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The God Gene–Bad Science Meets Bad Theology

Sociobiologist Edward O. Wilson once declared religious belief to be “the greatest challenge to human sociobiology and its most exciting opportunity to progress as a truly original theoretical discipline.” In other words, Wilson admitted that belief in God is a fundamental challenge to the theory of evolution, since evolution cannot explain why this belief could be so widespread, so powerful, and so closely tied to human existence. Now, Dean Hamer, a geneticist at the National Cancer Institute at the National Institutes of Health, claims to have found the genetic explanation for belief in God—a “God gene” that provides an evolutionary explanation for faith.

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Dean Hamer’s work, published as *The God Gene: How Faith is Hardwired into Our Genes*, is certain to attract considerable attention. His argument that belief in God is tied to a mix of factors, but localized in a specific gene, fits the reductionistic mind of the age. Furthermore, Hamer’s hypothesis is the natural complement to a purely materialistic worldview.

The evolutionary worldview leads to a specific understanding of the human being, and that understanding is derived directly from pure materialism. The human being is understood to be the product of an evolutionary process that at every point is explained purely in terms of natural factors. Humans are collections of atoms and molecules, and all consciousness, belief, emotion, and moral judgment must be explained by nothing more than biochemical processes within the brain. In other words, the evolutionary mindset must reject the notion of a soul and must insist that all dimensions of consciousness are definable in purely physical terms.

In the physicalist worldview, the entire human experience is explained by genes, chemicals, natural selection, and the environment. In *The God Gene*, Dean Hamer attempts to explain religion and spirituality in purely physical terms. Yet, before he ever discusses the so-called “God gene,” he redefines faith itself. Hamer begins his book with an illustration drawn from Buddhist spirituality, and within the first ten pages he redefines faith as “self-transcendence.” As he explains, “Self-transcendence provides a numerical measure of people’s capacity to reach out beyond themselves—to see everything in the world as part of one great totality. If I were to describe it in a single word, it might be ‘at-one-ness’.”

Hamer admits that self-transcendence will sound a bit “flaky” to many readers. Nevertheless, “it successfully passes the test for a solid psychological trait.” Well, at least it passes the test of serving as a useful tool that will enable Hamer to continue his argument.

Continuing in a New Age direction, Hamer distinguishes “spirituality” from “religion.” Spirituality is tied to his notion of self-transcendence while religion is far more concrete, rational, and particular. As Hamer explains, “the self-transcendence scale tries to separate one’s spirituality from one’s particular religious beliefs by eschewing questions about belief in a particular God, frequency of prayer, or orthodox religious doctrines or practices.” Just in case we missed the point, Hamer adds: “Even individuals who dislike all forms of organized religion may have a strong spiritual capacity and score high on the self-transcendent scale.” So . . . the “God gene” doesn’t actually have anything directly to do with

believing in God, only [he argues] with the capacity to achieve self-transcendence.

Once Hamer makes this argument, he surrenders any sense of integrity in talking about a “God gene.” Having redefined his terms, limiting the specific scope of his explanatory thesis to concern for self-transcendence that can be understood in purely secular terms, Hamer undermines his own argument and marketing strategy.

Since Hamer is a research scientist who hopes to maintain some credibility in the scientific community, he must offer several caveats concerning his work. First, Hamer acknowledges that a genetic explanation can go only so far in explaining the totality of religious experience, or even self-transcendence. “The specific gene I have identified is by no means the entire story behind spirituality,” Hamer admits. “It plays only a small, if key, role; many other genes and environmental factors also are involved. Nevertheless, the gene is important because it points out the mechanism by which spirituality is manifested in the brain.”

Before considering Hamer’s genetic argument, what are we to make of his category of self-transcendence? Hamer uses the term to mean “spiritual feelings that are independent of traditional religiousness.” These feelings are not tied to belief in any specific God, nor are they tied to traditional practices of devotion or to any doctrinal structure. Instead, self-transcendence “gets to the heart of spiritual belief: the nature of the universe and our place in it.” Individuals who experience self-transcendence “tend to see everything, including themselves, as part of one great totality.” In other words, they sound like individuals who have graduated from the latest New Age self-help course in spirituality.

