

***The God Delusion*, by Richard Dawkins, New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2006. 416 pages. Appendix. Index.**

Richard Dawkins' aim in this book is not just to provide atheists with ammunition to support their cause, but to help convert people to atheism. He hopes that people who are not atheists when they take up the book will be atheists when they put it down. This ambitious task confirms an important truth that many overlook in the contemporary debate between atheism and religion—that atheism (perhaps today best described as secularism) is a worldview in its own right with its own view of reality, its own theory of morality and, most significantly, its own political agenda. Atheists would like their moral and political agenda to be a major player in the shaping of modern culture, a major influence on the way people live their lives. Indeed, Dawkins calls for atheists to be more confident in asserting their views publicly, so that they can have political clout, hopefully at the expense of the religious worldview

Unfortunately, in this book Dawkins' defense of atheism is laughably weak. It is worth remembering that Dawkins is a scientist, who works and writes usually in the area of evolution. In this book he steps outside his area of expertise, for he is mainly trying to do philosophy and theology here, and it is painfully obvious that he has little knowledge or experience in these areas.

Three problems are glaringly obvious to anyone who even glances over the book. First, Dawkins does not know how to argue

for his thesis. He mainly presents the weakest kind of arguments—sometimes embarrassingly bad arguments—for his views. Second, he does not do his research properly. His discussion of various arguments for the existence of God and for the rationality of religious belief are based on a superficial, usually prejudiced reading of the work of maybe one thinker associated with an argument (and in some cases no thinkers at all). In addition, most of the resources to which he appeals to back up his points are newspaper or magazine articles, or Internet sites, rather than detailed, informed scholarly discussions by experts; the latter are what honest, responsible readers rightfully demand.

Third, the tone of the book is shocking. Although liberal secularists often have a reputation for dogmatism and superciliousness, Dawkins' contribution far surpasses anything I have seen in twenty years of work on this topic. The book is full of abuse, invective, and intolerant rants toward religion and religious believers; indeed, his style will likely put many people off, atheists as well as theists. One does wonder if there might not be some psychological reason for his hatred of religion. (If so, do not be surprised if some time in the future, he converts!) Can there be any doubt that if a theist of any stripe had written a similar diatribe against atheism, reviewers sympathetic to Dawkins' views would point out that it was filled with "hate speech," and was a good indication of the irrationality and general nastiness of religious believers? I suspect, though, that even many atheists will find it difficult to give him a pass on the tone of this book.

The book has chapters on the arguments for the existence of God, on how evolution can explain all of reality, offering a speculative evolutionary account of the origin of religious belief, attempting to show how we can justify our objective moral beliefs without God, on the corruption of education by religion, etc. Almost without exception, Dawkins takes the weakest or, in some cases, the most extreme argument he can find in favor of the view he is opposing, and critiques that argument. He never seriously considers the important work of major thinkers on the

various topics, and almost always prefers some popular, often extreme, statement that shows religion in its worst light (and unfortunately there is no shortage of these). He willfully avoids serious engagement of his views by critics.

The main argument running through the book is that the excesses of religion (evil done by religious believers in history and today), which he often cites in detail, show that God does not exist, and so all claims that appeal to the supernatural must be false! A good example is provided by his discussion of religion and abortion. He considers the views of those who think that abortion is murder and are prepared to kill in defense of embryos versus the views of those who support abortion, whose position is well thought out and who wish to provide “a medical service for patients in need, who would otherwise go to . . . backstreet quacks” (296). In a brief footnote, he mentions a third view—the “substantial majority of American Christians [who] do not take an absolutist attitude to abortion, and are pro-choice” (297). There is *no discussion* of the position of the substantial number of people who offer perfectly reasonable and well-thought-out arguments against abortion but are strongly opposed to violent means to achieve their goals. This is a good illustration of Dawkins’ style of argument.

All of the arguments in the book are of this quality, usually expressed in the insufferable, sneering tones of one who is utterly convinced of his own moral and rational superiority. Dawkins says more than once that most intelligent and educated people are atheists (including the Founding Fathers), a patently absurd argument; indeed, the opposite is true, and the vast majority of educated, intelligent people who have ever lived were and are religious believers. He also dismisses the argument that atheism, too, is responsible for great evil, especially in the twentieth century (Hitler, Stalin, Pol Pot, Mao), by saying that these were just evil people who happened to be atheists! Did Hitler not kill because of an atheist ideology? Was he not trying to advance National Socialism? (And why not give this benefit of the doubt to the excesses of religion as well?)

