

Richard Dawkins, George W. Bush, and Morality

The Guardian chose sixty people, mostly prominent British thinkers, to give President Bush the benefit of their advice on the occasion of his State Visit. There are some letters of welcome among their contributions, but their predominant tone is just as sneering, angry and empty as you might expect, given the venue. One of the most extreme is, predictably, from **Harold Pinter** (scroll down), who offers the "war criminal" President a glass of blood to wash down his cucumber sandwiches. But perhaps the most shocking was from the great evolution theorist Richard Dawkins. Readers of his books will be aware of his attention to detail and his nuanced arguments – in his own field. They will not find any of that in his **letter** to "Mr Bush":

Dear Mr Bush (I'd say President Bush if you had actually been elected),

Such things are often said in jest. But the rest of the letter makes it clear that Dawkins is serious. He really does believe that George W. Bush "stole" the Presidency – though he never states specifically which alleged actions by Bush constitute that theft. And that is our first clue that what we are seeing here is a **conspiracy theory**.

I've been asked to give advice to you on touching down in Britain. It is this. Go home. You aren't wanted here.

That is false. *The Guardian's* own opinion poll on that issue **reported** that in the real Britain, only 36% would have preferred President Bush not to visit, while 43% welcomed his visit.

You aren't wanted anywhere else either,

One pertinent counter-example to this is Iraq, where a **majority** are in favour of the Americans staying to finish the job. We suspect that Dawkins knows perfectly well that Britain is not the only country in which Bush would be welcome: there are many, but somehow he discounts them all. None of them count as 'anywhere', and people who respect President Bush don't count as 'anyone'. And that holds especially for the people of the United States, as we'll see in a moment.

but you may have been misinformed that Britain was the one place where you would be welcomed.

Once again, a mocking tone is used for what Dawkins intends as a

serious factual allegation – that President Bush is a stupid, inarticulate country bumpkin. That this claim is false is clear from overwhelming **evidence**, most recently the **testimony** of Dawkins' fellow campaigner against the liberation of Iraq, Menzies Campbell, the Liberal Democrat foreign affairs spokesman.

Wrong. Well, presumably your best pal Tony welcomes you.

It's not that they are "best pals". It's that they have **shared values**.

But that's about it. Your motorcades, your helicopters, your triggerhappy guards

There is no denying that the President uses motorcades and helicopters (though it is unusual for this to be levelled as a criticism: what is he supposed to use, camels?). But "triggerhappy guards"? What shred of factual substance is there in that allegation? Are US Presidential bodyguards known for opening fire on innocent people? Indeed, have they ever been known to fall short of the highest standards of professionalism? Calling them "triggerhappy" is a fantasy and a libel against honourable and highly competent people.

will try to protect you from the people of Britain, who would otherwise spoil the photo-ops for the folks back home.

Superficially, this is another joke: Dawkins is jocularly pretending that the Americans' concern for the President's safety is feigned, and that its real purpose is to suppress evidence that he is not welcome in Britain. But like all the jokes in this letter, it would not be relevant, and he would not have included it, if the underlying allegation were not intended seriously. And that allegation is, yet again, false. First of all, the President was, in fact, welcome. Second, the degree of totalitarian control that would be necessary to substitute a message different from what the media themselves think is true, is far beyond the real powers of the US Government (though not, of course, beyond the imaginary powers of imaginary conspirators engaging in unspecified skulduggery). Third, the precise location of the demonstrations (which was, of course, all that was at issue) is completely irrelevant to what "photo-ops" there will be for the "folks back home" to see – unless the protestors were allowed close enough to tear the President limb from limb.

But be in no doubt. We despise you here too.

Indeed there can be no doubt that Dawkins despises President Bush, and that he is not the only one. Yet his picture of a Bush-despising nation is yet another fantasy. If there is a grain of truth in it, it is that many in Britain take a rather condescending view of the President. As **Andrew Sullivan put it recently**: "I don't believe that the Brits are, as a whole, that hostile either to the war or to

Bush. The minority who hates him appeals to the ignorance of those

who condescend to him.”

After you and Jeb stole the election (by a margin smaller than the number of folks you executed in Texas)

Now, what is the relevance of that comparison? Perhaps it is a matter of symbolism: Bush won by a margin smaller than the number of people whom he ‘killed’ (by refusing to commute their sentences); and let us suppose that all those murderers would have voted for Gore, had they lived (and been released, and registered to vote in Florida). If, in addition, we forget that the people in question were executed for murder and not for their political opinions, then we discover a pleasant symmetry between Bush and the likes of Saddam Hussein, who also retained power by killing those who would otherwise vote against him.

However, if that is the intention, Dawkins himself spoils the symmetry by recognising the legitimacy of Saddam's rule while denying Bush's.

you were rightly written off as a one-term president: a fair advertisement for Drunks For Jesus but otherwise an idle nonentity; inarticulate, unintelligent, an ignorant hick. September 11 changed all that.

Dawkins doesn't intend this to mean that Bush is no longer an ignorant hick. But the accidental meaning is interesting. Many people do seem to have become wiser on that day. In others, it seems to have brought out the worst.

Not that you covered yourself with glory that day. You are said to admire Churchill. Can you imagine Churchill, at such a moment, panicking all around the country from airbase to airbase? Even nasty old Rummy bunkered down where he belonged.

Churchill was known for his **physical courage** which sometimes crossed the line into recklessness. But he was also known for his grasp of the big picture and for his sense of personal responsibility. So the idea that, as Prime Minister, he would have pointlessly risked his life – and risked conceding a major victory to the enemy – by staying at a location that might be under enemy fire is ludicrous and insulting. The parallel insult to Bush is meaningless and petty.

Now, finally, after many hints, we reach the mother lode of conspiracy theory:

Never mind, your puppeteers from the Project for the New American Century recognised the opportunity they had been waiting for.

Ah, the puppeteers. The **Project for a New American Century** is a recent favourite for the role of Conspirators, among people who **think that way**.

September 11 was your golden Pearl Harbor.

Yes, Conspirators traditionally rejoice in the shedding of innocent

blood, when it promotes their Sinister Agenda.

This was how you'd get elected in 2004 (not re-elected, elected).

Sigh. Yes, we got the joke the first two times. Except that it wasn't just a joke.

The secret means by which these terrifying Puppeteers rig elections, control the media, pull President Bush's strings and reap their ill-gotten rewards afterwards are not specified, but the overt means by which they get their Agenda implemented are:

You would announce a War on Terror. American troops would win. And you would be the victorious warlord, swaggering in a flight suit before a Mission Accomplished banner.

It worked in Afghanistan. But then those puppeteers moved on to their long-term project: Iraq. Never mind that you had to lie about weapons of mass destruction.

There is no evidence of any such lie.

Never mind that Iraq had not the smallest connection with 9/11.

What? Not even the smallest connection? What about **this**? Or **this**? Moreover, might not a regime that **rejoiced** at the destruction of 9/11, and had already **murdered hundreds of thousands**, be legitimately considered a **threat to the well-being of [its] people, the peace of [the] region, the security of the world**?

The good folks back home would never know the difference between Saddam and Osama.

Note the sweeping contempt for the American people that is inherent in this theory.

You would ride the paranoid patriotism aroused by 9/11 all the way into Iraq, and hand out oil and reconstruction contracts to Dick Cheney's boys.

This further conspiracy theory ('it's all about oil') is, as we have noted **before**, an unusually illogical one (see also **this link**). "*Dick Cheney's boys*"? What is the allegation here? That a company that Vice President Cheney once worked for will inflate the invoices for their reconstruction contracts and give a share of the markup to Cheney, who will then pass on a kickback to President Bush? But if they were that open to bribery, what difference would it make that Cheney once worked for the company in question?

Or is the idea that Cheney caused the puppet Bush to start a war as an act of pure friendship for his former colleagues, because they needed the work?

That escapade is now backfiring horribly, as many of us

said it would.

Many **hoped** it would. It **hasn't**.

No wonder young American travellers are sewing Canadian flags to their rucksacks. What we in Britain won't forgive is that you have dragged us down too.

The means by which Bush "dragged" Mr Blair into liberating Iraq is, again, unspecified, the evidence that any such dragging occurred, again, absent.

Go home.

He has gone home, with the praise of many Britons ringing in his ears.

And the letter is signed:

Richard Dawkins
Scientist

Scientists care about facts. In our comments above, we have addressed mainly the errors of fact throughout Dawkins' letter, even though the real issue is a moral one. We have chosen to do that because the two are connected. Dawkins was one of the great thinkers of the twentieth century. When someone of that calibre goes out of his way to publish a stream of factual falsehoods and muddled arguments – and with such passion too – it is not because he is stupid, and it is unlikely to be because he hasn't thought about the issue. It is probably because he is in the wrong about something.

Yet paradoxically, we believe, this wrongness is intimately bound up with an issue on which Dawkins is fundamentally in the right: his objection to religion, and in particular, to the religious conception of morality. Any attempt to base morality on God's alleged words or wishes is indeed invalid. For even if God exists, given human fallibility, we can only ever conclude that an idea is God's through a prior rational argument that it is good, never vice versa.

However, it does not follow from the fact that religious justifications for morality are fallacious, or from atheism itself, that there are no objective moral values, or that all values espoused by religious believers are wrong.

Indeed, the belief that all purportedly objective moral values are necessarily rooted in the supernatural is one which, ironically, Dawkins shares with President Bush and nearly all religious people. And many religious people, especially religious fanatics, share with Dawkins the view that the purportedly objective moral values of *other religions* are no more than myths and verbal tricks to frighten believers into submission to the priests of false gods.

An *atheist* who makes that mistake is therefore likely to be especially alienated from morality. Such a person must construct, and distort, their moral view around the non-objectivity of all moral

views, and their passion comes from the conviction that people who deem moral questions to be susceptible of true answers are the epitome of evil – indeed, the *only* evil. That fact that this stance is self-contradictory only serves to increase that passion.

And thence to the **dark logic of moral relativism** which is that a refusal to take sides between right and wrong always entails siding with wrong against right. And so, those who are committed to the proposition that Bush's morality is no better than that of Saddam or Bin Laden inevitably find their real passion directed against Bush.

Yet the truth is that despite what Bush and Dawkins both think, the morality behind US foreign policy is not actually derived from supposedly revealed knowledge. It comes from the mainstream of our centuries-old secular tradition, as represented, for instance, in the US Declaration of Independence, and in the Common-Law legal systems, of applying reason and criticism to the question "how ought we to live?", and judging practical issues of right and wrong against our evolving understanding of the objectively true answer to that question.

