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The Dawkins Delusion

“I do not, by nature, thrive on confrontation,” declares Richard Dawkins, the Charles Simonyi Professor of the Public Understanding of Science at Oxford University and one of the world’s leading skeptics concerning Christianity and belief in God. Dawkins is well known as an intellectual adversary to all forms of religious belief—and of Christianity in particular. He is one of the world’s most prolific scientists, writing books for a popular audience and addressing his strident worldview of evolutionary theory to an expanding audience. Put simply, Richard Dawkins aspires to be the “devil’s chaplain” of Darwinian evolution.

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All this is what makes Dawkins’ denial of a confrontational approach so ludicrous. It is simply false at face value. This is a man who has taken every conceivable opportunity to make transparently clear his unquestioned belief that the dominant theory of evolution renders any form of belief in God irrational, backward, and dangerous.

Dawkins set out the basic framework of his worldview in best-selling books including, *The Blind Watchmaker*, *Climbing Mount Improbable*, *Unweaving the Rainbow*, and, most famously, *The Selfish Gene*. Now, in *The God Delusion*, Dawkins brings his attack on Christianity to a broader audience. Interestingly, Dawkins’ new book is released close on the heels of two similar works. Fellow skeptics Sam Harris and Daniel Dennett have written similar books released since late summer. Taken together, these three books represent something of a frontal attack upon the legitimacy of belief in God.

There are few surprises in *The God Delusion*. Dawkins is a gifted writer who is able to popularize scientific concepts, and he writes with an acerbic style that fits his purpose in this volume. His condescending and sarcastic tone set the stage for what he hopes will be a devastating attack upon theism.

Dawkins admits his “presumptuous optimism” in hoping that his book will cause persons to set aside their faith. “If this book works as I

intend, religious readers who open it will be atheists when they put it down," he asserts. Time will tell.

Though *The God Delusion* is intended more as an attack upon theism than as a defense of evolutionary theory, the framework of evolution is never far from Dawkins' mind. In his opening chapter, he argues that most legitimate scientists—indeed all who really understand the issues at stake—are atheists of one sort or another. He defines the alternatives as between a stark atheism (such as that Dawkins himself represents) and a form of nonsupernatural religion, as illustrated by the case of Albert Einstein. "Great scientists of our time who sound religious usually turn out not to be so when you examine their beliefs more deeply," he explains. As examples, Dawkins offers not only Albert Einstein and Stephen Hawking but also Martin Rees, currently Britain's Astronomer Royal and President of the Royal Society. According to Dawkins, Rees "goes to church as an 'unbelieving Anglican . . . out of loyalty to the tribe.'" As Dawkins explains, Rees "has no theistic beliefs, but shares the poetic naturalism that the cosmos provokes in the other scientists I have mentioned. He cites Einstein to the effect that he was a "deeply religious nonbeliever"—moved by the majesty of the cosmos but without any reference whatsoever to a supernatural being.

As Dawkins explains, *real* scientists are naturalists. As such, they eliminate entirely the question of a supernatural being's existence. "The metaphorical or pantheistic God of the physicists is light years away from the interventionist, miracle-wreaking, thought-reading, sin-punishing, prayer-answering God of the Bible, of priests, mullahs and rabbis, and of ordinary language. Deliberately to confuse the two is, in my opinion, an act of intellectual high treason."

As Dawkins then makes clear, his attack upon belief is explicitly and exclusively directed toward belief in *supernatural* gods. As he explains, "the most familiar" of these deities is Yahweh. Put simply, Dawkins holds no respect for those who believe in the God of the Bible, whom he describes as ruthless, cruel, selfish, and vindictive.

Accordingly, Dawkins does not understand why social etiquette requires respect for those who believe in God.

