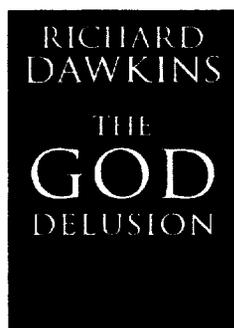


OFF COME THE GLOVES



Daniel C. Dennett

The God Delusion, by Richard Dawkins (Boston, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin, 2006, ISBN 0-618-68000-4) 416 pp. Cloth \$27.00.

First things first: since Richard Dawkins and I are allies on several fronts and friends, and since we have both recently published books on religion, the normal presumption of a disinterested reviewer must be cancelled. It is not that I couldn't write an objective and impersonal review if I tried, but that such an effort would be misplaced. No protestations of impartiality could, or should, dislodge the ambient assumption that friendship disqualifies one from the task. Moreover, what readers of *FREE INQUIRY* presumably would like to know is how our distinct but overlapping projects developed and what I make of the results. Are we playing good cop/bad cop? We cite each other frequently. Did we plan a division of labor in advance, and compare notes as we worked? No. We discussed our projects in only the most general terms. I finished my book first, in time for Dawkins to read as he was completing his, but we didn't trade drafts until then, wanting to keep our thinking and writing as independent as possible. That's just good research practice: two paths to the same destination may tell us more about the pathfinders and their mutual influence than about the real world unless they are orthogonal in several dimensions.

We agree about most matters and have learned a lot from each other, but

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on one central issue, we are not (yet) of one mind: Dawkins is quite sure that the world would be a better place if religion were hastened to extinction, and I am still agnostic about that. I don't know what could be put in religion's place—or what would arise unbidden—so I am still eager to explore the prospect of reforming religion, a task that cries out for a better understanding of the phenomena and, hence, a lot more research than has yet been attempted.

How can a self-declared atheist like me possibly take *any* form of reformed religion seriously? By recognizing that religions are already evolving rapidly away from their ancestral forms. The religions of tomorrow may be as different from the religions of today as the latter are from the religions of five hundred years ago. Many avowedly religious people are just as atheistic as Dawkins and I about all the gods that are truly preposterous and dangerous. Still, they choose to shape their thinking with a self-sustaining family of metaphors and rituals that seems to them to help them lead good lives. They may not be wrong. Thus *belief in God* is being displaced by *belief in belief in God* as the pivotal force of organized religion. This phenomenon of *belief in belief* still has plenty of problems associated with it, not least of which is the fury with which those for whom it is sacred respond to my exposure of their mental gymnastics. The phenomenon does in any case provide an alternative arena in which to play out some of the issues. And since belief in belief in God has belief in God as both its ancestor and its intentional object, Dawkins's concentration on the latter while I focus on the former sets up a good pincer movement,

closing off the escape routes. I give short shrift to the task of rebutting the standard arguments for the existence of God—only half a dozen pages by one reviewer's estimate—so I welcome the characteristically trenchant and imaginative demolitions that Dawkins has assembled. If you encounter people who think it might still be intellectually respectable to believe in God in any literal sense, direct them to *The God Delusion*, where they will get their heads dismantled—and reassembled with a different perspective.

Important as that is, it is not Dawkins's main objective, which is, as he says in the preface, to *raise consciousness* in people who are trapped in a religion and can't even imagine life without it. I didn't fully appreciate the importance of this goal before reading the book, and I applaud it. Richard Dawkins, first holder of the Simonyi Professorship in the Public Understanding of Science, is taking his office seriously and sees that he can use his eminence to perform a social service of great value. Consider the way Oprah Winfrey has used her television program as a consciousness raiser for battered women. How many thousands of women simply couldn't imagine standing up to their abusive mates or leaving them, let alone calling the police, until Oprah showed them on her daytime program (while horrible hubby was off at work) that this was not just possible but a duty they owed their children! By spearheading this movement, Oprah Winfrey has provided not just direction and resolve but safety in numbers, and safety in publicity, creating a positive-feedback phenomenon that has changed the prevailing attitudes of the nation (with some deplorable pockets of benighted cruelty still surviving, of course—bolstered by the ignoble "traditions" of some religions). Dawkins wants to initiate a similar movement among those who have been afraid to imagine leaving their religions—or just admitting their disbelief. As he well appreciates, this is particularly urgent in the United States, where pronouncements of intimidating piety have reached epidemic proportions. And, like Oprah, he is mounting a multifaceted campaign, with a television series and a Web site, conspicuously mentioned in his book, which also includes an appendix providing "a par-

tial list of friendly addresses, for individuals needing support in escaping from religion.”