Tue, 11/25/2003 - 02:21 | [digg](#) | [del.icio.us](#) | [permalink](#)

praise

Very nice.

- Elliot

by a reader on Tue, 11/25/2003 - 05:15 | [reply](#)

more praise

Well done. Sarah

by a reader on Tue, 11/25/2003 - 12:41 | [reply](#)

Awesome

Despite the pain of reading Richard Dawkins' letter. Awesome post.

Earlier this year I attended a public lecture given by him at the Oxford Union, promoting a freshly published essay collection. He made it clear that, on moral issues, he wanted to deny religious leaders the automatic right to media coverage. In the Q&A session, he was pressed on this point. Surely priests knew a thing or two about debating right and wrong? He defended his position, and stated that in such matters we should look first to the moral philosophers.

Well, I hope he looks over here at some point!

He's a great scientist, thinker and communicator. Looking back recently, I counted his book 'The Blind Watchmaker' as the beginning of my **real** education. He is now among the Great And The Good. So his letter deserves an uncompromising, detailed and

humane fisting. Looks like this is it.

by **Tom Robinson** on Tue, 11/25/2003 - 13:11 | [reply](#)

Awesome with knobs on

I agree with Tom's appraisal of this post.

I would just add that the "secular tradition" referred to in the last paragraph has been largely sustained by monotheism's gift of the metaphysical assumption that the moral world is real and knowable.

As regards Tom's report that Dawkins wants us to look to moral philosophers for guidance about matters of right and wrong, I wonder which philosophers Dawkins has in mind? Does he mean Karl Marx, who wrote in the Communist Manifesto:

Communism abolishes eternal truths, it abolishes all religion, and all morality, instead of constituting them on a new basis.

Or does he mean Nietzsche, who proclaimed that "God is dead" and that "Morality is the herd-instinct in the individual"? Or perhaps he is thinking of Peter Singer, a self-proclaimed moral rationalist whose reason has led him to conclude that chimpanzees have rights similar to those of human beings?

by **Kolya** on Tue, 11/25/2003 - 15:27 | [reply](#)

Why shouldn't chimpanzees be ...

Why shouldn't chimpanzees be granted rights similar to (if less comprehensive than) those of humans? And, for any given argument against such rights, why wouldn't a similar argument reach the conclusion that humans should have rights considerably less broad in scope than those of a putative superintelligent machine?

by **Rich** on Tue, 11/25/2003 - 19:48 | [reply](#)

monkeys

humans can learn anything.

monkeys can learn nothing not in their genes.

spot the difference.

-- Elliot

by a reader on Tue, 11/25/2003 - 20:50 | [reply](#)

There's a significant amount ...

There's a significant amount of evidence for the cultural

transmission of tool use in chimpanzees and orangutans in the wild, not to mention the evidence that chimpanzees in captivity can learn symbols that represent concepts. So that criterion isn't going to hold water, unless you argue that it's a matter of degree: in which case, why are humans necessarily on the "rights" rather than "no rights" side?

by **Rich** on Tue, 11/25/2003 - 21:03 | [reply](#)

more praise

Well done. David

by a reader on Tue, 11/25/2003 - 21:11 | [reply](#)

what evidence?

what evidence? and how does it prove they didn't have the ability inborn?

meanwhile, do you have an argument with the theory humans can learn anything? or with the theory chimps can't?

- Elliot

by a reader on Tue, 11/25/2003 - 21:13 | [reply](#)

A quick google turns up many,...

A quick google turns up many, many pages on cultural transmission in chimpanzees. Here's a review article:

<http://138.251.146.69/cultures3/articles/download/cultures.pdf>

Also, just to be different, here's a page on cultural transmission in orangutans:

<http://www.dukenews.duke.edu/news/newsrelease.asp?p=all&id=1286&catid=2>

The ability can't be inborn if it can spread from one individual to another after birth (unless you claim that the external stimulus is activating inborn skills, which seems highly unlikely to me).

I don't think either humans or chimps can learn "anything". For example, I don't think that either could learn to memorise trillion digit pseudo-random numbers.

by **Rich** on Tue, 11/25/2003 - 21:27 | [reply](#)

why is activation unlikely?

in your scheme, chimps construct from various patterns of photons hitting their eyes a whole behavioral script. they, in their brain,

have a behavioral script constructor of some sort. that's all very

complicated.

in my scheme, chimps have inborn various behaviors that depend on the contents of certain variables (memory locations), and also have inborn instructions to set the variables based on what they see, hear etc this is all very possible, isn't it?

as to big numbers, that's simply a hardware issue (limited memory). that has nothing to do with how our brains work. in principle, we could give our brains extra memory. then we could memorise big numbers.

chimps, given unlimited extra memory, still couldn't do philosophy.

by a reader on Tue, 11/25/2003 - 22:18 | [reply](#)

It's possible in some cases -...

It's possible in some cases - it's roughly comparable to the way humans learn grammars - but not if the diversity of possible behaviours is too high. For example, cultural transmission of words or methods for solving new problems would fall, I would imagine, outside the scope of possible inborn instructions.

How about the ability to visualise rotations of objects in five dimensions (as opposed to just deducing such properties)? (I think the evidence suggests that people can't even visualise general rotations of objects in three dimensions, although I don't have such evidence to hand.)

I agree that there are some things that humans can do that chimps can't even in principle learn to do, but do we really want to say that rights inhere only in entities that can do philosophy?

by [Rich](#) on Tue, 11/25/2003 - 22:32 | [reply](#)

cubes are enough for me

we can't visualise objects in 5 spacial dimensions because there aren't that many..?

i *do* want to say only entities that do philosophy have rights, yes. well, it's not just philosophy. but how can one suffer if one doesn't have wants? one can't..... moral entities are entities that make choices. making choices requires being able to consider the options and have values to choose by and such. monkeys don't do that.

look if we could build a metal robot to act like a monkey, and could build it only using the methods i say (inborn instructions and variables), you would agree the robot had no rights, yes? and if such a robot is possible, and could do what monkeys do, then it's a better explanation than deciding monkeys are semi-human. so now you need to point to something convincing to say my model is insufficient.

- Elliot

by a reader on Tue, 11/25/2003 - 23:21 | [reply](#)

Setting monkeys to rights?

Rich writes:

Why shouldn't chimpanzees be granted rights similar to (if less comprehensive than) those of humans?

To turn your question around, what quality do you believe entitles an entity to be granted rights?

by [Kolya](#) on Tue, 11/25/2003 - 23:31 | [reply](#)

The Dimming of Dawkins

That the thread descended (with modification!) from Dawkins to chimps somehow seems appropriate. As I read his letter's excerpts (along with the excellent fisking), this Bright man dimmed, dimmed, dimmed before my eyes. I better not hear about this kind of thing from Daniel Dennett, or I shall have to fall upon my copy of *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*.

An excellent posting.

Jerome du Bois

by [Jerome du Bois](#) on Wed, 11/26/2003 - 02:21 | [reply](#)

Humans...

have a hard time sticking to the point.

by a reader on Wed, 11/26/2003 - 02:33 | [reply](#)

So what is the "objectively true answer "

to the question "how ought we to live?"

And why is it collective? (You did use the word "we" not "I") Indeed, how can there be a collective answer?

Perhaps you have some intuitive idea of what the answer is, but unless you can answer it explicitly, why would you expect anyone else (e.g.:Mr. Dawkins) to agree with your view of morality?

by a reader on Wed, 11/26/2003 - 03:10 | [reply](#)

Objective Knowledge

The collective nature of the question "How ought we to live?" is no different from the collective nature of the question "What ought we to believe about the laws of nature?". In neither case does the legitimacy of the question depend on our prevailing ability to answer it explicitly.

But in both cases it is incoherent to argue that such questions are

meaningless, while at the same time maintaining that one or more of the proposed answers are actually false. Yet that is precisely Dawkins' position. He believes both that there is no objective morality, and that Bush's moral theories are actually wrong.

by [Kolya](#) on Wed, 11/26/2003 - 04:03 | [reply](#)

we

in this case, 'we' = 'people'

s e m a n t i c s

- Elliot

by a reader on Wed, 11/26/2003 - 04:44 | [reply](#)

Too many questions

Eliot said:

we can't visualise objects in 5 spacial dimensions because there aren't that many..?

So you're revising your position to: humans can learn anything, where by "anything" we mean "things that humans can learn"? ;)

i *do* want to say only entities that do philosophy have rights, yes.

Then you'd deny rights to newborn babies, people with profound learning disabilities, people in comas and so on?

so now you need to point to something convincing to say my model is insufficient.

Would pointing to the lack of any such robot show that it's at least too early to say whether such a model is sufficient?

by a reader on Wed, 11/26/2003 - 19:34 | [reply](#)

Pleading ignorance

Kolya said:

To turn your question around, what quality do you believe entitles an entity to be granted rights?

I really don't know, and it's this lack of knowledge that leads me to think that we should err on the side of inclusivity.

But I do think that rights are not an inherent property of the universe, but come down to what can be defended, supported or enforced by a sufficiently large subset of a society.

by a reader on Wed, 11/26/2003 - 19:38 | [reply](#)

Postscript

Those last two comments were by me. And I clearly meant Elliot.
It's been one of those days...

by **Rich** on Wed, 11/26/2003 - 20:17 | [reply](#)

anything and more

learn anything -- anything would only include physically possible things..?

learning disabilities and babies -- they **do** philosophy. comparing babies and animals well they don't compare. babies soon learn language. this doesn't happen all of a sudden. they've been human for a long time before they speak. and people with "learning disabilities" ummm they might be a little dense but that's no big deal.

comas -- well, they used to be human, and may be again. that counts for something. you shouldn't lose all rights if you put yourself in stasis for a while.

robot -- umm, pick a monkey behavior and give an argument why that sort of robot couldn't do it. if we can't find any such arguments, then we can tentatively say my model is sufficient.

- Elliot

by a reader on Wed, 11/26/2003 - 20:18 | [reply](#)

The limits of ignorance

Rich said:

I do think that rights are not an inherent property of the universe, but come down to what can be defended, supported or enforced by a sufficiently large subset of a society.

I note that the Koran declares monkeys to be **despicable**:

So when [the Jews] exceeded the limits of what they were prohibited, We said to them: "Be you monkeys, despised and rejected."

Does it not follow from your position that if militant Islam succeeds in its declared aim of conquering the world, apes *ought not* be granted rights, because such rights could not be "supported or enforced by a sufficiently large subset of a society"?

