

Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, (Bantam 2006)

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Richard Dawkins has been described as ‘materialistic, reductionist and overtly anti-religious.’¹ Nevertheless, *The God Delusion* – which is descended by design from the two-part television series *The Root of all Evil?*² – is his first book written to make a direct attack upon religion. As a Christian philosopher I find plenty with which to take issue in *The God Delusion*; primarily because this rhetorical *tour de force* relies upon setting up and knocking down straw men: ‘reading it can feel like watching a Michael Moore movie. There are 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.’³

The God Delusion is the work of a passionate and rhetorically savvy writer capable of making good points against religious fundamentalism. As Stephen Law observes: ‘what Dawkins attacks is typically a highly *Authoritarian* brand of religion.’⁴ However, as Antony Latham laments: ‘Dawkins clearly has an inflated idea of his competence in metaphysics.’⁵ Alister McGrath comments: ‘Dawkins’ engagement with theology is superficial and inaccurate, often amounting to little more than cheap point scoring... His tendency to misrepresent the views of his opponents is the least attractive aspect of his writings.’⁶ Terry Eagleton similarly remarks: ‘Imagine someone holding forth on biology whose only knowledge of the subject is the *Book of British Birds*, and you have a rough idea of what it feels like to read Richard Dawkins on theology.’⁷

Dawkins’ critique of the arguments for God’s existence in *The God Delusion* has received enthusiastic praise from some quarters. Biologist P.Z. Myers thinks that: ‘*The God Delusion* delivers a thorough overview of the logic of belief and disbelief. Dawkins reviews, dismantles, and dismisses the major arguments for the existence of the supernatural and deities...’⁸ However, Myers is so way off base that a philosophical global positioning system would be calmly issuing repeated pleas to ‘turn around when possible’. In reality, Dawkins’ unscholarly procedure takes the following route to what Eagleton dubs a ‘victory on the cheap’⁹:

1) Select a far from comprehensive sub-set of theistic arguments without giving a hint that this is what you are doing, 2) caricature the selected arguments – referring to (but not quoting) medieval rather than contemporary versions (John Cornwell observes: ‘there is hardly a serious work of philosophy of religion cited in his extensive bibliography...’¹⁰), or simply failing to define the target – and then 3) give the appearance of blowing away these arguments with an observation (rather than an argument) or a charge of logical invalidity that either depends upon the fact that you are attacking a straw man, or which completely misses the point of the argument you are attacking.

McGrath has the measure of Dawkins: ‘It is perhaps his weakest book to date, marred by its excessive reliance on bold assertion and rhetorical flourish, where the issues so clearly demand careful reflection and painstaking analysis...’¹¹

Dawkins delivers a feast of fallacies, including: wishful thinking (supposing that the odds against the spontaneous formation of life are less than 1 in 10^9), equivocation (over the anthropic principle), data picking (Jonathan Richardson berates Dawkins for 'Detailing a selection of believers, largely consisting of clearly-deranged nuts rather than his scholarly equals'¹²), ridiculing anything he cannot understand (on the apparent assumption that there must therefore be nothing to understand) and various *ad hominem* attacks, from name-calling (e.g. 'dyed-in-the-wool faith-heads are immune to argument'¹³) to 'poisoning the well' (e.g. tendentiously talking about 'creationist Michael Behe'¹⁴). Dawkins contradicts himself on several occasions.

Blowing away houses made from philosophical straw is a praiseworthy endeavour; but Dawkins' substitution of straw houses for the real thing means that his critique has more puff than bite. As atheist philosopher Thomas Nagel writes concerning Dawkins' 'amateur' attempts at philosophy: 'Dawkins dismisses, with contemptuous flippancy the traditional... arguments for the existence of God offered by Aquinas and Anselm. I found these attempts at philosophy, along with those in a later chapter on religion and ethics, particularly weak...'¹⁵

Dawkins accuses 'dyed-in-the-wool faith-heads' of being 'immune to argument...'¹⁶ It is hard to test this assumption using *The God Delusion*, since its arguments against theism are conspicuous either by their absence or their invalidity. Dawkins hopes that 'open-minded' religious believers 'whose native intelligence is strong enough' and who read *The God Delusion* 'will be atheists when they put it down', because such people 'need only a little encouragement to break free of the vice of religion altogether.'¹⁷ However, *The God Delusion* fails to provide rational encouragement to this end. Dawkins' critique is one long bluff that deserves to be called. The Emperor has no clothes.

