

October 22, 2006

## Beyond Belief

By [JIM HOLT](#)

Richard Dawkins, who holds the interesting title of “Charles Simonyi professor of the public understanding of science” at [Oxford University](#), is a master of scientific exposition and synthesis. When it comes to his own specialty, evolutionary biology, there is none better. But the purpose of this book, his latest of many, is not to explain science. It is rather, as he tells us, “to raise consciousness,” which is quite another thing.

### THE GOD DELUSION

By Richard Dawkins.

406 pp. Houghton Mifflin Company. \$27.

The nub of Dawkins’s consciousness-raising message is that to be an atheist is a “brave and splendid” aspiration. Belief in God is not only a delusion, he argues, but a “pernicious” one. On a scale of 1 to 7, where 1 is certitude that God exists and 7 is certitude that God does not exist, Dawkins rates himself a 6: “I cannot know for certain but I think God is very improbable, and I live my life on the assumption that he is not there.”

Dawkins’s case against religion follows an outline that goes back to Bertrand Russell’s classic 1927 essay “Why I Am Not a Christian.” First, discredit the traditional reasons for supposing that God exists. (“God” is here taken to denote the Judeo-Christian deity, presumed to be eternal, all-powerful, all-good and the creator of the world.) Second, produce an argument or two supporting the contrary hypothesis, that God does not exist. Third, cast doubt on the transcendent origins of religion by showing that it has a purely natural explanation. Finally, show that we can have happy and meaningful lives without worshiping a deity, and that religion, far from being a necessary prop for morality, actually produces more evil than good. The first three steps are meant to undermine the truth of religion; the last goes to its pragmatic value.

What Dawkins brings to this approach is a couple of fresh arguments — no mean achievement, considering how thoroughly these issues have been debated over the centuries — and a great deal of passion. The book fairly crackles with brio. Yet reading it can feel a little like watching a [Michael Moore](#) movie. There is lots of good, hard-hitting stuff about the imbecilities of religious fanatics and frauds of all stripes, but the tone is smug and the logic occasionally sloppy. Dawkins fans accustomed to his elegant prose might be surprised to come across such vulgarisms as “sucking up to God” and “Nur Nurny Nur Nur” (here the author, in a dubious polemical ploy, is imagining his theological adversary as a snotty playground brat). It’s all in good fun when Dawkins mocks a buffoon like [Pat Robertson](#) and fundamentalist pastors like the one who created “Hell Houses” to frighten sin-prone children at Halloween. But it is less edifying when he questions the sincerity of serious thinkers who disagree with him, like the late [Stephen Jay Gould](#), or insinuates that recipients of the million-dollar-plus Templeton Prize, awarded for work reconciling science and spirituality, are intellectually dishonest (and presumably

venal to boot). In a particularly low blow, he accuses Richard Swinburne, a philosopher of religion and science at Oxford, of attempting to “justify the Holocaust,” when Swinburne was struggling to square such monumental evils with the existence of a loving God. Perhaps all is fair in consciousness-raising. But Dawkins’s avowed hostility can make for scattershot reasoning as well as for rhetorical excess. Moreover, in training his Darwinian guns on religion, he risks destroying a larger target than he intends.

The least satisfying part of this book is Dawkins’s treatment of the traditional arguments for the existence of God. The “ontological argument” says that God must exist by his very nature, since he possesses all perfections, and it is more perfect to exist than not to exist. The “cosmological argument” says that the world must have an ultimate cause, and this cause could only be an eternal, God-like entity. The “design argument” appeals to special features of the universe (such as its suitability for the emergence of intelligent life), submitting that such features make it more probable than not that the universe had a purposive cosmic designer.

These, in a nutshell, are the Big Three arguments. To Dawkins, they are simply ridiculous. He dismisses the ontological argument as “infantile” and “dialectical prestidigitation” without quite identifying the defect in its logic, and he is baffled that a philosopher like Russell — “no fool” — could take it seriously. He seems unaware that this argument, though medieval in origin, comes in sophisticated modern versions that are not at all easy to refute. Shirking the intellectual hard work, Dawkins prefers to move on to parodic “proofs” that he has found on the Internet, like the “Argument From Emotional Blackmail: God loves you. How could you be so heartless as not to believe in him? Therefore God exists.” (For those who want to understand the weaknesses in the standard arguments for God’s existence, the best source I know remains the atheist philosopher J. L. Mackie’s 1982 book “The Miracle of Theism.”)