And what about the rights of women? If bin Laden has his way with the world, would it not follow that women *ought not* be granted rights, either?

by **Kolya** on Wed, 11/26/2003 - 22:46 | [reply](#)

Chimp Rights.

I don't know how Socrates did it. Having these discussions day in, day out.

I had a dorm neighbor advocate teaching Chimps how to make fire and setting them loose. At least they'd be able to fight for their rights.

They arm bears don't they?

by a reader on Wed, 11/26/2003 - 23:53 | [reply](#)

Arming Bears

They arm bears don't they?

No, but they bear arms.

David Schneider-Joseph

by [DavidSJ](#) on Thu, 11/27/2003 - 00:25 | [reply](#)

Dawkins

Is a cretin as his letter reveals.

by a reader on Thu, 11/27/2003 - 01:17 | [reply](#)

Flying President Bush to Omaha

Dawkins and others presuppose that Bush flying to Little Rock (I believe Barksdale is the current home of the Big Ugly Fat Fellow) and on to Omaha (command center of the Apocalypse) was cowardice.

From the beginning I thought it was making a less-than-subtle diplomatic point, and that point was to threaten nuclear war. At the time we did not know the magnitude of the attack or the conspiracy, and to the extent that we were threatened with "decapitation" (i.e. a possible coordinated attack against our leadership),

our side was going to 1) protect the leadership, and 2) remind our enemy whom they were dealing with.

A nuclear retaliation would have been of minimal value in dealing with the ragtag miscreants in Afghanistan. But just as the beat cop wears a gun in a holster in plain view, I somehow think that sending the President to Omaha was a polite reminder to our enemy of the powers presidents control.

by a reader on Thu, 11/27/2003 - 01:37 | [reply](#)

The Great Thinker

A world-reknown biologist, intellectual and professor at a leading

university writes:

After you and Jeb stole the election (by a margin smaller than the number of folks you executed in Texas)...

Ye gods! I hope he holds his students to higher standards of logic and accuracy. Will someone point out to the great thinker the glaring internal contradiction in this single sentence alone? By mocking the small margin of victory, he concedes there *was* a margin of victory. (By comparing the "margin" to the Death Row population, we can assume that he's thinking about voter margin and not the margin of consenting opinion in the Supreme Court). Well, which is it, Richie? A laughable margin of victory in the vote or a stolen election by judicial appointment?

We've all heard these canards about the Florida Recount as well as capital punishment in Texas 100 times before. But I've never seen someone claim the election was stolen, then concede it wasn't, and then work in the 'Bush the Executioner' meme all in one sentence. The combination of sheer intellectual torpor and ideological fervor is awe-inspiring.

by a reader on Thu, 11/27/2003 - 03:56 | [reply](#)

Dawkins ultimate sin..

was to disagree with the editor on his pet issue. So the editor responds: "I cast you into the pits of hell, ye Judas, Richard Dawkins." (failing that I will refer to you in the past tense). The editor's disciples sing his praise: "Very nice!" "Well done!" "Awesome!" "Awesome with knobs on!"

by a reader on Thu, 11/27/2003 - 19:04 | [reply](#)

Ultimate Sin?

What was the point of that "Dawkins ultimate sin.." comment?

If the reader thinks that Dawkins was right and the World was wrong, then he should make an argument to support it. I don't see one.

If he thinks that **The World** is wrong to criticize Dawkins strongly when they think he is wrong (and that the readers who agree are wrong to say so), then he's unclear on the concept of a weblog (and probably many others, as well).

Gil

by **Gil** on Thu, 11/27/2003 - 20:19 | [reply](#)

It's sad

It's sad to hear such nonsense from an important thinker. It's

simply sad....One thing I find funny about this epidemic of conspiracy theories is that more people seem to believe in them than not. Then *who* is being manipulated by these conspirators?

One point about animal rights.

How can you be sure they can't learn? based on what can you be certain they can't feel pain or suffer? And if they do, and they seem to do if you open your eyes, then denying them any rights is an immoral act, a crime. Simple.

An Iranian Student

by a reader on Fri, 11/28/2003 - 03:28 | [reply](#)

Kolya said: I note that th...

Kolya said:

I note that the Koran declares monkeys to be despicable

Well, perhaps it does in the original arabic, but that quote could just mean "Be you (monkeys) and (despised) and (rejected)", rather than saying that monkeys are necessarily despised and rejected.

Does it not follow from your position that if militant Islam succeeds in its declared aim of conquering the world, apes ought not be granted rights, because such rights could not be "supported or enforced by a sufficiently large subset of a society"?

No, but it does mean that they wouldn't be granted rights. What I was trying to say is that "ought" is a matter of opinion, and which of those opinions wins out in practice comes down to the ability of those opinions to influence the people with the power; or, in practice, the ability of people with those opinions to preserve and extends their power, which isn't quite the same thing in the short term and certainly not the same thing in the long run.

Perhaps what I ought to have said is that the truth value of abstract moral statements is perhaps unknowable and in any case almost irrelevant to the development of the world. So we can't know the truth value of "X is morally wrong", but only of "Alice believes X is morally wrong" or "Bob doesn't believe X is morally wrong".

- **Rich**, who often worries that his moral viewpoint is full of contradictions.

by **Rich** on Fri, 11/28/2003 - 13:25 | [reply](#)

Do you really believe this?

Rich said:

Perhaps what I ought to have said is that the truth value of abstract moral statements is perhaps unknowable and

in any case almost irrelevant to the development of the

world.

Do you believe that the truth value of the statement "slavery is wrong" is unknowable, and that it has been "almost irrelevant" to the development of the world?

To put this another way, do you believe that the statement "slavery is right" is morally just as valid, and that therefore the actual wrongness of slavery has played no causal role in its abolition?

by **Kolya** on Fri, 11/28/2003 - 14:08 | [reply](#)

Yes, actually I think I do

Kolya said:

Do you believe that the truth value of the statement "slavery is wrong" is unknowable, and that it has been "almost irrelevant" to the development of the world?

Yes, actually I think I do. I also think that I believe that slavery is wrong, even though I don't know that this is absolutely true; that an increasing number of people believe that slavery is wrong; that this has tended towards the abolition of slavery; and that this has increased the general felicity of the world.

What would it mean for "slavery is wrong" to be absolutely true? Where in the quarks and gluons and curved spacetime of the world is this wrongness encoded? *Nowhere!* All that there is are patterns of matter that encode *beliefs* about the relative rightness or wrongness of such statements, where beliefs are things that can be accessed using heterophenomenological methods, and which make a difference in the world by their consequences outside our skulls.

- **Rich**

by **Rich** on Fri, 11/28/2003 - 15:57 | [reply](#)

Re: Yes, actually I think I do

Rich said:

that an increasing number of people believe that slavery is wrong; that this has tended towards the abolition of slavery; and that this has increased the general felicity of the world.

The problem with that theory is this: if an increasing number of people had instead tended *against* the abolition of slavery, and it had therefore not been abolished but further entrenched, then you would still be saying that the "general felicity" had been increased by what had happened, and would still be offering this as an explanation of why it had. Therefore the fact that it 'increased the general felicity' is vacuous as an explanation of why people

converged on that opinion, for it means nothing other than that

people converged on that opinion.

By contrast, my explanation would run something like this (of course this is a highly telescoped summary, which suffices for present purposes): people were looking for the truth about whether slavery is right or wrong. They were doing this in the context of traditions of rational behaviour and interactions, which facilitate successful truth-seeking. They converged on similar opinions about slavery, because they were all converging on the objective truth about slavery, which is that it is wrong.

If one adopts this explanation, then one is faced with a challenge whenever people, especially in our truth-seeking society, seem to be converging on what one believes is a falsehood. Say - the popularity of appeasement in the inter-war years would be a good example. And this challenge is a good thing in three ways, all of which are unavailable to someone who denies that moral truths can be objective. First, it causes one to question the objective truth of one's own views: if there is no such thing, then the existence of truth-seeking people in large numbers converging on a different opinion is no reason to think about anything. Second, it makes it meaningful to say: they are all agreed on X, but X is still false. The inability of moral relativists to make sense of such a statement is an absolute disaster for their moral thinking - as I think Kolya was trying to point out. And third, it identifies the challenge that one is facing in regard to persuasion, in the case where one is right. For the only way to change the situation of the majority being wrong about something, is to persuade them that they are *in fact* wrong.

by [David Deutsch](#) on Fri, 11/28/2003 - 21:02 | [reply](#)

David said:They converged...

David said:

They converged on similar opinions about slavery, because they were all converging on the objective truth about slavery, which is that it is wrong.

I don't accept that they were converging on the objective truth about slavery. In fact, I think that by saying this you're falling into the very fallacy of which I have been accused. At most we can say that there are some particular arrangements of society and circumstances of history in which increasing numbers of people tend to believe that slavery is wrong. There are, for example, other circumstances of history and society in which, as you note, people converge on ideas about morality that we might find reprehensible, such as the tenets of National Socialism.

There is *no* objective means to determine which of the many sets of moral ideas on which people converge are objectively true and which are objectively false. At most we can say that such-and-such a set of moral ideas will have this or that as necessary consequences if sufficiently many people believe in them, for those sorts of statements are the sorts of things that are amenable to objective investigations. We can also say that this person or that

person would like or dislike those consequences. We can find theories (perhaps from evolutionary psychology) that are useful in explaining why people have differing predilections. But what we cannot do is deduce from these preferences or social developments anything whatsoever about the objective truth of the moral assertions.

(And, furthermore, the relative probabilities of all such convergences for human populations are highly contingent, which means any ideas of morality will be highly parochial when we take a wider view. For example, consider an intelligent species whose mode of reproduction necessarily involves the parasitisation of a host of another, equally intelligent, species and consequently the death of said host. Would it then be morally wrong for the first species to reproduce? How are we to balance this with our idea that killing conscious entities is in general wrong?)

Despite all this, I'm not a moral relativist. Instead, I have my own beliefs about what is right and what is wrong, and will argue in favour of these beliefs. My view is that regardless of the absolute truth or falsity of these beliefs (or, indeed, the meaninglessness of the very idea truth or falsity of them), they will tend to produce the sort of society in which I would like to live. And, for me, my beliefs and desires are very important, regardless of how utterly indifferent the greater cosmos might be to them.

- **Rich**, who thinks he should now immediately go to read "**How are Moral Assertions Connected with the World of Facts?**"

by **Rich** on Fri, 11/28/2003 - 21:42 | [reply](#)

How do you explain moral progress?

