural selection works. Dawkins (perhaps Hoyle too) is comparing the Boeing to the animal at the end (so far) of the evolutionary process, but it is the separate coming into being of the living, self-reproducing primeval organisms, the hitherto unthought-of even if primitive eye, ear, nose, lung, heart, penis, vagina, etc., that presents the problem. Darwin himself understood this, and so refrained from discussing such origins.

Dawkins, however, blithely announces that natural selection explains “the whole of life” (p. 116). Even when dealing with the example of the eye, he tries to make out that something so “apparently *designed*...was really the end product of a long sequence of non-random but purely natural causes” (p. 116), as if his (not Darwin’s) theory did not depend on an entirely random but immediately effective mutation that gave birth to the primitive light-sensitive nerve on which natural selection got to work.

In this context, however, it also needs to be borne in mind that the very concept of sight did not exist before that random mutation, and yet the various unconscious cells in some mysterious way “knew” that this primitive light-sensitivity could develop further, and so quite spontaneously they were able to develop new nerves and cells which eventually resulted in sight, and then in better sight. And hearing, and smell, and taste, and touch, and so on. Each one the result of an initial random mutation.

Perhaps, then, for a moment we might pause to imagine precisely how this process might work. Let us picture the primitive, pregnant oojah lying beneath a tree when a bolt of lightning strikes beside it. Perhaps, in order to boost the chances of probability, there is a herd of pregnant oojahs. As a result of the shock or the powerful electrical discharge, the mini-oojahs emerge with a genetic mutation: they have a primitive, light-sensitive nerve. For some reason, this primitive nerve provides them with an advantage over the oojahs that haven't got one, and enough of them are lucky enough to survive and pass on their light-sensitive nerve to a new generation of oojahs. Then what happens? Neither oojahs nor their nerves have the slightest concept of vision, and even if they did, no amount of straining would enable them to develop new structures that would result in a change to their light-sensitive nerve. No matter how many generations of oojahs and light-sensitive nerves you count, by what means did they develop the additional, hugely complex structures that lead, even step by step, from light-sensitivity to vision? The atheists' scenario, as their creatures climb Dawkins' Mount Improbable, is of a "continuous and shallow slope", evolving "by slow (or even, maybe, not all that slow) gradual degrees." (p. 124). It's a very plausible image, but it only explains what happens and not how or why it happens. Where did the mechanism of physical change spring from? The initial random mutation – a colossal miracle in itself – which Dawkins attributes to luck, is followed by a long chain of inexplicable additional mini-miracles as each new generation of oojahs...does what, exactly? They can't consciously change what they have, any more than I can change the degree of my myopia; what they pass on is only what they already have. At what point, allowing for the gradual improvements, does a light-sensitive nerve turn into vision? How and, since vision did not exist as a concept, why? How did the new connections, nerves, muscles form themselves? In this context of physical *change*, natural selection explains nothing, because although it tells us why beneficial changes survive and are perpetuated, and indeed why organs will improve over time, it does not explain the mechanism that enables such changes to take place. For an atheist, "luck" brought about life, the ability to reproduce, random mutations that proved meaningful, and the ability to change. For an agnostic, the degree of improbability (a favourite weapon of Dawkins) is so huge that it is impossible to "dismiss" the idea of design.

There is one further anomaly in the Dawkins' theory of evolution. What he calls the "jackpot or nothing fallacy": "Either the eye sees or it doesn't. There are assumed to

be no useful intermediates. But this is simply wrong. Such intermediates abound in practice” (p. 122). He goes on to describe the eye of the flatworm as “less than half a human eye”, and of the nautilus as halfway between the flatworm and the human eye. But eyes at the "intermediate stage" can still see. They would be useless if they couldn't. The miracle lies in the original, primitive, light-sensitive “nerve”, which if it did not already provide some degree of advantage – even 0.0001% of human vision – would not have survived. This may have been “simple” by comparison with later eyes, but it remains inexplicable.

Furthermore, neither Dawkins' nor Darwin's theory solves our problem of physical changes. How and why did successful, individual oojahs – for even over thousands or millions of years, the process can only develop through individual animals – transmute themselves into floojahs, then flatjahs, then flatwoohs, and then flatworms? Even if we accept the idea that one particular oojah suddenly decided that it would go and live under the earth, and this oojah was so successful that it spawned more, where did its *adaptability* spring from? Once again, we return to the miracle of the beginning, for now we find that Darwin's original few forms (or one) were *simultaneously* brought to life, endowed with the ability to reproduce themselves, and – crucially for evolution – able to adapt themselves to changing conditions and also to pass on their adaptations. All this achieved at a stroke by sheer chance.

The design argument thus relates to four things: 1) origins, 2) heredity, 3) adaptability, and 4) the hugely complex nature of all the organs that we know of. Natural selection goes some way towards explaining only the fourth of these, in so far as nature will favour the survival of those creatures endowed with certain advantages. It is true that most areas of our existence show that once the initial mechanism is in place, complexity may develop from comparative simplicity, but it is precisely this initial mechanism that is the problem. We know that change happens. The codes have been cracked. But could chance have created the codes? Maybe it could, but you need an act of faith to believe it.

To put these miracles in perspective, let us conclude by drawing an invented parallel. The camera is our nearest mechanical equivalent to the eye. The conscious, human mind has created an instrument that can perform most of the eye's functions. And yet for all our conscious ingenuity, we are still not able to invent a camera that is capable of spontaneously replicating itself, of spontaneously repairing its own defects, of spontaneously improving itself, or of spontaneously passing on any improvements

made in itself. We are not capable of such engineering brilliance but, in the atheist view, chance is.

Dawkins' misrepresentation of the design argument reaches its apogee in a typical combination of two favourite themes: "Design is not the only alternative to chance. Natural selection is a better alternative. Indeed, design is not a real alternative at all because it raises an even bigger problem than it solves: who designed the designer?" (p. 121) He always falls back on this non sequitur when other arguments fail.

4. The limitations of science

Before we consider the implications of the above, we need to consider the nature of science itself. In one of the quotations from Darwin, you will have noted that science *as yet* throws no light on...the essence and origin of life. This holds out the possibility that one day it will. Atheists think that it will, and religious believers think that it won't. Agnostics hedge their bets.

Science can only concern itself with the physical world as we know it. Science cannot speculate on matters beyond the scope of what can be tried and tested, and so by definition any belief in a non-physical world must be unscientific. But unscientific does not mean unreal or non-existent. There are many things in our lives that transcend the physical world as we know it – love, art, music, beauty, premonitions and so on – but more importantly, the tools with which we examine the physical world are inadequate. Even birds and insects are able to perceive things that we cannot. We are clever enough to devise instruments that hugely enhance our capabilities of perception, but even then, they will only be able to show us that which the human brain *is able to* perceive. How, then, can we know that there are no other forms of life and being that exist on a totally different plane? The atheistic scientist's argument is that because he can only see X, nothing but X exists. A deaf man might argue that because he can hear nothing, sound doesn't exist. This is not to denigrate science. It is simply a denial of the right of science to exclude the possibility of phenomena outside its range. By extension, it is a denial of the right of an atheist to claim that religious faith is unscientific and therefore wrong.

5. Origins

Despite his inability to grasp the nature of his own faith in chance, Dawkins does not entirely ignore the problem of origins. His solution lies in something so nebulous that it can be made to fit any theory. It is the so-called “anthropic principle”, whereby we can be certain that we are on one of the few planets that are suitable for sustaining life, because we know that we are on one of the few planets that are suitable for sustaining life. Dawkins is surprised that religious apologists love the principle, because they think it supports the case for design, whereas he loves it because he thinks it does the opposite. So much for the decisive influence of the anthropic principle.

He now – all credit to him – forgets his equation of natural selection with the whole of life, and admits (p. 137) that “Darwinian evolution proceeds merrily once life has originated”, though he does not mention the fact that the merry procedure still requires countless random mutations for the production of new organs. “But how does life get started?” Again he admits that this “may have been a highly improbable occurrence”. “The origin of life was the chemical event, or series of events, whereby the vital condition for natural selection first came about. The major ingredient was heredity, either DNA or (more probably) something that copies like DNA but less accurately, perhaps the related molecule RNA.” This is an extraordinary simplification. The origin of life must at the very least have had two major ingredients, and they must have sparked into life at precisely the same moment: heredity was one, but what Darwin called the “breath” was the other. DNA is not much use in a lifeless body. By only calling on DNA/RNA, at a stroke Dawkins has halved the degree of the already high improbability. But be reassured: “I shall not be surprised if, within the next few years, chemists report that they have successfully midwived a new origin of life in the laboratory” (p. 137). That’s OK then. Dawkins thinks that the combined knowledge of the finest brains, working on the findings of generations of earlier fine brains, will soon be able consciously to put together the ingredients and breathe the spark of life into them ... which will prove that life came about through unconscious chance.

But Dawkins has one more theoretical trick up his sleeve. Statistics. There are billions and billions of galaxies in the universe, and so life is statistically bound to have arisen by chance not only on this planet but probably on millions more. “The beauty of the anthropic principle is that it tells us, against all intuition, that a chemical

model need only predict that life will arise on *one* planet in a billion billion to give us a good and entirely satisfying explanation for the presence of life here” (p. 138). The beauty of the Dawkins principle is that it tells us, against all reason, that if you want to believe in miracles, you need only cloak them in chemical or statistical terms to make your belief entirely satisfying. “The spontaneous arising by chance of the first hereditary molecule strikes many as improbable. Maybe it is – very very improbable” (p. 137). But the fact that we are here, and that there are billions and billions of planets, proves that this very very improbable event took place *by accident* through the laws of probability. And so “this statistical argument completely demolishes any suggestion that we should postulate design to fill the gap” (p. 139). Given enough time and space, then, chance-might produce absolutely anything. Presumably even Hoyle's Boeing 747.

