

Book review

The God Delusion **Richard Dawkins** **Bantam Press, 2006**

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The temptation with a rallying cry such as Dawkins's latest effort is to join the chorus of praise or boos, or note dismissively that it is a popular book not really worthy of academic attention. While we might imagine a theological journal taking a passing interest (along with passing pot-shots), surely a social scientific journal need not pay attention to *The God Delusion*. But Dawkins quite strongly, if inadvertently, makes the case that science is a social, cultural and ideological phenomenon, which is, of course, interesting to social scientists.

Doubtless, Dawkins would disagree with that assessment, since science is "the honest and systematic endeavour to find out the truth about the real world" (p. 361), and cannot, therefore, be ideological, and would only be accidentally social or cultural, but I think the claim stands. Before defending it, however, I will do my reviewer's duty and outline the book.

Dawkins's target is not just god(s), but the cultural and social practices that he claims privilege religion. Why, he asks, is faith given special exception to the rigours of intellectual examination? Why do claims of faith merit special protection in multicultural societies? The villains of his piece are less the religious extremists he regularly lampoons than the religious moderates who make the world safe for unthinking, uncurious faith, and the scientists who contend that questions of faith and science are mutually exclusive, thereby exempting religion from scientific critique. Dawkins argues that we would ridicule people who said we should show deference to belief in UFOs. Instead such claims would be rationally tested. In contrast, he contends we demand no such accountability from religious people.

If we were to subject religion to the test of rationalism, Dawkins argues that we would show that it is, indeed, a delusion. He quickly (if not always convincingly) dispatches many of the arguments for God's existence and then attempts to show why natural selection makes better sense of reality than religion. He also pokes holes in recent efforts to repackage creationism as intelligent design.

But why does religion exist? Could we explain its development naturally? For a good Darwinian like Dawkins, no merely ideological description will suffice. Instead, he wants to find the biological roots of belief. On the one hand natural selection weeds out traits and behaviours that threaten long-term reproduction. And religious behaviour is time-consuming, energy-consuming, often as extravagantly ornate as the plumage of a bird of paradise (without the reproductive benefits). Religion can endanger the life of a pious individual, as well as the lives of others. Thousands of

people have been tortured for their loyalty to a religion, persecuted by zealots for what in many cases is scarcely distinguishable alternative faith. Religion devours resources, sometimes on a massive scale (p. 164).

Yet religious behaviour or some closely associated traits must have had some use to our ancestors. He wonders whether “religious behaviour may be a misfiring, an unfortunate by-product of an underlying psychological propensity which in other circumstances is, or was, useful” (p. 174). For instance, children need to trust parents and elders. Such blind trust is an important part of survival, but this trust can lead into the terrors of religion. Children are also likely to be “native teleologists” (p. 181), ascribing purpose—hence implicit design—to things. Such a view allows us to find use for the world around us, thereby making us better able to survive in it. Dawkins contends these and other examples give good reason for thinking belief in god(s) may be a natural phenomenon.

The second half of the book explores both the natural foundations of morality and the inadequacy of religion as an ethical guide. Moral guidelines emerge as rules of thumb that were shaped by natural selection. As atheism is the logical conclusion from understanding the reality of natural selection, so humanism is the logical ethical system arising from non-theocentric understanding of the universe. Having established a natural basis for morality, Dawkins then devotes a chapter to showing how inadequate religious (specifically, biblical) bases of morality are. Far from being necessary for morality, Dawkins tries to show that religion undermines genuine humanistic morality such that raising kids to be religious—or indoctrinating them as Dawkins would put it—is actually a form of child abuse, a subject to which he devotes an entire chapter.

In his final chapter, Dawkins tries to show why religion would not be missed. What religion has provided through the ages—an explanation for why we are here, a basis for our morality, a consolation in difficulty, and an inspiration to achievement—science now usurps. “Science flings open the narrow window through which we are accustomed to viewing the spectrum of possibilities. We are liberated by calculation and reason to visit regions of possibility that had once seemed out of bounds or inhabited by dragons” (p. 374).

Central to Dawkins’s argument are the tight links between science, atheism and humanism. Science renders god(s) improbable and superfluous. It also provides the general outlines—the rules of thumb—for what constitutes a flourishing existence. Our self-consciousness, which enables us to reflect on these scientific realities and their philosophical implications, pushes us to develop ways of living that encourage flourishing and discourage self-destructive behaviour (hence, ethical humanism).

At first glance, this model seems to be a classic nature→society argument. Nature is nature. Science, which is the gateway to reality itself, discerns it. We construct society within the reality science discerns. I suspect Dawkins would see the argument in this way. Social scientists, of course, have been developing new ways of understanding nature and society, or the relationship between science and culture (the public reception of science, co-production, etc.). Dawkins tries to insulate himself against

some such critiques through dismissing those “infected with ‘cultural relativism’” (p. 282).

Strangely for a book that makes a richly historical process—natural selection—the heart of its argument, Dawkins’s world is curiously ahistorical, an abstraction floating above the dynamics. Perhaps it is better to say that, in Dawkins’s world, history has come to an end. The arguments against both religion—an evolutionary misfiring that needs to be overcome—and cultural relativism—“francophonyism” he calls it elsewhere—are key to my point.

