

DAWKINS ON LANGUAGE: A DELUSIONAL BOOK-REVIEW

EDITOR'S NOTE

Sparing no expense to promote the new multiverse feminist fantasy film "The Golden Notepad", Gnu-Lion Cinema has opened a small window to one alternate universe, from which they have extracted a single intellectual artefact, a book review. The book upon which this review is based was, sadly, too distended to pass through the wormhole, but until the technology and funding are developed to expand the opening, the review offers the best glimpse available into an alternative civilisation that surpasses our own substantially. It should be noted that the Professor Richard Dawkins who is the author of the book under review is in all respects (but particularly those related to tort law) a different and far more dubious character than the one who resides (with his solicitors) in the Oxford of our universe.

While recently derived theorems on the conservation of ego prove that it is effectively impossible to have a universe with no Dawkins (absent fundamental disruptions in the structure of space, time, and celebrity) there is some evidence that we will find, once the technology permits exploration further afield from our own world, alternative universes in which the Dawkins of our world has resolved itself into multiple, individually coherent beings, locked into a perpetual self-regarding smooch.

BOOK REVIEW: *The Language Delusion*, BY RICHARD DAWKINS* [SEE ABOVE]

Once you've slain the deity, what do you do for an encore? Richard Dawkins, intellectual provocateur and self-professed light unto the gentiles and Jews alike, has now provided his answer. To the embattled band of freethinkers who feared that our leader might buckle under the slings and arrows of outrageous popular opinion, I come to testify: Exult! Rejoice! The master has surpassed his masterpiece.

Most reasonable people will agree that the public discourse on ethics and the meaning of life, on both sides of the Atlantic, has been dominated by anti-intellectuals who fail to understand a single thing about science. Hard-pressed freethinkers at last have their champion, one who has demonstrated in book after book, article after article, that he does know one single thing about science. After this work, we will not speak the same way about life, love, community, politics, religion, or genius ever again. In fact, we will not speak of anything at all, now that Dawkins' "The Language Delusion" has exposed the clay feet of the logorrheic orthodoxy that for millennia has repressed meaningful, dawkinsian ratiocination. Where William S. Burroughs merely diagnosed that "language is a virus from outer space", Dr Dawkins is the first to offer a cure.

First, though, we cannot begin to demolish language without pausing to get our terms straight. Dawkins rejects the epithet "illogical" that is often assigned to those who would reject the pre-eminence of language, arguing that it should rightly be reserved to the more extreme wing, who deny the very existence of language, a view with which Dawkins does not entirely agree. At the same time, ever seeking the middle path, he declines to call himself an "ineffable" (the term favoured by his more ardent devotees) or to condemn his adversaries as "babblers" and "yaks", preferring the more neutral terms "tacits" for his party, opposed to "the language cabal".

While never less than brilliant, Dawkins' writing soars when the master turns his pen to a topic about which he is knowledgeable. Back when he was a scientist, Dawkins dismantled the orthodoxy on animal communication, untangling the skein of fitness, status, semiotics, and dishonest signalling. While he has since moved on to other problems, self-puffery has remained at the centre of his career. (The rutting mule deer is a favoured image, bellowing and roaring to attract attention.) Speech is in its essence mere chimpanzee hooting, descendant of bacteria squirting food signals and spare DNA into the surrounding medium. As such, he explains, it can attract or repel a mate, signal strength or weakness, even organise communal action; but only a fool (and here he does name names) would believe that mere jitters of air or scratches on paper could be vehicles for complex truth. "I and mine do not convince by arguments, similes, rhymes," he quotes Walt Whitman. "We convince by our presence." Language can serve practical needs, like book contracts and seducing a sexual partner, but complex thought and truth must be sought elsewhere. It is a lesson that his earlier books did not convey as clearly as they might have, one presumes because of meddling editors, but it has been very much on display in his more recent works, and particularly in his essays and forays into journalism.

The book is a tightly structured brief against even the most apparently innocuous dalliance with verbiage. Following on Chapter 1 ("Names can never hurt me?"), which outlines how language has been misused to criticise Richard Dawkins (and, in retort, makes this the first philosophical treatise to make substantive use of the phrase "nur nurny nur nur"), Chapter 2 ("The Route of all Evil") extends the tale to centuries and millennia of evil that can justly be blamed on language. The most heinous dictators have not only been ardent practitioners of language, they have used language centrally in pursuit of their crimes. One need only mention Adolf Hitler and Ronald Reagan, and he does. There are those who at this point would counter with the famously taciturn Joseph Stalin, but Dawkins has an ingenious riposte ready, to the effect that Stalin's silence was actually a kind of speech, and sometimes he did speak. The argument is sealed by Dawkins quoting himself adapting the famous bon mot of historian Stephen Henry Roberts, to say that "We are all nonspeakers of all languages but the one of which we happen to be devotees. I would just go one language further than the monolingualists."

