

How Not to Be an Atheist

The God Delusion, Richard Dawkins (Bantam Press 2006), Pp. 416, ISBN: 0593055489, Pbk. €10.

Anyone who attempts to write on one of the three ‘great questions’, namely, God, the Universe and Humankind, should remind themselves of the limits of such an endeavour by pasting many small pieces of paper around the house with the words ‘I don’t know’ written on them, especially if one is going to have the bravery or audacity to write on all three. Philosophers are perhaps a bit better than scientists in using (or having to use) these few small words since we are aware of the ghost of Socrates at our elbows. So it is that while the author of *The God Delusion* may spend much of his time reminding others of their ignorance, he unfortunately forgets his own in particular and that of science in general.

This is a book which I think the author will regret writing. Previous books which abounded in enthusiasm, beautiful prose, and sheer wonder at the marvels revealed by science rarely appear here. There is a regrettable tendency in the book towards rhetoric and point-scoring rather than argument. Again, he blunders into many areas where angels would fear to tread. This is because he regards science as the only *magisterium* and so he feels competent to judge of many matters where friends might have advised caution. Although the presentation is engaging, the structure of the book is extremely weak since Dawkins seemed to have exchanged scholarship for journalism.

At the beginning of the book, Dawkins states that the work is written for those who have been raised as religious and did not know that they could leave. His book deals with four main areas, all in a rather polemical, ‘consciousness-raising’ style, intended to encourage the aspiring atheist, who may perhaps be faltering along the way:

- To be an atheist is a brave and splendid aspiration
- The power of ‘cranes’ such as natural selection
- Religion and childhood
- Atheist pride

So far so good. If someone has examined the arguments and come to the conclusion that there is no God, then this is to be respected. However, if one first asks for respect for one’s atheistic views, it hardly serves to bolster one’s case by then entering into a polemic with opponents who are termed ‘faith-heads’ (pp. 5-6). Religious fundamentalists are very much the bogeymen of the book. Yet fundamentalism is not just confined to religion. Dawkins surely cannot equate all religious belief with bigotry just because some believers are prejudiced—this unfortunately is a fallacy repeated throughout the length of the book.

Lack of clarity or the blurring of distinctions makes it quite difficult for the reader to follow him at times and to be quite sure what he means. Already early on in the book, Dawkins seems to wish to regard pantheism as being the same as atheism or at least as being so close to atheism as to make no difference. Now a philosophical theist is not the same as a religious theist, an agnostic is not the same as a pantheist, and certainly a pantheist is not an atheist. A religious person will recognise something of the quality of Einstein's wonder at the universe as something he or she also experiences. The strange thing is that while Dawkins admits that he shares this experience himself he wishes to deny that someone such as Einstein might have really meant that this was a 'pantheistic' experience. In fact, we are told that 'Pantheism is sexed-up atheism' (p. 18). Furthermore, Dawkins regards the metaphorical use of the word 'God' by physicists as something which should be refrained from and that to confuse the pantheistic God of the physicists with the God of ordinary language is 'an act of intellectual high treason' (p. 19).

Already by p. 21 Dawkins strays into an area with which we are perhaps more familiar than he is; Northern Ireland. His contention is rather strange, that there the conflict between Catholics and Protestants has been euphemised into a conflict between Nationalist and Loyalists respectively. Clearly nobody told him about the difference between Nationalist and Republican, between Unionist and Loyalist; here as in many places throughout the book, he is simply careless. It is the attention to detail which marks out the success of modern science and he really should know better if his job is to promote a public understanding of science. It simply annoys that he did not bother to check to see if there are Protestant Republicans or Catholic Unionists. The book is full of examples which he picks at random and which show that his views at times tend to be unscientific and over-simplistic and what is perhaps sad to point out in a scientist, an impatience with subtle or fine distinctions made by others. The intellectual credentials of theologians are dismissed without there being any acknowledgment that (within the Catholic tradition at least but by no means confined to it) a trained theologian must be educated in philosophy as well as psychology, sociology, law, history, science, and so on.

Pages 24-27 contain examples which are drawn from past abuses in order to reach general conclusions. As I have mentioned already, Dawkins should know that this kind of procedure is invalid. And yet he is right to say that the respect which can be accorded to another person's religious sensitivities has a limit. This is part of the frustration in reading this book. There is much that a scientifically and philosophically educated person will agree with Dawkins about, but the erratic nature of his arguments, the lack of fair-mindedness in the people he targets, make him a floating mine, a threat to friend and foe alike. The publisher of the book also bears a certain amount of blame since they should have made the author aware of the fact that he needed a friendly but philosophically educated reader to prune his excesses and to weed out those arguments which are not particularly fit to survive.

