

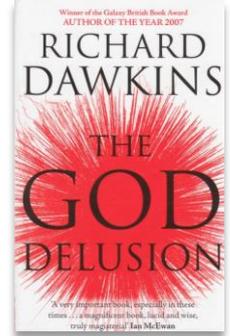
# Richard Dawkins : The God Delusion

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Summary and notes by Alison Morgan, August 2007

*I am often asked, 'should I read this?' by Christians who are afraid that to do so would undermine their faith. Don't worry – it won't. This is a man who dismisses Christian experience of God with the single sentence 'I have dealt with illusion and hallucination in chapter 3', and summarises the argument of the 12th century theologian Anselm in the phrase 'Nur Nurny Nur Nur' (bet you've often wondered how it's spelt!). Internationally recognised for his work in genetics, Dawkins has investigated the carriers of life to their smallest components. But while it's been said that science can help us understand reality by studying it in ever more elemental parts - biology can be explained by biochemistry, biochemistry by chemistry, and chemistry by physics - Dawkins pursues his scientific journey down to the biological and chemical, but then goes into a kind of reverse, constructing a vast edifice of materialist philosophy over the humble gene – and claiming it as science. Many leading scientists have publicly expressed their embarrassment. The book is full of emotionally driven assumptions, caricatures, and insults. It's certainly not 'scientific'.*

Key: Square brackets are my comments. Italics or inverted commas indicate direct quotes. Normal type is paraphrase/summary.



## Preface

He is 'sure' that there are lots of people brought up in a religion who just don't know they can leave. This is for them [he doesn't at any point consider the possibility that some may turn to a faith not because they were indoctrinated into it but through choice]. *The God hypothesis is a scientific hypothesis about the universe, which should be analysed as sceptically as any other* [but his analysis isn't scientific, it's a rant; and the statement itself rests on a prior assumption that there is no knowledge outside the realm of science]. *The reason many people don't notice atheists is that many of us are reluctant to 'come out'.* *My dream is that this book may help people to come out.* [persecution of atheists is a surprising and recurring theme!!]. *If this book works as I intend, religious readers who open it will be atheists when they put it down.*

Definition of religion from MS Word dictionary: 'a persistent false belief held in the face of strong contradictory evidence, especially as a symptom of psychiatric disorder'.

## 1. A deeply religious non-believer

Einsteinian religion is not the same as supernatural religion. Einstein used the name of God but did not mean a personal God; he called himself a 'deeply religious non-believer'. His statements are pantheistic, not theistic, and he used the word God in a poetic, metaphorical sense. This isn't the God Dawkins is referring to.

An atheist believes 'that although there is only one kind of stuff in the stuff in the universe and it is physical, out of this stuff come minds, beauty, emotions, moral values – in short the full gamut of phenomena that gives richness to human life' – Baggini.

'A theist believes in a supernatural intelligence who, in addition to his main work of creating the universe in the first place, is still around to oversee and influence the subsequent fate of his initial creation'.

Society has an 'overweening respect' for religion, and accepts that religious faith is especially vulnerable to offence and should be protected by an abnormally thick wall of respect. Why?

## 2. The God hypothesis

*The God of the OT is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully'.*

Book advocates alternative view to that of a creator deity: 'any creative intelligence, of sufficient complexity to design anything, comes into existence only as the end product of an extended process of gradual evolution.

Creative intelligences, being evolved, necessarily arrive late in the universe, and therefore cannot be responsible for designing it. God, in the sense defined, is a delusion; and.. a pernicious delusion'. *I am not attacking any particular version of God or gods. I am attacking God, all gods, anything and everything supernatural, wherever and whenever they have been or will be invented.*

'Judaism is originally a tribal cult of a single fiercely unpleasant God, morbidly obsessed with sexual restrictions, with the smell of charred flesh, with his own superiority over rival gods and with the exclusiveness of his chosen desert tribe' [argument by insult here]. Judaism, Islam and Christianity can be treated as indistinguishable. 'Compared with the OT's psychotic delinquent, the deist God of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Enlightenment is an altogether grander being'.

American atheists feel sad and lonely, isolated – the US is ruled by theocrats.