It is doubtful that many people come to believe in God because of logical arguments, as opposed to their upbringing or having “heard a call.” But such arguments, even when they fail to be conclusive, can at least give religious belief an aura of reasonableness, especially when combined with certain scientific findings. We now know that our universe burst into being some 13 billion years ago (the theory of the Big Bang, as it happens, was worked out by a Belgian priest), and that its initial conditions seem to have been “fine tuned” so that life would eventually arise. If you are not religiously inclined, you might take these as brute facts and be done with the matter. But if you think that there must be some ultimate explanation for the improbable leaping-into-existence of the harmonious, biofriendly cosmos we find ourselves in, then the God hypothesis is at least rational to adhere to, isn’t it?

No, it’s not, says Dawkins, whereupon he brings out what he views as “the central argument of my book.” At heart, this argument is an elaboration of the child’s question “But Mommy, who made God?” To posit God as the ground of all being is a nonstarter, Dawkins submits, for “any God capable of designing a universe, carefully and foresightfully tuned to lead to our evolution, must be a supremely complex and improbable entity who needs an even bigger explanation than the one he is supposed to provide.” Thus the God hypothesis is “very close to being ruled out by the laws of probability.”

Dawkins relies here on two premises: first, that a creator is bound to be more complex, and hence improbable, than his creation (you never, for instance, see a horseshoe making a blacksmith); and second, that to explain the improbable in terms of the more improbable is no explanation at all. Neither of these is among the “laws of probability,” as he suggests. The first is hotly disputed by theologians, who insist, in a

rather woolly metaphysical way, that God is the essence of simplicity. He is, after all, infinite in every respect, and therefore much easier to define than a finite thing. Dawkins, however, points out that God can't be all that simple if he is capable of, among other feats, simultaneously monitoring the thoughts of all his creatures and answering their prayers. ("Such bandwidth!" the author exclaims.)

If God is indeed more complex and improbable than his creation, does that rule him out as a valid explanation for the universe? The beauty of Darwinian evolution, as Dawkins never tires of observing, is that it shows how the simple can give rise to the complex. But not all scientific explanation follows this model. In physics, for example, the law of entropy implies that, for the universe as a whole, order always gives way to disorder; thus, if you want to explain the present state of the universe in terms of the past, you are pretty much stuck with explaining the probable (messy) in terms of the improbable (neat). It is far from clear which explanatory model makes sense for the deepest question, the one that, Dawkins complains, his theologian friends keep harping on: why does the universe exist at all? Darwinian processes can take you from simple to complex, but they can't take you from Nothing to Something. If there is an ultimate explanation for our contingent and perishable world, it would seemingly have to appeal to something that is both necessary and imperishable, which one might label "God." Of course, it can't be known for sure that there is such an explanation. Perhaps, as Russell thought, "the universe is just there, and that's all."

This sort of coolly speculative thinking could not be more remote from the rococo rituals of religion as it is actually practiced across the world. Why is it that all human cultures have religion if, as Dawkins believes he has proved, it rests on a delusion? Many thinkers — Marx, Freud, Durkheim — have produced natural histories of religion, arguing that it arose to serve some social or psychological function, such as, in Freud's account, the fulfillment of repressed wishes toward a father-figure.

Dawkins's own attempt at a natural history is Darwinian, but not in the way you might expect. He is skeptical that religion has any survival value, contending that its cost in blood and guilt outweighs any conceivable benefits. Instead, he attributes religion to a "misfiring" of something else that is adaptively useful; namely, a child's evolved tendency to believe its parents. Religious ideas, he thinks, are viruslike "memes" that multiply by infecting the gullible brains of children. (Dawkins coined the term "meme" three decades ago to refer to bits of culture that, he holds, reproduce and compete the way genes do.) Each religion, as he sees it, is a complex of mutually compatible memes that has managed to survive a process of natural selection. ("Perhaps," he writes in his usual provocative vein, "Islam is analogous to a carnivorous gene complex, Buddhism to a herbivorous one.") Religious beliefs, on this view, benefit neither us nor our genes; they benefit themselves.

