

## Selling the Soul of Science for a Pot of Message Evangelizing Atheism in *The God Delusion*

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Bestseller lists for the past two years chart a swelling tide of interest in a long-standing backwater: atheism. Nothing so tame as old-fashioned agnostic doubt, the new wave floods readers with outspoken scientific atheism. Sam Harris's *The End of Faith* (2004) was the earthquake that triggered a tsunami swollen by urgent tributaries from Daniel C. Dennett's *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (2006) and Marc D. Hauser's *Moral Minds* (2006), swelled all the more by Harris's reprise *Letter to a Christian Nation* (2006). That atheist tidal wave has yet to crest—Carl Sagan hectors us from the grave in *The Varieties of Scientific Experience* (2006), Lewis Wolpert castigates religion as one of his *Six Impossible Things before Breakfast* (2006), and Christopher Hitchens decries “how religion poisons everything” in *God Is Not Great* (2007). There is getting to be so much scientific atheism that Victor J. Stenger sounds redundant with *God: The Failed Hypothesis* (2006). For all the flotsam crowding their antitheological surfaces, these atheist spokesmen sound, bottom line, a lot alike: science is the sole reliable truth source, so if scientists cannot find him, God is not there.<sup>1</sup>

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1. Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004); Daniel C. Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (New York: Viking, 2006); Marc D. Hauser, *Moral Minds: How Nature Designed Our Universal Sense of Right and Wrong* (New York: Ecco, 2006); Sam Harris, *Letter to a Christian Nation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006); Carl Sagan, *The Varieties of Scientific Experience: A Personal View of the Search for God*, ed. Ann Druyan (New York: Penguin, 2006); Lewis Wolpert, *Six Impossible Things before Breakfast: The Evolutionary Origins of Belief* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007); Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: How*

The most vociferous if not obstreperous apologist for scientific atheism has to be British evolutionary psychologist Richard Dawkins in his most recent diatribe, *The God Delusion*.<sup>2</sup> It is clear from the first page why it is the bestselling standard-bearer for current atheism—this intense defense, far from abstruse treatise, is a rip-snorting read. Dawkins knows his scientific bailiwick backward and forward, parading it so sure-footedly his confidence downplays some dramatic missteps outside his expertise into the minefield of theology. This is high-risk territory, made riskier for this interloper by his scanty religious awareness; yet Dawkins manages some deft moves in his argument for atheism. He is a vivid and, at his best, a witty writer—I cannot remember when I have chuckled so much with any book of philosophy, let alone one so insistently insulting: “This sounds terrific,” Dawkins says about my view of creation, “right up until you give it a moment’s thought” (55).

He is, moreover, surprisingly often right—I say surprisingly because people who are as sure as Dawkins that they are always right are usually wrong. Cocksureness does not obscure some shrewdly compelling arguments on the well-trodden turf of Dawkins’s expertise, as with his point about the improbability of more complex beings (meaning God) appearing early in a process: “*Any creative intelligence, of sufficient complexity to design anything, comes into existence only as the end product of an extended process of gradual evolution*” (31). That is a likely notion: if we are persuaded we are in a process that is getting more complex, things were probably simpler earlier. That is why “the designer hypothesis immediately raises the larger problem of who designed the designer” (158). Even on the subject of God, where Dawkins’s scientific agility degenerates to plodding incomprehension, he manages some telling insights: “Omniscience and omnipotence are mutually incompatible. If God is omniscient, he must already know how he is going to intervene to change the course of history using his omnipotence. But that means he cannot change his mind about his intervention, which means he is not omnipotent” (78). How can God know everything that will happen and simultaneously be able to change it? Though this question has been of little concern to most theological illuminati, Dawkins raises the conundrum intriguingly.

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*Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Twelve, 2007); Victor J. Stenger, *God: The Failed Hypothesis: How Science Shows That God Does Not Exist* (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus, 2007).

2. Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006). All italics in quoted material are in the original.

