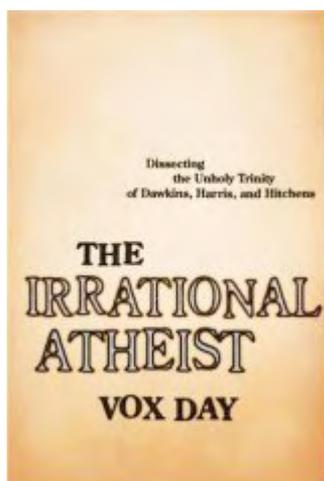


BOOK EXCERPT



Vox Day

*The Irrational Atheist:
Dissecting the Unholy Trinity of Dawkins, Harris,
and Hitchens* ↗

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[W]hile I am a believer, a non-denominational evangelical Christian to be precise, my purpose in writing this book is not to defend God, or even to argue for the truth of my particular religious faith. Instead, I intend to defend those who are now being misled into doubting their faith or being misguided into feeling more secure in their lack of faith on the basis of the fraudulent, error-filled writings of [Dawkins, Harris, and Hitchens]. I do not make this triple charge of fraudulence lightly, nor is my doing so a fearful response to their churlish disregard for what to me and millions of other individuals is the central element of human existence.

There is simply no more fitting description of the cerebral snake oil that [these three men] are huckstering to the unwary reader — and the media — under the false label of science and reason. I am confident that no one, not even the most purely rational, über-skeptical agnostic or card-carrying ACLU atheist, will take serious exception to my charge by the time they finish this book.



This is not a theological work. The text contains no arguments for the existence of God and the supernatural, nor is it concerned with evolution, creationism, the age of Earth, or intelligent design. It contains no arguments from Scripture; in attacking the arguments, assertions, and conclusions of the New Atheists, my only weapons are the purely secular ones of reason, logic, and historically documented, independently verifiable fact. . .

At first glance, it may seem crazy that a computer game designer. . . should dare to dis-

pute an Oxford don, a respected university professor, a famous French philosopher, a highly regarded journalist, and an ecstasy-using dropout who is still working towards a graduate degree at forty. . .

But don't be tempted by the logical fallacy of the Appeal To Authority; after all, in this age of academic specialization, an evolutionary biologist is less likely to be an expert on the historical causes of war and religious conflict than the average twelve-year-old wargamer, and even a professor in the field of cognitive studies may not have spent as much time contemplating the deeper mysteries of intelligence as a game designer who has seen many a sunrise while experimenting with the best way to make the monsters smarter. . .



This is a book about religion and atheism, not science. But it is impossible to entirely separate atheism from science, because scientific materialism has such an influence on atheistic thinking even in matters where science is not directly involved. . .

So, what is science. . .

Richard Dawkins, who has devolved from spending his time performing genuine science in the field of evolutionary biology to performing in public as a professional science propagandist, is surprisingly unhelpful in this regard, especially considering that it is his job to help the public better understand science. While he leaves the reader with no doubt that he likes science very much indeed, his description of it in *Unweaving the Rainbow* bears more similarity to the Apostle Paul's description of love recorded in his first letter to the Corinthians than to anything approaching a useful definition. . .

But if Oxford's most famous professor never quite gets around to answering the question, the *Oxford English Dictionary* does not shirk from the task. It defines science as "the intellectual and practical activity encompassing the systematic study of the structure and behavior of the physical and natural world through observation and experiment. — ORIGIN Latin *scientia*, from *scire* 'know'."

There, was that so hard? Science is systematic study done through observation and experiment. Therefore, if the study is not systematic, or if observation and experiment are not involved, it is obviously not science by this definition. . .

One of the more famous alternate definitions, and one to which both Dawkins and Hitchens make reference, is that provided by the Austrian Karl Popper, a professor at the London School of Economics who is considered to have been one of the leading philosophers of science. Popper's primary criterion for distinguishing between science and not-science is the concept of falsifiability. For a hypothesis to be falsifiable, it must be theoretically possible to make an observation that would disprove [it]. Atheists are particularly fond of this definition, as the difficulty involved in falsifying a supernatural God allows them to argue that religion cannot be science. But can Popper's concept of falsifiability really be taken seriously as a dividing point between science and not-science? It appears more than a little flawed to me. Let's begin with postulating that a

study of the language of the gods is not proper science, whereas a study of the color of swans is.