After this complete demolition comes another small concession before the final hammer blow, with its heavy reliance on the totally non-committal “anthropic principle”: “[Natural selection] needs some luck to get started, and the ‘billions of planets’ anthropic principle gives it that luck. Maybe a few later gaps in the evolutionary story also need major infusions of luck, with anthropic justification. But whatever else we may say, *design* certainly does not work as an explanation for life, because design is ultimately not cumulative and it therefore raises bigger questions than it answers” [i.e. who designed the designer] (p. 141). A few later gaps would have to include the birth of the primitive but immediately functioning organs we have listed earlier, and the unconscious mutations (also functioning at once, or they would not have been worth reproducing) along the many different lines of species development. Design “certainly” does not work (by this stage in Dawkins’ thesis we are indeed dealing in certainties) because it is “ultimately not cumulative”. Isn’t it? Did Hoyle’s Boeing suddenly spring into perfection from nowhere in no time? Are there any precedents in any field of design that are not cumulative but automatically come up with spontaneous perfection? Earlier, Dawkins points out that there are flaws in evolved organs – “exactly as you would expect if they have an evolutionary history, and exactly as you would not expect if they were designed” (p. 134). He may get away with this if we stick rigidly to the concept of the omnipotent, omniscient, all-perfect God, but for an agnostic who finds it difficult to believe in the miraculous creativity of chance and yet at the same time keeps an open mind about the nature of a possible designer, the statement is quite baseless. Design requires experimentation,

and just like natural selection functions by eliminating the unnecessary and perfecting the necessary. Consider the history of cars, planes, ships, and you will see that human design follows precisely the same process as evolution - a gradual elimination of flaws and enhancement of qualities. Besides, it seems reasonable to assume that the history is not yet finished: the work is still in progress, and still "perfecting" itself, whether by chance or by design.

But if it's hard to believe that life came about by chance, it's just as hard to swallow the explanations offered to us by religion and myth. According to *Genesis*, in a version accepted by Jews, Christians and Muslims alike, God created the heaven and the earth, then said, "Let there be light: and there was light", and went on saying, "Let there be this and that" for six days, and the job was done. What could be simpler? Many Creationists stick to the literal truth of this account (or dispute the meaning of the word "day"), argue that humans and all other species were created separately and individually, and by diligent biblical calculations have worked out that we have all been on the Earth for only 6000 years. Even allowing for the possible inaccuracies of scientific research, current knowledge suggests that *homo sapiens* has been around for about 130,000 years, and probably diverged from the chimpanzee family about 5 million years ago. It is true that many believers reject the fundamentalist interpretation of the Bible, but once they begin to question the *literal* truth of what they believe to be the word of God (and we should not forget that *Genesis* is billed as the First Book of Moses, who had direct access to the Lord), it becomes increasingly difficult to accept anything as authentic. The separate, individual creation of all species runs counter to the theory of evolution, as does the simultaneous arrival of the beasts of the earth and man (all created on the sixth day). Here the fossil record clearly shows that the beasts of the earth preceded man as we know him by millions of years. Again allowing for the problem of origins as well as for gaps in the fossil record, it is difficult for someone non-committed to subscribe to the *Genesis* version with its truncated cosmology and history of life on Earth.

According to Hesiod's *Theogony* (8th century BC), creation started with Gaia (Earth), who gave birth to Uranus (Heaven), and he was thoroughly nasty to his children until one of them, Cronos, castrated him; Cronos in turn ate his own children, but his wife Rhea gave him a stone to eat instead of Zeus; when Zeus grew up (on the island of Crete), he forced his father to vomit up the rest of the family, and all of them ganged up on Cronos and gave him a hammering. Is this version more or less credible

than *Genesis*? It has plenty of detail and action, and so why should Moses' version be any more reliable than Hesiod's? Who actually established in the first place that the Bible was the Word of God? Muhammad and Joseph Smith also claimed to have experienced divine revelation. What grounds do Jews and Christians have for rejecting their claims (even if they do not dispute the *Genesis* version of origins)? Hesiod may only have been recounting a version passed down to him by earlier generations that went all the way back to the beginning.

Immanuel Velikovsky, a towering figure much reviled by the scientific establishment, ingeniously collated myths and legends from ancient cultures and literatures - including the Bible - and related them to the geological and cosmological evidence of past catastrophes such as the Flood and the parting of the Red Sea. He did this, incidentally, at a time (the 1950s) when uniformitarianism (the theory that geological processes have remained stable throughout history) was the order of the day, but many of his findings have now been confirmed. The point I wish to make here is that the stories of the Bible and of ancient myths may be based on history, and as such they may well contain truths that we have come to regard as fairy tales. We cannot dismiss them.

The North American Indians have a large variety of creation myths, one of them centring on conflict between "hero twins" whose father is the sun-god. One twin is helpful to mankind, and the other brings old age, disease and death. The concept of twin gods provides a far less mystifying explanation of good and evil than that of a single, all-good Creator who designs the Devil. In classical Indian mythology, Brahma is the creator who forms a trinity with Vishnu and Shiva, respectively the forces of light and dark, life and death etc. Brahma, as the balance between them, represents existence originating from the union of opposites. Interestingly, Brahma no longer figures as a major deity in Hinduism, perhaps reflecting increased concern with human life rather than with creation - a little like the atheist focusing on natural selection rather than on the origin of life.

But I do not belong to Hesiod's culture, or to Amerindian culture, or to Indian culture, or to Dogon culture (Amma threw pellets of earth into space to make the stars, and then made the Sun and Moon by using pottery), or to Chinese culture (Pan Gu woke up inside a big black egg, smashed it, and the contents became the heavens and the earth). Erich von Daniken tells us that visitors from outer space built many of our monuments, and the Raelians assure us that life on Earth was created in the

laboratories of the Elohim - who also live in outer space, and are busily cloning Jesus and Muhammad, among others. If you subscribe to these interpretations of origins, so be it, but in my own quest for a believable truth, I find all these concepts as incredible as that of chance-created life, heredity and adaptability, and that of a benign deity who, in six days 6000 years ago, conjured up heaven and earth and every single form of life, with not a single stage of progression from one to another. This is a subject we shall return to under "Religion".

Despite my inability to take the necessary leap of faith, however, one of the above explanations may be true, or some of them may contain some of the truth. The fact remains that we are here, and so there must be a true explanation of how we got here. Whatever it may be, it will seem fantastic. Science may be moving us towards new discoveries about our planet and our cosmos, but time and our way of life are moving us further and further away from our origins. Perhaps the ancients knew things that we do not. We should therefore remain open-minded, which is the hallmark of agnosticism, for the admission of ignorance is rarely as harmful as the assumption of knowledge.

6. The nature of a “Creator”

This is where atheism and agnosticism join forces against religion, but first we must consider the alternatives again. Either you believe that life, reproduction, the original organs and the many associated processes came about by chance – a belief that requires an act of blind, irrational faith – or you believe that they were designed. There is no middle way here. Natural selection came later, after life began and after each random mutation. Dawkins states categorically that attributing life to a designer is a “total abdication of the responsibility to find an explanation” (p. 155), and believes that through natural selection “we can now safely say that the illusion of design in living creatures is just that – an illusion” (p. 158). His attribution of the multiple miracles of life to luck and statistics is clearly a far more satisfying and "responsible" explanation for him. But if, on the other hand, you opt for a designer, you open yourself up to all kinds of problems, quite apart from Dawkins' unanswerable (though in relation to our understanding of life on Earth, also irrelevant) one of who designed him/her/it/them. What is its nature? Why did it create our world? Where is it now? (I shall use “it” in order to avoid unwanted associations.)

Some religions past (Greek and Roman) and present (especially Hinduism) have

opted for a multiplicity of deities, and some for just one, but the same questions apply. The answers can, of course, only be speculative, but the advantage of agnosticism is that the speculation can remain free from all the intellectual paraphernalia that encumbers the established religions. An agnostic can look at the work of art and draw conclusions about the artist. An adherent of any religion will tend to start with the artist. This is why theologians have tied themselves in knots trying to explain the origin of evil and to reconcile it with their belief that their god is all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-good.

It is always dangerous to assume that a work of art (let us continue the analogy for a moment or two) reflects the artist directly. Who would have thought that the *Ode to Joy* with which Beethoven's 9th Symphony reaches its triumphant climax was written by a sad and lonely, relatively old man? Or that the writer of *King Lear* could also pen *A Midsummer Night's Dream*? But what we can assume is that no artist can create something totally unknown to him. Even the most fantastic creatures of science fiction and fairy tales have some features that make them into recognizable living beings. What, then, do we learn from the world about the possible world-maker?

At this stage, I should like to change the image, or at least extend it. The artist is, or was, also a scientist. We're not talking here about big bangs or primordial soups, but we're not talking about supernatural powers either. For the designer to create life, it needed the right conditions, so it found the Earth, or maybe it created the Earth – we just don't know. But once the conditions were right, it set about devising the mechanisms that eventually led to us. The astonishing variety that has arisen out of those mechanisms is ample evidence of the designer's ingenuity; the beauty is evidence of its aesthetic sense; the love and self-sacrifice (not just human – we shall talk about animals later) is evidence of its goodness; the chaos, violence, cruelty are evidence of its darker side. Evil could not have come into being without its knowledge of evil. Man's sense of humour, though, is a great comforter, and that too can only have sprung from a corresponding trait in the designer. Even the most ardent believer in the literal truth of the Bible can hardly ignore the all-important line in *Genesis I*: "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him." If we are in God's image, then he is also in ours, and at a stroke we can do away with all the twists and turns of casuistry.