Dawkins is especially disappointing on the arguments for the existence of God. For example, on the cosmological argument, which says that the universe must have a first cause outside the physical order, he thinks an effective reply is to ask, “What caused God?” Whereas in fact the key point of St. Thomas Aquinas’s version is that it is reasonable to conclude that *a necessary being exists*. This is because there are only two possible answers to the question of how our (contingent) universe got here. The first is that it was created by a necessary being, a being who always existed, a being who cannot fail to be. The other answer is that there is no explanation available, a position the human mind strongly resists because it is not reasonable. The main point of Thomas’s argument is to illustrate that a necessary being *must* exist, otherwise we have no explanation for the universe.

Dawkins is well known from his previous work for arguing that evolution can explain everything, and there is nothing new offered here on this position. In his critique of intelligent design, he argues that it is easy to imagine situations in which half an eye would be better than no eye at all. This is true, but it is not the main issue. The claim of intelligent design theorists is that, according to strict Darwinism, the optic nerve, for example, evolved because it performed some selective advantage for the organism, yet the function it performed could *not* have been connected with sight, because for sight to occur we would need the eye itself, the optic nerve, and connections to both the optic nerve and the brain, all present at the same time. This is an interesting objection to natural selection. Dawkins may think he has an effective response to it, but his reply about operating with half an eye is obviously not going to work. He needs to explain first how we got the optic nerve, and what advantageous function it was performing, and then how it *later* became a perfectly functioning part of a different system (sight) in the organism.

Dawkins also does not acknowledge that the theory of evolution applies only to biological systems. And so it cannot help us with the real question concerning design: how the

design of the universe come about, “design” understood as the laws of physics. Evolution cannot give us an explanation for the laws of physics, because evolution, like all scientific theories, must *presuppose* these laws. The matter and energy involved in evolutionary change follows or obeys the laws of physics in ways we have discovered in science. Evolution is not an explanation of these laws; rather, it operates according to them.

These are all serious problems for Dawkins’ view, problems which are, in fact, fatal to his atheistic account of reality, yet he does not give them the attention an honest thinker should. Instead, he advocates totally speculative theories about how evolution produced religion as a by-product of something else that was somehow connected to our survival—another example of a scientist, who elsewhere insists that we should stick to the evidence and the facts, resorting to mumbo-jumbo to paper over problems in his position.

He does the same thing later, when returning to the question of where our universe came from, by appealing to the theories of Lee Smolin. Smolin has suggested that ours may be one of multiple universes, where daughter universes are born of parent universes coming out of black holes. Dawkins thinks this explanation is more probable than the God hypothesis! He does not address the question of how the whole process began, of where the first “parent” universe came from. He also suggests that objective moral values are probably biological, having their origins somehow in our evolutionary past. (It *must* be that way in his worldview, but of course no account of how this occurred is possible; instead, he must accept it as an article of faith.)

Talk of morality exposes another major problem for his view: free will. Free will is the root not only of moral decisions, but of responsibility, punishment, and democracy. This is a very thorny problem for secularists, who are faced with having to say that, since all of our actions are rooted in our brains and central nervous systems, which have been created by the random, impersonal process of evolution, then all of our “choices” should be explicable in terms of scientific causal

laws operating on bits of matter. In short, there is no room in a naturalistic universe for free will. Many secularists realize that it is almost impossible to conceive of human life as we understand and experience it without believing in free will, and so the cost of giving it up is huge, and yet they can see no way to fit free will into a completely physical universe. On this major problem for his view, Dawkins is silent.

If Dawkins’ book is anything to go by, it may tell us three things about the modern face of atheism: (1) atheists want to keep religion out of politics so that *their* worldview can have significant influence on society; (2) atheists can be just as dogmatic as religious believers, regarding themselves as “the enlightened ones,” which (in a democratic context) can be dangerous; (3) atheists are not as interested in honestly debating their worldview as they make out.

BRENDAN SWEETMAN, PH.D.  
Professor of Philosophy  
Rockhurst University  
Kansas City, Missouri