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# AMERICAN ATHEIST

A JOURNAL OF ATHEIST NEWS

IGHT

WWW.AMERICANATHEIST.ORG

MAY / JUNE 2008

\$4.95

Noted Atheist and Scientist,  
Dr. Massimo Pigliucci asks:  
**“Is *Dawkins*  
Deluded?”**

**Also In This Issue:**

- The Rapture: The Sooner, The Better
- Silent no More
- Thoughts for Atheists at Graduation
- Is Religion a Form of Psychosis?
- Modern Humans, Not Neandertals,  
May be Evolution's "Odd Man Out"

# Is Dawkins Deluded?

by Massimo Pigliucci

Let me begin by answering the rhetorical question in the title of this essay with a resounding, “No!” Contrary to the thesis in the recent book by A.E. and J.C. McGrath, “The Dawkins Delusion,”<sup>[1]</sup> endorsed by none other than the Archbishop of Canterbury, I don’t think Dawkins is deluded at all. To be “deluded” means to foolishly hold to a false belief, i.e. to believe in something despite plenty of evidence to the contrary. I see no trace of such mental disease in Dawkins’ book.<sup>[2]</sup>

Moreover, I actually agree with most of Dawkins’ conclusions as they are expressed both in *The God Delusion* and in various other writings he has published in *The Guardian* or in humanistic magazines. Why, then, am I writing this essay? Because I think Dawkins is off the reasonable track with some of his reasoning, and – more importantly – he seems to entirely mistake the nature of his most important argument. Since Dawkins and I belong to the Atheist and Humanist communities, which we like to think are distinguished from most religious communities by the fact that we welcome open debate and critical thinking, it seems that it would not be right to dodge a friendly challenge. So here it goes.

I will begin by outlining what I think are five of Dawkins’ main theses in *The God Delusion*, in order of increasing disagreement between the two of us, and I will briefly discuss where and why we depart. My hope is to raise the level of Atheist discourse, on the assumption that we don’t *know* that we are right *a priori*, we *think* we are right, and we can explain why.

Dawkins makes various arguments to the effect that: (1) Criticism of religion should be a normal part of the democratic process; (2) We need to raise awareness of discrimination against the non-religious; (3) Mainstream religion is complicit in the development of extremism; (4) Religious indoctrination of the young amounts to child abuse; and (5) Science can refute what he calls the “God hypothesis.”

First, that criticism of religion (or, for that matter, of anything at all) ought to be a normal part of the democratic process, seems to me rather uncontroversial, which of course doesn’t mean that we don’t need to keep telling people about it. Specifically, Americans seem to be in constant need of being reminded of the words of the First Amendment to the Constitution:

*“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.”*

If you doubt that such Civics 101 is necessary, may I refresh your memory about what some high profile people in the United States get away with saying in public about Atheism:

*“We’re in a religious war and we need to aggressively oppose secular humanism; these people are as religiously motivated as we are and they are filled with the devil.”*

— Timothy LaHaye, co-author of the *Left Behind* series

*“He (God) is using me, all the time, everywhere, to stand up for a biblical worldview in everything that I do and everywhere I am. He is training me.”*

— Tom DeLay (R-TX), former Majority Leader of the U.S. House Rep.

*“We’re fighting against humanism, we’re fighting against liberalism ... we are fighting against all the systems of Satan that are destroying our nation today ... our battle is with Satan himself.”*

— Reverend Jerry Falwell

*“I want you to just let a wave of intolerance wash over you. I want you to let a wave of hatred wash over you. Yes, hate is good — Our goal is a Christian nation. We have a biblical duty. We are called by God to conquer this country. We don’t want equal time. We don’t want pluralism.”*

— Randall Terry, founder of *Operation Rescue*

That this is acceptable discourse in American society; that this sort of language is not strongly condemned by media and public alike, means that Dawkins is surely correct on his first point.<sup>[3]</sup> We still need to do much work to obtain a society where criticism of religion is not seen as inherently evil and is accepted as part of the normal civic discourse.

