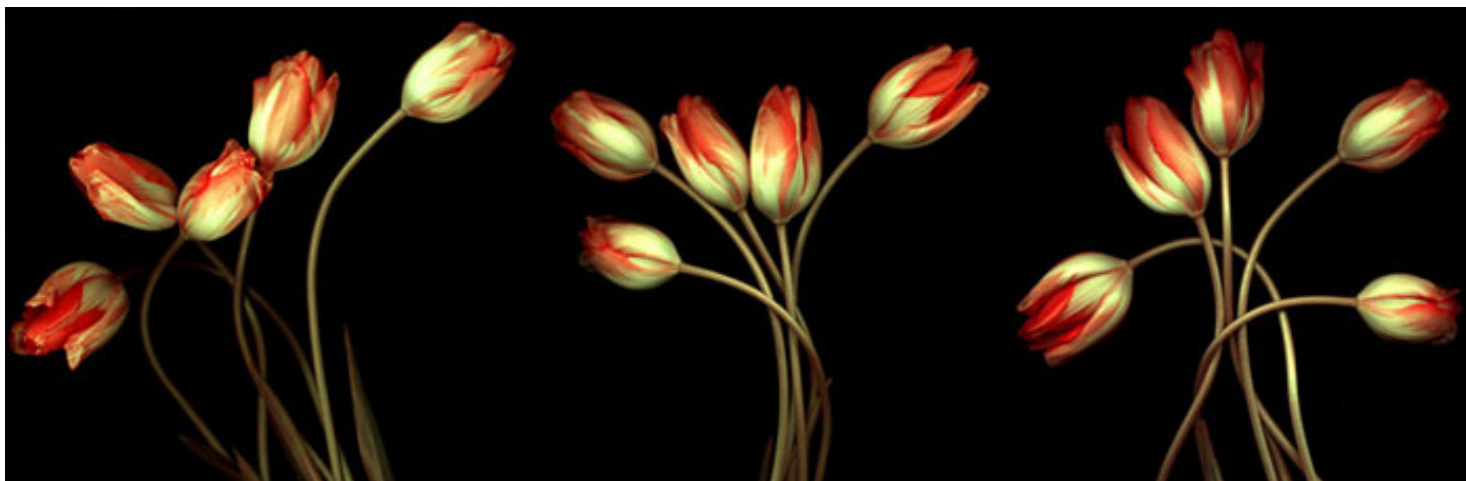



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Edge 202 — February 12, 2007
(13,000 words)



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When I explained then in a private letter to you what I had meant, you conceded to me in your private response that you had not seen my point in the light I intended, and that my claim was not in fact the blunder you had said it was—but of course you never chose to recant your criticism in print, so your uncorrected accusation stands to this day. Such a gentleman and a scholar you are! But times have changed. We now have blogs, so this time you can readily respond in public to my open letter.

OPEN LETTER TO H. ALLEN ORR
By Daniel C. Dennett

FROM: **Daniel C. Dennett**
TO: **H. Allen Orr**

Dear Allen,

You claim Dawkins ignores the best thinking on the subject. *The Selfish Gene*, which you rightly admire, doesn't waste any time rebutting Teilhard de Chardin, or any of the perennial would-be defenders of Lamarckism, or even—I might add—many of the murkier claims made by Richard Lewontin over the

years. Do you object that he thus "ignores the best thinking on evolution"? No, you say he "wrestled with the best thinkers." So you must have in mind some neglected gems on religion: what arguments and/or thinkers on the topic of religion ought Dawkins to have tackled in detail? What in your opinion *is* the best thinking on the subject?

I hope that you don't mean the recent reviews. Some of them did indeed "shred" Dawkins' 747 argument, if by that you mean they scoffed and hooted and clawed at it. Did any of them, in your opinion, rebut it soundly? Tom Nagel made some dismissive remarks-not arguments-in passing. Do you count that? I'd really like to know which published critique of the 747 argument you endorse, so I can explain to you, a non-philosopher, what its shortcomings are. Maybe there are some good ones I haven't seen, but I'll lead with my chin. I myself think Dawkins has made some excellent improvements on the standard arguments, improvements any philosopher would be proud to have composed. As I said in my own review, in *Free Inquiry*:

"Dawkins set out to expose and discredit every source of the God delusion, and even when he is going over familiar ground, as he often must, he almost invariably finds some novel twist that refreshes our imaginations. Some of the innovations are substantial. After flattening all the serious arguments for the existence of God, he turns the tables and frames an argument against the existence of God, exploiting one of the favorite ideas of Intelligent Design demagogues: the improbability of design. The basic argument, that postulating God as creator raises the question of who created God, has been around for years, but Dawkins gives it a proper spine and uses it to show first that "Chance and design both fail as solutions to the problem of statistical improbability, because one of them is the problem, and the other one regresses to it. Natural selection is a real solution. It is the only workable solution that has ever been suggested." (p121) Then he goes on to show how understanding this conclusion illuminates the confusing controversies surrounding the proper use of the anthropic principle. We are accustomed to physicists presuming that since their science is more "basic" than biology, they have a deeper perspective from which to sort out the remaining perplexities, but sometimes the perspective of biology can actually clarify what has been murky and ill-motivated in the physicists' discussions."

I'd be interested to see the 'shreddings' that persuaded you otherwise.

And you say that C.S. Lewis "had already dispensed with" one of Dawkins' claims. Am I to take it that you are now endorsing the quote from Lewis as an adequate rebuttal or pre-refutation of Dawkins?

