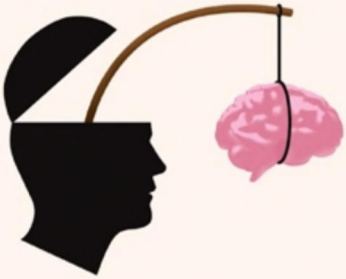
THE SCIENCE DELUSION



Asking the Big Questions
in a Culture of Easy Answers

CURTIS WHITE

"Splendidly cranky." —MOLLY IVINS

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MELVILLE HOUSE
BROOKLYN • LONDON

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First Melville House printing: May 2013

Melville House
145 Plymouth Street
Brooklyn, New York 11201

and

8 Blackstock Mews
Islington
London N4 2BT

mhpbooks.com

eISBN: 978-1-61219-201-7

A catalog record for this title is available
from the Library of Congress.

v3.1

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INTRODUCTION

One of the most astonishing spectacles of popular intellectual culture in the first decades of the 21st century has been the "confused alarms of struggle and fight" rising from the clash between the Christian evangelical and the scientist. At the very moment that the neo-cons made the child-minded mythologies of the Christian right the defining ideology of the Republican Party scientific liberalism produced a series of triumphal books proclaiming the victory of science and reason over religion. The commercial success of these works —led by Richard Dawkins (*The God Delusion*), Christopher Hitchens (*God Is Not Great*), Alex Rosenberg (*The Atheist's Guide to Reality*), Sam Harris (*The Moral Landscape*), and, of course, Bill Maher's lethal dose of pop *sapientia*, the movie *Religulous*—is a "phenomenon," as the book world likes to say. In any case, it is clear that the story these writers have to tell is one that a very powerful part of our culture wants told and emphatically so.

More recently, a separate series of extraordinarily successful books, lectures, and articles have appeared concerning the advancement of scientific knowledge about the human brain: how it works and how it possesses those mystifying capacities that until now we have called consciousness and creativity. I will be focusing on three science writers—the science journalist Jonah Lehrer and the neuroscientists Antonio Damasio and Sebastian Seung. These writers are, I think, typical representatives of the field, but their work is just a sliver of the total output: between the neuroscientists and their allies among the advocates of Artificial Intelligence, the literature explaining the brain's "wiring" is vast and technically intimidating.

Unlike those scientists and critics at war with religion, it is much less clear that these writers have an antagonist, or are part of our culture wars, but it is obvious that neuroscientists are trying to explain phenomena that until the last few decades were thought to be in the domain of philosophy, the arts, and the humanities. The surprising thing is how much interest and enthusiasm neuroscientists and their advocates have generated in the media and among readers. For example, until his unfortunate fall from grace for lapses in journalistic ethics, Lehrer's *Imagine: How Creativity Works* was a best seller; and Sebastian Seung's TED lecture on the "connectome" has had over half a million views. There have been a few critiques of this work from academic philosophers like Thomas Nagel (*Mind and Cosmos*) and Alfred R. Mele (*Effective Intentions*), but there has been nothing remotely like a popular response to neuroscience's encroachment on the humanities.

Shouldn't there be voices as prominent as Lehrer's asking very different questions? Are we really just the percolating of leptons and bosons, as philosopher of science Alex Rosenberg believes? Are we just matter obeying the laws of physics? In our emotional lives, have we been for all this time nothing better than the humiliated lover of E. T. A. Hoffmann's "The Sand Man" who falls in love with Olympia, a seductive piece of clockwork? For all these centuries, have our soul mates (as Notre Dame linebacker Manti Te'o called his electronically simulated "girlfriend") been mere congeries of meat, wire, and chemical? Are our ideas best understood as gene-like "memes" for which the most important consideration is not truth but adaptive "fitness"? Is the best way to understand our social behavior by tagging it to genes: the "selfish gene," the violence gene, the altruism gene, the compassion gene, the romance gene, etc.? Most importantly, whether the neuroscientists are correct about all this or not, what are the social and political consequences of *believing* that they are correct, or nearly so?

So I'd like to ask, "In whose interest do these science popularizers and provocateurs write? And to what end?"

They would like us to think that their only interest is the establishment of knowledge. What I will suggest is that their claims are based upon assumptions many of which are dubious if not outright deluded, and that the kind of political culture their delusions support is lamentable. I say lamentable because it is too late to say "dangerous." It's already here and well established.