Dawkins’ second point is a little less obvious, though still compelling. He says that what Atheism needs is to raise people’s consciousness, in a way analogous to what Martin Luther King Jr. did for the civil rights movement in the U. S., or the Stonewall riots in New York’s Greenwich Village did for the gay rights movement.<sup>[4]</sup> His favorite example is how feminists began to point out the ubiquitous presence of male pronouns, for example, in everyday discourse. Once one’s attention is drawn to this seemingly benign detail, one begins to pay attention to the fact that language reflects assumptions and ideologies. Once the biased use of language is exposed, one’s consciousness has been raised to be aware of (and therefore to question) those underlying assumptions.

This is a point well taken, and there are, in fact, compelling examples of this sort of bias in the case of religion. The fact that the U. S. Supreme Court consistently accepted the thesis that “In God We Trust” inscribed on American currency is *not* in breach of the separation of church and state, because it is a ceremonial reference to a “generic deity” is, on the face of it, ridiculous – and yet is accepted by the majority of the public and the media as a rather benign and uncontroversial statement. On the other hand, I’m not quite as convinced as Dawkins seems to be that this sort of battle is worth fighting at all. Human psychology is such that direct challenges to one’s prejudices are met with fierce resistance and generate entrenchment. On the other hand, it is the slow erosion of ideological positions that can work miracles – so to speak – over longer periods of time. Take Christmas, for example. The most effective weapon undermining its religious interpretation is precisely the increased commercialization and trivialization of the “holy-”day, and it is deliciously ironic that Christians themselves are first in line after every Thanksgiving to contribute to its demise by rushing to the mall to catch the latest bargain.

Turning now to Dawkins’ third point, let us consider the idea that mainstream religion is complicit in the development of extremism.<sup>[5]</sup> I agree with Dawkins that one should expect a bit more forceful condemnation of, say, extreme Islamism by moderate Muslims, or of some particularly despicable flavor of American Christian fundamentalism on the part of mainstream Christian denominations. But to go from there to suggest that moderate religions foster fanaticism is a flagrant example of the slippery slope logical fallacy. Dawkins here seems to play into his critics’ ends when he ignores long established traditions of tolerance and even internal critical discourse within many religious sects (Catholicism and Judaism come to mind, for example).

Granted, discussions among believers about doctrinal points make as much sense as discussions among different schools of astrologers (i.e., they are both based on entirely arbitrary and wholly unsubstantiated assumptions). Nevertheless, it simply doesn’t follow that once one embraces an arbitrary belief one is more likely to foster violent action. Such a link cannot be made *a priori*, but only on the basis of serious sociological studies, which Dawkins does not mention for the simple reason that there are none. And when Dawkins says<sup>[6]</sup> that “only religious faith is a strong enough force to motivate such utter madness in otherwise sane and decent people” (referring to suicide bombers) he is assuming that suicide bombers are, in fact, sane and decent (something one could reasonably question on the very basis that they lend themselves to similar acts). More importantly, he is disingenuously ignoring the fact that plenty of non-religious ideologies also cause apparently “sane and decent people” to commit insane actions. The problem is not just religion, but rather any absolute ideology, of which religion is only one example, and not even the most bloody one, during the last century or so.

The fourth point I wish to highlight in Dawkins’ attack is the idea that religious indoctrination amounts to child abuse.<sup>[7]</sup> This is not just highly questionable, but downright pernicious. Dawkins is again committing the slippery slope fallacy, this time with a vengeance. It is most certainly true that some types of religious teachings fulfill a reasonable definition of child abuse. The case of so-called Christian Scientists (if ever there was a misnomer for a religious sect, that is surely it) withdrawing medical care from their children on the grounds that all disease is spiritual and can be cured by prayer, is insane. Sure enough, such behavior is, in fact, treated as child abuse in Western countries, and such parents are prosecuted accordingly.

