

# **The Incompetent Atheist**

## **or, There is no God and Darwin is his Prophet**

Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 2006

Before starting *The God Delusion* I made a prediction, based on some reading of Dawkins's earlier works. I expected the argument to have the following steps:

The question whether God exists is the first question in religion. It is a question like any other about existence, to be answered by evidence.

All evidence of existence is scientific.

There is no evidence for the existence of God.

Therefore God does not exist.

Therefore all religion is a kind of deception.

To begin with, it looked as if I was going to be right. Chapter 2, in which the book's argument begins, is called "The God Hypothesis", and the one after "Arguments for God's existence". *Hypothesis* is a term in science: Dawkins says explicitly that the first question in religion, "the existence of God", is to be settled scientifically. "Either he exists or he doesn't. It is a scientific question ... " (p. 48) and "the existence of God is a scientific hypothesis like any other." (p. 50) (Dawkins does not ask why it counts as a hypothesis when there is no conceivable experimental test.)

At this point my prediction went wrong. Dawkins does not draw from the absence of evidence the conclusion that God does not exist. He allows the conceivability of the existence of God and that *disproof* is impossible. So it is possible that God exists. The question for Dawkins is then one of probability. He has a scale of probabilities from 1 (strong theist, Jung) to 7 (strong atheist, no examples). (pp. 50–1) Dawkins puts himself in group 6, "very low probability, but short of zero. 'I cannot know for certain but I think God is very improbable, and I live my life on the assumption that he is not there.'" (pp. 50–1) Dawkins naturally uses the Bertrand Russell example of the celestial teapot. If someone asserts that there is a teapot in orbit round the earth but unfortunately too small to be detected by any scientific means, he cannot be proved wrong, but the chances of his being right are negligible. (pp. 51–2) "Russell's teapot, of course, stands for an infinite number of things whose existence is conceivable and cannot be disproved." (p. 52) If God exists, therefore, Dawkins thinks that it must be as one of the infinite number of things, and in the same way as the possible teapot, for there is only one mode of existence. There is, however, no more evidence ascertainable by any scientific means for the existence of

God than of the orbiting teapot, and so we have no reason to suppose he exists.

Dawkins supposes that “I believe in God”—as the Nicene Creed begins, not “I believe that God exists”—really means “I believe that in the physical universe there is an object called God.” No creed in Christendom has ever declared anything so stupid, and until the generation of Darwin and John Stuart Mill nobody was ever stupid enough to think that that is what anybody meant by “I believe in God”. No orthodox Christian (theologian or not) has ever supposed God to be an object of the same kind as (though bigger than?) a teapot. Perhaps the *protasis* of the Lord’s Prayer in a sort of way asserts existence, “which art in heaven”, but if so not as a hypothesis.

If heaven is undiscoverable by geography or astronomy it does not follow that the existence of heaven is either probable or improbable. Amongst that infinite number of things whose existence, like God’s, is conceivable but can neither be detected nor disproved by scientific means, are many whose existence Dawkins himself (like the rest of us) takes incuriously for granted. In the course of trying to disprove the “argument [for the existence of God] from beauty”, Dawkins speaks innocently of beauty, music and the sublime as real and as if his principles didn’t oblige him to think belief in them every bit as much a delusion as belief in God. “Obviously,” he says, “Beethoven’s late quartets are sublime. ... They are sublime if God is there and they are sublime if he isn’t.”<sup>1</sup> (p. 86) But how on earth does he know that the Beethoven quartets exist as music at all, let alone as examples of the sublime and the beautiful? What scientific evidence is there? It is easy to prove the existence, as things in the universe, of quartet groups, of audiences,

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<sup>1</sup> If anything this is an argument from inspiration. An argument from beauty would be something like: Beauty is very various (a sunset, Beethoven’s late quartets, King Lear’s asking forgiveness of Cordelia, the Parthenon, Orion) and there is no scientific test for the existence of beauty. It is nevertheless real, recognised in personal experience but not personal whim. So perhaps beauty hints at the divine nature. I again predict what Dawkins’s answer would be: beauty is whatever stimulates a certain bit of the brain. For an answer to *that* see *Words in Edgeways* 5, November 2003: if we have identified beauty, some brain activity may be associated with our knowledge of beauty, but nothing can ever be proved beautiful by observation of the brain activity.