One thing that can be safely said is that these ideas are not entirely new, never mind the fact that part of the hype is that they are the cutting edge of scientific knowledge. The truth is that the fundamental assumptions of modern scientific culture are part of the ideological baggage of the Enlightenment. In his famous lectures on *The Roots of Romanticism* (1964), Isaiah Berlin expressed that ideology in this way:

> [The view is] that there is a nature of things such that, if you know this nature, and know yourself in relation to this nature, and … understand the relationships between everything that composes the universe, then your goals as well as the facts about yourself must become clear to you.… About all these things disagreement may occur, but that there is such knowledge—that is the foundation of the entire Western tradition.… The view is that of a jigsaw puzzle of which we must fit in the fragments, of a secret treasure which we must seek.
>
> The essence of this view is that there is a body of facts to which we must submit. Science is submission, science is being guided by the nature of things, scrupulous regard for what there is, non-deviation from the facts, understanding, knowledge, adaptation. (118–19)

None of this would have been a surprise to Dostoevsky's spiteful Underground Man, exactly a century earlier, in the famous short story "Notes from Underground" (1864):

> "[T]hen, you say, science itself will teach man … that he never has really had any caprice or will of his own, and that he himself is something of the nature of a

piano-key or the stop of an organ, and that there are, besides, things called the laws of nature; so that everything he does is not done by his willing it, but is done of itself, by the laws of nature. Consequently we have only to discover these laws of nature, and man will no longer have to answer for his actions and life will become exceedingly easy for him. All human actions will then, of course, be tabulated according to these laws, mathematically, like tables of logarithms up to 108,000 and entered in an index; or, better, still, there would be published certain edifying works of the nature of encyclopedic lexicons, in which everything will be so clearly calculated and explained that there will be no more incidents or adventures in the world. (68)

My claim in this book is that the message of neuroscience advocates is much the same as that of the so-called "New Atheists," and that the two should be considered together. The New Atheists speak on behalf of science just as the neuroscientists do, and the message of both camps is: submit. Confess to the superiority of science and reason. But it is not only to evangelicals that this directive is sent; it is also sent to another historical adversary—art, philosophy, and the humanities. There the directive goes something more like this: the human mind and human creations are not the consequence of something called the Will, or inspiration, or communion with a muse or daemon, and least of all are they the result of genius. All that is nebulous; it is the weak-minded religion of the poets. The human mind is a machine of flesh, neurons, and chemicals. With enough money and computing power the jigsaw puzzle of the brain will be completed, and we will know what we are and how we should act.

President Obama's dramatic announcement that billions of dollars will be spent over the next decade mapping the brain makes it very likely that this narrative will become even more powerful in the near future (if for no other reason than that so much money has been thrown at it). Even now the

idea that the brain can be mapped has come to seem inevitable—the next genome project, as many say—so that even criticism from scientists seems unwelcome. For example, Donald G. Stein, a neurologist at Emory University, has commented, "I believe the scientific paradigm underlying this mapping project is, at best, out of date and at worst, simply wrong. The search for a road map of stable, neural pathways that can represent brain functions is futile." (John Markoff, "Connecting the Neural Dots," *The New York Times*, "Science Times," February 26, 2013) I suspect that Professor Stein's skepticism will be lost in the bustle to get in line for grant money. I'd be surprised if Stein himself didn't find some angle that he could legitimate in his own mind. Who could blame him: in the sciences, grants make careers. But what's interesting about Stein's comment is not only that it questions the wisdom of concentrating so much valuable funding on such a quixotic endeavor; what's even more interesting is that it seems to call into question that foundational Enlightenment story of reality as a vast puzzle. As he says, the paradigm itself is wrong!

The problem is to know just who it is that continues to believe and retell this Enlightenment story. Is this what "science" as such thinks? Or is it just what *popular* science thinks? Or is it simply an abuse of science by people with social and political agendas? I think that to varying (and unknowable) degrees it is all three. It is certainly historically what most scientists in their heart of hearts have thought and still think (in spite of the "uncertainties" of quantum mechanics); it is usually the fundamental assumption of popular science and science journalism; and it is certainly an abuse of the real value of science as one of the great on-going human endeavors. It is, in its essence, science as ideology (or "scientism," as it is often called).

