

The Atheist Delusion: Answering Richard Dawkins

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If there is a dangerous delusion in the world, it is not so much moderate religion, as Dawkins would have it, but fundamentalism in all its forms — ideological, scientific and religious — as the imposition of dogma that brooks neither doubt nor respect for disagreement.

There is much truth in Dawkins' criticism. One only has to look at human tragedies occurring around the world to see the effects of unquestioning faith and religious righteousness. And not just in recent years; consider the Albigensian Crusade, the witch-hunts of the Middle Ages, right up to the troubles in Northern Ireland. Belief in a dogma, without doubting the actions that arise out of that faith, can be the foundation upon which horrors grow. Millions have died fighting for, and against, particular religious ideas.

Dawkins is a gifted thinker, and some of his questions and insights about religion are certainly worthy of contemplation. For instance, Dawkins queries the righteousness of any particular religion in the following passage:

If you have a faith, it is statistically overwhelmingly likely that it is the same faith as your parents and grandparents had. No doubt soaring cathedrals, stirring music, moving stories and parables, help a bit. But by far the most important variable determining your religion is the accident of birth. The convictions that you so passionately believe would have been a completely different, and largely contradictory, set of convictions, if only you had happened to be born in a different place.

Also insightful is his concern for political representation. In *The God Delusion*, Dawkins points out that religious groups can form powerful lobbies, able to effect large-scale changes in government policy which rule *all* of our lives. One of the more prominent examples is the Bush administration's stance on stem cell research, a strand of science which perhaps offers the most profound steps forward in medicine for decades (suggested as a possible treatment for spinal injury paralysis, Parkinson's Disease and Alzheimer's).

Current US leaders rely far too heavily on 'heartland' support by the large Christian voting blocks to allow research into stem cells — even if the arguments against seem to be at best scare campaigns based on faulty logic. This situation, in which non-believers like Dawkins are at the 'democratic' mercy of religious groups able to exert political pressure, must be a particularly troubling one for him — and I must confess, it is to me as well.

The Most Dangerous Delusion

However, in his attacks on all religions, regardless of individual philosophies, as being the source of all ills in the world, Dawkins goes too far — and it is astounding that someone of his obvious intellect could err so badly. Religious writer John Cornwell summed up the major problem with Dawkins' vitriolic stance towards religion in these words:

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Cornwell's comment is incisive. Dawkins' attack singles out the very worst elements of religion — fundamentalist, non-thinking faith, and intolerance of others outside the 'flock' — while ignoring the large-scale charity work carried out by many religions, both large and small, as well as the profound morality teachings found in each, from the parables of Jesus Christ through to the Buddhist doctrine of protecting all life.

Professor of English Literature Terry Eagleton, himself no defender of fundamentalist religion, was quick to point out this massive flaw in *The God Delusion*. "In a book of almost 400 pages, he can scarcely bring himself to concede that a single human benefit has flowed from religious faith, a view which is as *a priori* improbable as it is empirically false," Eagleton wrote. "The countless millions who have devoted their lives selflessly to the service of others in the name of Christ or Buddha or Allah are wiped from human history — and this by a self-appointed crusader against bigotry."

So too, in characterising religious believers as "faith-heads" (his words), gullible believers of nonsensical stories, does Dawkins paint with a broad and superficial brush. While it is true that most believers grow within their religion of birth, many eventually connect with a more universal sense of deity, rather than continuing with a blind faith in the particular godly identity defined by their religion. Dawkins also does not delve into the worldwide mystical traditions closely tied to each religion, such as the Jewish Kabbalah, Islamic Sufism, and Hindu teachings of yoga, all of which speak more to a personal, wondrous gnosis than the blind worship of an autocratic, vengeful god that Richard Dawkins appears to take umbrage with.

Dawkins, in his inimitable style, once eloquently asked, "If there is only one Creator who made the tiger and the lamb, the cheetah and the gazelle, what is He playing at? Is he a sadist who enjoys spectator blood sports? . . . Is He manoeuvring to maximise David Attenborough's television ratings?" While on the surface it is a humorous and insightful quote, it also betrays the lack of depth to Dawkins' own conception of deity. In Eagleton's words, "He seems to imagine God, if not exactly with a white beard, then at least as some kind of *chap*, however supersized. He asks how this chap can speak to billions of people simultaneously, which is rather like wondering why, if Tony Blair is an octopus, he has only two arms."

Indeed, the 'God' that Dawkins argues against is actually the 'non-God' of the unintelligent "faith-heads" he so despises — and one can only be struck by the ridiculous realisation that the acerbic Oxford professor, one of the intellectual giants of our time, is

engaging religion on the same philosophical level as ‘Bubba’ from the deep South of the United States of America. Dawkins is directing his antipathy toward the white-bearded grandfather figure sitting in the sky, patiently listening to all our prayers on his intercessory answering machine — the same ‘God’ that many of us left behind with our childhood. And yet the most profound teachings of the mystics through the ages are consigned to the same dark definitions that Dawkins foists upon all religious beliefs, universally.