You misconstrued my NYRB letter in several ways. I didn't say you held Dawkins' book to too high a standard; I said you imposed a goal on the book that was not Dawkins' goal. I didn't say or imply that Dawkins' book was "merely a popular survey" and I didn't say or imply that you were "disturbed by Dawkins' atheism." I said you adopted a double standard-like many atheists, I might add-and were attempting to protect religion from serious criticism, for reasons I am curious to know. These misconstruals do not strike me as unintended, but perhaps you read with a broad brush.

As I write this message, I am reminded of your earlier trashing, more than ten years ago, of my book *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*, first in *Evolution*, which does

not permit rebuttals from authors, and then, slightly enlarged, in the *Boston Review*, which does. You leveled very serious charges of error and incomprehension in that review, and when I challenged them, you responded with a haughty dismissal of my objections (in an exchange in the *Boston Review*). Quoting an example, dealing with the speed of evolution: "Now I've been in the population genetics business for some time and, frankly, I have no idea what Dennett is talking about. And-I can find no polite way of putting this-it's hard to escape the conclusion that Dennett has no idea what he's talking about either." (1996, p37) Now that was rude-even ruder than your reply this time. When I explained then in a private letter to you what I had meant, you conceded to me in your private response that you had not seen my point in the light I intended, and that my claim was not in fact the blunder you had said it was-but of course you never chose to recant your criticism in print, so your uncorrected accusation stands to this day. Such a gentleman and a scholar you are! But times have changed. We now have blogs, so this time you can readily respond in public to my open letter.

Note that I have not yet claimed that you have no idea what you're talking about; we philosophers try not to jump to conclusions. I have however asked you, twice now, to tell us what you're talking about. Please.

I await your reply.

Dan Dennett

The New York Review of Books

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Letter

'THE GOD DELUSION' by Daniel C. Dennett, Reply by H. Allen Orr

In response to **A Mission to Convert** (January 11, 2007)

To the Editors:

H. Allen Orr, in "A Mission to Convert" [NYR, January 11], his review of Richard Dawkins's *The God Delusion* and other recent books on science and religion, says that Dawkins is an amateur, not professional, atheist, and has failed to come to grips with "religious thought" with its "meticulous reasoning" in any serious way. He notes that the book is "defiantly middlebrow," and I wonder just which highbrow thinkers about religion Orr believes Dawkins should have grappled with. I myself have looked over large piles of recent religious thought in the last few years in the course of researching my own book on these topics, and I have found almost all of it to be so dreadful that ignoring it entirely seemed both the most charitable and most constructive policy. (I devote a scant six pages of *Beheading the Spell* to the arguments for and against the existence of God, while Dawkins devotes roughly a hundred, laying out the standard arguments with admirable clarity and fairness, and skewering them efficiently.) There are indeed *recherché* versions of these traditional arguments that perhaps have not yet been exhaustively eviscerated by scholars, but Dawkins ignores them (as do I) and says why: his book is a consciousness-raiser aimed at the general religious public, not an attempt to contribute to the academic microdiscipline of philosophical theology. The arguments Dawkins exposes and rebuts are

the arguments that waft from thousands of pulpits every week and reach millions of television viewers every day, and neither the televangelists nor the authors of best-selling spiritual books pay the slightest heed to the subtleties of the theologians either.

Who does Orr favor? Polkinghorne, Peacocke, Plantinga, or some more recondite thinkers? Orr brandishes the names of two philosophers, William James and Ludwig Wittgenstein, and cites C.S. Lewis's *Mere Christianity*, a fairly nauseating example of middle-brow homiletic in roughly the same league on the undergraduate hit parade as Lee Strobel's *The Case for Christ* (1998) and transparently evasive when it comes to "meticulous reasoning." If it were a book in biology—Orr's discipline—I daresay he'd pounce on it like a pit bull, but like many others he adopts a double standard when the topic is religion. [...more]

H. Allen Orr replies:

Daniel Dennett's main complaint about my review is that I held Dawkins's book to too high a standard. The *God Delusion* was, he says, a popular work and, as such, one can't expect it to grapple seriously with religious thought. There are two things wrong with this objection. The first is that the mere fact that a book is intended for a broad audience doesn't mean its author can ignore the best thinking on a subject. Indeed it's precisely the task of the popularizer to take this best thinking and present it in a form that can be understood by intelligent laymen. This task is certainly feasible. Ironically, the clearest evidence comes from Dawkins himself. In his popular works on evolution, and especially in *The Selfish Gene*, Dawkins wrestled with the best evolutionary thinkers—Darwin, Hamilton, and Trivers—and presented their ideas in a way that could be appreciated by a broad audience. This is what made *The Selfish Gene* brilliant; the absence of any analogous treatment of religion in Dawkins's new book is what makes it considerably less than brilliant.

The second thing wrong with Dennett's objection is that it's simply not true that *The God Delusion* was merely a popular survey and "not an attempt to contribute to ...philosophical theology." Dennett has apparently forgotten that the heart of Dawkins's book was his philosophical argument for the near impossibility of God. Dawkins presented his so-called Ultimate Boeing 747 argument in a chapter entitled "Why There Almost Certainly Is No God," branded his argument "unanswerable," and boasted that it had stumped all theologians who had met it. I can see why Dennett would like to forget about Dawkins's attempt at philosophy—the Ultimate 747 argument was shredded by reviewers—but it's absurd to pretend now that *The God Delusion* had no philosophical ambitions. [...more]

[\[...continue\]](#)