A Response to Richard Dawkins’ The God Delusion

In the past few years, there have been several extremely popular books criticizing religious faith and the possibility of the existence of God. Possibly the most iconic among them is The God Delusion, by Richard Dawkins. Dawkins formerly held the Simonyi Professorship Chair for the Public Understanding of Science at the University of Oxford. He became known for his popular books on the theory of evolution and the mechanisms of natural selection, which were widely read and well received.

In 2006, Dawkins focused his keen writing ability on a book-length inquiry into the existence of God, in which he attacked religious faith with vigour. The God Delusion contains Dawkins’ argument that there is no good reason to believe in any god or gods. He argues that the theory of god does not give a good explanation of anything; does not help us to act morally; does not have an exclusive role to play in inspiring art or awe; and, if untrue, is not a good place to turn for consolation.

The God Delusion: The central argument

The central argument of Dawkins’ book is that, given what we know about the world, the existence of God is improbable. Does this ‘probabilistic’ proof for the non-existence of God work? Does Dawkins successfully show that God’s existence is very, very unlikely?

Dawkins’ argument is straightforward. He first tells us what it is that he wants to show is unlikely – that there exists a superhuman, supernatural intelligence who deliberately designed and created the universe and everything in it, including us.

He counters it with this statement:

any creative intelligence, of sufficient complexity to design anything, comes into existence only as the end product of an extended process of gradual evolution.

He explains further why this means there can be no God of the sort he has defined:

However statistically improbable the entity you seek to explain by invoking a designer, the designer himself has got to be at least as improbable.

To restate the argument: the universe is a complicated place which contains many different things that relate to each other in complicated ways. In that universe is life, which in many ways is more complicated than the rest of the universe. If we assume that the universe and its contents, including life, are all designed, what does that tell us about the designer? Based on what we know, the designer would have to be even more complex than the things that it had designed. For instance, a carpenter is more complicated than a chair and a mechanic is more complicated than a car. To put it another way – in order to design, the designer must have a clear mental picture of what he or she wants to design, as well as knowledge of what he or she does not want as an end result. Only a complex sort of mind can have these kinds of pictures. By implication, then, a God who designed the universe would have to be very complex.

According to Dawkins, the only way we know that can make complex things come out of simple things is the process of evolution by natural selection. Certainly, most scientists would agree that evolution by natural selection does allow more complex forms of life to develop.

Dawkins asks, if God existed before there was anything else, then where did God come from? Did he just appear? The spontaneous appearance of God is possible, but that is why Dawkins says that his proof works on probability. Why does God exist, even if he is eternal? It is possible that God just appeared, complex and ready to create, as it is possible that he is eternal, but it is very unlikely. In Dawkins’ opinion it is much more likely that God doesn’t exist, and that all life came about by natural selection.

The God Delusion: Some general problems

There are a couple of broad problems with Dawkins’ approach to theism. One is that very few people are simply ‘theists’: most people who believe in God follow a set of beliefs – Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and so on. No matter how hard Dawkins tries to construct a general inclusive argument, it would still need to be modified to address the concerns of any one of these particular religions. Each belief system may have nuances which render his broad-sweep arguments non-applicable. So, while Dawkins may have successfully argued against, and disproved, some general idea of ‘theism’, he has not done enough to show that these specific traditions are intellectually bankrupt.

Another problem is Dawkins’ implicit assumption that belief in God is a means to an end. His perspective is that there are only four reasons to believe in God: belief explains the world; it exhorts us to do good; it consoles us; and it inspires us. Dawkins argues that science and natural selection provide more satisfying answers than theistic belief in all of these areas: therefore there is no reason to believe in God.

This argument might work– if it did it would only show us that these specific reasons are not good reasons to believe in God. The question, then, becomes this: are these really the reasons why Christians believe in God? ... Christians do not believe in God because that belief is convenient

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2 The God Delusion, 52.
3 The God Delusion, 138.
The God Delusion: The central problem

Regardless of whether Dawkins’ argument applies to any specific belief system, we need to ask whether his main argument works on its own terms. There are several reasons why it does not. One important objection has to do with the nature of scientific evidence. Science is based on observation of the natural world, and presumably Dawkins would be quick to assert that his evidence and arguments are based on his observations of the natural world – including observation of what creative intelligence looks like in the natural world. This means that Dawkins needs to modify two of the statements we looked at earlier for the sake of accuracy.

