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## Book review

Richard Dawkins

# Science in the Soul: Selected Writings of a Passionate Rationalist

Reviewed by Geoff Gregory

As the century drew to a close, Richard Dawkins, the only scientist among invited lecturers to a BBC feature on 'What will the 20<sup>th</sup> century leave to its heirs?', bewailed the 'hijacking by pseudoscience and bad science fiction [that] is a threat to our legitimate sense of wonder' as are the 'wacky 'personalities' ... performing funky tricks to show that science is fun, fun, fun'. He also considered that 'the twentieth century ended with approximately the same level of supernatural credulity as the nineteenth, and rather more outright hostility to science'. This talk is one of forty-one of his essays, speeches, and articles produced over the last three decades and brought together in this anthology.

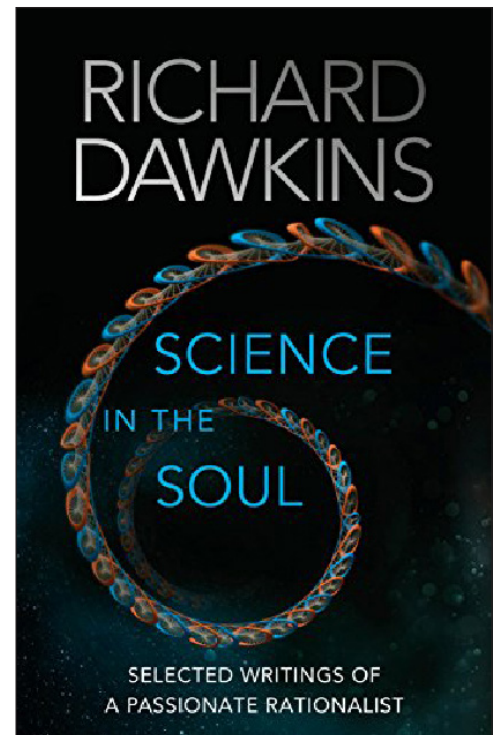
It does not, however, consist of a set of gloomy prognostications. Following the format of his earlier anthology, *A Devil's Chaplain* (2003), it could easily have borne the same subtitle: '*Reflections on hope, lies, science, and love*', as it encompasses many of the same themes: expressions of his continuing sense of wonder at the natural world and his belief in the positive role of the scientific way of thinking in human affairs; and messages of hope for both a spirituality untainted by the 'infantile babblings of religion' and the further evolution of human values to outlaw prejudice, abuse, and violence towards each other and our animal relatives. He scotches systems of mind control by 'superdumb' religious beliefs, the 'tyranny of the texts', the hypocrisy of their 'cherry-picking' exponents, and the notion of a supernatural, disembodied soul – a 'spook' that survives death of the brain. However, he looks towards science solving the mystery of consciousness and the launching to 'undreamed-of heights' of the soul as he interprets it – the seat of intellectual power, sensitivity, and emotions.

Since *A Devil's Chaplain*, Dr Dawkins has published those beautifully descriptive books on evolution, full of intriguing examples and insightful analogies, *The Ancestor's Tale* (2004, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn with Tan Wong 2016) and *The Greatest Show on Earth* (2009), and his spirited, polemical book on religion, *The God Delusion* (2006, 10<sup>th</sup> anniv. edn 2016).

In between, he has written prolifically in support of atheism and reason and rationality in human affairs. In *Science in the Soul*, editor Gillian Somerscales has undertaken the enormous task of reading and selecting representative samples from this *embarras de richesse* of shorter pieces. She precedes each of the book's eight sections with an erudite and sensitive introduction, and Dr Dawkins, unwilling to change what he originally wrote, has brought the pieces up-to-date with footnotes and afterwords.

The first section, on values, covers not only the fundamental scientific value of objective truth and the need to reserve judgement in the absence of evidence, but also the responsibility to society to warn of the possible unfortunate consequences of truth-seeking. It also encompasses the evils of eugenics, racism, and speciesism. Discussing the origin of good values in the face of the teachings of an evil Jehovah he speculates about the future evolution of the 'shifting moral zeitgeist' which has successively illegalised the slave trade, bear baiting, burning at the stake, genocide, and wholesale bombing of cities, and hopes it will include morally abhorrent practices associated with keeping livestock.

The next section constitutes a primer on evolution by natural selection, and includes reasons for the inadequacy or falsehood of alternative proposals. In this and a later section entitled 'The sacred truth of nature', Dawkins is arguably at his best, with



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Audio, narrated by Richard Dawkins and Lalla Ward, duration 14 hours 41 minutes downloadable at:

<https://www.audiobooks.com/audiobook/9780525495703?ref=cj>

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fascinating tales of the weird and the wonderful in the world. Incidentally, he likens giving support to basic science for its spin-offs, for example space research for the development of non-stick frying pans, to supporting music for the exercise it provides for the right arm of a violinist!

Elsewhere he sounds off about some of the artificial constructs often applied to educational attainment, social situation, political beliefs, the legal system, bureaucratic rulings, and, of course, religious designation. He has a knack of coining such satisfying phrases as 'dimwitted dundridges', 'Brexit-blighted Blighty', 'politicians who flaunt their ignorance as a vote-winning virtue'.

As might be expected, a large part of the book is about religion and atheism. He is forthright in his criticisms of the 'time-consuming, wealth-consuming, hostility-provoking, fecundity-forfeiting rituals of religion', and the evil nature of the God of the Abrahamic texts. He tries reason, iconoclasm, and even satire (e.g. an article about the delusional drug 'Gerin oil' – get it? – responsible for all manner of wars and atrocities). It might surprise religious devotees that, in a piece entitled 'Atheists for Jesus', he writes in praise of the 'superniceness' of Jesus and his 'genuinely original and radical ethics', speculating that human superniceness, which seems a 'perversion of Darwinism', might be spread like an epidemic through *memes* (a term, now widely used on the internet, that was coined by Dawkins in *The Selfish Gene*). His anger comes over in an article about the terrible tsunami in Asia in 2004, for which religious explanations have ranged from 'loopy' (payback for original sin) to vicious (sent to try our faith). Science knows how this happened and can give warning about such events. He writes: 'If a small fraction of the tax breaks handed out to churches, mosques, and synagogues had been diverted to early warning systems, tens of thousands, now dead, could have been moved to safety'.

Finally, there are tributes to Dawkins' father and an uncle, to his Oxford mentor, Niko Tinbergen, to friend and writer, Douglas Adams (as a foreword to his book *Last Chance to See*), and to friend and 'intrepid warrior for truth', Christopher Hitchens, to whom the current volume is dedicated.

Dr Dawkins remarks that it is high time that the Nobel Prize for Literature was awarded to a scientist, such as Carl Sagan, Loren Eiseley, and others. Dawkins himself, who writes with such elegance and incisiveness for a broad audience, should perhaps be a candidate.