

10-1-2008

Book Review: The God Delusion

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Recommended Citation

Oakes, Robert (2008) "Book Review: The God Delusion," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 25 : Iss. 4 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol25/iss4/8>

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BOOK REVIEWS

The God Delusion, by Richard Dawkins. Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006. Pp. 416. \$27.00 (hardback).

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One of Elizabeth Bishop's remarkable and widely cited poems, "One Art," opens with this somewhat poignant observation: "The art of losing isn't hard to master." With apologies to Bishop for an abrupt and abrasive descent into the prosaic, *The God Delusion* makes it clear that, unfortunately, this is also true of the "arts" of cliché-mongering and caricature. Indeed, the quality of Richard Dawkins's polemic against classical supernaturalism is, for the vast most part, paradigmatically sophomoric. Moreover, while civility is not entirely absent from his deliberations, the tone of his discussion tends all too often to be surly, arrogant, and self-congratulatory. As a representative example, Dawkins tells us early on of his hope concerning his book that "religious readers who open it will be atheists when they put it down" (p. 5). He realizes, however, that this is "presumptuous" of him. But exactly *why* does he regard this as a vain hope? A touch of humility? Hardly. It is because "dyed-in-the-wool faith-heads are immune to argument," which, in turn, is largely due to their "childhood indoctrination" (p. 5). Apart from the implied insult that committed theists or "faith-heads"—the class of which includes, of course, Aquinas, Augustine, Abelard, Duns Scotus, Descartes, Leibniz, Maimonides and Gersonides—are intellectually inferior to atheists, is Dawkins actually unaware that there are many ardent theists who were raised as *atheists*—or at least as *agnostics*—by their parents?

Before moving into disputational high-gear, it seems to me that a question can tenably be raised about Dawkins's writing style. On the back cover of the book, one of the pre-publication reviewers characterizes him as "one of the best nonfiction writers alive today." It is hard to see this as something short of hyperbolic praise. (See the other blurbs there as well.) For it can hardly be plausible to regard superb nonfiction writing as failing to preclude the persistent use of annoyingly ersatz "New Age" platitudes such as "raising our consciousness." (Hooray for high ceilings!) On the first page of his "Preface," Dawkins tells us that he is out



to *raise consciousness*—*raise consciousness* to the fact that to be an atheist is a realistic aspiration, and a brave and a splendid one . . . this is the first of my *consciousness-raising* messages. I also want to *raise consciousness* in three other ways. (my italics)

On and on it goes. One can hardly *count* the references to “consciousness-raising” or “raised-consciousness” in the section entitled (can you guess?) ‘Natural Selection as a Consciousness-Raiser’ (pp. 114–18).

Stylistic issues, however, are largely overshadowed by conceptual ones. Just as an appetizer, Dawkins claims that “atheists are a lot more numerous, especially among the educated elite, than many realize” (p. 4). And he goes on to contend that this was also true in the nineteenth century. In support of the latter, Dawkins cites John Stuart Mill (no source given): “The world would be astonished if it knew how great a proportion of its brightest ornaments . . . are complete skeptics in religion.”

Well, astonished or not, Dawkins’s assertion here is about *atheists*, while Mill is speaking of *skeptics* in religion. Accordingly, Mill’s contention fails to support Dawkins’s claim. A world which contained only believers and skeptics on the question of God’s existence would, ipso facto, contain *no atheists at all*.

At the outset of chapter two, “The God Hypothesis,” there is a diatribe against “the God of the Old Testament,” who, according to Dawkins, “is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: . . . a petty, unjust, misogynistic, homophobic [*afraid of homosexuals?*], racist . . . capriciously malevolent bully.” Presumably, Dawkins echoes here the assessment of Thomas Jefferson: “God is a being of terrific character—cruel, vindictive, capricious and unjust” (p. 31). Now since there is hardly space in this review for an extended excursus into Biblical exegesis—even if I had the requisite expertise in this area—let me simply note the following: while Scripture is clearly taken by classical monotheists to constitute the receptacle of God’s revealed Wisdom, it has long been understood that the Bible is *written in human language*. Accordingly, it is a vulgar error (though hardly an infrequent one) to maintain *that religious orthodoxy requires Scriptural literalism*. Maimonides, for example, widely regarded as the premier expositor of traditional Judaism, argues vigorously—along, of course, with many distinguished *Christian* thinkers—against Biblical literalism, regarding it as “darkening the brilliance” of Divine Revelation. Moreover, it is the *Oral Law*—taken to be Divine in origin and elaborated by the Rabbis of old—which is authoritative for normative Judaism. (For example, while the *lex talionis*—the Biblical principle of “an eye for an eye”—has often been scorned as a principle of vengeance, Rabbinic Judaism makes it perfectly clear that this is to be understood solely as a legal requirement of “compensation for damages:” that innocent victims who suffer harm or loss be compensated for such damages by the relevant perpetrators.) Accordingly, it seems clear there is an arguably significant analogy between the Oral Law in Judaism and the significant teaching role of the Magisterium within the Church.

