

Totalitarianism Comes In Many Guises

A Review of Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion* (Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006).

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I have been an atheist for virtually all of my conscious life. I say “virtually” because there were a few moments when I was a kid (about 7 or 8, if I remember), when I came close to believing. Several times during those years, feeling lonely and neglected in a family in which there wasn't much love, I hoped there was a god and tried to imagine him—someone who knew about me, someone who cared about me and about how I was feeling. I must admit that it comforted me, although I was never able to imagine a face or convince myself that He really did exist. Since then, I have been a staunch nonbeliever. I do not believe there is a god. I do not believe the universe was created or that some intelligent being governs it and watches over our lives. I do not believe there is a heaven or a hell or any other form of life after death or any other place or manner in which what we do in this life is somehow weighed and accounted for, the good rewarded and the evil punished. I also do not believe that there is a universal soul or intelligence out there which we can contemplate and/or with which individual souls commune. I believe that the one life we live, long or short, fulfilling or not, good or bad, is all we have. After that, there is nothing. I'm not crazy about this belief, and the thought of existing in a cosmic void sometimes causes me despair, but it is what I believe.

The main problem I have with the idea of God is the question of evil, or what is known in philosophy as theodicy. By this, I mean not only the bad things that human beings do to each other but also the naturally-caused misfortunes that afflict people, the good and the bad alike, without rhyme or reason. I cannot avoid asking myself these questions: If God is omnipotent, why did He create a world in which suffering/pain occurs? Why does there have to be so much of it, why does it have to be as intense as it is, and why is it spread around so unevenly? Why, if God is not directly responsible for it, does He allow it to happen? And, if He is not omnipotent and is therefore not responsible for it, why believe in Him? There have been many, and varied, attempts within the JudeoChristian tradition to grapple with this problem. Perhaps the most convincing is the claim that God gave humanity the (divine) gifts of freedom (free will) and the mental capacity (reason) to exercise it, that is, to make appropriate (morally correct) decisions if we choose to. Given this, He cannot be expected to regularly intervene to make sure that the decisions people make are never bad/evil. As a result, people must suffer the consequences of

their moral choices, and humanity as a whole must suffer the consequences our overall level of obedience to God's commandments.

The (to me) obvious problem with this argument is that the people who make bad choices (do evil things) are often, even usually, not the ones to suffer the consequences. Instead, totally innocent people pay the price of the evil others commit.

Examples abound: slavery, the slave trade, lynchings, the Holocaust, the Armenian genocide, forced collectivization in the Soviet Union, the Great Leap Forward in China, rapes, anti-gay assaults, etc. While in the Judeo-Christian tradition, suffering has a redemptive character, through which the pains of this world are redeemed by an eternity of bliss in heaven, by the eventual establishment of God's Kingdom on Earth (at some unknown point in the future), or by both, to one like me, who does not believe in an after-life, this looks like a bad trade. The claim also does not address the effects of natural disasters (hurricanes, tornados, droughts, floods, earthquakes) in which, once again, totally or largely innocent people suffer while evil-doers often do not.

Other believers (such as the German philosopher, Wilhelm Leibniz) attempt to explain the difficulty by arguing that, while God created the universe, He was not totally free in doing so. For example, once having created the cosmos and the laws of nature that govern it, He was constrained to allow those laws to operate. As a result, He can only intervene on a very infrequent basis, if at all. In a similar vein, other thinkers, such as the Russian philosopher, Nicolas Berdyaev, have a mystical sense that freedom exists ontologically in the cosmos prior to God, that God cannot intervene to abrogate our free will.

Still others believe that God has a special place in his heart for those who suffer and yet keep their faith. These people therefore gain some solace in sensing God's loving presence, in knowing that He is "with them."

One of the least convincing attempts to explain the problem of evil in a world created by an omnipotent, omniscient God, is one articulated by the English writer C. S. Lewis. It is that God allows evil/misfortune to exist so that there can be heroes. But what this attempt fails to explain (like the others) is why are some people forced to be more—a lot more—heroic than others?

We can all come up with our favorite examples. Here is mine. I remember hearing the following anecdote a few years ago (I believe it was on a newscast):

A woman was afflicted with polio when she was a small child, one of those so paralyzed, from the neck down, that she could not breathe on her own. She spent the rest of her life in a breathing apparatus, what was then called an "iron lung," on her back, unable to tend to her most minimal needs by herself. Despite this, she had a strong will to live and to do something productive with her life. Her parents arranged a television hook-up from her various schools into her home, so that she was able to "go to school" and learn. In this way, reading books placed on a stand over her head and writing with her mouth, she went through elementary, middle, and high school, and was even graduated from college. But one day, when she was a young adult, the mid-western town in which she lived was struck by a tornado, and the local power grid was knocked out. Fortunately, her father had set up a back-up generator in their home, but before power was restored to the grid, the generator failed, and the woman died...

Where was God in all this? What kind of god would allow this? Unless C. S. Lewis and the other proponents of the heroes/heroism conjecture were forced during their lives to be one tenth as heroic as this woman, their argument is hypocrisy and an insult.

In contrast to this woman, consider someone like Mitt Romney, who as far as I can see, has never done much of value to anybody or been heroic in any way. Yet he was born into money,

possesses good health, a fine family, five homes, several boats, and billions of dollars, and has nothing better to do than to amuse himself (and the rest of us) by running for president. I know, life isn't fair, but the degree of unfairness I see in the world deeply offends me.

As I see it, the arguments that attempt to reconcile God and evil/suffering ultimately come down to the assertion that the question is really beyond our powers to comprehend, that we just have to take it for granted ("on faith") that this is somehow all to the good. Unfortunately for me, perhaps, I refuse to give up my right to try to understand this, and not being able to, can only confess that the existence of evil and suffering in the world tries my moral sensibilities.

