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## The God Delusion

Category: Thinkers  
Essays

Richard Dawkins (RD)

This Bookthought is by  
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### General Bookthoughts:

This book's title says it all. Dawkins is a fierce critic of all unsound logic and anything that teaches us that belief in the absence of evidence is a good thing. Perhaps when the outcome seems favourable to us, we will believe anything that supports with this. We are all above average intelligence, above average drivers and above average parents, right? Yet, besides this delusion that biases towards self benefit, it is clear from the God Delusion and other books that perhaps the God of the Hebrew Bible may not be that pleasant to be around after we die anyway. How else would we justify the death of innocents like children or loved ones being taken from us in an untimely way? I would struggle with a boss like this at work, that's for sure.

At Thoughtpiece, we make a clear pledge to avoid showing or carrying any biases. So, you could ask – are we not biased against God? Well, no. We simply afford any God the same privilege as any other topic when assessing its integrity and truth value. Would I need to be quiet if I disagreed with your economic policy or political view? I hope not and by writing this review, we feel we remain true to this value and our cherished objectivity. Read it, it's great.

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### Specific Bookthoughts:

- Dawkins highlights many notable individuals who clearly did not believe in the God of any Bible – Carl Sagan (my hero), Stephen Hawking, Thomas Jefferson, Albert Einstein, Baruch Spinoza etc. There are equally many scientists and thinkers who do believe in God too – like Isaac Newton, Francis Collins etc. The point is that being an atheist or agnostic should not continue to feel like a minority position. Plenty others are loud and proud.
- He starts out by stating the case for God, going back to the roots of God. Initially our ancestors would confuse cause and effect. Perhaps they saw lightning as the work of God because it was accompanied by rain and thunder. It is a quick step from praying to lightning for rain and believing in the God of lightning. Initially religions (like Romans, Vikings and Greeks) involved many gods (and some still do – the Hindu Gods for example). Perhaps even the Roman Catholics have many gods – the Father, Son and Holy Ghost! It was a memetic certainty that monotheism would follow –one God trumping all Gods is a clincher. The challenge, of course, is that there are now three main Gods – as represented in Judaism, Islam and Christianity – and each are atheists with respect to each other. That’s a problem because if you are from one of the faiths, you have a two thirds chance of being an infidel with the other two. And all three religions suggest death to punish infidels. It’s not ideal. Nuclear weapons and all.
- Each of the three Abrahamic religions stems from the original Hebrew (Jewish God) – or more formally, Judaism is the oldest monotheistic religion. We know that Jesus created a splinter movement that became Christianity. Mohammed only appeared hundreds of years after Jesus.
- Science requires that we withhold opinion until the evidence is in. This is why it is argued that atheism is an incorrect stance to take – you cannot be 100% sure God does not exist. But Dawkins makes a great point – agnosticism is an impoverished position because it amounts to a non position. Atheism at least makes a point and makes it quite strongly. And for those on the fence, it offers a clear argument that they can cling to – rather than one of neutrality (“fence sitting” as he calls it). Clearly it is a point he feels is worth making, given the issues we could face if religions turn on the infidels.
- We are reminded that the healing power of prayer has been tested and does not work, statistically. The counter argument is that you cannot test God. Yes, quite. But we have mentioned that we should, just to be fair. I may have mentioned that I really struggle with insecure authority figures.
- Many smart people have offered reasons to believe in a God that on face value seem sensible. Thomas Aquinas offered the “nothing can start from nothing” idea and “who breathed life into the first being” etc. These, as Dawkins points out, offer nothing more than an infinite regress. Who made God? The mere fact that smart people like Newton believed in God often results in believers thinking they should too. Pascal’s Wager is also trotted out – something like if you believe in God and its true, then you win, if you are wrong, you have lost nothing. However, if you don’t believe and its true then you loose significantly by rotting in Hell. It therefore pays you to hedge your bets and believe. Yet, a God who accepts followers who are believing on condition they get access to heaven, must surely see through such shallow attempts. Does such a God need to offer a prize to attract followers? Does that not disobey leadership 101 principles? People also use scriptures to prove God’s existence – who else could write such brilliance and

insights and morals? There are, of course, far less thoughtful reasons for believing – I feel the presence of God etc.