Unfortunately, scientism takes its too-comfortable place in the broader ideology of social regimentation, economic exploitation, environmental destruction, and industrial militarism that, for lack of a better word, we still call capitalism. How the ideology of science meshes with the

broader ideology of capitalism will be a consistent interest of my investigations here.

The only remaining question is to what degree Western culture, or some meaningful part of that culture, can free itself from the delusions (for they are delusions) on which the ideology of science is based, and find the resources to compose an alternative narrative about what it means to be human. I hope to show that many of those resources are to be found in the poorly understood tradition of Romanticism. It was that nebulous movement that first challenged science's "jigsaw" view of the world, and yet on what grounds it did so and in the name of what contrary idea of nature and humanity it acted, all that is mostly lost to us now. The Romantic tradition certainly has none of the public presence that science and rationalism presently enjoy. It cannot organize the equivalent of Richard Dawkins's Reason Rally of twenty thousand atheists in front of the Washington Monument. My more modest hope is to begin a process of remembering some part of that worthy movement of artists, philosophers, and, yes, social revolutionaries in order to see just what they might have to say to us now.

I hope you will find that they can still speak very powerfully to us.

I. WHAT'S A GOOD LUNCH?

First, a parable.

An evangelical and a scientist are taking a hike, and the forest is echoing their eternal refrain—"Evolution!" "Design!" "Evolution!" "Design!"—like the call and response of forest thrushes or a Miller Light commercial: "Less filling!" "Tastes great!"

Gustav Mahler approaches from the opposite direction. He stops before them and says, "There's no need to argue about the origin of this world, these mountains and trees." He gestures grandly as if calling an orchestra to a magnificent *tutti*. "I've composed all this already."*

The evangelical and the scientist look at Mahler as if to say, "What's he doing here?" But then they look where Mahler has gestured and say in unison, "Hey! Look! We're in a forest!"

But this moment of revelation is brief. Their venomous glares soon lock back on each other, and off they march like doomed soldiers to the front. The forest lifts and vanishes as if it were as insubstantial as mist in a breeze, and these men of religion and science are left hanging in air, although they seem not to notice.

In his book *The God Delusion*, Richard Dawkins has a parable of his own. He tells of a talk he once had with Jim Watson, "founding genius of the Human Genome Project."

> In my interview with Watson at [Cambridge], I conscientiously put it to him that, unlike him and [Francis] Crick, some people see no conflict between science and religion, because they claim science is about

how things work and religion is about what it is all for. Watson retorted, "Well, I don't think we are *for* anything. We're just products of evolution. You can say, 'Gee, your life must be pretty bleak if you don't think there's a purpose.' But I'm having a good lunch." We did have a good lunch, too. (126)

My question is, "What's a good lunch?" and why would a "product" be interested in it? What's the difference between a good lunch and a bad lunch? Is this something science can tell us about? Is it just a way of talking about competition for scarce food resources (I eat squab, you eat pressed ham)? Or is it the case that in order to know the difference between a good lunch and a bad lunch you have to be something more than a scientist and certainly something more than a product? It would seem so. Don't you have to know about something called "cuisine"? But what's cuisine? And in just what way is it outside of science?

Watson and Dawkins are indulging in a familiar sort of self-satisfied gloating over the simpleminded anxieties of the religious.† What they don't seem aware of is the possibility that this moment of gloating and self-satisfaction is also a moment of *thoughtlessness*. What exactly are they saying? Are they saying, "Seize the good lunch for tomorrow we die our purposeless deaths"? A mid-day *carpe diem*? Is that the ethical imperative that follows from the theory of evolution and all of science's "bleak" discoveries about the destiny of the universe?

To a degree, I'm kidding, but Dawkins is guilty of the same sort of thoughtlessness in more serious ways. He writes:

> Natural selection … has lifted life from primeval simplicity to the dizzy heights of complexity, beauty and apparent design that dazzle us today. (99)

Ordinarily, we pass over this sort of frothy enthusiasm in science writing, especially when it is looking at the cosmos. But isn't it a failure of nerve? If science writers were to be

consistent, wouldn't it make more sense for them say something more like, "That? That's the Eagle Nebula. It's nothing special. There are billions of nebulae. Some of them make stars, like we need more stars. We can barely see the ones we've got. Dazzling? I don't know what you mean. It's a nebula." Wouldn't that be more consistent with their assumption that everything is just a product?