Rich said:

I believe ... the abolition of slavery ... has increased the general felicity of the world

Would you agree that the rule of law, political and religious toleration, representative democracy, and women's emancipation have also tended to increase the general felicity of the world?

Would you also agree that the promoters of the abolition of slavery and the other cause I mentioned have generally tended to argue for them on the grounds that these causes were *actually right*?

If these people were mistaken, if there is no moral truth towards which modern world has been evolving, how do you explain the amazing coincidence that most of changes brought about by these self-deluded moralists have, *by your own subjective standards*, "increased the general felicity of the world"?

by **Kolya** on Sat, 11/29/2003 - 15:18 | [reply](#)

More answers than questions

Kolya said:

Would you agree that the rule of law, political and religious toleration, representative democracy, and women's emancipation have also tended to increase the general felicity of the world?

Yes, I think that is undoubtedly the case.

Would you also agree that the promoters of the abolition of slavery and the other cause I mentioned have generally tended to argue for them on the grounds that these causes were actually right?

No, I would say that some of the promoters of those ideas have argued for them on the grounds that *they believe* that these causes were morally right. Others have argued for them on the grounds that they would naturally lead to consequences that would be beneficial to said promoters. Still others have argued that their consequences would be beneficial to society as a whole, and have believed that this is a good end.

If these people were mistaken, if there is no moral truth towards which modern world has been evolving, how do you explain the amazing coincidence that most of changes brought about by these self-deluded moralists have, by your own subjective standards, "increased the general felicity of the world"?

Because, as it says at the top of this very weblog, ideas have consequences. Even in the absence of any absolute moral truth towards which social and political evolution can be directed, people are still able to judge the likely consequences of their moral beliefs, and to judge that these might be beneficial in the various ways I've noted above. In still other cases, people have argued for things without such motivations, but using arguments or supporting causes that have been consistent with arguments or causes that on general grounds have been expected to cause such improvements or have been found in the past to produce such improvements.

"If people believe X, or if society is based around principle X, then Y will be a consequence" is a statement whose truth or falsity can be established (or at least investigated) using rational methods. "X is morally right" isn't such a statement. "If people want outcome Y and become convinced that X will result in such an outcome then they will tend to believe in X" is also a statement about the way things could be; "Wanting outcome Y is morally right" isn't.

Once again, you are very nearly approaching exactly that variant of the naturalistic fallacy into which you think I've fallen (but into which I *haven't*). If you think that the modern world necessarily approaches moral truths, how would you explain National Socialism or Communism? From my viewpoint these movements are rather easy to explain: people have at various times tended to be seriously mistaken about the likely outcomes of acting on their beliefs. The

ways in which we might avoid such horrible situations in the future are also rather obvious: by improving our methods to rationally deduce the likely outcomes of putting into action our beliefs. Hence, the scientific method, rationalism in general, the open society, the rule of law, widespread education etc. Regardless of the truth or falsity of moral assertions, these are things that will tend to lead to outcomes that are more nearly congruent with people's desires, and so, given that people have such desires and the faculty of rational insight, will be generally supported by most people who understand them.

- **Rich**, who hasn't forgotten the animal rights subthread; and who thinks he should write up a more coherent version of the ideas he's been putting forward here as an essay on his own weblog.

by **Rich** on Sun, 11/30/2003 - 19:58 | [reply](#)

Re: More answers than questions

Rich wrote:

No, I would say that some of the promoters of those ideas have argued for them on the grounds that they *believe* that these causes were morally right.

There's a difference, isn't there, between:

- Believe this on the grounds that I believe it; and
- Believe this on the grounds that it is true.

Are you really denying that any of the promoters of those causes ever argued in the second way?

Well, I think that the great majority of arguments for (and indeed against) those causes have been of the second form. A minority have been on grounds of practicality. Few, if any, have ever been, as you claim, of the first form. Arguments of the first form are of course logically nonsense.

by **David Deutsch** on Sun, 11/30/2003 - 21:23 | [reply](#)

Minor retraction

Yes, you are in fact right here, and I was much too sloppy in what I'd written. I am not denying that promoters of those causes ever argued in the second way. Well, actually I *did* deny that, but I didn't mean to and wouldn't have done if I'd been less tired. What I had intended to say was that people had advanced arguments for the truth of some moral positions because those people believed in those moral positions, but this (clearly) does not make those moral positions true or false.

But although the argument "believe this on the grounds that it is true" may be elaborated upon in superficially persuasive ways, it also, in the case of moral principles, reduces to a vacuous

argument: "this is true because it's true". It's similar to the

situation in mathematics: we might be able to prove that some theorem is true given some (consistent) set of axioms, but that says nothing at all about the truth of the axioms themselves. (Indeed, I don't really see what it might mean for a set of mathematical axioms to be true in any absolute sense.)

So far as I can tell, nobody in this discussion has yet presented any reasonable objective test for the truth or falsity of moral principles. The idea of the convergence of lots of people on a principle isn't one, for example, because you yourself have suggested that it's meaningful for lots of people to converge on a *false* position.

- **Rich**, who is concurrently arguing elsewhere that moral relativism is a bad idea, and now feels the way he did when he stumbled into an argument between people who thought science was the path to absolute truth and others who thought it was all socially constructed theories of no more validity than any others, and then argued against both sides.

by **Rich** on Sun, 11/30/2003 - 21:53 | [reply](#)

Objective vs absolute knowledge

In an earlier comment Rich said:

What would it mean for "slavery is wrong" to be absolutely true? Where in the quarks and gluons and curved spacetime of the world is this wrongness encoded? Nowhere! All that there is are patterns of matter that encode beliefs about the relative rightness or wrongness of such statements, where beliefs are things that can be accessed using heterophenomenological methods, and which make a difference in the world by their consequences outside our skulls.

In his last comment he said:

So far as I can tell, nobody in this discussion has yet presented any reasonable objective test for the truth or falsity of moral principles.

And he signed that comment:

Rich, who is concurrently arguing elsewhere that moral relativism is a bad idea, and now feels the way he did when he stumbled into an argument between people who thought science was the path to absolute truth and others who thought it was all socially constructed theories of no more validity than any others, and then argued against both sides.

It is notable that, whereas the critics of Dawkins' conception of morality have spoken of the possibility of *objective* moral knowledge, Rich criticises their stance in terms of the impossibility of *absolute* moral knowledge. The difference between the two is

that the term "absolute knowledge" implies certitude derived from

the application of some *criterion of truth or falsity*, whereas "objective knowledge" carries no such connotation.

I hold that knowledge of morality can be objective in exactly the same sense as can knowledge of physical reality. What I mean by this is that there exist *non-arbitrary explanations* of the phenomena in the respective domains, and that we can search for understanding of those phenomena in ways that tend to lead us closer towards the true explanations.

These objective explanations, whether of physics or morality, are not themselves "encoded" anywhere in the universe, until and unless we or some other sentient beings create them in the course of trying to understand reality. But the underlying realities, both physical and moral, are independent of the existence and state of mind of any sentient beings.

In both cases, the pursuit of seemingly subjective goals, namely seeking better explanations and better ways to live, tends to lead us towards truer knowledge. The nature of the relationship between reality and our knowledge of it, is philosophically somewhat problematic. But Rich has offered no argument why it is more problematic in the moral domain than in the physical domain.

It would be useful if Rich could clarify whether he believes in the possibility of objective knowledge in general, for instance with regard to the physical world, and, if so, in what way that belief is on a sounder philosophical footing than the belief in the possibility of objective moral knowledge.

by [Kolya](#) on Wed, 12/03/2003 - 10:56 | [reply](#)

Usefulness, not truth

Before I say anything, I'd like to say that I've been thoroughly enjoying this discussion.

Kolya said:

But Rich has offered no argument why it is more problematic in the moral domain than in the physical domain.

As might be clear from my article [Maps of Physics](#), I don't think that science is the search for truth. Instead, science is about inventing theories that make useful predictions about the behaviour of reality. I don't think that scientific theories form successive approximations to some kind of truth, but rather that their domains of applicability successively enlarge into they cover all of reality. (I will argue about this at greater length if anyone is interested.)

However, whereas in the scientific domain we have an "external" test of the usefulness of a theory - if it fails to predict the outcomes of experiments it must be discarded or at least be no longer considered a theory of universal applicability - we don't have such an "external" test of a moral theory. We might be able to fit moral theories into a larger framework (for example, by saying that in

application they tend to increase some utility function), but that doesn't remove the central problem (in this example, "Why is increasing the utility function good?").

The best we can do with moral theories, so far as I can tell, is to say that they tend to lead to the sorts of outcomes that we'd like or perhaps that they fit with the innate moral sentiments wired into our brains by natural selection. But this doesn't mean that they are *true*. At best, we might find that there are such moral sentiments that really are common to all people, and then invent moral theories that are consistent with those sentiments. But that still leaves the issue of extending those moral theories to other sentient beings, which perhaps have evolved quite radically different moral sentiments (as would have the putative aliens I described earlier in the thread).

(As an aside: when I say "true" or "false", I mean *absolutely* true or false, in the way that mathematical statements might be theorems or else falsehoods.)

- Rich

by Rich on Wed, 12/03/2003 - 13:15 | [reply](#)

That conclusion probably woul...

That conclusion probably would follow from such an argument. That seems perfectly fair to me: that conclusion does not invalidate the argument. Or to put it another way, I don't claim that such a putative superintelligent machine is bound to grant me the same rights it might grant its putative brethren.

-Marcus-

by a reader on Wed, 12/03/2003 - 13:34 | [reply](#)

The Basis for Science and for and Morality

Rich said

Instead, science is about inventing theories that make useful predictions about the behaviour of reality.

I would argue that this is a bit strong. IMHO, science is about modeling what we observe. There is no way to determine the inherent limitations of our observations. Indeed, idealism is a perfectly respectable philosophy for a physicist to have. Wheeler, for example, stated that the universe could not exist without a primitive act of registration.

Rich also said:

The best we can do with moral theories, so far as I can tell, is to say that they tend to lead to the sorts of outcomes that we'd like or perhaps that they fit with the innate moral sentiments wired into our brains by natural selection.

I differ here too. I think the best we can do is accept that morality

is inherently based on faith. It might be faith in God, it might be faith in the existence of self-evident truths. (e.g. We hold these truths to be self-evident....) But, any attempt to derive morality either through pure reasons or from observations ends up faltering.

I have no problem with the requirement of having to have faith. I'm not sure why others find this distressing.