Dawkins (like many liberal theologians actually) does not seem to entertain the notion that a religious belief could be true because based upon something which really happened. (I remember once in the course of a lecture presenting some of views of the Anglican theologian Don Cupitt as published in an interview given to the *Philosophers' Magazine*. One student confessed to being delighted to hear such views since, as an atheist, it seemed to him that theologians such as Cupitt were finally coming around to his point of view!) Most believers not only believe in something because it seems good to do so (belief in) but also because it contains a factual basis (belief that). The belief which springs from a reading of the New Testament accepts its supernatural character, otherwise the teaching contained therein would not differ from any philosophical or moral teaching. Dawkins like many others may dispute that the miraculous events of the New Testament really took place. Like Hume he may be sceptical about all reports of purported miracles, but he cannot reject them out of hand unless he can demonstrate their impossibility. Hume, arguably a greater mind than Dawkins, fell into the same trap of confusing implausibility with impossibility and attacking miracles with fallacious arguments, most of which were *ad hominem*. A believer will hold that what he believes is true because it is based on the report of something which really happened, and that otherwise it is really not worth believing in. One may not share these beliefs, one may reject what one perceives to be credulity in another but the improbability does not rule out a *prima facie* case for examining the truthfulness or otherwise of such beliefs. Any fair-minded person (including someone with a robust faith I presume) can laugh with him at some of the excesses of religious credulity as long as we can also laugh at the credulity of scientists as well—who now recalls the welcome given by some scientists to the discovery of ‘cold fusion’ and to the ‘memory’ of water?

A central plank in Dawkins' position is that religion is a delusion, and not only that it deludes but that its effects are pernicious. As a corollary, he regards atheism as virtuous because among other things it involves the virtue of honesty. One of the points made against this view is that enlightened scepticism or atheism seems fine for an elite who can take comfort in a pleasant society which is underpinned either by religious belief or secular forms of Christianity such as socialism. Critics have pointed to examples of totalitarian regimes which were aggressively atheist and which were responsible for millions of deaths. The response that religion has also been responsible for innumerable deaths is hardly a good answer. Philosophers for centuries have pointed out that the acquisition of virtue and the avoidance of vice does not necessarily go hand in hand with an individual's religious belief or lack of one. It is obvious that some atheists are good and some are bad, just like some Christians are good and some are bad. Again, if an atheist expects toleration, surely she or he should extend toleration to the public expression of religious belief and individual conscience (p. 45).

Although most people will make a distinction between atheism and agnosticism, Dawkins wishes to show that the low probability of God's

existence leads to *de facto* atheism (p. 47). Indeed, this is his own acknowledged position and, to many, it will seem that his position is close to that of Hume. There is a theoretical difference of course between the two, as has already been alluded to above, but here Dawkins will argue that from a practical point of view agnosticism in everyday life is indistinguishable from atheism. He comments (p. 53) that our position regarding an open question will normally be somewhat 50/50 and that the evidence tends to move us more to one side rather than to the other. However, lack of evidence will also from a practical point of view make us tend towards one point of view rather than the other. Dawkins contends that if no evidence can be found, one should adopt a mental stance which is close to atheism. However, surely the difference between an atheist and an agnostic is that the atheist like the theist has made up his or her mind in a more or less definitive fashion. On p. 55 Dawkins seems to have a problem with the sincerity of many religious believers or theistic philosophers. Scientists who likewise stray and affirm even a minimal theism also have their sincerity questioned. Surely if a person writes something, we are not entitled to say without evidence that they did not mean it. And yet this is how Dawkins regards Stephen Jay Gould in his book *Rocks of Ages*. Gould's crime, as it were, is to put forward the notion of non-overlapping magisteria or NOMA, i.e., that the competence of the scientist might be restricted to a specific field of inquiry and that others might be experts in their own field. What Dawkins will not concede is that a theologian (or any theist) has any authority to speak because there is only one magisterium, that of science and of its servants. Religion can have no authority because Dawkins does not accept the existence of miracles or supernatural events. Even less so does he accept the notion that a religion might be divinely revealed. Although he does not say so explicitly, he seems to imply that the competing truth claims of the various religions cancel each other out. Nor does he mention that in the case of reported miracles that the Catholic Church, for example, does take the care to ask scientific and medical experts to carry out investigations to see if the event might have a natural explanation. One will, however, have sympathy with his rejection of the 'prayer experiment' (p. 67) and our natural sense of justice will also lead many readers to reject Swinburne's 'grotesque' argument that 'some people need to be ill'.

A version of Flew's challenge appears on pp. 69-71. One might not be able to disprove the existence of alien life, Dawkins argues, but at least we can write down the kind of evidence which might count for or against it. Why should the case of God be any different? It is clear that for Dawkins the God hypothesis is not outside of the remit of science since there is no other discipline competent to deal with matters of fact.