I base this premise on the classic example of a falsifiable proposition, the statement that “all swans are white.” The fact that one could prove this proposition to be wrong by observing a black swan makes it falsifiable and therefore a proper scientific matter. . .

The problem here is that the proposition “all gods speak Aramaic” is equally falsifiable, given that the theoretical observation of a monolingual Greek-speaking god would suffice to falsify the proposition. This would therefore make divine linguistics a legitimate matter of science, the current difficulty of observing gods notwithstanding. And however impossible it might seem to credit, divine linguistics has indeed been an object of serious contemplation throughout history by some of Mankind’s greatest minds, including Dante and Leibniz. Now, Popper would presumably. . . place “Swans, Color” in the category approved by sophisticated methodological falsification and “Linguistics, Divine” in the category not approved by it. But this merely expands the falsifiability test into a haphazard, technology-driven definition that dives headlong into tautology, defining science as whatever scientists believe science to be at the moment. . .



[M]ost people today are under the vague impression that the very reason for the Dark Ages’ grim nomenclature stems from a puritanical, power-hungry, monolithic Church’s iron-fisted repression of science and human liberty, a totalitarian religious oppression that was finally shaken off by the bold freethinkers of the Enlightenment. But as medievalists such as Umberto Eco and numerous historians have explained in copious detail, this simply is not true. . .

It is not within the scope of this book to consider why many Enlightenment intellectuals were opposed to Christianity in general and the Church in particular, it is enough to simply note that this was the case. In his Lectures on Modern European Intellectual History, the historian Stephen Kreis, author of *The History Guide*, summarizes the Enlightenment figures thusly:

what united [the *philosophes*] was their common experience of shedding their inherited Christian beliefs with the aid of classical thinkers, specifically Roman, and for the sake of modern philosophy. They were agreed that Christianity was a supernatural religion. It was wrong. It was unreasonable. It was the infamous. *Écrasez l’infâme!* shouted Voltaire. “Wipe it out! Wipe out the infamous!” Only science, with its predictable results, was the way to truth, moral improvement and happiness.

This was particularly true of the French *Encyclopédistes*, and the influence of their landmark *Encyclopédie* paved the way for modern rationalism and the French Revolution, as well as firmly fixing the notion of the irrationality, superstition, and tyranny of the previous millennium in the public consciousness. By waging a fierce intellectual war against Religion in the name of Reason and by defining the two concepts in inherent opposition to each other, it was the *philosophes* who were responsible for weakening

that pre-nineteenth century social and judicial pressure to which Richard Dawkins referred. . .¹

Although historians rejected this idea of intellectual depression and religious oppression more than seventy years ago, it is apparent that this rejection has not yet managed to dislodge the commonplace belief in the fundamental rivalry between Religion and Reason established nearly 300 years ago by the passionate rational materialists of the Enlightenment. . .

Thomas Riggins, in the Marxist journal *Political Affairs*, notes that many Enlightenment intellectuals were not opposed to religion in itself, but rather to religion being used by “dictatorial religious elements using religion for their own selfish purposes.” In a variant on this theme, I suggest that the New Atheists are not actually particularly interested in defending science in itself, but are deeply afraid of science reaching a friendly *rapprochement* with religion.

Since we have already established that the opposition of Dawkins, Dennett, and Harris to religion does not stem from any rational fears for science as a body of knowledge, a profession, or a process, and that there was no significant historical enmity between science and religion, it is apparent that the New Atheists’ stated desire to destroy religion must stem from another source. And given the way in which their opposition to religion so closely resembles that of their rationalist antecedents, it is reasonable to suggest that they are not so much interested in defending science as they are in advocating an outdated, nineteenth-century meme.

The evidence fits the hypothesis. As will be demonstrated subsequently in no little detail, Richard Dawkins’s grasp of history is not so much outdated as nonexistent. As for his adherence to the Enlightenment rather than science, he makes as many references to Denis Diderot in *The God Delusion* as he does to Sir Isaac Newton. But even if Dawkins can’t quite make up his mind as to the proper way to categorize the beliefs of the man he rightly describes as “the great encyclopedist of the Enlightenment,” there can be no question of his allegiance to Diderot’s ideals, as in 2006 he informed the *Sunday Times* that he was setting up a charity to “divert donations from the hands of ‘missionaries’ and church-based charities because ‘the enlightenment is under threat. So is reason. So is truth. So is science.’”

