

Darwin's Rottweiler

Sir Richard Dawkins: Evolution's fiercest champion, far too fierce

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It was a very Richard Dawkins moment. About 10 minutes into an interview, as he sat in the airy living room of his Oxford home, casually attired in a T-shirt with a dinosaur emblazoned on its front and in midtalk about *The Ancestor's Tale*, his book about evolution that some regard as his magnum opus, Dawkins had suddenly interrupted the conversation, risen to his feet, and stalked off to look up a very British word he had just used.

"I just wouldn't have felt comfortable saying, 'I am a duckbilled platypus, and this is how I find my shrimps,' " he had said. "I think it would have been twee."

Dawkins begins one chapter of the book with a witty and erudite introduction to the platypus, an animal renowned for the ducklike bill grafted onto its mammalian body. "It seemed so weird when first discovered," Dawkins writes, "that a specimen sent to a museum was thought to be a hoax: bits of mammal and bits of bird stitched together. Others have wondered whether God was having a bad day when he created the platypus. Finding some spare parts left over on the workshop floor, he decided to unite rather than waste them."

But then Dawkins delivers the scientific punch line: a lucid explanation of the platypus's remarkable ability, embedded in its goofy Donald Duck appendage, to detect the faintest electrical signals generated by muscular twitches of shrimp and other prey buried in the mud. Some 40,000 exquisitely fine-tuned sensors arrayed in that bill manage to electrolocate food beyond the range of sight, sound, or touch; indeed, the platypus closes its eyes, ears, and nostrils while foraging. "See no prey, hear no prey, smell no prey: yet it finds prey with great efficiency," Dawkins wrote with appreciative relish, "catching half its own weight in a day."

Even though *The Ancestor's Tale* is based loosely on the fanciful life stories shared by a group of pilgrims in Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, Dawkins found himself unable to adopt the voice of a platypus or any other animal and write in the first person. He was telling me he thought it would be very "twee" to do so.

Now it turns out that was also the word Dawkins had used to make the same point in the book. So I mentioned in passing that American readers might stumble over "twee," finding it an elusive foreign colloquialism. A brief—and rare—look of doubt crossed his face.

"Oh," Dawkins said, sounding startled. "I guess it is. I hadn't realized that. It sort of means . . . self-consciously attempting to be charming." He paused, then added with a short laugh, "And failing."

Clearly irritated—but in an intellectual, not emotional, sort of way—by this news, he got up from his chair and walked to the bookshelf in the living room to fetch—what else?—the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*. "I



FIERCE CRUSADER

A deference to public sensitivities about religion led Charles Darwin to amend the second edition of *On the Origin of Species* to attribute the grandeur of life to "the Creator" in the book's final sentence. Darwin's intellectual heir, Richard Dawkins (above), is not so polite. "Faith," he has written, "is blind trust in the absence of evidence, even in the teeth of evidence."

think I'll look that up.”

One reason Dawkins has become perhaps the best-known popularizer of science in the English language is his precision—his precise understanding of biology (especially evolution), the precise way in which he translates that knowledge into the public idiom, and the precise manner in which he builds an argument, organizes an essay, or demolishes the wobbly logic of a rival in debate. So he wanted to dispense with this twee business right away. After a few moments of silent riffling, he announced the definition. “Sweet, dainty, chic,” he read. “Now chiefly derogatory: affected and dainty or quaint.”

There is nothing affected or dainty or quaint about the way Dawkins communicates science. He has a naturalist's love of animal behavior, a theorist's love of bold thought, a writer's love of the well-turned phrase. All those things make him a pleasure to read. But Dawkins is no mere retailer of cute animal tales. Whether discussing the territorial behavior of stickleback fish in *The Selfish Gene* or the behavior of elephant birds in *The Ancestor's Tale*, he sands and shapes each anecdote with the loving care of a medieval stonemason working on a cathedral. In Dawkins's universe, this craftsmanship serves to embellish the edifice of evolution—enhancing not only its beauty but its solidity as a soaring monument to human reason.