Self-consciousness emerges slowly through eons of natural selection. Life pushes and probes forward and humans—beings who both exist within nature and transcend it through scientific observation—are one of the results. Things such as religion are relics of past states that have been or should be overcome through the accumulation of memetic wisdom. (Memes are the cultural counterparts to genes. As natural selection weeds out bad genes and promotes useful ones, so cultural selection weeds out bad ideas/memes and promotes good ones, i.e. ones that better enable human flourishing.)

What makes this process seem ahistorical is that with the rise of modern science and its ability to perceive reality *simpliciter*, the progress of natural selection (and the cultural selection that seems to lag behind it), in a crucial sense comes to a stop. Dawkins does argue that our minds and imaginations are ill-equipped to take in the splendour of the universe, and that science can push us to deeper understandings (pp. 362-74), thereby allowing a kind of continuing historicity in our growing understanding of reality, but I think this continued historicity is something of an illusion.

History before the rise of modern science is a history marked by strange worlds and alternative realities. It is a history of pre-rationals struggling to live in a universe that is only accidentally hospitable and creating myths and stories to construct truth while lacking the tools (modern science and its rationality) needed to make truth known. But with the emergence of modern science (and its sibling, the Enlightenment), humanity finally sees reality for what it is. While human perception of reality may deepen, it will not fundamentally change in the way it did with the Great Leap Forward that modern science and the Enlightenment mark. Hence religion is passé and cultural relativism an infantile rejection of the rational maturity now offered through a scientific understanding of the world. In other words, humans now have access to capital ‘R’ Reason itself and, consequently, capital ‘T’ truth will follow.

That there may be other ways of perceiving the world, other possibilities we might grow into or old possibilities learned anew seems ruled out. That Enlightenment rationality may itself be subject to memetic alteration seems impossible, because it is rationality *per se*, not just a form of rationality.

A good example of this imperious rationality is Dawkins’s ridiculing of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity (ie, that God the Father, Jesus the Son and the Holy Spirit are three-in-one). Dawkins points out that Arius and his followers were excluded from the orthodox tradition by refusing to admit that Jesus was consubstantial with the Father.

He then writes, “What on earth could that possibly mean, you are probably asking? Substance? What ‘substance’? What exactly do you mean by ‘essence’? ‘Very little’ seems the only reasonable reply.”

Without attempting a detailed explanation of the doctrine (neither space nor expertise permits such), I want to point out how Dawkins makes no attempt to genuinely understand the doctrine. The doctrine, in its mature form, claims that God is three persons in one substance. The Patristic theologians used these words (Greek/Latin, of course, not English) in very technical and innovative ways. The doctrine famously cannot be found in Christian scriptures, and although many theologians now find problems with the doctrine, it nonetheless represents a fairly elegant solution to some very complex theological problems raised by Christians’ self-understandings of the relationship of Jesus to the God of Abraham.

But its elegance is only apparent from within the kind of rationality and imaginative world within which those who crafted it thought (which means, too, taking seriously their vocabulary as they used it, not in the flippant manner Dawkins does in the questions above). In other words, you have to enter their history to begin to assess the success of their endeavour. That does not mean we merely accept it or the terms with which they argue the point, but that we engage them with the carefulness and critical empathy of a good historian such as Peter Brown or Caroline Walker Bynum.

Dawkins’s rationality need make no such concessions. As rationality itself, it can merely denounce foolishness. Because this rationality is not culturally shaped, it can extend its grasp forward and backward across history, taking us out of the flow of time and culture, thereby allowing us to escape the erosive effects of that flow.

Of course if one accepts Dawkins’s assertions about rationality, then this arrangement seems just fine. But one does not have to be infected with cultural relativism to want a richer understanding of rationality than the monochromatic epistemology Dawkins offers. Such rationality has come under increasing and sustained critique from a wide range of philosophers, historians, theologians and others, and it is at this point that the social, cultural and ideological aspects of Dawkins’s science emerges.

The sociology of Dawkins science is not merely a thing of the laboratory. It is not just about how scientists establish facts or collectively imagine the physical processes of the universe. It is a way of being for life in general. While in theory one can rationally inspect the claims of religion and make up one’s own mind (pp. 372-8), in reality anyone who deigned to accept claims such as the virgin birth of Jesus or the doctrine of the Trinity would be “a subject of amused bafflement” to genuinely rational people (p. 99). Good science not only produces factual evidence, but it produces good atheists. (The high prevalence of atheism among scientists is used by Dawkins to support his claim that atheism is rational.)

Science socialises us to atheism. It foments the development of a humanistic (ie, non-religious) culture. Dawkins might well agree with these statements, but my third claim that science is an ideology would probably rile him. It might be kinder to refer to science as a philosophy, but in Dawkins’s case ideology seems the better term. He

takes an idea—a certain view of what science is and the nature of the rationality that undergirds it—and makes it the centre of his hermeneutic of life. Whatever does not meet the criteria of this ideal falls under suspicion.

Of course, science is a more complex reality than Dawkins portrays it (which may well be a function of his genre—polemics—and the popular audience for whom he writes). But as Dawkins uses it, science cannot be kept in the lab. It cannot be reduced to a provider of bare facts. Science is a way of being, a vision of the good life or at least the possibilities of the good life.

Social scientists may not need Dawkins to show them that science is a far more complex social, cultural and ideological reality than is commonly assumed. But if you want to give a non-academic or undergraduate audience a handy, well-written case study in how and why science cannot be confined to the laboratory nor exempted from social analysis, Dawkins's book might not be a bad read. Of course, that is not the use Dawkins intends, but those francophonies have taught us a few interesting things about authorial intention, too.

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