Science, you’ll note, actually comes in fourth, not first as you might have erroneously guessed. Dawkins thus reveals that it is not science in itself that he is defending so vociferously, but rather his Enlightenment ideals. . .

It is even easier to establish Daniel C. Dennett’s belief in precisely the same ideals, as

1 As Dawkins himself admits, the overwhelming majority of scientists throughout centuries in which the scientific process was developed were religious, or at least claimed to be: “Newton did indeed claim to be religious. So did almost everybody until — significantly I think — the nineteenth century, when there was less social and judicial pressure than in earlier centuries to profess religion, and more scientific support for abandoning it.”

Dennett not only directly equates science with the Enlightenment, but also states that his “view of science is very much an enlightenment view.” . . .

Sam Harris is known to be motivated by the same ideals as well, as Chris Lehman of *Reason* recognized when he noted Harris’s “litany of Enlightenment-era objections to medieval models of piety” in his review of *The End of Faith*. . .

Despite how it is commonly portrayed by the New Atheists, the rationalist war on religion cannot properly be described as a war between science and religion; it is more akin to a tug-of-war between rationalists and religionists over the way in which science is to be henceforth used and the purposes to which science is ultimately harnessed.

If religion and science were as fundamentally incompatible as the New Atheists assert, then it would seem more than a little strange that the magazine *Nature*, which bills itself as “the international weekly journal of science,” would concur with *Science* magazine in reporting that one of the places where science is growing fastest is Iran, a country not exactly famous for its militant atheism or general disdain for religion.



There is also genuine cause for doubting whether Enlightenment atheism and science can honestly be considered as fundamentally compatible as religion and science have been for centuries. It is worth noting that it was neither Christians nor Muslims but revolutionary atheists inspired by Enlightenment ideals who beheaded the man known today as the father of modern chemistry, Antoine-Laurent de Lavoisier, in 1794, declaring “*La République n’a pas besoin de savants ni de chimistes; le cours de la justice ne peut être suspendu.*”²

. . . atheists like to posit that Man has evolved to a point where he is ready to move beyond religion. This has been their constant theme for over 100 years, but as Daniel C. Dennett points out, the evidence is mounting that this simply isn’t going to happen. A more interesting and arguably more relevant question that none of the New Atheists dare to ask is whether science, having produced some genuinely positive results as well as some truly nightmarish evils over the course of the last century, has outlived its usefulness to Mankind. . .

The five major religions of the world, in order of their appearance on the scene, are Hinduism, traditional Chinese folk religion, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam. These five religions have approximately 4.85 billion adherents, representing an estimated 71.3 percent of the world’s population in 2007, and they have been around for a collective 11,600 years. During the vast majority of those 116 centuries, the world has not been in any danger of extinction from weapons of any kind, nor has the human race been in serious danger of dying out from pollution, global warming, overpopulation, or anything else. Despite 116 centuries filled with hundreds, if not thousands, of diverse

2 “The Republic has no need of scientists or chemists; the course of justice cannot be suspended.” — Jean-Baptist Coffinhal, President of the Revolutionary Tribunal.

religions, all competing for mindshare, resources, and dominance, the species has not merely survived, it has thrived. . .

Modern science has only been around for the last 350 years, if we date the scientific method back to the man known as the Father of Science, Galileo Galilei. One could push that date back considerably, if one wished, to Aristotle and Archimedes, or forward to Newton and the Age of Enlightenment, but regardless, the dire threat to mankind described by Harris only dates back to the middle of the twentieth century. In the last sixty years, science has produced a veritable witches' brew of potential dangers to the human race. . . Moreover, the quantity and lethal quality of those threats appears to be accelerating, as the bulk of them have appeared in the most recent sixth of the scientific era.

It is not the purpose of this chapter to examine whether religion exacerbates or alleviates these scientific threats; that appraisal must wait for a later chapter. Harris's extinction equation, which states that $S + F = \text{☠}$, is not inherently wrong. But his conclusion is, because it is Science, not Faith, which is the factor in the equation that presents a deadly danger to mankind.