First of all:

In our experience of the natural world, any creative intelligence, of sufficient complexity to design anything, comes into existence only as the end product of an extended process of gradual evolution.

Dawkins has already defined God as supernatural. This could mean many things, but one thing which it most certainly does mean is that God is not natural and therefore, although able to act in the natural world, he is not a part of it. So we cannot assert, based on our experience and observation of the natural world, that a complex God would have had to come into existence as the end product of evolution, or even that a God who creates must necessarily be complex. In fact, if we define God as supernatural, there is no possibility that science will ever be able to comment on this specific issue – even if it is able to comment on other issues regarding belief, religious or otherwise. The realm of science is nature, and the assumption that nature is all that exists is a belief that lies beyond science.

We can go further than this: time and space are a part of the natural world. If God is supernatural, then he exists outside of time and space. If he exists outside of time, he didn’t ‘come into existence’ at all – he just is. As an ‘absolute’ being, outside of time, God may indeed require an explanation. But he does not require a causal or scientific explanation such as that offered by evolution by natural selection.

Second:

In our experience of the natural world, however statistically improbable the entity you seek to explain by invoking a designer, the designer himself has got to be at least as improbable.

Again, Dawkins has defined God as supernatural, and this means that this statement simply does not apply to God. In the natural world, according to our observations, anything that creates must be complex. But we cannot directly or easily apply this statement to God. Although clearly this does not work as a viable argument for belief, it does effectively remove Dawkins’ argument as a viable basis for disbelief – probability does not apply in eternity.

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The God Delusion: The morality question

Having argued that there is no good reason to believe in God, and that there are good reasons not to believe in God, Dawkins moves on to argue that there is no good reason to want to believe in God. His tool for showing that religion is not just untrue, but also unnecessary, is the moral Zeitgeist. This is a term for the way that moral standards change and develop through time.

His argument is that

It is beyond my amateur psychology and sociology to go any further in explaining why the moral Zeitgeist moves in its broadly concerted way. For my purposes it is enough that, as a matter of observed fact, it does move, and it is not driven by religion – and certainly not by scripture.4

The Bible, according to Dawkins, is a very odd book because it was written by many different people over a long period of time. One thing Dawkins says we can be sure of, though, is that its use as instruction or example in moral reasoning will result in horrifying actions. Dawkins rubbishes the ways people interpret the Bible as disingenuous. He thinks that people interpret it to fit with what they already believe is right, rather than using it genuinely to criticize their own moral beliefs and actions. Dawkins sees this as a good thing, because taking the Bible at face value would lead to all kinds of despicable acts. The Bible may have been a helpful moral guide in its time, but it should not be used as a moral signpost in our time, Dawkins asserts, because of the changing moral Zeitgeist.

There are two problems with Dawkins’ approach. First, Dawkins has not taken the time to understand the way that scriptures function within their religious communities. Dawkins asserts that any kind of interpretation of the Bible is simply an attempt to finesse it to agree with our current moral climate.5 The evidence he gives for this is the variety of different moral perspectives that the Bible has been used to support. This approach rules out the possibility that we are still working to understand the Bible, and that the work of understanding it is productive and provides new insights that we can incorporate into the life of the Christian community. Second, Dawkins has not actually proven his case that religion and scripture do not drive meaningful and positive moral change. Dawkins gives examples of the changing moral Zeitgeist, paying special attention to slavery, racism for example, to show that the general standards of morality have changed, and have changed for the better. However, he has not convincingly shown that this change is not a result of religious belief. While the Bible has been used to support opposing moral attitudes, this does not mean that it has nothing meaningful to contribute. Would it be asking for too much faith in human rationality (or the Holy Spirit guiding the church) to grant that, generally speaking, the better interpretation wins the day? A perfect example is one which Dawkins himself uses.

