The God Delusion

Richard Dawkins

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Because of its popularity, Richard Dawkins’ *The God Delusion* calls for an extensive review. An adequate critique of it would require a book of the same size as *The God Delusion*. So I restrict my critique to just a handful of his claims.

I scrutinise three groups of them: (1) the existence of God is highly improbable; (2) the survival value of belief in God explains the puzzling fact that most people in the past and now believe in God; (3) the history of theism shows that it is a Very Bad Thing, the cause of much misery, so that the sooner it is dispatched to the garbage bin the better.

A theist believes that God exists. An atheist believes that God does not exist. Richard Dawkins is an atheist. He is a learned, persuasive, and highly articulate atheist. Already his book has topped best seller lists for non-fiction with sales of a million copies.

His book will have a wide influence. Dawkins has been interviewed on radio and has been the subject of television programmes. To broadcasts he brings wit and eloquence and the lustre of being Professor of the Public Understanding of Science at Oxford University. Hundreds of reviews of the book have been published, plus hundreds of commentaries on it. It is *The Da Vinci Code* of atheism.

For this reason Christians and other theists need to take it seriously. If they are to answer his case for atheism, they will need to know what they are talking about. As for today’s Catholics, the long tradition of rational argument for God which the Church has fostered is largely unknown to them, leaving them vulnerable to plausible-looking cases for atheism.

The book contains hundreds of statements which are false or misleading. An adequate answer to it would require a book of the same size as *The God Delusion*. So I restrict my assessment to just a handful of his claims.

I shall examine three groups of them: (1) arguments to show the existence of God is highly improbable; (2) explanations of the puzzling fact that most people in the past and now believe in God; (3) a history of theism (belief in God) intended to show that it is a Very Bad Thing, the cause of much misery, so that the sooner it is dispatched to the garbage bin the better.

Dawkins confronts Jews, Christians, and Muslims - believers in God whom I define as the creator and sustainer of the cosmos, who knows all and is all powerful, who is like humans in being good, being rational, having purposes, who cares deeply for humans. However, Dawkins is mostly concerned with Christians.
In fact the book is addressed to Americans. Why? Because they are unusually religious. Some 150 million of the 300 million Americans attend a place of worship each month. Further, a large percentage of the worshipers are enthusiastic propagators of theism. To Dawkins, this is deeply puzzling, for Americans are amongst the most educated people in the world, especially in science which, he claims, is lethal to theism.

He begins by complaining that poor little atheists are despised and rejected and excluded from public offices. Dawkins urges atheists to declare themselves and realise that they have the numbers. A reviewer for The Daily Mail wrote that this book is “A rallying cry to those who want to come out as non-believers, but are not quite sure if they dare...”.

He must be writing for Americans because atheism is all the rage in Russia, Scandinavia, France, China, and is widespread in Australia. I am not aware that articulate atheists, Philip Adams and Terry Lane, are shunned in polite circles. Though only about 20% of the Australian population claimed to have no religion in the recent census, research into what people believe when they claim to have a religion shows many believe in something which is not God. As for Generation Y (born 1976-1990), a recent project surveyed 1272 people in their teens and 20s. The results were compared with groups from Generation X (born 1961-75) and the 'Baby Boomer' generation (1946-60).

Overall, researchers found that less than half of Australia’s Generation Y believed in a God, a third were unsure and one in five did not believe in a God.

Add to these the bigger number of those I call 'practical' atheists - those who believe “Something must have started it all” but, whatever the Something is, it has no importance, so they give it no further attention.

(1) Arguments to show the existence of God is highly improbable

We cannot prove the non-existence of anything, says Dawkins, but we can show the existence of God to be very improbable. I beg to differ. There are no singing alligators because we observe none and none are needed to explain what we do observe. Nor are there any soldiers under the command of Napoleon Bonaparte.

Leaving that aside, let us consider his argument. He presents then scrutinises the Five Ways (Proofs) for God’s existence of St Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas concludes that a first mover is God, that the first cause of things is God, that God is the one and only necessary being who keeps contingent beings in existence, that God is the maximum of perfections like being and goodness, that things seem to be designed, they do not design themselves, so they must have a designer who is God.

