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Title Ideology in the Guise of Science

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Reference *FARMS Review* 19/2 (2007): 239-43.

ISSN 1550-3194 (print), 2156-8049 (online)

Abstract Review of *The God Delusion* (2006), by Richard Dawkins.

IDEOLOGY IN THE GUISE OF SCIENCE

David Grandy

Review of Richard Dawkins. *The God Delusion*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006. x + 406 pp., with appendix, bibliography, and index. \$27.00.

Years ago while serving as full-time missionaries, my companion and I were invited to talk about our faith to an introductory philosophy class at the University of Missouri at Columbia. Since neither of us knew anything about philosophy, we simply relied on the missionary discussions to make our presentation. Only one member of the class was hostile, stating that we were “intellectual midgets” compared to Freud and Marx. We took that in stride, not knowing Freud and Marx except by name. Afterward, as the professor and several students thanked us, I happened to glance at a book that the professor had in hand and that evidently was being used as a course text. It was Bertrand Russell’s *Why I Am Not a Christian*.¹

About a year later, fresh off my mission and at Brigham Young University, I borrowed Russell’s book from the library and opened its pages with some trepidation. Before long I realized that I mostly agreed with Russell, but only because he was attacking a crude caricature of the God I believed in. I didn’t believe in that caricature either. For all his philosophical learning, Russell had written a shallow, non-threatening book about religion.

1. Bertrand Russell, *Why I Am Not a Christian: And Other Essays on Religion and Related Subjects* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1957).

Richard Dawkins, a well-known biologist and critic of religion, has written a similar book—*The God Delusion*. The book has gotten a lot of advance publicity and is selling well, but for those who keep track of such things, its publication is a bit of a nonevent. Here is another predictable salvo against religion from the world of science. But it is not science: it is ideology poorly disguised as science. Nor does its author grasp the nature of religious experience. Dawkins dismisses religious claims after measuring them against a rather badly misshapen scientific yardstick. This is positivism at its best (or worst): truth is established scientifically or not at all.

Dawkins would have us believe that Darwinian evolution is the omni-explanatory solution to all of life's mysteries. This is an old refrain, one going back to Ernst Haeckel, Thomas Huxley, H. G. Wells, and, in more recent decades, Daniel Dennett. It is not science per se, but the dramatization of science for ideological purposes. Evolutionary biology is a perfectly legitimate theory of science, but like all intellectual constructions, it has its limitations. This fact, readily acknowledged by those familiar with quantum theory and Kurt Gödel's incompleteness theorems, has never really seemed to register with life science enthusiasts like Dawkins. Their passion for universal explanations harks back to an earlier era when Newtonian science struck many people as evidence that the human race had finally arrived. Dawkins, wholly enamored of Darwinian biology, is a curious throwback to that era; and he, like certain *philosophes* of the Enlightenment, is eager to throw traditional religion overboard so as to clear the deck of all ideologies but his own.

It is important to note that Dawkins is not writing in a vacuum. He is replying to a crowd of thinkers—scientists, philosophers, and theologians—who in recent decades have tried to harmonize scientific and religious truth. "What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem?" asked Tertullian centuries ago.² Tertullian's reply was "nothing," and Dawkins's is the same, although for vastly different reasons. The goal of harmonizing faith and reason is an old one, but there are pitfalls along the way; and to his credit, Dawkins does a good job of pointing

2. Tertullian, *De Praescriptione Haereticorum* 7.9.

some of them out. If we invest faith in, say, intelligent design, irreducible complexity, or certain versions of the anthropic principle, all of which lean on God to make sense of things, what happens when persuasive naturalistic explanations emerge?

This is worldview warfare, not science versus religion. Dawkins readily admits he is opposed only to the idea of a God who takes a personal interest in humankind and who therefore strives to bring off our salvation and happiness. His God, if he must use the word, is coincidental with the laws of nature and consequently perfectly oblivious to our being. This outlook is, of course, not original with Dawkins; most notably it is associated with Einstein and Spinoza. But neither Einstein nor Spinoza dogmatically and zealously asserted it. Both took it as a religious *preference*, not as a weapon with which to attack and destroy other religious preferences. Dawkins, however, is a religious firebrand in scientific guise, and by trying to straitjacket others into his atheistic worldview, he does science a profound disservice.