That monument has come under fierce attack these days—from postmodernists (to whom truth is subjective and cultural), from creationists (to whom truth is biblical), and from religion in general (where faith is often seen to compete with reason as the fount of ultimate answers). As a result, Dawkins has found himself increasingly thrust into a more active role than writer: He has waded into this battle as a self-styled paladin of scientific rationality. An unabashed atheist and an avidly polemical public intellectual, he has employed a scorched-earth vocabulary to take on religion, the evangelical right, Muslim fundamentalism, parochial education, and the faith-based political philosophy of George W. Bush.

All these battles have revealed a different side of Dawkins. As when he went to look up the word in the dictionary, he has a need not only to be precise but to be right—ruthlessly right. Dawkins has become “Darwin's rottweiler”—as Alister McGrath, an Oxford theologian, reminded readers of his recent book, *Dawkins' God: Genes, Memes, and the Meaning of Life*—so intent on prevailing in intellectual combat that he alienates others and undermines the dazzling quality of his argumentative skills. How did this mild-mannered son of an Oxfordshire farmer become such a ferocious public intellectual? That is a tale, too, involving another sort of evolution.

In person Dawkins, unfailingly gracious, is a constrained version of the witty, expansive, passionate, and intellectually provocative persona that animates the pages of his books. On the day we spoke in Oxford, he seemed guarded and somewhat reticent. At age 64, he looks fit but older than his book-jacket photos suggest, his hair short and silvered with a boyish flip in front, his gold wire-rimmed glasses lending a bit more grise to his longtime eminence.

Although certainly a scientist of the first order, Dawkins does not “do science” in any conventional sense. He occasionally writes papers but has no lab, no postdocs, no ongoing experiments. He hardly even gives any lectures at Oxford University, where he is the Charles Simonyi Professor of the Public Understanding of Science. Mostly he stays at home to do what he does best—think about, and write about, evolution.

The “laboratory” for all this cogitation is a three-story stone cottage on a quiet side street in Oxford, with a little wavelet of lavender lapping against the facade. Dawkins shares the home with his wife, Lalla Ward, a British actress beloved by a sizable public who grew up watching her in the BBC's science-fiction show *Doctor Who*. The home has the usual appurtenances of the writerly life, with crammed bookshelves and curios of achievement, but also the perquisites that a reliable perch on the best-seller lists can confer, such as the Panasonic wide-screen television, the office assistant on call in a nearby room, even the six-inch-thick slab of 150-million-year-old Jurassic limestone in the garden, an impression of a dinosaur footprint on its underside, that occasionally serves as a writing desk. Perhaps the most fitting inhabitants of the living room, however, are the wooden horses, hares, and bears salvaged from vintage carousels by Ward's mother. However inanimate this bestiary, it seems a companionable backdrop for a writer whose acute explications of evolutionary theory are often animated by wonderful evocations of animal behavior.

“I want very much to communicate science to as wide an audience as possible,” Dawkins says, “but not at a cost of dumbing down, and not at a cost in getting things right. If I can lure”—he draws the word out in a honeyed way, as if it rhymed with fewer—“readers to raise their game and tackle something a bit harder than they would normally do, if I can do that in an appealing way, without dumbing down, without making it all jokey and larky

and fun, but retain the integrity and lure them into it by some kind of literary merit—that would be my ideal.” Judging from the reaction of critics and book buyers, he has made good on that goal many times over.

Dawkins insists his parents were better naturalists than he. Born in Nairobi, Kenya, in 1941, he spent most of his first eight years in Nyasaland (now Malawi), where his father, who studied botany at Oxford, served in the British colonial service as an agricultural officer. “He then, out of the blue, was left a farm in the will of an extremely distant cousin,” Dawkins recalls. “I don’t think he was even aware of this cousin’s existence.” Nonetheless, the elder Dawkins returned to England and actively ran the farm, located 20 miles northwest of Oxford.