So the atheist spokesman is occasionally adept at theology, generally astute on science. But from so insightful a scientist, from so compelling a writer who knows and cares so much, I had hoped for more. Specifically, I had hoped for more of what seemed to be the inherent strengths of the scientific viewpoint: more objectivity, more balanced fair-mindedness, and above all more openness to possibilities. That hope sank as I read these atheism defenses. These scientists are superlatively good at their way of seeing; problem is, that way is better at deciding what cannot be than at discovering what is, and that is lethal when one tries to think theologically. Looking at the universe from this atheist view feels like cramping everything through a telescope or microscope—wonderfully focused on what can be seen, but drastically restricted by the frame.

I am not suggesting Dawkins is small-minded—anything but. He just keeps his energetic mind on too tight a scientific leash. Dawkins distrusts imagination so much I sometimes wonder if he has any. This distrust limits his perspective, almost as if he is color-blind to theology. He focuses so intently on the black and white of material reality he cannot perceive the slightest tint of theological color. Old-school psychologist William James in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1905) has far less problem imagining the perspective of the believer.<sup>3</sup> James, with a modicum of imaginative empathy, was able to comprehend what Dawkins may never see: religious evidence may be real evidence; personal evidence of God may be more directly experiential, however much less measurable, than scientific evidence.

For Dawkins, religious thinking—all religious thinking, no matter its quality—is *ludicrous*, a term he applies lavishly:

The ludicrous idea that believing is something you can *decide* to do is deliciously mocked by Douglas Adams in *Dirk Gently's Holistic Detective Agency*, where we meet the robotic Electric Monk, a labour-saving device that you buy “to do your believing for you.” The *de luxe* model is advertised as “Capable of believing things they wouldn't believe in Salt Lake City.” (104)

That is clever, as Dawkins often is—genuinely funny. But I am too close to Salt Lake City not to notice more cleverness here than substance. Dawkins in this witty diatribe runs unfortunately afoul of William James's century-old central argument that faith is, at its core and at its best, precisely what Dawkins laughs at—willed decision. James's thoughtful

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3. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1905).

analysis develops this point more substantively, more scientifically, and far more persuasively than Dawkins's mocking dismissal of it.

It is a significant irony that an evolutionary psychologist fails to consider the crucial Jamesian juncture—human will—in the evolution of psychology. It is doubly ironic because the early-twentieth-century crisis of faith, the wake of skepticism that followed nineteenth-century Darwinism itself, was triggered by Freudian psychology. Freud relegated the supernatural to human psychology in much the same way that Dawkins and his cohort of current evolutionary psychologists relegate the numinous to natural selection. That historical lens makes recent evolutionary psychology appear, as Yogi Berra would say, like *déjà vu* all over again. It seems obtuse if not disingenuous for Dawkins and crew not to notice that the science of psychology that prevailed from last century's science-religion confrontation was more inclusive of divinity than Freud, more in the mode of Carl Jung's inscription over his door: "Bidden or not bidden, God is present."

Excommunicating God from the psychological universe at this late date in Darwinian history requires a certain scientific sleight of hand. Dawkins's scientific credo demands (as he thinks all scientists demand, scientists like William James notwithstanding) not just evidence but his kind of evidence: evidence must be observable. By him. He rules out as observation, *de facto*, anything he has not observed or, even more closed-mindedly, anything he cannot imagine observing. Dawkins cannot admit the possibility that another mind could have real experience if he himself is not capable of the experience. He invests much of his argument in the subjectivity of human thought, insisting—I think rightly—that we delude ourselves readily with the machinations of our malleable minds. The underlying problem for him as for me is that our perceptions are not reliable; we can trust only half of what we see, nothing of what we hear, so even less of what we think.

Unless, in Dawkins's mind, we think scientifically. Any kind of thinking within that realm works well enough. Thinking certified as science sounds suspiciously in Dawkinsian epistemology like a kind of scientific faith: "At an intellectual level, I suppose he [physicist and cosmologist Fred Hoyle] understood natural selection. But perhaps you need to be steeped in natural selection, immersed in it, swim about in it, before you can truly appreciate its power" (117). Seeing scientifically for Dawkins is not just another way of seeing, not even the best way of seeing: it is the only way of seeing. Never mind that he readily concedes that scientific seeing, like all our seeing, comes down to human observation and interpretation. Dependent though it ultimately is on unreliable bodily sensation and less reliable

mental construction, the scientific quality of that observation makes it for him sacrosanct.

