

## Book Reviews

**THE GOD DELUSION** by Richard Dawkins, *Bantam Press*, London, 2006, pp. 374, £20.00 hbk.

Richard Dawkins, as famous now for his unbelief as for his scientific acumen, proffers his latest book to those ‘who have been brought up in some religion or other, are unhappy in it, don’t believe it, or are worried about the evils that are done in its name’ (p. 1). On their behalf he rails against the irrationality, disutility and moral depravity of religious belief, and seeks to ‘raise consciousness’ of what he perceives as its antithesis – atheistic humanism.

It is on this latter subject that Dawkins is most compelling. Atheists are, as he rightly points out, a misunderstood and misrepresented group. Indeed, recent research by the University of Minnesota indicates that ‘atheists’ are the least trusted social grouping in the United States – well below, for example, ‘recent immigrants’, ‘Muslims’, ‘blacks’ and ‘homosexuals’. (Although Dawkins does not cite this study, he has a raft of others very like it.) The plight of atheists is, admittedly, less dire in the UK. Nevertheless, a degree of *religious privilege* remains in many aspects of British society and law. Dawkins makes a fair point here concerning the near-automatic granting of charitable status to organizations promoting (monotheistic) religion, bypassing the rigorous vetting required of secular charities. His hope to raise ‘atheist pride’ is noble and much-needed; one can indeed ‘be an atheist who is happy, balanced, moral, and intellectually fulfilled.’ (p. 1). This fact, although primarily aimed at ‘closet-unbelievers’, is one which theologians, and religious people in general, would do well to heed.

On the other hand, Dawkins’s cavilling critique of religion (and of those ‘dyed-in-the-wool faith-heads’ who find it plausible) rarely transcends the realm of immoderate and ill-informed broadside. A skewed definition of *faith* as ‘blind trust, in the absence of evidence, even in the teeth of evidence’, debuted in 1976’s *The Selfish Gene* and no less false now, undergirds and legitimates his whole enterprise. No theologians are cited to support this assertion (not even the much-misquoted Tertullian and Kierkegaard), and its falsity has been often pointed out, most recently in Alister McGrath’s 2004 volume *Dawkins’ God: Genes, Memes, and the Meaning of Life* – a book Dawkins claims to have read (although not, it seems, attentively enough to quote its title with any accuracy; cf. p. 54). The host of ‘Arguments for the Existence of God’ sketched and summarily dismissed in chapter three might seem, moreover, to nullify this understanding. As it happens, Dawkins avoids contradiction by presenting even the strongest arguments so superficially that, to the philosophically innocent bystander, it appears they really are so ‘spectacularly weak’ (p. 2) as to be impossible for any sincere, half-way intelligent person to accept. This strategy, however, leads Dawkins into some interesting dead-ends, as with the young Bertrand Russell’s fleeting assent to the ‘ontological proof’. Unable to admit that this ‘infantile’ piece of ‘logomachist trickery’ (pp. 80, 81) might possess even a shred of plausibility, he wildly suggests that Russell was ‘an exaggeratedly fair-minded atheist’, and gently berates him for being, as a philosopher, ‘over-eager’ to base his beliefs on *logic* (p. 81)! Another awkward fact – the conversion, on the strength of modern

arguments from ‘cosmological fine-tuning’, of sometime atheist Antony Flew to belief in some form of deistic demiurge – is addressed in a footnote, first by implying Flew’s senility, and then with an abrupt and illogical comparison with the atheist (one brief aberration notwithstanding) Russell: ‘On the other hand, Russell was a great philosopher. Russell won the Nobel Prize’ (p. 82). Quite what Russell’s literary abilities (for which he received the Nobel) have to do with Flew’s philosophical convictions (which prompted his intellectual metanoia) is not explained.

Dawkins is on somewhat firmer ground, however, when advancing his own demonstration as to ‘Why there almost certainly is no God’. Briefly put, he avers that anything capable of formulating and creating a universe must be a very complex entity indeed, and would require at least as much explanation for *its* existence as it provides for the universe’s. Positing an infinite god to explain a finite universe is, he argues, gratuitously extravagant: ‘Far from terminating the vicious regress, God aggravates it with a vengeance’ (p. 120). This is a legitimate objection – if not, perhaps, an unanswerable one. Dawkins does not seem, however, to have checked whether theistic philosophers have formulated any adequate response. Here, as throughout the book, a lack of real *engagement* with (as opposed to the odd quotation from) serious theology and religious philosophy is glaring. As conspicuous, but more puzzling, is the absence of serious *atheist* philosophy also. Thus the powerful and closely-reasoned critiques of religious belief by Michael Martin, Nicholas Everitt and Kai Nielsen, incomparably stronger allies to Dawkins’s cause than the popular and superficial works littering his bibliography, all go unmentioned.

A passing acquaintance with Martin’s *Atheism, Morality and Meaning* (2002), in particular, would vastly have strengthened Dawkins’s two chapters on the relationship of religion to morality which, as they stand, already contain some of the volume’s highlights. There are indeed good reasons to be repulsed, along with Dawkins, by any account of morality which affirms that ‘should belief in God suddenly vanish from the world, we would all become callous and selfish hedonists, with no kindness, no charity, no generosity, nothing would deserve the name of goodness’ (p. 227). It is also thankfully true that ‘people who claim to derive their morals [directly] from scripture do not really do so in practice’ (p. 233). Even so, a naïvely scriptural version of ‘divine command ethics’ is neither the only form of theological morality, nor the most persuasive (far subtler conceptions occur, for example, in the works of Dostoevsky and Karl Rahner). Equally, it is not enough simply to say *that* religion and morality are quite properly autonomous; one must instead demonstrate *how* that is the case – something Martin’s book, as opposed to Dawkins’s, does admirably.

There is much else in *The God Delusion* deserving of comment; far more, both positive and negative, than can be done justice in a short review. Dawkins made his name as a brilliant popularizer of complex biological science – a subject upon which he is amply qualified to comment. Here too, when writing on the virtues and plausibility of a humanistic worldview, and when demolishing creationism and the Paleian teleological argument, Dawkins is at the top of his game. The same cannot, however, be said for his more general forays into philosophy and theology – subjects in which he has neither expertise nor interest. Indeed, as the celebrated zoologist himself once put it in a footnote to *The Selfish Gene*: ‘Publishers should correct the misapprehension that a scholar’s distinction in one field implies authority in another. And as long as the misapprehension exists, distinguished scholars should resist the temptation to abuse it.’

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