Now if only he could get on Oprah's program! That is, alas, even more unlikely in the current climate than the prospect of his own series being shown on network television in the United States, but perhaps we can do something about this and find some brave and well-financed individual who can make this, and other sequels, happen. Charles Simonyi is one of the Microsoft billionaires. Another, Paul V. Allen, underwrote the seven-hour PBS documentary, *Evolution*, which incurred the wrath of the Intelligent Design demagogues. Some of the world's most generous and effective philanthropists are avowedly secular, but even they, for all their power and prestige, would surely stagger under the onslaught from the Religious Right if they were to champion Dawkins's cause. It is reflecting on this sobering political reality that makes me all the more concerned for our future as a civilized species.

We need to enlist support and cooperation from like-minded people, and a big part of the problem is that we secularists cannot avail ourselves of some of the most effective methods of the opposition: we cannot permit ourselves to honor irrationality, to celebrate self-blinding devotion that preempts all criticism, or to lie for atheism the way so many eminent and even well-intentioned people lie—knowingly—for their religions. As the Bush administration's unilateral tinkering with the Geneva Convention's prohibition of torture makes all too plain, when people think they are defending their sacred religion from the enemy, common decency and honesty are readily abandoned. We must not fall into that trap, however high the stakes. Our hope lies, I think, in raising the awareness of good people everywhere to the terrible costs of intellectual dishonesty “for the sake of goodness,” and Dawkins's book is a compendious and vivid exhibit of those costs.

About half of his book covers topics that I also cover in *Breaking the Spell*: among the most important, the question of how the extravagant behaviors of religion could have evolved in the first place, the question of whether religion is essential for morality (it isn't), the

question of “how ‘moderation’ in faith fosters fanaticism,” and the dangerous role of religious education in early childhood and how to counteract it. On these topics, we have no significant disagreements that I can see, but we choose different strategies and emphases. His are sometimes superior to mine. For instance, we both stress the evolution of morality—in spite of, not because of, religious tradition, which has tended to retard progress—but he has gathered a striking collection of examples demonstrating this in very recent history. He quotes statements by Thomas Huxley and Abraham Lincoln that are uncomfortably racist by today's standards and, marking an even more recent shift, notes: “Donald Rumsfeld, who sounds so callous and odious today, would have sounded like a bleeding-heart liberal if he had said the same things during the Second World War” (p. 268). To give another instance, we both treat cargo cults as eye-opening examples, but he goes into rather more detail than I did, very effectively. This set me to reflecting on just why it is that these delectable cases of all too human folly are so little known. Why doesn't everyone know at least in outline the alternately amusing and heart-wrenching story of the people of Tanna, devoutly awaiting the return of John Frum, King of America and dispenser of high-tech bounty? The answer is obvious: it adheres a little too closely for comfort to the stories of the founding of the “great” religions and would almost surely provoke heretical musings in any child who encountered it.

Both Dawkins and I have to deal with the frustrating problem of the game of intellectual hide-and-seek that “moderate” believers play to avoid being pinned down to the underlying absurdities of their traditions. “Don't be so *literal-minded!*” they chortle, marveling at the philistinism of anyone who would attempt to take them at their word and ask them for their grounds for asserting that, for instance, God actually answers prayers (here, now, in the real world, by performing miracles). But then, as soon you start playing the metaphor game with them, they abuse the poetic license you have granted them and delight in dancing around the truth, getting away with all sorts of nonsense because they are indeed playing intellectual tennis

without a net. Dawkins's solution is to adopt a rather less patient attitude than I have done. As a philosopher, I cannot comfortably adopt this policy, since I was trained to hunt for treasure in the confused and confusing gropings of brilliant explorers and am always encouraging my students to go out of their way to find charitable interpretations. I must say, however, that I'm warming to the rhetorical leverage it provides, for instance in this passage:

To cap it all, Adam, the supposed perpetrator the original sin, never existed in the first place: an awkward fact—excusably unknown to Paul but presumably known to an omniscient God (and Jesus, if you believe he was God?)—which fundamentally undermines the premise of the whole tortuously nasty theory. Oh, but of course, the story of Adam and Eve was only ever *symbolic*, wasn't it? *Symbolic*? So, in order to impress himself, Jesus had himself tortured and executed, in vicarious punishment for a *symbolic* sin committed by a *nonexistent* individual? As I said, barking mad, as well as viciously unpleasant. (p. 253)