It is not just the logic that is bad here; it is the science. Dawkins should have learned from his predecessor Francis Bacon that “by far the greatest impediment and aberration of the human understanding” arises because “things which strike the sense outweigh things which, although they may be more important, do not strike it directly.” We cripple our view when our contemplation “ceases with seeing, so much so that little or no attention is paid to things invisible.”<sup>4</sup> Harvard psychologist Daniel Gilbert in *Stumbling on Happiness* pinpoints that scientific blind spot: “Westerners have had a special reverence for conclusions that are based on things they can see.” It is evident that if only tangible reality is seen, what it might contain is missed, and so is what it might become. Dawkins severely underappreciates how much the scientific brain is involved in the act of seeing itself: “The brain and the eye may have a contractual relationship,” continues Gilbert, “in which the brain has agreed to believe what the eye sees, but in return the eye has agreed to look for what the brain wants.”<sup>5</sup>

Scientific atheists really should have seen that. “Constructing models,” Dawkins instructs us, “is something the human brain is very good at. When we are asleep it is called dreaming; when we are awake we call it imagination or, when it is exceptionally vivid, hallucination” (91). Yet when those mental models are Dawkins’s models, scientifically approved models, this dreamily imaginative hallucination of human thought suddenly transcends into *science*, synonymous for him with truth. That mental hubris may spawn the self-righteousness that smirks from Dawkins’s prose. No religionist I know—not even the most fundamentalist preacher—would claim the kind of exclusivity for religious thinking just because it is religious that Dawkins claims for scientific thinking only because it is scientific. Science for him is self-evidently true, not mere “opinion or belief” (366). Rather it is “something that they [the poor benighted believers], when they have understood your reasoning, will feel compelled to accept” (366). Dawkins and his atheist fellows may be the only coterie of thinkers anywhere, certainly the only sane ones, that privilege their way of thinking to the point they cannot give credence to other thought.

I would have thought before reading *The God Delusion* or *The End of Faith* or *God: The Failed Hypothesis* that a scientist would be quicker

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4. Francis Bacon, *Novum Organum* (1620), trans. by Peter Urbach and John Gibson (Chicago: Open Court, 1994), 60.

5. Daniel Todd Gilbert, *Stumbling on Happiness* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 163, 167.

than a believer to apprehend that though there are better and worse ways of thinking, there is no infallible way of thinking—even if it thinks itself divinely sanctioned, and even, heaven help us, if it thinks itself scientifically self-evident. Most ways of thinking—whether scientific or religious, idealistic or pragmatic, legal or logical, psychological or philosophical, mathematical or metaphorical, hyperbolic or hallucinogenic or however otherwise demented—have weaknesses as well as strengths, with limitations that allow concentration in particular areas.

Science is superbly focused on the world of physical fact. That need not be a problem unless a scientist somehow convinces himself physical fact is all there is. The crippling limitation of materialistic focus is manifest in how many scientists have persuaded themselves that the world of physical fact is the total extent of reality. Christopher Hitchens rules out scripture as “chiefly spiritualist drivel, as one might [apparently with no awareness of the self-fulfilling prophecy of such expectations] expect.”<sup>6</sup> Daniel C. Dennett dismisses the whole of theology as “intellectual conjuring tricks or puzzles rather than serious scientific proposals.”<sup>7</sup> Sam Harris excludes the entirety of religion from the realm of right thinking: “The problem with religion—as with Nazism, Stalinism, or any other totalitarian mythology [except, of course, for science]—is the problem of dogma itself.”<sup>8</sup> Christopher Hitchens takes this reductiveness so far as to persuade himself that the only legitimate thought is modern thought: “Religion comes from the period of human prehistory where nobody . . . had the smallest idea what was going on.”<sup>9</sup>

I have an autistic grandson who is absolutely brilliant in the spheres he can relate to, quite strikingly more tenacious, thorough, and reliable of mind than I or even Dawkins. His inherent limitations—disabilities, really—in other areas remind me of these atheists’ inability to comprehend anything they cannot subject to their senses. The most crucial questions of life for many of us, such fundamental human issues as “Am I in love?” “Is my life making me happy?” “Is there anything more beautiful than a baby’s smile?” “Am I my brother’s keeper?” “Is God really there?” seem to escape Dawkins and like-minded atheists altogether.