That doesn't mean, however, that the designer is an old man with a white beard. It may be such, of course, because the mechanism it created, once set in motion, could

have populated the world over time. On the other hand, it may be something as vast as a planetary system, and capable of holding the Earth in the palm of its hand (or the unearthly equivalent of its hand). The latter would be helpful if we wanted to explain some of the cataclysms that have struck the Earth in its history. Once the designer had decided to take drastic steps to change the physical Earth, it would have had to use physical means. But instead of using the hand, maybe it could have created tornadoes, earthquakes, floods – all through science, of course, not mere magic. When scholars find natural explanations for historical or mythical phenomena, like the parting of the Red Sea, they are not disproving the interference of the designer. If it wanted to part the Red Sea, it would have devised a physical method to do so.

The atheist will complain that we are entering the realms of fantasy, but is this any more fantastic than the idea that inanimate, unconscious matter can become animate, reproduce itself, and develop new organs by chance? Remember, we are now considering the alternative to the atheist's fantasy, and we are speculating. If there is/was a designer, it will be beyond our comprehension and perception, but it will in some ways mirror what it designed. So let us talk of microcosms and macrocosms. Within our own world there are many parallels between cells and the universe, between individual and society, between the body of man and the body of the Earth – so perhaps it is the same between us and our designer. Perhaps the cells that microreflect the body that microreflects society that microreflects the Earth that microreflects the universe are also a microreflection of the designer. The designer may even *be* the universe, which may even *be* a body, within which the galaxies are limbs, and our solar system a mere cell.

What we have, then, is the artist/scientist creating the mechanism of life. Now we must ask why. Why does an artist paint a picture, write a book, compose a symphony? Why does a scientist invent a machine, devise a technique, conduct experiments? Why do we sing, play games, gossip? Because that's what we humans do. And so our designer did what designers do. That may not seem very helpful, but it sets us off on an interesting track. Why did it take so long for the design to evolve into human beings capable of questioning, investigating, even denying the existence of the designer? Why all the mindless organisms, the monsters, the creatures incapable of acknowledging it?

We cannot answer these questions, of course, but we can go on speculating. Here are some ideas: 1) the designer set the whole process in motion and then sat back to

see what would evolve; 2) the designer carried on experimenting (occasionally destroying whole swathes of its creation, having got fed up with those particular species); 3) the designer didn't know what it wanted, but kept fiddling till it got us (human-centred interpretation); 4) the designer lost interest, gave up and walked away, leaving the process to look after itself; 5) the designer is still there watching. These are not meant to be alternatives; they may be phases. But on the analogy of the designer being in man's image, we might assume that it gave us and all the other creatures the freedom to do what we wanted to do, because automata would have been dull.

Let us not, however, ignore the churches, the mosques, the synagogues. Worship is central to most religions, and who is to say that the designer doesn't/didn't want to be worshipped? That too would be an understandable analogy: the artist hopes to be praised for his masterpiece, the scientist for his invention. Since this is natural to man, why not to his image? But if so, it does seem like an afterthought, bearing in mind the lateness of our appearance on the planet. It certainly cannot have been the prime motive, unless the designer simply couldn't come up with the goods first, second, or umpteenth time around. Entertainment seems a more likely candidate, with all the different creatures evolving, surviving, killing, dying, being born...

Microcosm, macrocosm: we watch the world fall to pieces, and our designer watches us watching the world fall to pieces. Step by step. Natural disasters: just that. Part of the unpredictable scenario. We watch gruesome disaster movies for our entertainment. We are a disaster movie for the designer's entertainment. That's heresy, but an agnostic is free to say what he thinks he sees. And it is not a pretty sight. A conscious being creates situations in which children die in excruciating pain, and their parents must witness their agony, unable to do anything about it. Just as the theologians tie themselves in knots to explain evil, they fall over backwards to excuse their creator for allowing the guiltless to suffer. When all else fails, they offer hope of consolation in the next life (of which more anon), but what consolation can there be for a mother who has watched her child screaming in agony before the pain finally ends, cutting short a life that has barely begun? I'm referring to disease, accident, natural catastrophe, and you can extend the range of suffering in any direction you want. What sort of inventor invents the slaughter of the innocents?

While on the subject, we may as well deal with an extraordinary piece of pain-

infliction. Christians believe that Christ died his agonizing death on the cross in order to redeem them, whatever that means. What sort of father allows his son to suffer such pain in the first place? And what precisely is the point and process of this “redemption”? If we are good, we will be rewarded; if we are bad, we will be punished. So where does Christ’s agony fit in? Couldn’t the designer have “redeemed” us without Christ’s blood? Of all the verses in the story of Jesus, there is none so resonant and chilling as Matthew 27, 46: “And about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying, Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani? That is to say, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?”

Christians may argue that Christ's suffering is an example to all of us: so long as we have faith and behave ourselves, we will be rewarded for our pain. It is the same message as that given in the story of Job (see "Religion"), but why inflict such suffering? Christ and Job were presumably both "perfect and upright", so they should have been saved anyway. And I, who am not "perfect and upright", will not be made so by Christ's crucifixion or by Job's losses, since it is clear that I too must have faith in God (or Christ, which - mysteriously - amounts to the same thing thanks to the doctrine of the Holy Trinity) and obey his commandments, or I shall be condemned. We are told by John, in his first epistle general, that if we walk in God's light, "the blood of Jesus Christ his [God's] son cleanseth us from all sin." But if I already walk in God's light, what need is there for Christ's blood? Will I obey the commandments simply because Christ died an agonizing death? And could I not have had faith in him anyway without such a death?

The fact is, I am no closer to "redemption" after Christ's death than I was before it. This is not to deny that he may have been a great teacher, and many of his principles set out a good moral and social basis for living (most religions do). It is simply a comment on the senselessness of the sacrifice. The nature of the "Creator" as it emerges from this story is very much in tune with a haunting line from a Madonna song: “Only the one that hurts you can make you feel better.” God hurt Job and Christ, then made them feel better, but that won't help the rest of us, unless we can live up to their noble standards - and even that is no guarantee of favour.

What about love, then? If we are to follow our parallels, might not the artist love his own work? Might not the playwright take pity on his characters? Of course he might. If the great spectator takes a liking to you, why shouldn't he offer you special terms?

Once you are free from the scientific faith of atheism and the dogma of religion, you can pick any scenario you like, because they are all equally possible/impossible. If I cannot entirely discount the possibility of life etc. through random miracles, I most certainly cannot discount the possibility of a conscious designer taking note of little me and putting its metaphorical thumb up or down. We may shift the parallel here from the playwright to the great dictator: if The Father of the Nation likes me, he'll be nice to me; if he hates me, he'll make me suffer. It is not a comforting thought, but it is just as likely/unlikely as any other of our scenarios.

At the beginning of this chapter, I asked three questions about the possible designer: What is its nature? Why did it create the world? Where is it now? On the assumption that the design reflects the designer, I have suggested that it is fair enough to ascribe all the good and all the bad qualities of life on Earth to the being that created it; this leads to the possibility that the act of creation was a sort of pastime, maybe for entertainment; and this in turn brings us to the third question. Is it still watching? But in order to speculate on that, we need to return to a different aspect of the first question.

7. Where is it now?

If there is/was a designer, what form does/did it have? We have mentioned the possibility of a giant physical being (or maybe several beings) that could take the Earth in the palm of its hand. The universe itself may be a body or bodies. But there is also the possibility of a totally different form of life that we are unable to perceive – what people call the spirit world. Fantasy? Maybe, but remember that any explanation we come up with will seem fantastic – none more so than the faith that total unconsciousness could randomly create consciousness.

Is there any evidence of a different form of life? It depends what you mean by "evidence". Thousands if not millions of people down through the ages have reported seeing ghosts. There are people who say they have made contact with the dead, or have lived before. Others claim to have special powers: healers, clairvoyants, telepaths, prophets, mediums. Is every single one of these a fake, or a self-deluder? You only need one genuine case to show that there are forms and forces of life beyond those that we know. In my wife's family (she comes from Nigeria) a child died and another was born soon after. The second child, while still an infant, recalled scenes from the dead child's life that he could not possibly have known from his own

childhood. I myself, when living in Ghana, where I spent four years, saw a boy cut himself with broken glass and not bleed, and thrust his hand into the fire and not burn. At the time he was under the influence of a juju. What we regard as supernatural belongs to everyday life in parts of Africa. The atheistic scientist may scoff but, as we have seen, science is not equipped to explain such phenomena. (In *The God Delusion*, Dawkins does not even scoff. He does not mention psychic phenomena at all.) The agnostic remains open-minded. He has to acknowledge that there *may* be genuine cases of all the above.

What, then, would this imply about our maker? If it is/was not a physical being, it is/was a so-called spiritual being. This may seem to contradict the image of the scientist manipulating his materials, but once we take the step of acknowledging spiritual powers, we must acknowledge telekinesis. A 'spirit' can move an object. I hesitate to call it a mind, since that is so closely associated with the brain, but 'spirit' too has unwanted associations. Some would use the word 'soul', but it sounds too religious. I will stick to 'spirit'.

If the designer is/was a physical being, either it has departed, or it is still there but we have failed to recognize it as such with our scientific instruments. Perhaps it is simply too big for us to discern its shape. Or perhaps it exists in another dimension. String theory and superstring theory suggest that there may be as many as 10 or 11 dimensions, compared to the meagre four that we are aware of. If, however, the designer is/was a spiritual being, we can only recognize it through our own spirit – the mental powers encased within our brains. Some scientists will inevitably argue that when the brain dies, the mental powers die (“inevitably” because science is only equipped to deal with the physical world), but your ghosts and your mediums suggest otherwise. Once again, the design may reflect the designer, and may take the form of a spirit.

Does the spirit die? The question sounds theological, but that is because of the word itself. Try to strip it of its associations, and instead concentrate on the idea that it is a form of life different from the physical one we know. Perhaps this will be easier if we take a physical analogy. When we look at each other, what we see is the person who existed one five-hundred-millionth of a second ago. When we look at a star that is 186,281 miles away, we see it as it was one second ago. If I had a telescope that could focus on an object 660 million miles away, I would see it as it was an hour ago. The greater the distance, the further back into the past we can see. Modern technology is

working on this even as I write and as you read. We can already see things millions of light years away. Theoretically, it means that nothing is lost so long as light is able to travel. A telescope on a planet X billion miles away would enable the observer to watch the crucifixion. There are, then, waves that go on for ever.

