



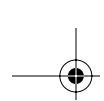
Introduction



SINCE THE PUBLICATION OF *THE SELFISH GENE* (1976), Richard Dawkins has established himself as one of the most successful and skillful scientific popularizers. Along with his American colleague Stephen Jay Gould, he has managed to make evolutionary biology accessible and interesting to a new generation of readers. I and other admirers of his popular scientific works have long envied their clarity, their beautiful use of helpful analogies, and their entertaining style.

Yet his latest book marks a significant departure. *The God Delusion* has established Dawkins as the world's most high-profile atheist polemicist, who directs a withering criticism against every form of religion.¹ He is out to convert his readers: "If this book works as



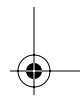
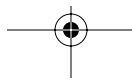
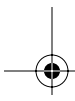


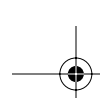
I intend, religious readers who open it will be atheists when they put it down.”² Not that he thinks that this is particularly likely; after all, he suggests, “dyed-in-the-wool faith-heads are immune to argument.”

Yet the fact that Dawkins has penned a four-hundred-page book declaring that God is a delusion is itself highly significant. *Why is such a book still necessary?* Religion was meant to have disappeared years ago. For more than a century, leading sociologists, anthropologists and psychologists have declared that their children would see the dawn of a new era in which the “God delusion” would be left behind for good. Back in the 1960s, we were told that religion was fading away, to be replaced by a secular world.

For some of us, that sounded like a great thing. I was an atheist back in the late 1960s and remember looking forward to the demise of religion with a certain grim pleasure. I had grown up in Northern Ireland and had known religious tensions and violence at first hand. The solution was obvious to my freethinking mind. Get rid of religion and such tensions and violence would be eradicated. The future was bright—and godless.

Two things have changed since then. In the first place, religion has made a comeback. It is now such a significant element of today’s world that it seems strange to think that it was only a generation ago that its death was foretold with such confidence. The humanist writer Michael Shermer, perhaps best known as the director of the Skeptics Society and publisher of *Skeptic* magazine, made this point forcefully back in 1999 when he pointed out that never in history have so many, and such a high percentage of the American population, believed in God.³ Not only is God not





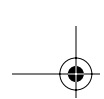
“dead,” as the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche prematurely proclaimed; he never seems to have been more alive.

Second, and rather less important, my own attitudes have changed. Although I was passionately and totally persuaded of the truth and relevance of atheism as a young man, I subsequently found myself persuaded that Christianity was a much more interesting and intellectually exciting worldview than atheism. I have always valued freethinking and being able to rebel against the orthodoxies of an age. Yet I never suspected where my freethinking would take me.

Dawkins and I have thus traveled in totally different directions, but for substantially the same reasons. We are both Oxford academics who love the natural sciences. Both of us believe passionately in evidence-based thinking and are critical of those who hold passionate beliefs for inadequate reasons. We would both like to think that we would change our minds about God if the evidence demanded it. Yet, on the basis of our experience and analysis of the same world, we have reached radically different conclusions about God. The comparison between us is instructive, yet it raises some difficult questions for Dawkins.

Dawkins, who is presently professor of the public understanding of science at Oxford University, holds that the natural sciences, and especially evolutionary biology, represent an intellectual superhighway to atheism—as they did for him in his youth. In my own case, I started out as an atheist who went on to become a Christian—precisely the reverse of Dawkins’s intellectual journey. I had originally intended to spend my life in scientific research but found that my discovery of Christianity led me to study its history





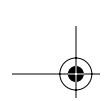
and ideas in great depth. I gained my doctorate in molecular biophysics while working in the Oxford laboratories of Professor George Radda, but then gave up active scientific research to study theology.

