

Review: JAD065

A SUMMARY CRITIQUE  
**DARWIN'S ROTTWEILER:  
Fierce Barks, Feeble Bites**

a book review of  
*The God Delusion*  
by Richard Dawkins  
(Houghton Mifflin, 2006)

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When Professor Phillip Johnson—who would become the strategist for the Intelligent Design movement—was on sabbatical from teaching law in the late 1980s, he read two books about Darwinism. One was Richard Dawkins's best-selling *The Blind Watchmaker* (W. W. Norton, 1987), a defense of Darwin. The other was Michael Denton's *Evolution: A Theory in Crisis* (Adler and Adler, 1986). Johnson, whose expertise is in legal evidential reasoning, was surprised to learn that the case for Darwinism was weaker than he had imagined; in fact, it was so weak that he wrote *Darwin on Trial*. Johnson examined Darwinism very closely and concluded that it was supported more by a commitment to philosophical materialism (which had become a reigning ideology) than by empirical evidence.

One wishes that Richard Dawkins, the prestigious professor from Oxford, would take theism as seriously as Phillip Johnson took Darwinism. Dawkins has been called "Darwin's Rottweiler," but he has refused to publicly debate proponents of Intelligent Design. He has produced *The God Delusion*, however, which is a well-written and acerbic, though unconvincing, case against the existence of God in general and against Christianity in particular (with potshots taken at other religions). He is one of a breed of atheists (which includes Sam Harris<sup>1</sup> and Christopher Hitchens<sup>2</sup>) that takes theism to be beneath contempt. For example, Dawkins concludes his book by arguing that raising children religiously is a form of child abuse.

Dawkins routinely uses "sledgehammer rhetoric" in this book. He puts the case against the opponent in the strongest possible terms and belittles the opponent as having nothing but irrationality to offer. Dawkins wields the sledgehammer in order to strike a series of lethal blows, and yet the hammerhead seldom hits the target. It instead twirls in circles, creating quite a lot of agitated air, but little cogent argumentation.

**Sledgehammer Hits.** There is much to critique in this large book, and I cannot address everything, but first, there are a few things to commend. Dawkins critiques the idea that a reverential attitude toward the universe—as evidenced by the iconic Einstein—reconciles modern science and monotheistic religion. Einstein, however, was not a theist, but (at best) a pantheist of the Spinoza variety.<sup>3</sup> Like the philosopher Spinoza, Einstein believed that nature is the deity, but that the deity is not a personal creator, designer, and revelator; it would not intervene in nature since it *is* nature, viewed from a certain angle.

Dawkins is also right to chastise theists who claim that God has not left any scientifically detectible evidence for His existence and that one must take it on blind faith. He is correct to expect that if an omnipotent and omnipresent being went to the trouble of creating the cosmos, He should have left some evidence of Himself in it. This is what the Bible itself claims (see, e.g., Ps. 19:1-4; Rom. 1:18-21). Dawkins overstates the

case, however, when he claims that religion is a scientific hypothesis: Christian truth claims can be verified through means other than science (such as philosophy, religious experience, history, and so on).

Dawkins rightly ridicules those who accept the Darwinian explanation for biology (which was created as a designer substitute) and who claim that God used this godless method to create the world. Dawkins quips that if this is the method God employed, God left Himself very little to do.

I also generally agree with Dawkins's criticism of the unchristian conduct of some professing Christians. My agreement with Dawkins, however, pretty much ends here, except for his condemnation of Islamic terrorism.

**Sledgehammer Misses.** Most of *The God Delusion* argues against God and Christianity, with Chapter 4, "Why There is Almost Certainly No God," stating the case most strongly. Having dispensed with the deity, Dawkins then explains why so many people are religious when there is no God and goes on to explicate the evils he thinks emanate uniquely from religion. Here Dawkins invokes evolutionary psychology and a number of other highly speculative explanations to account for belief. If Dawkins's case against God and Christianity fails, however, the attempt to explain away Christian belief on godless Darwinian grounds can be dismissed as begging the question. He also tries to explain morality apart from religion—while never giving the moral argument for God more than a passing glance—and argues that atheism is the best hope for humanity. The attempt to explain morality without God, however, is dismissed adequately elsewhere.<sup>4</sup> Rather than addressing his explanation for religion and his positive program of grounding ethics merely in materialistic evolution, I will focus on his critique of the case for God.