Their refusal to admit into their world anything other than what can be measured by their calipers looks a lot like fear of uncertainty, like mental anal-retentiveness, like orderly minds ruling out of consideration

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6. Hitchens, *God Is Not Great*, 113.

7. Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, 241.

8. Harris, *Letter to a Christian Nation*, 43.

9. Hitchens, *God Is Not Great*, 64.

whatever they cannot order. As nearly as can be discerned from the blurriness of their argument, their privileging of the scientific viewpoint is primarily a matter of overlooking an important point: science can be a hostage to the unreliabilities of observation, as can any other view, and may be more vulnerable than less materialistic perspectives.

Secondarily, their shared blind spot may be a matter of the expectation that evidence be communal as opposed to individual—they think the best human thinking is not unique genius but groupthink, consensus science think. And they think we should all think like them. Worse, they think if we are really thinking, we *will* think like them. They are persuaded that any reliable experience must be repeatable—that is to say, their experiment, their reiteration of the experience, must produce for them the same results it produced for you, or your experience is illegitimate. This seems to me, as the Church Lady on *Saturday Night Live* used to grin, “convenient.” My results can never be valid except when they echo scientific results. That of course makes scientists’ external observations inherently valid and my internal observations automatically invalid because scientists cannot replicate them. It seems obvious everywhere in these atheist polemics, as Dawkins is fond of parodying, that “there are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, / Than are dreamt of in *your* philosophy” (364). The thing that surprises me most about this view is its narrowness. Evident in the central premise of their atheistic argument and everywhere in its scientific details is the pointed fact that these observers are missing things that other people see.

Their science gets in the way of their theology so dramatically that the most persuasive argument for atheism may come from the least credentialed scientist, Sam Harris, in his *Letter to a Christian Nation*. Harris trumps Dawkins’s god of science with the god of reason: “The conflict between science and religion is reducible to a simple fact of human cognition and discourse: either a person has good reasons for what he believes, or he does not.”<sup>10</sup> Harris states that more tellingly than he thinks: it really may come down to what a person “believes.” Ultimately it is hard to trust Harris’s reason any more than Dawkins’s science, because both seem equally solipsistic: “The core of science is not controlled experiment or mathematical modeling; it is intellectual honesty. . . . One is either engaged in an honest appraisal of the evidence and logical arguments, or one isn’t.”<sup>11</sup> What Harris seems to mean is that we can take his logic on faith

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10. Harris, *Letter to a Christian Nation*, 66.

11. Harris, *Letter to a Christian Nation*, 64–65.

because he thinks it is honest. Harris, for all the strength of his case against religious rationalizing, is very nearly blind to scientific irrationality.

Compared with more comprehensive theological studies, even those of a light caliber of argument like J. B. Philips's *Your God Is Too Small*, this atheist science seems too small. The myopia that makes for keen-eyed close-ups does not serve well at a distance; the worldview simply does not include enough. Richard Dawkins is fully capable of realizing, for instance, that elimination of a premise does not establish a competing premise: I admire his conclusion that evidence that the world was not created by chance does not prove intelligent design. Yet it does not occur to him, by precisely the same logic, that the establishment of a premise does not necessarily eliminate a competing premise: evidence of evolution does not disprove God's creation.

Dawkins thinks so habitually in terms of either/or that he thinks all scientists think in this mode. "What the religious mind then fails to grasp," he pontificates in a typical proposition, "is that two candidate solutions are offered to the problem. God is one. The anthropic principle is the other. They are *alternatives*" (136)—as in black and white, his italics shouting at us, no room for wishy-washy gray. Thinkers with a broader perspective disdain that kind of dilemma, never referring to it without its faithful sidekick word—*false* dilemma. The reason dilemmas are often false is because Dawkins is not the only mortal who has trouble perceiving shades of grey. Desperate for certitude, we pose exclusive alternatives without it occurring to us (except the carefully logical—legal experts, for instance) that *either/ors* include possibilities of *neither/nors* and, most interestingly in light of Dawkins's arguments, *both/ands*.