Despite his early exposure to animals and plants, Dawkins does not attribute his interest in zoology to this agrarian interlude. “I was brought up in a family which valued natural history,” he says. “Both my parents knew the names of all the British wildflowers, so as we went walking the country, I was constantly being exposed to a natural history sort of knowledge.” As a teenager, he attended the British boys’ school Oundle, which was renowned for sports. It is hard to picture Dawkins, slight of build and ferociously verbal, mixing easily among the jocks. He impressed David Barker, an older student who lived in the same house at Oundle and went on to become a biomedical researcher, as an “obviously clever” boy in occasional need of kindness. “The big heroes were sportsmen,” Barker says, “and the lesser heroes were those who were clever in class. The potential for oppression is greater when boys are living together 24 hours a day.”

Dawkins and Barker formed part of the natural history club at Oundle, but, as Dawkins puts it, “I think my own interest in biology really took off at Oxford.” In 1959 he arrived as an undergraduate and studied zoology. After graduating, he taught at the University of California at Berkeley from 1967 to 1969 as an assistant professor, and then returned to Oxford to do lab-based graduate research with Nikolaas Tinbergen, the Dutch ethologist who shared a Nobel Prize in 1973 for pioneering studies of animal behavior. During this period, Dawkins discovered the animating idea of his career—an idea that took some dense evolutionary thought inspired by Tinbergen to a new level and packaged it with an artful turn of phrase.

“What I specifically got from Tinbergen would be my phrase ‘survival machine,’” Dawkins says. That was another way of saying that behavior was one of the principal ways of helping an animal survive, and if survival was the name of the game in evolution, then the biological machinery that contributed to successful survival and reproductive behaviors is the key factor of evolution, even more important than individuals.

At their most fundamental level, those factors, Dawkins reasoned, were genes. “So the idea,” he says, “[was] that when you study animal behavior, you’re looking at the product of a kind of piece of clockwork machinery which was put there because of natural selection on generations of ancestors. What definitely *didn’t* come from Tinbergen is any emphasis on the gene as the unit of selection. He would always have thought in terms of individual survival, whereas I then tended to emphasize that that was only a means to the end of gene survival.” That little qualifying addendum reflects another form of Dawkins’s precision: He husbands the priority of his ideas as fiercely as if they were offspring and has been known to use footnotes in his books to clobber detractors and reassert the primacy of his reasoning.

When he was still an experimentalist in the early 1970s, he began to explore mathematical models of animal behavior in tests that focused on the way animals make choices. Baby chicks in a box could peck one of two keys with different pictures on them, and an electrical apparatus tallied the number of pecks. The electrical part of this anecdote is key, because it inadvertently led Dawkins to abandon the bench and pick up the pen.

“There was a terrible episode of industrial unrest,” Dawkins remembers, “and Britain went onto what was called the ‘three-day week,’ and electricity was rationed. I was doing lab experiments which required electricity. So I therefore decided to do what I sort of vaguely had thought about for a while, which was to write a book for laypeople. I wrote a couple of chapters, I think, before the electric power came on again. Those effectively were the first two chapters of *The Selfish Gene*.”

Published in 1976, *The Selfish Gene* catapulted Dawkins into the first rank of scientific literati. Gracefully describing the behavior of fish and butterflies and humpback whales, spinning out extended metaphors of great explanatory power, and conveying it all in a voice that was both familiar yet rigorous, Dawkins not only achieved a superb, lay-friendly exposition of Darwinian evolution but pushed the science into novel conceptual territory. He argued that the fundamental unit upon which natural selection acted was not the individual but rather the gene itself, which was intrinsically selfish because it engaged in a battle against other genes for survival.

Dawkins pushed this provocative idea further with a cultural twist on genes: the *meme*, which he defines as “words, ideas, faiths, mannerisms, and fashions” that can be reproduced, transmitted, and disseminated, almost in

epidemic fashion, across cultures and between generations. The idea of the meme has taken on so much of a life of its own in the past three decades that few people remember that, in Dawkins's original formulation, it came wrapped in black paper. He intended memes to have mostly a negative connotation, and a prime example he gave of a meme was religion.