But, says Dawkins, (1) why give the name “God” to whatever is the first mover or cause? Why cannot it be “'a big bang singularity', or some other physical concept as yet unknown” (2) Also God in Christian belief is not only a first mover, etc. but he is also omniscient, omnipotent, good, and so on and these proofs do not show that God has these qualities. (3) Further, God cannot be both omniscient and also omnipotent. So the 'proofs' fail hopelessly.
We must be fair to Dawkins: he is not writing for philosophers but for the market. Very much so. Nevertheless, anyone acquainted with the arguments of Aquinas will fall about laughing at this parody of his proofs. They have many critics amongst philosophers of religion but few as childish as those of Dawkins. A reviewer writes that Dawkins presents “even the strongest arguments so superficially that, to the innocent bystander, it appears they are so ‘spectacularly weak’ (p.2) as to be impossible for any sincere, half-way intelligent person to accept.” (Stephen Bullivant)

It is difficult to believe that Dawkins has ever read Aquinas. For example, he says a big bang could be the first cause. It could not. Why? Because whilst a big bang could account for the beginning of the universe billions of years ago, it cannot explain why things are causing and being caused at this moment. It cannot do so because the big bang no longer exists - it is not now doing anything. This means that Dawkins has not grasped that Aquinas is not talking about the origin of anything but only of the chain of movers and causes which exist right now. My father caused me to exist but he is not now keeping me in existence.

Dawkins does not even report accurately what St Thomas wrote. Regarding the third, the cosmological argument, Dawkins reports the first premiss as being, “There must have been a time when no physical things existed.” That is not in St Thomas’s argument: he does not mention physical things. It reads, “Some of the things we come across can be and need not be ... Now everything cannot be like this ... there has got to be something that must be.” (ST I. II. 3). Moreover, “St. Thomas did not believe that it could be proved philosophically that the world was not created from eternity: he admits the abstract possibility of the world’s creation from eternity ... “ (Frederick Copleston, A History of Philosophy, Vol. 2, 341)

There is worse to come. Summarising the conclusion of the same argument of Aquinas, Dawkins writes: “But, since physical things exist now, there must have been something non-physical to bring them into existence, and that something we call God.” Dawkins has not read Aquinas whose argument is not framed in terms of a distinction between the physical and the non-physical but between what exists contingently (can fail to exist) and that which exists necessarily (cannot fail to exist). One wonders whether Dawkins got his account of Aquinas from an atheist web site.

It is difficult to explain why the universe exists. It is also difficult to explain why Dawkins would falsify the arguments of a well-known philosopher. Dawkins is highly intelligent, well read, a vastly experience researcher, and occupies a Chair in one of the world’s best equipped sources of information. Had he wanted to clarify a point of Aquinas’s writings, all he had to do was wander down the road to Blackfriars whence enlightenment would have come from Dominican friars.

As for Aquinas’s failure to show that God is omniscient, etc., as part of the proofs as in, say, his Summa Theologiae, they are only sketches of proofs which he proceeds to fill out and strengthen. For example, having shown that a necessary being exists he proceeds to show it is also omniscient, etc.

And why cannot God be both omniscient and also omnipotent? Dawkins has great fun at this point. He says if God knows he is going to do something, then he is powerless to
change his mind - he is not all-powerful. It is all so simple. There is available an equally simple reply: If God is all-knowing, he knows he will change his mind.

He deals with St Thomas as if the latter's brief arguments were the last word on the subject. The proofs, as they stand, are deficient. They are sketches of proofs which have been developed over 700 years. Other philosophers have offered and do offer much more sophisticated versions of Aquinas's arguments. Take, for example, the argument based on modern philosophical logic of Australian Marist Father, Barry Miller. These arguments are daunting in their rigour. Apparently Dawkins is unaware of them.

It is interesting to note that Dawkins attaches an eight page bibliography to his book, showing the works he consulted. Not one is devoted to Aquinas.