Even if we were to take Dawkins's enthusiasm seriously, shouldn't we at least ask, what do you mean by "lifted"? Is it that you think it's *better* to be human than a primordially simple trilobite or dinosaur? Why? Why is "complexity" a good thing? You say, "Evolution is not just true, it's beautiful," but what do you mean by "beauty"?

For authors of popular science books, feeling dazzled is a consistent response to the grandeurs of the universe. For example, Stephen Hawking writes at the end of his recent *The Grand Design*, "… the true miracle is that abstract considerations of logic lead to a unique theory that predicts and describes a vast universe full of the amazing variety that we see." (181) Perhaps he's using the word "miracle" loosely, but what about "amazement"? What is it to be amazed? What is amazement's relationship to the M-theory that Hawking claims explains the origin of our universe and many more like it?

None of these terms—dazzle, amazement—has anything to do with the practice of science. There is no sense in which this passage is related to the scientific method. Hawking uses an aesthetic terminology without feeling any need to provide an actual aesthetic. In short, there is an unacknowledged system of extra-scientific *value* at work that science refuses to take responsibility for, either because it is unaware of the presence of the system or because it doesn't wish to disturb its own dogmatic slumber.

Dawkins writes critically of paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould's attempt to provide some explanation for these extra-scientific values. In Gould's book *Rocks of Ages*, he suggests that science and religion are "non-overlapping magisteria," each with its own province: science is for how things work,

religion is for ultimate meaning. But, as Gould makes clear, these are not the only magisteria. There is also art. "These two magisteria do not overlap, nor do they encompass all inquiry (consider, for example, the magisterium of art and the meaning of beauty)." (quoted in Dawkins, 78–9) Dawkins, of course, sees no need for religion, but Gould's suggestion that art and beauty are a part of human knowledge passes before him without comment, as if it were something that couldn't be seen.

My point is that Dawkins refuses to consider "beauty" even while happily invoking its reassuring aura. If you suggested to him that his own position, that a human is just a "product" of evolution, provides no explanation at all for why this product should be dazzled or amazed by anything, I think he would be indignant. And he would not be alone. Remember the wide-eyed and emotional performance of Carl Sagan on his PBS masterwork *Cosmos*? Dawkins even quotes one of Sagan's gushier moments: "When you're in love, you want to tell the world. This book [*The Demon-Haunted World: Science as a Candle in the Dark*] is a personal statement, reflecting my lifelong love affair with science." Wasn't half of Sagan's purpose to teach us about the proper aesthetic or even spiritual relationship with the cosmos? Wasn't the universe something more than a terse given, a product, for Sagan? Without this aesthetic education, might we not say, with Hegel, "The stars, hmmm, a gleaming leprosy in the sky"?‡

Well, what's all this gushing amazement about then? Aloof in the disdain of a victor, Dawkins doesn't want to be bothered with such questions. We win, he says. We scientists win. We'll gush all bedazzled and amazed when we feel like it and without any requirement to explain what that's all about. The only thing that's important is this: if you deny our truth, you are a member of that large and contemptible demographic, the stupid.§ As for cosmic awe, "Well, you know what I mean." The weakest version of this perspective is delivered by Simon Singh in his book *Big Bang:* "Beauty," he confides, "in any context is hard to define, but we all know it when we see it" (149), from which one might

conclude that it had something to do with pornography.

The legendary Richard Feynman takes a shot at the problem in a footnote in his book *Six Easy Pieces:*

> Poets say science takes away from the beauty of the stars—mere globs of gas atoms. Nothing is "mere." I too can see the stars on a desert night, and feel them. But do I see less or more? The vastness of the heavens stretches my imagination—stuck on this carousel my little eye can catch one-million-year-old light.... For far more marvelous is the truth than any artists of the past imagined! (59–60)

Well, to be generous, Feynman does not give me a lot of confidence that he actually knows much about what the artists of the past imagined. And it's rather unfair to blame the "past" for not knowing what scientists didn't know until *very* recently: what the stars were made of and how they burn. But that aside, what does he mean by "feel," "imagination," and "marvelous"? He clearly thinks he knows, and he thinks his readers know, but my suspicion is that what he means is both trite and unexamined. To "feel" in this sense comes out of Rousseau and Romanticism, but it is opposed to scientific rationality. Feynman is very assertive, but he doesn't know what he's talking about.