Fallacies litter the logical trail of *The God Delusion*. "If [fill in the blank with any behavior, as Dawkins does] wasn't positively useful for survival until reproduction, natural selection would long ago have favoured individuals who refrained from it" (164). However reliable that sort of circular reasoning may be for Dawkins as scientific thinking, it is embarrassing for other thinkers, including other scientific thinkers. For him, the context of science inoculates his thought against fallacy and makes his thinking seem immune to human error. That produces a disorienting tilt to Dawkins's mental disposition: nonscientific kinds of thinking are subjected to the strictest standards of logic, but science thinking, apparently for no better reason than because it is about science, is for him legitimate even when illogical.

Fallacy is not a glitch in Dawkins's argument: it is the way he thinks. Each chapter showcases this: whether it is yet another incarnation of begging the question in "Why There Is Almost Certainly No God," or its



false dilemma form in “How ‘Moderation’ in Faith Fosters Fanaticism,” or its hasty generalization disposition in “Cargo Cults,” or its equivocation aspect in “Childhood, Abuse, and the Escape from Religion,” or its straw-man configuration in “The Poverty of Agnosticism,” or its *post hoc* mode in “Psychologically Primed for Religion,” or in general its false analogy format—his most frequent fallacy and the one in which he is most fluent (my personal favorite is his chortling application of the “Celestial Teapot” analogy)—Dawkins’s scientific thinking about theology comes down again and again to oversimplification.

We understand what he is getting at when he makes a statement like “The only difference between *The Da Vinci Code* and the gospels is that the gospels are ancient fiction while *The Da Vinci Code* is modern fiction” (97). Yes, yes, Dawkins, there may be fictive elements in both texts. But a more comprehensive thinker would wish to qualify any simplification that gross, might even want to point out that there are in fact more differences than similarities between the books, might stretch so far in the direction of accuracy as to indicate that in direct contradiction to his simplistic homogenization, these books are about as different as it is possible for books to be. When Dawkins strains his slight case into statements as untenable as “The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction” (31), the only arguable conclusion that any reader who has read any fiction at all can reach is that Dawkins has not.

It is intriguing that Dawkins’s version of the scientific view turns out to be more liable to limited thinking than religious perspectives. People whom Dawkins castigates as superstitious are actually more likely than he to be able to see as causation of life either God or natural selection or both. There are few creationists I have met, even in the deep American South, who have not at least wondered, on seeing evidence of evolution, as to whether that might be the means whereby God created the universe. Dawkins and crew for all their scientific erudition seem congenitally incapable of considering so much as the possibility of the existence of a God who could have created the universe, let alone any kind of related corollary that he might somehow be directing evolution. Even Bible Belters, not always regarded as models of expansive thinking, think more inclusively.

That calculated limitation characterizes *The God Delusion* and its clones. Dawkins grasps scientific concepts so cogently that his misapplication of them elsewhere may come as a shock to readers, as shocking as if someone were to declare on the basis of “The Emperor’s New Clothes” that kings never wear clothes. Dawkins can appreciate the glories of science so thoroughly as to work up missionary zeal about them: “I think about how much the poor fundamentalists . . . are *missing*. The truths of evolution,

along with many other scientific truths, are so engrossingly fascinating and beautiful; how truly tragic to die having missed out on all that!" (283). Tragic indeed—that anyone can see so expansively within his confined scope and yet never have had cross his mind even a shadow of the possibility that he may be rejecting, through a deliberately delimited scientific range of vision, truths at least equally fascinating and beautiful.