He says that part of the reason for advance in morality is the increased understanding that each of us shares a common humanity with members of other races and with the other sex –

4 The God Delusion, 308.

5 ‘We pick and choose which bits of scripture to believe, which bits to write off as symbols or allegories. Such picking and choosing is a matter of personal decision, without an absolute foundation’ (The God Delusion, 269).
both deeply unbiblical ideas that come from biological science, especially evolution\(^6\)

Of course, anyone who has read through the long genealogies in Genesis,\(^7\) or Jesus’ story of the good Samaritan,\(^8\) will realize that the claim that ‘common humanity’ is an unbiblical idea is nonsense. Likewise, the idea that the knowledge of common humanity is inevitable given evolutionary science would be amusing, were its history not so tragic. Doubtless Dawkins would claim (and claim reasonably) that the widespread eugenics programmes in the early twentieth century were an inappropriate application of evolutionary science. But why is it then unreasonable for Christians to claim that when the Bible is used to oppress, it is used incorrectly? In fact, key areas of moral development during the last few hundred years have indeed come out of arguments over correct interpretation of the Bible,\(^9\) and Western conceptions of human rights have been the result of this debate.

Dawkins, however, dismisses the idea that religion could be the impetus for widespread moral change. Rather, he says that ‘there is a consensus about what we do as a matter of fact consider right or wrong: a consensus that prevails surprisingly widely. The consensus has no obvious connection with religion.’\(^10\) It should be obvious, however, that ‘no obvious connection’ is not the same thing as ‘no connection’, and especially in such a complex arena as the relationships between morality, culture and religion – where nothing is particularly obvious and the things that appear to be obvious often turn out to be wrong.

Theologian David Bentley Hart has argued very strongly that the modern moral consensus, which we in the West often assume is universal, is in fact a product of the change Christianity provoked when it impacted on Roman society.\(^11\) He argues that what Dawkins would perceive as a slow-moving Zeitgeist is actually the result of such a radical change in human history and morality that, even after two thousand years, its full effects have yet to be realized. Indeed, Hart challenges those who think otherwise to provide solid evidence – surely, he says, this kind of change should have happened more than once. He asks, ‘What other large multiethnic empire, for instance, incubated a Christian morality?’\(^12\)

Dawkins concludes that

> Whatever its cause, the manifest phenomenon of Zeitgeist progression is more than enough to undermine the claim that we need God in order to be good, or to decide what is good.\(^13\)

But this is obviously not true. Labelling the change in moral standards as a change in ‘Zeitgeist’ does not explain the reason for change, which is something Dawkins has admitted he is not qualified to do. It is inconsistent for Dawkins to admit that he does not possess the necessary skills to explain a change in Zeitgeist while at the same time claiming that it is clearly not the result of religious belief.

**Conclusion**

Richard Dawkins has tried to argue that, all things considered, it would be better not to believe in God because that belief does not explain anything and does not make us better. His arguments are simply unconvincing.

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\(^6\) The God Delusion, 307.
\(^7\) E.g., Genesis 5.
\(^10\) The God Delusion, 298.
\(^13\) The God Delusion, 308.

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The God Delusion: Taking it further

Websites and articles to download:

Stephen Barr, ‘Barr: Dawkins, Unfortunately’. This is a short review article by the particle physicist Stephen Barr: http://www.firstthings.com/onthesquare/?p=506


There are more responses to The God Delusion linked on the Christians in Science website resources page, found at http://www.cis.org.uk/resources/dawkins

Books:

David Robinson, The Dawkins Letters: Challenging Atheist Myths (Christian Focus, 2007). This book contains a series of letters which were posted on Dawkins’ website. The author is a Free Church of Scotland minister who wrote these letters as chapter-by-chapter responses to Dawkins’ book as he read it. They are intelligent, but not difficult to read.

Alister McGrath, Dawkins’ God: Genes, Memes, and the Meaning of Life (Blackwell, 2004). McGrath wrote this book, before The God Delusion was published, as a rebuttal of ideas present in Dawkins’ other writings. It is written at a popular level and attempts to analyze and critique Dawkins’ worldview. It is probably best suited for those with some previous knowledge of the issues involved.