This leads into chapter 3 which examines some philosophical arguments for the existence of God. This is perhaps the part which the trained philosopher will most look forward to since it is what she or he will be most familiar with. But what a disappointment! With what a heavy heart and internal groaning do we anticipate Dawkins's mistakes being repeated over and over again in

undergraduate examination scripts for years to come! It is a matter of some wonder that the author cannot even get Aquinas's Five Ways right. Dawkins could have at least copied them down accurately, something we would expect from a First Year philosophy student. It reflects badly upon him as a scholar and questions the reliability of what he writes elsewhere in the book that he gets such a simple task so badly wrong. Students are always warned against the dishonesty inherent in constructing a 'straw man' which is exactly what Dawkins does here. It seems that he is so convinced that Aquinas is wrong that he does not have to understand what Aquinas wrote.

In particular, Dawkins gets the Third Way hopelessly wrong (p. 77). He then goes on to make the assertion that the first three ways use the notion of regress and invoke God to terminate it. For some strange reason he seems to think (following Hume, it appears) that having invoked an absolute 'Terminator' that it is then an unwarranted assumption to hold that God is immune to the regress. How strange that it never occurred to Aquinas to ask what came before God! Now one can say that there is no First and that a potentially infinite regress is all that there is, but it is hardly fair that if someone holds that God is First absolutely to then ask them what came before? As a question it makes little sense and even less sense as an objection. However, no-one is going to argue that such arguments as put forward in the first three of the Ways say very little about the nature of God. Indeed, a First Cause argument only seeks to establish the existence of a 'Terminator' and not the God of theism. Furthermore, Dawkins's contention that omnipotence and omniscience have been shown to be mutually incompatible (p. 78) would be news indeed to Boethius.

Dawkins rushes on getting the fourth way wrong, confusing moral and ontological goodness. Again, an undergraduate would explain to him why the argument cannot be used to establish the existence of privations.

The Fifth Way surely is the one that we would expect Dawkins to get right (p. 79) at least out of his own professional curiosity. However, like many others he seems to think that Aquinas's argument is the same as Paley's—teleology is not quite the same as design. In general, Aquinas's reflections on directedness in nature take place in the context of the intelligibility of nature as a whole. Dawkins, I suppose, is not to be expected to know that Aquinas knew of some elements of an evolutionary theory, namely birds and fish having a common ancestor, and the role of random mutations. Darwin gave a natural explanation for how life develops from a common source without the intervention of an Intelligence during the course of the process once the process had begun. There are some things yet to be explained such as why the universe should be intelligible and (stranger and more marvellous still) how the dust of stars can become conscious and intelligent.

Dawkins, curiously enough, is far better on the ontological argument (p. 80) and the references to Russell are very interesting indeed. Other arguments for the existence of God get short shrift and in some cases rightly so since they either would not be regarded as valid or as philosophically significant. Indeed,

some of the arguments, such as the argument from Emotional Blackmail (p 85) are downright ridiculous. The reader, however, is not informed or made aware that philosophers would not heap such arguments together as if they were all the same, nor that the trite presentation of some of them is a distortion.

The next chapter, entitled 'Why there almost certainly is no God' contains a variation upon the principle of Falsification. Dawkins helpfully provides what he would accept as falsifying evolution, namely fossils in the wrong strata (p. 125). He gives a good (if not conclusive) argument against irreducible complexity, *pace* Behe. On the other hand, the quotation attributed to Augustine seems to be taken out of context: Augustine is warning against wasting time on speculation which will lead to nowhere and not against science per se. Dawkins would surely admit that some funded research projects in science may well turn out to be a waste of time and money. Again, one cannot but agree with Dawkin's statement (p. 134) that we get nowhere by labelling our ignorance God and few contemporary theists would resort to such a 'God of the Gaps'. Again, some religious writers seem to base their rejection of evolution by singling out gaps in the theory but this is dangerous to their position because it is quite likely that such gaps will be closed in the future. It is a matter of concern that we hear rumours that guides in National Parks in the US cannot refer to the 'purported' age of the fossils. The peril of opening religious belief to ridicule by the use of such an 'omphalos' theory was already amply demonstrated in *Father and Son* by Edmund Gosse.

I am afraid that I find it hard to follow Dawkins contention (p. 137) that the origin of life, being a highly improbable event on the natural scale, and therefore unlikely to be intended, implies that the origin of life is therefore absolutely unintended. As he points out, the origin of life is the real problem since the diversification of life has already been largely explained. He rules out, of course, that the origin of life can have anything other than a natural explanation. A similar line of argument is given (p. 143) where the improbability of a Goldilocks Universe (one 'just right' for life) is held by Dawkins to lead to the improbability of God. This may be the case if one treats God as an object within the universe. For Dawkins, the hypothesis concerning the existence of God must always be an empirical one and there is no way in which he is willing to treat of God as a being which transcends the universe. If God cannot be the object of science, then for Dawkins he has the same status as 'fairies at the bottom of the garden'.¹ Again, it seems to me that Dawkins rightly dismisses the argument that the universe 'knew' we were coming – given the way that our corner of the universe is set up, only the kind of life which we find here could have emerged.