As the Romanticist Morse Peckham observed of the use of terms like "marvelous":

> They make the members of the cultural group who use them have the *affective experience of meaning* without forcing them to go to the trouble of finding out whether they have understood anything or not. These words are the totems of in-groups at the higher cultural levels. They are the equivalent of the insignia of the Masonic Shriners. (*Rage*, 310)

I suggest to you that this is a failure to take evidence, *all* the evidence, seriously. Scientists—Dawkins included—*do* get weepy-eyed over their discoveries. *I* get weepy-eyed over

their discoveries. Who can look at images from the Hubble telescope and not feel something very powerful (although it should be understood that the spectral but completely artificial tinting of the photos helps to create this powerful feeling)? What I do blame Dawkins and science for is their lack of curiosity about what this feeling of awe means. They claim the feeling, and claim its popular appeal, without thinking that it needs to be "substantiated statistically," as everything else they consider is required to be. Amazement-before-the-cosmos cannot be tested or proved by observation, and it is not predictive of anything other than itself. In the hands of science, beauty is just a tautology, or a *dogma*. The dogma is this: "When you are presented with the discoveries of science, you will marvel at their beauty."

Isn't this part of what every kindergarten trip to the planetarium teaches? This is the solar system, and *this* is the proper emotional and aesthetic response to the solar system. You may ask questions about the planets, but you may not fail to be amazed. And if you do fail to see the universe as beautiful, you will be frowned upon by adults. In short, science operates within a matrix of familiar aesthetic values that while not necessarily religious are entirely extra-scientific. And it seems to be entirely blind to the fact. Worse yet, the education it offers young and old is this: you will defer to your betters, those who know, the scientists. If they say the cosmos is beautiful, it's beautiful.

You might think that this would be the place where a little philosophical inquiry could help out, you know, some aesthetics, but you would be wrong. For science, the only thing deader than God is philosophy. As Stephen Hawking puts it in *The Grand Design:*

> Traditionally these are questions for philosophy, but philosophy is dead. Philosophy has not kept up with modern developments in science, particularly physics. Scientists have become the bearers of the torch of discovery in our quest for knowledge. (5)

Amazingly, while the news media rose in scandal over the possibility that Hawking denied God, his claim for the death of philosophy passed nearly without comment. It was as if the world said, "Yes, well, of course *that's* dead." I suppose that's what philosophers get for not "keeping up," as if they were the slow kids at school.

Hawking sounds sweetly reasonable in comparison to Lawrence Krauss and Alex Rosenberg's scorched-earth versions of Philosophy is Dead. In an interview with Ross Anderson of *The Atlantic* (April 23, 2012), Krauss repeated his earlier claim that "philosophy hasn't progressed in 2,000 years." He added:

> Philosophy is a field that, unfortunately, reminds me of that old Woody Allen joke, "those that can't do, teach, and those that can't teach, teach gym." And the worst part of philosophy is the philosophy of science; the only people, as far as I can tell, that read work by philosophers of science are other philosophers of science.… And so it's really hard to understand what justifies it. And so I'd say that this tension occurs because people in philosophy feel threatened, and they have every right to feel threatened, because science progresses and philosophy doesn't.

Rosenberg (ironically, one of those philosophers of science about whom Krauss is so disdainful) is worse:

> The humanities are nothing we have to take seriously except as symptoms. But they are everything we need to take seriously when it comes to entertainment, enjoyment and psychological satisfaction. Just don't treat them as knowledge or wisdom. (307)

Symptoms? Symptoms of what? And "psychological satisfaction"? What does that mean?

Dawkins's own way of saying much the same thing is even cruder. In a throwaway aside, he comments on Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes by saying that they are "icons of

haute francophonyism." (388) But of course Dawkins knows sweet nothing about Foucault. What do any of these science writers know about the history of philosophy before Bertrand Russell? Their comments are merely expressions of an anti-intellectual prejudice. I would go so far as to say that they are a kind of bigotry.