Returning to Cornwell’s comments, it is worth pointing out that as many atrocities have been carried out in the name of religious disbelief as in blind faith. Stalin was an atheist who brutally attacked priests under his regime, let alone the horrors he visited upon the general populace. Fundamentalism isn’t the exclusive domain of religion it seems. Indeed, as the evolutionary biologist H. Allen Orr said, atheism must be held to the same standards as religions when judging their comparative flaws and benefits. And, to quote Orr directly:

Dawkins has a difficult time facing up to the dual fact that (1) the 20th century was an experiment in secularism; and (2) the result was secular evil, an evil that, if anything, was more spectacularly virulent than that which came before.

In political ideology, this fundamentalism has mixed with an ugly dualism to create overly simplistic and ultimately useless categories — liberal or conservative, commie or capitalist — with a complete disregard for the true spectrum of political ideas. In the words of George W. Bush: “You’re either with us or against us.” It is therefore the polarising elements of ‘ideology’ which we need to be fearing, far more than any particular religious belief. Especially the ideology of ‘us’ being somehow better, more intelligent, more moral, than ‘them’ — ironically, a trait which Dawkins describes as a particular Darwinian adaptive trait known as the “kin-selection principle.” Again, the Oxford professor seems not eager to find the quite obvious “evils” of science, technology and Darwinism.

Fundamentalist Scientists

Dawkins would be apoplectic at the suggestion that science is as close-minded and vicious as the religions he despises so much. But one doesn’t have to travel far to find examples of true fundamentalism.

Last September, at the British Association for the Advancement of Science conference, there was uproar after ‘fringe’ scientists Rupert Sheldrake, Peter Fenwick and Deborah Delaney were allowed to present their research into ideas such as telepathy and after-death states. The apostate scientists were not welcome in this church of science — “it’s quite inappropriate to have a session like that without putting forward a more convincing view,” said geneticist Sir Walter Bodmer. “I know of no serious, properly done studies which make me feel that this is anything other than nonsense,” said media darling Lord Winston. Perhaps Lord Winston had the same level of knowledge as Dr. Peter Atkins, whose interview (with Rupert Sheldrake) spoke volumes about whether the uproar was based in science or belief:

Dr. Atkins: Well, you can't rely on any of these experiments . . . there is no serious work done in this field. The samples that people use are very tiny, the effects are statistically insignificant, the controls are not done in a scientific way.

Dr. Sheldrake: Well I'd like to ask him if he's actually read the evidence? May I ask you Professor Atkins if you've actually studied any of this evidence or any other evidence?

Dr. Atkins: No, but I would be very suspicious of it.

And then there's the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (recently renamed — in what can only be seen as a blatant marketing move — to 'CSI'), the supposed guardians of the paradigm, an organisation that Robert Anton Wilson described as “one of the most dogmatic, fanatical, and crusading of the atheistic religions around now.” One has only to read through the writings of James Randi or Michael Shermer to see through the veneer of their ‘science delusion’, and glimpse the zealot within.

To be fair to Richard Dawkins — in contrast to his polemics against religion — he does not seem to be overeager to vilify parapsychology. He has warned James Randi of his belief that Randi's infamous million dollar prize for exhibition of a paranormal ability may one day be claimed, due to the existence of what he described as the ‘perinormal’. The term is scientific legalese to allow Dawkins to mention the possibility of the paranormal, without being accountable for it, but all the same it is worth noting to Dawkins' credit that he believes we are not at ‘the end of science’ just yet.

Further, Dawkins has gone on record as saying “the popularity of the paranormal, oddly enough, might even be grounds for encouragement. . . . I think that the appetite for mystery, the enthusiasm for that which we do not understand, is healthy and to be fostered. It is the same appetite which drives the best of true science, and it is an appetite which true science is best qualified to satisfy.”

In contrast, most materialists and Darwinists warn of the outright danger of studying anything but physical, orthodox science. In a now infamous hit job, the BBC's flagship science program *Horizon* dedicated a feature to the theories of alternative historian Graham Hancock (titled “Atlantis Uncovered”), in which they portrayed ‘fringe’ thinking as a descent into irrational thought, and ultimately (of course!) National Socialism.

Similarly Michael Shermer, in *Why People Believe Weird Things: Pseudoscience, Superstition, and Other Confusions of our Time*, states “today's paranormal beliefs probably seem relatively harmless. They are not. The reason is that if someone is willing to accept such claims on nonexistent evidence, what else are they willing to believe?”