I am not arguing that ignorance is better than knowledge, I am merely pointing out that the evidence suggests that in some circumstances, ignorance may be preferable to knowledge, especially partial knowledge imperfectly understood and enthusiastically embraced too soon. I'm not eager to return humanity to a Stone Age state — an ironic accusation given Albert Einstein's assertion that the Fourth World War would be fought with stones and clubs, thanks in part to his scientific legacy. . .

The argument that all risks are worth taking and all knowledge is worth pursuing is not only foolish, it is an argument that is based on neither evidence nor reason, only blind secular faith. Technological progress offers no guarantees of a better world, no matter how strong one's optimistic aspirations or belief in Man's inevitable progress towards a self-made paradise on Earth might be.

As for the better world of today, there are three obvious flaws in the assumptions that credit all of it to science.

. . . advocates for science in all its aspects habitually make use of a different measure depending on whether they wish to credit science for a technological innovation or to deflect blame from it. . . While vaccines, like massive ordnance air blast bombs, were discovered and developed by scientists making use of the scientific method, scientists no more provide shots to children than they drop bombs on unsuspecting civilian populations. Politicians make the decisions regarding the way vaccines are to be funded and used while doctors and nurses administer them, just as politicians decide if bombs are to be utilized and air force pilots deliver them to their targets. One can either argue that science is responsible in both cases. . . or that science is not responsible in either case. . . but what one cannot logically do is to conclude that science is responsible in

the one case and not the other.

. . . capitalism and individual freedom arguably play a greater role in technological advancement than all three aspects of science³ combined. Despite devoting double the percentage of its national expenditures to science than did the United States or any other country in the West, the technologically retarded state of the scientifically enamored former Soviet Union demonstrates that the link between science and technological progress is far more tenuous than is usually considered to be the case.



[T]he three most often cited crimes of religion against science are the Catholic Church's persecution of Galileo, the occasional school board battle over teaching evolution in the public schools, and the Christian opposition to the federal funding of research using stem cells taken from human embryos. As one might expect, all three of these issues are brought up in one or more of the New Atheist books.

And yet, these are not serious issues. Taken in their entirety, they barely amount to mild smack-talk between unarmed border guards from two neighboring countries caught up in a dispute over agricultural subsidies. To argue that these three things are in any way indicative of an implacable and incorrigible hostility is obviously absurd. Galileo was not attacked because he defended the Copernican theory that had been published eighty years before, but because he was foolish enough to both disobey and publicly caricature his former supporter, Pope Urban VIII, in a book that had been granted both papal permission and Inquisitorial authorization. Evolutionary theory is not only taught in the public schools, its teaching is largely unquestioned and unchallenged, a few high profile cases of stickers on textbooks notwithstanding.

As for the stem cell controversy, it is looking increasingly likely as if there simply isn't one. Opposition to federal funding is not inherently religious; moreover, federal funding is not science and should never be confused with it. Unless scientists are being jailed and put on trial by church authorities for pursuing this morally suspect research, it is a huge exaggeration to claim that the controversy is an example of religion inhibiting science in any way. . .

But stem cells are only a single issue, and since it seemed possible that I might have missed a skirmish or two in this ongoing intellectual struggle, I posed the question of what tangible sins Christianity had committed against science to the readers of my blog,⁴ and, arguably more usefully, to the readers of the hitherto mentioned science blog Pharyngula. This was the most comprehensive list, which covered pretty much

3 A dynamic body of knowledge ("scientage"), a process ("scientody"), and a profession ("scientistry").

4 <http://voxday.blogspot.com>. The Ilk of Vox Popoli aren't without their strengths, but they do tend to be rather more useful when it comes to questions like "9mm or .45?" and "What's the best way to get rid of a dead body?" Feel free to stop by, but whatever you do, don't ask about anything to do with the Civil War, or as some prefer to call it, Round One.

everything brought up by anyone else:

