

The God Delusion

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Richard Dawkins is an Oxford professor and the author of a series of best-selling books that popularize a version of evolutionary theory. According to Dawkins, evolution is driven by "replicators"—genes, and also "memes," viruses of the mind that spread and persist in human populations. Those genes and memes that replicate most effectively become dominant, with every consequence for the natural world and for civilization and history. The usefulness of this notion, which does have the virtue of simplicity, is a question obscured by the demands Dawkins has placed on it. By his lights this is the universal etiology, a fully sufficient refutation of religion in every form and the basis for a new view of humankind. Under the name of Darwinism it has been thrown into the rhetorical wars that seem, to the combatants, to pit science against religion. As argument it has taken on the character of this environment, getting lost in the miasma of its own supposed implications.

It is never a surprise to find Dawkins full of indignation. In his new book, *The God Delusion*, he has turned the full force of his intellect against religion, and all his verbal skills as well, and his humane learning, too, which is capacious enough to include some deeply minor poetry. Truly this book is a sword which turneth every way, to judge by the table of contents at least. There is no doubt in Dawkins's mind that the evils of the world are to be laid at the doorstep of the church, mosque, and synagogue, and that science must be our salvation. It is the "God delusion," which has afflicted almost everyone almost anywhere through the whole of recorded time, that has made us behave so badly. And Science (by which he really means his version of Darwinism) is our potential rescuer from this vale of tears. We need only to become more Dawkins-like in our thinking. This is a fairly cheery view of things beside others on offer, at least as regards the ongoing life of the planet, which he seems to assume.

Still, it is a difficult thing to set reason aside, and the habit of critical thought, and the sense of the past, not to mention the morning news. While I was reading this hook, I noticed an article about a speech the British physicist Stephen Hawking delivered in Hong Kong. In it he said that the early colonization of other planets would be necessary to save humankind from extinction, given the likelihood of disaster that would render Earth uninhabitable. He mentioned nuclear war and biological weapons as probable agents of catastrophe. Another scientist, when asked for his view of Hawking's remarks, noted that Hawking was speaking outside his area of expertise. Much better, said he, to think in the short term about burrowing under Antarctica.

I have never seen the suggestion anywhere that the threat of imminent catastrophe on a "biblical scale"—a phrase favored by journalists— which has hung over the world for more than half a century, might have consequences for the stability of the global public mind. Is it really any wonder so many people turn to mass-market apocalypics? It is amazing, when the movers and shakers of the so-called postwar have devoted so much effort and rhetoric to policies with names like Mutual Assured Destruction, that anyone could be surprised to find some significant part of the populace reading up on End Times. But here is Richard Dawkins to dispel the clouds of fear and gloom — that is, religion. He is by profession a dedicated promoter of the Public Understanding of Science. In his view, understanding is clearly not to be achieved by looking at history, or at present or potential consequences of science and its practice for that same Public. I note these omissions because Dawkins

implicitly defines science as a clear-eyed quest for truth, chaste as an algorithm, while religion is atavistic, mad, and mired in crime.

Since Dawkins's declared intention in this book is to hearten the many atheists who, he is sure, exist, but who conceal their convictions for fear of disapproval or rejection, no doubt his tendentiousness is meant to be enjoyed by the like-minded, as is so much that is called "objectivity" in these fulminating times. Yet Dawkins is in earnest in presenting himself as a man in possession of liberating truth — another characteristic of the genre — and his readership is sure to be much wider than the crypto-atheist community. So it seems fair, if not strictly possible, to take him as seriously as he takes himself.

These are, certainly, troubled times. The tectonics of culture are suddenly active, and all the old rifts and stresses and pressures that seemed to have fallen dormant have awakened at once, with a great deal of portentous rumbling and spouting. The God Delusion is another instance of this phenomenon. Like so much of the contemporary clamor, it is out to name and denounce the great Satan, which in this case is religion. This view is commonplace now, in part because the institutions of religion, like the institutions of journalism and government, have done a great deal to trivialize or disgrace themselves lately.