This sort of thinking is nonsensical, as similar outcomes can be assigned to nearly any type of human endeavour. As the physicist Henry Stapp has argued, physicalist science on its own is also dangerous, because it leaves “no rational basis for anything but self-interest . . . the collapse of moral philosophy is inevitable.”

Indeed, while Dawkins warns us of the dangers that religion poses, we might ask whether it is worth being concerned about a world with no religion. Are large populations truly capable of living without a moral compass? It is easy enough to pronounce from a nice office at Oxford University that morality comes from within, not from religion. But for those on the breadline, fighting for their very survival, is it as easy to not

transgress moral guidelines if one feels they are arbitrary, rather than rules set in stone? On that arbitrariness — where is the line drawn; who, in effect, sets the morals? Oxford professors, politicians, perhaps corporate leaders? Certainly, there is an arbitrariness to religious morals as well, depending on where you were born, and the problem of morality does not rebut Dawkins' queries against religion — but if he wishes to change a flawed system, he must also be able to propose a working alternative.

Challenging Science

While Dawkins can be credited with being open to a 'widening' of science via inclusion of the 'perinormal', the same cannot be said of his faith-like defence of Darwinian evolution. In recent years, he and others have attacked the "Intelligent Design" movement vociferously — sometimes on very good grounds. However, orthodox science appears to have constructed their own dualism in the evolutionary debate, with the new strawman of "Intelligent Design" being a helpful tool in their fight. By this, I mean there seems to be a conscious over-looking of the 'intelligent design' propounded by individuals of the standing of Francis Crick (co-discoverer of the structure of DNA, and a physicalist himself).

Instead, in terms of debating the theory of evolution, these days you're either for Darwin, or you are labelled a religious nutter. No mention of Crick's idea of intelligent design, or mathematician Charles Muse's suggestion of hints of conscious evolution (in which our consciousness is guiding our evolution), or even the disapproval of a number of high-profile scientists to the core tenets of neo-Darwinism. In the words of Deepak Chopra, who has joined in the debate over Dawkin's assault against religion, "To say that Nature displays intelligence doesn't make you a Christian fundamentalist."

Witness the recent book *Biocosm*, by complexity theorist James Gardner, which proposes that life and intelligence have not emerged in a series of Darwinian accidents but are essentially hardwired into the cycle of cosmic creation, evolution, death, and rebirth. Why is there not more debate and discussion of these theories by Dawkins, rather than taking on the easy target of evangelical leader (and sometimes indulger in gay prostitute sex) Ted Haggard?

Instead of the *Biocosm* ideas of James Gardner, or of Stuart Hameroff and Roger Penrose's intriguing theory of quantum mechanical processes in the brain, and numerous other truly scientific discoveries and theories pointing at some sort of transcendent 'other' aspect to our reality, Dawkins instead wants the debate to be between physicalist Darwinism, and dogmatic faith in the childish notion of 'God the bearded grandfather figure'.

There is no doubt a need for concern about the dangers of fundamentalist religion. There is a rising tide of violent conflict around the world growing from irrational faith, so Dawkins is correct in raising the alarm and should not be faulted or pilloried for doing so. The only problem is that he is throwing a baby out with that bathwater.

Orthodox science is a wonderful tool for understanding the physical aspects of our existence. But we should doubt it as well. Not just guarding against dogmatic belief in the current scientific paradigm, but also any moves to enshrine physicalism and logical

thought as the only way to frame the world. Metaphor, art, and emotion are all part of the human experience which should not be denied, and there is an argument that religious experience should be included in there as well.

Philosopher Thomas Nagel, who describes himself as an ‘outsider’ to religion, eloquently mirrored these thoughts in his critique of *The God Delusion*: “The fear of religion leads too many scientifically minded atheists to cling to a defensive, world-flattening reductionism,” he said. “We have more than one form of understanding ... the great achievements of physical science do not make it capable of encompassing everything, from mathematics to ethics to the experiences of a living animal. We have no reason to dismiss moral reasoning, introspection or conceptual analysis as ways of discovering the truth just because they are not physics.”

Richard Dawkins once argued against a quote by John Keats: “Do not all charms fly at the mere touch of cold philosophy? There was an awful rainbow once in heaven: we know her woof, her texture; she is given in the dull catalogue of common things. Philosophy will clip an angel’s wings, conquer all mysteries by rule and line, empty the haunted air, and ... unweave a rainbow.”

Dawkins thought that the scientific truth behind the rainbow was even more beautiful – a worthy comment, but one that disregarded all the other various ways of seeing and knowing due to a belief that his way was the only way – and that is the very definition of Fundamentalism. It is an ideology which seeks to replace all other thoughts and philosophies, and if Dawkins thought with a clear mind on the topic he would see that this is exactly his real concern.

Let us attempt to understand the rainbow in all its beauty – physical, emotional and spiritual – without dogma and prejudice, and allow all others to find their own way freely.

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