



# Is Dawkins Deluded?

## *When Scientists Talk about Religion*

By some accounts, 2006 was the year atheists struck back. Three books in particular made headlines across the world: Sam Harris's *Letter to a Christian Nation*, Daniel C. Dennett's *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*, and Richard Dawkins's *The God Delusion*. Dawkins received an especially large share of criticism for stepping beyond the boundaries of science, with theologians and biologists alike telling him that he made fundamental mistakes in both theology and science. By and large, he did neither, but he can be criticized for a somewhat sloppy philosophy.

Let us start with the charges that Dawkins's view of theology is naïve and that his arguments do not take into account the sophistication that modern theology has reached. For example, Jim Holt, writing in *The New York Times* (October 22, 2006), says that Dawkins "dismisses the ontological argument [for the existence of God]" and yet "seems unaware that this argument . . . comes in sophisticated modern versions that are not all that easy to refute." Dawkins

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actually anticipated such criticism and rejects the very notion that theology is a field of expertise. On p. 56 of *The God Delusion*, he says, "[I] wonder in what possible sense theologians can be said to have a province [of expertise]" (emphasis in the original), and on the following page: "I have yet to see any good reason to suppose that theology . . . is a subject at all." Indeed, the reason why the ontological "argument" for the existence of God (which essentially says that God exists by definition, He being the most perfect thing imaginable, and perfection "obviously" entailing reality) is difficult to reject logically is because it is fundamentally nonsensical, similar to asking what the color of triangles is.

Similarly, Allen Orr (himself an evolutionary biologist) writes in *The New Yorker* (January 11, 2007) that "the most disappointing feature of *The God Delusion* is Dawkins's failure to engage religious thought in any serious way." Orr—who wouldn't dream of accusing astronomers of failing to engage astrologers seriously—chastises Dawkins for citing Douglas Adams (the author of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*) and the "science popularizer" Carl Sagan (apparently, Orr is unaware that Sagan was a professional astronomer as well), rather than philosophers like William James and Ludwig Wittgenstein. But the real question is: did Wittgenstein and James say anything more meaningful about religion than Sagan and

Adams? I doubt it, and so, obviously, does Dawkins.

The second charge, that Dawkins misapplies science itself in his criticism of religion, is closer to the truth, but not for the reasons some of his fellow scientists apparently believe. For example, on November 13, 2006, Dawkins debated fellow biologist (and Christian) Francis Collins—of human-genome-project fame. According to *Time* magazine, which sponsored the debate, Collins disagreed with Dawkins's position that the truth or lack thereof of the proposition "God exists" can be ascertained scientifically, because "God cannot be completely contained within nature, and therefore God's existence is outside of science's ability to really weigh in." What does "completely contained within nature" mean? Is God partially contained in it? Can science then say something about that part of God that is in fact contained within nature? And in what sense does nature "contain" things or, even better, *fail* to contain them? This is the same sort of sophistry that gives theology a richly deserved bad name.

Yet, Collins was onto something, albeit not for the reasons he thought. On the one hand, Dawkins is absolutely right when he says that any religion that makes specific claims about physical aspects of the world (and make no mistake about it, *all* of them do, in one form or another), then that religion is

open to scientific inquiry. Moreover, wherever such inquiry has actually been carried out, religion lost, often spectacularly. In that sense, then, there is no compatibility between science and religion (*pace* both Stephen Jay Gould and Pope John Paul II). Consequently, any believer whose faith depends on the truth of his religion's assertions about the physical world is out of luck.

But Dawkins is more ambitious than that, and that's where he falls short. On p. 31 of *The God Delusion*, he defines what the "God hypothesis" consists of: "There exists a super-human, supernatural intelligence who deliberately designed and created the universe and everything in it, including us." On p. 36, he specifies that "I am not attacking any particular version of God or gods. I am attacking God, all gods, anything

and everything supernatural, wherever and whenever they have been or will be invented." It is this hubris that is Dawkins's downfall, because his science would have been sufficient for a devastating attack on the overwhelming majority of gods and, certainly, of those that matter (largely the Judeo-Christian-Muslim tradition). But, when he says, for example on p. 48, that the God hypothesis (as previously defined) "is a scientific question," he is wrong. It's a philosophical one.

The problem is that Dawkins, despite his alliance with Dan Dennett, is no fan of philosophy, repeatedly displaying the all-too-common attitude of intellectual smugness shared by other scientists, from fellow biologist E.O. Wilson to physicist Steven Weinberg. On p. 293 of the book, for example,

Dawkins invents an imaginary moral philosopher in order to mock the whole idea that philosophy has something to contribute to our understanding of morality. Bad move, because it turns out that Dawkins's argument throughout *The God Delusion* is, in fact, a very compelling *philosophical* argument.

The "God hypothesis" is indeed unlikely to be correct, but this is not because science can refute such a vague hypothesis on empirical grounds. Rather, it is because one can build a compelling set of arguments—informed by science and thoroughly compatible with it—that to believe in *anything* despite the complete lack of evidence is, in fact, irrational. Being an a-theist is as reasonable as being an a-unicornist, but that ain't science; it's a good, old-fashioned philosophical argument. □

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