

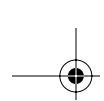
1

Deluded About God?



GOD IS A DELUSION—A “PSYCHOTIC DELINQUENT” invented by mad, deluded people.¹ That’s the take-home message of *The God Delusion*. Although Dawkins does not offer a rigorous definition of a *delusion*, he clearly means a belief that is not grounded in evidence—or, worse, that flies in the face of the evidence. Faith is “blind trust, in the absence of evidence, even in the teeth of evidence.”² It is a “process of non-thinking.” It is “evil precisely because it requires no justification, and brooks no argument.”³ These core definitions of faith are hardwired into Dawkins’s worldview and are obsessively repeated throughout his writings. It is not a Christian definition of faith but one that Dawkins has invented to suit his own polemical purposes. It immediately defines those who believe in



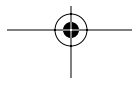


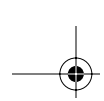
God as people who have lost touch with reality—as those who are *deluded*.

Dawkins rightly notes how important faith is to people. What you believe has a very significant impact on life and thought. That makes it all the more important, we are told, to subject faith to critical, rigorous examination. Delusions need to be exposed—and then removed. I agree entirely. Since the publication of my book *Dawkins' God* in 2004, I am regularly asked to speak on its themes throughout the world. In these lectures, I set out Dawkins's views on religion and then give an evidence-based rebuttal, point by point.

After one such lecture, I was confronted by a very angry young man. The lecture had not been particularly remarkable. I had simply demonstrated, by rigorous use of scientific, historical and philosophical arguments, that Dawkins's intellectual case against God didn't stand up to critical examination. But this man was angry—in fact, I would say he was furious. Why? Because, he told me, wagging his finger agitatedly at me, I had “destroyed his faith.” His atheism rested on the authority of Richard Dawkins, and I had totally undermined his faith. He would have to go away and re-think everything. How *dare* I do such a thing!

As I reflected on this event while driving home afterward, I found myself in two minds about this. Part of me regretted the enormous inconvenience that I had clearly caused this person. I had thrown the settled assumptions of his life into turmoil. Yet I consoled myself with the thought that if he was unwise enough to base his life on the clearly inadequate worldview set out by Dawkins, then he would have to realize someday that it rested on de-



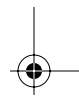
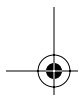


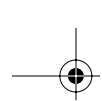
cidedly shaky foundations. The dispelling of the delusion had to happen sometime. I just happened to be the historical accident that made it happen at that time and place.

Yet another part of me began to realize how deeply we hold our beliefs, and the impact that they make on everything. Dawkins is right—beliefs are critical. We base our lives on them; they shape our decisions about the most fundamental things. I can still remember the turbulence that I found myself experiencing on making the intellectually painful (yet rewarding) transition from atheism to Christianity. Every part of my mental furniture had to be rearranged. Dawkins is correct—unquestionably correct—when he demands that we should not base our lives on delusions. We all need to examine our beliefs—especially if we are naive enough to think that we don't have any in the first place. But who, I wonder, is really deluded about God?

FAITH IS INFANTILE

As anyone familiar with antireligious polemics knows, a recurring atheist criticism of religious belief is that it is infantile—a childish delusion which ought to have disappeared as humanity reaches its maturity. Throughout his career Dawkins has developed a similar criticism, drawing on a longstanding atheist analogy. In earlier works he emphasized that belief in God is just like believing in the Tooth Fairy or Santa Claus. These are childish beliefs that are abandoned as soon as we are capable of evidence-based thinking. And so is God. It's obvious, isn't it? As Dawkins pointed out in his "Thought for the Day" on BBC Radio in 2003, humanity "can leave the crybaby phase, and finally come of age." This "infantile expla-

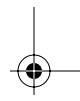
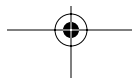
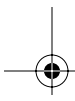


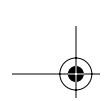


nation” belongs to an earlier, superstitious era in the history of humanity. We’ve outgrown it.⁴

Hmmm. Like many of Dawkins’s analogies, this has been constructed with a specific agenda in mind—in this case, the ridiculing of religion. Yet the analogy is obviously flawed. How many people do you know who began to believe in Santa Claus in adulthood? Or who found belief in the Tooth Fairy consoling in old age? I believed in Santa Claus until I was about five (though, not unaware of the benefits it brought, I allowed my parents to think I took it seriously until rather later). I did not believe in God until I started going to university. Those who use this infantile argument have to explain why so many people discover God in later life and certainly do not regard this as representing any kind of regression, perversion or degeneration. A good recent example is provided by Anthony Flew (born 1923), the noted atheist philosopher who started to believe in God in his eighties.

