

## Richard Dawkins: *Vox Populi*

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### Introduction

Richard Dawkins, Professor of the Public Understanding of Science at Oxford University, in his best-selling, conversation-inspiring, and “consciousness raising” manifesto, *The God Delusion*, sets up and then rigorously and devastatingly destroys a number of straw men and their arguments concerning God and religion. From the general perspective of “science”—and scientific standards of proof, method, and truth—and from the specific perspective of evolutionary biology, Dawkins engages in a modern intellectual pastime: the critique of religion, its beliefs, its practices, and its all-too-frequent harmful consequences. Though his work is aimed at a lay audience (with the explicit intent of “converting” theists of all stripes to be atheists), its greatest value lies in Dawkins’s clearly articulating a number of the modern, secular, Western assumptions (dare I say “delusions”?) about God and religion.<sup>1</sup>

First and foremost among those assumptions is the almost blind faith in Science and its method and standard as the ultimate arbiter of Truth. In his work Dawkins makes reference to Robert M. Pirsig’s *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, but he curiously overlooks the passage of that book where the narrator describes modern scientists in their white lab coats as being like new priests of a new religion serving a new god.<sup>2</sup> Uncritical views of science and its veracity by both the laity and scientists alike is one of the underlying symptoms of modernity that leads to books like *The God Delusion*—works which deal with questions of philosophy and religion which people take as authoritative even though they are not written by philosophers or theologians, but precisely *because* they are written by the new priests of Truth, the scientists.

It is not my position that such works are to be ignored or forbidden *per se* by some petty academic turf defender. Such a position would make as little sense as saying that philosophers and theologians should butt out of questions of biology, chemistry, or physics simply because they are not trained as biologists, chemists, or physicists. Rather, philosophers and theologians have an obligation to their respective disciplines to provide informed, intelligent, and instructive critiques and alternative perspectives regarding all the various disciplines. In the same way, we should hope that the conscientious scientist would attempt to transcend his or her narrow discipline and view it from an external perspective – a perspective which would allow the scientist to critique his or her endeavors from a number of different vantage points: methodological, ethical, even theological. In other words, we philosophers ask, even implore, the

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<sup>1</sup> Whether Dawkins’s book succeeds in “raising consciousness” or improving the public understanding of science and religion is an open question. However, it cannot be denied that Dawkins’s book has spurred much discussion. Besides being a best-selling book, Dawkins has provoked innumerable reviews and critiques, among them an open conversation between H. Allen Orr and Daniel C. Dennett in the *New York Review of Books* (H. Allen Orr, “A Mission to Convert,” 11 January 2007) and at least one full-length book response, *The Dawkins Delusion?: Atheist Fundamentalism and the Denial of the Divine* by Alister E. McGrath and Joanna Collicutt McGrath (IVP Books, 2007). The present article hopes to continue the public discussion by examining three important deficiencies in Dawkins’s arguments.

<sup>2</sup> Robert M. Pirsig, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (New York: Bantam Books, 1989), 14–16.

scientific community to be philosophical and to contribute to the conversation of matters which impinge upon all of us as part of the human community. The best scientists of the past have engaged in this mode of dual inquiry, beginning with Aristotle and continuing through to Avicenna, Averroes, Moses Maimonides, Descartes, Leibnitz, Kant, and Einstein, to name just a few. As Ludwig Wittgenstein stated it, "Philosophy is not one of the natural sciences. (The word 'philosophy' must mean something whose place is above or below the natural sciences, not beside them.)"<sup>3</sup> This is so because the natural sciences either repose upon philosophy insofar as they assume a particular philosophic/metaphysical/methodological position consciously or not, or philosophy acts as a critique of the natural sciences and their underlying philosophical assumptions. It is in this spirit that I offer the following critique of Dawkins's *The God Delusion*.

There are three major topics which I would like to address: 1) Dawkins's one-dimensional caricature of God; 2) Dawkins's uncritical and exclusive understanding of truth; 3) Dawkins's quasi-Hegelian dialectical understanding of morality.