However, to take the opposite extreme, who in his right mind would seriously accuse, say, Unitarian Universalists, of child abuse? And yet, they are a religious denomination, and therefore, strictly speaking, they engage in “religious indoctrination.” Moreover, of course, Dawkins’ own rhetoric can be turned around to bite Atheists on their behind, since the concept of “indoctrination” isn’t limited to religiosity. I certainly do not subscribe to the argument made by a large number of Dawkins’ critics who talk about “fundamentalist Atheism.” That, plain and simple, is an oxymoron. But by the same token, if one associates all religious teaching with close-mindedness one simply hasn’t been paying attention. The Jewish faith, some sectors of the Catholic Church (e.g., the Jesuits), and even Islam have a long and venerable tradition of skepticism and the fostering of critical thinking. Dawkins should have read Jennifer Michael Hecht’s wonderful *Doubt: a History*<sup>[8]</sup> to get at least a taste of it.

My last point of disagreement with Dawkins represents our largest departure: the relationship between science and religion, and in particular the idea put forth by Dawkins that science can test (and refute) the “God hypothesis.” Dawkins defines the God hypothesis as follows:

*“There exists a superhuman, supernatural intelligence who deliberately designed and created the universe and everything in it, including us.”<sup>[9]</sup>*

He then goes on to clearly state (I’m being very careful here because I do not want to invite the possibility of being accused of committing the straw man fallacy) that the God hypothesis “is a scientific question.”<sup>[10]</sup> Simply put: it isn’t.

Before proceeding any further, let me make clear that not only am I no sympathizer of Stephen Gould’s (Dawkins’ former nemesis) “NOMA principle,” but that, in fact, I agree with Dawkins’ main conclusion in *The God Delusion*. I just think his reasoning is unsound. First, let us quickly address Gould, and his *Rocks of Ages*.<sup>[11]</sup> Gould argued that science and religion are separate enterprises, characterized by “non-overlapping magisteria,” a fanciful Gouldian term for the idea that science deals with facts, religion with values, and the two shall never meet. This is sheer nonsense, as I explained in a review of Gould’s book.<sup>[12]</sup> To begin with, religion does not have a monopoly on matters of value. Philosophy has a long history of ethical discourse, and even science has recently begun to inform our understanding of human morality. Spectacular progress has been made in evolutionary biology and neuroscience regarding moral decision making. (Of course, I am aware that scientific *facts* about moral judgment still do not dictate our value judgments, but surely an explanation of how

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the latter come about, cannot be considered irrelevant to the “magisterium” of morality). Moreover, almost all religions have, in fact, repeatedly invaded science’s turf by making claims about the origin of the universe, life and humanity. If they hadn’t, we wouldn’t have continuous debates about creationism, and Galileo would have happily retired in the Chianti region instead of being condemned to house arrest for the last part of his life.

When I say that I agree with Dawkins’ main conclusion, I mean that I consider myself as belonging to his “category 6” (out of 7) along the continuum from “strong theist” to “strong atheist.” As Dawkins puts it, category 6 means, “very low probability [of God’s existence]. *De facto* atheist. I cannot know for certain but I think God is very improbable, and I live my life on the assumption that he is not there.”<sup>[13]</sup> Furthermore, I belong to category 6 because of the same basic reasoning that Dawkins presents in his book: in a reversal of the argument from intelligent design used by creationists, Dawkins points out that “the God hypothesis tries to get something from nothing. God tries to have his free lunch and be it too.”<sup>[14]</sup> In essence, the existence of God is very unlikely because it implies that an infinitely complex cause (God) is a simpler answer to the question of the origin of the universe, while surely the simplest answer is that the universe originated out of low-level natural processes, just like everything else we have studied so far.

It strikes me as obvious that Dawkins is right on this. To say “God did it,” contrary to popular belief, is not the most parsimonious answer to any question (technically, it isn’t even an answer, unless one adds some details about *how* and *why* God did “it”). The religious believers and simple-minded theologians who invoke Occam’s razor seem to completely misunderstand it. William of Occam (1288-1348) rightly admonished philosophers (there were no scientists at the time) never to invoke any explanatory principle that is not strictly necessary: “*Entia non sunt multiplicanda sine necessitate.*” God is not only unnecessary, it’s the Cadillac of all unnecessary ontological principles.

