

Dawkins and the New Atheism

A number of books have appeared on the best-seller lists recently that have attacked religion in general and Christianity in particular. These books claim that religion is a dangerous and repressive aberration of human nature based on delusion underpinned by blind stupid faith. I am referring to *The God Delusion* by Richard Dawkins, *The End of Faith* and *Letter to a Christian Nation* by Sam Harris, and *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* by Christopher Hitchens. These works have come to be called collectively the “new atheism.” One of the themes running through these works is that science has somehow disproved the existence of God. Since this is a course on science and religion, it seems appropriate to examine this claim. Of the three men, only Dawkins has any real scientific credentials. (Harris is a graduate student at UCLA and Hitchens is a journalist.) Dawkins was a reader in zoology at Oxford before he took his present position as Simonyi Professor of the Public Understanding of Science. He has written a number of popular books on science including *The Selfish Gene*, *The Blind Watchmaker*, and *Climbing Mount Improbable*. Although I have not read any of them, it is my understanding that they are well written, entertaining, and accurate. *The God Delusion* is his most recent. Since I only have a half hour to devote to this subject I would like to concentrate on Dawkins and concentrate particularly on the claim that science refutes religion. But first I need to make some comments about the book in general.

In his introduction Dawkins writes, “If this book works as I intend, religious readers who open it will be atheists when they put it down.” This is evangelism of a very high order! I must say, it had somewhat the opposite effect on me. If I had been an atheist when I opened the book, I would have had an immediate conversion experience. It is so full of strange arguments, unwarranted assumptions, ridicule, distortion, insult and slander that I get physically exhausted just reading it. It is not so much a reasoned argument as a long rambling harangue against anything and anyone related to religion. Despite his central claim that science makes belief in God impossible, he presents only one argument that purports to prove this assertion. He calls it his Boeing 747 argument, and he claims that he has never heard a satisfactory refutation. I will explain the argument presently and tell

you how it gets the strange name, but first let's look at Dawkins's style of arguing. Let's start with the following quote.

The God of the Old Testament is in his words, "... arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction; jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty, ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sado-masochistic, capriciously malevolent bully."

OK A careful reading of the Old Testament could turn up a few passages which, if taken literally, would justify some of these claims. But this does no justice to the OT as a whole. It does not acknowledge that these stories come from a primitive, bronze-age, nomadic tribe that was fighting for its very existence, nor does it acknowledge the fact that most of us are appalled by these passages anyhow. You see the strategy here: distort, ridicule, demonize. Here's another juicy one on the New Testament.

"Jesus was a devotee of the same in-group morality – coupled with out-group hostility – that was taken for granted in the Old Testament. Jesus was a loyal Jew. It was Paul who invented the idea of taking the Jewish God to the Gentiles. ... Jesus would have turned over in his grave if he had known that Paul would be taking his plan to the pigs."

Remember the game plan here. Ridicule, distort, belittle and demonize.

Dawkins is clearly uncomfortable with the fact that some distinguished scientists believe in God or are at least sympathetic to religion. For example, Steven J. Gould wrote a book entitled, *Rocks of Ages* in which he formulated the idea of non-overlapping magisteria, or NOMA for short. Magisterium is a Catholic term meaning that realm in which the Church has power and authority to teach religious truths. Gould said repeatedly that science cannot prove or disprove the existence of God. Science and religion simply occupy different magisteria; they can have no contact with one another. I think he was wrong, otherwise there would be no point in this course, but Dawkins is outraged that Gould would concede any authority to religion whatsoever. "I simply do not believe that Gould could possibly have meant much of what he wrote in *Rocks of Ages*." You see how this works. Gould is

too well known and distinguished for Dawkins to get away with calling him a deluded fool. He has to settle for second best – he calls him a liar.

One more example in the same vein. Freeman Dyson, one of the founding fathers of quantum field theory, was given the Templeton Prize for his contributions to the understanding of science and religion. As part of his acceptance speech Dyson gave a modest account of his own religious beliefs. Dawkins reproduces the text of the speech interspersing each sentence with his own mocking comments. He then claims that Dyson was a hypocrite and was bribed by the Templeton foundation to make the speech!

Einstein often spoke of God and religion. Dawkins can't quite get up to calling Einstein a deluded fool or a liar, so he uses another strategy. He said that when Einstein used the word God he didn't really mean God, and when he spoke of religion he didn't really mean religion. He then chastises Einstein for his "disingenuous" use of words.

The best story, however, has to do with the Pope. This comes not from the book but from a colleague, Michael Ruse. On October 22, 1996, Pope John Paul II issued a statement offering support for the general idea of biological evolution. Dawkins' response was simply that the Pope was a hypocrite, that he could not be genuine about science and that Dawkins himself simply preferred an honest fundamentalist!