## I. God

In Chapter 1, Dawkins quickly disposes with any and all nuanced conceptions of God and arrives at what I like to call "The Great Santa Claus in the Sky." This is a conception of a personal God where God is imagined much like Michelangelo or William Blake depicted Him in their iconic imagery. In addition to being an old man sitting high upon the clouds, this God is omniscient, which means that He (always a he) knows if you've been naughty or nice and shall assign rewards and punishments accordingly (coal being a mildly symbolic reminder of burning eternally in Hell and presents being a symbolic image of all the things *you* want and think are good).<sup>4</sup> As Dawkins puts it, "if the word God is not to become completely useless, it should be used in the way people have generally understood it: to denote a supernatural creator that is 'appropriate for us to worship'" (p. 13). By "appropriate for us," Dawkins means a god who is able to hear and respond to prayers, because a god who cannot do that is, as Carl Sagan said, "emotionally unsatisfying...it does not make much sense to pray to the law of gravity" (p. 19).

In one short paragraph Dawkins defines for us what is meant by theists, deists, and pantheists—or rather, what *he* means by these terms. It is primarily the theists that concern him, for these are the people who believe in a personal, supernatural, intelligent god who intervenes in human affairs. By deists, he seems to imply people who believe in *Deus Otiose*, or *Deus Abscondus*—a god who is "confined to setting up the laws that govern the universe...[and] never intervenes thereafter." Finally, pantheism uses the word "as a non-supernatural synonym for nature, or for the Universe, or for the lawfulness that governs its workings." In a pithy phrase he says, "Pantheism is sexed-up atheism. Deism is watered-down theism." (p. 18) These last two

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<sup>3</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D.F. Pears and B.F. McGuinness (London: Routledge, 2002), 4.111.

<sup>4</sup> Notice, by the way, how many stories about Santa Claus—from *Miracle on 42<sup>nd</sup> Street* to *The Polar Express*—hinge on the child's believing in Santa Claus. No wonder why so many people, when they realize that this jolly fellow is a fraud, also feel great doubt as to the existence of God and all the other articles of faith in Christianity.

sentences seem to easily dispose of the difficulty of considered, intelligent, and more subtle conceptions of God. Either you're with me or you're against me, Dawkins seems to be saying, in oddly Bush-like ideological simplicity. There is no middle ground.

On one level I think that Dawkins's simplistic portrayal of God as Santa Claus in the Sky does accurately describe many people's vague image of what God is, or at least a childhood belief one may have had in God. It is, perhaps, due to this ubiquitous image (found in children's illustrated Bibles, reinforced in various movies, artworks, etc.) that many people find that God and the watered-down religious beliefs they received in childhood simply do not meet the needs of their adult realities, their complicated problems, or the profound depths of their psychology. I would like to take a moment, though, to point out something remarkable about "God" which may help to dispel the delusion Dawkins casts upon science and religion, particularly in the first chapter of his book.

It is little known, or at least not much heralded, that the Hebrew for the word which gets translated in the King James Version of the Old Testament as "Lord" is the so-called tetragrammaton; that is, the Hebrew four-letter word consisting of the letters *yud*, *hey*, *vav*, and *hey*. Occasionally, as in Dawkins's book, one will see these letters rendered as "Yahweh." What one almost never finds is the fact that these four letters, arranged as they are, are etymologically related to the Hebrew words for: 'was,' 'were,' 'will be,' and 'been.' That is to say that the tetragrammaton is some form of a being verb. But in Biblical Hebrew grammar there is no present-tense being verb, nor is there the participle "being." It is my suggestion that the tetragrammaton would best be translated by the word "Being," rather than the word "Lord," with all of its patriarchal and economic, not to mention historical, overtones.

