Dawkins' God

Genes, Memes, and the meaning of life.

Professor Alister McGrath
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Richard Dawkins
Richard Dawkins (born 1941)

The Selfish Gene (1976)
The Extended Phenotype (1981)
The Blind Watchmaker (1986)
River out of Eden (1995)
Climbing Mount Improbable (1996)
Unweaving the Rainbow (1998)
A Devil’s Chaplain (2003)
The Ancestor’s Tale (2004)
The God Delusion (2006)
Dawkins’ five grounds of criticism of religion

1. The natural sciences make belief in God unnecessary or impossible. Although hinted at in *The Selfish Gene*, this idea is developed in detail in *The Blind Watchmaker*. 
2. Religion makes assertions which are grounded in faith, which represents a retreat from a rigorous, evidence-based concern for truth. For Dawkins, truth is grounded in explicit proof; any form of obscurantism or mysticism grounded in faith is to be opposed vigorously.
Dawkins’ five grounds of criticism of religion

3. Belief in God arises from a "meme", or a "virus of the mind", which infects otherwise healthy minds.
Dawkins’ five grounds of criticism of religion

4. Religion offers an impoverished vision of the world. "The universe presented by organized religion is a poky little medieval universe, and extremely limited". In contrast, science offers a bold and brilliant vision of the universe as grand, beautiful, and awe-inspiring.
Dawkins’ five grounds of criticism of religion

5. Religion leads to evil. This is a moral, rather than a scientific, objection to religion, which is deeply rooted within western culture and history.
Some historical background ...
The Perpetuation of Myths

Two myths lie behind Dawkins' approach:

1. Science and religion are engaged in a warfare from which only one can emerge as victorious

2. Historical myths - such as the legendary account of the debate between Wilberforce and Huxley at Oxford - cast a lingering shadow over contemporary discussions
Wilberforce and Huxley
Wilberforce and Huxley

Mrs Isabella Sidgewick’s recollections of 1898

I was happy enough to be present on the memorable occasion at Oxford when Mr Huxley bearded Bishop Wilberforce. . . . The Bishop rose, and begged to know, was it through his grandfather or his grandmother that he claimed descent from a monkey?
Responding to Dawkins

1. Are science and religion in conflict?
2. The relation of faith and evidence
3. Is religion a virus of the mind?
4. Does religion impoverish our appreciation of nature?
5. Why is religion such a bad thing?
1. Does science lead to atheism?

Why should science lead to atheism?
If anything, it leads to agnosticism, or an understanding of God’s relationship with the world based on secondary causality – such as that developed by Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century.
Does science lead to atheism?

The problem:
At the most general level, the scientific method is incapable of deciding whether there is a God or not.

So why does Dawkins insist that the sciences lead to atheism?

Do they necessarily lead to any specific belief system? Theism? Atheism?
Some twenty years ago, or thereabouts, I invented the word "Agnostic" to denote people who, like myself, confess themselves to be hopelessly ignorant concerning a variety of matters, about which metaphysicians and theologians, both orthodox and heterodox, dogmatise with utmost confidence.
Agnosticism is of the essence of science, whether ancient or modern. It simply means that a man shall not say he knows or believes that which he has no scientific grounds for professing to know or believe. . . Consequently Agnosticisn puts aside not only the greater part of popular theology, but also the greater part of anti-theology.
Stephen Jay Gould

America’s foremost evolutionary biologist
Died 2002, aged 60, from lung cancer
To say it for all my colleagues and for the umpteenth millionth time: science simply cannot (by its legitimate methods) adjudicate the issue of God’s possible superintendence of nature. We neither affirm nor deny it; we simply can’t comment on it as scientists.
Either half my colleagues are enormously stupid, or else the science of Darwinism is fully compatible with conventional religious beliefs - and equally compatible with atheism.
2. Dawkins on Faith

Faith "means blind trust, in the absence of evidence, even in the teeth of evidence."