The gravest questions about the institutions of contemporary science seem never to be posed, though we know the terrors of all-out conflict between civilizations would include innovations, notably those dread weapons of mass destruction, being made by scientists for any country with access to their skills. Granting for the purposes of argument that Dawkins is correct in the view that the majority of great scientists are atheists, we may then exclude religion from among the factors that recruit them to this somber work. We are left with nationalism, steady employment, good pay, the chance to do research that is lavishly funded and, by definition, cutting edge — familiar motives of a kind fully capable of disarming moral doubt. In any case, the crankiest imam, the oiliest televangelist, can, at his worst, only urge circumstances a degree or two farther toward the use of those exotic war technologies that are always ready, always waiting. If it is fair to speak globally of religion, it is also fair to speak globally of science.

There is a pervasive exclusion of historical memory in Dawkins's view of science. Consider this sentence from his preface, which occurs in the context of his vision of a religion-free world: "Imagine . . . no persecution of Jews as 'Christ-killers.'" In a later chapter he condemns Jews for discouraging "marrying out" and complains that such "wanton and carefully nurtured divisiveness" is "a significant force for evil." It is of course no criticism to say that he values the tradition of Judaism not at all, since this is only consistent with his view of religion in general. He seems unaware, however, that there was in fact significant intermarriage between Jews and gentiles in Europe as well as secularism and conversion among the Jews, and that this appears only to have fired the anti-Semitic imagination. While it is true that persecution of the Jews has a very long history in Europe, it is also true that science in the twentieth century revived and absolutized persecution by giving it a fresh rationale — Jewishness was not religious or cultural, but genetic. Therefore no appeal could be made against the brute fact of a Jewish grandparent.

Dawkins deals with all this in one sentence. Hitler did his evil "in the name of . . . an insane and unscientific eugenics theory." But eugenics is science as surely as totemism is religion. That either is in error is beside the point. Science quite appropriately acknowledges that error should be assumed, and at best it proceeds by a continuous process of criticism meant to isolate and identify error. So bad science is still science in more or less the same sense

that bad religion is still religion. That both of them can do damage on a huge scale is clear. The prestige of both is a great part of the problem, and in the modern period the credibility of anything called science is enormous. As the history of eugenics proves, science at the highest levels is no reliable corrective to the influence of cultural prejudice but is in fact profoundly vulnerable to it.

There is indeed historical precedent in the Spanish Inquisition for the notion of hereditary Judaism. But the fact that the worst religious thought of the sixteenth century can be likened to the worst scientific thought of the twentieth century hardly redounds to the credit of science. To illustrate the point: Dawkins tells the story of Edgardo Mortara, the Italian Jewish child taken from his family by the police in 1858 and reared by priests because he had been secretly baptized by a maid in his parents' house. A terrible story indeed. And how might it have been worse? If the child had fallen, as in the next century so many would, into the hands of those who considered his Jewishness biological rather than religious and cultural. To Dawkins's objection that Nazi science was not authentic science I would reply, first, that neither Nazis nor Germans had any monopoly on these theories, which were influential throughout the Western world, and second, that the research on human subjects carried out by those holding such assumptions was good enough science to appear in medical texts for fully half a century. This is not to single out science as exceptionally inclined to do harm, though its capacity for doing harm is by now unequaled. It is only to note that science, too, is implicated in this bleak human proclivity, and is one major instrument of it.

The nineteenth-century abolitionist, feminist, essayist, and ordained minister Thomas Wentworth Higginson made the always timely point that, in comparing religions, great care must be taken to consider the best elements of one with the best of the other, and the worst with the worst, to avoid the usual practice of comparing, let us say, the fatwa against Salman Rushdie with the Golden Rule. The same principle might be applied in the comparison of religion and science. To set the declared hopes of one against the real-world record of the other is clearly not useful, no matter which of them is flattered by the comparison. What is religion? It is described by Dawkins as a virtually universal feature of human culture. But there is, commingled with it, indisputably and perhaps universally, doubt, hypocrisy, and charlatanism. Dawkins, for his part, considers religion wholly delusional, and he condemns the best of it for enabling all the worst of it. Yet if religion is to be blamed for the fraud done in its name, then what of science? Is it to be blamed for the Piltdown hoax, for the long-credited deceptions having to do with cloning in South Korea? If by "science" is meant authentic science, then "religion" must mean authentic religion, granting the difficulties in arriving at these definitions.