I am not saying that the spirit goes on for ever. I am an agnostic, and I do not know. I am saying that it is a possibility. That is all we can ever say if we are not able to take the leap of irrational faith which endows atheists and religious believers with their certainty. And so, if it is a possibility, we should examine its implications for ourselves (which we shall do in the next chapter) and for our designer. The designer may or may not live for ever, but what seems more likely than not is that it lived or will live a great deal longer than us. The formation of the Earth took aeons, and the idea that the designer rattled off the whole mechanism of life within, say, seventy years (let alone six days) doesn't fit in very well with any conceivable motive for making the design in the first place. On the analogy of the designer reflecting the image of the design, one can't help feeling that it would have wanted to see the outcome of its work. Whether conscious existence was planned from the start, or came about after much experimentation, or evolved gradually from increasing levels of consciousness sparked off by a mutation (deliberate or accidental), the scientific fact remains that it followed on from millions of years of pretty basic stuff: birth, survival by various means, reproduction, death. There is no fossil record of amoebas or dinosaurs having built churches, or having come up with any new technology to master the natural world, or having mounted a challenge to the very existence of the designer. If the latter's purpose was to provide itself with entertainment, it is unlikely to have walked away before the most exciting twists in the tale (assuming it knew what exciting possibilities it had created), or to have done its work in such a way that it would die before seeing them. What seems most probable is that the observer will stay on till the end of the story.

We are therefore left with the following choices: 1) the unbelievable creative genius of pure chance (= atheism); 2) a physical designer which we cannot see, either because it is dead, has gone away to another part of the universe, or is unrecognizable to our perception; 3) a spirit designer with the same qualifications – dead, gone away, or unperceivable (the 'spirit', remember, being a word for some other, non-corporeal form of life). In the second and third scenarios, we must assume that the designer had some sort of motivation for its work, and this seems likely to have involved interest in

the outcome. We can't measure the time scale by our own standards – the designer's scale runs into millions of years. As the hymn puts it: "A thousand ages in thy sight / are but an evening gone." In that case, it seems unlikely (that is as far as one can go in one's speculations) that in the short time humans have been on the Earth, the designer would have got fed up with the whole thing and packed its bags.

There is no comfort in any of this. Nobody likes being under surveillance, and the idea that some mighty power is watching every move is thoroughly off-putting. So too is the idea that this power couldn't care less what happens to us. So too is the idea that we are entirely on our own, at the mercy of the random catastrophes we are exposed to. So too is the idea that we are only there as entertainment, and our suffering is part of the performing rights. So too, if we take the two possibilities open to ourselves, are the prospects of eternal death and eternal life, but we shall look at these later. For the moment, it is the designer and not the design on which we are focusing, and for the moment what we see is both frightening and depressing. Religion is no help at all. "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart," commands Jesus (Matthew 22, 37). "Fear God," says Peter, his disciple (1st Epistle General, 2, 17). Can we love what we fear? Imagine being told by your father: "Love me, or I'll beat you to a pulp." But we are a long way from exhausting the possibilities of our scenarios. The designer, after all, is infinitely cleverer than we are, and since it has been able to create such a vast variety of patterns, it is not unreasonable to assume that it has plenty more tricks up its sleeve.

8. Endings

Astronomers have predicted that our solar system will end cataclysmically five billion years from now. What a great way to earn a living! I can't help wondering if it might not happen four billion years from now. Or maybe six. If you're interested, the disaster will strike when the sun runs out of hydrogen, swells into a red giant (approximately 200 times the size it is now), destroys the nearest planets, and either boils us up, or sucks us in. Global warming is peanuts compared to this. But in the light of our discussion on the nature of the designer, it does raise interesting questions. Things end. What happens after the ending, and if it comes to that, what happened before the beginning? We don't know. We can't know. And so we should not pretend to know.

But if we consider our various alternative explanations of life, we can't escape the

fact that each one has the ending built in: every living thing that we know dies. We can take that one step further back: every living thing that we know changes. The changes may be imperceptible from one second to the next, but look at the photo of yourself twenty years ago, look at the photo of your dog five years ago, hunt for the flower that was in bloom five weeks ago. Things are always on the move. If you want eternal life, you may feel it's a crying shame that evolution has not perfected the undying gene. After all, it has perfected reproduction, and even self-healing and self-immunisation. No problem for the atheist, who will simply argue that the chance combinations which brought about life never got round to creating the deathless gene, and it's "natural" anyway that things should die – as if unconscious nature somehow ordained death. There is a problem, though, for the designer concept. Death has clearly always been an integral part of the design, and we need to know why.

Before human beings came along to bring variety to the spectacle, we assume that other species lived their lives, as mentioned above, and died, leaving the next generation to do precisely the same. When you've seen say twenty generations of brachiosauruses munching a thousand or so generations of bananas, even if all these generations are but an evening in thy sight, there must be a degree of boredom. Imagine, then, the tedium of endless generations, or of one endless generation. Variety is essential to any form of entertainment. A symphony with one repeated note, a play with one repeated word, or a football match in which everyone stands stock still for ninety minutes – these will not set the pulses racing.

In general, change and ending are integral to any spectacle. Much though we may regret the fact that our moments of glory or bliss do not last for ever, we would certainly regret it even more if they did. And rather sickeningly, it has to be said that if the daily news consisted of nothing but happy reports of how well everything was going, we would very soon long to hear some bad news. We in England love our sunny summer days, but hot sun 365 days a year? It is the mixture of good and bad that makes even our own lives richer, and since change involves endings and beginnings, we can scarcely complain even on our own behalf that the designer's work is faulty in this respect. That is not to condone the seemingly needless pain and suffering mentioned earlier, but we are trying to see the whole picture, and to understand it – not to pass judgement. The designer introduced the concept of endings because it was the only way that the programme could be made interesting, both for it and for us.

Whether the designer will also come to an end in five billion years is a little difficult for a mere agnostic to say, but the line of speculation that I should now like to follow is that of our own ending. If the atheists are right, and we are miraculous descendants of a million astonishing coincidences, then of course there can be nothing after death. If there is/was a designer of a purely physical nature – the colossus whom we cannot see – then the same applies. But if there is/was a designer on a different plane from ourselves, which for want of a better term I have labelled “spirit”, then an afterlife as a spirit cannot be discounted.

Before wandering off into this “undiscover’d country”, I should like for a moment to consider what *is* life and, for that matter, what *is* death. Even the vast collection of complex, interconnected organs that make up our bodies are just lumps of matter without the spark, the breath, the lightning that sets them in motion. Darwin talked of life having been “breathed” by the Creator into his “few forms or one”. There is no doubt that when we die, everything stops, the engine cuts out, the light goes off, the bubble bursts – but what is it that leaves us? And when it all began, a thousand ages ago, what was it that entered us? We do not know. There is no scientist on earth who can tell us. There is no atheist or theologian on earth who can tell us. Since we do not know, we must keep an open mind about the possibilities.

The third category of originator (chance and a physical designer being the first two) presents the option of another form of life. If it created us in its image, then the body may be the container, and the other form may be the content. What we said earlier about ghosts and mediums comes into operation in this context: if just one story or one “contact” is genuine, then the whole scenario is real. Life on Earth would then be only a chapter in our history.

Some people have been brought back from the dead and have reported extraordinary experiences – an amazing light, peace, contact with their loved ones, out-of-body observation of the activities going on around the body they have vacated. None of this can be dismissed. It cannot be verified either – that is the nature of the non-physical beast – but you would need to have rock-solid faith in your limited tools of perception and comprehension in order to ignore the claims of every single testimony.

Do we want an afterlife? The question is totally irrelevant to our quest for truth, but it is worth asking all the same, since it might influence our beliefs. The answer in most cases would probably be: “It depends...” We certainly don’t want an eternal hell. An eternal heaven sounds attractive, though impossible to visualize without the

dreaded element of boredom taking over. What about perfect peace? Well, perfect peace would surely be eternal, dreamless sleep. And that is what we think of as death. Since in this life we are unlikely to know the answers to our most fundamental questions, the agnostic can look forward to death with a degree of enthusiasm (though I'm talking of death itself, and not the act of dying, which may be a dreadful ordeal). Either there will be perfect peace, which can't do us any harm, or there will be a new life in which we may learn some of the longed-for answers. We should not discount those philosophies and religions such as Buddhism and Hinduism that promise (or threaten) a new life on Earth in another form, or maybe as another person, but even that prospect need not worry us unduly. Only one of the options is really frightening, and that is the much disputed concept of hell. But in order to understand such concepts, and in order to gauge the possible nature of an afterlife, we need to consider exactly who or what it is that will enter it. This is a question of identity.

9. Identity

If the spirit is the essence that gives us life, and if it's that which survives after the body's death, who is it? No problem when the medium says, "Your Uncle Charlie is here", or when we find out that the headless lady in the corridor was Mrs Smith whose husband accidentally missed the log. But what if Uncle Charlie died of Alzheimer's? Will the spirit then have no clue as to who it is, or who it meets? What if it's a baby? Will it spend eternity, or at least a few billion years, communicating sweet nothings? What if it's an alcoholic, a drug addict, a schizophrenic? Are there cures out there in the spirit world? What if the person was a murderer, a rapist, a megalomaniac, a shyster? Any chance of reform? Is the spirit capable of change at all? What would change it? The very fact that the medium can tell you Uncle Charlie is here suggests that the spirit not only knows who it is, but also knows who you are, and so by inference will know who other familiar spirits are. What, then, goes on in that bodiless world? An endless round of social intercourse via telepathy?

