

Pittsburg State University

Pittsburg State University Digital Commons

Faculty Submissions

Philosophy

3-2007

Dawkins, The God Delusion review

Donald W. Viney

Pittsburg State University, dviney@pittstate.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.pittstate.edu/phil_faculty



Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Viney, Donald W., "Dawkins, The God Delusion review" (2007). *Faculty Submissions*. 53.
https://digitalcommons.pittstate.edu/phil_faculty/53

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Philosophy at Pittsburg State University Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Submissions by an authorized administrator of Pittsburg State University Digital Commons. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@pittstate.edu.

The following review was originally published in *The Midwest Quarterly* 48/4 (Summer 2007): 602-605. A Dutch translation of this review was also published: "Richard Dawkins: 'God als misvatting'" in *Gamma* 14/1 (March 2007): 51-54.

Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006).

Donald Wayne Viney
Pittsburg State University

Richard Dawkins—eminent biologist and *bête noire* of creationists—endeavors to show that belief in a supernatural being that created and designed the universe is a pernicious delusion (31, 108). As one would expect, Dawkins makes his case with cleverness, pugnacity, and flashes of brilliance. The first 160 pages attack theistic arguments as "spectacularly weak" and argue that it is overwhelmingly probable that God does not exist. In the remaining 200 + pages, Dawkins sketches a theory of religion as the misfiring of something useful (like children believing what their parents tell them), traces the Darwinian origins of our moral sense, denies the relevance of religious beliefs to sound ethical principles, lays bare the mischief done by absolutist religion (especially harm to children), and waxes eloquent on how science can inspire us. Dawkins promotes his book as a "consciousness-raiser" for "atheist pride." He hopes that religious readers follow the examples of Douglas Adams (author of *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*) and others who became atheists after reading Dawkins' earlier books (5, 116-117, 322).

Much of Dawkins' project can be endorsed by intellectually responsible theists. For example, if "is" and "ought" are not conflated, few theists would object to exploring the evolution of our sense of right and wrong. Or again, Dawkins omits to mention that many theists embrace the Socratic dictum that an act can be good whether or not it is loved by God. Thoughtful people of faith will join Dawkins in bemoaning evils done in the name of religion. They might add that religiously motivated individuals are often—but not often enough—in the vanguard of social justice movements: think of William Wilberforce on slavery and animal cruelty, Dorothea Dix on the humane treatment of the mentally ill, and Martin Luther King Jr. on civil rights. In recent memory, the Anglican theologian Norman Pittenger advocated full acceptance of homosexuals and lived openly with his partner. Theists also agree that the study of sacred writings is integral to a literary education (340f). Finally, theists, no less than atheists, can appreciate the grandeur of the world as revealed by science. Teilhard de Chardin was fond of saying that research is adoration.

Where, then, is the battle joined? A. N. Whitehead called the obsession with the idea of the necessary goodness of religion a "dangerous delusion." Dawkins, however,

seems to be obsessed with the contrary extreme of the necessary badness of religion, or at least of the tendency of religion to be bad. He speaks of “the religious [or theological] mind” (313, 358, 360), thereby employing a rhetorical trick (the use of the singular) that he recognizes in racist writing as reducing “an entire plurality of people to one ‘type’” (269). The *fact* is that there is no single religious mind, but a variety of minds that think in often sharply conflicting ways. Dawkins saddles religion with amplifying in-group loyalties and out-group hostilities (254f). This is true of what Henri Bergson called closed morality and static religion, but it is false of open morality and dynamic religion. Modern religious thinkers from Kierkegaard to Tillich speak of doubt as an essential ingredient in the life of faith. Hence, Dawkins’ identification of faith with unquestioned dogmatism (306) is dubious, notwithstanding that these nuances are easily missed when religious extremists dominate the headlines.

The book’s first part is where Dawkins directly makes the case for atheism. Unfortunately he does not present theistic arguments in anything like the forms that their most thoughtful defenders would recognize. Consider Anselm’s ontological argument. For nearly half a century philosophical discussion has focused on the second, or modal, version of the argument (formalized by Charles Hartshorne in 1962). Dawkins ignores these developments. He tells of piquing some philosophers and theologians by his adaptation of Anselm’s (first) argument to prove that pigs could fly. He adds this enticing morsel: “They felt the need to resort to Modal Logic to prove that I was wrong” (84). Yet, modalities are precisely what one needs to deal intelligently with Anselm. Moreover, Hartshorne urged that Anselm’s reasoning, though inconclusive, shows the futility of framing God’s existence as an empirical question (in Karl Popper’s sense of falsifiable by some conceivable experience); this directly challenges Dawkins’ own assumptions.