No argument for the existence of God will ever convert anybody, but if Dawkins is trying to answer them let him do it. He misunderstands Anselm’s ontological argument. “It is possible to conceive, Anselm said, of a being than which nothing greater can be conceived.” (p. 80) On the contrary Anselm not only never says that God is conceivable, he explicitly denies it: “Es quiddam majus, quàm cogitari possit.” (*Proslogion* 15) He does conduct an argument based on the intelligibility of comparatives, an argument from language; Dawkins rules out argument from language *a priori*. But there is no point trying to answer an ignorant dismissal of an argument Anselm does not conduct.

of cds, of violins, but where is the scientific proof of the existence of the music or its beauty and sublimity?

If God is a delusion because He is undetectable by science then music, beauty, sublimity must be delusions too; and so must literature, poetry, art, love, virtue, heroism, the good—and science itself. By his own standards of evidence Dawkins has no grounds at all for believing in the existence of science. Science can no more detect its own existence than it can God's or music's. The question whether science exists is not a question for science; and neither is the question whether God or music exist.

Dawkins thinks of science (or even perhaps of *experiment*) as the ground or source of all knowledge but it can't be. It can't, for instance, be its own ground. An *experiment* to *test* whether science exists or not (yielding *results*, which might be *confirmed*, or not, by *further experiments* and constitute *evidence*) obviously pre-supposes the existence of the very thing it is devised to detect. In order to do science it is necessary to know science from non-science but such knowledge isn't obtained experimentally. It is rather the ground or condition necessary for experiment to take place.

A man, whether it be John Stuart Mill, or Bertrand Russell, or Richard Dawkins, who does not know that the existence of God is not a scientific hypothesis, can have nothing to say about religion. (Can he have anything to say about science?) One necessary thing for anyone entering an unfamiliar intellectual field is to try to understand what its practitioners think they are doing, what sense they are making. It may be that they are making no sense and that their activities are, as Dawkins supposes of theology, all nonsense. But before reaching that conclusion you have to find your way about the subject. When he discusses religion Dawkins does not know what he is talking about. And to loose off boisterous opinions about something one does not understand is the first mark of the *uneducated*.<sup>2</sup>

Dawkins just denies that any extra-scientific question can be discussed by theology, and that “why?” questions have any meaning (“What on earth *is* a why question?”(p. 56)), as against “how?” questions. (So, “Why did you lie to me?” has no sense?)

The closely connected second mark of the uneducated is to ignore one's opponents. As early as p. 17 Dawkins quotes at length an

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<sup>2</sup> The reception of *The God Delusion* in the English “heavies” is fresh evidence of how complete the rule of the uneducated has become. With one exception they were all somewhere between Joan (“the [one-time] thinking man's crumpet”) Bakewell—gushing brainlessly in the *Guardian*—and Charles Moore feebly and respectfully demurring in the *Spectator*. The one exception was Terry Eagleton in the *London Review of Books*, licensed to be hostile, I imagine, because respectably left-wing. None was anywhere near as good as Thomas Nagel in the American *New Republic*.

answer to Einstein's declaration "I do not believe in a personal God",<sup>3</sup> beginning, "We respect your learning, Dr Einstein; but there is one thing you do not seem to have learned: that God is a spirit and cannot be found through the telescope or microscope, no more than human thought or emotion can be found by analyzing the brain." If Dawkins had any inkling of the kind of discussion he was engaged on he would have had to try to answer this comment. In fact *all* he says, in two lines, about his sixteen-line quotation, is "What a devastatingly revealing letter! Every sentence drips with intellectual and moral cowardice." The intellectual and moral cowardice (as well as the nauseatingly poetical style) is in fact Dawkins's, for it is a kind of failure of intellectual courage not to confront what your opponents actually say, and goes against one of Dawkins's own commandments, "Question everything." (p. 263, actually from a list picked up from a blogsite, but accepted by Dawkins) He never questions the all-embracingness of science even when the challenge is directly made.

But say some sort of scientific experiment proved the existence of God, what then? What but that atheism would be solidly established and undeniable? If the God who created the heavens and the earth, and man in his own image, is proved to be one object (?creature) amongst others, God as asserted in the creeds certainly does not exist. What exists in His place is a very superior alien intelligence of the sort that Erich von Däniken thought built the pyramids and L. Ron Hubbard thought gave us hang-ups.

If, on the other hand, as Christians, Jews and Muslims believe, it has been revealed that God created the heavens and the earth, it may not be unreasonable to doubt the revelation, but it is very stupid to think it may be established or refuted by experiment.