In one of the central chapters of his book, Dawkins attempts to accomplish two simultaneous purposes: to undermine the intellectual movement known as Intelligent Design and, in a twist of its logic, to suggest that belief in God is itself a refutation of the very notion of an intelligent design. As Dawkins sees it, "the existence of God is a scientific hypothesis like any other." As he sets out his case, he denies that there *could be* any legitimate basis for belief in God. The very notion of a supernatural agent flies directly in the face of his presuppositional naturalism. Therefore, by definition, such a God cannot exist and those who believe in such a God prove their intellectual inadequacy or gullibility.

In accordance with his own evolutionary theory, Dawkins acknowledges that the universe displays appearances of design. Nevertheless, he suggests that these appearances are false, and that any example of apparent design is actually due to the Darwinian engine of natural

selection. He considers the traditional proof for God's existence offered by the philosophers and rejects each out of hand. Finally, he considers the argument that the existence of God can be proved by Scripture—but then launches a broadside attack upon Scripture itself.

When it comes to the fundamentals of the Christian faith, Dawkins displays absolute amazement that any intelligent person could even entertain the notion that such teachings might be true. Pointing back to the nineteenth century, Dawkins asserts that the Victorian era was “the last time when it was possible for an educated person to admit to believing in miracles like the virgin birth without embarrassment.” He adds: “When pressed, many educated Christians today are too loyal to deny the virgin birth and the resurrection. But it embarrasses them because their rational minds know it is absurd, so they would much rather not be asked.”

Since Dawkins considers the existence of God to be nothing more than a scientific hypothesis—just like any other—he presents his case that “the factual premise of religion—the God Hypothesis—is untenable.” In other words, “God almost certainly does not exist.”

So why do so many persons believe in Him? Consistent with his evolutionary worldview, Dawkins must offer a purely naturalistic interpretation for the origin and function of religion. He argues that religion must be, like all other human phenomena, a product of Darwinian evolution. Nevertheless, he understands that the existence of religious belief poses some interesting Darwinian questions. “Religion is so wasteful, so extravagant; and Darwinian selection habitually targets and eliminates waste,” Dawkins explains. Therefore, there must be some fascinating Darwinian explanation for how religious belief emerged and survives. Citing his colleague Daniel Dennett, Dawkins suggests that religious belief is “time-consuming, energy-consuming” and “often as extravagantly ornate as the plumage of a bird of paradise.” He sees no good in it at all. “Thousands of people have been tortured for their loyalty to a religion, persecuted by zealots for what is in many cases a scarcely distinguishable alternative faith. Religion devours resources, sometimes on a massive scale. A medieval cathedral could consume a hundred man centuries in its construction, yet it was never used as a dwelling, or for any recognizable useful purpose.”

In his own twist, Dawkins argues that belief in God is simply a by-product of some other evolutionary mechanism. He suggests that one possible source of belief in God (understood in purely physicalist and natural terms) is the need for the brains of children to accept on faith the teachings of their elders. Thus, he argues that evolution may have “psychologically primed” the human brain for some form of belief in God. Nevertheless, whatever function this may have served the process of evolution in the past, Dawkins now believes that it has become a dangerous liability.

“I surmise that religions, like languages, evolved with sufficient randomness, from beginnings that are sufficiently arbitrary, to generate the bewildering—and sometimes dangerous—richness of diversity that we observe. At the same time, it is possible that a form of natural selection, coupled with the fundamental uniformity of human

psychology, sees to it that the diverse religions share significant teachers in common.” In the end, Dawkins sees all these forms as dangerous.

Along the way, Dawkins insists that morality is not based in absolute truth but in a consequentialist form of reasoning that is itself a monument of evolutionary development. He plays with categories and concepts—no doubt intentionally—in order to confuse the question. Christians do not argue that those who believe in God always act in a way that is morally superior to those who do not. Atheists may behave better than Christians. This is to our shame, but it does not pose an intellectual challenge to the validity of the Christian faith. The more urgent question has to do with how any form of moral absolute—including even a prohibition on murder or incest—can survive if all morality is merely a natural phenomenon of human evolution. Dawkins simply embraces the relativity of morality, arguing that this explains why Christians are so dangerous. Believing in moral absolutes, Christians are led to defend the sanctity of human life at every level and to believe that, of all things, the Creator actually has set forth moral commandments and expectations concerning our sexuality. Dawkins rejects these ideas altogether.