Despite my atheist convictions, I have no desire to convince other people of my (dis)belief; I have no urge to proselytize, to convert people to the cause of atheism. (I have written the above only to explain where I am coming from.) I realize that not everyone wants to live in a world as bleak as mine.

Moreover, I do not believe that atheists, as a group, are in any way superior to—more intelligent, more rational, less deluded, kinder, more mature—than religious believers. I know many religious people whom I greatly admire, while there are atheists whom I respect very little; some I even despise. Whether people are or are not religious is of no importance in determining my attitude towards them. Instead, I try to judge them according to the values they hold and act upon—how they treat other people, what kinds of goals they have in life, and what kind of world they wish to live in.

Beyond this, I have, during the course of my life, been profoundly influenced by figures who have been religious, some extremely so. These include writers, such as Balzac, Dostoyevsky, and Tolstoy; philosophers, such as Kierkegaard, Berdyaev, and Shestov; composers, such as Bach, Handel, and Vivaldi; musicians, such as tenor saxophonist Lester Young, and historical figures, such as Jesus. I cannot imagine living in a world in which these figures' contributions might not exist and the present and future contributions of artists and others who are religiously motivated would not be produced.

It is because of this, and in apparent contradiction to the fact that I am an atheist, that I have a strong aversion to atheists who take it upon themselves to proselytize for atheism, who feel the need to debunk all religious beliefs and to (essentially) denounce all believers as stupid, ignorant, misguided, crazy or deluded.

I am referring to such figures as Richard Dawkins, whose book, *The God Delusion*, published in 2006, I have recently read. Dawkins, an English biologist and the author of many books, most notably, *The Selfish Gene*, is a declared atheist and a militant fighter for science in general, for the theory of evolution in particular, and against what he sees as religious intolerance and superstition. In fact, he is a militant opponent of all forms of religious beliefs.

Motivating Dawkins' attitude is his conviction that the main issue confronting the world today is a global conflict between religion, the embodiment of obscurantism, superstition, and despotism, on the one hand, and what he calls "Scientific Rationalism," the representation of reason, science, and freedom, on the other. He believes that religion, in all its forms, is, has been, and will be (for as long as it exists) the cause of most of the evil in the world and considers that the only consistent defense of the values he defends is atheism, the complete and utter disbelief in God or in any other spiritual entity. He is particularly hostile to any form of what he calls "theism," the traditional belief in a personal creator god of the major monotheistic religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. To Dawkins, all positions on the question of religion that are not militantly atheistic, including those of moderate religious figures, agnostics, and even those atheists who

do not wish to join his crusade, are shameful capitulations to the enemy. His book is therefore a war-cry and a manifesto, a strident and unself-conscious advocacy of atheism. Dawkins makes no bones about the fact that his goal is to drive religion in all its forms off the face of the Earth.

Despite the fact that I agree with Dawkins on many issues, I believe *The God Delusion* does the cause of science and freedom far more harm than good. Although there is some worthwhile material in the book, on the whole I find *The God Delusion*, by turns, arrogant, naive, superficial, dishonest, silly, facile and ignorant. Most important, I consider the standpoint it advocates to be extremely dangerous, no better than the religious fanaticism Dawkins claims to be fighting against. Before proceeding to my criticisms, I would like to list some of the issues on which I agree with Dawkins so that there can be no doubt about where I stand.

1. I do not believe God exists in any shape or form.

2. I support the neo-Darwinian theory of evolution by natural selection and completely reject Creationism, the theory of Intelligent Design, and all other attempts to sneak religion into the realm of science.

3. I believe Creationism, Intelligent Design, and related conceptions are unscientific by definition (they are non-naturalistic and cannot be tested) and have no business being taught in science classes (although they might reasonably be subjects for classes in philosophy and religion).

4. I reject all attempts on the part of religiously-motivated forces to control the science curricula in public schools, either by outlawing the teaching of evolution or by mandating the inclusion of Creationism and Intelligent Design in science programs.

5. I oppose efforts to break down the separation of church and state as embodied in the United States Constitution.

6. I believe that terrible things have been done and continue to be done because of and in the name of religion; moreover, that throughout history organized religion has, for the most part, shamelessly and hypocritically buttressed the existence of brutal, oppressive regimes and social systems.

7. I am opposed to the harassment and persecution of atheists that has occurred in the United States and elsewhere throughout the world.

With this said, let me proceed to Dawkins' book. To begin with, I find *The God Delusion* to be arrogant. This is apparent in his intended audience and his attitude toward it. Dawkins sees his book as a self-help manual for atheists who are "in the closet," people he surmises are atheists but who have been too intimidated by their upbringings, by their families and friends, by their communities, and by the undeserved respect with which religion is held in the United States, to "come out," to publicly declare themselves as atheists. He explicitly says that his aim is to "raise consciousness." Dawkins considers the current religious climate in the world as a whole, and in the United States in particular, to be so oppressive, the popular hatred of atheism and atheists so intense, that millions of Americans continue to pretend to be religious, up to and including attending religious services, despite their lack of belief in God. He thinks this is particularly true of the United States' intellectual and political elite, a majority of whom he believes are actually atheists but who are terrified to admit it. If all these people were to "come out," Dawkins reasons, it might be revealed that atheists constitute a majority of the population.

To support his contention that atheists are oppressed, Dawkins cites the results of various opinion polls that show that while large numbers of Americans (roughly 80–90%) claim to be willing to vote for Black, Latino, women, gay, Catholic, Jewish, and Mormon candidates for public office, only 49% admit that they would vote for atheists. He also recounts stories of people in

the United States recently being fired from their jobs, disowned and ostracized by their families, harassed by members of their communities, threatened by police, and physically attacked simply for being atheists and/or for publicly promoting atheist causes.