- The argument for design seems a strong one, at face value (and we are predisposed to assign a designer when we see complexity). How could a random process make something as complicated as the eye? Is it not equivalent to a hurricane blowing through a scrap yard and creating a Boeing? This argument misrepresents natural selection. Natural selection is non random – the changes to our genes are random but the selection is non random. There is also the argument of irreducible complexity – a point where science can no longer explain the underlying detail. Perhaps Francis Collins feels this way. I prefer to withhold judgment than fill in the gaps with God.
- Many of these arguments for God say nothing about the moral qualities of God. Even if they were true (God started the big bang or breathed life into us), it requires a massive leap of faith to conclude that God is also omniscient and omnipotent (and kind).
- The anthropic principle is interesting. The Earth is clearly in an ideal situation and the laws of nature are perfect for our kind of life. If gravity were weaker or stronger, if we were closer to the sun, if the weak force were stronger etc. It does seem highly unlikely that all these attributes would all line up together. However, it presupposes two things – one is that our form of life is the only one (which it may not be) and that statistically our universe is not large enough to warrant a single instance of a planet like ours existing (with M theory, one doubts that). Besides, it says nothing about the type of God that could be involved, even if He tinkered with all the variables and made it just right.
- We are reminded that Darwin offers a very plausible alternative explanation to how life evolved on Earth. Sadly, physics does not have such a unifying theory (biology has evolution by natural selection) and is prone to argument from creationists seeking an “I don’t know” answer from a physicist. Perhaps the answer is “we don’t know yet”.
- Many explanations are offered for religion’s existence, given it is ubiquitous across cultures and land masses and predates writing and formal societies. It is an interesting question. First, there are advantages to religion. It binds groups, offers a social platform and it seems to make people happier (perhaps by being able to offload problems to God, or feeling transcendence which brings great dopamine rewards that atheists may not experience often). Is there some Darwinian advantage? Dawkins ponders the question. It is not easy to answer – why do we appear to be wired to be reassured by beliefs that are false? Perhaps it is a by product of something more important? Or does it help group selection (where Dawkins believes in individual selection)? One thing for sure is that religion has evolved so well, so as to be a firmly entrenched meme. It lures you by offering life after death, redemption on death (even virgins for sex sometimes), it offers faith as a virtue making belief in the absence of evidence something to aspire to and be proud of, etc.
- I think we are wired for following authority and religion could be an extension of this. If normal people can follow Hitler or Stalin, surely we can follow God or almost anything for that matter.
- It is often assumed that we would have no moral compass if it were not for the moral teachings of the scriptures. In a sense, morality, is a wholly owned subsidiary of religion. Dawkins, quite rightly, shows this to be wholly inaccurate. He points to the evolutionary gains to be had by having an inherent sense of right and wrong – the glue that enables us to form social bonds and live in groups. Christopher Hitchens often makes the point that the religious argument for morals implies that humans must have all had no morals before the ten commandments arrived. Did we

kill, steal and rape before we had sight of these tenets? Of course not. Indeed, when we do reflect on the ten commandments (the Decalog, as Hitchens does so beautifully on Youtube), they are incredibly poor guides for what is right or wrong. The first few, as examples, are centred on God and I summarise them here: I am God, Seek no other Gods, create no images of God (the Catholics may struggle here given all the images of Mary, Jesus and the rest), do not take God's name in vain and worship me on the Sabbath. Quite an insecure and self centred God wrote these. But, if you only offered ten morals, surely they could be improved on? The rest are reasonable – honour your parents, don't kill (Moses ordered his people to kill swathes of others right after receiving this commandment) or steal, don't covet your neighbour's spouse or belongings (a thought crime) and don't be a false witness. But where are the commandments on slavery? Paedophilia? Racism? Sexism? Violence? Rape? Homosexuality (defending them)? Fraud? Be sceptical, seek evidence etc. Clearly our legal system is far removed from the ten commandments – are we not, therefore, led to believe that we are better judges of what is right and wrong, than the scriptures?