'it is in the nature of faith that one is capable.. of holding a belief without adequate reason to do so'. The existence of God is a hypothesis like any other, hard to test in practice, but it belongs in the same box as doubts about the Permian and Cretaceous extinctions. 'God's existence or non-existence is a scientific fact about the universe.. If he existed, God himself could clinch the argument, noisily and unequivocally, in his favour' [no mention of Jesus here]. Journalist Andrew Mueller says that pledging yourself to any particular religion is like choosing to believe that the world is rhombus-shaped, and borne through the cosmos in the pincers of 2 enormous green lobsters called Esmerelda and Keith [but we have evidence it isn't..]. *What matters is not whether God is disprovable (he isn't), but whether his existence is probable* [thank you].

The NOMA argument (non-overlapping magisterial, ie science is one field and religion is another) is invalid; theologians bring no expertise that scientists don't have to cosmological questions. NOMA is popular only because there is no evidence to favour the God-hypothesis. *I suspect that alleged miracles provide the strongest reason many believers have for their faith; and miracles, by definition, violate the principles of science* [do they?? Why? Because we 'know' they can't happen??].

There are 2 incompatible choices: the hypothesis of ultimate design, and gradual evolution. He dismisses intelligent design, and accused the Pope of being a hypocrite when he endorsed Darwinism, on the basis that the real war is between rationalism and superstition, and you can't believe in the God hypothesis and also in evolution [throughout the book Dawkins insists on this polarisation. Middle ground isn't something he does].

### 3. Arguments for God's existence

**Aquinas** offered 5 proofs which are 'easily exposed as vacuous':

- The unmoved mover – nothing moves without a prior mover
- The uncaused cause – nothing is caused by itself; there must be a first cause
- The cosmological argument – something non-physical must have brought physical things into being
- The argument from degree – diversity must be measured by its diversity from something, which is God
- The argument from design

The first three are the same, an infinite regress, and all assume God is immune to the regress. The fourth is fatuous. The fifth is the one in use today; but thanks to Darwin we know evolution produces an excellent simulacrum of design.

**Anselm** offered the ontological argument . This is Dawkins' summary of it:

'Bet you I can prove God exists.' 'Bet you can't.'

'Right then, imagine the most perfect perfect perfect thing possible.' 'Okay, now what?'

'Now, is that perfect perfect perfect thing real? Does it exist?' 'No, it's only in my mind.'

'But if it was real it would be even more perfect, because a really really perfect thing would have to be better than a silly old imaginary thing. So I've proved that God exists. Nur Nurny Nur Nur. All atheists are fools.'

He offers a selection of other points of view, in similar tone, from a website called [godlessgeeks.com](http://godlessgeeks.com).

**The argument from beauty.** The existence of great art does not prove the existence of God.

**The argument from personal 'experience'** [note the inverted commas – if D hasn't experienced it it's not valid]. The brain has powerful simulation software.

**The argument from scripture.** 'Although Jesus probably existed, reputable biblical scholars do not in general regard the NT as a reliable record of what actually happened in history, and I shall not consider the Bible further as evidence for any kind of deity'.

**The argument from admired religious scientists.** Before Darwin, everyone was religious, so Newton et al don't count, they had no choice [same doesn't seem to apply to influence of modern secularism]. There are only 3 top British scientists who are Christian: Peacocke, Stannard, Polkinghorne; he remains 'baffled' by their belief in the details of the Christian religion [maybe he's missing something?? In fact there are many more Christian scientists –

but he likes to make extreme statements and then knock them down]. He cites research stating that ‘the higher one’s intelligence or education level, the less one is likely to be religious’ [ignores influence of prevailing culture, and touchingly assumes that those with the highest IQ are always right, which if of course science is the highest arbiter of reality they probably will be].

#### 4. Why there almost certainly is no God

The **argument from improbability** is a big one. Hoyle said the chance of the world coming into existence by chance is similar to that of a hurricane sweeping through a scrapyard and assembling a Boeing 747. But evolution is not chance; it’s the opposite. Theists who say natural selection is God’s way of achieving his creation (God doesn’t have to do anything) amaze him. This is a lazy God... [he has no concept of role of HS, or even of existence of HS]. There are only 2 choices: design and natural selection. ‘Natural selection is not only a parsimonious, plausible and elegant solution; it is the only workable alternative to chance that has ever been suggested’ [false dichotomy]. Intelligent design is not a plausible solution to the riddle of statistical improbability (eg in the existence of a complex organism like a sponge). Design is not the only alternative to chance; natural selection is better. Design just raises a bigger question: who designed the designer? [I think this is what Aquinas was getting at..]. Natural selection succeeds as a solution to the problem of improbability whereas design and chance do not, because it breaks it down into minute steps, each of which is much more probable. He rejects the argument of **irreducible complexity** (phrase coined by Michael Behe in 1996)– ie that the eye has to exist functioning, there can be no intermediate stages. There can. This is worship of gaps.