I have often wondered how Dawkins and I could draw such totally different conclusions on the basis of reflecting long and hard on substantially the same world. One possibility might be that, because I believe in God, I am deranged, deluded, deceived and deceiving, my intellectual capacity having been warped through having been hijacked by an infectious, malignant God virus. Or that, because I am deranged, deluded, deceived and deceiving, my intellectual capacity having been warped through having been hijacked by an infectious, malignant God virus, I believe in God. Both those, I fear, are the substance of the answer I find in the pages of *The God Delusion*.

This may be an answer, but it's not particularly a persuasive answer. It might appeal to diehard atheists whose unbending faith does not permit them to operate outside the "non-God" box. But I hope that I am right in suggesting that such nonthinking dogmatists are not typical of atheism. Another answer to my question might be to repeat the same nonsense, this time applying it to Dawkins. (Although in this case, I suppose that we would have to posit that his mind had been hijacked by some kind of "no-god virus.") But I have no intention of writing something so implausible. Why insult Dawkins? Even more important, why insult the intelligence of my readers?

The beginnings of a real answer lie in some wise words of Stephen Jay Gould, whose sad death from cancer in 2002 robbed

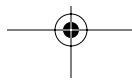


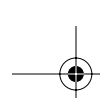


Harvard University of one of its most stimulating teachers, and a popular scientific readership of one of its most accessible writers. Though an atheist, Gould was absolutely clear that the natural sciences—including evolutionary theory—were consistent with both atheism and conventional religious belief. Unless half his scientific colleagues were total fools—a presumption that Gould rightly dismissed as nonsense, whichever half it is applied to—there could be no other responsible way of making sense of the varied responses to reality on the part of the intelligent, informed people that he knew.⁴

This is not the quick and easy answer that many would like. But it may well be right—or at least point in the right direction. It helps us understand why such people hold such fundamentally different beliefs on these matters—and why some others consequently believe that, in the end, these questions cannot be answered with confidence. And it reminds us of the need to treat those who disagree with us on such questions with complete intellectual respect rather than dismissing them as liars, knaves and charlatans.

Whereas Gould at least tries to weigh the evidence, Dawkins simply offers the atheist equivalent of slick hellfire preaching, substituting turbocharged rhetoric and highly selective manipulation of facts for careful, evidence-based thinking. Curiously, there is surprisingly little scientific analysis in *The God Delusion*. There's a lot of pseudoscientific speculation, linked with wider cultural criticisms of religion, mostly borrowed from older atheist writings. Dawkins preaches to his god-hating choirs, who are clearly expected to relish his rhetorical salvos and raise their hands high in



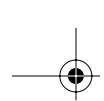


adulation. Those who think biological evolution can be reconciled with religion are dishonest! *Amen!* They belong to the “Neville Chamberlain school” of evolutionists! They are appeasers! *Amen!* *Real* scientists reject belief in God! *Hallelujah!* The God that Jews believed in back in Old Testament times is a psychotic child abuser! *Amen! You tell them, brother!*

When I read *The God Delusion* I was both saddened and troubled. How, I wondered, could such a gifted popularizer of the natural sciences, who once had such a passionate concern for the objective analysis of evidence, turn into such an aggressive antireligious propagandist with an apparent disregard for evidence that was not favorable to his case? Why were the natural sciences being so abused in an attempt to advance atheist fundamentalism? I have no adequate explanation. Like so many of my atheist friends, I simply cannot understand the astonishing hostility that he displays toward religion. Religion to Dawkins is like a red flag to a bull—evoking not merely an aggressive response but one that throws normal scholarly conventions about scrupulous accuracy and fairness to the winds. While his book is written with rhetorical passion and power, the stridency of its assertions merely masks tired, weak and recycled arguments.

I’m not alone in feeling disappointed here. *The God Delusion* trumpets the fact that its author was recently voted one of the world’s three leading intellectuals. This survey took place among the readers of *Prospect* magazine in November 2005. So what did this same magazine make of Dawkins’s book? Its reviewer was shocked at this “incurious, dogmatic, rambling, and self-contradictory” book. The title of the review? “Dawkins the Dogmatist.”