Yet *The God Delusion* is surely right to express concern about the indoctrination of children by their parents.⁵ Innocent minds are corrupted by adults cramming their religious beliefs down their children’s throats. Dawkins argues that the biological process of natural selection builds child brains with a tendency to believe whatever their parents or elders tell them. This, he suggests, makes them prone to trust whatever a parent says—like Santa Claus. This is seen as one of the most significant factors involved in sustaining religious belief in the world, when it ought to have been wiped out ages ago. Break the intergenerational cycle of the transmission of religious ideas, and that will put an end to this nonsense. Bringing up children within a reli-



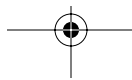
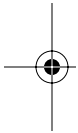


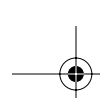
gious tradition, he suggests, is a form of child abuse.

There is, of course, a reasonable point being made here. Yet somehow, it gets lost in the noise of the hyped-up rhetoric and a general failure to consider its implications. Having read the misrepresentations of religion that are such a depressing feature of *The God Delusion*, I very much fear that secularists would merely force their own dogmas down the throats of the same gullible children—who lack, as Dawkins rightly points out, the discriminatory capacities needed to evaluate the ideas. I do not wish to be unkind, but this whole approach sounds uncomfortably like the antireligious programs built into the education of Soviet children during the 1950s, based on mantras such as “Science has disproved religion!” “Religion is superstition!” and the like.

There is indeed a need for a society to reflect on how it educates its children. Yet no case can be made for them to be force-fed Dawkins’s favored dogmas and distortions. They need to be told, fairly and accurately, what Christianity actually teaches—rather than be subjected to the derisory misrepresentations of Christian theology that litter this piece of propaganda. *The God Delusion*, more by its failings than its achievements, reinforces the need for high-quality religious education in the public arena, countering the crude caricatures, prejudicial stereotypes and blatant misrepresentations now being aggressively peddled by atheist fundamentalism.

For many years I gave a series of lectures at Oxford University titled “An Introduction to Christian Theology.” I cannot help but feel that these might have been of some use to Dawkins in writing his book. As the cultural and literary critic Terry Eagleton pointed out in his withering review of *The God Delusion*: “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.”⁶

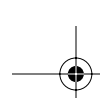
Dawkins quotes with approval the views of his friend Nicholas Humphrey, who suggests that parents should no more be allowed to teach children about the “literal truth of the Bible” than “to knock their children’s teeth out.”⁷ If Humphrey is consistent here, he should be equally outraged about those who peddle misrepresentations of religion as if they were the truth. Might he argue, I wonder, that parents who read *The God Delusion* aloud to their children were also committing child abuse? Or are you only abusive if you impose religious, but not antireligious, dogmas and delusions?

FAITH IS IRRATIONAL

There is, I suppose, a lunatic fringe to every movement. Having been involved in many public debates over whether science has disproved the existence of God, I have ample experience of what I think I must describe as somewhat weird people, often with decidedly exotic ideas, on both sides of the God-atheism debate. One of the most characteristic features of Dawkins’s antireligious polemic is to present the pathological as if it were normal, the fringe as if it were the center, crackpots as if they were mainstream. It generally works well for his intended audience, who can be assumed to know little about religion and probably care for it even less. But it’s not acceptable. And it’s certainly not scientific.