The **anthropic principle** (named by Brandon Carter in 1974) points out conditions for life are very precise (Earth is in the so-called Goldilocks zone of the sun). But the anthropic principle doesn’t support the design hypothesis; it’s an alternative to it. Life gets started improbably, as a chemical event occurring in water, and the main ingredient is heredity (DNA or similar). The spontaneous arising by chance of the first hereditary molecule is very very improbable. But it did happen; and it only had to happen once. The rest is evolution. ‘Natural selection works because it is a cumulative one-way street to improvement. It needs some luck to get started; and maybe a few later gaps in the evolutionary story also need major infusions of luck. But it’s an adequate explanation. Design isn’t, because it just raises bigger questions than it answers. A God capable of calculating the Goldilocks values for the 6 fundamental variables would have to be at least as improbable as the finely tuned combinations of numbers itself. ‘I see no alternative but to dismiss it’. ‘Any God capable of designing a universe, carefully and foresightfully tuned to lead to our evolution, must be a supremely complex and improbable entity who needs an even bigger explanation than the one he is supposed to provide’ [argument by repetition..].

Cambridge theologians have told him there are other ways of knowing than the scientific, and one of these must be employed to know God. The most important turns out to be personal, subjective experience of God. Some claimed that God speaks to them; this is illusion and hallucination.

Summary of his central argument is given here:

1. One of greatest challenges to human intellect is to explain how the improbable appearance of design in the universe arises
2. The temptation is to attribute the appearance of design to design itself – a designed thing needs a designer
3. But that raises the bigger question of who designed the designer, harder to solve than the question we started with which is how to explain statistical improbability
4. The best explanation so far is Darwinian evolution by natural selection [plus luck]. Design is an illusion.
5. We can’t do it yet for physics
6. But probably one day we will.

#### 5. The roots of religion

Everyone has their own pet theory of where religion comes from and why all human cultures have it (comfort; group cohesion, meaning etc). As Darwinians we should ask what pressures exerted by natural selection favoured the impulse to religion. Perhaps group selection. But the common cold isn’t for our benefit, yet we have it. Religion similarly may be to the benefit not of genes or germs but memes; ie to the ideas themselves [but they don’t exist outside us, which germs do]. *Though the details differ,.. no known culture lacks some version of the time-consuming, wealth-consuming, hostility-provoking rituals the anti-factual, counter-productive fantasies of religion. Some educated individuals may have abandoned religion, but all were brought up in a religious culture from which they usually had to make a conscious decision to depart* [not so; and again he’s equating a religious scale with an IQ scale, with atheists at the top].

Advantages of religion – little evidence it protects people from stress-related diseases [not true]. It may provide consolation and reassurance, just as a GP does, in some cases. Perhaps religion is a placebo; but it's hard to believe health is improved by Catholic-induced morbid guilt. But religion is a large phenomenon and it needs a large theory to explain it.

- Group selection theories – groups do better if they have a cohesive religion
- Religion as by-product of something else – eg moths navigate by moon, but fly straight into flames. We are wired up as children to believe what our elders tell us. So we believe religion.
- Psychologically primed for religion – the brain has a natural dualistic tendency, separating matter and mind. Perhaps irrational religion is a by-product of the irrationality mechanisms originally built into the brain by selection for falling in love [poor guy, he's struggling here in all sorts of ways]. 'The symptoms of an individual infected by religion may be startlingly reminiscent of those more ordinarily associated with sexual love'. We are meant to love (navigate by moonlight), but we fly into flames (religion) as a result. So he suggests religion is a misfiring of a useful mechanism. And immortality caters to wishful thinking.
- Memes – memes are ideas, to be compared at an ideological level with genes at a physical one [he's losing touch with reality here]. Just as genes make copies of themselves, perhaps so do memes. Religion is a meme. It self-replicates. Differentiation into different religions occurs by unconscious evolution.