Dawkins gives most attention to Aquinas's argument from teleology or design. This is because, as Dawkins notes correctly, it is the most popular argument for the existence of God. Moreover, Dawkins's field of expertise is evolution, on which he has written important books. Here he is an expert.

Put briefly, the argument from design runs thus. Things, such as eyes, are like things that humans design. But humans did not design them. Such complex entities could not have arisen by chance. They must be designed and the designer is God.

Regarding living things, Dawkins replies that evolution by natural selection explains apparent design in living things. Small changes over thousands, perhaps millions, of years accumulated, were passed on in the genes of progeny, resulting in highly complex things like human eyes. The apparent design is not evidence for God as designer.

What are we to make of this? A theist can agree that evolution explains many of the structures and behaviours of living things. Scientific explanations are good ones. But they are not full explanations. A full explanation leaves nothing further to be explained.

There are two kinds of explanation: personal and scientific. If I decide to study drama rather than biology, there is a personal explanation. Maybe I find drama the more interesting subject. There is no scientific explanation because such an explanation is by reference to scientific laws or regularities of behaviour (e.g. drop something and it will fall to the earth). Evolutionary theory relies on those thousands of laws. But it is not a full explanation because it can not explain why there are any laws in the first place. There is no law which explains why all other laws operate. There is no explanation of the laws, if God does not exist. Their existence is rendered probable if there is a person who chooses that such laws exist and operate. Let us call that person God. Then God is the best explanation for the existence and operation of laws which govern evolution.

There is further support for the argument from design. Suppose that Dawkins is correct - that natural selection has been working for millions of years so as to produce highly complex organs with specialised functions. How do we explain this? God seems the likeliest explanation, God as the one who designed the whole process which results in the capacities of living things to survive and even improve their functions. Natural selection can be God's way of designing. Given that natural selection is a fact, it does not rule out that God designed the whole process of selection.
Before we leave the argument from design, I invite you to take part in a thought experiment. According to Dawkins, humans are the result of millions of years of slight modifications in living things, modifications which enable those things to survive and propagate. But imagine that a five-second burst of radiation occurred resulting in the death of all humans. There are no humans in the cosmos. How confident are you now that natural selection will produce humans in a few million years?

Fortunately Dawkins has chosen to argue that God's existence is improbable, that is, that his existence is more improbable than probable.

A theist can argue that the existence of a complex physical universe in which the conditions for humans to exist, and even to flourish, is very improbable - if God does not exist. But if, like a good scientist, our theist adopts the hypothesis that a being exists with unlimited powers and knowledge and who values a universe which includes humans, and chose to create it, then our present universe is much more likely to occur than if he did not exist.

Again, that is a personal explanation. God acts like a person. He decides. So he is the full explanation for the universe.

In this review I cannot offer detailed arguments for God's existence. All I can do is point to well-developed arguments which are available, arguments of which Dawkins seems unaware.

He offers one repeated objection to God's being the explanation of the universe (pp. 54, 56, 78, 109, 120, 141, 156). Given that the physical universe is highly complex, if God is the explanation he would have to be even more complex and, so, would demand an explanation. So God fails to explain.

This argument can be expressed thus: if anything is complex, then it demands explanation and an explanation of anything complex would have to be even more complex and demand its explanation. If theists posit God as the explanation, then God needs an explanation.

Is this true? Newton's laws of motion are simple and explain a great deal about changes in the universe. They reduce to simple formulae a vast range of motion. They are simple in comparison to what they explain. Einstein's formula E=mc² is very simple and does not demand something even more complex to explain it. There may be an explanation for the formula but that explanation does not have to be even more complex. Besides, the attributes assigned to God by theists are extremely simple: God is alone in keeping all else in existence, God knows all (not a finite number of things), God has power without limit, God exists at all times. Such an explanation is the simplest possible.

(2) The fact that most people in the past and now believe in God

Suppose that religion is believing in God and worshiping God. Dawkins's question is: Given that science has shown God's existence very improbable, what is the explanation for widespread belief in God - even amongst highly educated Americans?
His answer has the merit of simplicity. Evolution theory shows that behaviours survive if they increase the capacity of a species to survive. Young humans survive only if they believe most of what their parents tell them. Most parents throughout history, and today, believe in God and teach their children to likewise believe. So because children trust their parents, they believe a manifest falsity (God exists) along with many useful truths. There, you have it all.