The problem, I think, is that for him there is no outside. His compartmentalization of perspective, his "my world is all the world there is" conviction, shows up again and again in his argument. Consider, for instance, his argument about feelings: "I don't want to decry human feelings. But let's be clear, in any particular conversation, what we are talking about: feelings, or truth. Both may be important, but they are not the same thing" (353). Certainly not. Neither, though, are they mutually exclusive. Even if we should buy into Dawkins's implied syllogism that there can be no truth in feeling, no feeling in truth, that schizoid division of our hearts from our heads might still be unwise. Maybe we do not have to divide, let alone choose between feeling and truth as he has; maybe we shouldn't.

Dawkins fears human imagination because of the tricks our minds can play on us. But I keep thinking maybe a little theological imagination on his part, the slightest capacity to think beyond his scientific rut, might make him a richer, even a more reliable thinker. "Polls suggest that approximately 95 per cent of the population of the United States believe they will survive their own death," he states. "I can't help wondering how many people who claim such belief really, in their heart of hearts, hold it" (356). This is not the only or even the most dramatic passage in *The God Delusion* where Dawkins directly informs us that he cannot believe we believe. We believers, on the other hand, readily conceive that he does not believe. This one point is a small statistical sample, but suggestive: perhaps one expansive effect of faithful thinking is to enable a person to credence the internal experience of others, to imagine somehow that the insights of someone who sees differently than we do might in some way have some value, if only for them.

The possibilities Dawkins misses are provocative. What if faith evolved, as every single thing in Dawkins's universe evolves? What if faith evolved not as the mental aberration for fooling ourselves that Dawkins assumes it to be, but for a function? What if faith had a real function, a purposeful function like every other thing that ever evolved, according to Dawkins's reiterated catechism, not excepting the appendix and male pattern baldness and PMS? What if that evolved function were to help us see things we could not otherwise see? After all, eyes did: our aural and kinetic senses are adequate for orientation and even navigation, and touch

is more precise for discernment than vision. But eyes, though they could be considered as extraneous as some construe faith, allow us to perceive things ears and even fingers cannot. What if faith were a kind of spiritual eye, never meant to displace reason nor to replace the material observations of science, but intended as a complement to them? What if faith evolved to enhance human perception, allowing us to see more?

Meanwhile, blissfully immune to what-ifs unless they are his hypotheses, Dawkins sticks to his locked-in scientific values as securely as a fly to flypaper. He is visibly proud of his elevated position, condescending to us primitives in the colonies. Dawkins considers himself smarter than nonbelievers even in the face of the clear fact that he cannot himself detect any intellectual dimension at all in the faith we think so much about. He assumes that because he has not thought about it, it has not been thought about. His position is even shakier than that: he does not think it is possible to think about faith, at least not in the only way that counts—scientifically: “If ever there was a slamming of the door in the face of constructive investigation, it is the word miracle. Once you buy into the position of faith, you begin losing . . . scientific . . . credibility.”<sup>12</sup>

Dawkins can be obtusely arch, positively gloating over the limitations of his view. He gleefully indicts the circularity of reasoning in the *Catholic Encyclopedia*: “Purgatory must exist, otherwise our prayers [for the dead] would be pointless” (360). But here as everywhere Dawkins hangs himself on his own petard of scientific bias. The linchpin of his anticreationist argument is what he terms “the anthropic principle” of creation, which comes down to the astonishingly simplistic argument that “we exist here on earth. Therefore earth must be the kind of planet that is capable of generating and supporting us” (135). Perhaps only Dawkins with his scientific nose in the air could stumble over how much more tautological his “we’re here because we’re here” argument looks than the Catholics’ “we wouldn’t pray if it didn’t work” argument.

Time and time again Dawkins allows his scientific viewpoint to limit his view. No wonder believers do not accept as definitive his theological declarations—he obviously does not think the field of theology exists. For those of us who believe the unexamined religious life is not worth living, his thinking verges disturbingly in the direction of “take it on scientific faith.” His mindset seems constitutionally incapable of any kind of religious perception, his worldview excluding religious experience to the extent that I seriously wonder if he has had any. He evidently has not even thought much about God, though he gets quite belligerent about that:

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12. David Van Biema, “God vs. Science,” *Time*, 168 (November 13, 2006): 54.

“What expertise can theologians bring to deep cosmological questions that scientists cannot?” (56). I would have thought *theological* expertise.