His summary of Christian belief:

- In the time of the ancestors, a man was born to a virgin mother with no biological father being involved.
- The same fatherless man called out to a friend called Lazarus, who had been dead long enough to stink, and Lazarus promptly came back to life.
- 'The fatherless man himself came alive after being dead and buried three days.
- Forty days later, the fatherless man went up to the top of a hill and then disappeared bodily into the sky.
- If you murmur thoughts privately in your head, the fatherless man, and his 'father' (who is also himself) will hear your thoughts and may act upon them. He is simultaneously able to hear the thoughts of everybody else in the world.
- If you do something bad, or something good, the same fatherless man sees all, even if nobody else does. You may be rewarded or punished accordingly, including after your death.
- The fatherless man's virgin mother never died but 'ascended' bodily into heaven.
- Bread and wine, if blessed by a priest (who must have testicles), 'become' the body and blood of the fatherless man.

## 6. The roots of morality: why are we good?

Here he offers a selection of nasty letters from religious people, threatening death, hatred etc. Why does God need such ferocious defence? [for the same reason D offers ferocious assault – insecurity?]

Does morality have a Darwinian origin? There is a field of Darwinian morality. It's the gene which is selfish; it doesn't behave the individual to be. We have a moral sense which is inbuilt and independent of religious belief. He's inclined to suspect that there are very few atheists in prisons.

## 7. The 'Good' Book and the changing moral Zeitgeist

The Bible encourages a system of morals which any civilized modern person would find obnoxious. Much of it is not systematically evil but just plain weird. Those who wish to base their morality literally on the Bible have either not read it or not understood it (Spong).

Here there's a discussion, with examples, of the behaviour of some American fundamentalists; and an examination through outraged eyes of various episodes from the OT (eg Noah, Lot, Abraham/Isaac, Jephthah, God's demands for ethnic cleansing).

Jesus is a huge improvement over the cruel ogre of the OT. He was one of the great ethical innovators of history. But there are other ethical teachings in the NT that no good person should support: primarily, the central Christian doctrine of atonement for original sin.

Religion is a divisive force – take N Ireland, or India.

Morals, like other things, evolves; we have moved on a long way since the NT. OK, Hitler and Stalin shared atheism, but they both had moustaches too. Anyway, it's not clear Hitler was an atheist. And even if he was, individual atheists may do evil things but they don't do it in the name of atheism.

## 8. What's wrong with religion? Why be so hostile?

'Despite my dislike of gladiatorial contests, I seem somehow to have acquired a reputation for pugnacity towards religion' [surely not??]. Colleagues ask him, why be so hostile? But he doesn't want people to miss out; the truths of evolution are so engrossingly fascinating and beautiful; it makes him passionate! As a scientist he is hostile to fundamental religion (he's not fundamentalist because he knows what it would take for him to change his mind) because it actively debauches the scientific enterprise. It teaches us not to change our minds, and not to want to know exciting things that are available to be known [does it?].

Muslims execute people for converting to Christianity. Christians persecute homosexuals, and uphold the death penalty whilst screaming against abortion (Mother Teresa is 'sanctimoniously hypocritical'). Fundamentalists blow people up.. Faith is an evil because it requires no justification and brooks no argument.

## 9. Childhood, abuse and the escape from religion

Story of an Italian Jewish boy removed by the papal police from his parents in 1858 and taken to be brought up as Catholic (on the grounds he'd been baptised by a babysitter). Priests have abused children sexually; but also mentally – examples here of people terrified as children by graphic descriptions of hell, and children rejected by parents for becoming atheists. His own parents taught him not what to think but how to think. Schools which teach literal creationism teach falsehood; the cry of diversity won't do, it's an educational scandal. And children should not be labelled 'Christian' or 'Muslim'; they are too young to be anything. Religious education should be part of literary culture – we can learn about Greek gods without being asked to believe in them, after all.

## 10. A much needed gap?

It's often said we have a God-shaped gap in the brain, a psychological need for God, like the imaginary friends we have as children. A A Milne describes one called Binker. The Binker phenomenon of childhood may be a good model for understanding theistic belief in adults [sure]. 'Could religions have evolved originally by gradual postponement, over generations, of the moment in life when children gave up their binkers?'. God offers consolation. But religion's power to console doesn't make it true [or false]. He discusses the useful concept of Purgatory here.

How to fill the gap? With science. We see the world as if through a burka; there is so much more to imagine, discover. Not a single atom of you is was part of you when you were a child. There may be plural universes. What we see of the real world isn't the real world, it's a model of the real world, regulated and adjusted by sense data.

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Revd Dr Alison Morgan