And if the spirit is the essence that gives us life, let us not forget that every insect, reptile, mammal, bird is possessed of the same spirit. We shall talk about animals later, but they too are alive one second and dead the next, and they too have an identity. How will our brachiosaurus spirit cope when it meets the spirit of the tyrannosaurus that ripped it to pieces?

The fact is, we cannot conceive a spirit world. It raises so many questions that the

whole concept becomes laughable – sheer pleasure for the atheist, who can ignore his own blinkered vision by poking fun at the blinkered vision of others. And yet...we are still faced with the need (a) to discredit every single spirit tale, report, communication, sighting, and (b) to identify what it is that gives us life. We always come back to the problem of origins, and if we are unable to share the blind, unreasoning and unreasonable faith of the theist or the atheist, we must consider the alternatives.

Is there a scenario that can encompass all the ghost stories and yet at the same time remove all the problems associated with the spirit world – identity, how do spirits pass the time, where does the animal world fit in, etc.? A lot of ghost stories concern spirits that cannot “rest”. This at least gives us one way out of our dilemma. If rest is the problem, then death is the solution. The dreamless sleep of death is the perfect rest and provides the perfect peace beyond all understanding. And so maybe the vast majority of spirits (remember, I use the word only to describe the unknown spark that gives us life) die with their bodies. The current is switched off. But maybe in some cases, it lingers for a while, independently of the dead body. Just as the amputated limb continues to hurt, maybe the spirit hurts too. Maybe the death of the spirit is a loss of the will to live (= the desire to rest), but the will to live survives in those who for whatever reason feel they need to go on: to right a wrong, to contact the living, to find out what happens next.

Another possibility with regard to ghosts lies with the observer: as we have seen, light waves theoretically go on for ever, and so perhaps the observer is able to shift his position in time/space, and latch onto the ongoing waves, “seeing” the past. This doesn’t explain the medium’s contact with the dead, who send messages to the living, but the ability – conscious or otherwise – to move onto another wavelength would be a common feature between the two sets of claims. This may even be on a par with the ability of animals to perceive things that humans can’t perceive. We know for a fact that there are, for instance, sounds beyond our hearing, and there are innumerable verified tales of animals sensing danger long before we do. Perhaps in some people there is the same heightened sensitivity to the “waves”, the “vibes”, or whatever you want to call them.

“Perhaps” is not the sort of word to find favour with your scientist or your self-confident believer or your equally self-confident atheist. They all want firm truth, and “perhaps” is worthless to them. But your scientist can only investigate the material universe, and your believer and your atheist rely ultimately on faith, and since neither

the material universe nor faith can provide us with a provable explanation of the origins of life, reproduction, etc., “perhaps” is the best we can do. And within its parameters lie not only infinite possibilities, but also guidelines for future research into the nature of communication and into the forces that make us what we are.

10. Animals

Darwin believed that all living creatures were descended from just a few or one original species. Man and the apes had a common ancestor, and for all the imperfections of the geological record, there can be no doubt that in terms of skeletal structure, organs, senses, reproduction, digestive processes etc., all mammals have a vast array of common features. The inference that they are variations on a theme seems inescapable, and from this we can extrapolate all kinds of fascinating insights into the nature both of animals and of man.

One of the most important has to be the fact that the distinction I have just drawn is false. Man *is* an animal. It is therefore a mark of intellectual arrogance to denigrate the instincts, feelings, sensitivities and capabilities of animals as being somehow different from those of man. Mammals (I shall confine myself to these, as they are our closest relatives) can only survive by reproducing, caring for their young, feeling and responding to pain, finding food and drink, protecting themselves against their enemies, etc. If they are “programmed” to do this, then so are we. (We shall not delve here into the question of who devised the “programme”.) Our means of survival are precisely the same as those of other animals, and the idea that animals feel what we feel is not an anthropomorphic projection, because it is the other way round: in the evolutionary order of things, they came before us, i.e. we inherited the programme from them, and so we feel what they feel. An elephant mother loves its baby, nurtures, suckles, protects it just as we do, and if the baby dies, the elephant grieves. There are countless examples of animals expressing emotion, and you don’t even have to be a zoologist or a wildlife observer to experience this. Anyone who has lived with a cat or dog will know that it has feelings.

Another vital element in survival is communication. We pride ourselves on the complexities and range of our languages, but again these are only extensions of animal language. Scientists have observed that different animal sounds have different meanings, and it is known that there are sounds we cannot hear, and some may travel over vast distances. Our senses in many areas are inferior to those of other animals,

and it may even be that our superior brain power has adversely affected those senses, as we do not rely on them so much. Natural selection may emphasize that which is advantageous, but perhaps it also creates a balance whereby one feature is enhanced and another shrinks. A heightened sense of smell may accompany a diminution of vision (or conversely, a diminution of vision may be compensated for by a heightened sense of smell).

The point I am making here is that we have lost sight of our animal origins, and because we have done so, we have misunderstood a huge area of our own behaviour. Before we discuss the animal nature of man, however, we should consider human influence on other animals.

Knowing as we do that they are our fellow creatures, and share so many of our traits, we should not assume that their suffering is any different. They cannot describe their feelings in our language, but a cry of agony is the same in any language, human or animal. To inflict pain on an animal is in principle no different from inflicting pain on a human, and anyone who uses the excuse that they are different from us is merely one step away from the most appalling crimes in human history: Europeans enslaved Africans; Hitler murdered Jews; Sunnis and Shias, Tutsis and Hutus, Israelis and Palestinians slaughter one another with the same excuse. Difference is no justification for cruelty or destruction.

This is clearly an argument in support of the animal rights movement, but it needs to be tempered. Even though there can be no excuse for deliberately inflicting suffering on animals, this is not a reason to reverse processes that appear to be natural, and it most certainly is not a defence of violence to prevent violence. For an animal rights supporter to go round killing medical scientists is equivalent to a member of the Zebra Protection Society shooting lions. If we use animals for meat or for vital research, for instance in combating disease, then that is part of the whole evolutionary pattern by means of which survival depends on advantage. But on the other hand (agnostics cannot help waving the other hand), we must impose limits on our advantage if we are to maintain it. By over-exploiting or killing off other species, we will ultimately deprive ourselves not only of our own food sources, but also of the biodiversity and the ecological benefits that those species bring to our planet.

As far as our own animal nature is concerned, so caught up are we in our self-awareness that we forget what we are. It is a similar process to that by which we build streets and houses to form a city, and then forget that underneath is a layer of earth,

and if we once more removed the streets and houses, there would once more be earth. We cover up nature, and we cover up ourselves. This is not to say that we do *not* differ from other animals, but until we recognize the common points, we shall never attain a proportionate view of ourselves or of them.

11. Humans

It is surely the designer's absolute masterstroke (or, if you insist, the masterstroke of mindless, emotionless, sexless chance) that survival depends on love. Once single-cell reproduction had given way to sexual reproduction – you may recall the penis that hung around through generations of single-cell beings until it got itself right and simultaneously found a vagina that had also got itself right – there had to be a union of bodies, followed by a period of motherly devotion. Without these two phases, survival of the species would have been and still is impossible. Although sex is obviously not synonymous with love, there are many creatures that mate for life, and even if humans are not necessarily among them, nevertheless, the initial union of man and woman is generally a mixture of the physical and the emotional.

The second phase, in which the mother (and one hopes, in the case of humans, the father too) nurtures, feeds, protects, teaches, etc., is one of absolute devotion. The baby is helpless. Without parental love, it must die. As far as we know, animals provide that love spontaneously. A lioness does not need to be taught how to give birth, how to suckle, etc. Humans do, or at least they do in societies that like to think of themselves as sophisticated. Parenting is a subject for study, for theory. We write books about it, we hold courses, we even change direction, as one fashionable expert gives way to another. This applies to all the activities that animals perform naturally, and it is symptomatic of the loss of animal spontaneity that makes us forget what we are.

Lest the religious believer be carried away with the notion of love being evidence of the designer's beneficent nature, we need to redress the balance by mentioning another process without which we cannot survive – namely, eating. When life according to the atheist sprang spontaneously into existence, and spontaneously created its own reproductive system, it also originated an extraordinary process of fuelling. The complexities of the digestive system need not concern us here, though. In this context, we are considering the nature of man and other animals as a reflection of their possible designer, and eating is surely the very converse of the love we have

just lauded. If the absorption of other matter is a scientific necessity (and we must face the fact that life requires energy, and energy requires fuel), why – even before the arrival of humans – did the designer not confine the concept of food to things without feelings? Drink too is essential to life, but it is probably safe to assume that water has no awareness, no sensitivity to pain. We have no evidence that grass, herbs and other forms of vegetation have feelings either. But other animals most certainly do. To make the survival of some animals dependent on their killing other animals seems cruel in the extreme. And totally unnecessary.

When eventually we humans came on the scene, the pattern was already clear. We were ready to kill and eat anything. Not only that, but other patterns were also clear: animals would fight for territory, for mates, for leadership. Violence was integral to the fabric of life. And from all this violent competition and conflict, from the endless struggle for survival and power, comes much that we call sin. How absurd, then, to claim that Adam and Eve were in any way responsible for it, when the entire system of selfishness and destruction was established long before them.

So far as we know, our ancestors lived much like animals: they inhabited caves, reproduced, nurtured their young, went out to hunt and kill, and taught their children to do the same. The fact that they devised tools to make the task easier does not mean that the task itself was any different. But if we now leap forward to modern man, we find two things: 1) that the task has been institutionalized, and 2) that it has been vastly expanded.

The repercussions of “institutionalization” reach into most areas of our existence. We have already mentioned the possibility that our senses have been dulled by the dominance of our intellect, and when it comes to food, shelter, defence/attack, education and all the other facets of our push for survival, we have created an enormous range of mechanisms that hide the animal nature of the processes. Our food industry is an extension of the hunt; our houses are an extension of the caves; our arms industry is an extension of teeth and claws; our schools are an extension of parenting, and so on.