But what, then, of the sublime beauty and anguish of, say, Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*, which simply could not have come into existence without the “inspiring” story of the Redeemer that Dawkins has just trashed so effectively? What indeed? Dawkins's unflinching condemnation of the *story* opens the door to a fresh reconsideration of what treasures might be gleaned not just from the music and the drama, but even from the themes themselves, suitably distilled. Selfless love, loyalty, sacrifice, bravery in the face of uncertainty and pain, to say nothing of insights into the unfathomable complexities of the human condition—these are all worthy of celebration by genius, but we must firmly jettison the rest of it. It's just a story, like the stories of the Germanic gods that captured the genius of Wagner. You don't have to believe the stories to love them. Consider the Aztecs, spurred by ultimately inexcusable delusions to create their exquisite temples of ritual human sacrifice. What should we do about the enjoyment we cannot help taking in these spectacularly ill-gotten treasures? We might assuage our guilty pleasure by dedicating ourselves to making the future morally better than the past, an act of genuine—not just symbolic—redemp-

tion. Those of us who love *foie gras* should make it a point of honor to know how it was made, and be willing to put the costs firmly in the balance, just as those who love Wagner should confront the sordid anti-Semitism that curdled his brilliant art—and probably made it, alas, more interesting. Let us recognize, in the same spirit, that the strangely haunting story of the Crucifixion does not so much transfigure as disfigure our species. Perhaps, at best, our susceptibility to this pathological tale is the price we must pay for our moral imaginations, in which case, our best response would be to acknowledge this.

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” (p. 121). 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. In this regard, I highly recommend both his mid-book discussion of anthropic reasoning and his closing essay on “the mother of all burkas,” an insightful look at the evolution of our perceptual perspective, which—until we invented sci-

ence—was limited to a narrow band, a mere slit, in the electromagnetic spectrum. This everyday perspective, which Wilfrid Sellars made famous in philosophy as the “manifest image,” is our home base, grounding what we can readily imagine: middle-sized solid objects moving at moderate speeds. Having evolved in such a cramped and sheltered corner of the universe, it is naïve and parochial in the extreme but yet so exploitable (with some strain and distortion) when we treat it as a base for metaphor and map onto it what science has shown us about the rest of the universe. These sections will be required reading for my students in the future.

What do I wish were different in Dawkins’s book? The same thing I wish were different in mine. Sometimes, he

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just cannot conceal his mounting impatience with the arguments he has obliged himself to consider, and when his disrespect, or even contempt, shows through in spite of his strenuous efforts—I know just what he’s going through—he must surely lose many readers. Good riddance to them? Well, no, this is a problem. Serious argument depends on mutual respect, and this is often hard to engender when disagreements turn vehement. The social psychologist and game theorist, Anatol Rapoport (creator of the winning Tit-for-Tat strategy in Robert Axelrod’s legendary prisoner’s dilemma tournament), once promulgated a list of rules for how to write a successful critical commentary on an opponent’s work. First, he said, you must attempt to re-express your opponent’s position so clearly, vividly, and fairly that your opponent says, “Thanks, I wish I’d thought of putting it that way.” Then, you should list any points of agreement (especially if they are not matters of

general or widespread agreement), and third, you should mention anything you have learned from your opponent. Only then are you permitted to say so much as a word of rebuttal or criticism. I have found this a salutary discipline to follow—or, since it is challenging, to attempt to follow. When it succeeds, the results are gratifying: your opponent is in a mood to be enlightened and eagerly attentive. But this is well nigh impossible when the arguments you wish to rebut are too flimsy. For one thing, you fear that hyper-patience will appear patronizing and simply drive other, swifter readers away. For another, we are dealing here with arguments that in most instances no longer have identifiable living exponents. Who stands by the Ontological Argument today? There are historians of philosophy and theology aplenty who will lovingly *teach* the argument (and its variants and rebuttals and the rebuttals of the rebuttals), but with few exceptions, they don’t *defend* it. It is treated as a interesting historical example, a worthy attempt, a jewel in the treasure house of religion and philosophy, but not as a consideration that demands a response in today’s arena of argument. That being so, giving the argument the Full Rapoport Treatment would be misplaced effort, comically earnest.

Still, what are we to say to those who, not being experts on the arguments themselves, have often heard them spoken of highly, and may well feel *entitled* to a more patient account? I think I can *imagine* mustering the goodwill, the humor, and the pedagogical doggedness to satisfy them, but I certainly couldn’t find the strength to do it now, and on present showing, Dawkins couldn’t either. In that case, then, perhaps it is all for the best that some readers will probably come away from the book more impressed by Dawkins’s disrespect than persuaded by his arguments. Dawkins might even add that when ideas are contemptible, to conceal one’s contempt is dishonest—and since he is so very good at expressing and defending the scientific ideas for which he has respect, this very contrast may, in the end, be a more potent consciousness raiser than any argument. Perhaps some claims should just be laughed out of court. **ff**