I wish, then, to speak of science in the highest sense of the word, as the astonishingly fruitful human venture into understanding of the world and the universe. The reader may assume a somewhat greater admiration on my part for religion in the highest sense of the word, though I will not go into that here. Science thus defined does not claim to understand gravity, light, or time. This is a very short list of its mystifications, its inquiries, all of which are beautiful to ponder. These three are sufficient to persuade me that conclusions about the ultimate nature of things are, to say the least, premature, and that to suggest otherwise is unscientific. The finer-grained the image of reality physicists achieve, the more alien it appears to every known strategy of comprehension.

The odd thing about Dawkins's work, considering his job description, is that it does not itself seem the product of a mind informed by the physics of the last century or so. A reader

might find it instructive to start with his last chapter, in which he does acknowledge the fact of quantum theory and certain of its implications. This chapter is an interesting lens through which to consider the primary argument of the book, especially his use of physicality and materiality as standards for determining the real and objective existence of anything, along with his use of commonplace experience as the standard of reasonableness and — a favorite word — probability. He does this despite his awareness that the physical and the material are artifacts of the scale at which reality is perceived. For us, he says, "matter is a useful construct." Quoting Steve Grand, a computer scientist who specializes in artificial intelligence, he offers these thoughts on the fluidity of matter: "Matter flows from place to place and momentarily comes together to be you. Whatever you are, therefore, you are not the stuff of which you are made. If that doesn't make the hair stand up on the back of your neck, read it again until it does, because it is important." Earlier, Dawkins attributes the origins of the illusion that we have a soul to the persistence of a childish or primitive tendency toward dualism — "Our innate dualism prepares us to believe in a 'soul' which inhabits the body rather than being integrally part of the body. Such a disembodied spirit can easily be imagined to move on somewhere else after the death of the body." Yet the image of deeper reality invoked by him here suggests a basis for the ancient intuition of the persistence of the self despite the transiency of the elements of its physical embodiment.

I do not wish to recruit science to the cause of religion. My point is simply that Dawkins's critique of religion cannot properly be called scientific. His thinking is reminiscent of logical positivism. That school, however, which meant to carry out a purge of language it considered meaningless, specifically metaphysics and theology, by subjecting statements to the "scientific" test of verifiability, plunged into all sorts of interesting difficulty, as rigorous thought tends to do. Dawkins acknowledges no difficulty. He has a simple-as-that, plain-as-day approach to the grandest questions, unencumbered by doubt, consistency, or countervailing information.

The chapter titled "Why There Almost Certainly Is No God" reflects his reasoning at its highest bent. He reasons thus: A creator God must be more complex than his creation, but this is impossible because if he existed he would be at the wrong end of evolutionary history. To be present in the beginning he must have been unevolved and therefore simple. Dawkins is very proud of this insight. He considers it unanswerable. He asks, "How do they [theists] cope with the argument that 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?" And "if he [God] has the powers attributed to him he must have something far more elaborately and non-randomly constructed than the largest brain or the largest computer we know," and "a first cause of everything.. . must have been simple and therefore, whatever else we call it, God is not an appropriate name (unless we very explicitly divest it of all the baggage that the word 'God' carries in the minds of most religious believers)." At Cambridge, says Dawkins, "I challenged the theologians to answer the point that a God capable of designing a universe, or anything else, would have to be complex and statistically improbable. The strongest response I heard was that I was brutally foisting a scientific epistemology upon an unwilling theology." Dawkins is clearly innocent of this charge against him. Whatever is being foisted here, it is not a scientific epistemology.

Evolution is the creature of time. And, as Dawkins notes, modern cosmologies generally suggest that time and the universe as a whole came into being together. So a creator cannot very well be thought of as having attained complexity through a process of evolution. That is to say, theists need find no anomaly in a divine "complexity" over against the "simplicity"

that is presumed to characterize the universe at its origin. (I use these terms not because I find them appropriate to the question but because Dawkins uses them, and my point is to demonstrate the flaws in his reasoning.) In this context, Dawkins cannot concede, even hypothetically, a reality that is not time-bound, that does not conform to Darwinism as he understands it. Yet in an earlier book, *Unweaving the Rainbow*, Dawkins remarks that "further developments of the [big bang] theory, supported by all available evidence, suggest that time itself began in this mother of all cataclysms. You probably don't understand, and I certainly don't, what it can possibly mean to say that time itself began at a particular moment. But once again that is a limitation of our minds. . . ."