To be sure, any sort of social pressure against and harassment of atheists is despicable and to be condemned, but I find Dawkins' analogy between the situation of atheists in the United States and the oppression of lesbian/gay, bisexual, and transgender people to be misleading and offensive. First, while Dawkins may be noble in wanting to devote so much of his time, energy, and expertise (he tours, gives lectures, participates in roundtable discussions, and writes) to the cause of liberating "closeted" atheists from their oppression, I suspect that the majority of the people who Dawkins surmises fall into this category are not really atheists at all, or if they are, do not feel very oppressed and do not need help in liberating themselves, if, indeed, they desire it.

Second, aside from the condescending nature of Dawkins' attitude, his analogy trivializes the much more intense social pressures and repression, including the vicious hatred and the ever-present threat and actuality of violence, that LGBT people face every day of their lives. This is still the case today (as witnessed by recent assaults and murders), despite the tremendous progress that has been made on this issue, especially in the United States, in the past few decades.

Third, while I do not wish to denigrate the fears and persecution of others, I must confess that I have never considered myself to be particularly oppressed as an atheist. It is true that I have often felt isolated and alienated in U.S. society, but this is for all sorts of reasons, not primarily or even significantly because I am an atheist. For example, by the time I was a teenager, living in a conservative, all-white, upper middleclass, anti-Semitic suburb, I felt isolated as an avowed Marxist/Communist with a dark complexion and coming from a Jewish family. Later, during my college years and after, I felt alienated from most of the left because I did not share other leftists' illusions in and adulation of the Stalinist regimes. And as an adult, I have often felt isolated because of my unwillingness or inability to be married and have children or even to live with a partner. Even today, I would much rather avow my atheism to a group of observant Jews than to declare to them my hostility to the state of Israel and my corresponding support of the cause of the Palestinians. I would also greatly prefer to admit my lack of belief in God to group of church-going liberals than to try to explain to them why I did not vote for Barack Obama in the last two presidential elections (or for any Democrat in any election).

Finally, it is disturbing to me that Dawkins seems oblivious to the fact that many people who are not devout in the traditional sense of the term continue to attend religious services and to otherwise participate in religious communities for many understandable and even worthy reasons. Among these are a desire to continue the traditions of their families and/or because they feel a sense of spiritual connection with a community with whom they share common values. Beyond this, church/synagogue/mosque-going people hold to a broad range of religious views, from very literal, fundamentalist beliefs to a variety of symbolic interpretations of religious texts and concepts. Either ignorant or dismissive of this, Dawkins thinks the only reason why atheists, agnostics, and believers who do not accept every tenet of their religions' dogmas would continue to attend church/mosque/synagogue is that they are too petrified not to. This is absurd.

Despite Dawkins' pose as all-knowing, he is often quite naive. On page 1 he writes: "Imagine, with John Lennon, a world with no religion. Imagine no suicide bombers, no 9/11, no 7/7, no Crusades, no witch-hunts, no Gunpowder Plot, no Indian partition, no Israeli/Palestinian wars, no Serb/Croat/Muslim massacres, no persecution of Jews as 'Christ-killers', no Northern Ireland

‘troubles’...” Dawkins continues with his list of senseless conflicts and brutal atrocities he believes have been caused by religion. While Dawkins concedes that there are, in fact, other sources of evil in the world besides religion, he sincerely believes that religion is the major cause of that evil and that most of it would not have occurred, would not be occurring today, and would not occur in the future if there were no religion.

I find this is rather astounding. For, even if we concede Dawkins’ implication that if there were no religion, the horrors he mentions and others like them would not take place, there would still be plenty of others. For example, the vast majority of the wars in the 20th century (a very bloody century, indeed) were not primarily motivated by religion: the Russo-Japanese War, World War I, the Russian Civil War, the Japanese invasion of China, the Spanish Civil War, World War II, the Chinese Revolution, the Korean War, the Algerian War, the War in Vietnam. While religion, as a central component of human life, certainly played a role in many of these contests, it was not close to being the dominant cause of them. Even without religion, they still would have happened.

In addition, many of the events on Dawkins’ list are not simply or even primarily religious in nature, although they may appear to be so to the superficial observer. Marxism insists that religion is a phenomenon of society’s “superstructure,” an ideological reflection of underlying material forces, an ideational form through which more fundamental economic and social conflicts are fought out. While this may be too schematic, it is not without some truth. Thus, to see the “troubles” in Northern Ireland as exclusively or largely religious is to ignore the centuries of brutal oppression of Ireland by the English elite and to denigrate the very real historical—economic, social, and political (not just religious)—grievances of the Irish people.

Similarly, the conflict in Palestine is not primarily a religious one, although it certainly has religious undertones. For one thing, not all of the Palestinians are Moslem. For another, while the Jews were historically formed (and defined themselves) by and through their religion, it makes more sense today to see them in broader ethnic terms, analogous to a nationality. Consistent with this, while some of the most fanatic Israelis have been and continue to be motivated by religion, most Israelis have not been and are not today. The Zionist movement was not launched and pioneered by religious Jews but by assimilationist, secular ones. Theodor Herzl, considered the founding father of modern Zionism, was a member of a German-speaking dueling fraternity (the one that accepted Jews) when he was a student in Vienna. The leaders of the Labor Zionists were socialists and militantly anti-clerical. Vladimir Jabotinsky, the leader of the Revisionists, was a secular Jew from Odessa; I don’t think he even spoke Yiddish. For decades, the Zionist movement was vehemently opposed by the Orthodox religious establishment, and it was only after the founding of the state of Israel that a section of that leadership became reconciled to it. To this day, some ultra-Orthodox Jews see Israel as an abomination (the Messiah, not sinful humanity, is supposed to bring about the return of the Jews to the Holy Land). Meanwhile, for many years, Yasir Arafat’s inner circle included an Orthodox rabbi. Finally, the Zionists seriously considered alternate locations for the Jewish state; these included parts of Uganda and Argentina. The fact that, for their own reasons, the British imperialists encouraged the Zionists to settle in Palestine, the home of the ancient Hebrews, certainly fueled enthusiasm within the Zionist movement and in broader Jewish circles for the Zionist project. But for the majority of Jews, the attachment to Palestine was fundamentally historic, not religious. The specifically religious basis for the Zionists claim to “Eretz Israel,” the entirety of Biblical Palestine, was something

the secular Zionists used both to attract Jewish settlers and to justify the establishment (and aggressive expansion) of their state in a land that was already occupied.