- 1 Galileo's trial. (1633 a.d.)
- 2 The demonization of mathematics during the Dark Ages. (476 to 1000 a.d.)
- 3 The persecution of alchemists during the Middle Ages. (476 to 1485 a.d.)
- 4 The execution of Michael Servetus. (1553 a.d.)
- 5 Opposition to the theory of evolution.
- 6 The destruction of libraries and the burning of books during the fourth and fifth centuries.
- 7 The ban on the works of René Descartes. (1663 a.d.)
- 8 The imprisonment of Roger Bacon. (1277 a.d.)
- 9 The condemnation of Francis Bacon. (1621 a.d.)
- 10 The destruction of Islamic manuscripts by Cardinal Ximenes. (1499 a.d.)
- 11 The execution of Giordano Bruno. (1600 a.d.)
- 12 The execution of Lucilio Vanini. (1619 a.d.)
- 13 The murder of Hypatia. (415 a.d.)
- 14 The recantation of the Comte de Buffon. (1753 a.d.)
- 15 St. Paul's rants against the "wisdom of the wise" in Corinthians. (First century a.d.)
- 16 The Byzantine emperor Justinian's closing of Plato's Academy in Athens. (529 a.d.)
- 17 The ecclesiastical monopoly upon lay education.
- 18 Martin Luther's attacks upon reason. (1517 a.d.)
- 19 Rejection of modern medicine by the Jehovah's Witnesses and other sects.
- 20 The excommunication of Johannes Kepler by the Catholic Church. (1612 a.d.)

Now, one can't help but note that the most recent of these terrible sins against science took place more than 250 years ago, in 1753, except for the three that still apply today. This is not evidence of an ongoing war, it is merely a collection of historical grudges, most of them remarkably petty. . . Furthermore, five of these seven individual victims of Christian persecution were themselves Christians. No wonder the Unholy Trinity found it difficult to come up with anything more specific than the spurious example of stem cell research.

The idea that religion is the enemy of science is a remarkably silly one when examined in scientific terms. Consider that Christian nation and the hostility to science which it supposedly harbors due to its extraordinary religiosity. The United States of America accounts for more than one-third of the global scientific output despite representing only 4.5 percent of the global population. The scientific overperformance of religious

America is a factor of 7.89, representing 28.7 percent more scientific output per capita than the most atheistic nation in Europe, France.



While the scientific method may lead invariably to a more accurate understanding of the material world, the same is not true of the scientists who pursue it. The profession of science is growing increasingly authoritarian and political, as can be seen by the treatment of those who fail to fall in line with the scientific consensus on subjects where the evidence is far from settled, such as global warming. This poses a real danger to the credibility of all three aspects of science, which is particularly ill-timed in light of the very real danger that science presently poses to humanity. . .

Religion does not threaten science so much as science threatens itself. By combining increasingly authoritarian arrogance with an encroachment upon intellectual spheres they are manifestly unprepared to invade, scientists and their thoughtless science-fetishist followers risk starting a genuine war they cannot possibly hope to win.



The division between science and the moral and philosophical purposes towards which scientists ultimately direct the scientific method was always inevitable. Richard Feynman understood this, pointing out that scientific knowledge provides the ability to do good or evil, and that using it to do good is not only to the credit of science, but to the credit of the moral choice which led to the good work as well. And like Daniel Dennett, Feynman regretted that Man's accomplishments had fallen far short of what had been believed possible at the beginning of the Age of Reason. . .

But Feynman's response to this division was a commendably scientific one that is profoundly different from the moral philosophy advocated by Dawkins, Harris, and Hitchens. Feynman believed that it was the responsibility of scientists to proclaim the value of intellectual freedom, to support open discussion and criticism, and to welcome doubt, not suppress it. He declared that demanding this freedom for all future generations was a fundamental scientific duty. He was far more dedicated to protecting science as an effective means than he was to using it to advocate any specific ends.

The New Atheists harbor no similar dedication to open discussion, let alone criticism. To them, science is but a means to a specific end, something to be prostituted in order to sell the secularist Enlightenment morality that they see in competition with the Christian faith. Having already sold out science, they reject any sense of scientific responsibility and thus will tolerate no skepticism, let alone outright opposition. Dawkins is the worst offender — his prickly reaction to criticism is not to address it, not to discuss it, but to disdainfully dismiss it, unread. . .