Dan M.

by [Dan M.](#) on Wed, 12/03/2003 - 20:01 | [reply](#)

amusing

i believe rich, david, kolya and I all agree faith-based truth is no truth at all. we shouldn't believe something without a good reason.

- Elliot

by a reader on Wed, 12/03/2003 - 23:24 | [reply](#)

What is "a good reason."

Eliot wrote

I believe rich, david, kolya and I all agree faith-based truth is no truth at all. we shouldn't believe something without a good reason.

So, you are arguing that the truth of a statement is dependant on human beings having good reason to believe it? I've always thought of truth as something that is true whether we know enough to say anything about it or not. For example, either "Jesus was less than or equal to 5 feet in height" or "Jesus was over 5 feet in height" is a true statement. I really don't know which statement is true, but one is.

I'm also not sure what "a good reason" means. For at least some of the major actors in the Enlightenment, the self evident nature of the rights of man was good enough reason for them to base "their lives their fortunes and their sacred honor" on that principal. I'm guessing you differ with that, but I'm wondering what constitutes "a good reason" for you. If it is emperical proof, then there is a wealth of things we take for granted that we have no basis for accepting as true.

Dan M.

by [Dan M.](#) on Thu, 12/04/2003 - 00:31 | [reply](#)

Truth, not usefulness

Rich said:

I don't think that science is the search for truth. Instead, science is about inventing theories that make useful predictions about the behaviour of reality.

This view of science may be a true description of the mental attitude of the majority of scientists. But it is generally not true of those scientists who make fruitful theoretical discoveries. Whatever *Rich* may think they are doing, *they* think they are searching for the truth.

For instance, that is what Einstein thought he was doing when he created the theory of special relativity. The alternative explanation, namely that the problem Einstein was working on at the time was how to "make useful predictions about the behaviour of reality", is factually false. Einstein is known to have been a hard epistemic realist.

Rich can argue that Einstein's perception that he was seeking the truth, does not constitute an argument for the proposition that the truth exists. But I think it does suggest an opening for such an argument. The easiest way to explain this is with a thought experiment.

Consider two AI systems running rival algorithms for doing physics research:

- a non-realist algorithm that operates on past observational data searching for new mathematical formalisms that better fit the existing data; and
- a realist algorithm that seeks to create new, more powerful models of reality, which it tests against existing uncontentious models of reality, and also against past observational data.

I believe that the realist algorithm would outperform its non-realist rival by orders of magnitude. This conjecture is no more an argument for realism than are Einstein's beliefs on the subject. But it does show that the difference between epistemic realism and non-realism is in principle testable, and it creates an opening for a substantive argument for the realist stance. If the assumption of realism proved operationally necessary for the creation of successful new theories, epistemic realism would be corroborated, if for no other reason, by the application of Occam's razor.

by [Kolya](#) on Thu, 12/04/2003 - 01:16 | [reply](#)

ummmm i didn't say that

So, you are arguing that the truth of a statement is dependant on human beings having good reason to believe it?

no.

what we should believe is dependent on what we have good reason to believe. what's true isn't effected by whether we happen to be right about our beliefs or not.

as to what a good reason is. that's really another subject. all the matters for now is that we can argue over that, and change our

mind over that. there is one truth, but our search for truth must

not be monistic. there isn't a single golden road to the truth. our search, rather, gets to involve many approaches.

- Elliot

by a reader on Thu, 12/04/2003 - 02:49 | [reply](#)

the best way to do physics

Koyla wrote:

{quote}

For instance, that is what Einstein thought he was doing when he created the theory of special relativity. The alternative explanation, namely that the problem Einstein was working on at the time was how to "make useful predictions about the behaviour of reality", is factually false. Einstein is known to have been a hard epistemic realist.

{end quote}

I wouldn't argue with that, but Einstein can be considered the last of the great old physicists. He had strong disagreements with Bohr and the Copenhagen school concerning QM. He was convinced that there was a layer of real, local, hidden variables underlying QM.

At the time, it was a very reasonable position. But, with Bell and Wigner's work, supported by experimentation over the last 30 years, local realistic hidden theories of QM have been shown to be inconsistent with observations. If you look at the foundation of the progress in QM since the '20s, including things like renormalization, you see a tendency to ignore the question of realism. As Feynman said, "shut up and calculate."

So, while, on paper, your proposition sounds reasonable, the data from the last 75 years or so is inconsistent with that understanding.

Dan M.

by [Dan M.](#) on Thu, 12/04/2003 - 19:53 | [reply](#)

Realism does not reside in hidden variables

Dan said:

So, while, on paper, your proposition sounds reasonable, the data from the last 75 years or so is inconsistent with that understanding.

What's at issue here is the metaphysical proposition that scientific enquiry yields genuine knowledge of the objective world. Nothing that is discovered about the laws of *physics*, can logically have any bearing on whether that proposition is true.

Speaking of progress in quantum theory – which you mistakenly claim has refuted epistemic realism – I believe that many, if not most, of the workers who have created the subject of quantum

computation, have subscribed to the realist conception of the multiverse. This supports my earlier conjecture that the process of scientific discovery is highly dependent on scientists actually seeking the truth.

To paraphrase George Bernard Shaw, those who believe in the truth find it, those who don't make instrumental use of truths discovered by others.

by **Kolya** on Fri, 12/05/2003 - 02:09 | [reply](#)

Local realism is not the only realism

Dan M said:

At the time, it was a very reasonable position. But, with Bell and Wigner's work, supported by experimentation over the last 30 years, local realistic hidden theories of QM have been shown to be inconsistent with observations.

Yes, this is undoubtedly the case. However, I think you're conflating two positions if you're using this to argue against realism in general. That experimental results have violated the Bell inequality by quite a few standard deviations might show that no locally real theory can accurately describe nature, but this doesn't mean that there are *no* theories that can, and it certainly doesn't mean that there isn't some kind of reality "out there". A world running according to the principles of quantum mechanics (putting aside, for now, difficulties about what constitutes a "measurement") is just as real, by my standards, as a world running by classical mechanics.

- **Rich**, who'll have more to say about such matters later.

by **Rich** on Fri, 12/05/2003 - 21:37 | [reply](#)

read Fabric of Reality by David Deutsch

read The Fabric of Reality by David Deutsch

we **have** a local, realist interpretation of QM

or on the web see: <http://www.hedweb.com/manworld.htm>

- Elliot

<http://www.curi.us/>

by a reader on Fri, 12/05/2003 - 23:09 | [reply](#)

Terminological tangle

Elliot said:

we **have** a local, realist interpretation of QM

Yes, but we don't have a locally realist interpretation of QM. The

MWI is certainly a realist interpretation (in the sense that it is based on physical things rather than ideas or consciousness as fundamental entities). It's also, given a suitable Hamiltonian, a local interpretation (that is, one in which causal influences travel at the speed of light or slower). (Also, given the right Hamiltonian, we can make a quantum mechanical theory that cluster-decomposes, which means that the universe can be broken down into [not necessarily local] subsystems whose behaviours can be independently analysed.) However, the MWI is not a locally realist interpretation in the sense of Einstein, Podolsky and Rosen: that would require that the state of the system determines fully the results of any experiments on local sub-parts of the system.

Of course, it's very possible that I've misunderstood the meanings of various terms under consideration (whose definitions are a real mess, to the point at which one can subscribe to, for example, a locally realist idealism or whatever) or overlooked some aspect of the MWI.

- **Rich**

by **Rich** on Sat, 12/06/2003 - 11:27 | [reply](#)

Re: Terminological tangle

Rich's definition of 'local' contains the phrase:

the state of the system determines fully the results of any experiments

This is indeed a terminological tangle, but it is easily untangled:

If "determines ... the results of any experiments" is intended to imply that each experiment has exactly one outcome in reality, then it rules out many-universes interpretations and hence cannot be used to determine properties, such as locality or otherwise, of such interpretations.

If it isn't, then in (many-universes-)quantum theory the state of the system *does* fully determine the results of any experiments (and everything else that happens in reality), and therefore that theory qualifies as local and deterministic under the definition.

All of which is a long way of saying that quantum theory in the many-universes interpretation is local and deterministic, period. Which includes locally realistic, realistically local, globally realistic, realistically deterministic, deterministically realist, locally deterministic, deterministically local, and uncle Tom Cobley and all.

Now, enough of this mysticism. Richard Dawkins would be appalled. :)

by **David Deutsch** on Sat, 12/06/2003 - 23:08 | [reply](#)

David said: If "determines..."

David said:

If "determines ... the results of any experiments" is intended to imply that each experiment has exactly one outcome in reality, then it rules out many-universes interpretations and hence cannot be used to determine properties, such as locality or otherwise, of such interpretations.

Yes, indeed. It seems to me that in Einstein's arguments he's concerned with what we observe being uniquely determined by the state of the system, hence the efforts of those in agreement with him to make local hidden variable theories. But, as I've said, this isn't the only kind of realism and so Dan M, by using the disproof by experiment of all theories based on local hidden variables to dismiss *all* realistic interpretations of physics, is taking a step too far.

All of which is a long way of saying that quantum theory in the many-universes interpretation is local and deterministic, period. Which includes locally realistic, realistically local, globally realistic, realistically deterministic, deterministically realist, locally deterministic, deterministically local, and uncle Tom Cobby and all.

In his ***Incompleteness, Nonlocality and Realism***, Michael Redhead describes seven different types of locality :)

- **Rich**, who still hasn't read or digested all of that book it despite it having been on his shelf for many years.

by **Rich** on Sun, 12/07/2003 - 09:05 | [reply](#)

Representations

As a non-physicist (last time I did physics was when I was at school with Rich) I'd like to make a contribution to this discussion.

This discussion seems to hinge around the relationship between representations and "reality" and is negotiating the idea that there is a class of ideas that might work as a causal model outside of any specific context. That is what a universal realist position on morality implies.

You could take it at the level of "in a society characterised by the interaction of human organisms such and such rules always hold true." This in turn assumes that there are characteristics of human societies that are universally true, and that these characteristics can serve as the basis of specific linguistic formulations which will hold true for any of the possible (context dependent) interpretations of that rule in the super complex and changing circumstances that all societies find themselves in.

If this were true, then evidently it would mean that evolutionary fitness would be vastly increased were organisms already provided

with these rules internalised. Like a sort of "Universal moral

grammar."

But in the face of the imprecision which all formalisations imply due to the gross simplification they represent in relation to a complex and changing world, we have instead evolved with a flexible mind, sensitive to the contingencies of real life. It is sometimes called a conscience. To say that moral universals exist is to deny that morality is fundamentally a specific act of conscience, where an agent is put in the position of relating generalisations to their specific, unique and often surprising circumstances.