I would have thought everybody, believer and unbeliever alike, would expect God to be thought about if he is to be examined, even scientifically examined. The fact that Dawkins has thought as thoroughly as he has within the constraints of his scientific creed is not map enough for the theological territory he wanders into. It is not nearly enough that he has considered carefully the nonpossibilities of God. Dawkins demonstrates himself in his own conceptual terms to be someone from the “Middle World” (369), his mind convinced through its earthy experience that objects—our washer and our dryer, say, or God and science—cannot occupy the same space. What that limited model leaves out is that there may be levels of being and dimensions of seeing in which neutrinos can pass through solid walls (369) and scientists can actually conceive theology.

For all his astute insight and energetic scientific discipline, Dawkins is, in a word, reductive. My father on his deathbed said a single word, a summary of his life experience as a believer: “more.” Richard Dawkins says over and over in his *God Delusion* argument: “enough.” When we try to tell him there may be more to creation than process, he insists that intelligence only complicates the issue—the *why* does not matter, the *how* is enough. When we propose that agnosticism is a stronger logical position than atheism on the basis of what everyone agrees is inconclusive evidence, he concludes that existing evidence is, for him, evidence enough. When we try to suggest that Occam’s Razor is a superb tool for determining the relative efficiency of theoretical explanations but less effective as a discoverer of life’s fulness, he insists happiness is a will-o’-the-wisp of our imagination, scientific understanding enough. When we point out that our mature experience of God does not really have all that much in common with his theory of the evolution of God, which he likens to childhood imaginary friends like “Binker” (348), he shrugs: close enough. When we hint that it appears to us sometimes that scientists could be the worst group in the world to look to for ethical, let alone moral, insight, he assures us that sufficiently moral for his purposes, purpose enough for his life, is—I kid you not—“a good lunch” (100).

Despite those studied limitations, Dawkins is right on the money about some of his conclusions. Undeniably, religious narrow-mindedness and the destructive perversions that it engenders—from crusades to holocausts, from inquisition to fundamentalism—plague mankind. Yet obvious as that disastrous religious narrow-mindedness is, I just do not see how scientific narrow-mindedness can be its cure. Dawkins focuses so restrictively on the religious dark side that he fails to recognize that faith

provides many with light to guide manifestly positive lives. It is intriguing that his failure to find religion in any way illuminating does not upset believers as much as believers' disbelief in his views upsets Dawkins—we seem less compelled to convert him than he to convert us. Dawkins's assumption there is no God does not disturb me. Why does my conviction there is a God, my personal experience of a relationship with a God he is convinced is not even there, so incense Dawkins?

Could it be frustration at missing things others see? I play tennis with an aging cohort, their eyesights fading. My vision is still 20/20, which I am persuaded permits me to see tennis evidences my colleagues cannot. The resulting contested line calls, very much like my readings of *The God Delusion*, render me incapable of understanding how someone who has failed to see a thing can be surer of what he has not seen than someone who has seen it. Seeing things that are not there, as Dawkins warns, is for us unreliably perceiving humans a definite problem. But a bigger practical problem is not seeing things that *are* there. Far fewer car accidents are caused by hallucination than by failure to observe.

I do not suppose Dawkins could ever agree that I have seen what I have seen, even though I am perfectly willing to agree he has not seen what he has not. Even as agenda-driven a thinker as this deliberately blindered scientist might be, I would hope he might agree that negative evidence can be less persuasive than positive evidence. Even a scientist might admit, were he willing to think about it beyond his usual dismissive range, that the experience of a person who claims to have experience with another Person does more to establish the existence of that Person than the lack of experience of another person does to deny it.