Moving on to Dawkins’s polemic against the God-Hypothesis as such, the major thesis of his book seems to be that classical supernaturalism constitutes “a pernicious delusion” for the following reason:

[A]ny creative intelligence of sufficient complexity to design anything, comes into existence only as the end product of an extended process of gradual evolution. (p. 31, Dawkins's italics)

Why should we construe this postulate—Dawkins calls it his “alternative view”—as anything less than a scientific monstrosity? Why would anyone find it compelling or even attractive? Since Dawkins tells us that the “central argument” of his book is contained in chapter four (“Why There is Almost Certainly No God”), it seems proper to infer that this chapter is “designed” (sorry!) to support this “alternative view” (p. 157). But it seems clear that there is nothing *close* to a compelling argument in this chapter (or, indeed, elsewhere in the book) for the proposition which constitutes his “alternative view.”

Intriguingly, however, it seems readily demonstrable that even if we become drunk with charity and *grant* Dawkins his radical postulate here, it *fails* to imply that the universe has not been (created and) designed by a transcendent intellect, i.e., Dawkins's “alternative view” is compatible with the following: there existed a cosmos prior to the present one; call it *the earlier* cosmos. Moreover, life-forms came into existence at the earlier cosmos solely as a result of naturalistic evolution. This process finally reached its “end-stage,” at which time it gave rise to a Being (B) with the creative and intellectual power to produce and design a cosmos. However, there already *existed* (ex hypothesi) a cosmos at that time, i.e., the *nonteleological* cosmos which eventually gave rise to B. However, B decided to *dispense* with the earlier cosmos and replace it with one which is more to his liking: a cosmos which conforms to his design-plan. And this *newer* cosmos—this *teleological* cosmos—is in fact the one which we now inhabit. Accordingly, Dawkins's “alternative view” fails to imply that the cosmos we now inhabit is undesigned.

Since Dawkins's book is so strongly focused on the issue of Design-versus-Natural-Selection, it is hardly unreasonable to expect that his rendering of the classical Argument from Design would have the virtue of accuracy (p. 79). Unfortunately, this is not the case. (Also, a *fact-checker* would not have been a bad idea. The howler I have in mind is Dawkins's claim that the Design Argument “is the only one in regular use today.”) His ill-formed exposition of the Argument is as follows:

Things in the world, especially living things, look as though they have been designed. Nothing that we know looks designed unless it is designed. Therefore there must have been a designer and we call him God.

This argument by Dawkins clearly fails to constitute an acceptable version of the Teleological Argument; for at the *heart* of the latter is the notion that there obtains enough of an *analogy* between natural objects and human artifacts to make it plausible to conclude that the cosmos is designed. Moreover, and perhaps because analogical reasoning is inherently inductive or probabilistic, philosophical theologians—in contradistinction to what Dawkins maintains—tend *not* to regard the Design Argument as “the ultimate knockdown argument” for the truth of theism (p. 79).

Dawkins also addresses (in chapter three, "Arguments for God's existence") the arguments by Aquinas and Anselm, and, at least insofar as his discussion of Anselmian reasoning is concerned, his critique seems especially shallow and platitudinous. He apparently knows nothing of the influential reconstructive work of, for example, Plantinga and Harts-horne on this argument. Dawkins is also predictably unfriendly to "the Argument from Personal Experience" (pp. 87–92). His discussion clearly implies, mistakenly, that this argument rests heavily on "visions" and other sensory manifestations. For distinguished figures within the mystical tradition of Classical Supernaturalism have long displayed very little confidence in "sensory imagery" as a trustworthy indication of Divine Revelation. Also, Dawkins considers many *other* arguments in this chapter, a number of which are remarkably silly, and, accordingly, would hardly be defended by any self-respecting theist (see p. 36). Dawkins seems to have the notion that classical supernaturalism is weakened or damaged by the fact that there are religious believers who have offered embarrassingly awful arguments for the existence of God. But that, of course, is like maintaining that medical science is fraudulent because there are fraudulent practitioners of medicine.

