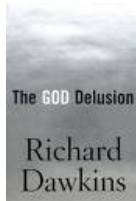


AlbertMohler.com

## Dawkins and *The God Delusion* Revisited

Monday, October 23, 2006



Richard Dawkins and his new book, *The God Delusion*, continue to attract media attention and reviews. Dont miss these two reviews, published in recent days.

In “[Lunging, Flailing, Mispunching](#),” literary theorist Terry Eagleton begins his review essay in *The London Review of Books* with this *bon mot*: “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.”

In essence, Eagleton accuses Dawkins of not knowing about which he is writing. As Eagleton observes:

*What, one wonders, are Dawkins’s views on the epistemological differences between Aquinas and Duns Scotus? Has he read Eriugena on subjectivity, Rahner on grace or Moltmann on hope? Has he even heard of them? Or does he imagine like a bumptious young barrister that you can defeat the opposition while being complacently ignorant of its toughest case? Dawkins, it appears, has sometimes been told by theologians that he sets up straw men only to bowl them over; a charge he rebuts in this book; but if *The God Delusion* is anything to go by, they are absolutely right.*

From his best paragraph:

*Dawkins considers that all faith is blind faith, and that Christian and Muslim children are brought up to believe unquestioningly. Not even the dim-witted clerics who knocked me about at grammar school thought that. For mainstream Christianity, reason, argument and honest doubt have always played an integral role in belief. (Where, given that he invites us at one point to question everything, is Dawkins’s own critique of science, objectivity, liberalism, atheism and the like?) Reason, to be sure, doesn’t go all the way down for believers, but it doesn’t for most sensitive, civilised non-religious types either. Even Richard Dawkins lives more by faith than by reason. We hold many beliefs that have no unimpeachably rational justification, but are nonetheless reasonable to entertain. Only positivists think that ‘rational’ means ‘scientific’.*

Jim Holt, reviewing the book for the October 22, 2006 edition of *The New York Times*, comes to a similar conclusion — Dawkins is playing recklessly with the very realities and concepts he purports to critique: “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.”

The comparison with Michael Moore is apt. Here is the strongest section of Holt’s critique:

*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.*

A couple of weeks ago, philosopher Thomas Nagel took Dawkins to task in *The New Republic*. Interestingly, Nagel began his book with this sentence: “Richard Dawkins, the most prominent and accomplished scientific writer of our time, is convinced that religion is the enemy of science.” The part about Dawkins being “the most prominent and accomplished scientific writer of our time” seems a bit overblown. His most famous books are popular treatments of scientific discussions. There is no doubt that he is prominent, but as the most ‘accomplished’ part . . . well, does Nagel know something about Dawkins that the Nobel committee has overlooked?

Consider this statement by Nagel:

*In this central argument of Dawkins’s book, the topic is not institutional religion or revealed religion, based on scripture, miracles, or the personal experience of God’s presence. It is what used to be called “natural religion,” or reflection on the question of the existence and nature of God using only the resources of ordinary human reasoning. This is not the source of most religious belief, but it is important nonetheless.*

In other words, Dawkins misses the point that natural theology is not the main support for Christianity or belief in God. Nagel also criticizes Dawkins’ treatment of the concept of design in nature. Essentially, he claims that Dawkins is simply too reductionistic — reducing all truth to what can be “proved” by modern science:



*We have more than one form of understanding. Different forms of understanding are needed for different kinds of subject matter. The great achievements of physical science do not make it capable of encompassing everything, from mathematics to ethics to the experiences of a living animal. We have no reason to dismiss moral reasoning, introspection, or conceptual analysis as ways of discovering the truth just because they are not physics.*

Good stuff here — and not only for considering Richard Dawkins’ latest book. All three of these reviews demonstrate interesting approaches to taking ideas seriously.