Let us think about this. True, humans do well in their infancy to believe their parents. But they do badly if they grow up believing everything their parents taught them. Many come to disbelieve some things their parents taught them. Those humans often survive as well those who continue to believe their parents. Moreover atheists pass on their atheism to their offspring, who seem to survive quite as well as the theists. It is difficult to believe that survival is likely only in cases of believing all that parents teach.

Most humans used believe their parents who told them the earth is flat. The belief has vanished. Most parents used tell children the sky can be reached using a sufficiently long ladder. The belief vanished. Lots of children believe parents who tell them Father Christmas brings presents. Children soon stop believing. Indeed, they survive even better than those who continue to believe their parents' teaching! The fact that children tend to believe parents does not explain the persistence of belief in God.

It is interesting that Dawkins's argument can be turned on its head. For if humans have been theists for 30,000 years and survived, that suggests that theism is good for survival. It is not due to their believing their parents on just any matter but on the existence of God. As a good evolutionist, Dawkins should be promoting belief in God as an aid to survival. Of course, whether such a belief aids survival depends on the environment. In Mecca one is more likely to survive if one is a theist than an atheist, whereas making known one were a theist in Albania around 1970 was a prescription for a short future.

He holds that we are now vastly more knowledgeable than in the past. Who would disagree? But note that this development occurred within societies which were overwhelmingly theistic and led by humans who were mostly theists. Theism did not have to be discarded as a condition for progressing.

I have already noted that belief in atheism could have the same explanation as that of Dawkins for theism. Governments and parents in Communist nations over 70 years taught children that God does not exist. This teaching has been successful. Atheists are much more numerous in former Communist East Germany than in West Germany. The theist, puzzled by the persistence of atheism can learn from Dawkins that atheist parents explain atheism’s continuance. But there is no evidence that their atheism increases their chances of survival after infancy.

Dawkins might like to consider a different explanation for the continuance of theism, namely, that people judge belief in God better fits the facts than atheism and confidently pass on that belief to children and some of those children also come to believe that the existence of God fits the facts.

The facts include: the existence of the universe needing an explanation; laws which govern the universe; the improbability of humans coming into existence, almost universal reports...
of humans both having experiences of something “tremendous and fascinating” (something that fills them with awe), and also their own experiences as of ‘Someone’ as trustworthy and affectionate. The existence of God seems to most people the best explanation for these and other facts.

3) Religion Bad Thing

According to Dawkins, theism has had appalling results. Wars, persecutions, intolerance, corrupt morals, ill-treatment of women. There is nothing new in this allegation. In 1927 Bertrand Russell wrote in his well-known work:

Religion prevents our children from having a rational education; religion prevents us from removing the fundamental causes of war; religion prevents us from teaching the ethic of scientific co-operation in place of the old fierce doctrines of sin and punishment. It is possible that mankind is on the threshold of a golden age, but, if so, it will be necessary first to slay the dragon that guards the door, and this dragon is religion.

Presumably it was religion that caused the Second World War, the Korean and Vietnam wars, the Pol Pot regime, and the oppressive Communist regimes.

Theism already has a bad press. Extremist Muslims are doing more to promote atheism than Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris, and others of the present wave of atheist writers. People are saying, “If belief in God inspires these horrors, then the sooner we get rid of that belief the better.” Dawkins can be sure that this part of his book will receive enthusiastic acceptance from many readers.

Let us pause to think about this. Try another thought experiment. Suppose that all belief in God ceased. Everyone is now an atheist. Ask yourself: Would there still be wars, persecutions, discrimination of various kinds, promotions of guilt feelings, intolerance, acts of violence, assassinations, torture? Would there even be a diminution in the the occurrence of human wrong doing? If, as I do, you think there would be little change, then theism has added little to human depravity.

But that leaves as a fact that people have often believed they were licensed or commanded by God to do wicked things. Here we might pause to remember that much the same applies to atheists and agnostics whose principles have licensed the doing of grave evils.