The specific, complex, unique and surprising quality of the real is the argument that is used to reassert a form of realism in the face of solipsistic or relativistic arguments (David Deutsch uses this position himself in Fabric of Reality, Roy Bhaskar gives a slightly less Sci-Fi treatment of this form of realism in "Reclaiming Reality.") : It is real because it is capable of surprising you, or in other words, of challenging your assumptions. But if this is a strong criteria for reality, then fixed formulations of moral universals clearly do not fit very well with it.

It is not that reality does not exist, it is that moral universals do not fit very well with it. To privilege the way one thinks and perceives above the complex and indeterminate character of reality leads to a fragmented and unrealistic perspective, of a reality which is far more continuous, complex and causally intermeshed than any of us can imagine, let alone measure.

This implies that all truths are context dependent to an extent, and are all contingent on acts of definition. To illustrate this point how do we draw the distinction, in any absolute universal way, between slavery and economic coercion? Many people exist in a situation of waged labour where physical force will be applied to them if they attempt to join a union. Others exist in a situation of bonded labour in order to pay off debts. Nations can also face such a predicament. At the same time slaves were often controlled by the threat of withholding of their livelihood as much as by physical force.

I am not saying there are no differences between these situations. But it is unhelpful to attempt to analyse them on the basis of one distinction. Also it is politically suspect. To focus solely on the moral universality of the statement "slavery is wrong" is a political act that glosses over the moral complexities and ambiguities of our current situation, where slavery may be marginal by our definitions, but is in substance (by which I broadly mean the concept of unacceptable levels of coercion and economic exploitation being a part of business as usual) very much alive and kicking by the criteria of many others.

A hubris of precision can be highly misleading, especially in social life.

by a reader on Sun, 12/07/2003 - 16:22 | [reply](#)

QM and Realism

Rich wrote

Yes, this is undoubtedly the case. However, I think you're conflating two positions if you're using this to argue against realism in general. That experimental results have violated the Bell inequality by quite a few standard deviations might show that no locally real theory can accurately describe nature, but this doesn't mean that there are no theories that can, and it certainly doesn't mean that there isn't some kind of reality "out there". A world running according to the principles of quantum mechanics (putting aside, for now, difficulties about what constitutes a "measurement") is just as real, by my standards, as a world running by classical mechanics.

First of all, the specific point that I was making in my post was that people who dropped or tabled the question of reconciling QM with realism made the most progress in physics. The work of the Copenhagen school, the development of QED and the standard model involved people who dropped, tabled, and tabled the question of realism, respectively.

With all due respect to those attempting to develop quantum computing, I wouldn't rank their work as nearly as critical in the development of physics as the development of QM, QED and the standard model. It is quite possible that some of them accept all the metaphysical implications of MWI, but I know that at least some folks regard it as a convenient fiction.

Having said that, let's go on to realism. I think that I have a stronger definition of realism than you do. If you look at the history of philosophy, you can see realists not just arguing that there are real things apart from us. They argue that the objects of our observations, such as books, tables, or chairs exist apart from us.

As I mentioned elsewhere, Kant has a philosophical view that occupies the middle ground between realism and idealism. Nonenon exists apart from our minds, but it is not the world we live in. Rather we live in the world of phenomenon that is the interface between nomenon and our minds.

Going back to the MWI and non-local "realistic" interpretations, let us see what they require for acceptance. Both require things that are both very real and unseen. In MWI, there is a rich infinity of universes created every attosecond. Indeed, there is a rich infinity of Dan's and Rich's created every attosecond. Both of us will do everything it is theoretically possible for us to do. Each of us will kill millions of people, torture children by the score, etc.

None of this is subject to empirical testing, of course. As far as I can tell, it's all there in the name of symmetry. While I tend to like symmetry as well as the next fellow, the improvable claims of MWI are a bit much for me to swallow in order to obtain this symmetry.

You also mentioned that there could be hidden non-locality. Certainly there could. But, as I'm sure you know, accepting real, hidden violations of well-verified theories has difficulties of its own.

With this type of latitude, I can develop a nifty argument for creationism, bring back the aether, and even develop a fine argument in support of "Last Thursdayism."

Realistic philosophical systems always argued against postulating the reality of things unseen and unseeable. Take for example, the extreme modern realism of Popper. Now, it appears that the only way to keep realism is to refer to the real existence of the unseeable, or what might yet be discovered that will overturn theories that have not been falsified in tens of thousands of experiments over a hundred years.

I'll be happy to admit that this does not falsify realism. But, I think it is very reasonable to point out how problematic it is for realistic interpretations of QM to require the reference to either unseen violations of well-verified theories, such as SR, or unseeable but very real things that strain credibility.

Dan M.

by **Dan M.** on Mon, 12/08/2003 - 21:13 | [reply](#)

Hello World! you!=world

1. None of the positions in the letter and in this article are unbiased.
2. This has to be the funniest political rant I read this year.
3. Fact - there are many people in **The World** who don't like Mr. Bush.
4. I'm one of them. (And I like FOXNEWS :) the funniest "news chanel")
5. Even slashdot sounds more unbiased than this article - witch sounds more like - Chewbaka Defense.

MOD: Funny +5!

by a reader on Wed, 01/14/2004 - 03:14 | [reply](#)

Re: Hello World! you!=world

a reader wrote (in summary):

You're biased.
funny, funny;
biased. (Biased.)

You seem to be saying that our article is biased in some comical way, though it's hard to tell without any specific assertion. The closest you come to being specific is to imply that we claim that no one in the World dislikes Mr Bush. However, we explicitly said the opposite. Several times. So you must have had something else in mind.

More importantly, though, you didn't mention, even indirectly, whether you think that anything we said in this article is false.

Is the article entirely true, but biased; or does it contain any false

assertion, in your opinion?

by **Editor** on Wed, 01/14/2004 - 08:49 | [reply](#)

Hello world! (2)

I must apologize for not signing my last message (Hello World! you!=world) as well for any mistakes I have made due to the fact that English is not my native language.

My name is Osman Ergean and my e-mail is: ergean@yaho.com (this is my signature).

First Dawkins is very emotional and out sync with his scientific activity, and makes a huge mistake signing his letter as Scientist. A letter that is more a personal rant in which he expresses his personal opinion. (I won't enter a debate about the view that even a scientific position is based on a personal view of the world.) That doesn't mean he is not a scientist anymore, and those who starting from this letter begin to reconsider his work should reconsider their "way of thinking".

Some of the issues that jumped in my view are:

1) Mr. Bush was elected in a debatable election! He is the president according to the constitution. Dawkins has a point, Bush election was in no way a clear and classical win. "The aristocracy" of Leo Strauss has shown its power. Any way Dawkins is walking a thin line here. The point about number of people killed is symbolic in other way, Europe is uneasy with death penalty, no political connection here, just plain ethics.

2) Churchill was not reckless, he played his cards well, just like the royal family did, and that was a strong message for all the people at that time. The point of Dawkins, I believe, was that Mr. Bush sent the wrong message - I don't know what the hell is going on, so I'll fly until I find out. Be calm, everything is OK!?!?!? (As someone above pointed Bush was rushed to a central command to send the world a message - Don't mess with us I have WMD. - I don't think that was an appropriate message: panicked and uninformed.)

3) The Iraq-9/11 connection, there is no official prove for that, and there is no sign of WMD from Iraq - even with the "convincing" Dick Cheney show-the-photos-show last year at UN. "Dick Cheney's boys" - well is hard not to believe that when all GSM contractors except the Americans were banned from auction (and the rules of the auction were changed several times).

4) At the end of the article is an attack on Dawkins religious beliefs, even when in his letter there is no such mention of religion, at least none I could find.

Thank you for your attention and Have a nice day!

by a reader on Wed, 01/14/2004 - 15:03 | [reply](#)

In defence of Dawkins

I think that Mr Deutsch is taking Dawkins' letter much too seriously,

and delving much too deeply into the hidden innuendoes (I'll illustrate this claim shortly).

Yes, Dawkins' tone is one of belittlement and contempt. As I see it, the letter was written to amuse and entertain like-minded people (such as Guardian readers) depressed and angry at what they see as the stupidity and corruption of the present US administration and the flawed election that brought it into being. I think Dawkins did a smashing job - as usual his attack is hilarious thanks to the combination of its 'fanatical' zeal and the eloquence of its expression. It put a smile on my face in these troubling times, and of course I knew not to take it all literally. I neither knew nor thought it relevant what proportion of people welcomed Bush's state visit. Myself and more-or-less everyone I know feel much the same as Dawkins. My suspicion (wholly unjustified by hard evidence, but I'll state it anyway) is that the vast majority of the 'intelligentsia' in this country think of Bush as being somewhere in between a shockingly ignorant statesman and a dangerous psychopath.

To give an example of your (Deutsch's) overliteralism, consider your response to Dawkins' reference to Bush's 'triggerhappy' guards. I think you have to give Dawkins some poetic license here.

(1) Everyone knows that the real US president's bodyguards could hardly be called 'triggerhappy'. The notion is absurd. Hence, we should look for a non-literal interpretation of Dawkins' remark.

(2) In the Iraq war, the number of 'friendly fire' incidents was needlessly high, and in particular a number of journalists were killed (including, incidentally, the Al Jazeera man Tariq Ayoub, who died after the Al Jazeera offices received a direct hit from an American rocket).

The president's own guards may not be triggerhappy, but they are affiliated with the US armed forces, who are.

Also, the comment about Bush's winning margin being smaller than the number of people executed in the state of Texas is basically a throwaway remark. I think it's silly to try to reconstruct a hidden argument where clearly none was intended, and especially if what you finally come up with (that Dawkins regarded Saddam as a more legitimate leader than Bush) is so clearly absurd. All Dawkins wanted to do here was remind us, in a memorable way, of (a) the narrowness of Bush's (nominal) victory and (b) the fact that under Bush's governorship, a relatively high number of people were executed. Once again, I think he succeeded.

by Neil Fitzgerald on Sat, 11/27/2004 - 02:30 | [reply](#)

You're right

I think Neil Fitzgerald is right.

Dawkins succeeded in amusing those like-minded people who care less about whether their ideas are true than that those false and contemptuous ideas get reinforced.

How rude to criticize such a noble effort!

Gil

by **Gil** on Sat, 11/27/2004 - 07:28 | [reply](#)

Gil: Nothing Dawkins says in

Gil: Nothing Dawkins says in the letter is outright false. Much of it is just common knowledge (e.g. that lies were told about weapons of mass destruction.)