But despite our extraordinary self-awareness, we remain helpless in the grip of the same instincts that govern the other animals. We are, if you like, still “programmed”, and no matter how much we may rationalize, analyse and theorize, the basics remain exactly the same. Instead of hunting, gathering, etc., we go to the office so that we can pay for the kill or the fruit, for the cave, for the protection, for the parenting. This is a

major problem for all human-centred religions: they cannot accept the idea that man was not at the forefront of their god's thinking when he began the life process. Even though they know that the so-called animal kingdom preceded the human kingdom by many thousands of years, they still cling to the idea that the *real* beginning was the arrival of man, and that man has a unique place in the pattern. They do not ask why it took their god so long to put him there, and they do not see that the savagery of our human world is no more than a continuation of the system that has made nature "red in tooth and claw".

Why does it matter? When Darwin first propounded his theory, there was an outcry against the idea that man was descended from the monkeys – although of course Darwin never said any such thing, his proposition being that man and monkeys had a common ancestor. It was as if people were in denial of their animal nature, and in denial of the facts placed before their eyes (the physiological similarities, and the shared basic needs). But perhaps the denial went and still goes deeper – right into the heart of the designer. Once we acknowledge the fact that, for all our sophistication, we are only part of a developing process that began with creatures we deem to be inferior to ourselves, we open up the terrifying possibility that we are not in safe hands.

12. Religion

We have already noted the fact that the fossil record has not yet produced a single dinosaur church. It is a fairly safe bet that it never will. From present-day observation, it would seem that animals other than ourselves do not worship, although admittedly our inability to understand animal language makes it dangerous to state this as a given truth. Religion, then, is one area of existence that we probably do not share with other animals.

Man's extra levels of consciousness have enabled him both to worship and to deny his designer. We have considered at some length the case against atheism, which is relatively straightforward: life and all its associated processes are too intricate to have come about by chance. We have also considered the alternative, which is far from straightforward: a designer. To recap on this: it may be physical, it may be "spiritual", it may be dead, it may be absent, it may still be present. We have considered its possible nature and its possible motivations. What we have not yet considered is the impact on human society of human speculations regarding the designer.

If we believe in a conscious creator or creators, we must face all the possible scenarios listed above, and since this is precisely the area of existence that is dealt with by religion, we can scarcely ignore the descriptions offered to us. Each religion claims to have captured the truth, which in itself makes all of them suspect, but what they have in common is the idea that the designer is interested in human affairs. In monotheistic religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam) there is also an abiding faith in the beneficence of the deity, while polytheistic religions like Hinduism at least offer the believer a variety of gods and goddesses - a pleasing equal opportunities policy here - ranging from the adorable Krishna to the terrifying Kali. (It has been claimed that Hinduism boasts over 300 million gods, although it is also claimed that every one of these merely represents particular aspects of the one Supreme Being.) As far as interest in human affairs is concerned, this seems logical (if the designer is still around), as there would be little point in its creating an on-going saga if it was *not* interested. But what humans cannot bear is the thought of a malevolent or even an indifferent designer. This is the ultimate nightmare.

The Bible, however, is full of examples of God's cruelty and injustice. Right from the start, he creates the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (which he created because he created all things) together with the serpent which, in his omniscience, he knows will tempt Eve. As a result of the fall, which he thus engineers and of which he already knows the outcome, he proceeds to condemn all of us for our "original sin", and this according to Christianity can only be overcome through baptism and loyalty to Jesus. "He that believeth on him is not condemned; but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God" (John 3:18). At a stroke, then, the Christian God condemns not only the non-believers, but also the unbaptised - every Jew, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, etc. that ever lived, not to mention those poor unfortunate souls that have never heard of Jesus or were unlucky enough to be alive BC ("And no man hath ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven, even the Son of man" (John 3: 13)). Can any of us truly believe in, let alone condone such unfairness?

The answer is yes. Jehovah's Witnesses even assert that the number of souls saved will be limited to 144,000: "And I heard the voice of harpers harping with their harps....and no man could learn that song but the hundred and forty and four thousand, which were redeemed from the earth." It's not clear if the harpers harping with their harps were among the chosen few, but even if we add them to the 144,000,

it still seems grossly unfair that all the good folk of the Old Testament, not to mention those of other cultures, should be condemned.

But the tone, as we have seen, was set right from the start. Consider the tale of Cain and Abel: "Cain brought of the fruit of the ground an offering unto the Lord. And Abel, he also brought of the firstlings of the flock and of the fat thereof. And the Lord had respect unto Abel and to his offering: But unto Cain and to his offering he had not respect." Why? It would seem that the Lord was happy to see innocent, pain-sensitive lambs slaughtered in his name, but didn't much fancy the vegetarian diet.

Noah's flood is such a sweet tale of good old Noah and the two-by-two menagerie that we conveniently forget how the Lord deliberately destroyed every man, woman, child and unborn child (not to mention the animals) on Earth. The harrowing scenes that we now see on our TV, when tsunamis and hurricanes smash cities and drown their inhabitants, would have been nothing compared to the destruction the angry Lord deliberately wreaked on Noah's contemporaries.

Of all the books in the Old Testament, that of Job comes closest to challenging the idea of God's beneficence. Even the Lord describes him as "a perfect and an upright man", and yet he deliberately destroys this good man's family, home and property. Initially, Job accepts his fate, but eventually the agony is too great, and he rails against the injustice of it all in some of the finest poetry to be found in the biblical history of human suffering:

"Thou knowest that I am not wicked...Thine hands have made me and fashioned me round about; yet thou dost destroy me. Remember, I beseech thee, that thou hast made me as the clay; and wilt thou bring me into dust again? Hast thou not poured me out as milk, and curdled me like cheese?" Eventually, after much debate with his friends, Job gets his answer from God himself, and what an answer it is: a long list of all God's achievements and mighty powers. "Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth?" he asks. "Knowest thou the ordinances of heaven? Canst thou set the dominion thereof in the earth? Canst thou lift up thy voice to the clouds, that abundance of waters may cover thee? Canst thou send lightnings, that they may go, and say unto thee, Here we *are*?" The Lord's basic response to Job's criticism of his divine cruelty and injustice is to boast of his powers and to belittle his suffering victim. Sadly, though not surprisingly, the perfect and upright man is cowed, and meekly gives in: "I know that thou canst do every thing, and that no thought can be withholden from thee...Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes." And

God rewards him with thousands of sheep and camels, seven sons, and three amazingly good-looking daughters.

The New Testament, as we have seen, culminates in bloody execution, with the Lord allowing his "only begotten son" to die an excruciatingly painful death in order to "redeem" mankind for the original sin that God himself had engineered at the start of the story. This redemption will be granted if we believe in Jesus, but won't if we don't, so what exactly was the point of the execution in the first place? We could profess our love of Jesus, and obey his commandments, even if he'd died of old age. No wonder he cried out in despair at God's forsaking him.

The list of the Lord's cruelties and injustices is endless, and yet the Jewish, Christian and Islamic God is praised for his infinite goodness. So what is the truth-seeker to make of all this? As someone brought up in the western tradition, I read these tales and cannot equate the God of the Bible with the God of these religions. The written "evidence" that we are urged to study provides no comforting answer to the burning questions of how evil originated or of why the designer inflicts such arbitrary pain on his creations, even when they are upright (Job) or innocent (every babe slaughtered in God's indiscriminate catastrophes). The very fact that the established religions insist on finding excuses, or on blaming us all for Eve's blunder, makes me doubt their overall claims to veracity. Even if I were to accept St Thomas Aquinas's explanation of evil as man's abuse of free will, necessary for doing good, or Leibniz's view of it as the necessary contrast to highlight the goodness of goodness in this the best of all possible worlds, it still won't separate God from the origin of evil, and it still won't excuse *his* cruelty, as opposed to man's. Besides, if this really is the best of all possible worlds, why should we be blamed for evil, and what does it tell us about paradise?

Let us not, however, equate religion with God. Maybe, as we discussed in the section on "origins", the tales are true and the interpretation is false. After all, the Flood is an event common to many histories and cultures: it is part of the Epic of Gilgamesh, recounted in a text from the library of Ashurbanipal of Nineveh (who reigned 668-627 BC), and even earlier is the myth of Ziusudra, the Sumerian Noah. The Chinese ruler Yü conquered the Great Flood, and the Aztecs, Incas and Maya all had their equivalent of the tale. Events are recounted, passed down from generation to generation, eventually written down by someone - generally long after the event itself

- and lo and behold, we have a myth that might once have been a history. The borderline between truth and fiction becomes impossibly blurred, each telling is fashioned by the teller, and if he or she believes in God, then of course God is assigned his major role. The reader of the story must draw his own conclusions. In the case of the flood, which indiscriminately destroyed both humans and animals, one is left with the same choice as usual: accident or design? And if it was by design, then maybe the designer is indeed cruel and unjust. So why pretend otherwise?

What we have here is an extraordinary capacity to dismiss or ignore contrary evidence. It is precisely the same head-in-the-sand tactic that marks the atheist's insistence on the inventive genius of unconscious matter. Another analogy might be the child who closes his eyes in order not to be seen. Why do we do this? Perhaps it all goes back to survival instincts, and is our means of coping with fear.

That we all have to die is the only certainty we have, and so it is amazing that we do not spend every minute of the waking day trembling with terror. But we shut death out most of the time. We get on with living. If we didn't, we would soon become gibbering wrecks. Shutting out unpleasant truths is part of our mechanism for survival. Another of those mechanisms is to talk ourselves into believing what we want to believe. Politicians are particularly adept at this: when they have made a mistake, or have told lies, they will seize on any half-truth, any glimmer of justification that will rescue their image, not only in the eyes of others but also in their own, because very few people are able to live with the knowledge that they have been wrong or are perceived to have been wrong. Not even scientists are immune from the process of self-delusion. History is filled with cases of scientists who have falsified evidence, or have ignored and even suppressed evidence that goes against their findings.