Even more important, to reduce the Israeli/Palestinian conflict to a purely or even largely religious dispute is to explain away the concrete material injustices done to the Palestinians, specifically, the fact that they have been dispossessed of their land—their homes, farms, and businesses—by technologically (and financially) superior conquerors who utilized the oppression they suffered in Europe as an excuse to “ethnically cleanse” an indigenous population that had no responsibility whatsoever for that oppression. So, not only is Dawkins’ religious explanation of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict a gross simplification; it, like his “analysis” of the “troubles” in Ireland, trivializes if not outright dismisses the legitimate complaints and struggles of a grievously wronged people.

Much the same can be said of most of the other conflicts on Dawkins’ list. For Dawkins, it’s all very simple, do away with religion, then, Voila!, we no longer have to pay attention to pesky oppressed peoples fighting for their national liberation. (They’re all deluded, anyway.)

Beyond being arrogant, naive, and superficial, *The God Delusion* is dishonest. This is most apparent in Dawkins’ efforts to address the fact that paramount figures in the history of science, including Galileo, Isaac Newton, Albert Einstein, and others alive today, were and are religious. This is an embarrassment to Dawkins and a lethal threat to his argument.

Since Einstein was so crucial to the development of modern physics and, in contrast to Galileo and Newton, so recent a historic figure, it is particularly important that Dawkins dispose of his religiosity. The fact is that Albert Einstein was religious; he believed in God. True, Einstein’s god was not the traditional god of the monotheistic religions (although I suspect it was greatly influenced by his Jewish background). Instead, Einstein believed in the existence of a super-cosmic mind or intelligence, a supernatural essence that lies behind or beyond the phenomenological universe. Nor was this a mere intellectual notion. Einstein was moved by profound religious feelings and regularly referred to God in his arguments with those physicists with whom he disagreed, specifically over the question of the probabilistic conclusions that flowed from the theory of quantum mechanics. “God does not play dice,” Einstein repeatedly said, meaning that the universe was determined; there was no room in it for indeterminacy and probability. In sum, while Einstein disavowed belief in a personal God, he was definitely not an atheist. Einstein’s God, similar to the God of the Dutch-Jewish philosopher, Baruch/Benedict Spinoza, was (roughly) coterminous with the underlying logical/mathematical structure of the universe. For this God, Einstein felt a deep reverence and awe, which, according to most definitions, is the fundamental characteristic of religion, what Rudolf Otto has called the “Idea of the Holy.” Einstein’s belief, like Spinoza’s, has been called “pantheistic,” from the Greek, meaning that God is everywhere and in every thing, a kind of Cosmic Soul. Einstein was not unique among scientists in holding this kind of religious belief; many others, including cosmologists alive today, have similar notions.

Now, this is a problem for Dawkins, because he is arguing for a strict atheism, not pantheism. To get around it, he simply defines it away: “Pantheism is sexed-up atheism,” he writes (p. 18). To him, those scientists who refer to God as Einstein did, are not really religious; they merely use the term “God” in a “pure metaphorical, poetic sense.”

This is pure sleight-of-hand, a sleazy ideological maneuver that obscures a very real difference of meaning, philosophic and religious, between pantheism and atheism. For example, I am an atheist; I am not a pantheist. I do not believe in God, period; I do not believe the “laws of nature” represent God. I do not believe there is a cosmic intelligence or spirit behind, beneath, or within

the phenomenological universe. When I look up at the sky at night and try to imagine the entire cosmos, however impressed I might be by its size and complexity, I do not see, imagine, or feel God. I am not awe-struck; I do not feel reverence. I suspect I am missing something, but I do not sense that the universe is holy. Pantheists, who do feel such awe and reverence, thus feel and believe much differently from the way I do. To me, their sensibility is very close to that of mystics, most of whom also find God in all things.

It is certainly true that pantheism is different from the theism of traditional monotheistic religion, but it is definitely not atheism. If the pantheism of scientists such as Einstein is merely a poetic form of atheism, why didn't/don't they call themselves atheists? The answer should be obvious: it's because they weren't and aren't. But Dawkins has to fudge this, since religion in all its forms is anathema to him. Dawkins attempts to buttress his contention with a quote from Einstein, a dubious interpretation of it, and a battle-cry (p. 19.)

Einstein: "To sense that behind anything that can be experienced there is a something that our mind cannot grasp and whose beauty and sublimity reaches us only indirectly and as a feeble reflection, this is religiousness. In this sense I am religious."

Dawkins: "In this sense I too am religious, with the reservation that 'cannot grasp' does not have to mean 'forever ungraspable' [thus reversing the meaning of Einstein's words]. But I prefer not to call myself religious because it is misleading. It is destructively misleading because, for the vast majority of people, 'religion' implies 'supernatural'" (although what Einstein said sounds "supernatural" to me).

Dawkins continues: "Nevertheless, I wish that physicists would refrain from using the word God in their special metaphorical sense." (Maybe they use the word "God" because they mean it in more than a "special metaphorical" sense.)

Finally: "The metaphorical or pantheistic God of the physicists is light years away from the interventionist, miracle-wreaking, thought-reading, sin-punishing, prayer-answering God of the Bible, of priests, mullahs and rabbis, and of ordinary language. Deliberately to confuse the two is, in my opinion, an act of intellectual high treason."