So, why, exactly, am I criticizing Dawkins, then? Because he repeatedly claims that the more general form of the “God hypothesis” is a scientific hypothesis, that can be rejected by science. He is dead wrong. Specific creationist claims can indeed be rejected on scientific grounds. If you believe that the earth is 6,000 years old, or that there was a worldwide flood about 4,000 years ago, sorry, but geology, physics and biology flatly contradict you. This rejection based on science is possible because some religious claims are *empirical* in nature, i.e. they are precisely the sort of claim that science is good at testing.

But suppose that a creationist came back and said (and they do, believe me), “sorry, chap, but I think God made it *appear* as if the

earth is billions of years old, it was created with the ‘fossils’ strategically put in place to make people think that it is old, but in reality it has only been in place a few thousand years, just as the Bible says. It’s a test of faith, you know.” This is pretty much the scenario concocted by science fiction writer Douglas Adams (to whom Dawkins dedicates *The God Delusion*) in his delightful *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*: the earth was really a custom-made planet, not designed by God, but by a race of intelligent beings who had been commissioned to build an organic computer (the earth) that would eventually crank out the answer to the question of life, the universe and everything.

The point is that the creationist rejoinder cannot be debunked on scientific grounds, because it concedes that the empirical evidence would, in fact, point to the *appearance* of a very old earth. To refer again to Adams’ masterpiece, the hitchhiker’s guide of the book’s title bears a legal disclaimer that says that in every case where the guide’s assertions are found to be contradicted by reality, it is reality that is wrong. It would be hard to find a better way to summarize the creationist’s “thinking.”

So, Dawkins is correct in rejecting the God Hypothesis, and he is correct about the reasons to do so, but he thinks this is a scientific rebuttal, while instead it is a philosophical argument. The difference is important, and I’m sure Dawkins himself would concede the point, if we could chat over a glass of wine. Not only is it just fair to recognize that it is a different discipline (philosophy) that we invoke in order to justify our conclusion, but it is actually to science’s advantage to recognize what philosophers would call its epistemic limits. Simply put, there are things science cannot do, and we should not therefore pretend that it can, under the penalty of crossing the line into scientism, a pernicious attitude of cultural colonization displayed by a variety of scientists, including Dawkins.

Instead, reasonable people should realize that science and philosophy can unite to defeat religion, both in terms of their combined arguments against the existence of God, and even, eventually, in offering a more sane and appealing view of the world and humanity’s place in it. Now, that is a project behind which I can rally with the likes of Dawkins and Dennett.<sup>[15]</sup> Shall we begin? \*

## Notes

- [1] *The Dawkins Delusion*, IVP Books, 2007.
- [2] *The God Delusion*, Houghton Mifflin, 2006.
- [3] See *The God Delusion*, chapter 1, especially pp. 20-27.
- [4] *The God Delusion*, pp. 114-118.
- [5] *The God Delusion*, pp. 301-308.
- [6] *The God Delusion*, p. 303.
- [7] *The God Delusion*, chapter 9
- [8] Hecht, J. M. 2003. *Doubt: a History*. HarperSanFrancisco, San Francisco, CA.
- [9] *The God Delusion*, p. 31.
- [10] *The God Delusion*, p. 48 and p. 50.
- [11] Gould, S. J. 1999. *Rocks of Ages*. Ballantine, New York.
- [12] Durm, M. W., and M. Pigliucci. 1999. Gould’s separate ‘magisteria’: two views. *Skeptical Inquirer* 23(6):53-56.
- [13] *The God Delusion*, p. 51.
- [14] *The God Delusion*, p. 114.
- [15] See Dennett, D. 2006. *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*. Viking Adult, New York, NY.

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