

# The ambassador of science

By Jerônimo Teixeira, at Pirenópolis (Goiás state, Brazil).

Veja magazine, Brazil, July 8th 2009. Translated by Eli Vieira – [eli@elivieira.com](mailto:eli@elivieira.com)

The Englishman Richard Dawkins was brought to biology intrigued about great issues on the origin of life. He has become the greatest modern spokesman for Darwinism and a militant atheist. For the first time in Brazil, he made sure he could exercise his naturalist side.

---

Richard Dawkins interrupts the interview and points his finger to the sky, where a flock of noisy birds are flying about. “Look there! Parrots”. Sober, rigorous in his answers, Dawkins sometimes shows himself to be sarcastic – particularly when he attacks his favourite target, religion –, but he is not exactly an expansive person. His almost childish enthusiasm before parrots and toucans – a fauna he obviously cannot find at home in Oxford – may be credited to the fascination towards nature which the author so well conveys in books such as *Climbing Mount Improbable* and the recent *The Ancestor’s Tale*, published in Brazil by *Companhia das Letras*. Dawkins, however, says he hasn’t become a biologist because he liked animals or plants.

“I must confess I have never been a great naturalist. I have developed it through the years. My starting motivation for the study of biology was philosophical”, he says. His curiosity was aimed at what he calls “great questions”: Why life exists? How did it appear on Earth? And his answers come from a fundamental source: the thought of Charles Darwin (this one, by his turn, a born-to-be naturalist). Dawkins, 68 years old, is today the greatest spokesperson for Darwinism. But he did more than just “popularising” modern biology: since his spectacular debut with *The Selfish Gene*, in 1976, Dawkins is, and this is no exaggeration, consolidating a new worldview.

Dawkins spent two weeks in Brazil. He was honoured in the meeting of the Animal Behaviour Society, which gathered researchers from 23 countries in Pirenópolis between June 22<sup>nd</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup>. From there he went to a three-day trip to the Pantanal, together with other researchers who took part in the meeting. He came back marvelled by the diversity of life. “The variety of birds is spectacular. I was lucky I was accompanied by many ornithologists. I am no bird specialist”, he says. Last Thursday, a day before he flew back to England, he was in Parati, to join a reading on *The God Delusion*, his anti-religion pamphlet.

At the inn where the ABS meeting took place, Dawkins was always seen in the lobby, bending over his Apple notebook. He attended the lectures assiduously and attentively – he was

excited after he left University of California's Marlene Zuk's conference on the quick evolution of Hawaii crickets. "I studied these crickets myself in the 70's. But my research didn't yield great results", he says. The invitation for the animal behaviour meeting rendered Dawkins the chance to reconnect himself to the subject on which he initiated his studies in biology at Oxford, at the beginning of the 60's as a student with the Dutch ethologist Niko Tinbergen, the Nobel prize winner for medicine in 1973. In the last decades, however, he departed from direct research to dedicate himself to the popularisation of science. Now retired, Dawkins held, from 1995 to 2008, the first Charles Simonyi professorship for the public understanding of science, a Chair established in Oxford by donations from the Hungarian American Charles Simonyi, Microsoft's ex-executive and programmer. "I'm a sort of ambassador for science", Dawkins says.

Dawkins' books have always reserved criticism against religion (especially against creationists). But the crusade against faith has turned into the centre of his activities since the release of *The God Delusion* in 2006. The scientist has supported the campaign which displayed banners in the traditional red buses of London which read "there's probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life". Always bellicose, the biologist does not accept any commitment solution which reserves distinct places for science and religion. "Unlike many people claim, the two fields do overlap. The religious view of the Universe, the idea that the Universe has a creator – it is, in its way, a scientific theory, though a wrong one", he says. In Dawkins' view, therefore, to promote atheism is also a way to continue his main mission: popularising science. But he is growing resentful about the polemic fame the attack against God renders him. He regrets, for instance, that the journalists in general ask him questions about this theme only.

Indeed, some people started perceiving him as a maverick for a negative programme – the man who says no to God and religion. It was in this role that he was satirised, three years ago, in the always acid cartoon *South Park* (his response was witty: he complained about the horrid imitation of the British accent made by the actor who dubbed his animated version). The positive message of Dawkins is only one: the theory of evolution, unravelled by Charles Darwin in his classic 1859 book *The Origin of Species*. In *The Selfish Gene*, Dawkins found a unique speech to convey the deep meaning of this process. He saw natural selection from the eye view of its basic unit, the gene. The living creatures, he argued, are nothing more than vehicles for the replication of genes by means of reproduction. This is, up to date, the basic perspective of evolutionary psychology, which seeks to explain animal behaviour (human included) on Darwinian grounds. "There has never been a science book like *The Selfish Gene*", wrote the writer Ian McEwan on the book's 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary. "It triggered a gigantic change in the theory about evolution, and at the same time seduced the layman, without being condescending and with style."

Dawkins' revolutionary point of view wasn't immediately a consensus in the scientific arena. Steadfast readers have criticised the supposed "genetic determinism" of the author. The attack against Dawkins and other biologists who worked in similar lines – such as Edward O. Wilson, at Harvard – was more of an ideological rather than scientific nature. Left-wing critics like the geneticist Richard Lewontin, the neuroscientist Steven Rose and the palaeontologist Stephen Jay Gould showed a programmatic aversion to any suggestion that the human behaviour could be influenced by genetics. "I have never understood why claiming that the environment

influence surpasses that of genes was so important for Marxists. Maybe it has something to do with the belief that the human being can always be improved”, Dawkins says. *The Selfish Gene* at last established itself as a fundamental reference for modern biology – and it has been followed by eight other elegant and enticing books in his explanation of evolution (a new title, *The Greatest Show on Earth*, is about to be published this year).

His description of life from the gene may suggest a hard and disenchanted materialism. The final lesson, however, is about a radical humanism: the human being is the only one capable of rebelling against the tyranny of the genes. “Whenever we use a contraceptive, we are contradicting the Darwinian imperative of reproduction. And we do it in many other serious issues”, Dawkins says. Orthodox Darwinist, Dawkins could repeat in any of his books the famous statement with which Charles Darwin ended *The Origin of Species*: “There is a grandeur in this view of life”.

Image subtitles:

**“Birds in the Pantanal**

Richard Dawkins: almost childish enthusiasm for parrots and toucans”

**“The man who says no**

The animated version of Dawkins in South Park: acid satire and horrid British accent”

**“No conciliation**

Dawkins at the door of a bus of the atheist campaign: he thinks the Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution (below) is incompatible not only with creationism, but with any other religious concept”