That God exists outside time as its creator is an ancient given of theology. The faithful are accustomed to expressions like "from everlasting to everlasting" in reference to God, language that the positivists would surely have considered nonsense but that does indeed express the intuition that time is an aspect of the created order. Again, I do not wish to abuse either theology or scientific theory by implying that either can be used as evidence in support of the other; I mean only that the big bang in fact provides a metaphor that might help Dawkins understand why his grand assault on the "God Hypothesis" has failed to impress the theists.

The God Delusion has human history and civilization as its subjects, inevitably, considering the pervasiveness of religion. Dawkins dwells particularly on Christianity, since he is most familiar with it, and because its influence is and has been very great. On the one hand, he professes a lingering fondness for the Church of England and regrets that familiarity with the Bible, a great Literature, is in decline. On the other hand, he finds the Old Testament barbarous and abhorrent and the New Testament mawkish and fairly abhorrent as well. His treatment of these texts depends to a striking degree on a "remarkable paper" by John Hartung, an associate professor of anesthesiology and an anthropologist. The paper, titled "Love Thy Neighbor: The Evolution of In- Group Morality," originally published in 1995, is available on the Web. Dawkins and his wife are thanked in the acknowledgments. Curious readers can form their own impression of its character. A sympathetic review by Hartung of Kevin MacDonald's *A People That Shall Dwell Alone: Judaism as a Group Evolutionary Strategy, with Diaspora Peoples* is also of interest. These are murky waters, the kind toward which Darwinism has often tended to migrate.

Dawkins says, "I need to call attention to one particularly unpalatable aspect of its [the Bible's] ethical teaching. Christians seldom realize that much of the moral consideration for others which is apparently promoted by both the Old and New Testaments was originally intended to apply only to a narrowly defined in-group. 'Love thy neighbor' didn't mean what we now think it means. It meant only 'Love another Jew.'" As for the New Testament interpretation of the text, "Hartung puts it more bluntly than I dare: 'Jesus would have turned over in his grave if he had known that Paul would be taking his plan to the pigs.' Pigs being, of course, gentiles.

There are two major objections to be made to this reading. First, the verse quoted here, Leviticus 19:18, does indeed begin, "You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people," language that allows a narrow interpretation of the commandment. But Leviticus 19:33—34 says "When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. . . . You shall love the alien as yourself." In light of these verses, it is wrong by Dawkins's own standards to argue that the ethos of the law does not imply moral consideration for others. (It would be interesting to see the response to a proposal to display this Mosaic law in our courthouses.) Second, Jesus provided a gloss on 19:18, the famous

Parable of the Good Samaritan. With specific reference to this verse, a lawyer asks Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus tells a story that moves the lawyer to answer that the merciful Samaritan—a non-Jew—embodies the word "neighbor." That the question would be posed to Jesus, or by Luke, is evidence that the meaning of the law was not obvious or settled in antiquity. In general, Dawkins's air of genteel familiarity with Scripture, though becoming in one aware as he is of its contributions to the arts, dissipates under the slightest scrutiny.

Nor is Dawkins's argument from history impressive. He cheerfully posits a "Zeitgeist" that wafts us to ever higher states of ethical sensitivity, granting lapses, specifically those associated with Hitler and Stalin: "We are forced to realize that Hitler, appalling though he was, was not quite as far outside the Zeitgeist of his time as he seems from our vantage-point today. How swiftly the Zeitgeist changes — and it moves in parallel, on a broad front, throughout the educated world." Dawkins fails to note that the racial anti-Semitism that arose in Germany in the later nineteenth century had appeared to recede, until Hitler and others revived it. The article on anti-Semitism in the 11th Edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica, published in 1911, describes the movement as a German "craze" that had "shown little activity since 1893." According to the article, "While it remained a theory of nationality and a fad of the metaphysicians, it made considerable noise in the world without exercising much practical influence." So, although Dawkins's Zeitgeist might seem a harmless fudge, a spiritus ex machina meant to rescue his Darwinian atheism from the charges of bleakness and emptiness, it excuses his consistent inattentiveness to history. It is precisely the swiftness with which the Zeitgeist can change that makes it profoundly unworthy of confidence.