A careful reading of these passages reveals that Dawkins is, in fact, arguing for two positions. One is that pantheism is simply another word for atheism, and that scientists who believe as Einstein did were/are really atheists and not religious at all. But he knows or senses that this is stretching the truth and so reverts to another claim. This is that, well, yes, Einstein and those scientists who felt/feel as he did were/are religious in some sense, but their kind of religion is OK, because it is not belief in the crude personal creator god who causes miracles, answers prayers, and punishes sins that most religious people believe in. Either way, what Dawkins is saying comes down to this: Dawkins' belief (whichever it is—strict atheism or pantheism) is right, while everybody else's is wrong. And when he asks us to imagine a world without religion, he is actually asking us to imagine a world in which everybody believes exactly as he does, in other words, one in which everybody agrees with him.

Dawkins' dishonesty is also apparent in his efforts to deal with the question of Hitler and Stalin, historical figures assumed by many to have been atheists who were perpetrators of great evil (thus implying that religious people do not have a monopoly on the commitment of atrocities). Most of the section of *The God Delusion* that addresses this issue is devoted to questioning whether Hitler really was an atheist, parading a string of quotations that can be interpreted, alternatively, as religious or atheist. Since Hitler was a consummate opportunist, it is hard to tell exactly what he believed (although he was almost definitely not a Christian). But there can be little doubt that,

as an adult, Stalin was a fervent atheist. Raised by a very devout mother (who was brutalized by Stalin's father), Stalin spent some years in a seminary but ultimately rejected Christianity and embraced Marxism, of which atheism is a crucial component. But rather than address the significant question of whether there is, in fact, a relation between the atrocities committed by Stalin and other Marxists, such as Lenin and Mao, in their attempts to implement the Marxian program and Marxism itself (including its atheism), Dawkins dismisses the entire issue:

“Stalin was an atheist and Hitler probably wasn't; but even if he was, the bottom line of the Stalin/Hitler debating point is very simple. Individual atheists may do evil things but they don't do evil things in the name of atheism.” (p. 278)

After contrasting atheism with religion, in the name of which millions have killed and been killed, Dawkins concludes: “By contrast, why would anyone go to war for the sake of an absence of belief.” (p. 278)

Here, once again, Dawkins resorts to a conjuror's trick rather than to a serious argument. Specifically, Dawkins slides over the fact that atheism almost never occurs by itself, as a simple lack of belief, but is almost always coupled with, as its obverse side, a positive belief, a positive philosophy. For Stalin, this positive philosophy was Marxism, and there can be little doubt that, during the 20th century, millions of people did kill and were killed in the name of that ideology. As a result, to simply write off the possibility that people may have done evil things in the name of atheism, as Dawkins does, is dishonest in the extreme.

Dawkins, too, has a positive belief. As I mentioned, he calls it “Scientific Rationalism,” for which Dawkins has devoted his personal crusade. Scientific Rationalism argues that the entire universe is rational (logical) in its nature and structure and is therefore entirely knowable by human reason. But Dawkins never actually argues for his belief; he just asserts it as true, while insisting that any alternative to it is “superstition.” While to Dawkins, it may seem obvious that what he calls “Scientific Rationalism” is simply the underlying philosophy of contemporary science, not every scientist or philosopher would agree with him, for not every scientist or philosopher believes that the cosmos is entirely rational. While Dawkins may believe he is merely defending the natural philosophy of science, he is actually guilty of what philosophers call “scientism,” the belief that all questions can be answered through the methods of science, even those that lie beyond science's purview. Since, as I see it, Marxism is also a variant of “Scientific Rationalism,” it is too soon to judge whether, in the future, people will kill or be killed in the name of this ideology. Given Dawkins' stridency, there might be reason to worry. Beyond this, *The God Delusion* is, at times, just silly. Such is Dawkins' attempt to demonstrate scientifically that God doesn't exist.

There exists today a fairly broad consensus among scientists, philosophers, and theologians alike that the existence of God can be neither proved nor disproved scientifically. Science, by definition, excludes non-natural phenomena from consideration; it therefore cannot address the issue of God. At best, all one can do is to attempt to demonstrate, through suggestive or analogical arguments, that God exists or does not exist.

Scientific proof, either way, is not possible. Fundamentally, belief or disbelief in God is a question of choosing; one chooses to believe or not. When people choose to believe, it is called “faith.” When people choose not to believe, it is not usually called faith, but that, in fact, is what it is. It is just as much a matter of choice (of faith) as choosing to believe. (It is also worth

recognizing that most of us who accept the results of science are also choosing to believe, for how many of us, including Dawkins, are sufficiently expert in enough of the fields of contemporary science to be able to make intelligent decisions about all the relevant scientific issues?)

Despite this, Dawkins attempts to prove, scientifically, that God doesn't exist. Since he knows that this cannot actually be done, and since he is concerned to be, or to appear to be, scientific, he couches his proof in terms of probabilities. In other words, he tries to demonstrate that it is very improbable that God exists. Hence the title of his chapter: "Why God Almost Certainly Doesn't Exist."

Dawkins' argument is ridiculous. First, one doesn't need to know much about math to know that there is a qualitative difference—a vast chasm, in fact—between "certainly" and "almost certainly." Certainty is 100%, not 99% or even 99.9999%. If something is not 100% certain, it is not certain at all, so that to say that it is "almost certain" that God doesn't exist is a contradiction in terms and to admit that He might indeed exist. It is thus absurd to imply, as Dawkins does, that he has somehow demonstrated that God doesn't exist. In reality, Dawkins has demonstrated, let alone proved, nothing.