In the end, the problem for science is that it doesn't know what its own discoveries mean. It can describe the long process of evolution, but it can't say how we should judge it. Are these happy facts? Depressing? Or dazzling? As science historian John Gribbin acknowledges concerning the discoveries of quantum physics, they don't "mean" anything. That is, quantum physics cannot tell anyone what to think about a universe composed of quanta. Fulfillment? Disappointment? Science offers no way of *evaluating* what its methods produce. Gribbin writes:

> People still argue about what all this "really means," but for our purposes it is sufficient to take the pragmatic approach and say that quantum mechanics works, in the sense of making predictions that are confirmed by experiments, so it doesn't matter what it means. (520)

As a consequence, when pushed on the matter by people who persist in wanting to know what it all means, science resorts to a tautology: "What we know is what we do with our reasoning, our experiments, and our instruments. If you want something more than that, go ahead … so long as you don't violate scientific methodology as theology, philosophy, and art do." Which is what psychologists call a double bind: science confesses that it doesn't know how to provide meaning for its own knowledge, but all other forms of meaning are forbidden.

Oh well. In the room the scientists come and go talking of lunch.

While a scientist like Dawkins might be forgiven for not having his philosophic/aesthetic house in order, no such

tolerance should be allowed for his notorious comrade-in-arms Christopher Hitchens. In spite of the fact that Hitchens regularly invokes the authority of empiricism and reason—he condemns anything that "contradicts science or outrages reason," and he concedes something that no poet would: that "proteins and acids … constitute our nature"—he was not a scientist but a literary critic, a journalist, and a public intellectual. So, you would think that the perspective of the arts, literature, and philosophy would find a prominent place in his thought. But that is not the case. He proposes to clear away religion in the name of science and reason. Literature's function in this brave new world is to depose the Bible and provide an opportunity to study the "eternal ethical questions."

Hitchens's *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* is an intellectually shameful book. To be intellectually shameful is to be dishonest, to tell less than you know, or ought to know, and to shape what you present in a way that misrepresents the real state of affairs. In this sense, and in Hitchens's own term, his book lacks "decency."[a]

Like Hitchens, I am an atheist, if to be an atheist means not believing in a CEO God who sits outside his creation, proclaiming edicts, punishing hapless sinners, seeking vengeance on his enemies, and picking sides in times of war. This God and his hypocrite followers have been easy targets for enlightened wit since Rabelais, Molière, Voltaire, Thomas Paine, and our own Mark Twain. Of course, this God and his faithful are still very much a problem politically, and Hitchens never lets us forget that unhappy fact. Our own religious right is real, and international fundamentalism is dangerous and frightening, especially for the sad people who must live with it.

As critics have observed since its publication, one enormous problem with Hitchens's book is that it reduces religion to a series of criminal anecdotes. In the process, however, virtually all of the real history of religious thought, as well as historical and textual scholarship, is simply ignored as if it never existed. Not for Hitchens the rich cross-

cultural fertilization of the Levant by Helenistic, Jewish, and Manichaean thought. Not for Hitchens the transformation of a Jewish heretic into a religion that Nietzsche called "Platonism for the masses." Not for Hitchens the fascinating theological fissures in the New Testament between Jewish, Gnostic, and Pauline doctrines. Not for Hitchens the remarkable journey of the first Christian heresy, Arianism, spiritual origin of our own thoroughly liberal Unitarianism. (Newton was an Arian and anti-Trinitarian, which made his presence at Trinity College permanently awkward.) Not for Hitchens the sublime transformation of Christian thought into the cathartic spirituality of German Idealism/Romanticism and American Transcendentalism. And, strangely, not for Hitchens the existential Christianity of Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky, Karl Jaspers, Paul Tillich, Martin Buber, and, most recently, the religious turn of poststructural thought in Jacques Derrida and Slavoj Žižek. (All of these philosophers sought what Žižek calls Christianity's "perverse core.") And it's certainly not that he didn't have the opportunity to acknowledge these intellectual and spiritual traditions. At one point he calls the story of Abraham and Isaac "mad and gloomy," a "frightful" and "vile" "delusion," but sees no reason to mention Kierkegaard's complex, poetic, and deeply felt philosophical retelling of the story in *Fear and Trembling*. In this way, Hitchens is often as much a textual literalist as the fundamentalists he criticizes.