Why would an atheist ignore the evidence for design? Perhaps for the same reason as a theologian will ignore the evidence for a less than benign god. We do not like the idea of being watched, and we do not like the idea of someone having total power over us. Worst of all is not only to be watched by and subject to someone with total power, but also to know that the someone is or may be ill-disposed towards us. Besides, even if the someone were benevolent, he would still be in authority, and he would lay down laws and make us feel obliged to obey. Freedom from such authority is an attractive proposition. Given the choice between that and serving an obscure but distinctly threatening power, most people would, I suspect, choose freedom. That

freedom is guaranteed by atheism.

On the other hand, to be alone in the universe, to have no prospect of help from above, to contemplate one's own oblivion – these are equally daunting prospects. So we embrace the concept of the deity. Especially in poorer societies, the divine creator is often integral to the hope for a better future. But hope and comfort will not be nourished by the concept of a cruel or arbitrarily partial designer, any more than they would be under the rule of a cruel or arbitrarily partial human dictator, and so we cherish the concept of the just and loving god. If the not so loving god is evoked, it is in the context of punishment – be good or else the bogeyman will get you.

For an agnostic, all things theoretically are possible, though all seem equally impossible, but fear should not come into the equation. The criterion should be truth. And since we do not have an undisputed truth, we ought to remain open-minded. Should I then have taken seriously the belief of the pre-war Japanese that their Mikado was descended directly from the sun-goddess Amaterasu Omikami and was therefore sacred and inviolable (a faith rudely shattered by their defeat in 1945)? Should I believe with the Ngoni people of East Africa that if they pour beer into a pot, pray to their rain-god, drink the rest of the beer, and then do a song and dance, the rains will come? When I watch a Western, and see the North American Indians in their war paint, leaping round their totem poles singing songs I do not understand, should I accept that their link with the designer is just as feasible as any other? The answer has to be yes. If I am expected to take seriously the Catholic claim that the Pope derives his authority directly from Jesus, and is therefore infallible, and if I am expected to take seriously the genuflecting before a statue flecked with red paint, the splashing of "holy" water on the forehead, the consumption of "consecrated" bread and wine, the counting of beads, the mumbling of verses and archaic formulae, the gaudy costumes, the miraculous narratives, then of course I must take their non-European counterparts seriously, for there is absolutely no difference between them. Either they are equally valid, or they are equally absurd, depending on whether or not there is a designer who is paying attention.

This, of course, we do not know. In its way, the very fact of our ignorance is comforting. Let us by all means continue the search – indeed it is our nature to do so – but let us ask our questions with calm acceptance of our ignorance, and with the impartiality that ought to be the hallmark of science. People spend vast amounts of

time predicting the future: weather forecasts, football pools, opinion polls...but the future will come anyway, and our predictions have no value beside the actual happening. Very well, then, let us enjoy the present, and when/if the truth is revealed to us in due course, we shall know it. If it is not, we shan't. There may be exciting times ahead, or there may be nothing, but either way, we shall be no worse off than we are now.

As far as religion itself is concerned, and its impact on human society, let us give it due credit for bringing consolation to those in need of relief, for providing moral and ethical guidance where its laws are not oppressive, for its charitable works, and for offering us a possible explanation of life's deepest mysteries. On the other hand, let us not ignore the evils committed in its name and, in many cases, by its instigation, and let us not be misled by its inconsistencies and its cover-ups. As with everything else in the accidental fabric or the deliberate design, religion is a mixture of good and bad.

13. Art

So far we have stressed the animal nature of man, but have distinguished him from the beasts because of his heightened consciousness (which, among other things, has given him the capacity to deny or worship the power that may have designed him).

Language is not unique to man, since all creatures have various means of communication, and even the use of tools is only an extension of nature, although our resultant technologies clearly give us enormous advantages over all other species.

There are, however, some areas of our lives in which we appear to differ strikingly from the beasts: we have an insatiable curiosity which has led to the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake. Animals may be inquisitive, but there is no reason to suppose that they will investigate the world's phenomena for any reason other than their relevance to survival. We, however, need to know. It's true that the practical applications of science fit in with the whole evolutionary process as it pushes on towards some kind of perfection, but we will investigate all things, regardless of practical value. We are aware of mysteries, and are uncomfortable until we have solved them. The atheist would argue that religion is a misguided attempt to solve a mystery by manufacturing a solution that entails another mystery, whereas the believer would argue that atheism is a misguided attempt to solve a mystery by claiming that there *is* no mystery.

Of all our human activities, art (by which I mean the arts in general) is the one that

seems to take us furthest away from the animals whose ancestry we share. Music above all epitomizes the aesthetic sense which transcends understanding. The animal kingdom produces its own sounds, of course, but so far as we know, these are functional and form part of the communicatory processes. They are indispensable to survival. Beethoven's 9th Symphony is indispensable to no-one, and yet we rank it as a supreme human achievement. (If you don't, then substitute any piece of art that you regard as supreme.) Some of the greatest minds in our culture pay homage to the work of the composers, the painters, the sculptors, the writers, and our lives would be infinitely poorer without them. And yet generally speaking, they are of no practical value. Literature comes closest to practicality in so far as it may provide usable insights into the way the human mind and human society function; painting and sculpture may challenge our modes of perception, or draw our attention to facets of the world we might otherwise be unaware of. But how many poems or novels, paintings or sculptures, have actually changed the way the world functions? Not even the plays of Shakespeare – even though they have spawned a vast industry and keep thousands of people in employment – can be described as indispensable or even contributory to the survival and continuation of our species. Music, though, is the art most remote from the practical world, and its appeal presents an insurmountable challenge to our understanding.

Why should a combination of sounds with no articulate meaning (let us, for argument's sake, consider only instrumental music here) have such a profound effect on us? We can be plunged into darkest melancholy, or whipped up into a celebratory frenzy, and yet there is nothing tangible to direct us. Why do I want to weep at the end of Tchaikovsky's 6th Symphony? Why do I want to cheer at the end of Brahms's 2nd? Why do I melt within at the adagio of Schubert's C-major String Quintet? Why do I want to wave my arms, tap my feet, dance like a dervish during the last movement of Beethoven's 7th?

In everyday life we experience emotions such as love, fear, joy, etc. without questioning what processes actually take place to make us "feel" them. We take them – as we take most of our functions, both physical and mental – for granted (until they go wrong). I blink, breathe, sit, stand, move, etc. without ever thinking about how I do it. The body takes over as soon as the mind decides on an action – or if it is an ongoing action like breathing, the body performs it without my even instructing it to do so. Emotions are the same: my "feeling" of love, fear, joy comes automatically

according to the situation, and I do not ask what is going on inside me. I merely relate the feeling to the situation. With music, there is not even a situation to relate to. Only meaningless sounds. To a degree, the same applies to art and sculpture – whatever the nature of their appeal, they are normally unrelated to our own, real lives. Why, then, do they “move” us?

The question inevitably takes us back to origins. In terms of the purely physical universe, where do emotions and aesthetics spring from? Remember that the atheist’s starting point is mindlessness – total inanimateness. Even if you can accept the extraordinary coincidence of inanimate matter forming itself at one and the same time into something live and able to reproduce itself, what gave birth to the hitherto non-existent and – so far as we know – also non-physical spheres of “feeling” and, especially, of artistic expression, which in itself is of no practical value (the crucial force that drives evolution)?

There is an additional mystery here. Any writer who visits a primary school will confirm that one of the most frequently asked questions is: “Where do you get your ideas?” Small children are aware of the problem, even if they do not see its implications. In the creation of artworks, there are strange mechanisms in operation. Ideas generally spring from the so-called subconscious mind. Suddenly, out of the blue, a writer will get an idea: some will then begin to plan their tale, whereas others will simply allow the idea to develop of its own accord. Even those who plan will tell you that more often than not the characters force them to abandon the plan. They take on a life of their own. We do not understand the mechanism ourselves, but it can be summed up by something Michelangelo once said – namely, that the statue was *already* in the marble; he only had to find it.

The artist knows what he is doing – he is conscious of sculpting, painting, composing or writing – but in most instances he feels that the material is guiding him rather than the other way round. Of course, if you take away the brain, or even a certain part of the brain, the composer will stop composing, but the same applies if you take away the heart or the lungs or the liver. No-one is claiming that in this life we function without our physical casing. The question here is why physical matter is able to produce concepts that have nothing to do with physical matter, or with the survival of that physical matter. The atheist may say that this, like all organs and organic processes, is the result of chance mutations which create totally new though primitive phenomena, and these become more sophisticated as time goes by. Chance

created a D, and then over thousands of years the D converted itself into Beethoven's 9th. But why should it have done so?

Scepticism over the creative powers of chance will not, however, answer the primary school question: where do ideas come from? The honest answer is: we don't know. And we should not pretend that we do. But we can speculate. If there is a designer, and if that designer is not a physical being like ourselves, it is possible that the force that gives us life (I have called it the "spirit") is also possessed of the non-physical emotions and aesthetics we have been discussing. This makes the artist a vehicle – the material is not coming from him but through him, although he may have to work on it many times because he is not a pure filter. In other words, those elements of our nature that are not physical may have a non-physical source.

A religious artist will claim that his inspiration comes directly from God. God is dictating to him, and it is only because his "hearing" is imperfect that he is sometimes forced to work on the dictation – perfecting it until he is satisfied that he has come as close as possible to the message transmitted from on high. An atheist will claim that the "message" emanates from globules of matter emitting electrical impulses that somehow by sheer chance have developed a sense of aesthetics. An agnostic will admit that he is mystified. There is no shame in this, and there is if anything a great deal more excitement, because an unsolved mystery is always infinitely more fascinating than one that has been solved.