_The Selfish Gene_, 198.
Dawkins on Faith

Faith is the great cop-out, the great excuse to evade the need to think and evaluate evidence. Faith is belief in spite of, even perhaps because of, the lack of evidence. . . . Faith is not allowed to justify itself by argument.
W. H. Griffith-Thomas on Faith

[Faith] affects the whole of man's nature. It commences with the conviction of the mind based on adequate evidence; it continues in the confidence of the heart or emotions based on conviction, and it is crowned in the consent of the will, by means of which the conviction and confidence are expressed in conduct.
Faith and Proof

Can God’s existence be proved?
Or disproved?
Arguments about God’s existence have been stalemated for generations
Atheism and theism are both faiths; neither can prove their case with total certainty.
If the natural sciences necessitate neither atheism nor religious faith, we seem to have two broad options about belief in God:

1. The question lies beyond resolution;
2. The question has to be resolved on other grounds.
Inference to best explanation


More recent explorations include:
“Inference to the best explanation”

Idea developed by Gilbert Harman

There are many potential explanations of the world

So which offers the best fit?
The simplest? The most elegant?

Not a knock-down argument - but an important attempt to evaluate how we make sense of complex situations
The idea of "empirical fit"

What worldview makes most sense of what we observe in the world?
What "big picture" offers the best account of what we experience?

"Inference to the best explanation" is about working out which explanation is the most satisfying
The idea of "empirical fit"

Richard Dawkins:

"The universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but blind pitiless indifference."

River out of Eden, 133.
The idea of "empirical fit"

C. S. Lewis:

"I believe in Christianity as I believe that the Sun has risen - not only because I see it, but because by it, I see everything else."

The idea of "empirical fit"

The real question is this: does belief in God amount to the “best explanation” of what we observe and experience? These things can’t be proved or disproved. Theme of “underdetermination of theory by evidence” – noticably absent from Dawkins’ writings.
The limits of science

Dawkins argues that science proves things with certainty.

Anything worth knowing can be proved by science.

Everything else - especially belief in God! - is just delusion, wishful thinking, or madness.
"Whatever knowledge is attainable, must be attained by scientific methods; and what science cannot discover, mankind cannot know."

Bertrand Russell

Echoed and endorsed by Dawkins
"The existence of a limit to science is, however, made clear by its inability to answer childlike elementary questions having to do with first and last things - questions such as "How did everything begin?"; "What are we all here for?"; "What is the point of living?"

Peter Medawar, winner of the 1960 Nobel prize for medicine, in his book *The Limits of Science*
A question . . .

If the sciences are inferential in their methodology, how can Dawkins present atheism as the certain outcome of the scientific project?

Richard Feynman: scientific knowledge is a body of statements of varying degree of certainty - some most unsure, some nearly sure, but none absolutely certain.
3. Is God a Virus? Or a meme?

“Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperm or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain by a process which, in the broad sense of the term, can be called imitation.”
Four fundamental problems about memes . . .

1. There is no reason to suppose that cultural evolution is Darwinian, or indeed that evolutionary biology has any particular value in accounting for the development of ideas.
Four fundamental problems about memes . . .

2. There is no direct evidence for the existence of "memes" themselves.
Four fundamental problems about memes . . .

3. The case for the existence of the "meme" rests on an analogy with the gene, which proves incapable of bearing the theoretical weight that is placed upon it.
Four fundamental problems about memes...

4. Quite unlike the case of the gene, there is no necessary reason to propose the existence of a "meme" as an explanatory construct. The observational data can be accounted for perfectly well by other models and mechanisms.
Do memes actually exist?

Dawkins is aware of the problem:

“Another objection is that we don’t know what memes are made of, or where they reside. Memes have not yet found their Watson and Crick; they even lack their Mendel.”
Do memes actually exist?

“Whereas genes are to be found in precise locations on chromosomes, memes presumably exist in brains, and we have even less chance of seeing one than of seeing a gene (though the neurobiologist Juan Delius has pictured his conjecture of what a meme might look like).”
William Blake
The Ancient of Days
(1794)
Memes are trivial, to be banished by simple mental exercises. In any wider context, they are hopelessly, if not hilariously, simplistic. To conjure up memes not only reveals a strange imprecision of thought, but, as Anthony O’Hear has remarked, if memes really existed they would ultimately deny the reality of reflective thought.
God as a virus?