One of Dawkins' favorite rhetorical devices is the hateful non sequitur. He gives many examples of vile and stupid things Christians have done over the centuries. Such examples are not hard to find: holy wars, religious persecution, inquisitions, witch hunts, and intolerance of all sorts. And so far as stupid remarks are concerned, we could compile a great list just from the Letters to the Editor in the GT! But does this mean that God does not exist or that one should be an atheist? What is the logical connection between the statements, "Christians do terrible things," and "God does not exist."? Surely God exists or doesn't exist independently of what some people do. Take democracy for example. Much evil has been done in the name of Democracy. Remember that just a few years ago, America's foreign policy was informed by the necessity of bringing Democracy to the Middle East. After we had installed Democracy in Afghanistan and Iraq, we

would install it in various neighboring countries. That's a scary thought, but does it mean that democracy is inherently evil or meaningless? No, it's an example of the well-known truth that when people conceive grandiose destructive agendas, they justify them with whatever currency is at hand, be it democracy, god, ethnic purity, the liberation of the masses, or whatever. Christians can be terrible. I have led a very sheltered life, but the meanest and most treacherous people I have dealt with were all Christians in a Christian context working out of allegedly Christian motives. This is something that has always puzzled me. Christianity seems to bring out the best in some people and the worst in others; and the worst can be very bad indeed. We could have an interesting discussion on this point, but I don't think it's germane to the question of God's existence. I could give many similar examples from *The God Delusion* all to the same point; these are arguments based on *non sequiturs*. These are emotional arguments, not logical arguments.

So Christianity seems to bring out the best in some people and the worst in others. Now suppose you were to pick out the worst of the worst and hold it up as representative of all of Christianity while ignoring all the rest. It would hardly be a fair representation, but this is one of Dawkins's favorite rhetorical strategies. Let me give you an example. In the preface he imagines the following criticism of his work. "You go after crude, rabble-rousing chancers like Ted Haggard, Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, rather than sophisticated theologians like Tillich or Bohnhoeffler who teach the sort of religion I believe in." Dawkins responds to this criticism as follows. "The melancholy truth is that this kind of understated, decent, revisionist religion is numerically negligible. To the vast majority of believers around the world, religion all too closely resembles what you hear from the likes of Robertson, Falwell or Haggard, Osama bin Laden or the Ayatolla Khomeini." If Dawkins had limited himself to criticizing television evangelists, *The God Delusion* would be a good book, entertaining and insightful as his others. As it is, we are all getting tarred with the same brush. Remember the game plan; distort, ridicule, demonize.

One more preliminary before I get to the Boeing 747 argument. In Chapter 1 he defines the philosophical stance called *naturalism*. "[A] philosophical naturalist is somebody who *believes* there is nothing beyond the natural, physical world, no supernatural creative intelligence lurking behind the observable universe, no soul

that outlasts the body and no miracles – except in the sense of natural phenomena that we don't yet understand.” The customary definition of naturalism is the hypothesis that there is nothing in the universe except matter and fields (in the quantum mechanical sense) and that everything that happens can be ultimately explained in terms of blind chance as limited and channeled by the laws of physics. The second definition makes it clearer what is being assumed. In either case I call your attention to the words “believe” and “hypothesis.” Naturalism in the second sense (technically called methodological naturalism) is the central working hypothesis that almost all scientists accept. I would say that naturalism defines the scientific enterprise. The results of science are those things that can be learned within the context of naturalism. When science strays outside the limits of this hypothesis (as the proponents of intelligent design do) it ceases to be science. But notice the absolutely crucial difference between working hypothesis and belief. The Dawkins-style naturalist (technically known as a philosophical naturalist) believes that the only reliable knowledge we possess comes via naturalism; that is to say, the only reliable knowledge is scientific knowledge. There is no scientific way to prove this. It is a matter of belief. It requires a leap of faith. Dawkins ridicules Christians for their reliance on blind faith. Turnabout is fair play. Of course, having assumed there is no supernatural, it is quite easy to prove that God doesn't exist. Now I will finally discuss the central argument of the book.

The argument Dawkins provides is called the Boeing 747 gambit because of a remark allegedly made by astronomer Fred Hoyle that the probability of life originating on earth by chance is no greater than the chance that a hurricane, blowing through a scrap yard, would assemble a Boeing 747. Life on earth, like the airplane, is extremely complex. The implication is that life, because of its complexity, is extremely improbable. It's hard to make much sense of this statement, however. A probability is a ratio of two numbers. The probability that a flipped coin will come up “heads” is 50%. The reason is that the coin has two sides one of which is heads. Heads is one out of two possibilities, so its probability is $\frac{1}{2}=0.5$. If life is improbable, what is the numerator and what is the denominator? I will waive that point for the time being. The further implication is that events with very small probabilities don't happen. Some of the proponents of intelligent design also make this assumption. It's wrong as I will explain when I get around to

ID, but again, I waive the point. Darwinian evolution shows us how something as improbable as an eye for example, can come about via an accumulation of small changes, each one of which might be only moderately improbable. Dawkins uses the image of a mountain. One side of the mountain is a sheer cliff. The other side is a gentle slope leading to the summit. Creating the eye all at once is like scaling the cliff, very improbable. But you can always go around to the back of the mountain and walk to the top via the gentle slope, one step at a time. This is the way of evolution. Dawkins then asserts that everything we see about us in the universe is also the result of some similar sort of natural selection process. There is very little evidence to support this assertion. This is a serious weakness to his argument, but again I waive the point.