If the only bad effect of the notion to yield a highly selective reading of the past by dismissing the modern horrors as anomaly, that in itself would be grounds for objection. But it enables a misreading of the history it chooses to acknowledge. For example, Dawkins quotes a passage from an essay by T. H. Huxley, Darwin's contemporary and champion, in which Huxley says the black man will not "be able to compete successfully with his bigger-brained and smaller-jawed rival [that is, the white man], in a contest which is to be carried on by thoughts and not by bites." Dawkins cringes at this, but, he says, "good historians don't judge statements from past times by the standards of their own." He finds evidence for his advancing moral Zeitgeist in the crudeness of Huxley's racism: "The whole wave keeps moving, and even the vanguard of an earlier century (T. H. Huxley is the obvious example) would find itself way behind the laggards of a later century."

But *was* Huxley in the vanguard? The essay from which Dawkins quotes, "Emancipation — Black and White," published in 1865, is an explicit rejection of the belief in racial equality active in America before and for some time after the Civil War. Huxley dismisses "standards" that had long been salient among his contemporaries. He is saying that emancipation may well prove to have very mingled consequences — "emancipation may convert the slave from a well-fed animal into a pauperised man" — and that the egalitarian hopes the movement inspired should be rejected. This was the crucial period of Reconstruction and of the ratification of the 14th Amendment to the Constitution, which established the full rights of citizenship to everyone born or naturalized in this country. Its passage was the work of emancipationists, and it was meant to create meaningful political equality for African Americans, among others. The vanguard in the period in which Huxley wrote were those Christian abolitionists whose intentions he dismissed as, of course, at odds with science. Huxley's racism, like Hitler's, is not a standard from which ineluctable progress can be inferred but instead a proof of the power of atavism.

Dawkins allows that our upward moral drift is a "meandering sawtooth" — he is admired for his prose — but he seems not to be alert to historical specifics. The United States never suffered a more grievous moral setback than when it allowed thinking like Huxley's to make a dead letter of the 14th Amendment. As for the lesser issues of justice that arose in the wake of slavery, Huxley had this to say: "whatever the position of stable equilibrium into which the laws of social gravitation may bring the negro, all responsibility for the result will henceforward lie between Nature and him. The white man may wash his hands of it, and the Caucasian conscience be void of reproach for evermore. And this, if we look to the bottom of the matter, is the real justification for the abolition policy." No, he wasn't joking.

Finally, there is the matter of atheism itself, Dawkins finds it incapable of belligerent intent — "why would anyone go to war for the sake of an absence of belief?" It is a peculiarity of our language that by war we generally mean a conflict between nations, or at least one in which both sides are armed. There has been persistent violence against religion — in the French Revolution, in the Spanish Civil War, in the Soviet Union, in China. In three of these instances the extirpation of religion was part of a program to reshape society by excluding certain forms of thought, by creating an absence of belief. Neither sanity nor happiness appears to have been served by these efforts. The kindest conclusion one can draw is that Dawkins has not acquainted himself with the history of modern authoritarianism.

Indeed, Dawkins makes a bold attack on tolerance as it is manifested in society's permitting people to rear their children in their own religious traditions. He turns an especially cold eye on the Amish:

"There is something breathtakingly condescending, as well as inhumane, about the sacrificing of anyone, especially children, on the altar of 'diversity' and the virtue of preserving a variety of religious traditions. The rest of us are happy with our cars and computers, our vaccines and antibiotics. But you quaint little people with your bonnets and breeches, your horse buggies, your archaic dialect and your earth-closet privies, you enrich our lives. Of course you must be allowed to trap your children with you in your seventeenth-century time warp, otherwise something irretrievable would be lost to us: a part of the wonderful diversity of human culture."

The fact that the Amish are pacifists whose way of life burdens this beleaguered planet as little as any to be found in the Western world merits not even a mention.

Yet Dawkins himself has posited not only memes but, since these mind viruses are highly analogous to genes, a meme pool as well. This would imply that there are more than sentimental reasons for valuing the diversity that he derides. Would not the attempt to narrow it only repeat the worst errors of eugenics at the cultural and intellectual level? When the Zeitgeist turns Gorgon, the impulses toward cultural and biological eugenics have proved to be one and the same. It is diversity that makes any natural system robust, and diversity that stabilizes culture against the eccentricity and arrogance that have so often called themselves reason and science.

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