Dawkins aims at a variety of arguments for God's existence, but keeps missing the targets. He, amazingly, never addresses the kalam cosmological argument, one of the most powerful and most discussed theistic arguments of the past thirty years. Nor does he mention the much-discussed theistic interpretation of Big Bang cosmology.<sup>5</sup> Pascal's wager is summarily dismissed and badly botched.<sup>6</sup>

Dawkins rather begins with an argument he thinks he can safely mock: the ontological argument. This is a deductive argument based on the very idea of God as a superlative being. This argument is impossible to summarize simply and fairly as well, and Dawkins doesn't really bother to do so. There are two main forms of the ontological argument, both of which have received extensive philosophical attention (pro and con) in the past fifty years. Dawkins claims that it is absurd to infer the existence of God from a theological concept, since we should have empirical evidence for important claims. This statement, however, if taken to be a universal principle, is self-refuting, since the statement itself is not backed by empirical claims, but is a mere assertion. Furthermore, there are intellectually rigorous versions of the ontological argument formulated by Alvin Plantinga and Norman Malcolm that escape Dawkins's facile and fatuous dismissal.<sup>7</sup>

**The Design Target.** The ontological argument is little known outside of academic circles, but the argument from design is a staple of popular and academic apologetics. The structure of the argument from design is that certain features of nature are better explained on the basis of being designed than of being the product of mindless chance and necessity (or unintelligent causes). The argument can appeal to large-scale features of the universe revealed by astrophysics (the fine-tuning argument) or smaller portions found in biology.

Dawkins's attack against design is two-fold. First, he maintains that purely natural forces best explain apparent design at all levels. Second, he asserts that even if an appeal to a designer were warranted, this would explain nothing, since the designer (being vastly complex) itself would have to be designed, thus triggering an infinite regress in which nothing gets explained.

Dawkins dismisses the arguments of the Intelligent Design movement (ID) as "lazy" and based on ignorance. He maintains that invoking a designing intelligence to explain something like the sophisticated bacterial flagellum (an outboard motor that propels bacteria through the living cell) is a science stopper, since ID proponents simply cry "God did it," thus ending scientific explanation.

Dawkins's critique of Michael Behe's argument based on the flagellum and other biological systems misses the mark. Behe argues that the flagellum is "irreducibly complex."<sup>8</sup> This means that all of the

approximately forty protein parts need to be in place for the motor to work at all. A partially functioning motor does no good for the bacterium and would not be conserved by natural selection, which only conserves biological functions that benefit the organism's propensity to survive. Behe calls this "the mousetrap principle," because all the parts of a mousetrap are required for it to catch mice. The flagellum (like many other biological functions) fails to fit Darwin's demand that evolution be slow and gradual. Behe argues that in light of recent discoveries about the cell, Darwin's theory on this level has broken down, and that an appeal to an intelligent cause, a designer, is scientifically warranted given the empirical evidence.

Dawkins simply affirms that there must be a materialistic explanation for the flagellum, since this is how science—in his materialistic view—is done. This begs the question, however, as to whether there could be detectable empirical evidence of design in nature. Dawkins says *no* and relies on a post-dated check for some materialistic explanation to be found. "Just give us time." He does note that another biological system—the Type III Secretor System—contains ten of the flagellum's forty parts and announces that this refutes Behe, since this less complex system had to have been an ancestor to the flagellum. This is called the co-option theory, and it is woefully inadequate, since it leaves thirty parts of the flagellum unexplained, as well as the detailed DNA assembly instructions that are required for the flagellum to be put together properly in the correct sequence.<sup>9</sup>

Dawkins also errs by saying that Behe's theory claims that none of the approximately forty necessary parts of the flagellum can be found in other working systems. Since ten are found in another system, he states, Behe is refuted. Behe never made the claim that other parts could not be found in other organisms, however; rather, he said that all forty parts of the bacterial flagellum are required for its motor function and that this function could not be built up by Darwinism's "slight, successive variation."

Behe's inference to design as the best explanation for the flagellum is not "lazy" or a "science stopper." Nor is it based on ignorance. It is based rather on vastly increased *knowledge* of the workings within the cell that has come about in the past several decades. Further, Behe is open to plausible materialistic pathways (which appeal only to unintelligent causes) that would lead to the flagellum's function. None have been forthcoming, however, aside from the "just-so" stories required to keep philosophical materialism afloat in biology.<sup>10</sup>

As ID theorist William Dembski argues, the design inference is a "can-do" principle. We *know* that intelligent designers produce irreducibly complex systems (such as mouse traps and things far more complex),<sup>11</sup> but the only recourse for Darwinists is to summon unintelligent and mindless nature to explain the flagellum. *Any* materialistic explanation, then—no matter how far fetched or evidence-challenged—beats *every* design inference (in principle). This is not a reasonable way to do science.

Design thinkers, moreover, are cautious in saying "God did it." They rather claim that materialism is *scientifically* inadequate to explain aspects of life. They leave the identity of the designer fairly open. The ID conclusion is certainly "friendly toward theism," as ID theorist Stephen Meyer puts it, but it does not attempt to give a total apologetic for Christianity.

**Missing the Designer.** Who designed the designer? Dawkins repeatedly plays this as his trump card. If nature is complex, the designer of nature must be more complex. If so, the designer must be explained by a designer outside of itself, and so on, *ad infinitum*. Dawkins's trump card, however, is really a joker.

This is because, first, ID attempts to explain certain *finite, material, and contingent states in nature* through a design inference. It does not make the grand claim that everything that is complex needs a designer.

Second, if God is the designer, God is not a finite, material, or contingent being by definition. God, rather, is self-existent (Acts 17:25).