Dawkins's gullible-child proposal is, as he concedes, just one of many Darwinian hypotheses that have been speculatively put forward to account for religion. (Another is that religion is a byproduct of our genetically programmed tendency to fall in love.) Perhaps one of these hypotheses is true. If so, what would that say about the truth of religious beliefs themselves? The story Dawkins tells about religion might also be told about science or ethics. All ideas can be viewed as memes that replicate by jumping from brain to brain. Some of these ideas, Dawkins observes, spread because they are good for us, in the sense that they raise the likelihood of our genes getting into the next generation; others — like, he claims, religion — spread because normally useful parts of our minds "misfire." Ethical values, he suggests, fall

into the first category. Altruism, for example, benefits our selfish genes when it is lavished on close kin who share copies of those genes, or on non-kin who are in a position to return the favor. But what about pure “Good Samaritan” acts of kindness? These, Dawkins says, could be “misfirings,” although, he hastens to add, misfirings of a “blessed, precious” sort, unlike the nasty religious ones.

But the objectivity of ethics is undermined by Dawkins’s logic just as surely as religion is. The evolutionary biologist E. O. Wilson, in a 1985 paper written with the philosopher Michael Ruse, put the point starkly: ethics “is an illusion fobbed off on us by our genes to get us to cooperate,” and “the way our biology enforces its ends is by making us think that there is an objective higher code to which we are all subject.” In reducing ideas to “memes” that propagate by various kinds of “misfiring,” Dawkins is, willy-nilly, courting what some have called Darwinian nihilism.

He is also hasty in dismissing the practical benefits of religion. Surveys have shown that religious people live longer (probably because they have healthier lifestyles) and feel happier (perhaps owing to the social support they get from church). Judging from birthrate patterns in the United States and Europe, they also seem to be outbreeding secular types, a definite Darwinian advantage. On the other hand, Dawkins is probably right when he says that believers are no better than atheists when it comes to behaving ethically. One classic study showed that “Jesus people” were just as likely to cheat on tests as atheists and no more likely to do altruistic volunteer work. Oddly, Dawkins does not bother to cite such empirical evidence; instead, he relies, rather unscientifically, on his intuition. “I’m inclined to suspect,” he writes, “that there are very few atheists in prison.” (Even fewer Unitarians, I’d wager.) It is, however, instructive when he observes that the biblical Yahweh is an “appalling role model,” sanctioning gang-rape and genocide. Dawkins also deals at length with the objection, which he is evidently tired of hearing, that the arch evildoers of the last century, [Hitler](#) and [Stalin](#), were both atheists. Hitler, he observes, “never formally renounced his Catholicism”; and in the case of Stalin, a onetime Orthodox seminarian, “there is no evidence that his atheism motivated his brutality.” The equally murderous Mao goes unmentioned, but perhaps it could be argued that he was a religion unto himself.

Despite the many flashes of brilliance in this book, Dawkins’s failure to appreciate just how hard philosophical questions about religion can be makes reading it an intellectually frustrating experience. As long as there are no decisive arguments for or against the existence of God, a certain number of smart people will go on believing in him, just as smart people reflexively believe in other things for which they have no knock-down philosophical arguments, like free will, or objective values, or the existence of other minds. Dawkins asserts that “the presence or absence of a creative super-intelligence is unequivocally a scientific question.” But what possible evidence could verify or falsify the God hypothesis? The doctrine that we are presided over by a loving deity has become so rounded and elastic that no earthly evil or natural disaster, it seems, can come into collision with it. Nor is it obvious what sort of event might unsettle an atheist’s conviction to the contrary. Russell, when asked about this by a *Look* magazine interviewer in 1953, said he might be convinced there was a God “if I heard a voice from the sky predicting all that was going to happen to me during the next 24 hours.” Short of such a miraculous occurrence, the only thing that might resolve the matter is an experience beyond the grave — what theologians used to call, rather pompously, “eschatological verification.” If the after-death options are either a beatific vision (God) or oblivion (no God), then it is poignant to think that believers will never discover that they are wrong, whereas Dawkins and fellow atheists will never discover that they are right.

As for those in between — ranging from agnostics to “spiritual” types for whom religion is not so much a metaphysical proposition as it is a way of life, illustrated by stories and enhanced by rituals — they might take consolation in the wise words of the Rev. Andrew Mackerel, the hero of Peter De Vries’s 1958 comic novel “The Mackerel Plaza”: “It is the final proof of God’s omnipotence that he need not exist in order to save us.”

*Jim Holt, a regular contributor to The New Yorker and The New York Times Magazine, is working on a book about the puzzle of existence.*

[Copyright 2006 The New York Times Company](#)

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)

---