Problem 1:

Real viruses can be seen – for example, using cryo-electron microscopy. Dawkins’ cultural or religious viruses are simply hypotheses. There is no observational evidence for their existence.
Tobacco Mosaic Virus
God as a virus?

Problem 2:

There is no experimental evidence that ideas are viruses. Ideas may seem to "behave" in certain respects as if they are viruses. But analogy is not identity - and the history of science illustrates only too painfully how most false trails in science arise from analogies mistakenly assumed to be identities.
God as a virus?

Problem 3:

On the basis of Dawkins’ criteria, isn’t *atheism* also a virus of the mind? He has no objective, scientific method for distinguishing between his own faith (atheism) and that of others (such as Christianity).
Are all beliefs “viruses of the mind”? Dawkins holds that belief in God is a “virus of the mind”. But there are many other beliefs that cannot be proven – including atheism. Dawkins ends up making the totally subjective, unscientific, argument that his own beliefs are not “viruses”, but those he dislikes are.
4. Religion impoverishes our view of the universe

One of Dawkins’ persistent complaints about religion is that it is aesthetically deficient. Its view of the universe is limited, impoverished and unworthy of the wonderful reality known by the sciences.
Religion offers a ‘poky’ view of the universe

The universe is genuinely mysterious, grand, beautiful, awe-inspiring. The kinds of views of the universe which religious people have traditionally embraced have been puny, pathetic, and measly in comparison to the way the universe actually is. The universe presented by organized religions is a poky little medieval universe, and extremely limited.
The Nuremberg Chronicle (1493)
Responding to this criticism

A Christian approach to nature identifies three ways in which a sense of awe comes about in response to what we observe.
1. An immediate sense of wonder at the beauty of nature. This is evoked immediately. I can see no good reason for suggesting that believing in God diminishes this sense of wonder.
2. A sense of wonder at the mathematical or theoretical representation of reality which arises from this. But why does Christian faith have any problem with this?
The case of James Clerk Maxwell

A Treatise on Electricity and Magnetism
(1873)

Maxwell-Gleichungen (in differentieller Form)

\[
\begin{align*}
\nabla \cdot \vec{E} &= \frac{\rho}{\varepsilon_0} \\
\nabla \cdot \vec{B} &= 0 \\
\nabla \times \vec{E} &= -\frac{\partial \vec{B}}{\partial t} \\
\nabla \times \vec{B} &= \mu_0 \left( \vec{j} + \varepsilon_0 \frac{\partial \vec{E}}{\partial t} \right)
\end{align*}
\]
3. For the Christian, there is an additional sense of wonder because the creation bears witness to its creator, "The heavens declare the glory of the Lord!" (Psalm 19:1). For Christians, to experience the beauty of creation is a sign or pointer to the glory of God, and is to be particularly cherished for this reason.
5. Religion is a bad thing

Dawkins rightly points out that religion has caused lots of problems - such as intolerance and violence.

But so did atheism in the twentieth century - witness its attempts to forcibly eliminate religion.

The real truth is that beliefs (religious or atheist) can make people do some very good and very bad things.
Religion is a bad thing

Now "science has no methods for deciding what is ethical."
- *A Devil’s Chaplain*, 34.

So how do we determine that religion is "bad" empirically?
A key review of the field:

Of 100 evidence-based studies:
79 reported at least one positive correlation between religious involvement and wellbeing;
13 found no meaningful association between religion and wellbeing;
7 found mixed or complex associations between religion and wellbeing;
1 found a negative association between religion and wellbeing.
Forthcoming book.

RICHARD DAWKINS

THE GOD DELUSION
The Dawkins Delusion
Answering Dawkins’ manifesto of atheist fundamentalism
Alister McGrath
with Joanna Collicut McGrath
Due February 2007 . . . .

Alister McGrath with Joanna Collicutt McGrath, The Dawkins Delusion: Atheist Fundamentalism and the Denial of the Divine. SPCK
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