The Retirement of Richard Dawkins: Reflections on a Stewardship

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PROFESSOR Richard Dawkins has lately retired from his chair at Oxford. It is not often that a senior academic becomes a household name; and the end of his tenure seems a suitable time to reflect upon his fame and achievements.

It is likely that his unrelenting attacks upon religious belief gained him much of his publicity. I will not discuss this aspect of his activities – although I happen to agree with him in this area – but will restrict myself more narrowly to the declared object of his chair.

When he was appointed I misread his title as Professor *of* the public understanding of science. This I thought ironic. Since there is no public understanding of science, he – of all people – would have to seek advice from the Professors of theology, who have centuries of experience of professing the non-existent. He was in fact Professor *for* the public understanding of science; and I suspect that he has hardly advanced that understanding at all.

Let me say at once that I have very great respect for Prof. Dawkins. If asked to name the best attempt at a serious popularisation of science I have ever read, I might hesitate to name his *Blind Watchmaker* only because I have also read his *Climbing Mount Improbable.* He writes with lucidity and vigour; his arguments are cogent; his style is elegant; his learning is immense. His television presentations are equally polished and forceful. Why, then, do I doubt his success?

Mainly for two reasons: most citizens have no desire to understand science and, unfashionable though it is to say so, most lack the capacity as well as the desire.

The nub of the matter is simply that science is difficult. The late Prof. Medawar – another brilliant writer – once made the preposterous statement that you need not be very bright to be a good scientist. I can only wonder how often he had talked to anyone not in the top few percent of the human ability range. That great Victorian Francis Galton was nearer the mark. He advised anyone who held such views to go to the best public lecture, the best presented, with the clearest demonstrations and afterwards to eavesdrop on the audience's conversations. All, he promised, would be mist and confusion. And how right he was.

What are the peaks of scientific achievement which we might hope the educated public to know about? This is a matter of opinion; but I am confident that most scientists would name, in whatever order, relativity, quantum mechanics, evolution and thermodynamics.

I defy any with, say, old-fashioned O-level maths (roughly equivalent to an A-level D today) to read Prof. Penrose's masterly *Road to Reality* and then put their hands on their hearts and say that they understand relativity and quantum theory. Of course, it may he said that they do not need to: neither is much demanded in daily life, although the solid-state devices in the word processor I am using now can only be understood with quantum theory. But this already marks a retreat from ambitions to enhance understanding.

Unfortunately, the argument from absence of need may not apply to the beautiful field of thermodynamics. Energy policy is very much in the public domain; and whatever may be attempted here is strictly limited by the laws of thermodynamics. How many of our legislators could give you even an elementary outline of them, or tell a joule from a Jubjub bird? It is likely, however surprising it seems, that most M.P.s are above the mean in general abilities; so perhaps many could learn, but do they even want to?

Evolution, in contrast, is basically a simple theory, however subtle its detail may be. Further, this is Prof. Dawkins' special field, to which he has made major contributions and to which he has devoted his main popularising effort. How far has he succeeded?

This is not easy to determine. However, I note that, in his recent T.V. series on Darwin, he still found it necessary to start at square one. Comments in the press indicate that the general public still hasn't got the proverbial foggiest. University lecturers I know tell me that they have to assume that first-year students – i.e., school-leavers, most of whom have straight As at A-level – have no understanding of the matter at all.

As long as I can remember, governments have been promising to enhance the teaching of science; but for all their efforts, such as there have been, and pretences, which are loud, no progress is evident. The noble efforts of scientists like Atkins, Dawkins, Penrose, Rees and Ridley seem to have been in vain.

Of course, there is no proof that the task set by the founder of Dawkins' chair was impossible, but the evidence is consistent with such a pessimistic view. This is rather worrying in the light of the democratic hypothesis that, though not everyone can initiate a policy, all may judge it. 'Policy' today includes government strategies in science, education and energy. Not so long ago, this hardly mattered since there was a general willingness to leave science, at least, to those who actually knew something about it. Such modesty is quite out of fashion now: the pages of the national press bear this out all too clearly.

Professor Dawkins is, like myself, an admirer of the poetry of A.E. Housman. Among Housman's formidably scholarly prose works is a lecture which includes the observation that science "... is an aristocratic affair, not communicable to all men, nor to most men." Quite so.