In the latter part of the book, Dawkins offers an explanation for religion. Believing that only Darwinian evolution can get to the bottom of this matter, he weaves an interesting story. But this is not to say that others, working from different principles, could not weave equally interesting but very different stories. The problem here is one that Karl Popper identified decades ago: theories that explain so much and that seem to be immune to falsification ought to arouse our suspicion.³ A piece of Silly Putty can be easily molded into the shape of an elephant, a dog, a giraffe, virtually anything we can imagine; but that does not mean that Silly Putty is the universal substance from which all the world was created. It is merely a substance that reacts easily to the human imagination.

Dawkins, it seems, fails to grasp this point. He never admits that there might be other ways to persuasively spin the empirical data, to play dot to dot with the events of nature. Rather, he talks as if Darwinian evolution affords a uniquely unbiased vision of the past. Yet anyone who closely attends to his explanations of the past notes

3. Karl R. Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge* (New York: Basic Books, 1962).

that they become obscure just at the critical moment. In this respect *The God Delusion* is exactly like *The Selfish Gene*,⁴ Dawkins's most sustained attempt to deal with our biological origins. The selfish gene, he says, began as a lifeless unit, void of intentionality. Eventually, however, it evolved into a living, purposive, "selfish" thing, though Dawkins never specifies quite how this happened. He can only say that natural selection—the mechanism that drives organic evolution—brought it about. Thus, while straining at the gnat of the selfish gene, Dawkins swallows the miracle of life that he is quick to disavow in religious contexts. After getting past this hitch, however, he is able to talk with great confidence, and his explanations come off as persuasive, albeit for reasons just indicated. Many people, unfortunately, overlook the leap of faith taken at the outset of the explanation (the assertion that natural selection somehow or other brings life into existence) and uncritically take that leap with Dawkins.

This failure to deal with fundamental issues affords Dawkins a great deal of argumentative mileage. A case in point is his claim that natural selection is not a random process. (He concedes the improbability of life originating from purely random processes.) He compares it to a combination lock that noticeably clicks each time one of the key digits is passed, thus allowing the person turning the lock to quickly decipher its code. Elsewhere⁵ Dawkins puts a similar spin on the old monkey-at-the-typewriter argument by insisting that a monkey *could* type out a line from Shakespeare in fairly short order: each time the monkey accidentally hits a correct character it gets locked in, while all the incorrect characters are immediately erased. Thus the monkey, completely unaware of what it is accomplishing, never has to start over from scratch—the process itself is self-improving. It retains correct characters, discards those that are incorrect, and, after sufficient iterations, produces a fully coherent sentence.

But for a monkey to do this, its typewriter would have to be programmed, and who or what is the programmer? Dawkins assigns that

4. Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976).

5. See Richard Dawkins, *The Blind Watchmaker: Why the Evidence of Evolution Reveals a Universe Without Design* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996).

role to natural selection. So on the one hand natural selection is blind and mindless, and on the other it is teleological. This is a contradiction that goes back to Darwin's personification of natural selection (he once described nature as "infinitely more sagacious than man" and as an "all-seeing being" that is ever "rigid and scrutinizing"),⁶ and it cuts so deeply as to shape up as yet another leap of faith. Dawkins might deny this by arguing that each tiny step of the evolutionary process gets locked in by virtue of its survival value, but it is by no means clear that this is always the case. More fundamentally, one wonders whence survival gets its intrinsic value in a cosmos initially devoid of value, which is the kind of cosmos Dawkins posits.

An old adage states that to a man with a hammer everything looks like a nail. This, no doubt, is an overstatement, but certainly to Dawkins any religious belief is something to be pounded on by the ideological hammer of atheistic science. One of his chief complaints against traditional religion is the religious intolerance that flares up in such places as Israel, Iraq, Northern Ireland, and even the United States. Granted, this is lamentable, but Dawkins's own brand of intolerance only exacerbates the problem. What is needed is not diatribe but dialogue and an openness to new ways of thinking and feeling. Religious experience may not make much sense to Dawkins, but, as William James would say, that is because he chooses to stand outside it: "One can never fathom an emotion or divine its dictates by standing outside of it. In the glowing hour of excitement, however, all incomprehensibilities are solved, and what was so enigmatical from without becomes transparently obvious. Each emotion obeys a logic of its own, and makes deductions which no other logic can draw. Piety and charity live in a different universe from worldly lusts and fears, and form another centre of energy altogether."⁷ Dawkins gives us one universe or thought world, but there are many others.

6. Charles Darwin and Alfred R. Wallace, *Evolution by Natural Selection* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958), 45–48.

7. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 2004), 286.

