

Classic Text 15 - Atheism

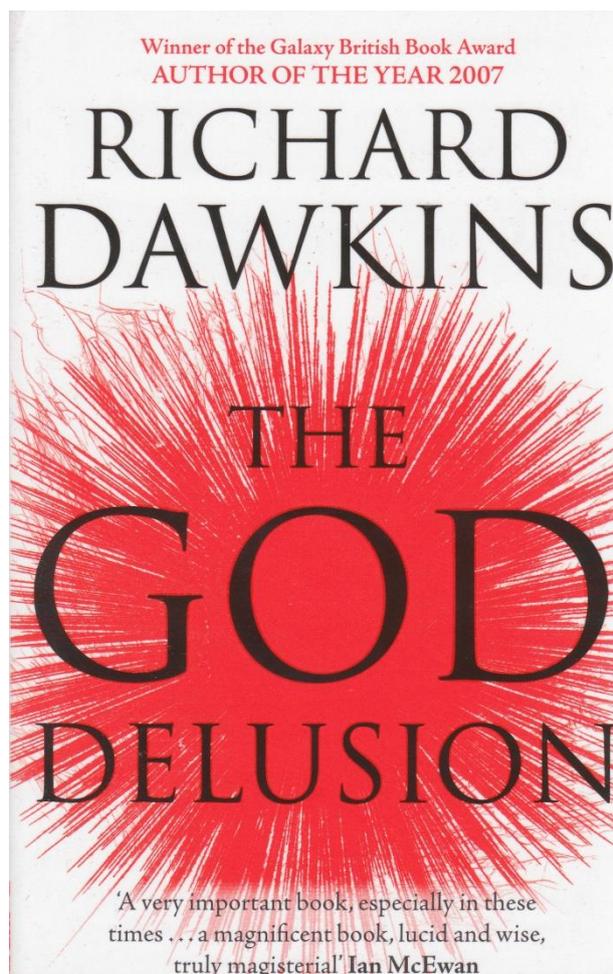
In Classic Text 03 and to a lesser extent in Classic Text 06 we considered several arguments in favour of God's existence, all of which were problematic in one way or another. **Atheism**, on the other hand, from the Greek *ἄθεος* (atheos) for "without a god" is the belief that there are no gods or God. The earliest documented evidence for atheism comes from the time of the historical Vedic religion in India in the 6th Century BCE and in Classical antiquity in the 5th Century BCE in the West. There have been many secular and atheistic historical movements or rather counter movements down the centuries, most noteworthy beginning in the Renaissance; however the atheism we shall be considering has been referred to by Wikipedia as **New Atheism**. (Wikipedia: New Atheism)

With notable exceptions such as Periyar E. V. Ramasamy, Vladimir Lenin and Bertrand Russell, most atheists before the turn of the 21st Century had been content to "practice" their disbelief in private. Whether spurred by the terrorist attacks of 9/11, the 7/7 London bombings of 2005, or the ongoing revelations of sexual abuse within the Catholic Church, prominent scientists and philosophers like Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett and other intellectuals have been advocating that "religion should not simply be tolerated but should be countered, criticized, and exposed by rational argument wherever its influence arises." (Hooper, 2006) Unlike previous thinkers who regarded religion merely as a source of error or folly, the New Atheists argue that it is harmful on both a personal and social level.

Following a popular debate between Christopher Hitchens and Dinesh D'Souza, atheists represented by Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett, have been dubbed the "Four Horsemen of the Non-Apocalypse" after the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse referred to in the Christian Bible. What unites these authors is that they "write mainly from a scientific perspective," treating the question of the existence of God or **God Hypothesis** on a par with other scientific hypotheses, capable of being falsified. (Wikipedia: New Atheism)

Recent empirical testing for the efficacy of intercessory prayer in a randomised control trial of cardiac bypass patients, for example, showed no benefit. On the contrary they displayed a small but statistically insignificant detriment. (Benson *et al.* 2006)

What may be new to the popular reader is the way these authors use logical argument to refute religious dogmas such as God's omniscience and omnipotence. If you have already worked through



Classic Text 03 on God's Existence, you will be familiar with such arguments and there will be no need to rehearse them here.