Following this defensive move, it is in chapter 3 ("Forlorn Order") that Dawkins raids the citadel of the enemy: The unfounded but mostly unchallenged belief that language is somehow fundamental for social order. There are many who agree with the antilogian perspective theoretically, but then quail before a supposed societal breakdown. Order, as Dawkins points out, is conventionally associated with "law", a manmade ritual copied from the more serious concept of "natural law". "Artificial law" (as Dawkins prefers to call it) is an absurdity, as though there needed to be a traffic officer policing the speed of light, or a trilobite breeder enforcing natural selection. These artificial laws exist only as a backstop for the language mafia: We need laws for social order, and laws must be written in a language. Hence we need language. "Which language, anyway?" Dawkins archly queries. "The one we happen to have been brought up with?" He drives the point home with the story of a man called RD (possibly a composite character) who made a pronouncement before a registrar, and was thereafter considered "married" to a certain woman. Despite the fact that he then wanted to be living with another woman (and then another after that), he was obliged to devote considerable time and money to the first woman. "This story," he writes, "is particularly revealing of the languagist mind, and the evils that arise specifically *because* of language. First is the remarkable perception by the languagist mind that a sprinkle of ink and a brief verbal incantation can totally change a person's life, taking precedence over his own desires."

In Chapter 4 (“The Meaning Hypothesis”) Dawkins raises the polemic to a new level. Why, he asks, are the rituals of language privileged above all others? There is no protection for hooting, screeching, or in fact any other kind of noisemaking in the public realm. And yet, freedom of speech is generally the subject of special protections, even being enshrined in the first amendment of the U.S. Bill of Rights. A worthy and (to my knowledge original) point, but then comes the dawkinsian turn of the screw: Despite this supposedly even-handed protection of all languages, there is in practice no protection for those who dispense with language altogether. The example of the United States is here particularly instructive, where it is almost impossible to imagine that a candidate who openly disavowed all language could be elected president. It is almost as though it hardly matters which language a person speaks — though non-English speakers are at a serious disadvantage, and speakers of newly minted languages like Esperanto, Klingon and Sindarin struggle to be taken seriously — but, above all, it has to be some language. How absurd! If I call this four-legged beast a “dog”, surely I cannot be indifferent to Mr Duval calling it a “chien”. At least one of us must be wrong. (Both are, Dawkins would say.) Across the pond there is a veritable cottage industry of historians attempting to prove that their Founding Fathers themselves were babblers *avant la lettre*, ignoring the fact that Thomas Jefferson once wrote in a missive to George Washington “While I remain I shall pursue **in silence** the path of right,” and that Benjamin Franklin, the pre-eminent scientist of that generation, sometimes published under the name Silence Dogood.

What will we do without language? How will we communicate? Here Dawkins stands ready to silence the critics who accuse him of nombrilism or worse, because he has a fully worked-out and field-tested plan, adapted from researches, already long-established, of one of the world’s leading scientific societies, the Academy of Lagado. “The first project was, to shorten discourse, by cutting polysyllables into one, and leaving out verbs and participles, because, in reality, all things imaginable are but nouns.” This Dawkins finds commendable, but he voices the suspicion that a more efficient language would only serve as an excuse to persist in habits that should be disposed of forthrightly. It is no surprise, then, that he approves the proposed second stage, whereby the nouns too will be eliminated: “Since words are only names for things,” the Lagado savants have reasoned, “it would be more convenient for all men to carry about them such things as were necessary to express a particular business they are to discourse on.” This, they have demonstrated, would be both salutary — their biomedical experts having established that “every word we speak is, in some degree, a diminution of our lungs by corrosion, and, consequently, contributes to the shortening of our lives” — and universally comprehensible “in all civilised nations, whose goods and utensils are generally of the same kind, or nearly resembling, so that their uses might easily be comprehended.”

A lesser genius would rest with having named the problem plaguing all mankind, explained its ramifications, and provided a solution, but the climax of the book is still to come, in chapter 5 (“Why Everyone Should Shut Up”), where Dawkins describes his “Ultimate Airbus super-duper syzygy”. He has laid the groundwork for this argument in previous chapters, not just by telling us how brilliant the idea is, but also by telling us how brilliant Daniel Dennett is, who says the idea is brilliant, and by telling us how he thought it up all by himself while flying to address the Worldwide and American Congress of Semioticians (WACS). While his syllogism puts all previous philosophy in the shade, he wisely avoids boring the readers with technical details of what exactly the argument is. Instead, he explains that his syllogism either proves that all language is meaningless, or it fails, and so itself becomes a demonstration of the failure of language, and moves on to listing more famous people who think he is very smart, including the warden of New College, Oxford (who

notably scoffed in the senior common room, “Linguistics? Is that a science or a kind of pasta?”) and Douglas Adams, until his death a world-renowned expert on improbability theory and orby planning.

