

The Priority of Mind



Keith Ward



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INTRODUCTION

A few years ago, Richard Dawkins wrote a best-selling book, *The Selfish Gene* (Boulder, CO: Paladin, 1976). It was a really well-written book, with lots of fascinating facts in it, by a well-respected zoologist at Oxford University. And yet it was almost completely wrong.

I need to amend that statement at once. The biological facts in it were not wrong. So it was not really *completely* wrong. In fact, it was a brilliant and illuminating account of evolutionary biology. But what was wrong was very important. It was the impression it gave, and that it *meant* to give, that you, and all human beings, are animals that have evolved by chance. There is no intelligent direction or purpose that got you here. You are composed of particles of matter that operate in accordance with blind laws of nature, and just happen to have produced you. You are some sort of accident of nature. In a later book, Professor Dawkins wrote, “There is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but blind pitiless indifference” (*River Out of Eden* [New York: Basic, 1993], 133).

You may think you are an intelligent, free, responsible agent. But, in fact, you are simply a machine controlled by your basic particles, your genes, and the smaller physical unthinking bits and pieces of which genes are made. Dawkins writes, “we are survival machines—robot vehicles blindly programmed to preserve the selfish molecules known as genes” (Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, x). There is no reason why you exist; there is no point in your

existence, and you are certainly not the high-point of creation, somehow more important than all the other animals.

I think that this is a significantly wrong picture of what you really are. I want to persuade you that it is a lopsided picture. It misses out all that is most important about being human. Its picture of human life and of the universe in which humans exist is in fact almost completely upside down.

This might seem to be a very rash claim of mine. Does it not fly in the face of everything modern science tells us? I do not think so. In fact, I am going to argue that modern science has a very different story to tell. And I am going to try to tell it.

I suppose I should start by saying something about who I am. This may seem rather egotistical, but it is important these days to know if an author is the genuine article. I am certainly not infallible, but I am, I suppose one could say, well qualified in both philosophy and theology. After a short spell in the Royal Air Force, I became a university lecturer in philosophy at Glasgow University, then at St. Andrews University, and then at King's College, University of London. After that, I was dean of Trinity Hall, Cambridge and director of studies in philosophy and theology at Cambridge University, where I lectured in the philosophy faculty. Then I held the following chairs, one after the other: Professor of Moral Theology, then Professor of the History and Philosophy of Religion, at London University, Regius Professor of Divinity at Oxford University, Research Professor in Philosophy at Heythrop College, and Professor of Philosophy at Roehampton University. I eventually retired at eighty-two. I am a Fellow of the British Academy and an Emeritus Student (the Christ Church term for a Life Fellow) of Christ Church College, Oxford.

I am only reciting that rather boring list to show that at least I am professionally qualified in the subject I am writing about. I need to do this because I have tried not to write this book in an academic style. It has no footnotes, references, equations, or too many technical terms (though I could not resist adding a short appendix with some references for those who are interested). It is meant to be a serious work in philosophy, but it is written in a

way that is not too serious. That is because I think it is a really important topic, so I wanted to make it readable to intelligent people who may not be professionally qualified.

This book is an attempt to persuade you of the truth of a philosophical view that I call “personal idealism.” Idealism, in philosophy, is the belief that mind is more real than matter. Without mind, matter would not exist. The fundamental nature of reality is mind. There could not be a physical universe without mind as its basis. Extreme Idealists say that matter does not exist at all. Personal idealists accept that matter exists, but that it wholly depends upon mental reality. There is one basic supreme mind, and the whole physical universe is the expression and manifestation of that mind. As a mind, it has the personal characteristics of knowing, feeling, and willing. So, the universe is not really blind, pitiless, and indifferent. On the contrary, it is conscious, compassionate, and concerned for human well-being.

This idealist view is, I think, rather unfashionable nowadays, even though some form of it has been held by most classical philosophers from Plato onwards. I intend to join them in defending it.

I have divided this book into four parts. The first is a look at human minds and what they are really like. The second asks what the universe must be like if it has generated such minds. It assumes an evolutionary view and suggests that the universe must be mind-like. The third draws conclusions about how humans should act if personal idealism is true and agrees (in a slightly new way) with the time-honoured tradition that human well-being consists in seriously pursuing truth, beauty, and goodness. And the fourth spells out the implication that, if the basis of reality is mind, there is probably a life beyond physical death in which human minds can find some sort of conscious and creative unity with that cosmic mind.