More specifically, Dawkins' argument comes down to the point that if we are going to assume something (God or the "Big Bang") as the original cause of the universe, it is more likely (more probable) that this cause is simple (the Big Bang) than that it is complex (God), and that it makes more sense to believe in the more probable cause than in the less probable one. But all that Dawkins has done is to smuggle a seemingly scientific criterion (an argument about probability) into a matter concerning which it is doubtful that it can be addressed scientifically at all. As I've stressed, most scientists, religious or not, believe that the question of the existence of God is not amenable to scientific procedure; it is beyond what science can legitimately address. Scientific arguments, including those about probabilities, are therefore irrelevant. Thus, to utilize what appears to be a scientific argument to attempt to demonstrate the non-existence of God is another ruse.

In fact, there are many questions that science is incapable of answering. Science cannot answer, for example, the question of why we, as human beings, are here. All it can say is that "we are here because we are here," and attempt to explain how it happened, how the universe is organized and evolved so that we appeared on the scene (a rather improbable event, it seems to me). To science, the question of "why" is meaningless, irrelevant and unanswerable. While atheists may be content with this answer, not everyone else is, and to attempt to answer it, they look elsewhere than to science (and, to me, this is completely understandable).

Science, by itself, also cannot tell us how to live our lives, what kind of values we should choose, what we should strive for, how we should behave, and the kind of politics we should hold and fight for, if any. Here, too, people look elsewhere than to science for answers to these questions, although science can certainly help us make our decisions.

Finally, science cannot even answer all the questions that can be posed scientifically. At the moment, most scientists believe that the universe was formed out of nothing, roughly 13.5 billion years ago, in what cosmologist Fred Hoyle (who then held to an alternative theory) dismissively called the "Big Bang." This conclusion is based on extrapolating backward from the present the current (perceived) rate of expansion of the universe (plus a fillip called "inflation" to account for otherwise unexplainable phenomena). Based on this assumption, most cosmologists deduce that the universe emerged spontaneously from an infinitely small, dimension-less point, called a "singularity," and then rapidly expanded to its current size and shape. But not all cosmologists

agree with this. A few, basing themselves on the implications of quantum mechanics, believe that the existence of such a dimensionless point is impossible and instead speculate that the creation of our current universe was the result of the collapse of a previously existing one into a very small—but not dimensionless—space, from which it “bounced back,” perhaps only one of an infinite number of such successive expansions and contractions. Other cosmologists hold to yet other theories, some positing the existence of multiple, parallel universes, others positing a structure of sequentially branching (fractal) universes.

The reality is that cosmologists do not know exactly how our universe formed; all they have are different conjectures based on a few scientifically-demonstrated facts, a lot of assumptions and inferences, and a great deal of speculation. And even if it were proved that the consensus view is how our universe actually did emerge, it is understandable why some people might not find this conclusion satisfactory. After all, to believe that the entirety of our current (vast and intricate) cosmos emerged spontaneously, all of a sudden and out of absolutely nothing, is a bit of a stretch. (How does one even begin to assess the probability of that happening?) Some might dare to consider it absurd and to think it no more absurd to believe that the universe was created by God.

As this suggests, *The God Delusion* is often facile. In his arguments, Dawkins almost always takes the easy way out. Thus, most of the religious figures he takes issue with and the religious arguments he takes on are the ones that are the simplest to demolish. So, instead of addressing the ideas of more sophisticated defenders of religion, Dawkins focuses his attention on Biblical literalists and other fundamentalist believers. For those who accept modern science in general and the theory of evolution in particular, many of the beliefs of such believers (e.g., that God made the cosmos in six days, that the universe is merely several thousand years old) are false on the face of it, so it is easy for Dawkins to score cheap points. But the arguments of those religious figures who do accept the results of modern science and attempt to integrate them with their religious beliefs (those who, for example, interpret the Bible and other religious notions symbolically) are almost entirely ignored.

Despite Dawkins’ academic credentials, his forays into philosophy (as, for example, his discussion of “Scientific Rationalism”) reveal ignorance. This is perhaps most obviously demonstrated in his discussion of contemporary morality. Since this exposition is so crucial to the central argument of Dawkins’ book, it is worth quoting him at some length (please forgive me): “...we do not—even the religious among us—ground our morality in holy books, no matter what we fondly imagine. How, then, do we decide what is right and what is wrong? No matter how we answer that question, there is a consensus about what we do as a matter of fact consider right and wrong: a consensus that prevails surprisingly widely. The consensus has no obvious connection with religion. It extends, however, to most religious people, whether or not they think their morals come from scripture. With notable exceptions such as the Afghan Taliban and the American Christian equivalent, most people pay lip service to the same broad liberal consensus of ethical principles. The majority of us don’t cause needless suffering; we believe in free speech and protect it even if we disagree with what is being said; we pay our taxes; we don’t cheat, don’t kill, don’t commit incest, don’t do things to others that we would not wish done to us. Some of these principles can be found in holy books, but buried alongside much else that no decent person would wish to follow: and the holy books do not supply any rules for distinguishing the good principles from the bad.

“One way to express our consensual ethics is as a ‘New Ten Commandments’. Various individuals and institutions have attempted this. What is significant is that they tend to produce similar results to each other, and what they produce is characteristic of the times in which they happen to live.” (pp. 262–263.)

After reproducing one such set of “New Ten Commandments,” which he found on an atheist website, Dawkins goes on to label the liberal ethical consensus he is describing.

“In any society there exists a somewhat mysterious consensus, which changes over the decades, and for which it is not pretentious to use the German loan-word *Zeitgeist* (spirit of the times).” (p. 265.)

He then describes, at some length, how this *Zeitgeist* has evolved in the United States, from the abolition of slavery, to the changing attitudes toward women (from the struggle for women’s right to vote to the present), changing attitudes toward racial minorities (particularly the Civil Rights movement of Black Americans in the 1950s and 1960s (and, I might add, changing attitudes toward LGBT people).