At the same time, he suggests that the morality revealed in the Bible is actually immoral when judged against the enlightened standards of our current *Zeitgeist*. Furthermore, Dawkins argues that modern persons do not actually derive their morality from the Bible, no matter how much they may claim to do so.

In a sweeping rejection of biblical Christianity, Dawkins expresses outrage at the morality of both the Old and New Testaments. “I have described atonement, the central doctrine of Christianity, as vicious, sado-masochistic and repellant. We should also dismiss it as barking mad, but for its ubiquitous familiarity which has dulled our objectivity,” he asserts. Dawkins would dispense with the Ten Commandments and replace these with a new set of commandments more attuned to modern times. Among his proposed commandments are these: “Enjoy your own sex life (so long as it damages nobody else) and leave others to enjoy theirs in private whatever their inclinations, which are none of your business;” “Do not discriminate or oppress on the basis of sex, race or (as far as possible) species.” Another of Dawkins’ commandments hits close to home: “Do not indoctrinate your children. Teach them how to think for themselves, how to evaluate evidence, and how to disagree with you.”

Amazingly, Dawkins denies that he is himself an absolutist. Accordingly, he expresses incredulity at the fact that he is seen as a particularly ardent opponent of Christianity.

“Despite my dislike of gladiatorial contests, I seem somehow to have acquired a reputation for pugnacity towards religion. Colleagues who agree that there is no God, who agree that we do not need religion to be moral, and agree that we can explain the roots of religion and of morality in non-religious terms, nevertheless come back to me in gentle puzzlement. Why are you so hostile?”

Dawkins denies that he is a “fundamentalist atheist.” “Maybe

scientists are fundamentalists when it comes to defining in some abstract way what is meant by 'truth.' But so is everybody else," he insists. "I am no more fundamentalist when I say evolution is true than when I say it is true that New Zealand is in the southern hemisphere."

In the end, Richard Dawkins will surely fail in his quest to turn theists in to atheists. His book represents nothing fundamentally new—just the same old arguments repeated over and over again. Dawkins is quick to label his intellectual adversaries as fundamentalists, but he conveniently redefines the term so that it does not apply to his own position. He claims to live life solely on the basis of scientific evidence, but is so fundamentally committed to the theory of evolution that we cannot take his protestations to the contrary seriously.

The God Delusion is sure to garner significant attention in the media and in popular culture. Dawkins, along with the other fashionable skeptics and atheists of the day, makes for good television and creates an instant media sensation. In one sense, we should be thankful for the forthrightness with which he presents his arguments. This is not a man who minces words, and he never hides behind his own argument. Furthermore, at several points in the book he correctly identifies weaknesses in many of the arguments put forth by theists. As is so often the case, we learn from our intellectual enemies as well as from our allies.

The tone of the book is strident, the content of the book is bracing, and the attitude of the book is condescending. Nevertheless, Dawkins insists that his strident attack upon the faith is limited to words. "I am not going to bomb anybody, behead them, stone them, burn them at the stake, crucify them, or fly planes into their skyscrapers, just because of a theological disagreement," he insists. He even allows that "we can retain a sentimental loyalty to the cultural and literary traditions" of organized religion, "and even participate in religious rituals such as marriages and funerals," he asserts. Nevertheless, all this must be done without buying into the supernatural beliefs that historically went along with those traditions." Further: "We can give up belief in God while not losing touch with a treasured heritage." All this raises more questions than Dawkins answers. If belief in God is so intellectually abhorrent, why would anyone want to retain the traditions associated with these beliefs? Why does Dawkins acknowledge that all this amounts to "a treasured heritage?" It must be because, in the end, even Richard Dawkins is not as much of an atheist as he believes himself to be. If Dawkins is so certain that theism is dead, why would he devote so much of his time and energy to opposing it? A man who is genuinely certain that Christianity is passing away would feel no need to write a 400-page book in order to urge its passing.