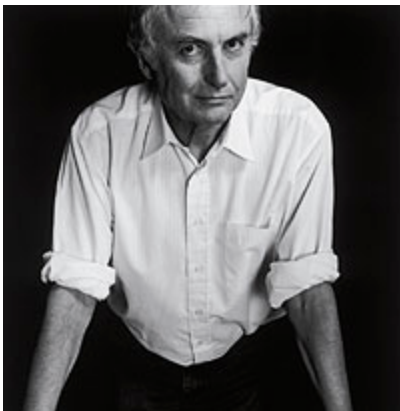
Since the publication of *The Selfish Gene*, Dawkins has been widely recognized as the foremost modern explicator of Darwinian evolution. "He writes and thinks more clearly about evolutionary theory than anybody else on the planet," says Ken Miller, a professor of cell biology at Brown University. In best sellers like *The Blind Watchmaker* and *Climbing Mount Improbable*, Dawkins has taken on creationism and ripped the notion of "intelligent design." In *Unweaving the Rainbow*, he championed a secular version of natural wonder. It is impossible to pick up any of his eight books without finding a piquant opinion or lovely turn of phrase on almost every page. But perhaps his greatest contribution—greater even than his explanations of Darwinism—is his steadfast explanation-cum-celebration of the scientific method as civilization's most powerful tool for arriving at truth. "What matters is not the facts," he wrote in *The Devil's Chaplain*, a recent collection of essays, "but how you discover and think about them."

His popularity is such that Sir Patrick Bateson, a leading ethologist at Cambridge University, says Dawkins has been single-handedly responsible for inspiring a new generation of scientists to enter biology in the United Kingdom, and probably elsewhere. "I think Richard's writings have unquestionably stimulated enormous numbers of people to get interested in biology," he said. "He's an extraordinarily effective popularizer of science, a very effective coiner of metaphors."

But not twee. He may not have been a sports hero at Oundle, but he certainly learned something about combat, because when he wades into a public debate these days, his polemical style tends to be, in Tennyson's immortal phrase, "red in tooth and claw."

Through his books and his many newspaper and magazine commentaries, Dawkins has leveraged his popularity and critical acclaim onto an entirely new plane of celebrity as a public intellectual. Unlike in the United States, there is—and always has been—a place of honor in the United Kingdom for scientists in the public conversation. Dawkins is the latest in a long line of stylish British scientific litterateurs that runs through immunologist Peter Medawar and geneticist J. B. S. Haldane all the way back to Darwin's original "bulldog," biologist Thomas Henry Huxley. When the British magazine *Prospect* asked its readers to vote for England's leading public intellectual last summer, Dawkins emerged victorious atop a list that included the playwright Tom Stoppard, feminist Germaine Greer, historian Simon Schama, and a host of other seemingly more household names. An illustration accompanying the poll results showed Dawkins brandishing a trophy, but being the champion of public discourse can be a mixed blessing.

Last October *The Guardian* newspaper in England asked several prominent British intellectuals—Dawkins, the novelist John Le Carré, and the historian Antonia Fraser—to write open letters to residents of Clark County, Ohio, urging them not to vote for George W. Bush. Unbeknownst to Dawkins, these short essays were ultimately used to spearhead an ill-conceived letter-writing campaign organized by *The Guardian*. The idea was to deluge Ohio voters with mail from British citizens urging the defeat of Bush.



Dawkins began his essay with a riff that many Ohioans found condescending. "Don't be so ashamed of your president," he wrote. "The majority of you didn't vote for him. If Bush is finally elected properly, that will be the time for Americans traveling abroad to simulate a Canadian accent." He went on to suggest that Bush was "Bin Laden's dream candidate," "an amiable idiot," and a liar. "An idiot he may be," he opined, "but he is also sly, mendacious, and vindictive."