Anyway why do you think a like-minded person would not care about whether their ideas are true? Do you think we think the way we do just because of short, incendiary pieces like that letter? Do you think if people like Dawkins stopped writing them then everyone would agree with you? Think again.

by a reader on Sat, 11/27/2004 - 13:11 | [reply](#)

Wrong

Reader,

No, many things Dawkins says are outright false. Read this post (again?) for some examples.

Well, Neil Fitzgerald seems to be an example of a like-minded person who didn't care much about whether the ideas were true.

But, in general, I admit that most people who agree with Dawkins would prefer to believe that their ideas were true. But, not so much that they are willing to subject those ideas to serious criticism. They seem to find it much more comfortable to shrug all criticisms off as unworthy of consideration, or coming from unworthy sources.

And, no, I think there will always be a subset of humanity that thinks the way Dawkins does whether he continues to write this drivel or not. Morality will always have to be learned, and many won't learn it. Many will prefer to act on envy and illusions of superiority, rather than adopting a proper respect for the autonomy of other individuals and their right to defend themselves and to be defended by surrogates.

I'm not saying that George W. Bush's strategy in Iraq is obviously correct; but I *am* saying that Dawkins' attitude towards Bush and his actions is pretty obviously wrong.

Gil

by **Gil** on Sat, 11/27/2004 - 20:41 | [reply](#)

Rereading what my first messa

Rereading what my first message, one might say I came to bury

Dawkins rather than praise him, but I'd like to explain something.

What I knew all along is that a sizeable chunk of the British population are so vehemently opposed to the policies of Bush's administration, and so deeply unimpressed by Bush as a man, that they despise him. This I know from reading many polls that have been carried out. Now, Dawkins claimed that Bush would be unwelcome if he came to Britain, which was supposedly shot down by pointing to a survey where 'only' 36% wanted him not to come. Bear in mind that it's a somewhat extreme opinion to have in the first place, to think that a statesman is so awful - that so little can be gained by negotiating with them - that you'd think it better that they cancelled their visit. Now suppose someone had invited you to a big party as the guest of honour, but then you found out that 'only' 36% of the other partygoers despised you. Surely you'd feel unwelcome, even if 43% of them felt OK with you being there.

Anyway, here's a more recent poll (I bet I could find you several more with enough patience) saying that 60% of British voters 'dislike' Bush.

60% of British voters 'dislike' Bush

(The increase from 36% to 60% is likely accounted for by Bush's growing unpopularity, and also the fact that one has to 'dislike' Bush quite a lot to want him to cancel state visits.)

In saying that Bush would be unwelcome in Britain, Dawkins was right, no matter how you spin it. It's not at all controversial.

This is what I meant when I said I thought the numbers in the poll you quoted were 'irrelevant'.

(I'm also the previous 'a reader' by the way.)

by Neil Fitzgerald on Sun, 11/28/2004 - 10:14 | [reply](#)

Not Wanted Here

Neil,

How many people would need to welcome Bush's visit for Dawkins' "You aren't wanted here" to qualify as false, in your opinion?

In my opinion, the number is 1. But 43% is far more than enough to qualify the statement as a falsehood.

If "You aren't wanted here" means "You aren't wanted here by me and other intellectual snobs and closed-minded people whom I know", then I suspect that everyone who has ever done anything controversial would qualify as "not wanted" in most places.

And, if that's the criterion, it's the statement "You aren't wanted here" that's irrelevant. Why bother saying it if it's always true? Why imply that it supports the case for why Bush should "Go Home"?

I think that if Dawkins were being reasonable, he would agree that

"You aren't wanted here" is false. It's true in the same sense that "You aren't the President of the United States" is true: not at all.

What I think he was trying to say was: "A lot of people with whom I identify hate you and don't want you here." Of course, I think he realizes that Bush doesn't and shouldn't care about that (certainly not enough to change his plans), so he expressed himself in a way that was strictly false; so that he could continue his confused rant.

Gil

by **Gil** on Mon, 11/29/2004 - 05:48 | [reply](#)

Twisted

Any statement ever made can be hideously misconstrued. You can defend Bush irrevocably, as I can Dawkins. However Bush can most discernably be bracketed as a poor politician and a paltry human being. Bush has diminished any bouncebackability the U.S could have ensued, appeasing that little place called 'the rest of the world' His and his countries reputation has been utterly and for the foreseeable future irreversibly destroyed. Dawkins for PM !

by Luke on Mon, 12/27/2004 - 14:07 | [reply](#)

Here Here!

Bush's 'religious principals' utterly contradict his actions. He gives a bad name to America, Christianity and freedom in general. Yes, freedom is worth fighting for but you do not have to spend billions of dollars on murdering and torturing the inhabitants of another country, which had nothing to do with what supposedly started the war in the first place.

You cannot honestly say that everything Dawkins said is false. You said that only 43% actually wanted Bush in Britain, that's still millions who didn't want him there; it's not exactly a small minority. Dawkins actually represents the view that many people in many countries have. Facts and figures don't mean a thing; he was exaggerating to express a point of view, a point of view that many will support.

by a reader on Mon, 02/28/2005 - 06:09 | [reply](#)

letter

I don't think Dawkin's letter was intended as a balanced critique of the Bush administration (several of these have already been spun-out to book length by numerous authors). Rather, I think it was an expression, however rhetorical, of Dawkin's contempt for the President. This is why it was written. This is why it was commissioned by the Guardian. Dawkin's is a great scientist and a master of the well-reasoned argument, but I wouldn't treat his

letter as his foray into political debate, but rather as his opinion of

Bush expressed.

I think Dubya is a cunt. Dawkins, apparently, thinks likewise.

Kieren.

by Kieren on Wed, 03/16/2005 - 19:49 | [reply](#)

Gil's slippery sophistry is w

Gil's slippery sophistry is worthy of a theologian! And as for the project of trying to unravel Dawkins' tirade with percentages and logical minutiae, it's like saying 'Objection, your honour!' in the middle of a fist-fight. You can't blame the man for his emotionality over this subject, and in fact, rather than impugning his intellectual credentials, I think his vehemence evinces a sensitivity to the horrors for which Bush is responsible that is felt by all thoughtful people. He was speaking for the people of Britain, most of whom are by now aware that our very lives have been put at risk by this avaricious monkey. Under the circumstances, I think we're entitled to sound a little shrill.

by Jamie on Fri, 06/10/2005 - 16:21 | [reply](#)

Slippery Sophistry?

It seems that Jamie thinks my points may have been technically valid, but miss the larger point (or something).

I find it fascinating that wanting to have a "fistfight" rather than a calm, reasoned, carefully worded discussion of various policy options is now the defense of the anti-war crowd's behavior.

And, while I think Dawkins is spectacularly wrong about Bush and the war, I didn't mean to impugn his intellectual credentials. I think he's brilliant when he's writing about subjects he understands. I certainly didn't resort to calling him a monkey (avaricious or otherwise).

Gil

by **Gil** on Fri, 06/10/2005 - 17:28 | [reply](#)

Sophistry and violence

We are with Gil in this matter. You will not find us, here at **The World**, defending any factually false statement that we or anyone else may make on the grounds that we feel strongly about it. That is the way to replace debate by violence.

Incidentally, in our piece we repeatedly noted that Dawkins was making some of his points in the form of jokes, not intended to be taken literally. In those cases we tried carefully to address his underlying point as well as his literal one.

by **Editor** on Fri, 06/10/2005 - 18:03 | [reply](#)

In response to 'Gil' and the Editor.

I sincerely apologise if I came across as in being in favour of violence over reasoned debate. Nothing could be further from my intention. I think that what causes people to react with emotion over this issue, even to the detriment of rational argument, is the patent reality that the 'War on Terror' (Bush's war) is an action consisting entirely of violence, with the minimum possible debate. It was clear on the very day that the towers went down in New York that some kind of reprisal would be inevitable, and that blood would be paid for blood. What wasn't clear was the sheer swiftness and scale of the violence to come.

Dawkins' statement is indeed factually flawed, and hysterical, and trivially paranoid to boot. But the tone should be noted, because it arises from a justified and widely shared sense of horror. Yes, there is a place for reasoned debate; but all the reasoned debate in the world withers in the face of violence backed by might. We have all seen the carnage with our own eyes, and I challenge anyone to recall the bloody images spewed out by the media coverage of the 'War on Terror' and to remain unmoved.

This forum's editor may be with Gil in this matter, but I remain with Dawkins. To quote Churchill, with whom Dawkins draws an unfavourable comparison to Bush: "Better jaw jaw jaw, than war war war." If Bush admired the old war-horse as much as he claimed, then perhaps the violence to which Dawkins responds might have been replaced by debate. Given that it is now clear that America was never under threat from Iraq in the first place, maybe the ineffectual 'debating society' (as Bush regards it) called the UN might still be debating, and certain streets in certain countries might not be quite so littered with corpses.

by Jamie on Sat, 06/11/2005 - 13:13 | [reply](#)

Entirely Of Violence

Jamie,

The War on Terror has brought about **these changes** in Afghanistan, and **these** in Iraq. Of course, these are just a small subset of the many improvements in the lives of the people who have been liberated (not in your name).

The war is not about paying for blood with blood. It's about preventing future bloodshed, by giving potential future terrorists better options. Unfortunately, this often requires fighting those who are violently opposing this improvement in the lives of people who deserve it. I hope you don't count yourself among their supporters.

And, I really don't think you want to start comparing who does the most corpse littering. Certainly of innocents (which should be a consideration).

Gil

by **Gil** on Sat, 06/11/2005 - 22:31 | [reply](#)

Jamie, Are you aware there

Jamie,

Are you aware there are people who feel strongly that the war is right, and that you are rejecting discussion with these people on the grounds that *you feel strongly* that they are violent?

-- Elliot Temple

<http://www.curi.us/>

by **Elliot Temple** on Tue, 07/05/2005 - 22:44 | [reply](#)

Response to Elliot

On the contrary, my grounds for rejecting discussion with the people you mention are that the war IS HAPPENING, regardless of public opinion within the countries whose troops are involved, and I am enough of a pragmatist to recognise the intractability, not to mention the futility, of the debate: wealth and power will do what they must to protect their own interests. On this very forum I have heard more noble and reasoned justifications for the war than were even thought of by those who perpetrate it. That is the point.

by Jamie on Sat, 07/30/2005 - 14:35 | [reply](#)

Oh, incidentally...