The key to understanding the New Atheism is that it is not based on science. The New Atheists have no commitment to scientage or scientody⁵ when either aspect of science

5 Cf. footnote 3.

happens to stand in the way of the secular morality they are selling with a scientific sheen. While their attacks are theoretically directed against all religions, they betray their focus for the main object of their hatred in both their language and the examples they choose. . .

So what, specifically, is this morality? Because it is never described in its entirety, it is necessary for us to piece it together from the hints sprinkled throughout the atheist canon. We know that Christianity stands in its way, courtesy of Bertrand Russell, who declares that the Christian religion is the principal enemy of moral progress in the world. And we know that it is in opposition to even the most moderate forms of religious faith, thanks to Sam Harris.

My biggest criticism of religious moderation. . . is that it represents precisely the sort of thinking that will prevent a fully reasonable and nondenominational spirituality from ever emerging in our world.

However, Harris never gets around to describing his proposed morality due to a tendency to meander into oxymoronic discussions of his New Age, neo-Buddhist rational spirituality. For a system of morals and ethics, Harris offers nothing more concrete than half-baked utilitarianism in declaring that morality is merely a recipe for maximizing happiness and minimizing suffering. Hitchens is a bit more helpful, as *god is not Great* builds up to a final chapter which informs us that there is a definite need for a New Enlightenment, and in the process asserts that the following things are positively immoral: presenting a false picture of the world to the innocent and credulous, the doctrine of blood sacrifice, the doctrine of atonement, the doctrine of eternal reward or punishment, and the imposition of impossible tasks. Other moral evils that go beyond this list of doctrinal thought crimes include frightening children, exploitation, suicide bombings, opposition to birth control, circumcision (male and female), banning and censoring books, and silencing dissenters.

Regarding the basic moral structure of this new and shinier Enlightenment, Hitchens is, like Marx describing the long-awaited Worker's Paradise, more than a little vague. After 282 pages of furious anti-religious foreplay, the climax is disappointing indeed, amounting to only a single paragraph of seven sentences. But we are informed that the New Enlightenment will be based on the idea that the proper study of mankind is man and woman. Literature and poetry will replace sacred texts, and most importantly, the sexual life will be divorced from fear, disease, and tyranny, all on the sole condition "that we banish all religions from the discourse" by knowing "the enemy" and fighting it. . .

Both Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett, on the other hand, are not looking for a New Enlightenment as they are still pledged to the old one. While it's absolutely true that atheism is not a religion, most High Church atheists subscribe to a specific denomination of the Enlightenment faith known as humanism. In *The God Delusion* Dawkins describes his belief in humanism, "the ethical system that often goes with atheism," and testified to his faith that "the broad direction of history is towards enlightenment" in an interview with *Salon*. Although he's much more famous for his atheism, his hu-

manism is no secret — the American Humanist Association named him the 1996 Humanist of the Year, while in 2004, it was Daniel Dennett's turn to be so honored. Richard Dawkins is also a public signer of the third Humanist Manifesto, which summarizes the principle articles of the humanist faith thusly:

- 1 Knowledge of the world is derived by observation, experimentation, and rational analysis.
- 2 Humans are an integral part of nature, the result of unguided evolutionary change.
- 3 Ethical values are derived from human need and interest as tested by experience.
- 4 Life's fulfillment emerges from individual participation in the service of humane ideals.
- 5 Humans are social by nature and find meaning in relationships.
- 6 Working to benefit society maximizes individual happiness.

Specifically what those humane ideals and ethical values might be is not explained. . . From these examples [some of which are omitted in this Book Excerpt], the educated reader should be able to see that the religion of reason is little more than a memetic chimera crossing the Summer of Love with Darwinism and scientific socialism: be happy, be nice, be Green, to each according to his needs, individuals exist for the purpose of serving the common good, human progress towards an earthly paradise is inevitable, all shined up with a thin veneer of science. It's no wonder Christopher Hitchens is seeking a New Enlightenment. . .

The terrible tragedy of the New Atheists is that they are laboring to lay the foundation for yet another reprisal of the very horrors they think to permanently prevent in the name of Reason. Voltaire may have been correct to write that "those who can make you believe absurdities can make you commit atrocities," but a more meaningfully rational statement would be to say: If you commit atrocities, then you believe absurdities.

And the undeniable fact is that the absurdity most often believed by those who have committed Man's greatest atrocities is that there is no God.