The people of Clark County, which is located west of Columbus, remained unswayed by—or in defiance of—one of the world's great voices of reason. Dawkins found himself on



NO GODS, PLEASE

Dawkins contends that religion and evolutionary theory are incompatible. Alister McGrath, a molecular biophysicist turned Anglican pastor, disagrees. "What Dawkins shows, strictly speaking, is simply that the theory of evolution leads to agnosticism—a principled uncertainty about whether there is a God or not," says McGrath. "And in driving it to atheism—that there is necessarily no God—he goes way beyond the limits of the evidence."

the receiving end of the kind of verbal barrage—albeit less eloquent and certainly much coarser—that he himself occasionally unleashes. "The response, from all over America, was the most vitriolic, vicious, obscene outpouring of sheer naked hatred that I've ever seen written in a newspaper," he told me after the election; the stricken look on his face made clear that this was not the way the hash is typically settled in Oxford. As it turns out, Clark was the only county in Ohio that, having voted for Al Gore in 2000, switched over to Bush in 2004.

Dawkins's brief as a public intellectual has extended far beyond such politics. He has weighed in on educational policy, the fallibility of jury trials, "pseudoscientific drivel" such as quantum healing, the "yahooish complacency" of postmodernism, terrorism, and governmental stem cell and cloning policy. But if there is one topic for which he is the go-to guy in the world of intellectual combat, it is religion and especially the tentacles it sends into secular life—

creationism, intelligent design, authority, superstition, and the method by which we determine what is true. It may be the ultimate culture war of our time, because it underlies fundamental and mutually exclusive visions of the path toward truth. It is a conflict that brings out the best—and, paradoxically, the worst—in Dawkins.

He is at his best when explaining the almost mystical richness of good science. Speaking at a meeting sponsored by the New York Institute for the Humanities last October, Dawkins drew a sharp yet dazzlingly poetic distinction between a science-based spirituality and the kind of religious literalism that, for example, esteems a biblical version of creation against the mass of geologic and paleobiological evidence that contradicts it. The former, he explained, is a kind of Einsteinian wonder at the precision and complexity of nature.

"Einsteinian religion is a kind of spirituality which is nonsupernatural," he told the gathering at New York University. "And that doesn't mean that it's somehow less than supernatural religion. Quite the contrary. . . . Einstein was adamant in rejecting all ideas of a personal god. It is something bigger, something grander, something that I believe any scientist can subscribe to, including those scientists whom I would call atheists. Einstein, in my terms, was an atheist, although Einstein of course was very fond of using the word *God*. When Einstein would use the word *God*, he was using it as a kind of figure of speech. When he said things like 'God is subtle but he's not malicious,' or 'He does not play dice,' or 'Did God have a choice in creating the universe?' what he meant was things like randomness do not lie at the heart of all things. Could the universe have been any other way than the way it is? Einstein chose to use the word *God* to phrase such profound, deep questions.

"That, it seems to me, is the good part of religion which we can all subscribe to," he continued. If he had left it at that, everyone would have been both humbled and uplifted. But he did not.

There's a reason he's been called Darwin's rottweiler, and it became apparent as he went on to verbally mix it up with other participants in the New York symposium.

The occasion for Dawkins's performance was a panel discussion with the innocuous title "Scientific Vantages." As other members of the panel—Ken Miller, physicist Freeman Dyson, Carl Sagan's widow, Ann Druyan, and science writer Margaret Wertheim—made generally polite observations about the tensions between science and religion, Dawkins alternately cocked an ear at their remarks and periodically pecked a few notes into his titanium laptop, which glowed like a night-light on the stage. The mere tap-tapping on his computer had an ominous, premonitory quality. When he adjusted his chair at the end of the table, it probably appeared as nothing more than an attempt to see and hear his fellow panelists better. I couldn't help thinking, however, of the physical vocabulary of aggression, an aspect of animal behavior that Dawkins's original mentors and contemporaries—Nikolaas Tinbergen, Konrad Lorenz, and Desmond Morris—first introduced to the general public four decades ago. Had he assumed an angle of attack?