Dawkins insists that Christian belief is “a persistently false belief held in the face of strong contradictory evidence.”⁸ The problem is





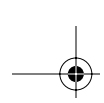
how to persuade “dyed-in-the wool faith-heads” that atheism is right, when they are so deluded by religion that they are immune to any form of rational argument. Faith is thus essentially and irredeemably irrational. In support of his case Dawkins has sought out Christian theologians who he believes will substantiate this fundamentally degenerate aspect of religious faith. In earlier writings he asserted that the third-century Christian writer Tertullian said some particularly stupid things, including “it is by all means to be believed because it is absurd.” This is dismissed as typical religious nonsense. “That way madness lies.”⁹

He’s stopped quoting this now, I am pleased to say, after I pointed out that Tertullian actually said no such thing. Dawkins had fallen into the trap of not checking his sources and merely repeating what older atheist writers had said. It’s yet another wearisome example of the endless recycling of outdated arguments that has become so characteristic of atheism in recent years.

However, Dawkins now seems to have found a new example of the irrationalism of faith—well, new for him, at any rate. In *The God Delusion* he cites a few choice snippets from the sixteenth-century German Protestant writer Martin Luther, culled from the Internet, demonstrating Luther’s anxieties about reason in the life of faith.¹⁰ No attempt is made to clarify what Luther means by *reason* and how it differs from what Dawkins takes to be the self-evident meaning of the word.¹¹

What Luther was actually pointing out was that human reason could never fully take in a central theme of the Christian faith—that God should give humanity the wonderful gift of salvation without demanding they do something for him first. Left to itself,



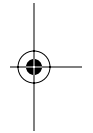


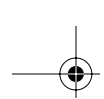
human common sense would conclude that you need to do something to earn God's favor—an idea that Luther regarded as compromising the gospel of divine graciousness, making salvation something that you earned or merited.

Dawkins's inept engagement with Luther shows how Dawkins abandons even the pretense of rigorous evidence-based scholarship. Anecdote is substituted for evidence; selective Internet trawling for quotes displaces rigorous and comprehensive engagement with primary sources. In this book, Dawkins throws the conventions of academic scholarship to the winds; he wants to write a work of propaganda and consequently treats the accurate rendition of religion as an inconvenient impediment to his chief agenda, which is the intellectual and cultural destruction of religion. It's an unpleasant characteristic that he shares with other fundamentalists.

ARGUMENTS FOR GOD'S EXISTENCE?

Dawkins holds that the existence or nonexistence of God is a scientific hypothesis which is open to rational demonstration. In *The Blind Watchmaker*, he provided a sustained and effective critique of the arguments of the nineteenth-century writer William Paley for the existence of God on biological grounds. It is Dawkins's home territory, and he knows what he is talking about. This book remains the finest criticism of this argument in print.¹² The only criticism I would direct against this aspect of *The Blind Watchmaker* is that Paley's ideas were typical of his age, not of Christianity as a whole, and that many Christian writers of the age were alarmed at his approach, seeing it as a surefire recipe for





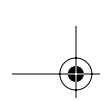
the triumph of atheism. There is no doubt in my mind that Paley saw himself as in some way “proving” the existence of God, and Dawkins’s extended critique of Paley in that book is fair, gracious and accurate.

In *The God Delusion*, Dawkins turns his attention to such other “arguments” based on the philosophy of religion. I am not sure that this was entirely wise. He is clearly out of his depth, and achieves little by his brief and superficial engagement with these great perennial debates, which often simply cannot be resolved empirically.¹³ His attitude seems to be “here’s how a scientist would sort out this philosophical nonsense.”

For example, Dawkins takes issue with the approaches developed by Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century, traditionally known as the “Five Ways.”¹⁴ The general consensus is that while such arguments cast interesting light on the questions, they settle nothing. Although traditionally referred to as “arguments for God’s existence,” this is not an accurate description. All they do is show the inner consistency of belief in God—in much the same way as the classic arguments for atheism (such as Ludwig Feuerbach’s famous idea of the “projection” of God; see p. 54) demonstrate its inner consistency, but not its evidential foundations.

The basic line of thought guiding Thomas is that the world mirrors God, as its Creator. It is an assumption derived from faith, which Thomas argues to resonate with what we observe in the world. For example, its signs of ordering can be explained on the basis of the existence of God as its creator. This approach is still widely encountered in Christian writings which argue that an existing faith in God offers a better “empirical fit” with the world

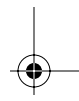


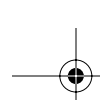


than its alternatives. As Dawkins himself uses this same approach to commend atheism elsewhere, I cannot really see that he has much to complain about here.