See Also

Peter S. Williams, 'Whose Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf?' @ www.damaris.org/content/content.php?type=5&id=501

Peter S. Williams, 'Darwin's Rottweiler and the Public Understanding of Scientism' @ www.arn.org/docs/williams/pw_dawkinsfallacies.htm

Peter S. Williams, 'Is Life Designed or Designoid? Dawkins, Science and the Purpose of Life' @ www.arn.org/docs/williams/pw_purposeoflife.htm

Peter S. Williams, *I Wish I Could Believe in Meaning: A Response to Nihilism*, (Damaris, 2005) @ www.amazon.co.uk/Wish-Could-Believe-Meaning-Response/dp/190475306X/sr=1-6/qid=1163414885/ref=sr_1_6/026-9251633-5979667?ie=UTF8&s=books

John Lennox, 'God and Richard Dawkins' @ www.bethinking.org/resource.php?ID=290

Nick Pollard, 'The Root of all Evil? The problem with Richard Dawkins' faith' @ www.damaris.org/content/content.php?type=5&id=453

Nick Pollard Talks to Richard Dawkins @
www.damaris.org/content/content.php?type=5&id=102

Alister McGrath, *Dawkins' God: Genes, Memes, and the Meaning of Life*, (Blackwell, 2005) @ www.amazon.co.uk/Dawkins-God-Alister-E-McGrath/dp/1405125381/sr=1-1/qid=1163414866/ref=sr_1_1/026-9251633-5979667?ie=UTF8&s=books

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- 1 Dorothy Nelkin, 'Less Selfish than Sacred? Genes and the Religious Impulse in Evolutionary Psychology', *Alas, Poor Darwin*, (Vintage, 2001), p. 15.
 - 2 cf. Dave Crofts, 'The Root of all Evil? Part 1' @ www.christchurchcentral.co.uk/culture/rootofallevil1_1.html & 'Part 2' @ www.christchurchcentral.co.uk/culture/rootofallevil2_1.html;
 - Nick Pollard, 'The Root of all Evil? The problem with Richard Dawkins' faith - part 1' @ www.bethinking.org/resource.php?ID=243&TopicID=2&CategoryID=1 & 'Part 2' @ www.bethinking.org/resource.php?ID=244&TopicID=2&CategoryID=1
 - 3 Jim Holt, 'A passionate atheist's case against religion', *International Herald Tribune*, Saturday-Sunday, October 21-22, 2006, p. 10.
 - 4 Stephen Law, *The War for Children's Minds*, (Routledge, 2006), p. 23.
 - 5 Antony Latham, *The Naked Emperor: Darwinism Exposed*, (Janus, 2005), p. 243.
 - 6 Alister McGrath, *Dawkins' God*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), p. 83-84..
 - 7 Terry Eagleton, 'Lunging, Flailing, Mispunching', *London Review of Books* Vol. 28 No. 20 dated 19 October 2006 @ http://www.lrb.co.uk/v28/n20/eagl01_.html
 - 8 P.Z. Myers @ www.seedmagazine.com/news/2006/10/bad_religion.php
 - 9 Terry Eagleton, *London Review of Books* Vol. 28 No. 20, 19 October 2006
 - 10 John Cornwell, 'A Question of Respect' @ www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,2102-2375182.html
 - 11 Alister McGrath, 'The Dawkins Delusion' @ www.theosthinktank.co.uk/The_Dawkins_Delusion.aspx?ArticleID=50&PageID=11&RefPageID=5
 - 12 Jonathan Richardson, 'The God Delusion by Richard Dawkins', *inthenews.co.uk* @ [www.inthenews.co.uk/entertainment/reviews/reviews/books/the-god-delusion-by-richard-dawkins-\\$453480.htm](http://www.inthenews.co.uk/entertainment/reviews/reviews/books/the-god-delusion-by-richard-dawkins-$453480.htm)
 - 13 Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 5.
 - 14 Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 129, my italics.
 - 15 Thomas Nagel, *The New Republic*, 'Fear of Religion' @ www.tnr.com/doc.mhtml?i=20061023&s=nagel102306
 - 16 Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 5.
 - 17 Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 6.