All of which is to say that I find both the matter and the manner of *The God Delusion* and its closer atheist cousins fascinating. This book was a genuine page-turner for me, a rare accomplishment for theology, made more intriguing by the engaging phenomenon of a nontheologian theologizing, impressive in its way as a dog dancing. The writing is lively and compelling, and Dawkins struggles so admirably hard to find the truth that he stumbles on some. As much as he overlooks outside his range of concern, Dawkins is almost as infallible as he thinks on almost everything he examines within his scientific purview: if his world were all there were, he would be absolutely right about the world. And he quarrels with such charming vigor—though the argument for atheism has been put more persuasively, it has never been presented more engagingly. So I am genuinely disappointed this fine thinker and fine writer and obviously fine person allows his science to stultify his theology, to wither his version of the transcendent to something essentially reductive. For all the brilliance

of his scientific insight, Dawkins's dismissal of God ultimately comes down to not much more than

As I was going up the stair  
I met a man who wasn't there.  
He wasn't there again today.  
I wish, I wish he'd stay away.<sup>13</sup>

*The God Delusion's* obsessiveness about divine nonbeing tends, in short, to undercut its claims. It is hard not to feel, in the face of such fervent protestations, that Dawkins, Harris, Dennet, Hauser, Wolpert, Stenger, Sagan, and Hitchens protest too much.

Most believers I have met are better scientists than these scientists are theologians: they simply have not had enough experience with God, not even theoretical mental experience, to comment helpfully on the subject. They are theological equivalents of entomologists who have not bothered to observe an insect. To those who are persuaded of the existence of God, their perspective will seem simplistic—not just color-blind, incapable of perceiving depth and texture, but myopically missing altogether what matters most. It is clear to me that these scientific atheists omit God from their mental universe because God does not matter to them, and even more clear that that omission is up to them. But their choice—a forced choice between God and science—looks from here like a Dawkinsian false dilemma, unnecessarily exclusive, unwisely limiting. Religious folks, notorious though we are for our exclusivism, seem more large-minded and less dismissive, less prone to throw the baby out with the bathwater. Though God matters as much to us as science matters to scientists, we are considerably less disposed by our priorities to dispose of science.

I love the vision of possibilities that opens up for the astute atheist Richard Dawkins through his scientific faith: “The power to imagine the alien world of a bat or a rhino, a pond skater or a mole, a bacterium or a bark beetle, is one of the privileges science grants us when it tugs at the black cloth of our burka and shows us the wider range of what is out there for our delight” (373). Would that Dawkins could apply that fine principle outside his science compound to what for him proves too alien to imagine: the mind of a believer. My perspective, unlike the bat's or the bark beetle's, alas, is not for Dawkins an enriching alternative view of reality. Insofar as my view does not match his view, my life experience is for him delusion.

I like Richard Dawkins. I like his feisty defense of essentially indefensible ground. I admire the quixotic nobility of his championing unlikely

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13. Hughes Mearns in *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, 3d ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 336.

causes. I stand in awe of his capacity to generate not just affection but ardor for views that strike a lot of people as repulsive. I respect the passion with which he tries to persuade us that passion is not an issue, the conviction with which he attacks faith: “Science flings open the narrow window through which we are accustomed to viewing the spectrum of possibilities. We are liberated by calculation and reason to visit regions of possibility that had once seemed out of bounds or inhabited by dragons. . . . Even better, we may eventually discover that there are no limits” (374). Dawkins’s farsighted vision of such magnificent potentialities makes me want to carry him off his scientific soccer pitch on my shoulders.

Meanwhile, back in *The God Delusion*, as in *The Varieties of Scientific Experience*, *God: The Failed Hypothesis*, *Breaking the Spell*, *Moral Minds*, *Six Impossible Things before Breakfast*, *God Is Not Great*, and *The End of Faith*, the actual working out of those possibilities in practice results in a disappointingly stunted perspective. These brilliant authors’ science is for them such a compelling framework, such an incomparable paradigm, such a superb mental construction that they cannot think outside it and they all think alike inside it. Determined not to find God, Richard Dawkins and his coterie of atheists have seen from their carefully controlled scientific viewpoint precisely what they expected to see, precisely what they want to see. I doubt their view will be enough for wider viewers of all kinds. There is more, as many faithful scientists have recognized. There are far larger views of life than mine, but even from here it is apparent that Dawkins and his atheist sidekicks miss much. For such a comprehensive collection of nothing-is-impossible evolutionary biologists and not-even-the-sky’s-the-limit astrophysicists, atheists leave a lot out of life.

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