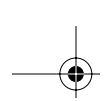
RESPONDING TO DAWKINS

It is clear that a response of some sort is needed to *The God Delusion*, if only because the absence of one might persuade some that no answer could be given. So how is one to reply? One obvious response would be to write an equally aggressive, inaccurate book, ridiculing atheism by misrepresenting its ideas and presenting its charlatans as if they were its saints. But that would be pointless and counterproductive, not to mention intellectually dishonest.

It is, in fact, actually rather difficult to write a response to this book—but not because it is well-argued or because it marshals such overwhelming evidence in its favor. The book is often little more than an aggregation of convenient factoids suitably overstated to achieve maximum impact and loosely arranged to suggest that they constitute an argument. To rebut this highly selective appeal to evidence would be unspeakably tedious and would simply lead to a hopelessly dull book that seemed tetchy and reactive. Every one of Dawkins's misrepresentations and overstatements can be challenged and corrected. Yet a book that merely offered such a litany of corrections would be catatonically boring. Assuming that Dawkins has equal confidence in all parts of his book, I shall simply challenge him at representative points and let readers draw their own conclusions about the overall reliability of his evidence and judgment.

Dawkins clearly has little interest in engaging religious believers, who will simply find themselves appalled by the flagrant misrepresentation of their beliefs and lifestyles. Is the case for atheism really so weak that it has to be bolstered by such half-baked nonsense? Dawkins pays his readers the highly dubious compliment

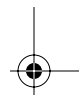


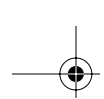


of assuming that they will share his prejudices and ignorance about religion. Any criticisms of his analysis will simply be met with the riposte: “Well, that’s what you *would* say, isn’t it?” Objections to his analysis are likely to be dismissed and discounted in advance precisely because they are made by “biased” religious people who are foolish and arrogant enough to criticize “objective” and “rational” atheists.

This is a very serious and troubling point. The total dogmatic conviction of correctness which pervades some sections of Western atheism today—wonderfully illustrated in *The God Delusion*—immediately aligns it with a religious fundamentalism that refuses to allow its ideas to be examined or challenged. Dawkins is resistant to the calibration of his own certainties, seeing them as being luminously true, requiring no defense. He is so convinced that his own views are right that he could not bring himself to believe that the evidence might legitimate any other options—above all, *religious* options.

What is particularly worrying is that, without seeming to realize it, Dawkins simply treats evidence as something to shoehorn into his preconceived theoretical framework. Religion is persistently and consistently portrayed in the worst possible way, mimicking the worst features of religious fundamentalism’s portrayal of atheism. When some leading scientists write in support of religion, Dawkins retorts that they simply cannot mean what they say. Dawkins clearly feels deeply threatened by the possibility of his readers encountering religious ideas or people that they might actually like—or even worse, respect and regard as worthy of serious attention.





All this seems to make writing books like this somewhat pointless. *Except that once I too was an atheist and was awaked from my dogmatic slumbers through reading books that challenged my rapidly petrifying worldview.* This book, I suspect, will be read mainly by Christians who want to know what to say to their friends who have read *The God Delusion* and are wondering if believers really are as perverted, degenerate and unthinking as the book makes them out to be. But it is my hope that its readers may include atheists whose minds are not yet locked into a pattern of automatic Dawkinsian reflexes. There are many who are deluded about God, and I used to be one of them.

This is a short book, with annotation kept to a minimum to save space. Its primary focus is simple and consistent: a critical engagement with the arguments set out in *The God Delusion*. Readers may wish that this book had been expanded to deal with other topics—such as a commendation and exploration of the intellectual resilience and spiritual power of Christianity.⁵ Those books will be written, in due course. But this one is simple, short and directly to the point. There are no digressions or diversions. It sets out to do one thing and one thing only—assess the reliability of Dawkins's critique of faith in God.⁶ Although written in the first person for historical and stylistic reasons, the views and arguments set forth are those of both authors.

But enough by way of introduction. Let us turn immediately to the themes of *The God Delusion*.