Harry Emerson Fosdick said that religion has the right to be judged by its most worthy expressions. Dawkins does not meet this standard. One must look elsewhere for accurate presentations of the best theistic arguments and thoughtful criticisms of them. Dawkins knows that there are respectable atheistic (and theistic) criticisms of these arguments, for he mentions J. L. Mackie’s *The Miracle of Theism* (1982), which rivals Michael Martin’s *Atheism: A Philosophical Justification* (1990) as the top book of its genre. If Dawkins knows this, why waste time clowning with frivolous and incompetent scholarship? And why the sophistry of supposing this approach settles important issues? Hartshorne rightly said that one should judge by argument, not insinuations. In the case of classical theistic arguments, Dawkins mostly insinuates.

Dawkins is much better at his old game of exposing the folly of considering “God did it” as a workable hypothesis to fill real (or imagined) gaps in the scientific account of the rise of life on earth. Most philosophers and theologians—with notable exceptions—

would put Dawkins on the side of the angels on this question. But he aligns himself with the fallen angels in his underlying assumption that the existence of God is *best considered* as a scientific hypothesis (2, 50). This claim is philosophic, not scientific, but one looks in vain for an argument for it, or for consideration of intelligent rebuttals of it. Dawkins' view that this is the only legitimate approach may stem from a belief that one can engage in "rational argument" about the world if and only if one engages in science (cf. 154). He insists that he is not advocating a "narrowly scientific way of thinking" (155). Perhaps not, but again he deals with his philosophical opponents by means of what C. S. Peirce called the method of convenient ignorance.

It is David Hume, interestingly, not Darwin, who provides Dawkins with his central argument that God does not exist. According to Hume, it is unavailing to use God to explain complexity (or design) since a divine being would have to be at least as complex, and hence as much in need of explanation, as the complexity that it is invoked to explain. Dawkins approvingly quotes Daniel Dennett's assessment that this is an "unrebuttable refutation" of belief in God (157). Or is it? Mozart's brilliance may be in need of explanation, but his creativity is surely central to explaining his music. Of course, appealing to Mozart's creativity presupposes intentionality, final causes, and purposes. One suspects that Dawkins would admit no explanation as fully adequate that made such appeals (which, following Dennett, he describes as skyhooks, or mind-first explanations). This is another controversial philosophical thesis for which Dawkins gives no argument.

There is, to be sure, a legitimate issue barely discernable through the dust that Dawkins kicks up: What, if anything, is gained by way of a rational account of things by positing God as the ontological ground of the universe rather than accepting the universe, or even God plus the universe, as the ultimate metaphysical fact? Since Dawkins is preoccupied with tilting at creationist windmills—assuming that God's existence is a scientific hypothesis—he never gets around to this question. The closest he comes is to claim that *all* entities complex enough to be intelligent are the result of evolutionary (non-skyhook) processes (73). Theists might agree that all entities *within* the universe are products of evolution. They can even agree that there are aspects of deity affected by evolutionary processes; but they should demand a reason for grouping God with localized beings. In any event, one wonders (and here Hume would agree) what basis Dawkins has for assessing probabilities at the highest levels of metaphysical generality. Once again, Dawkins does not so much settle questions as to beg them.

The deepest irony in this book is the failure to take developmental perspectives seriously where religion is concerned. Dawkins knows that the Bible is a library of books written over centuries (237), but he has a decidedly monochromatic understanding of the ideas about God in those books. He never considers what it might mean for people in

very different historical contexts to refer to God with theological constructs appropriate to their particular settings. Dawkins is apparently “an atheist for Jesus” because the Nazarene represents “a huge improvement over the cruel ogre of the Old Testament” (250). Yet, Jesus and the Hebrew prophets speak with one voice on issues of justice. Finally, one must ask how an atheist’s manifesto that touts the power of evolutionary thinking to raise consciousness could ignore those theists who are similarly impressed (I mentioned some of their names in this review). They could at least applaud Dawkins’ impassioned case that the extremists promote a pernicious delusion. Beyond this, Dawkins does not prove anything particularly pernicious or delusional about theism.