At no point does Thomas speak of these as being “proofs” for God’s existence; rather they are to be seen as a demonstration of the inner coherence of belief in God. Thomas is interested in exploring the rational implications of faith in terms of our experience of beauty, causality and so forth. Belief in God is actually assumed; it is then shown that this belief makes sense of what may be observed within the world. The appearance of design can offer persuasion, not proof, concerning the role of divine creativity in the universe. Dawkins misunderstands an a posteriori demonstration of the coherence of faith and observation to be an a priori proof of faith—an entirely understandable mistake for those new to this field, but a serious error nonetheless.

Where Dawkins sees faith as intellectual nonsense, most of us are aware that we hold many beliefs that we cannot prove to be true but are nonetheless perfectly reasonable to entertain.¹⁵ To lapse into jargon for a moment: our beliefs may be shown to be *justifiable*, without thereby demonstrating that they are *proven*. This is not a particularly difficult or obscure point. Philosophers of science have long made the point that there are many scientific theories that are presently believed to be true but may have to be discarded in the future as additional evidence emerges or new theoretical interpretations develop. There is no difficulty, for example, in believing that Darwin’s theory of evolution is presently the best explanation of the available evidence, but that doesn’t mean it is correct.¹⁶





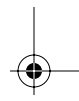
THE EXTREME IMPROBABILITY OF GOD

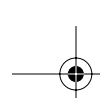
Dawkins devotes an entire chapter to an argument—or, more accurately, a loosely collated series of assertions—to the general effect that “there almost certainly is no God.”¹⁷ This rambling pastiche is poorly structured, making it quite difficult to follow its basic argument, which seems to be an expansion of the “who made God, then?” question. “Any God capable of designing anything would have to be complex enough to demand the same kind of explanation in his own right. God presents an infinite regress from which he cannot help us to escape.”¹⁸

Dawkins is particularly derisive about theologians who allow themselves “the dubious luxury of arbitrarily conjuring up a terminator to an infinite regress.”¹⁹ Anything that explains something itself has to be explained—and *that* explanation in turn needs to be explained, and so on. There is no justifiable way of ending this infinite regression of explanations. What explains the explanation? Or, to change the metaphor slightly: Who designed the designer?

However, it needs to be pointed out here that the holy grail of the natural sciences is the quest for the “grand unified theory”—the “theory of everything.” Why is such a theory regarded as being so important? Because it can explain everything, without itself requiring or demanding an explanation.²⁰ The explanatory buck stops right there. There is no infinite regress in the quest for explanation. If Dawkins’s brash and simplistic arguments carried weight, this great scientific quest could be dismissed with a seemingly profound yet in fact trivial question: What explains the explainer?

Now maybe there is no such ultimate theory. Maybe the “theory of everything” will turn out to be a “theory of nothing.” Yet there

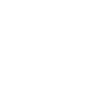


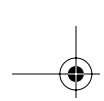


is no reason to suppose that this quest is a failure from the outset simply because it represents the termination of an explanatory process. Yet an analogous quest for an irreducible explanation lies at the heart of the scientific quest. There is no logical inconsistency, no conceptual flaw, no self-contradiction involved.

Dawkins then sets out an argument that makes little sense, either in the brief and hasty statement offered in *The God Delusion* or the more expanded versions he set out elsewhere. In a somewhat patchy and derisory account of the “anthropic principle,” Dawkins points out the sheer improbability of our existence. Belief in God, he then argues, represents belief in a being whose existence must be even more complex—and therefore more improbable. Yet this leap from the recognition of complexity to the assertion of improbability is highly problematic. Why is something complex improbable? A “theory of everything” may well be more complex than the lesser theories that it explains—but what has that to do with its improbability?

But let’s pause for a moment. The one inescapable and highly improbable fact about the world is that we, as reflective human beings, are in fact here. Now it is virtually impossible to quantify how improbable the existence of humanity is. Dawkins himself is clear, especially in *Climbing Mount Improbable*, that it is very, very improbable.²¹ *But we are here.* The very fact that we are puzzling about how we came to be here is dependent on the fact that we are here and are thus able to reflect on the likelihood of this actuality. Perhaps we need to appreciate that there are many things that seem improbable—but improbability does not, and never has, entailed nonexistence. *We* may be highly improbable—*yet we are*





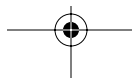
here. The issue, then, is not whether God is *probable* but whether God is *actual*.