When it came his turn to speak—he had specifically requested to go last—Dawkins launched into a series of eloquent denunciations. He disparaged the United States as a nation of "religious maniacs" and cited polls suggesting that 47 percent of the American electorate "think the entire universe began sometime after the Middle Stone Age." He derided the "cozy reconciliations" between science and religion suggested by other speakers at the

meeting. He said, "I think that scientists who say they are Catholics or Jews or Muslims owe it to us to say how they reconcile this with the sort of petty, cheap, parochial, niggling religion which goes with those titles." The theatricality of his delivery—each adjective attenuated to maximize the insult—made clear that Dawkins has traveled a long way from the one-on-one tutorials of New College, Oxford; he has learned to hone the kind of barbed *bons mots* that please large crowds. Even speaking on the fly, his remarks were as crisp and well-tailored as his suit, with barely a mortise or tenon of extemporaneous thought showing.

Throughout his remarks, Dawkins could barely suppress the contempt he feels for mystical religion. "What I can't understand is why we are expected to show respect for good scientists, even great scientists, who at the same time believe in a god who does things like listen to our prayers, forgive our sins, perform *cheap* miracles," he said, prompting a burst of nervous laughter to ripple through the audience, "which go against, presumably, everything that the god of the physicist, the divine cosmologist, set up when he set up his great laws of nature. So I don't understand a scientist who says, 'I am a Roman Catholic' or 'I am a Baptist.'" "

Dawkins is the first to admit that, in the community of scientists who fight against creationism, he may be "a bit of a loose cannon." Although he seemed reluctant to discuss religion when I spoke with him in Oxford, his combative stance on the subject has provoked comment and concern in England. As even his friend Patrick Bateson conceded, "Personally, I think he's gone a bit over the top on that, attributing all the evils of the world to religion. . . . I am not a believer, but I know some of my colleagues have been very offended by his brief on this." "I wish he wouldn't do it," said David Barker flatly. "It creates huge negative feelings in some people."

At the New York symposium, Dawkins insisted that an antireligious stance is a natural and inevitable outgrowth of evolutionary thought. "It's very clear that much of the opposition to evolution in this country—and it really matters; it's a very serious educational problem—is fed by the very suspicion, which I happen to think is justified, that evolution really is antireligious," he said. "Should we suppress our feelings about truths about the cosmos in the interests of I suppose what I have to call American politics? Possibly we should. I do think evolution may be a kind of test case."

Dawkins is hardly the only observer to mark the contours of the battlefield in this cultural war. The day after the 2004 presidential election, Gary Wills famously asked the question, "Can a people that believes more fervently in the Virgin Birth than in evolution still be called an Enlightened nation?" But even as Dawkins waved the banner of evolution in New York, he engaged in a little friendly fire, attacking a fellow officer in Darwin's latter-day army—Ken Miller, the Brown University professor, who sat at the other end of the table.

Miller is in many ways as staunch a defender of Darwin as Dawkins, and, from a practical standpoint, perhaps an even more important one. He has tirelessly traveled to Georgia, Pennsylvania, and other redoubts of creationism, to school board meetings and to courtrooms, to debate and refute those seeking to undermine the importance of evolution in modern school curricula. But Miller is also a walking paradox to people like Dawkins. As he confessed in his book *Finding Darwin's God*, Miller is a practicing Catholic, and as he pointed out to Dawkins, "I will persist in saying that religion for me, and for many other people, answers questions that are beyond the realm of science." Indeed, he complained that scientists often trafficked in a caricature of religion. And then, nodding toward Dawkins and Ann Druyan, he suggested that "atheists and agnostics are a whole lot more evangelical than religious people are." The observation may have started out as a joke, but it landed at Dawkins's end of the table like a spear.