Another theme on which Dawkins and others take a bold stand is the rejection of the belief in non-overlapping magisteria (NOMA), advocated by Stephen Jay Gould, regarding the existence of a "domain where one form of teaching holds the appropriate tools for meaningful discourse and resolution." (Gould, 1999) According to Gould, "science and religion should be confined to distinct non-overlapping domains: science would be limited to the empirical realm, including theories developed to describe observations, while religion would deal with questions of ultimate meaning and moral value". However as Dawkins and Ridley point out respectively, Abrahamic faiths expound on scientific matters and that moral value involves human behaviour which is an observable phenomenon and hence amenable to scientific study. Matt Ridley (1998) moreover claims "that there is substantial scientific research on evolutionary origins of ethics and morality". (Wikipedia: New Atheism) Although, we might add, Evolutionary Psychology is rich in speculation and comparatively poor on empirical evidence, that such research is being seriously undertaken is a case in point of overlapping magisteria.

Rather than tackling these and other issues concerning atheism here, we encourage you buy or borrow Dawkins' (2006) *The God Delusion*, read it and decide for yourself whether he makes a better case for atheism than, say Descartes or C.S. Lewis do for theism. Please take special note of Dawkins' summary of his central argument against the tenability of the "God Hypothesis" at the end of his chapter 4, as much else of what he has to say depends upon this line of thought.

In the interests of accessibility, we have reproduced chapters 4, 6, 8 and 9 of *The God Delusion*, [here](#) for download. This is possible under South African copyright law, where it is permissible to reproduce individual chapters of a book (but not the whole book) for educational purposes.

Atheism vs. Agnosticism

In *The God Delusion* Dawkins takes a firm stand for atheism rather than agnosticism. Historically, most people who did not believe in a God identified themselves as agnostics because, strictly speaking, they believed that they did not have a knock down argument for God's *non*-existence in the way that, say Aquinas thought that he had *for* his existence. These people have occupied the position of fence sitting, pending conclusive evidence either way.

Having read *The God Delusion*, the position of fence sitting is no longer an option, except in the driest ontological sense. Yes, technically one could be agnostic about the existence mythic creatures, because after all palaeontologists might one day unearth one and then we'd be convinced. The probability however is so vanishingly small that for all intents and purposes we confidently state that we do not believe in them, or that reports of them must have been mistaken for other creatures. Why then, do many contemporary non-believers continue to reserve a special place of non-committal concerning the "God Hypothesis"? For Dawkins then, it is time to climb down from that fence and take a stand!

Religious Culture

Another argument for the existence of God that is often touted by believers is that one can only explain such towering works of artistic genius such as Haydn's Creation, Handel's Messiah and Mozart's Requiem if they were divinely inspired. It is true all these composers were nominally Christian but they were also formidably talented. For centuries the Christian Church exercised a monopoly on artistic output from architecture to composition in Europe; however the existence of God does not follow from the fact that such great works were commissioned by Christians or dedicated to God or the Church. Had another religious tradition taken hold, presumably the bulk of artistic output would have been dedicated to those gods or god. More importantly, there would be no discernible difference between a work that was indeed divinely inspired from one that was inspired by the *idea* of God.

An atheist is just as capable of being moved by a work of religious culture for its artistry and its noble sentiments as a fervent believer, except that the atheist fully credits the composer with the genius, not God. For the atheist, Mozart for example was musical genius not because of God, but in spite of his non-existence. The same is true of the all too human moments of poetic compassion evinced in the Psalms of David - they are all too humanly compassionate (at times) because they were written by a man, period.

