

Richard Dawkins Punished for Inviting Us to Think

by Theodore Dalrymple



Walter Duranty was possibly the worst foreign correspondent in the history of the Western press. Reporting on Russia for the New York Times during the 1920s and 30s, he not only lied through his teeth about the death of millions during the Ukrainian famine, but conspired, with some success, to prevent anyone else from telling the truth about it.

He won the Pulitzer Prize in 1934 for his reporting, but ever since 1990, when a biography of him was published that emphasized the extent of his mendacity, there have been efforts to have the prize symbolically rescinded (Duranty died in 1957).

A man may be honestly mistaken, but Duranty had knowingly and persistently lied about matters of world importance. At the very least he deserved the sack rather than a prestigious

award, but was never called to account during his lifetime; and the Pulitzer committee has twice decided that the award should not be withdrawn.

I can see the argument for rescinding the prize because Duranty's conduct was truly despicable, and the prize had been for what, morally, was a great crime.

But there is also an argument for not rescinding it, for the posthumous withdrawal of an award can look like an attempt to rewrite the history of the awarding authority by an act of auto-absolution. An admission that the Pulitzer committee had made a terrible error of judgment might have been sufficient.

We seem to have advanced greatly since Duranty's time. Richard Dawkins, the great popularizer of evolutionary biology, has not had to wait until many years after his death to have an award withdrawn, that of the American Humanist Association given to him in 1996 for his services to public scientific understanding.

He dared (or at least was imprudent enough) to broadcast incorrect thoughts on the matter of transsexualism which were deemed incompatible with humanistic values, and so the association withdrew the award.

What did Professor Dawkins say that entirely vitiated his past contributions to popular scientific understanding that were deemed worthy of reward?

Here is his