Dawkins and Druyan proceeded to gang up on Miller. These arguments invariably devolve into snippy exchanges about the Genesis version of creation and unfold in a rhetorical no-man's-land somewhere between King James and Watson and Crick. "I regard Genesis as the spiritual truth," Miller said. "And I also think that Genesis was written in a language that would explain God that was relevant to the people living *at the time*. I cannot imagine—*cannot imagine*—Moses coming down from the Mount and talking about DNA, RNA, punctuated equilibrium. I don't think he would have gotten very far." Nonetheless, he reiterated his belief that the biblical stories of the world's creation "are true in the spiritual sense and that they are written by human beings in the language of the time."

Dawkins, at the far end of the table, almost levitated out of his seat with indignation. "But what does that mean?" he demanded, voice rising. The audience rewarded his indignation with combustive applause. "Is it a caricature for me to ask you, since you are a Roman Catholic, do you believe Jesus had an earthly father?"

"Ah, this is the famous Richard Dawkins question," Miller replied, sounding a little defensive.

"No, don't ridicule it!" Dawkins shouted, relentless.

“If I can just get a fragment of the body of Jesus,” Miller continued, “I could do DNA fingerprinting! I could figure out who gave Mary that Y chromosome!”

“That’s a facetious answer!” Dawkins cried out, his face flushed with conviction, shaking his finger at Miller. “That’s a facetious answer!” The heat was so palpable that, as Margaret Wertheim, the moderator, said later, “At least now we know that Richard actually believes this. Before, I wasn’t sure if it was just a performance.”

It was, as Dawkins himself acknowledged a few weeks later, a “robust exchange.” Reflecting on it later, I was struck by two things. One was the substance of the debate, which is important for Western science-based societies and has long-range implications for the books our children read, the science they are taught, the logic by which national decisions ranging from social policy to military intervention will be reached. Dawkins’s contention that religion can’t really answer questions about the geologic date of creation and the biological particulars of a virgin birth raises a deeper question: Do we want to live in a world where deeds, perceptions, and public policies are rooted in evidence or faith, sanctioned by fact or authority?

The other thing that struck me was the tone of the debate—Dawkins, in his undeniably civil manner, was so aggressive, so relentless, and so pitiless toward his intellectual adversaries that it almost detracted from the quality of his argument. As Miller later put it, “I don’t think Richard realizes how condescending he is when he says those things.” And this is the ultimate paradox. Dawkins—this superb thinker and phrasemaker, this best-selling author, this crackerjack logician and analytic mind—is one of the biggest guns the scientific community possesses in the argument between faith and fact, authority, and enlightenment. And yet he also recognizes that the way he goes about it, “the sort of language that I’m using,” is “tactically unwise.”

It’s all the more puzzling when you consider an interesting notion that Dawkins floated at the conclusion of his remarks at the New York symposium. He proposed a kind of marketplace battle of ideas as a meritocratic arena for the cultural war. “I suppose my hope would be that science—the best kind of science, the sort of science which approaches the best sort of religion, the Einsteinian spirituality that I was talking about—is so inspiring, so exciting that it should be sellable to everybody, not just us, but them,” he had said. “It should provide a bridge to stop us from talking about them. There is a hunger out there for wonder, for understanding, and there are people out there who think that the scientific worldview somehow denies, somehow reduces the poetic vision of the universe, which in its petty, paltry way their religion seems to give them.

“We have something far better to offer,” he continued. “It doesn’t have to be couched in incomprehensible jargon. It can be put in language that anybody can understand.” Indeed, no one does that better, on the page or at a lectern, than Dawkins himself. “Why are we freethinking secular scientists not getting into that same marketplace,” he went on, “and selling what we’ve got to sell? Because it’s a far better product, and all we’ve got to do is hone our salesmanship to the level that they are already doing it.”

Then, to great laughter, he concluded, “I think I’ve made it very clear that I’m not the best person to do that.”

This recusal underlines the most obvious contradiction about Richard Dawkins and the cultural war in which he has so much to contribute: You can be the world’s greatest apostle of scientific rationalism, but if you come across as a rottweiler, Darwin’s or anybody else’s, when you enter that marketplace, it’s very hard to make the sale.