Alister McGrath, The Dawkins Delusion?: Atheist Fundamentalism and the Denial of the Divine (SPCK, 2007). This book is a popular-level response to The God Delusion. Rather than rebutting Dawkins point by point, McGrath addresses the general issues of whether science and religion are really in conflict, and whether religion is actually as evil a thing as Dawkins suggests.

John Cornwell, Darwin’s Angel: An Angelic Riposte to The God Delusion (Profile Books, 2008). John Cornwell is an author, a journalist, and director of the Science and Human Dimension Project at Jesus College, Cambridge. This book is a witty, popular-level book written from the perspective of an angel. It contains chapters devoted to many of the specific issues brought up by Dawkins.

David Bentley Hart, Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies (Yale University Press, 2009). David Bentley Hart is an Orthodox theologian in the United States. This book looks at the way that Christianity changed Roman culture and formed the basis of Western culture. Critics of Christianity, Hart argues, have missed the fact that many of the positive benefits they attribute to secularism are regarded as positive in our culture because of the influence of Christianity.

Patrick Richmond, ‘Richard Dawkins’ Darwinian Objection to Unexplained Complexity in God’, in Science and Christian Belief (19), Oct 2007, pp. 99–116. This academic journal article summarizes and critiques many of the arguments against Dawkins and then offers a better critique of Dawkins which avoids the pitfalls of other responses.

The God Delusion: A general summary

To fully engage with Dawkins’ arguments you will need to read the book for yourself, but this summary may be a useful start.

Chapter 1: A Deeply Religious Non-believer

Dawkins begins his argument with two ideas: 1) Religion is given too much respect in society and therefore is not discussed openly. 2) He will give religion proper respect by examining it in a scientific manner.

Chapter 2: The God Hypothesis

Dawkins continues with a survey of different religious beliefs and the ways in which these beliefs have been seen to be compatible with science.

Chapter 3: Arguments for God’s Existence

Dawkins then proceeds to list some of the ‘proofs’ for the existence of God and explains why he thinks they are not convincing.
Chapter 4: Why there Is Almost Certainly No God

Dawkins asserts that we cannot account for the diversity of the world by appeal to God, because any thing that creates complexity must be more complex than the object it creates. You then have to explain the creator. Only natural selection provides a way to explain complexity without postulating further complexity.

He then presents an alternative explanation of the present complexity of the world: the biological world by reference to evolution by natural selection; and the fine-tuning of the planet and universe by invoking a version of the Anthropic Principle and multiverse theory.

Chapter 5: The Roots of Religion

Having concluded that science makes God improbable, Dawkins explains where religion comes from by looking to evolutionary psychology. For various reasons, impulses that have survival value in children and adults combine to give us an irrational predisposition to religion.

Chapter 6: The Roots of Morality: Why Are We Good?

Dawkins makes the same evolutionary argument for our moral sense, after concluding that religion does nothing to enforce morality.

Chapter 7: The ‘Good’ Book and the Changing Moral Zeitgeist

The pictures of God and morality put forward in the Bible are not moral. To even say whether they are moral or not we must compare them to some other standard, which would mean that they cannot be the standard for morality!

Chapter 8: What's Wrong with Religion? Why Be so Hostile?

Dawkins moves to assume that the world would be better without the absolutist morality of religion, which does not seem to make a difference anyway. He favours the consequentialist approach which judges actions by their consequences – or, to put it another way, by how much suffering an action causes or avoids, regardless of species.

Chapter 9: Childhood, Abuse, and the Escape from Religion

Dawkins asserts that teaching children to believe in a religion is a form of mental child abuse because they have no choice in choosing their beliefs. Religion is damaging because it teaches children not to be curious about the world, and it fosters fundamentalism and absolutism.

Chapter 10: A Much Needed Gap?

Religion, Dawkins says, is used to fill four roles:

Explanation – but it is superseded by science

Exhortation – but it doesn’t seem to have any effect morally

Consolation – but the fact that it is consoling doesn’t make it true, and false consolation may not be a good idea

Inspiration – but this is a matter of taste, and it might be better to find inspiration somewhere else, like science