- Dawkins acknowledges that Jesus was way ahead of his time from an ethical perspective – noting how the sermon on the mount was an extraordinary speech.
- Dawkins reminds us that religion has at its heart the need to love thy neighbour. Yet, it does not stand for inclusion, when we review the actions – schools segregated on the grounds of a particular faith, making it an anathema to marry outside the faith and the labelling of children as “Muslim” or “Christian”.
- He addresses the issue of Hitler and Stalin who many religious people seem to feel were driven to do what they did by their atheism (or belief in eradicating religion and replacing it with their own form of fascism). It is clear that both religious and non religious people commit atrocities, but all the major atrocities of the past were committed because of some irrational focus or cause (and religion seems to be a branch of this thinking). Pol Pot or Hitler did not do what they did because they were overly reasonable.
- On Hitler, it is worth digressing. I think people are mistaken about his religious motives. In the first chapter of Mein Kampf, Hitler says he is doing God's work and does not mention Darwin once in the whole book. The Oath that his officers took, swore to Almighty God (and the Fuhrer). On the belt buckle of each Nazi Soldier it said Gott mit Uns (God with us). One of the first treaties that the Nazis made was with the Vatican (who used to celebrate Hitler's birthday each year). He thinks the argument that he was atheist is a bit shallow. Although irrelevant...
- A very good question is posed by Dawkins: What is wrong with religion? Why be so hostile (towards it)? This is interesting in a few ways. Good things are certainly done in the name of religion (charity work, for example). But it is so often polluted by the religious motive – so many missionaries carry a bible into their charity work. Conversion is on their mind. Or anti abortion is on their mind. Or don't use condoms. It is not a clean, unbiased slate. The fact that good things are done in the name of religion does not mean it has a place in society. Hamas and Hezbollah do charity work. What would be better is if such work had no bias attached to it. The thing that Dawkins is particularly hostile to is that religion teaches us to avoid critical thinking and to be immovable in our opinions. “It subverts science and saps the intellect”. He mentions many instances where the absolutism of religion causes some terrible outcomes – penalty of death for homosexuality or for switching faiths, as examples.
- We are reminded of the logic that religious moderates help foster absolutism (or fanaticism). The fanatics, who seem to interpret scriptures most clearly, are in the religious minority. It is often

said that they are to blame for atrocities (like 911 or suicide bombings). The moderates, in contrast, are not taking their views to the extreme and are tainted by the bad deeds of the fanatics. It follows, in the view of moderates, that we should not call all religion bad if it is only a tiny fraction who are doing bad things (much like we would not say all journalists are bad if only a handful were). The problem is that all religion – whether practised by moderates or fanatics – is a topic that is not open for debate. It is a taboo topic. So, the moderates create cover for the fanatics because the entire religion is left unquestioned. Note how the western countries came to the support of the Muslim community during the Danish Cartoon scandal. They did not come out in favour of free speech (some free speech is not allowed).

- Dawkins is militant about this next point and I think he needs to be. It involves children. It is well documented that a person's religion is almost always inherited from their parents. Clearly this is not a result of the children being raised in an unbiased way. Children are raised as Muslims, Christians, Jews etc. and labelled as such. And schools segregate too, which is completely ridiculous. What is a Church of England School? It seems ridiculous to start with such a bias when you are an education based facility. The labelling of children, before they are able to make up their own minds, seems abusive. Imagine labelling a child a communist or a liberal democrat. It is no different, but because religion holds a special place in our discourse (a place where special rules apply), then it is allowed.
- Dawkins, like many scientists, feels his life has purpose without God. Looking at the night sky, at million year old fossil, the beauty of nature or being mesmerised by the Hubble telescope photos – you name it – there are numerous opportunities to feel elated about our place in the universe (without a supervising Deity). Living for life, rather than death, must be far more rewarding. And, although not necessary to disprove God, Darwin has given us a wonderful and elegant explanation of how and why we are here.