Third, Dawkins chides theists that if God is the ultimate designer, then God is unexplained. Explanations have to end somewhere, however. For theists, they end in God, who is conceived as a superlative and thus self-existent being. Dawkins thinks that for God to explain anything He must be simple, and that this is absurd, since God does so many complicated things such as create life, listen to prayers, and so on.

Many theists have argued that God is simple, but Dawkins misses the point. The issue is whether God, as a superlative being, is *self-existent* (unlike matter). For materialists, unthinking matter, chance, and fortuitous natural laws must explain everything, yet remain themselves unexplained.

Fourth, Dawkins presupposes a matter-first, bottom-up view of what explanations must be. He rules out, by materialist fiat, a mind-first, top-down (designing intelligence) view. Materialism thus disallows a proper investigation of the evidence at hand. ID theorists, in contrast, have more tools in their toolbox: they can appeal to both material causes and intelligent causes to explain nature.

Space forbids analysis of Dawkins's cavalier treatment of the fine-tuning argument for the intelligent design of the universe, and his dismissal of the fantastic improbabilities of the first life evolving on earth through mere natural forces.<sup>12</sup> Suffice it to say that Dawkins never states his opponent's views adequately, and offers in their place any possible materialistic explanation, no matter how far-fetched.

**The Bible Target.** The tone does not change when Dawkins addresses the Bible. On his view, the Bible can be little more than a collection of pious fictions, since its principle character—God—does not exist. Dawkins's approach is that any biblical text with a historical problem must be a palpable falsehood. Any miracle story, moreover, is false, since there is no God to perform such feats. In other words, the Bible is guilty until proven innocent; but it is never proven innocent, since God does not exist. This is a neat and convenient system of dismissal, but one lacking in academic integrity.

A good study Bible and sources by conservative biblical scholars can easily answer most of Dawkins's overheated objections.<sup>13</sup> For example, he dismisses the historicity of the Gospel accounts of Jesus' early life because they differ in various ways, such as in their genealogies. Rather than realizing that they were written by different authors with different audiences to emphasize different aspects, he infers that they are contradictory and are the result of theological agendas that invented pious fictions. Christian thinkers have noted these kinds of issues for centuries, and the plausible solutions they discovered are readily available, if one is concerned to study the issue carefully.<sup>14</sup>

**Dawkins's True Aim.** Dawkins confesses that the purpose of *The God Delusion* is to convert people to atheism. The book—along with several similar ones—seems to be giving ammunition to atheists and converting some from agnosticism to atheism. It nevertheless poses no serious threat to a well-informed and philosophically credible Christian faith; unhappily, however, not enough Christians have the apologetic background to withstand his attacks. This is not the fault of Christianity, but of intellectually lazy Christians. May this book serve to jolt unprepared Christians out of their ignorance and inspire them to defend Christian truth with zeal and knowledge (Jude 3).

— reviewed by Douglas Groothuis

## NOTES

1. Sam Harris, *Letter to a Christian Nation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006).
2. Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great* (New York: Twelve Books, 2007).
3. The Jewish philosopher Spinoza believed that the universe was one substance, which could be understood as either mind (God) or extension (matter).
4. On the moral argument, see Paul Copan, "Hume and the Moral Argument," in James F. Sennett and Douglas Groothuis, eds., *In Defense of Natural Theology: A Post-Humean Assessment* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), chap. 10.
5. On the kalam and Big Bang arguments, see J. P. Moreland, *Scaling the Secular City* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1987), chap. 2; and William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1994), chap. 3.
6. For an accurate statement and explanation of Pascal's Wager, see Douglas Groothuis, *On Pascal* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2003), chap. 9.
7. For an excellent summary of this issue, see Stephen T. Davis, *God, Reason, and Theistic Proofs* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), chap. 2. For a somewhat more popular yet convincing presentation, see William Lane Craig, "The Ontological Argument," in Francis Beckwith et al, *To Everyone a Reason* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), chap. 8.
8. See Michael Behe, *Darwin's Black Box, 10th anniversary ed.* (New York: The Free Press, 2006). This edition contains an appendix where Behe responds to the main criticisms of his theory.
9. The DVD *Unlocking the Mystery of Life* (Illustra Media, 2002) makes this point very clearly and graphically. Further, it has been argued that the Type III Secretor System came from the flagellum, and not vice versa.

10. This is an explanation concocted to preserve evolutionary explanations at all costs even when there is no evidence to support the explanation.
11. See William Dembski, *The Design Inference* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004).
12. For an introductory but thoughtful and documented presentation of these ID arguments, see Lee Strobel, *The Case for the Creator* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004). See also the insightful treatment of the origin of life in "Unlocking the Mystery of Life."
13. In my review of Sam Harris's *Letter to a Christian Nation*, I addressed arguments based on selectively citing Old Testament texts that offend contemporary moral sensibilities. Dawkins uses this argument as well. See Douglas Groothuis, "A Summary Critique: Sam Harris's Armory for Secularists against a Christian Nation," *Christian Research Journal* 30, 2 (2007): 46–48. For biblical problems in general, see Gleason Archer, *New International Encyclopedia of Biblical Difficulties* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001).
14. For example, see Craig Blomberg, *Jesus and the Gospels* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1997) and *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1987).