This case has been well made by others, if mostly in places far more obscure than Hitchens's privileged position on the *New York Times* best-seller list. For example, William J. Hamblin wrote a thorough and admirably restrained review ("The Most Misunderstood Book: Christopher Hitchens on the Bible") in which he held Hitchens to account for historical howlers of this kind:

> In discussing the exodus, Hitchens dogmatically asserts: "There was no flight from Egypt, no wandering in the desert …, and no dramatic conquest of the Promised Land. It was all, quite simply and very ineptly, made up

at a much later date. No Egyptian chronicle mentions this episode either, even in passing.... All the Mosaic myths can be safely and easily discarded." These narratives can be "easily discarded" by Hitchens only because he has failed to do even a superficial survey of the evidence *in favor* of the historicity of the biblical traditions. Might we suggest that Hitchens begin with Hoffmeier's *Israel in Egypt* and *Ancient Israel in Sinai*? It should be noted that Hoffmeier's books were not published by some small evangelical theological press but by Oxford University—hardly a bastion of regressive fundamentalist apologetics. Hitchens's claim that "no Egyptian chronicle mentions this episode [of Moses and the Israelites] either, even in passing" is simply polemical balderdash.

Hamblin is thorough, patient, relentless, but also, it seems to me, a little perplexed and saddened by Hitchens's naked dishonesty and, in all probability, by his own feeling of impotence. You can hardly blame him. Criticism of this character would have, and surely should have, revealed Hitchens's book for what it is ... if it hadn't been published in *The FARMS Review* of the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship at Brigham Young University. Hitchens need never have feared the dulling of his reputation for intellectual dash and brio from that source.

As Hamblin's case makes clear, even defenses of religion in the publications of university presses are not worthy of the attention of the so-called "new atheists." But what would Dawkins or Hitchens do with a book like Robert N. Bellah's *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age* (Harvard, 2011)? This book is a critique of Western culture operating under the one-sided influence of "theoretic" (scientific) culture, and a historical account of how the theoretic is dependent on the mythic. In a review by Linda Heuman in *Tricycle Magazine* (Summer 2012), she writes,

Bellah simultaneously undermines our unexamined confidence in the absolute authority of reason and increases our confidence in other kinds of truth.... In this view of human development, we are first embodied knowers, then storytellers, and only then analytic thinkers. Reason comes not first but last—it is the newest member of an established team, not the captain but a co-player.

Hitchens's most egregious misrepresentations are reserved for what he calls, with a great intellectual wheeze, "Eastern religion," as if all the varieties of Hinduism and Buddhism could be lumped together. In his chapter "There is No 'Eastern' Solution" (all ten pages of it) he reduces the religious traditions of Asia to the frauds perpetrated by one famously noxious guru (Bhagwan Sri Rajneesh) and a few gratuitous slanders on the Dalai Lama. On the basis of a sign he once saw at Rajneesh's ashram—"Shoes and minds must be left at the gate"—Hitchens concludes that *Buddhism* is a faith that despises the mind. Never mind that Rajneesh was no Buddhist and barely recognizable as Hindu.

God knows why Hitchens was so irate with Rajneeshism; it was a cult made for the worldly Hitch. The Sannyasa movement was interdenominational and emphasized the importance of capitalism, science, and technology over dogma. Far from being a religious fundamentalist, Rajneesh actually burned five thousand copies of a book, *The Book of Rajneeshism*, purporting to systematize his religion. His Indian critics complained not that he was a fundamentalist but that he was bourgeois. Sannyasa's primary success was as a business enterprise with a surprisingly corporate structure. As Hugh Urban reports, "By the 1980s, the movement had evolved into a complex, interlocking network of corporations, with an astonishing number of both spiritual and secular businesses worldwide, offering everything from yoga and psychological counseling to cleaning services." (171)

What's more galling for those who actually know

Millions upon millions of people over thousands of years zealously and destructively defending the faith … in spite of their own innate sense of good and evil? Isn't it more likely that killing the heathens and the heretics and the free thinkers was always something that could be done in perfectly good conscience insofar as it was done for Yahweh, Allah, or Mother Church? If it weren't for the Predators circling overhead, I think the Taliban would sleep quite soundly, never mind that they'll get up the next day and cut off someone's ear for listening to an iPod.

