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# Another Attempt to Reduce Belief in God to Biology

Wednesday, March 22, 2006

Culture critic John Carey of *The Times* [London] reviews Lewis Wolpert's new book, *Six Impossible Things Before Breakfast: The Evolutionary Origins of Belief*. We are again reminded that evolutionary theory comes complete with a worldview that must attempt to explain everything in purely materialistic terms

Wolpert teaches "biology as applied to medicine" at University College, London. Here is an excerpt from Carey's [review](#) of Wolpert's new book. Carey is explaining that Wolpert sees all aspects of religious belief as emerging from the evolution of human nature:

*The same applies with religious beliefs. Surveys suggest that religious people are happier, more optimistic, less prone to strokes and high blood pressure, more able to cope with life's problems and less fearful of death than the irreligious. It follows that belief in the supernatural is an evolutionary advantage, and our ability to have such beliefs must, Wolpert deduces, have been partly determined by our genes. Religious people might rejoice at that, concluding that God has wired us up to believe in him. But for Wolpert, the wiring is no more divine than our guts or toenails, or any other part of our evolved anatomy. Mystical raptures, similar to those reported by the devout, can be produced, he points out, by mental illness or hallucinogenic drugs and this, too, indicates that religion depends on neural circuits in our brain that accident or malfunction can activate. Some neuroscientists now link spiritual experiences with specific brain areas. Stimulating the brain of subjects with electromagnets causes tiny seizures in the temporal lobes that induce the subjects to believe they have spiritual experiences. The visions of St Teresa, it is suggested, may have been symptoms of temporal-lobe epilepsy.*

*Reductionism of this type can infuriate religionists. Yet Wolpert, though an atheist, is no foe to religion — at any rate in its benign aspects. A predisposition to religious beliefs is probably, he thinks, an essential part of human nature, and he tells how his youngest son, who had a difficult late adolescence, joined a fundamentalist Christian church and was undoubtedly helped by it. The book's argument is conducted modestly and without heat. It has a beautiful and sometimes breathtaking clarity, as when he writes of the protein molecules that made early multicellular organisms mobile, and evolved, over millions of years, into the nerves controlling movement in creatures such as molluscs and flatworms. These were the precursors of human brains, and their purpose was simply to make muscles move, so as to find food or avoid predators. "No muscles, no brain . . . And that is why plants do not have brains." The same neatness and brevity vitalise many passages in this radiantly intelligent book. They make a refreshing change from the hot air, vanity and bald assertion that characterise so much contemporary discussion of art and literature.*

You just have to love it when a man is described as "an atheist" who is "no foe to religion." Where are the atheists honest enough to argue that those who believe in a God whom the atheists believe does not exist are dangerous? Call me old fashioned, but I prefer atheists who believe in atheism.