A central mechanism of Hamer’s argument is a self-transcendence scale devised by psychiatrist Robert Cloninger of Washington University Medical School in St. Louis. Cloninger’s instrument for measuring self-transcendence, known as a “TCI inventory,” provides Hamer with a way of establishing a research base in which he could study twins in order to determine whether belief in God is a heritable characteristic.

Fast-forwarding Hamer’s argument, he claims to have discovered a gene known as VMAT2, which controls the flow of monoamines within the brain. Monoamines are chemicals in the brain that can make us feel pleasurable, ecstatic, or depressed. Monoamines include dopamine and serotonin, and are customarily released by psychotropic drugs and hallucinogenics. Thus, Hamer argues that evolution explains why many individuals possess the VMAT2 gene, and are thus more likely to have their monoamines regulated in a way that leads to self-transcendence. Following so far?

Once self-transcendence is defined as the goal of this evolutionary process, and once VMAT2 is identified as the gene responsible for creating the feelings associated with self-transcendence, Hamer is well on his way to arguing that self-transcendence plays a role in evolution by fostering optimism in individuals possessing the trait. Such optimism leads to better health, to a more positive outlook toward the future, and increased likelihood that these individuals will have children and hand down their genes through the biological process.

This physicalist explanation, limiting something like faith in God to purely chemical factors, is necessary because Hamer and his colleagues are committed materialists. He provides an explicit admission of this fact in *The God Gene*. Insisting that a scientific explanation for belief in God must be expressed in terms of chemistry and physics, Hamer explains: “Proponents of this view often are called ‘materialists’ because they believe that all mental processes can ultimately be accounted for by a few basic physical laws. Most scientists, including myself, are materialists.”

In other words, as a committed materialist, Dean Hamer is looking for an explanation of belief in God that will fit his evolutionary worldview. In order to do this, he has to jettison all that is customarily associated with theism, avoid everything that has to do with the content of belief, and redefine his entire concern in terms of self-transcendence—an experience he admits can be purely secular. In other words, Dean Hamer tells us absolutely nothing about belief in God and very little about modern genetics.

This point was made devastatingly clear in a review of *The God Gene* published in the current issue of *Scientific American*. Carl Zimmer, another major evolutionary theorist, blasts *The God Gene* as bad science and reckless argument.

As Zimmer notes, “The field of behavioral genetics is littered with failed links between particular genes and personality traits. Those alleged associations at first seemed very strong. But as other researchers tried to replicate them, they faded away into statistical noise. In 1993, for example, a scientist reported a genetic link to male homosexuality in a region of the X chromosome. The report brought a huge media fanfare, but other scientists who tried to replicate the study

failed. The scientist's name was Dean Hamer."

That's right. Dean Hamer is most famously [or infamously] known for his claim to have found a genetic explanation for male homosexuality. That study created a firestorm in the press, and though it was never replicated in order to establish scientific credibility, it quickly became standard fare for arguments claiming homosexuality to be absolutely natural, and therefore normal.

As Zimmer laments, "Given the fate of Hamer's so-called gay gene, it is strange to see him so impatient to trumpet the discovery of his God gene." Zimmer then turns the table on Hamer, arguing that The God Gene should have been entitled A Gene That Accounts for Less than One Percent of the Variants Found in Scores on Psychological Questionnaires Designed to Measure a Factor Called Self-Transcendence, Which Can Signify Everything from Belonging to the Green Party to Believing in ESP, According to One Unpublished, Unreplicated Study. In the scientific community, that's undiluted condemnation.

It is laughable to suggest that belief in God is tied to any genetic structure that can be accounted for in this way. The Bible provides an authoritative explanation for our capacity to know God. As the book of Genesis makes clear, human beings are made in the image of God. It is the imago dei that explains the fact that we are the only creatures able consciously to know God, and to know Him intimately.

Any effort to create a genetic explanation for a generic experience of self-transcendence will fall far short of scientific credibility. More importantly, it will fall tragically short of providing an adequate theological explanation for how human creatures can know our Creator. That explanation is found only within the Bible, and is itself a knowledge revealed to us by our Creator.

The God Gene becomes a parable for our postmodern times—further evidence of the lengths to which clever humans will go in trying to deny that we were made by a Creator who designed us with the capacity to know Him. The book is bad science and bad theology combined, but it does succeed in making one point clear: Materialism just can't answer the big questions.

