



Letters

When inspiration strikes, don't bottle it up!
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Keep them short and keep them coming!

Dennett Strikes Back

DEAR EDITOR: I am grateful to Father Paul McGavin for his review of *Breaking the Spell* in Issue 91, since it so excellently illustrates some of the main points in my book. First, as I never tire of observing, there are few folks angrier than a magician whose tricks are unmasked to the audience, and Father McGavin is quite wonderfully furious in his denunciations of my “tiresome and silly” book, with its “crude” analyses. He stoops to name-calling (“positivistic” and “rationalistic” – I’m surprised he didn’t throw in “scientistic”; he might as well call me a blasphemer, a heretic and an infidel while he’s at it). He is apparently not interested in persuading anybody who isn’t a fellow Catholic. I read it as a warning to his flock: “Don’t take this book seriously!” It might have worked in some Catholic magazine, but I don’t think most readers of *Philosophy Now* will be impressed by these epithets. Instead of name-calling, he should be offering examples of the mistakes I am making or the falsehoods I am expressing, but in spite of his blanket condemnation of the book, he offers only one, and it backfires on him: “A particularly egregious example of this lack of understanding is Dennett’s treatment of the Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ, where he makes an appeal to send the ‘wine’ to a biology laboratory for DNA testing! Clearly, he has no grasp of the doctrine of transubstantiation.” What he neglects to note is that I go on to contrast this literal reading with a metaphorical and symbolic meaning. I am perfectly well aware of the Catholics’ attempt to thread the needle between metaphor and miracle, but I don’t buy it. If the wine is not turned into the blood of Christ, where’s the miracle? And if it’s not just symbolic, and also not literal, how is the middle ground occupied? The burden of proof is on Father McGavin, not me.

You don’t just get to say what Father McGavin says if you’re in a discussion of

religion as a natural phenomenon. Why not? Because in naturalistic explanations you don’t get to play the ‘mystery’ card, ever. But that’s just what Father McGavin does: “The absence of a rationalistic account of this Sacrament would hardly satisfy the likes of Dennett, but... the inescapable fact remains that a rationalistic understanding does not suffice. This is seen in the sustained naming of these sacramental signs as *Sacred Mysteries*.” It’s a curious rhetorical move that first accuses me of not understanding transubstantiation, and then insists that nobody else does either! And the fact that I won’t take it on faith as he does is hardly a criticism of my naturalistic investigation. I am pleased with the ambiguity of one of his sentences on this topic: “His method is particularly crippling when he encounters a religion that is at once supernatural and natural.” Indeed I hope my method does cripple any religion that describes itself in blatantly self-contradictory terms. I would also hope to cripple any religion that proclaimed itself both honest and dishonest, both wealthy and impoverished. I doubt that is the reading he intended; but when people are angry they often don’t choose their words as carefully as they would like. Yes, I am well aware that religious leaders love to divert their flocks with such paradoxical assertions, and I daresay they find some strained reading of the paradoxes that saves them from sheer idiocy. But responding to a naturalistic critique with such word games is simply out of bounds.

It is quite clear that Father McGavin is not comfortable with my attempt to expose his religion to sunlight, and he shows it unmistakably by falling into my little trap. I entitled my book *Breaking the Spell*, and then went to great and explicit lengths to distinguish two different spells: the taboo against studying religion naturalistically, and the (supposedly wonderful) spell of religions themselves. My object, as I made unmistakably clear, was

to break the first spell, precisely so that that we can understand what religions are – something we should want to know whether we want to protect them, destroy them, or change them into something better. He must have read these passages, but he willfully suppresses the distinction: “his [my] object is not calmly to understand the life of faith, but to shatter it – to ‘break the spell’.” This is what I call faith-fibbing, being lured by your allegiance to your religion into doing a little, well, strategic misrepresentation of your opponent’s views. (Others call it lying for Christ, but I’m not that rude: I’m the polite one of the Four Horseman.) Father McGavin is not the first (or tenth) critic I’ve caught deliberately ignoring my oh-so-patient explanation of the distinction. I’ve even had a few apologies from some I’ve exposed for this excess of zeal. I wonder if Father McGavin will also find it in his heart to confess to his venial sin of faith-fibbing, and apologize.

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Enhanced Reactions

DEAR EDITOR: The article ‘Enhancing Human Life Span’ in Issue 91 is wrong on so many levels it’s hard to know where to start! First let’s examine Dr Foddy’s thesis that our mentality makes us mispend resources on fixing diseases instead of preventing them in the first place. At first glance the 4.0% of the British NHS budget spent on disease prevention seems to support this contention; but to bring this into perspective, they only spend twice this amount (8.3% of their budget) on drugs. But in fact, most of the spending on disease prevention occurs outside the NHS. For example, consumers in the UK spend £8 billion/year for clean water, uncontaminated by sewage. This complex and expensive task has long been recognized as one of the most important disease prevention activities ever undertaken.