An atheist might distance himself from the fanatical atheist, taking pride in being tolerant. Perhaps of him can be said, “The peak of tolerance is most readily achieved by those who are not burdened with convictions.” But there are limits to tolerance, even for atheists. We all value some things highly and we will use much force to preserve and promote those things. There is no shortage of people who value money so highly that they will do terrible things to others to get it. Supporters of a football team will kill in order to ‘prove’ that their team is better than a rival. Millions have died because they valued democracy. Some 600,000 Americans had to die because many valued the freeing of slaves. Muslim Jihadists kill themselves and others because they value submission to God. So it is no surprise that those who assign the highest value to belief in, and service of, God have promoted that belief in deplorable ways.
Arguing for the evil results of theism, Dawkins has sport with biblical fundamentalists who tend to believe everything in the Bible. They make an easy target. He is amusing. He describes God as presented in the Old Testament as “arguably the the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a ... capriciously malevolent bully.” This should give Dawkins a problem for no one has ever believed in such a being.

He refers to events in the Old Testament and New Testament. However, he admits that instructed Christians and Jews often do not credit as fact everything that appears in the Bible. Indeed they do not. He knows this and explains it as arbitrary interpretation. Had he bothered to study how Christians and Jews interpret their scriptures he would have noticed that they employ principles of interpretation, just as everyone else does when interpreting a text, just as Dawkins does when he uses what I call his Principle of Malevolence in discussing the Bible.

There are stories in the Old Testament of God's ordering massacres and of heroes who offered their daughters in place of men threatened by sodomites. But do we find Jews doing these things throughout history and today? When did you last hear of a Jew or Christian stoning to death someone caught in adultery?

As for the moral behaviour of Christians, Dawkins uses the old Accountant’s Trick: fill in the debit side of the ledger and leave blank the credit side. There is no mention of St Vincent de Paul or William Booth who spent their lives relieving poverty and its effects because they were Christians. Mother Teresa of Calcutta is just a “sanctimonious hypocrite”. So much for a lifetime spent in the slums of Calcutta and elsewhere. As for the vast network of Christian charitable works operating for 2000 years - and exhibited in Australia for two centuries - it receives no more than a nod.

Yet these could be called the macroworks of charity of Christians, as also of other theists. To be taken into account are the microworks, the countless small and largely unnoticed deeds which only observation and a study of biographies reveals. This fact is generously acknowledged by Michael Schermer, President of the Skeptics Society, who, having noted some of the ghastly deeds of theists, writes:

However, for everyone of these grand tragedies there are ten thousand acts of personal kindness and social good that go unreported ... Religion, like all social institutions, of such historical depth and cultural impact, cannot be reduced to an unambiguous good or evil.

There is also the question of a time scale when evaluating claims that theism has done little more than multiply evils. Theism is almost as old as mankind. Judaism has a history of at least 3000 years, Christianity 2000 years, Islam 1400. How can one compare their records with that of atheism which, as armed with coercive power, has only two centuries of history? If theists have done terrible wrongs over 30,000 years, I fail to be surprised. The evils atheists have done in the name of atheism over a mere 200 years does surprise me.

Striving for impact, Dawkins betrays abysmal ignorance. Comparing theists and atheists, he recalls that the Taliban Muslims destroyed ancient statues of Buddha. He adds, "I do not
think there is an atheist in the world who would bulldoze Mecca - or Chartres", etc. (p. 249). Has Dawkins forgotten the destruction of 20,000 churches, many of great beauty, by the atheist government of the Soviet Union, and the parallel acts in other atheist Communist countries? What about the execution of some 8000 priests and religious and the destruction of half of the 42,000 churches in Spain by the heavily atheist Republican government during the Spanish Civil War during the 1930s? Dawkins seems to suffer from occasional bouts of amnesia.

As I put down this book, I asked myself “Why is it selling?” Yes, it is cheeky and irreverent, designed to please scoffers. It has spice. But why would an Oxford professor produce a book so unbalanced and bad-tempered?