To say that we are innately creatures of conscience is the same as saying that, as Tom Waits sings in "Misery Is the River of the World," "there's one thing you can say about mankind, there's nothing kind about man." In short, both claims are no better than a prejudice. (If told this, Hitchens would get in a huff and move into debating posture, not unlike the "crane" stance in *The Karate Kid*, while Waits would grin that sly, slightly inebriated grin of his and say, "Yeah….") As Wallace Stevens wrote about truth claims of this variety, "The world is ugly,/And the people are sad./…/Have it your way." ("Gubbinal") For Stevens, the good and bad of things was not to be determined by religion, or science, or reason, or by a hispid Marxistcum-neo-con like Hitchens, but by poetry, which at least has the honesty to acknowledge it is making it all up. Making it all up and yet offering itself with the assumption that if others like its peculiar brand of the good and beautiful they'll follow and leave behind the self-interested culture of virtuous violence they were born in.

And what of Hitchens himself? Where is his conscience when he knowingly falsifies the history of religious and philosophical ideas? Is he not himself an example of how conscience is about what suits one's purposes? Personal ethics tend to reflect cultural ethics, and cultural ethics usually follow tribal interests. For Hitchens, too, has a tribe: the "reasonable," the clean, the well-spoken, the "right sort," the Oxford men, the ones who know and revel in their difference from the ignorant, the slaves, the Baptist rubes,

the ones who don't go to Cambridge and don't eat good lunches. Hitchens was of the oligarchs and shared their most intense privilege: the right not to have to take seriously their own lies and misdeeds.

This is all debatable, of course, and a worthy debate it would be. What's appalling is that none of this seems important to Hitchens. Our sense of "decency" is innate. Period. Have it your way, but I thought the truths you were interested in were based on evidence, and you have none.

As Nietzsche wrote in *Beyond Good and Evil*, "No one is such a liar as an indignant man."

The literature and philosophy of the period after the French Revolution were profoundly skeptical of the claims made by Enlightenment reason. They had seen its work. This literature is supposed to be Hitchens's specialty, although there is *no sign of it in this book*. He should know quite well that for Jonathan Swift scientific reason was "Laputa," the whore (also known as the Royal Society). Following Swift, virtually the entire British poetic tradition coming out of Blake opposed itself not only to religious belief but to what Blake called "ratio." For the Romantics, the primary problem for the future of Europe was not with religion, which it saw mostly as something needing to be re-imagined, but with the voracious claims of reason. The platitudinous Hitchens blandly claims that literature "sustains the mind" (whatever the hell that means), but the mind it sustains is opposed to his faith in science and reason. And a "faith" it is. Nothing else but faith could be so self-satisfied in spite of its dishonesty and its cruelties.

The crimes committed in the name of reason are no less than those committed by the faithful. In fact, one of the first expressions of a murderous faith in the Enlightenment reason that Hitchens holds so dear was made by French revolutionaries during the Reign of Terror. Dedicated to atheism and the "faculty" of reason, the Hébertists took over the cathedral of Notre Dame and staged celebrations to the

more efficient.

To know this—but of course everybody knows this—doesn't require a deep knowledge of science. You can know it from Bronowski's own second thoughts about the place of science in relation to power. As he says in his sadly forgotten BBC production *The Ascent of Man:*

> I bring in the name of Einstein deliberately because he was a scientist, and the intellectual leadership of the twentieth century rests with scientists. And that poses a grave problem, because science is also a source of power that walks close to government and that the state wants to harness. But if science allows itself to go that way, the beliefs of the twentieth century will fall to pieces in cynicism. We shall be left without belief, because no beliefs can be built up in this century that are not based on science as the recognition of the uniqueness of man, and a pride in his gifts and works. It is not the business of science to inherit the earth, but to inherit the moral imagination; because without that man and beliefs and science will perish together.

Of course, Bronowski should have known through his own experiences—as a science advisor to England during the Second World War—that his fears had already been realized. Two decades before the appearance of *The Ascent of Man*, Bronowski's close friend, the English novelist/scientist C. P. Snow, had written of the moral slough of science in his novel *The New Men* (1954). On the day after the bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, one of Snow's characters, Hankins, observes honestly and powerfully:

> "The chief virtue of this promising new age, and perhaps the only one so far as I can tell, is that from here on we needn't pretend to be any better than anyone else. For hundreds of years we've told ourselves in the west, with that particular brand of severity which ends up in paying yourself a handsome compliment, that of course we've established ethical Standards which are