



# Response to Daniel Levine

BY DANIEL DENNETT

I AM OFTEN ASKED by non-philosophers with whom I work why it is that philosophers so often read their papers verbatim at conferences, instead of talking more informally while showing overheads, slides, or PowerPoint presentations, the way scientists do. My answer has been that when scientists give their presentations they are *talking about* their research, which they typically conduct with painstaking attention to detail and rigor; when philosophers give presentations, their presentations *are* their research, and every qualification, every word and comma, has to be just so. Why? Because a tiny inadvertent nudge in one direction or another can turn an interesting thesis into a hopeless falsehood, and can turn an important argument into a *non sequitur*.

What is tantalizing about Dan Levine's review of my book are a series of near bull's-eyes that *almost* get me in their crosshairs but end up misconstruing me; what he thinks of as telling points of criticism are actually points I myself make. We are much closer to agreement than he realizes.

For instance, he finds my definition of religion too restrictive since it includes the requirement of a "supernatural" (instead of a "superhuman" agent or no agent at all), but as I say when I offer my definition, it does not really matter where I "draw the line" since I will be going over the line in any case (p. 7). I think it is sometimes more useful to describe an institution or other social phenomenon as *descended from* a religion rather than a religion in the original sense. Since it is one of my main aims to resist the traditional hyper-respect with which we treat religions, I reject the assumption that a value judgment is implicit in my relative neglect of "significant liberal theologians." Levine says: "He is impatient with religious liberals because he feels they have not clearly defined what they believe in, and therefore sees Left Hand beliefs as not truly 'religion.'" No, many religious liberals have gone to admirable lengths to define clearly what they believe in, and I devote a whole chapter to exploring the powerful phenomenon of *belief in belief* that explains why they do this, since they make it manifest that they do *not* believe in a supernatural agent with whom one can have an "extended exchange relationship," as Rodney Stark puts it. I take the idea of a god who literally answers prayers to be

the historically distinctive mark of religions, but not the feature that makes a religion (or would-be religion) valuable.

Are birds dinosaurs? Yes and no. They are direct descendants of dinosaurs, so one might say they are what dinosaurs have become today, although they are strikingly unlike their ancestors. In any case, birds are wonderful, and none the worse for not being dinosaurs—if that is what we decide. Are Left Hand of God religions really religions? Or are they descended from religions? The title of Michael Lerner's book, *The Left Hand of God*, nicely evokes the supernatural *agent* in their ancestry (the left *hand of whom?*), but it is a metaphorical hand today, not a hand that plucks ribs and smites the enemies of Yahweh. Still, Lerner's God is quite like a human agent. He says "God needs us as partners in the healing and transformation of the world and as stewards of the well-being of the planet, and sometimes gets irritated or upset when we misuse God or Torah or Judaism as a vehicle to escape doing what we know we must do to heal the world." Are we to read this assertion as only a useful metaphor? There is a good reason, of course, to insist that the Left Hand of God is, really, a religion. As L. Ron Hubbard recognized some years ago, calling your movement a religion is in itself a valuable adaptation, given the environment in which movements compete today, but there are also costs, as Lerner is well aware: some of those whose allegiance he rightly aspires to win are resistant to anything that calls itself a religion. But this is a question of strategy, not essence. Religions don't form a *natural kind*, so there is nothing to discover about which organizations are *really* religions.

It is interesting to compare two more or less opposite "charges" that are often leveled: Levine sees me as *charging*, in effect, that the Left Hand of God is not really a religion, while I, in turn, am often *charged* with having a religion: scientism. "Science is *your* religion!" people say, implying, typically, that my faith in science is no more rationally defensible than their faith in God—whichever God they have faith in. Both moves should be disqualified from the discussion, since each is a compound of facts and values that don't fit together well. I *do* have "faith" in science in this sense: I find no institution more deserving of trust and support than science, so it has my allegiance and I am prepared to make sacrifices to preserve it from its enemies, who are legion. But that is a rationally defensible allegiance, so it is just the opposite of "faith" in another sense. Some people have a rationally defensible allegiance to their religion—or what they call their religion—and I read *The Left Hand of God* as a persuasive expression of such an allegiance. Nowhere does it excuse itself from negotiating a contradiction by hiding behind "faith"—something no scientist would tolerate—and I certainly wouldn't want to exclude it from the charmed circle of religion because it had this fine feature! I would much rather extend the political and economic benefits of religionhood to my allegiance to science, but that is politically impractical, because—for reasons I recount in my book—the prevailing presumption in the world continues to be that it is virtuous and deep to be irrational about these matters.

Lerner, who expresses his own respect for science, nevertheless elides two entirely independent themes in his own attack on what he calls scientism: (1) the idea that science is the only path to factual truth, and (2) "the idea that people are only motivated by material self-interest." My work for the last decade has concentrated on defending the first *in order to refute* the second. Ever since I wrote *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*, I have argued, in books and articles, that, contrary to the anti-science bias enshrined in many corridors of the humanities, the way to understand our ability to rise above material self-interest is not as a "God-given" distinction from the rest of the natural world, but as itself a naturally evolved complex of phenomena. And this capacity for moral imagination and ethical reasoning, the existence of which science explains, gives us answers that science itself cannot give us. As Lerner says—with which I entirely agree—"I don't rely on science to tell me what is right and wrong or what love means or why my life is important." I don't rely on (old style) religion to tell me this either—and neither does Lerner. As Levine suggests at the end of his review, what he calls the Left Hand of Science is in agreement with

the Left Hand of God on almost all issues. Perhaps only a difference in expression and ceremony remains.