The formation of this *Zeitgeist* and why it tends to move in a progressive direction is a mystery to Dawkins, although he is firm on one point:

“Where, then, have these concerted and steady changes in social consciousness come from? The onus is not on me to answer. For my purposes it is sufficient that they have certainly not come from religion.” (p. 270.)

He then lists and discusses a number of factors that he believes have contributed to the advance of the “changing moral *Zeitgeist*.” Among these are: ongoing public discussions, oral and written; the activities of leaders; the role of education.

He concludes:

“It is beyond my amateur psychology and sociology to go any further in explaining why the moral *Zeitgeist* moves in its broadly concerted way. For my purposes it is enough that, as a matter of observed fact, it does move, and it is not driven by religion—and certainly not by scripture.” (pp. 271–272) It is obvious (and not surprising) that throughout his entire discussion of this issue, Dawkins is at great pains to downplay the role of religion in the formation and spread of the moral *Zeitgeist* he is discussing. Thus: “The emancipation of slaves and of women owed much to charismatic leaders. Some of these leaders were religious; some were not. Some who were religious did their good deeds because they were religious. In other cases their religion was incidental. Although Martin Luther King was a Christian, he derived his philosophy of non-violent disobedience directly from Gandhi, who was not.” (p. 271.)

This entire discussion reveals Dawkins at his most ignorant and dishonest.

For example, while it may be literally true that not all of the leading figures in the Abolitionist movement were religious, the reality is that many, if not most, of its most significant figures were: William Lloyd Garrison, John Brown, Frederick Douglass, to name just three. (Equally if not more important, the overwhelming majority of Black slaves and free Blacks were religious.) It is also most definitely not the case that their religion was “incidental” to their struggle. In fact, it is not even remotely possible to understand the Abolitionist movement without understanding the profound role that religion, particularly Christianity and certain Christian denominations,

such as the Quakers, and religious movements, such as the Great Awakening, played in it. Either Dawkins does not realize this (in which case he is ignorant) or he is consciously downplaying it (in which case he is dishonest).

Likewise with the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 60s. Without the Black churches and their leaders, the movement would have been inconceivable; at the time, they constituted, by far, the most important, most powerful institutional presence in the Black community. And there can be little doubt that the vast, vast majority of the participants in the Civil Rights movement, leaders and rank and file alike, were motivated—better said, were inspired—by their religious beliefs. In the words of one scholar of the period,

“It is hard to imagine masses of people lining up for years of excruciating risk against southern sheriffs, fire hoses, and attack dogs without some transcendent or millennial faith to sustain them... It is impossible to ignore how often participants carried their movement out in prophetic, ecstatic biblical tones.” (David L. Chappell, *A Stone of Hope: Prophetic Religion and the Death of Jim Crow*, University of North Carolina Press, 2004, p. 102.)

More narrowly, the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.’s Christianity was not “incidental” to his philosophy; it was central. And, while it is true that King got his notion of non-violent disobedience from Gandhi, who was not a Christian (although he was religious, a point Dawkins forgets to mention), Gandhi got the idea from Leo Tolstoy, who, when he came up with his idea of non-resistance to evil, most definitely was a Christian (as well as being an anarchist). Not least, probably the most important single influence on King’s thinking was the Protestant minister and theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr. Most important of all, Dawkins’ visceral hostility to religion blinds him to what is staring him in the face (remember, he calls for a “New Ten Commandments” and paraphrases the “Golden Rule” of Rabbi Hillel!): Along with other causes (such as humans’ evolutionarily-derived biological nature and the dynamics of capitalism, specifically, the drive to break down barriers to universal participation in the labor market), the chief cultural/intellectual factor behind the emergence and spread of the liberal ethical consensus of which Dawkins is such a fan is the progressive generalization and secularization of one of the most fundamental tenets of the Judeo-Christian tradition: the moral equality of all human beings, based on the notion that we have all been created by God! In other words, the essential idea behind the progressive *Zeitgeist* on which Dawkins’ argument depends is religious in origin. (No wonder Dawkins is at a loss to explain where it came from!) This is demonstrated by the fact that, politically, the three movements Dawkins cites as exemplifying this “moral *Zeitgeist*”—namely, the Abolitionist movement, the movement for women’s suffrage, and the Civil Rights movement of the 50s and 60s—based their arguments on, among other founding documents, the Declaration of Independence. Do I need to remind Dawkins how that text begins: “We hold these truths to be selfevident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights...”? One of the reasons these movements were successful (aside from the fact that millions of people devoted [and risked and gave] their lives to the struggles to achieve their goals) was because the central notion on which their demands were based was, precisely because of its religious origin, so widely accepted in American society.

Thus, while it may be true, as Dawkins claims, that we do not get our ideas of contemporary morality simply from holy books, it is certainly not true, as Dawkins implies, that religion was

incidental (if not accidental) to this process. In reality, our contemporary morality, including the “progressive” values Dawkins champions, would simply not exist without religion, particularly the theistic creeds that Dawkins so loathes. Finally, the point of view articulated in *The God Delusion* is dangerous. Most frightening to me is Dawkins’ attitude toward all those figures, from agnostics to atheists, and proponents of the neo-Darwinian view of evolution, such as paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould, who do not support Dawkins’ jihad. Gould has argued, in his book *Rocks of Ages* and elsewhere, that the realms addressed by science and religion, respectively, are mutually exclusive; he calls them “non-overlapping magisteria” or NOMA. What he means by this is that these two aspects of human culture (as well as that covered by aesthetics, the realm of beauty) do not deal with, and cannot answer, the same questions.

