

The Rationality of Faith:
Reflections on Issues raised by the
New Atheism

Alister McGrath

Metanoia

Not just *repentance*

A total change of mind

A mental transformation – adopting and being transformed by the “mind of Christ”

Paul wrote to the Christian church in Rome, explaining that coming to faith is about not being “conformed to this world”, but being “transformed by the renewing of your minds” (Romans 12.2).

Kathleen Norris

“Repentance means ‘not primarily a sense of regret,’ but ‘a renunciation of narrow and sectarian human views which are not large enough for God’s mystery.’”

N. R. Hanson

Observation is shaped by theoretical presuppositions.

The process of “looking at” nature is actually “theory-laden”, in what we “see” is often shaped by assumptions drawn from our culture or existing scientific theories.

Theories are like a set of spectacles; they affect what we see.

Austin Farrer

“Though argument does not create conviction, the lack of it destroys belief. What seems to be proved may not be embraced; but what no one shows the ability to defend is quickly abandoned. Rational argument does not create belief, but it maintains a climate in which belief may flourish.”

William James

Religious faith is a “faith in the existence of an unseen order of some kind in which the riddles of the natural order may be found and explained.”

William James. *The Will to Believe*. New York: Dover Publications, 1956, 51.

Michael Polanyi (1891-1976)

Polanyi argued that the scientist's pursuit of discovery was guided by "sensing the presence of a hidden reality toward which our clues are pointing."

Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967, 24.

G. K. Chesterton

“Numbers of us have returned to this belief; and we have returned to it, not because of this argument or that argument, but because the theory, when it is adopted, works out everywhere; because the coat, when it is tried on, fits in every crease . . . We put on the theory, like a magic hat, and history becomes translucent like a house of glass.”

G. K. Chesterton

“The phenomenon does not prove religion, but religion explains the phenomenon.”

“With this idea once inside our heads, a million things become transparent as if a lamp were lit behind them.”

Charles Darwin

“It can hardly be supposed that a false theory would explain, in so satisfactory a manner as does the theory of natural selection, the several large classes of facts above specified. It has recently been objected that this is an unsafe method of arguing; but it is a method used in judging the common events of life, and has often been used by the greatest natural philosophers.”

William K. Clifford (1845-79)

“It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.”

William Kingdon Clifford, *The Ethics of Belief and Other Essays*.
Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1999, 70-96.

Richard Dawkins

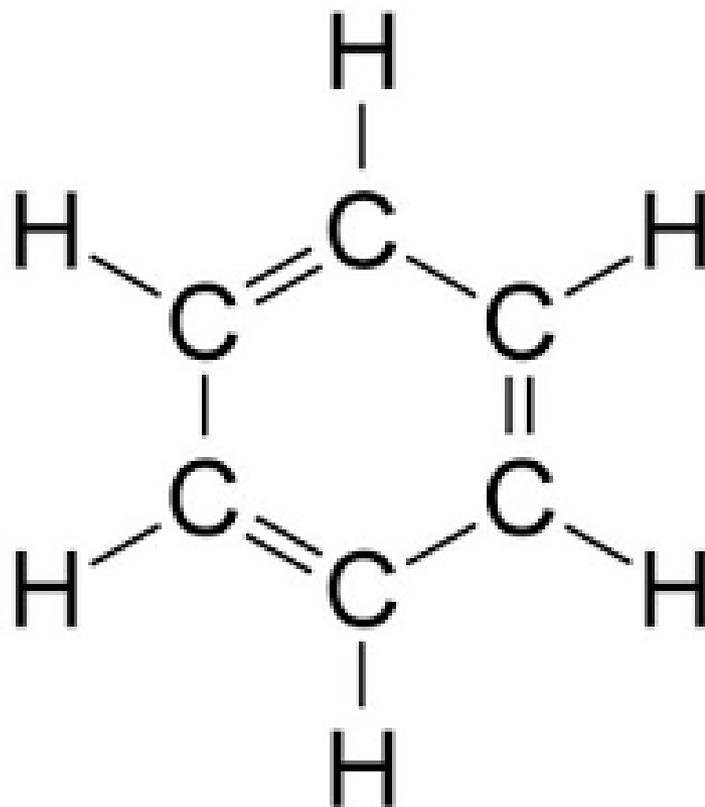
“[Faith] is a state of mind that leads people to believe something – it doesn’t matter what – in the total absence of supporting evidence. If there were good supporting evidence, then faith would be superfluous, for the evidence would compel us to believe it anyway.”

Charles Darwin

“A crowd of difficulties will have occurred to the reader. Some of them are so grave that to this day I can never reflect on them without being staggered; but, to the best of my judgement, the greater number are only apparent, and those that are real are not, I think, fatal to my theory.”

August Kekulé

The cyclical structure of benzene



Observation Statements

“The sun rose at Oxford at 6.25 a.m. on Tuesday, October 13, 1953”.

Since Copernicus, we would really need to restate this as:

“The sun appeared to rise above the horizon at 6.25 a.m. to an observer in Oxford on Tuesday, October 13, 1953”.

Svante August Arrhenius (1859-1927)

“The Universe in its essence has always been what it is now. Matter, energy, and life have only varied as to shape and position in space.”

Svante Arrhenius, *Worlds in the Making: The Evolution of the Universe*. New York: Harper, 1908, xiv.

Finally

The problems of Enlightenment rationalism

Marx, Darwin, and Freud

Postmodernity: there are multiple versions of
rationality