Levine's other serious misunderstanding concerns the role of genes (and genetic fitness) in biological or evolutionary explanations. He wants to diminish the importance of genes in any explanation of religion—and so do I. Levine gets off on the wrong foot, noting that I start out:

with an expression of puzzlement that so many people would engage in rituals and other practices that are costly and often involve sacrifice of economic comfort, and occasionally even of life. Surely, then, there must be some benefit that people derive from a belief in god that outweighs these costs.

Not “surely” at all! Yes, the differential replication of *something* must “pay for” these energetically costly and obviously designed phenomena, but one of my chief targets is the well-nigh standard assumption in evolutionary considerations of religion that “there must be some benefit that people derive.” That is only one possibility, and I insist that it *must not be assumed at the outset*. Who benefits? Perhaps the principle beneficiaries are the memes themselves, in their mindless competition for rehearsal time and space in the limited number of minds, not the people who are their vectors. Somehow this prospect, one of the main messages of my book, eluded Levine, who sees me as suggesting that “a rather unscrupulous class of religious leaders (generically labeled ‘shamans’)” might well be the chief beneficiaries. Actually, there is only one place in my book where I even mention this familiar idea: “the elite who control the system benefit, at the expense of the others,” and I have next to nothing to say in favor of it. And I never use “shaman” as a generic term to label unscrupulous religious leaders. I use the term to refer to the healers of traditional or folk religions, and I suggest that they may indeed have provided a remarkable health benefit to their clients.

Levine quotes my claim that “the ultimate measure of evolutionary ‘value’ is fitness” while overlooking the fact that I am talking as much about the fitness of memes—cultural replicators—as about the fitness of their hosts. Indeed, for our species, what Levine calls “quality of life, rather than survival advantage” is what motivates us, now that we have been so heavily occupied by cultural replicators, and this striking fact about us—that we are the only species that can thus transcend our genetic imperative—cries out for a biological explanation, which I have attempted to sketch. Biology is not just genes! Of course I agree with him when he cites “meaning, competence, bonding with others, physical and intellectual stimulation, and pleasure” among human needs, and I agree with Darwin’s emphasis on “cooperation, love, bonding, altruism, and morality” as human traits in need of an evolutionary explanation. I just insist that an evolutionary explanation need not be a *genetic* explanation. So when Levine concludes “So not *every* human behavior can be fully explained in terms of providing a survival advantage for those who engage in that behavior over those who engage in a competing behavior,” he is singing my song.

At one point Levine says “Dennett partly reflects this trend [the recognition that biology is not just genes]: he calls for ‘multilevel mixed processes, getting us away from the simplistic ideas of “genes for religion” at one extreme and “a conspiracy of priests” at the other extreme,’” but he seems to think this is a concession of mine, instead of part of my main message. It is frustrating to be branded a “gene centrist” after writing several books that have gene centrism as a central target, but I appreciate that for those outside the controversies that swirl in evolutionary theory, the fine points may get lost in the fog of battle.

How does Levine’s account of my views on the relation between religion and morality fare? Once again, he gets me almost right, seeing that my challenge to the traditional presumption that religions make us moral requires a defense that will be far from routine. He quotes Swinburne as surmising that perhaps religion makes individuals more moral than they otherwise would be, without observing that a corollary of this noted by me is that religions might then enable some people to be as moral as non-religious peo-

ple manage to be without any religion. Is that possible? Until we do the even-handed research—which has hardly begun—we just don't know, and one of my primary objectives was to dramatize the fact that here too, we must stop making the standard, undefended assumptions. If religion is the chief source, or even a major source, of the moral energy and conviction in the world, this should be something we can demonstrate conclusively, not something to be assumed just because people have always assumed it in the past.

We can all agree that in addition to all the good that religion inspires and enables, it has also on occasion provided a specious justification and an effective infrastructure for the perpetration of great evil. Levine finds my claim that fanatics exploit the protective coloration provided by their coreligionists' good deeds "overly harsh," but that puzzles me, since he goes on to say that I underestimate "the number, commitment and courage" of those within religion already engaging in the critical task that I call for: cleaning up their own houses. He notes that they stand up to "official silencing" and even death threats. Levine seems thus to be agreeing with me that their task is both unpleasant and dangerous. I am glad to be told that there are more such heroes than I have realized.

I am also happy that Levine quoted my closing statement: "Ignorance is nothing shameful; *imposing* ignorance is shameful." He is right, of course, that "each of the major faiths already has an element that advocates values without imposing ignorance." I join him in applauding these elements, and urge, moreover, that we support them by making a fourth R in American compulsory education: the basic facts about the history, creeds, rituals, prohibitions and practices of all the major religions. My hypothesis, as yet untested but testable indirectly, is that toxic religions all depend on enforced ignorance in the young, and that any religion that can flourish in a world of mutual knowledge of the facts about world religions is a benign religion that deserves to persist. I am pretty sure that we agree about that point, too. ■

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