Dawkins finds this particularly galling, because he does not believe religion is capable of telling us anything about anything. (Not surprising in a man who admits to being totally mystified by the origin of contemporary morality.) So outraged is Dawkins by this conception (one, it is worth repeating, that many, if not most, contemporary scientists and philosophers accept) that he calls people like Gould the “Neville Chamberlain school of evolutionists” (after the illfated British prime minister who advocated a policy of “appeasement” toward Hitler in the period leading up to World War II). In other words, to Dawkins, Gould, and those who agree with him, are traitors.

Dawkins considers it acceptable to be what he calls “temporarily agnostic” on an issue in which all the evidence is not in, such as whether life exists elsewhere in the universe than on Earth. He also considers it OK to be “permanently agnostic” on those issues that he believes are intrinsically unsolvable, such as certain problems of philosophy. But he is contemptuous of those figures, scientists and others, who are permanently agnostic on those issues that he thinks can be resolved scientifically. Such issues, in Dawkins’ opinion, include the question of the existence of God(!). As astounding as this is, Dawkins is adamant. He writes:

“Either he (God) exists or he doesn’t. It is a scientific question; one day we may know the answer (typically, Dawkins hedges his bets by using the word “may”), and meanwhile we can say something pretty strong about the probability.” (p. 48) We have already seen Dawkins’ attempts to explain why the non-existence of God is “almost certain.” The rest of his argument is of a piece.

Dawkins’ attitude points to what I think really is one of the most serious ideological dangers in the world today. It is not religion, per se; it is fanaticism, both religious and atheistic. Like fanatics everywhere, Dawkins bluntly declares: If you are not 100% with me, you are against me. Simply put, Dawkins is an atheist fanatic, out to obliterate all belief systems other than his own; he is right and everybody else is wrong. (It seems as if Dawkins has never changed his mind about anything; otherwise, he might not be so sure of himself.) Meanwhile, there are billions of people around the world who do believe in God but who are not devoting their lives to converting everybody to their beliefs and to smashing the “false idols” of every other creed.

One reason I fear atheist fanaticism as much as I do the explicitly religious variety is that I was brought up in it. I come from a long line of militantly anti-religious, left-wing Jews. While one of my great-grandfathers was a rabbi, both sets of grandparents were atheists. So were/are my parents. In our family, nobody went to synagogue, not even on the Jewish High Holy Days, and nobody was bar (or bat) mitzvahed; it wasn’t to be thought of. My parents were also, during the 1940s, 50s, and early 60s, supporters of the Communist Party and strong defenders of the Soviet Union and the other “socialist countries.” They and their friends were totally deluded about the nature of those regimes. All reports, no matter how well-documented, of the atrocities

committed in the name of “socialism” and “human liberation”—forced collectivization, the Great Leap Forward, and the mass famines they produced; the show trials; the millions killed, thrown into concentration camps and worked to death, exiled, or imprisoned; racist policies toward oppressed nationalities (including Jews)—were dismissed as lies and distortions, fabrications of pro-imperialist propagandists, or, where admitted by official sources (such as Soviet Premier Nikita S. Khrushchev in his secret speech to the 20th Party Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union), dismissed as minor blemishes on an otherwise spotless record of “socialist construction.” So convinced were they that the way they thought—their atheism and their belief in socialism and Marxism (although they had read very little Marx, Engels, or Lenin)—was the only way to think that anyone who thought differently was deemed either ignorant, brainwashed, stupid or a fascist. At a time when most children in the United States were, as Dawkins is fond of stressing, being indoctrinated into their religion, my brother and I were being indoctrinated into our (atheist) religion. The underlying message from our parents was: this is the only way to think, and if you don’t think this way, we won’t love you.

Virtually everyone our family socialized with thought the same way; even the children’s camp we attended for three summers reinforced the message. While I now understand, given what I’ve learned about the political climate of the period (the Cold War, the Red Scare [of which my father was a victim], and the destruction of the movement to which they had devoted so many years), where this was coming from, it was not easy growing up in this kind of environment. It was also not easy to break from it, even after I realized that my parents had been wrong on so many crucial issues. It was thus quite a relief to discover, much later when I was out of the house and enjoying Balzac, Dostoyevsky, and Tolstoy, that it was OK to believe in God if I wanted to. I did not ultimately come to believe, but I felt free to do so if I chose. This might explain why I find Dawkins’ arguments so offensive. To me, militant indoctrination, whether from a religious or from an atheist standpoint, is abhorrent. I do not see any difference between the two.

Although it may not seem so to people as simple-minded as Dawkins, our world and the universe of which it is a part are complicated and not easy to understand. To deal with them, to enable us to survive and to prosper in a hostile environment, humanity evolved and developed a variety of mechanisms, from our instincts (simple and conditioned reflexes) and emotional and moral intuition to sophisticated, highly elaborated cultural realms. Central to our culture have been our languages and the elaborate systems of symbols they have spawned. Such systems include religion, art, philosophy, math, and science. Utilizing, in different ways and in different degrees, each of these realms, human beings try to make sense of the world and to figure out how to live in it; as a result, we hold to different sets of values and world views. While science has come up with answers to many of the questions people have asked over the millennia, many such questions have not been answered; some (I believe) are not even answerable, despite what some fanatics—religious fundamentalists and atheist fundamentalists alike—may tell you. Do we really want to live in a world in which everyone believes the same thing? Despite the delusions of totalitarians like Dawkins, such a world would not be one whit less conflict-ridden than the one we live in today. But it would be a lot duller.

The way to a peaceful world lies not through attempts to impose a uniform ideology—religious or atheistic—on every individual in the world. It lies, instead, in the attempt to get people to imagine a different way of living, an alternative mode of existence, a new form of society, one without rich and poor, powerful and powerless, one in which people cooperatively and democratically decide what needs to be done and how to carry it out. Such a society, if it is not to degener-

ate into totalitarianism, cannot be based on ideological uniformity. It must entail, as a central component, a plurality of worldviews, an anarchism of philosophies.

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Ron Tabor
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