I know of very few (if any) philosophical theists who subscribe to the "Creationist" doctrine that there can be no acceptable version of the thesis of common ancestry. Rather, what is central to Classical Supernaturalism in this regard is that the doctrine of biological evolution fails to *preclude* the existence of God, and, moreover, that the evolutionary process (at every stage) cannot tenably be regarded as having taken place in the absence of Divine guidance. (Dawkins has, of course, yet to respond to Plantinga's influential argument that the hypothesis of *purely naturalistic* evolution is self-defeating.) Intriguingly, then, Dawkins and the Creationists agree on something quite major: that Evolutionism and Theism are incompatible. However, since incompatibility is clearly mutual, Dawkins's position entails of course that Evolutionism and Theism preclude each other. Accordingly, he (in effect) maintains—no less than proponents of "creation science" maintain—that traditional theism precludes any version of the doctrine of biological evolution. But why should we believe for even a moment that he has succeeded in establishing *that*? Accordingly, why should we believe for a moment that Evolutionism falsifies traditional theism?

Subsequent chapters of Dawkins's book (chapters 5–10) are ancillary to his polemic against traditional theism, dealing with questions such as: where does religion come from? Why is it such a powerful force in the lives of so many? What advantages does it have for us? Do we require religion in order to "be good?" (*No.*) Doesn't a religious upbringing constitute (or at least promote) child-abuse? (*Yes.*) According to Dawkins, religion must be seen as a by-product of something else in the human make-up, and this is what accounts for its "survival-value." It is similar to falling in love (which may well be a nice insight). Nonetheless, he regards it as a "mental virus" (p. 188). Children's minds are especially susceptible to such "infections," and once the "infection" takes hold, "the child will grow up and infect the next generation with the same nonsense." Clearly, there are no lengths to which Dawkins will not go to convince us that

everything important about our lives can be explained by Darwinism. He displays a remarkable amount of religious fervor for an atheist. This, of course, is hardly unusual. (Consider, for example, devotees of Marxism.) Unfortunately, however, Dawkins's religious zeal is all (mis)directed to the Church of Natural Selection.

Divine Motivation Theory, by Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski. Cambridge University Press, 2004. Pp. xvii + 410. \$75 (hardback), \$29.99 (paperback).

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In this ambitious, wide-ranging book, Linda Zagzebski puts forward 'a theological virtue ethics in which morality is driven by the attractiveness of the good,' and central to which is what she labels 'exemplarism' (p. xii). Through divine *motivation* theory, Zagzebski aims to challenge (though not necessarily contradict – see p. 270) divine *command* theory, with its tendency to focus on a conception of morality as law (that is, something that *compels* rather than attracts). Zagzebski divides her discussion into three parts. In part one, she sketches a type of virtue ethics that is 'motivation-based' (p. 1). This part of the theory is intended to be compelling naturalistically; it is not until part two that God becomes central. On this view, the moral properties of persons, acts and outcomes of acts all derive from a good motive, whereby what is meant is 'an emotion that initiates and directs action' (p. 1). Emotions, which for Zagzebski have an important cognitive dimension, are fundamental to her theory (see chapters 2 to 4).

Indeed, they are the foundation of ethics, as appropriate emotion enables us to see the world aright. Her main philosophical inspiration is Aristotle, and one of the most interesting aspects of her theory is the emphasis she puts upon his idea that we learn the good by ostensive definition: hence exemplarism. Zagzebski proposes that just as Kripke and others have suggested that natural kind terms such as gold or water should be defined as whatever is the same kind of thing as *that* (some 'indexically identified instance'), so the same method should be followed in ethics. On this model, the answer to the question 'What is a good person?' is always of the form 'Someone like *that*.'

In other words, not only is virtue basic, but we learn virtue through direct reference to exemplars. Human moral growth and education involves picking out people who are paradigmatically wise or good, and *imitating* them. Just as someone without an education in chemistry can competently recognise gold when she sees it, so someone unable to give an account of the nature of practical wisdom can recognise a good, practically wise person when she sees one. 'We do not have criteria for goodness in advance of identifying the exemplars of goodness' (p. 41). Zagzebski addresses one obvious objection to this, the issue of variability of exemplars and ethical pluralism, in part three (chapter 9). Meanwhile part two (chapters 5 to 8) moves from the naturalistic to 'divine motivation theory' itself. Here, Zagzebski builds upon the arguments of part one to argue that the true foundation of ethics is the motives of God, the ultimate exemplar. She offers divine motivation