Even Dawkins admits to being a "Cultural Anglican" because that is the culture in which he was raised. Yes, he admits he would enjoy hearing Evensong in a rural village because that is the culture in which he was raised. The fact that one embraces the culture in which one was raised in no wise saddles one with all its dubious religious accoutrements.

Task

A point by point exposition of *The God Delusion* would run into hundreds of pages and would probably constitute another book. By now you would have become quite skilled in identifying arguments and analysing their structure and quality. Find one passage or theme that runs through Dawkins' book that you either endorse or would like to challenge. Whatever your view, it is not enough to simply rehearse the argument and say what about it you like or detest. You will need to either substantiate or refute one or more of his arguments or bring into question the factual basis for an argument.

Please keep your analysis within the context of Dawkins' book, which is to demonstrate that the "God Hypothesis" is either wrong or vanishingly improbable, even if you disagree. Finally, no matter how sincerely you believe in one proposition or another, table thumping of the form "I KNOW x to be true..." does not constitute evidence, because if anything as Descartes has taught us, we could be wrong.

Feedback

From among the many issues raised by Dawkins in *The God Delusion* we were most persuaded by his discussion of the **anthropic principle**. After the demise of many religious explanations for such diverse phenomena, as the apparently geocentric model of the Solar System in Galileo's day to the descent of Humans by natural selection in the last century, one apparently astonishing mystery

remains according to the religious apologist: The Universe appears to be fine-tuned for our existence. If any of the six physical constants discussed by Martin Rees (1999) in his book *Just Six Numbers* had been even slightly off, the Universe would have been so utterly different as not to support any life, let alone conscious life.

According to the anthropic principle, of which there are stronger and weaker forms, we ought not to be astonished that the Universe appears to be fine-tuned for our existence because, were the Universe to be even slightly tuned any other way, we simply would not be around to observe it. Therefore the fact that we conscious creatures are around to wonder at the question is proof enough that the Universe we inhabit must be one capable of supporting conscious life. If there are other universes in which conscious life is not possible, then by definition, there would be no conscious creatures to wonder at their existence.

Some people are uncomfortable with the anthropic principle because, admittedly it is based on an unusual sort of argument, but no more unusual than Descartes *cogito* being based on reflection about one's own existence. Besides which, even if someone were to refute the anthropic principle, it does not follow that theism is the only alternative.

The idea by Lee Smolin (1997) that our Universe might have undergone process of "natural selection" to form black holes, because it arose from a singularity within another universe's that tended to form black holes, and that those physical parameters might have been passed on to our own is pure speculation. The truth is that we know nothing of what goes on at a point of singularity; all our physics simply breaks down. Therefore the idea of a "Darwinian natural selection of universes in the multiverse," while interesting, can't be relied upon to advance the Anthropic Principle.

Another interesting topic that you might have perused is the one from Ch. 6 "If there is no God, why be good?" (p. 226 ff) not because it is a serious question for most atheists but because it is apparently a very serious question for many theists who envision a world without God as one devoid of morality. Indeed this is a common rejoinder, "If there were no God, everybody would do just as they please. There would be wholesale rape, plunder and pillage..."

If, as Michael Shermer (2004) claims in *The Science of Good and Evil*, this is how you would react in the absence of an all seeing God, then you reveal yourself to be a deeply immoral person. If on the other hand you believe that you would continue to be a moral person in the absence of Divine Surveillance then you undermine your claim that God is necessary for us to be moral. The same could be said about questions of religious guilt. If God is required to set you down regular guilt trips, just so that you can continue to be a moral person, you are probably not a very moral person to start with.

Unfortunately this whole line of reasoning portrays adult humans as very naughty, even wicked children, incapable of behaving themselves without Divine paternalistic oversight. Recall however from Classic Text 10, Dawkins' more subtle argument from his chapter *Nice Guys Finish First* as to why altruism is mutually beneficial *and* self-interestedly so. If you were expounding on this topic for another person, this is where you might want to introduce that topic.

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