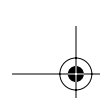
THE GOD OF THE GAPS

In *The God Delusion* Dawkins criticizes “the worship of gaps.” This is a reference to an approach to Christian apologetics that came to prominence during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—the so-called God of the gaps approach.²² In its simplest form it asserted that there were necessarily “gaps” in a naturalist or scientific understanding of reality. At certain points, William Paley’s famous *Natural Theology* (1801) uses arguments along these lines. It was argued that God needs to be proposed in order to deal with these gaps in scientific understanding.

It was a foolish move and was increasingly abandoned in the twentieth century. Oxford’s first professor of theoretical chemistry, the noted Methodist lay preacher Charles A. Coulson, damned it with the telling phrase “the God of the gaps.” In its place he urged a comprehensive account of reality, which stressed the explanatory capacity of the Christian faith as a whole rather than a retreat into ever-diminishing gaps.²³ Dawkins’s criticism of those who “worship the gaps,” despite its overstatements, is clearly appropriate and valid. So we must thank him for helping us kill off this outdated false turn in the history of Christian apologetics. It is a good example of how a dialogue between science and Christian theology can lead to some useful outcomes.

Unfortunately, having made such a good point, Dawkins then weakens his argument by suggesting that all religious people try to stop scientists from exploring those gaps: “one of the truly bad ef-





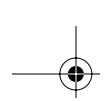
fects of religion is that it teaches us that it is a virtue to be satisfied with not understanding.”²⁴ While that may be true of some more exotic forms of Christian theology, it is most emphatically not characteristic of its approaches. It’s a crass generalization that ruins a perfectly interesting discussion.

After all, there is nothing wrong with admitting limits to our understanding, partly arising from the limits of science itself, and partly from the limited human capacity to comprehend. As Dawkins himself pointed out elsewhere: “Modern physics teaches us that there is more to truth than meets the eye; or than meets the all too limited human mind, evolved as it was to cope with medium-sized objects moving at medium speeds through medium distances in Africa.”²⁵

It’s hardly surprising that this “all too limited” human mind should encounter severe difficulties when dealing with anything beyond the world of everyday experience. The idea of “mystery” arises constantly as the human mind struggles to grasp some ideas. That’s certainly true of science; it’s also true of religion.

The real problem here, however, is the forced relocation of God by doubtless well-intentioned Christian apologists into the hidden recesses of the universe, beyond evaluation or investigation. Now that’s a real concern. For this strategy is still used by the intelligent design movement—a movement, based primarily in North America, that argues for an “intelligent Designer” based on gaps in scientific explanation, such as the “irreducible complexity” of the world. It is not an approach which I accept, either on scientific or theological grounds. In my view, those who adopt this approach make Christianity deeply—and needlessly—vulnerable to scientific progress.





But the “God of the gaps” approach is only one of many Christian approaches to the question of how the God hypothesis makes sense of things. In my view it was misguided; it was a failed apologetic strategy from an earlier period in history that has now been rendered obsolete. This point has been taken on board by Christian theologians and philosophers of religion throughout the twentieth century who have now reverted to older, more appropriate ways of dealing with this question. For instance, the Oxford philosopher Richard Swinburne is one of many writers to argue that the capacity of science to explain itself requires explanation—and that the most economical and reliable account of this explanatory capacity lies in the notion of a Creator God.²⁶

Swinburne’s argument asserts that the intelligibility of the universe itself needs explanation. It is therefore not the *gaps* in our understanding of the world which point to God but rather the very *comprehensibility* of scientific and other forms of understanding that requires an explanation. In brief, the argument is that *explicitability itself requires explanation*. The more scientific advance is achieved, the greater will be our understanding of the universe—and hence the greater need to explain this very success. It is an approach which commends and encourages scientific investigation, not seeks to inhibit it.

But what of the relationship of science and religion more generally? Dawkins has had much to say on this, and we must move on to consider it.