Of particular interest is the possible parallel between the playwright/novelist and the designer. One must acknowledge the fact that if there *is* a designer, we do not know where *its* ideas come from either, but that is no proof that there is no designer, any more than our ignorance of the playwright's source is proof that there is no playwright. The parallel, however, lies in the autonomy of the characters. If we imagine the designer now as the writer, it comes up with its brilliant idea of living creatures imbued with its own spirit, and then eventually hits on the variation of characters with complete consciousness of themselves. From then on, it watches – and maybe even records – what they do. According to the Bible, it occasionally interferes, but eventually it probably decides not to do so. The characters themselves must run the story, with built-in natural disasters to maintain a degree of unpredictability and to present renewed challenges.

This scenario at least has the advantage that it explains many of the problems that face religious believers. There is free will, humans are subjected to suffering that is

partly of their own making but partly caused by nature as created by the designer, prayers may or may not be answered because of the law of averages (for example, if both sides pray to God before a battle, one of them will have its prayers answered), some crises will be resolved and some will not, and the co-existence of good and evil springs from the designer itself. Once you accept the principle that a design in some way reflects the designer, many of the trickier theological questions become remarkably simple.

14. Politics

Another obvious parallel is that between the designer and the Great Leader. History is littered with men (though interestingly, not women) who believe or believed themselves to be living gods. Their aim is to redesign the world, and they nurture their own image even to the extent of erecting statues and inventing divine names for themselves. Other humans are there only for their benefit.

Of course, not all leaders are of that ilk. Some may even start out with genuine hopes and plans for the betterment of humankind. But in order to enter politics, one must first have the desire to change the world, and secondly have the belief that one can and should do so. These characteristics are already dangerous, since the desire and the belief are no guarantee of intelligence or human understanding. The arrogance of political, religious and philosophical fanatics who claim to “know” the truth is a massive threat to the wellbeing of anyone who comes under their influence.

So too is the blinkered vision of those who destroy the balance of nature for the sake of short-term profit. Whether that balance is the product of natural evolution or deliberate design is immaterial, since the result will be the same. Those who lead the processes of destruction (and it is humans who take these decisions, even if they hide themselves behind the façades of the corporations) impose lines of thought that are based either on “knowing” or on deliberately brushing aside those ideas that run counter to their “knowledge”.

It may be argued by those who are committed to a thought system that without such commitment there can be no decisions and no actions. However, it is precisely the lack of commitment that promotes open-mindedness and tolerance, which have to be the hallmark of any fair and balanced society. Conflict arises from commitment; it is only when we acknowledge the possibility that there are at least two sides to an

argument that co-existence becomes possible. Decisions and actions will then be based on consideration for all points of view instead of one, to the exclusion (and consequent resentment) of others. We are talking here, though, of a very limited field of decision. The basic direction of all religious and non-religious systems is the betterment of the human condition, and an agnostic is just as capable as a Christian or an atheist when it comes to determining the need for food, shelter, healthcare, etc. There will certainly be differences, however, in the approach to education, and this is probably the one political field in which dangerous seeds may be sown by committed teachers.

15. What should be taught in schools?

This is probably the most controversial topic of the moment, since particularly in America the Creationists have been making a strong bid to force their world view into the curriculum. Sadly, the concept of Intelligent Design has been used as a cover for Creationism, which gives the latter an undeserved shade of scientific respectability and the former an undeserved shade of religious fundamentalism. ID is the basis of the case against atheism, but it is no more conclusive as an argument for the Creationists' God than Darwin's theory of natural selection is conclusive as an argument for the atheists' god of chance.

In *The God Delusion*, Richard Dawkins argues against the religious indoctrination of children (though one suspects that he would have no problem if they underwent anti-religious indoctrination). Few would dispute Wordsworth's assertion that "the Child is Father of the Man", especially in the light of the Jesuits' notorious educational slogan ("Give me a child until he is seven, and I will give you the man"). But without an Orwellian thought-police force, you cannot prevent parents from passing on their beliefs. Indeed if you tried to do so, where would state interference end? The histories of Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union and countless lesser dictatorships give us the horrendous answer to that question. Besides, even in a comparatively free society, *any* single-track approach to the so-called "deeper" questions could lead to conflict within the home if the domestic belief is different from that taught in the educational establishment. I am not talking here just of religious education. If a child is told at home that there is a loving God looking after him, and at school he/she is told that there is no such thing as God, and science alone can give us reliable answers, the result will be confusion and conflict rather than enlightenment and harmony.

This is where agnosticism comes into its own. Until there is universal recognition of

the fact that *no-one* can claim a monopoly on truth, confusion and conflict are inevitable. Schoolteachers should not take it upon themselves to inculcate young minds with any one version, no matter how sure they may be of their particular beliefs. If religious indoctrination is a sin, so too is anti-religious indoctrination. Objectivity is all.

In view of the current dispute, however, let us be specific. The theory of evolution through natural selection is pure science. It is based on scientific observation, and is argued from a scientific standpoint. It should therefore be taught in science lessons. However, Creationism, Intelligent Design and atheism are emphatically not based on science and therefore should not be part of the science curriculum. If the question of origin comes up in class, no teacher has the right to push forward one of these faiths to the exclusion of the others. The answer has to be all or nothing: theist, atheist, and agnostic. When the child has been given all the information, it can mull things over for itself and, in due course, come to its own conclusions.

What about religious education as such? Again, there has to be objectivity. A single faith establishment can only breed prejudice, ignorance and intolerance. Religious instruction should encompass at least the most widespread faiths, including those that are not designer-orientated, such as Buddhism (the quest for human enlightenment) and atheism (belief in chance). But above all, what should be emphasized are those aspects of faith and religion that have common ground and that will lead young people to a greater understanding of human worth. Most religious systems encompass some form of social code that condemns sin and vice, and advocates neighbourly love and considerateness. The Jews have their Ten Commandments (Exodus 20: 2-17), and Jesus, when asked which was the greatest of these, picked two: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart" etc., and "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself" (Matthew 22, 37-39). The Qu'ran is filled with similar precepts: "You shall not serve any save God; and to be good to parents, and the near kinsman, and to orphans, and to the needy; and speak good to men, and perform the prayer, and pay the alms" (*The Cow*, 75-80). The most famous Hindu of modern times, Mahatma Gandhi, preached and practised non-violence, self-sacrifice and reconciliation. For Buddhists, the path to Enlightenment entails "right views; right aspirations; right speech; right conduct; right livelihood; right effort; right mindfulness; and right contemplation" (from the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*). And let us conclude our section on religious education with a quotation from Richard Dawkins, himself quoting from an atheist

website : "Do not do to others what you would not want them to do to you. In all things strive to do no harm. Treat your fellow human beings, your fellow living things, and the world in general with love, honesty, faithfulness and respect. Do not overlook evil or shrink from administering justice, but always be ready to forgive wrongdoing freely admitted and honestly regretted. Live life with a sense of joy and wonder" (<http://www.ebonmusings.org/atheism/new10c.html>).

16. A Mad World

In conclusion, it might be enlightening to look at our present world through the eyes of a possible designer, to see the truly astonishing follies we have come up with.

Leaving aside the positive advances in technology, of which the designer itself would certainly be proud, the top priority for insanity has to go to the destruction of the environment. Our conscious intelligence has led us inexorably to sitting on the end of a branch a hundred feet up, and sawing through it. With the destruction of our own world, we shall inflict untold suffering on millions of people – assuming the human race survives at all – and yet the wise leaders of our planet do precious little to stop it.

Not far behind, in this collective madness, is the fact that while the rich prosper by destroying the planet, the poor are the main victims of disease, natural disasters, and wars. In the west, mountains of food are destroyed or discarded, and at precisely the same time, other members of the same species starve to death. This extraordinarily intelligent race, capable now of exploring outer space, is totally unable to devise a system to preserve its own habitat and to protect itself from itself.

We apparently need leaders, and so we set them up - or allow them to set themselves up - as gods to rule over us, even though they may have no ability to do so wisely. We in England put someone in charge of education, and from one day to the next hand them foreign affairs – as if overnight they have become experts in the field. But they must pretend to be experts, and we must pretend that they are. We have a collective suspension of disbelief much akin to the faith of religion and of atheism when it comes to those who govern us, although the faith is usually dispelled in a very short time.

In fairness to our politicians, there is no political system that can cope with the vast complexity of society as it has evolved, but that complexity is the result of our own

misguided attempts at “progress”. When humans were confined to small groups, the problems were also confined: humans did not need social welfare, imports and exports, police forces, educational institutions, transport networks, prisons, etc.

This chapter, though, set out to deal not so much with problems as with collective madness. What would the designer make of crowds of people gathering together and going into paroxysms of pleasure or despair when a ball goes into a net or a hole or a basket, while they remain indifferent to other humans dying all around them? A man who can kick a ball into a goal or sing a catchy song will be valued perhaps a hundred times more than a man trying to heal or save the sick. A sunflower will cost you perhaps 20p, but a painting of a sunflower will cost you more than you will earn in a lifetime. A hero may die in poverty, but the actor who portrays him will be paid millions for doing so. It seems that reality is not what we want. The artificial world of made-up values is what we cherish. Perhaps that, in the last analysis, is why religious believers and atheists make their leaps in the dark. They cannot bear reality.

Let me, however, conclude with our starting-point of agnosticism, and offer you two alternative forms of madness: 1) countless numbers of people, sums of money, buildings, institutions, wars, miseries, joys, works of art have been devoted to or have sprung from human worship of something that never existed; 2) the designer’s creations are just beginning to understand, after centuries of conscious endeavour, how life functions, but they are still unable to design an organism like themselves that can spring from inanimate matter into living existence, reproduce itself, adapt to a changing environment, and pass on its adaptations to the organisms it engenders; they believe, however, that if they ever can consciously and deliberately design such an organism, it will prove that they themselves were not designed.

Take your pick.