The other way to explain the exquisitely designed complexity we see around us is to invoke a designer god. Dawkins argues that in order to design such a complex universe, God would have to be even more complex. This god in turn would have to be designed by an even more complex God. This leads us to an infinite regress which is logically unacceptable, consequently there is no god. The argument can be summed up in four words: who designed the designer?

There is an exquisite irony here. Dawkins claims he invented the argument, but in fact it was used by Aristotle to prove the existence of God! Aristotle put it this way. Everything we see has been caused by something else. This something else must have some prior cause, etc. Everything now stands at the end of a long causal chain. There must be no infinite regress, however. The chain must stop at some first cause that is the cause of all subsequent causes – God of course. Aristotle says there must be no infinite regress; therefore there must be a God. Dawkins says there must be no infinite regress; therefore there must not be a God. Shall we vote?

The moral is that appeals to infinite regress have no logical force. Because we are so limited in space and time, our knowledge is limited as well. We simply cannot answer ultimate questions with nothing more than science, and we certainly cannot answer them with cheap logical tricks.

There is a further point here. If you limit your explanations in keeping with naturalism as Dawkins does, then there is no way to avoid infinite regress with regard to the universe. We know that the observable universe originated at one

point in space and time with matter at presumably infinite density and pressure. How did this situation come about? However you answer that question, the next question is how did *that* situation come about? We simply can't answer such questions within the framework of naturalism.

The hard-core theist will simply say, "The universe was created by God who is eternal. End of discussion." I am a bit uneasy about such a glib answer. As we physicists like to say, a theory that explains everything, explains nothing.

There is another problem with Dawkins' argument that is worth further thought, since it is related to the issue of emergence we will be discussing later. Dawkins claims that in order to create such a complex universe, God must be even more complex. As a matter of fact the early universe was extremely simple. It was absolutely uniform, isotropic, and homogenous, with exactly the same temperature everywhere. One could just as well argue that to design such a simple universe, God would have to be very simple himself. But the universe didn't stay simple. It evolved galaxies, stars, planets, DNA, wart hogs, and finally human intelligence. On one hand, none of these developments presumably violated any of the laws of physics. On the other hand, no one has been able to explain in any detailed way solely on the basis of the laws of physics, how these things came about. The universe has the appearance at least of being driven by purpose, the purpose being to evolve organized complexity. I think the ultimate flaw in Dawkins' argument is the implicit assumption that everything has just one explanation. To give a trivial example, I am here because some sperm fertilized some egg in my mother's body. That's one explanation. Another explanation is that my parents loved one another and wanted to have a child. These are two levels of explanation, and you can think of many others. We are here because of Darwinian evolution. We are here because the laws of physics and the composition of the universe are exquisitely fine-tuned to make this possible. We are here because God wanted company.

Finally, what are we to make of Dawkins' basic posture of philosophical naturalism? What if everything were to be ultimately explainable in terms of the laws of physics? Where do we get art and music, morality, love, compassion and understanding? I think we are driven back to some sort of socio-biology, and I find some of these explanations preposterous. For example, let's say that our ancient

forbearers imitated animal calls in order to lure their prey and perhaps also to communicate with one another. From this we get the B-Minor Mass, Beethoven's late string quartets, and Rachmaninoff's third piano concerto. So far as I know, no socio-biologist has actually made this argument, but can you come up with a better one? To my way of thinking, the existence of art and music, of love, compassion, and morality, of beauty and the sense of wonder, and of a comprehensible universe, are the closest thing we will ever have to a proof of the existence of God.

So what are we to make of *The God Delusion* – over 400 pages saturated with anger and resentment? Alister McGrath in his book *The Dawkins Delusion* has suggested that the book's intended audience seems to be atheists who are wavering in their faith and speculates that Dawkins might be wavering in his. I think this is just a good-natured crack at Dawkins' expense. The book seems to me to have a compulsive, demented quality about it. It suggests a brilliant mind come somewhat off the track. At any rate, if it is just intended for atheists they are welcome to it. The book's real harm is that it drives otherwise reasonable Christians into the hands of the Intelligent Design movement, and it is to this group that I now turn.