Is it not strange when a scientist-philosopher has to be reminded that he ought to be reasonable? The prayer from the cross, "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do," cannot be applied to philosophers. A philosopher who knows not what he does is just incompetent. His fellow kakangelists (Dennett, Pinker, Chomsky, Pullman) ought—if they are not in the same pickle—to take Professor Dawkins on one side and have a quiet word with him. He risks bringing atheism into disrepute.

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<sup>3</sup> As reported by Dawkins this is another example of philosophical amateurishness. No qualification without aberration! "Personal" (as against "person" in the special theological sense, translating *hypostasis*) is not found in any of the catholic Creeds. I do not know the Einstein paper, and perhaps he clarifies what he means; as it stands in Dawkins nobody could know what is meant by *personal*. That God is a person (if so in what sense?)? That I as a person meet God?

## The Incompetent Theist

According to Professor McGrath

It is widely held that the scientific method simply cannot adjudicate on the God-question. The general view is that people tend to arrive at their religious views on other grounds, and then use their scientific ideas as retrospective validation of those views.<sup>1</sup>

Well, which? If science cannot adjudicate how can it validate? McGrath himself does not say that scientific method cannot adjudicate, but offers a “full and extended discussion” of Dawkins’s views, and “sets out to ask whether [Dawkins’s] famously aggressive atheism is actually warranted on the basis of the arguments he presents;”<sup>2</sup> which concedes that Dawkins is presenting relevant arguments. McGrath thinks it relevant that “there are many sane and intelligent individuals who draw conclusions which differ completely from [Dawkins’s] through precisely that same humble engagement with the scientific evidence.” So “Anyone who is remotely interested in ideas will find Dawkins an important sparring partner.”<sup>3</sup> On the contrary anyone of common sense will see that theology and Dawkins are not in the same ring.

I am afraid that my reading of *Dawkins’ God*, as of *The God Delusion*, was not very thorough, and I may have overlooked something. At any rate, I noticed the objection that would have saved McGrath the need for his “full and extended discussion” only once in his whole book, and then made in passing. “A Christian reading of the world denies nothing of what the natural sciences tell us, except the naturalist dogma that reality is limited to what may be known through the natural sciences.”<sup>4</sup> McGrath does not draw from this the conclusion that Dawkins’s search for scientific evidence is irrelevant to the question of the existence of God. On the contrary, he concludes that “Dawkins raises all the right questions.”<sup>5</sup> It is a mark of the modern age that the theologian who gets published as the Christian answer to Dawkins is on the defensive when talking of spiritual matters and much happier with science.

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<sup>1</sup> Alister McGrath, *Dawkins’ God: Genes, Memes and the Meaning of Life*, Malden, MA, 2005, p. 11

<sup>2</sup> pp. 11–12

<sup>3</sup> p. 9

<sup>4</sup> p. 149

<sup>5</sup> p. 158

Professor McGrath could not, naturally, allow *The God Delusion* to go unnoticed and so SPCK brought out his retort early the following year.<sup>6</sup> McGrath rightly remarks on how rambling Dawkins has become, and seems to take this as an invitation to do likewise, though happily only for 65 pages of text + Introduction. I lost count of the number of times McGrath assures us that numbers of scientists (40% in two surveys conducted at both ends of the twentieth century) believe in God. McGrath's intellectual agility has not improved either, for instance when he thinks a cause is the same as a necessary condition.<sup>7</sup> As in *Dawkins' God*, McGrath here blunders round the edge of a refutation of Dawkins without knowing where he is. He mentions opinions such as Medawar's that science is not equipped to answer "transcendent" questions, and Stephen Jay Gould's that science and religion constitute "non-overlapping magisteria", but has no inkling that this is what he needs, and himself confuses the matter with the idea of "partially overlapping magisteria".<sup>8</sup> How and where the overlaps come we are not told.<sup>9</sup>

In McGrath, the incompetent atheist has met his match in the incompetent theist. With such an enemy, what need has Dawkins of friends?

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<sup>6</sup> Alister McGrath with Joanna Collicutt McGrath, *The Dawkins Delusion?*, 2007

<sup>7</sup> p. 38

<sup>8</sup> *The Dawkins Delusion?* pp. 17, 18

<sup>9</sup> Perhaps to find out I would have to go elsewhere in the *oeuvre*. McGrath refers us to "The most widely used textbook of Christian theology, which sets out what Christians believe and why, clearly and impartially" (p. 76) written, of course, by himself.