With these and other citations, Dawkins makes abundantly clear that he does not consider himself to be the only reasonable, rational or intelligent person in the English-speaking world. There are several, at least, and not only those who have publicly proclaimed their admiration for Dawkins, and the various wits and wags like Adams who serve as Dawkins’ sense of humour by proxy, proving that he knows people who know how to tell a joke. Ever fair-minded and generous, Dawkins does not even dismiss all of those who publicly disagree with him as fools and incompetents. A few of them, he says, are even brilliant. It is this concession which makes his quest so poignant, to explain why these clever and thoughtful and even brilliant people persist in public positions that they could not possibly believe. Malice, of course, but the canker bores deeper than that. It is a sorry picture that he uncovers after his fabled Airbus touches down for the WACS. Some of the participants, he discovered, were being paid hard currency for their work, a depressingly common form of intellectual corruption that Dawkins himself has eschewed. Others simply lack Dawkins’ manly courage. At this particular meeting, Dawkins turned the tables on the so-called experts, dumbfounding them with the Ultimate Airbus. He then attacked the central hypocrisy of the language cabal, the supposed “non-overlapping magisteria” of sound and meaning. Whatever else it may be, the “meaning hypothesis” is a physical hypothesis about the real world. If words have meanings, it is no good to evade a fight with the linguofascists by pretending that meanings are a different kind of stuff, a psychological essence or some other mumbo jumbo. “Where are the meanings of words? Outer Mongolia? The Empyrean Realm?” Dawkins asks. “What are they made of? They have to be somewhere, and they have to be made of something.” The embarrassed silence in the hall is delicious to contemplate.

In a particularly impressive scene, Dawkins describes how he rose to his feet at a talk by an eminent German linguophile. “Where are the meanings?” Dawkins asked. “Where are the meanings?” he persisted, waving off the evasive teutonic technicalities. The description of the spluttering Professor Scheisskopf trying to form a coherent retort, struggling to change the topic back to New Guinean phonology, then slinking off in impotent rage, is priceless, classic Dawkins, as is his account of the lynch-mob atmosphere that he had to brave in the lecture theatre.

The book concludes with a heartfelt plea in chapter 6 (“Child Abuse, and the Escape From Language”) to end the linguistic indoctrination of children. “Most people are not even aware that the words they use for things are not the things themselves. They think that a rose most surely is a rose, despite the certainty that had they been born to parents in another country they would have been equally certain that a rose was *rosa* or *meril*.” A child comes into the world capable of producing and recognising all possible human sounds, but narrow-minded parents mould the defenceless thing into a little English-speaker or a little German-speaker. He tells a charming anecdote of a proud aunt of newborn twins who is asked their names, and replies “They’re calling the doctor Sheldon and the lawyer Irving.” In the same way, we should scoff, or cringe, to hear someone speak of a “French baby” or a “Chinese baby”. Only when they reach adulthood are humans competent to join a language community. By that point, he is confident, the mind kept innocent of linguistic prejudice will choose to remain free.

It is this unshakeable conviction, Dawkins’ philanthropy beyond ordinary measure, that produces another of the moving scenes of the book. On book tour in Belgium, he was asked his opinion of the paedophile who had recently been convicted of kidnapping, raping, and murdering

teenage girls. “Being tortured, raped and killed is surely a grave misfortune,” Dawkins replied (an “off the cuff” reply, he avers), “but not as grave as the misfortune of being raised francophone in the first place.” Dawkins’ remarks have been distorted and sensationalised in the press, by those motivated to gin up an international scandal. An unprejudiced observer reading the account in this book, though, could hardly fail to recognise that the context makes plain that he considers being raised Flemish an equal misfortune.

Would it be too much to expect a fair hearing for the world-view that dare not speak its name – indeed, that dare not, that by definition almost cannot even, speak any name? Secure in his faith in reason, in the truth of his cause, and in the example of Darwin who suffered untold calumny before he rolled away the massive stony prejudice beneath which his critics had hoped to bury him, to emerge triumphant, Dawkins predicts a future where language sceptics will attain the rewards that they have been so long denied. For now, we can be grateful that the meandering path of evolution, despite its lamentable tendency to mire its products in irrationality, has managed to produce this one shining example of a creature conceived free of any taint of unreason. If the message of Dawkins’ book is taken to heart we can hope that his will be the last word on the topic – and, indeed, on any topic.

David Steinsaltz