¹ See the dedication of the book to Douglas Adams. Adams was the author of *The Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy*, which I thoroughly enjoyed as a teenager when it was made into a television series. In this spirit perhaps it might be pointed out (*verbum cognoscenti*) that whereas science might come up with the answer '42', only philosophy might discover the question!

Although Dawkins acknowledges that there is nothing in physics to rival the explanatory model of Darwinian evolution in biology, he is curiously silent on the limits of scientific knowledge as evidenced, for example, in the on-going realism/anti-realism debate regarding the theoretical particles which constitute atomic theory. Dawkins never seems to doubt that evolution provides and will provide an explanation for the facts of biological life.

The uneven nature of the book manifests itself in the pages which follow. Can the world's more than one billion Catholics really be expected to take him seriously when he states that a Catholic of normal frailty and less than normal intelligence suffers a 'semi-permanent state of morbid guilt?' (p. 167). Again, he is hardly original or convincing in putting forward the thesis that a belief in an immortal soul and the existence of God is part of a childhood attitude. Dawkins never seems willing to accept that there is the possibility of a mature religious faith or an intelligent philosophical theist—all are deluded. He appears to be on thin ice when he tries to use a scientific theory of natural selection to explain language and religion (p. 188) and fellow scientists have difficulty in treating the theory of memes seriously. Here, as elsewhere, Dawkins resists the extension of the notion of the survival of the fittest to a form of social Darwinism but seems unable to say why (p. 221). Pity and generosity to a stranger are described as 'blessed precious mistakes'—we should not act in an altruistic fashion but inexplicably we do.

In a section entitled 'The Roots of Morality' (pp. 222-33), Dawkins spends some time arguing that religion is not necessary for morality with some mention of Kant. There is little which is novel here and most people will have little difficulty in accepting that the fear of punishment will not make people moral. He is probably right when he states that atheists are likely to subscribe to humanism, to have had access to higher education, to be intelligent and reflective and so less likely to be criminals. However, there is little reason to think (and to be fair Dawkins would probably concede the point) that if atheism were to become a mass movement that it would not also include people who are stupid and immoral.

The remaining chapters of the book (7 to 10) are less interesting from a philosophical point of view. I will, therefore, limit myself to a few observations. Dawkins is right when he points out the immorality of some of the passages of the Old Testament which are clearly unacceptable. He is also right in pointing out that religion can make good people do bad things but so can football, politics, etc. There are more fundamental questions here which Dawkins does not address nor does he feel the need to do so. The new Ten Commandments which he reprints (pp. 263-4; he got them on the internet) are fairly unobjectionable but his own additions seem rather banal. He implies, however, that it is fairly easy to achieve a natural moral consensus that any ordinary decent person would come up with but then he retracts this (p. 286) because some people subscribe to moral absolutism and extremism. Examples follow

regarding extremists on such issues as homosexuality and abortion. However, an extremist is hardly representative and most people will oppose fundamentalism (both religious *and* scientific) since it is opposed to reason. Although he has a certain sympathy (because of his dislike of ‘unfairness’) for Catholic clergy in Ireland and America who have been demonised over the issue of child sexual abuse, he regards the psychological harm of being brought up as a Catholic in the first place as worse (p. 317). Nor does Continental Philosophy fare much better. Dawkins (p. 347) dismisses Foucault, Barthes and Kristeva as ‘icons of haute francophonyism’.

Something of vintage Dawkins will be found in the section entitled ‘Inspirations’. Here he brings to life the marvel that is modern science and the wonder it can inspire. Dawkins points out that science reveals to us a universe which is infinitely richer than our senses can ever disclose to us. He shows how bright and imaginative and insightful the great scientific mind has to be. Here we begin to understand why he needs to fight against some religious people who would wish to deprive us for ever of seeing such marvels.

And this is really the nub of the problem, the ‘original sin’ as it were of *The God Delusion*. Dawkins has the means to carry believers and unbelievers forward in an appreciation and love of science. He can show us why we must fight against those who would make us sit in the dark, watching shadows. However, his rhetoric and invective, his poor logic and fallacies, weaken his case and the cause of science. A discipline such as science teaches the use of precise and painstaking measurement but here Dawkins reaches for a blunderbuss, shooting out arguments both good and bad, some hit the mark and some do not, but he hits friend and foe alike. The book purports to deal with a delusion but what it delivers is disillusionment. As H. Allen Orr writes: ‘Though I once labelled Dawkins a professional atheist, I’m forced, after reading his new book, to conclude he’s actually more an amateur.’²

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² The *New York Review of Books* 54-1, January 11, 2007.