... I never suggested that those who support the war are themselves violent, merely that, as I would think was patently obvious even to an obfuscating sophist, the war itself is a monstrous violence, one which has snuffed more innocent lives than any 'campaign of terror'. Why must you people ignore this fact? This is THE fact that motivates highly reasonable people, such as Dawkins, to make the kind of rash comments supposedly beins 'fisked' on this forum.

by Jamie on Sat, 07/30/2005 - 14:52 | [reply](#)

Incidentally

the war itself [...] has snuffed more innocent lives than any 'campaign of terror'

So the victims of the Taliban and of Saddam's regime were not in terror?

When Molly Ivins made a similar remark, she eventually realised that she owed those victims an apology and [ate crow](#). Good for her.

by **Editor** on Sat, 07/30/2005 - 15:05 | [reply](#)

Yes, it seems Molly Ivins was

Yes, it seems Molly Ivins was very mistaken in her claim that the casualties of the current war out-weighed those of Saddam Hussein's regime. They don't even come close. However, such was not my claim: the comparison I drew was between the death toll inflicted on innocent Afghanis and Iraqis by 'the Allies' in the current war, and that inflicted on western nations by Al Quaida, with whom said innocents had no connection whatever.

The victims of Hussein's regime and of the Taliban were indeed 'in terror' before the despots were deposed, but I don't recall that being used as a justification for the war during the build-up to it. What I remember was talk of Terror, with a capital 'T'; that conflated monster of hocus and shadows conjured up by Bush and his crew to get as many nice, safe, good ol' white folks as scared as possible in an attempt to get them to back his war. Any and all considerations regarding Iraqis and Afghanis became apparent only AFTER the show was underway.

As I say, you lot are far more sophisticated apologists for the Monkey than any he has ever had in his own employ.

by jamie on Sat, 08/13/2005 - 16:08 | [reply](#)

we aren't monkeys. are you wheat?

Arguments such as "don't attack if you will lose more soldiers than the enemy would murder if you didn't attack" and similar have a critical flaw. they fail to take into account that the situation after each of the actions is different. you count the dead bodies. but I count the living, and what sort of life they want to have, and what situation they want to live in.

-- Elliot Temple
<http://www.curi.us/>

by **Elliot Temple** on Sat, 08/13/2005 - 17:07 | [reply](#)

Re: I don't recall that being used

The victims of Hussein's regime and of the Taliban were indeed 'in terror' before the despots were deposed, but I don't recall that being used as a justification for the war during the build-up to it. [...] Any and all considerations regarding Iraqis and Afghanis became apparent only AFTER the show was underway

We are flattered to be compared favourably with President Bush and his 'apologists', but your recollections are mistaken.

President Bush on October 7 2002:

The Iraqi regime has violated all of those obligations. It possesses and produces chemical and biological weapons. It is seeking nuclear weapons. **It has given shelter and support to terrorism, and practices**

terror against its own people. The entire world has witnessed Iraq's eleven-year history of defiance, deception and bad faith. [Our emphasis.]

It would be easy to provide countless further counter-examples to your erroneous recollection. However, it might be more edifying for all concerned if we challenge *you* to find even a single example of a speech by President Bush, listing the justifications for the liberation of Iraq prior to the event, in which the harm inflicted by the Saddam regime on non-Americans, including Iraqis, did not appear among those justifications.

by [Editor](#) on Sat, 08/13/2005 - 18:12 | [reply](#)

justification and legality

As if I believed that the omission of humanitarian concerns as a justification for war in one of Bush's speeches would prove that it was not the overriding reason for starting the war! Of course it wouldn't, and neither does it's being mentioned prove that it WAS the overriding reason. I guess such lip-service didn't feature strongly in my recollections mainly because at the time I was paying greater attention to Bush's attempts at finding a legal basis for war, as were most of us in Europe.

Humanitarian intervention might have been given as a legal justification for war in 1988, when the Iraqi regime was carrying out its Anfal campaign against the Kurds; at that time, though, the Reagan administration— comprising many of the same officials who would later lead the invasion of Iraq—was supporting Saddam in his war against Iran and kept largely silent. The second major killing campaign of the Saddam regime came in 1991, when Iraqi troops attacked Shiites in the south who had rebelled against the regime in the wake of Saddam's defeat in the Gulf War; the first Bush administration, despite President George H.W. Bush's urging Iraqis to "rise up against the dictator, Saddam Hussein," and despite the presence of hundreds of thousands of American troops within miles of the killing, stood by and did nothing. See Ken Roth, "War in Iraq: Not a Humanitarian Intervention" (Human Rights Watch, January 2004).

by [Jamie Whyte](#) on Fri, 08/19/2005 - 13:59 | [reply](#)

Recollection

I guess such lip-service didn't feature strongly in my recollections

Previously you said it did not figure at all, and you categorically denied that such lip service had taken place.

Did this lip service feature in your recollection or not?

Also, recollections aside, it's not clear what you are now saying about whether the lip service actually took place or not. You previously said:

Any and all considerations regarding Iraqis and Afghanis became apparent only AFTER the show was underway

In your present opinion, is that statement true or false?

by **Editor** on Sat, 08/20/2005 - 11:19 | [reply](#)

Re: Recollection

Just out of interest, Jamie, prior to looking up the speeches in the context of this thread, had you heard or read any of them? Or were you relying on extracts presented by the media?

by **Editor** on Fri, 09/23/2005 - 00:58 | [reply](#)

re: blah blah blah

It's typical of a person who can justify in their own mind, to the extent that they can sleep easy, the boiling madness of war that they will focus on picking holes in an argument, rather than trying to come to terms with the gist it. This is why I call you 'sophists'. You deliberately miss the point, drawing a discussion away from said point until it is no longer visible. This is why I accuse you of 'obfuscation'.

I know you will take this as a cop-out, and really it is. I can no longer be bothered to argue with intelligent idiots about the justification for the ongoing war in Iraq when I know the argument is intractable. You can no more grow a conscience than I can ignore mine.

So I'll leave you with the last word...

by Jamie on Wed, 11/23/2005 - 16:57 | [reply](#)

Can I have the last word(s)?

Can I have the last word(s)?

Long story short: Everyone's Wrong. Or, for the glass-half-full amongst y'all, Everyone's Right.

I remember when the Lancet report came out with the 100,000 figure, and Pro War peeps started clutching desperately at(the previously rubbished) Iraq Body Count.

Given Hussein's Reign Of Terror was aided and abbetted by the US*, could we not divide the victims? How does that work out then?

*And a number of other countries, of course. We'd need a breakdown of Who supplied What, and then What was used to kill How Many.

Oh, and morality's an illusion, a bit like God. We've managed to off God, now it's just morality and free will. Though if we get rid of the latter, the former goes anyway.

by Tumbleweed Pete on Wed, 02/15/2006 - 03:14 | [reply](#)

Re: Can I have the last word(s)?

Although US policy towards dictators, including Saddam, was cynical and immoral for many years, the idea that the US 'aided and abetted' Saddam is hyperbolic to the point of fantasy.

we'd need a breakdown of Who supplied What

Here it is. What do you need it for?

by [Editor](#) on Wed, 02/15/2006 - 03:44 | [reply](#)

Well

I needed the breakdown in regards to earlier comments about weighing up numbers killed.

If x wants to kill y, and I gave x a gun, that would be aiding and abetting.

by Tumbleweed Pete on Wed, 02/15/2006 - 10:05 | [reply](#)

And another thing...

"cynical and immoral"

Enlightened self-interest, shurely?

by Tumbleweed Pete on Wed, 02/15/2006 - 13:05 | [reply](#)

Re: Well

Doesn't that depend on whether he already had a gun or access to a gun? Increasing his gun selection a little might not be important.

Doesn't whether it was bad to do depend on what we could reasonably have expected him to do with the gun, and whether we were negligent, or not, in deciding whether he was OK to sell to?

-- Elliot Temple

Now Blogging Again

by [Elliot Temple](#) on Thu, 02/16/2006 - 05:04 | [reply](#)

Re: Well, I needed the breakdown...

[For] *weighing up numbers killed.*

Exactly. And you said you needed to weigh those numbers up in order to "divide the victims" among Iraq's various arms suppliers. What were your results?

by [Editor](#) on Thu, 02/16/2006 - 23:23 | [reply](#)

"Doesn't that depend on wheth

"Doesn't that depend on whether he already had a gun or access to a gun?"

Not really, no.

"Doesn't whether it was bad to do depend on what we could reasonably have expected him to do with the gun, and whether we were negligent, or not, in deciding whether he was OK to sell to?"

Not where we know X wants to kill Y. What do you think a brutal dictator wants weapons for? Shooting supersized tin cans off of his palace?

"Exactly. And you said you needed to weigh those numbers up in order to "divide the victims" among Iraq's various arms suppliers. What were your results?"

The graph was next to useless. Not that I don't appreciate the effort. I'm still hunting around for the relevant information.

I'll be sure to let y'all know my results, though.

by Tumbleweed Pete on Fri, 02/17/2006 - 14:48 | [reply](#)

Dawkins and Pinter

D and P are both the worst kind of champagne Socialist: claiming to be 'Socialists', they are rich, living a life of luxury in some of the most expensive districts in their respective cities, patronising ('You aren't wanted here' - as though I have given this jerk permission to speak for me, any more than the real working classes have given that other unpleasant prat Pinter permission to speak for them), sneering and lying.

On this evidence, Dawkins is no more a scientist than Dewdney is (the idiot mathematician who goes around screeching that 9/11 was a project of the CIA, the Mossad and little green men from Pluto).

by [Yoni](#) on Sun, 09/10/2006 - 23:31 | [reply](#)

Faulty memory - can pills help this lad?

"The victims of Hussein's regime and of the Taliban were indeed 'in terror' before the despots were deposed, but I don't recall that being used as a justification for the war during the build-up to it"

Then you need to take memory pills. It was used, most emphatically and repeatedly.

Referring to Bush as a 'monkey' is a reflection on your infantile mentality, not on his.

by [Yoni](#) on Sun, 09/10/2006 - 23:36 | [reply](#)

This is a ridiculous statemen

This is a ridiculous statement. I might be able to spot the difference

if you could write it in legible English. Your point is therefore that humans have a greater capacity for reason and learning? Why should this be held as the marker for having rights? What about vegetated humans who will never have the capacity to gain greater intelligence than a pig or dog? should they have their rights limited also? I would guess your answer to "NO". and if it is your are simply exhaulting speciesism.....and that is a poor argument!

by a reader on Wed, 03/07/2007 - 13:22 | [reply](#)

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