THE OPTIMISM DELUSION

David Benatar

In the first of our three pieces responding to Richard Dawkins's The God Delusion, *David Benatar suggests that Dawkins is preaching 'the gospel of secular optimism'.*

Richard Dawkins seems to take a special pleasure in puncturing what he calls 'the God delusion', the delusion that there is a God. That basic idea and even many of the details are not new. Atheism has had many earlier proponents. What Professor Dawkins brings to these matters is his own accessible and flamboyant style, and the Dawkins branding.

In debunking theism in more than one of his books, Professor Dawkins reveals his own delusion – namely, a bad case of optimism. Optimism is the delusional belief that things are (or were, or will be) better than they really are (or were, or will be). Optimism can take various forms, but the relevant one here is optimism about humanity and the human condition. It is a delusion much more prevalent than theism. It blinds most people – both theists and atheists. Professor Dawkins is no exception.

For example, noting how amazingly small the chance was that any one of us would come into existence, he marvels at how lucky each one of us is to have been born. He suggests that wasting even a second of our lives is a 'callous insult to those unborn trillions who will never be offered life in the first place'. Elsewhere he says that we are lucky that we are going to die because most 'people are never going to die because they are never going to be born'. These 'unborn ghosts' 'outnumber the sand grains of Arabia'.

Although most people share his view that they have been bestowed a great good by being brought into existence, it is a thoroughly confused idea. Coming into existence can only be a good fortune if the alternative would have been worse. Yet the alternative is not bad at all – indeed it is much better

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than existing. Although one would not have experienced the joys of life had one never come into existence, one would not then have been *deprived* of those goods – quite simply because one would not have existed. In other words, there would have been nobody who would have been deprived. In contrast, by coming into existence we suffer the many harms for which existence is the precondition.

Optimists tend to forget just how much pain and suffering there is in the world. Professor Dawkins, for example, says that we 'live on a planet that is all but perfect for our kind of life', noting that it is neither too warm nor too cold, and that it contains both water and food. He is correct, of course, that our planet has the minimum conditions necessary to sustain life (at least for the moment). However, it is far from 'all but perfect'. Most people, most of the time, are too hot or too cold – not too hot or too cold in order to live, but rather too hot or too cold for comfort. Natural disasters and infectious diseases kill millions. The planet is not to blame for all our ills, however. Our own bodies fail us, causing vast amounts of suffering. There are millions of victims of human evil. Even the luckier inhabitants of our planet suffer much discomfort, pain, anxiety, disappointment, fear, grief, death and much else. All of these harms could have been avoided if the people suffering them had never been brought into existence. The belief that people are benefited by being brought into existence is, then, an extremely harmful delusion, for it only encourages the creation of further generations of suffering people.

The deeply deluded will deny that life is even nearly as bad as I have suggested. Such protestations are unreliable. There are well-established features of human psychology that lead most people to underestimate how bad the quality of their lives is. Chief among these psychological features is 'pollyannaism', an inclination most people have towards optimism. Research has shown, for example, that people selectively recall the good more often than the bad, overestimate how well things will go, and tend to think that the quality of their life is above average.

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It is curious that Professor Dawkins seems so unaware of these optimistic biases, given their obvious evolutionary explanation. Those with the right dose of delusion are more likely to produce offspring, whereas those who see the human condition for what it is, are unlikely to want to reproduce it. Optimistic delusions, within a normal human range, are thus adaptive. The delusions that help people cope with the human predicament are often theistic, but they are not always so. Professor Dawkins is quick to debunk the theistic consolations and to begrudge those who seek comfort in them. Yet he does not cast the same critical light on his own delusions and consolations.

He speaks rapturously about the 'feeling of awed wonder that science can give us', saying that it 'is one of the highest experiences of which the human psyche is capable'. Yet this secular equivalent of religious awe is no guarantor of life's meaningfulness. It is no proof that a Godless world is a meaningful one. Just because the universe and human life lack the meaning that theists often say a God would bestow on them, does not mean that the void has to be filled by some secular alternative. It might simply be the case that our lives are pointless. To ward off this conclusion, Professor Dawkins makes the common suggestion that one's life is 'as meaningful, as full and as wonderful' as one chooses to make it. But that assumes that subjective meaning is the only meaning our lives require. However, if that were the case, then a religious life could have immense meaning even when it is founded on delusions – because such lives too are 'as meaningful, as full and as wonderful' as the people living them choose to make them. It is one kind of delusion to think that one's life has meaning because it fits in with God's plan when, in fact, there is no God. It is another kind of delusion to think that one's life has meaning because it fits in with one's own plan when, in fact, one is mistaken that one's own plan can endow (the right kind of) meaning.

These are complex matters and they obviously cannot be explored in full here. It is curious, though, that Professor Dawkins

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preaches his gospel of secular optimism without feeling the need to engage seriously with philosophical pessimism – the ultimate delusion buster.

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