If one were to substitute the word "Being" for "Lord" throughout the Bible, this would make for some startlingly fresh translations. Just to mention one, the central Jewish creed, the *Shema*, which is often translated as "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one," (Deut. 6:1) would now read as, "Hear O Israel, Being is our God, Being is one." In other words, rather than religion being the impetus for divisions between people and inciting hostilities among them based upon differences, this creed emphasizes the unity, not only among and between peoples, but with the entirety of creation. Furthermore, on this reading, one can easily dispense with both faith and proofs of God's existence. One need only look to the end of one's nose for proof of the existence of God, for so long as anything exists (and even a delusion or illusion *exists*), there is God, that is, Being. To demand a proof of the existence of God is as nonsensical as asking for the proof of the existence of existence. Faith is the belief in something which cannot be proved. Since God's "existence" is "proved" with each waking moment, there's absolutely no need for faith.

Perhaps Dawkins is correct in pointing out that there is not much difference between this conception of God (as all of Being) and atheism. For with this translation and 'new'<sup>5</sup> interpretation, one is brought back to what Dawkins said, that "Pantheism is

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<sup>5</sup> This interpretation, strictly speaking, is not "new," insofar as there have been other theologians who have proffered a similar reading of the tetragrammaton. For instance, Baruch Spinoza in his *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, Part I, ch. 2; Thomas Aquinas, in the *Summa Theologica*, Article III, understands God as Being (though he derives this understanding, at least in part, from Exodus 3:14, which is not

sexed-up atheism. Deism is watered-down theism,” however with just a little twist. As Joseph Campbell once said, it is not the case that the atheist believes in nothing, but rather, the atheist believes in everything! Or, as Ludwig Wittgenstein said, what is truly miraculous is that there is something instead of nothing and thus Wittgenstein feels a certain wonder and awe before the existence of the universe. (He said this in his famous “A Lecture on Ethics,” which, as a meditation on religion and science, is as sublime as it is terse.)<sup>6</sup> In this respect Wittgenstein and Dawkins are extremely close; however, unlike Dawkins’s “theologian friends,” Wittgenstein is not claiming that there “had to be a reason why there is something rather than nothing” or that “the original prime mover was complicated enough to indulge in intelligent design to say nothing of mindreading millions of humans simultaneously” (p. 155). Rather, Wittgenstein (and a number of “theistic existentialists,” myself included) finds the existence of the world as even more wonder-full and awe-some, even more miraculous (if one can use comparatives in this context, which, as Wittgenstein points out, the very wonder at the existence of the world is itself nonsensical and a “misuse of language”) since *it did not have to be*—there is no “reason” for its existence. It is, to use some anthropomorphic language, a complete act of grace and generosity. The universe, life, and particularly my life, are absolute gifts—yet gifts which, unlike our usual way of thinking, require no “gift-giver.” To follow Wittgenstein’s suggestions in his lecture, religious language is, in some strange sense, an attempt to express the ineffable which stems from the (strictly speaking) illogical thought of wonder at the existence of the world.

When we get past the poor translation of the tetragrammaton as “Lord” and understand that “Being” is what was originally written, we can thereby understand the entire Hebrew Bible as a prolonged stammering attempt to express human awe before the universe. Understood in this way, you and I are each manifestations of “God” as Being, and everything you and I say, as well as the songs of the birds and the screams of those dying in concentration camps, is “the voice of God.” There is no such thing as “blasphemy,” for this God, as Being, is great enough to accommodate each and every expression of Being, even contradictions and strife, even the voices of Richard Dawkins and Muqtada al-Sadr, Jesus and Hitler, Thomas Aquinas and Laleshwari. This is, indeed, a profound and challenging thought of God, but not one which is new, for as Isaiah said, speaking in the name of God, “I form light and create darkness, I make peace and create evil, I, Being, do all this!” (Isa. 45:7).

## II. Truth

In a later chapter Dawkins tells of a conference at Cambridge on science and religion where, according to Dawkins, his talks were rebuked by critics as “nineteenth-century.” Dawkins explains to us, putting words in the mouths of his critics, what was meant by this was: “Contrary to what you seem to think Ha Ha Ha we don’t believe in an old man with a white beard any more Ha Ha Ha” (p. 156). Dawkins goes on to dissemble and dilute the force of this argument (however silly he may try to make it sound in his patronizing paraphrase), reducing it to a point of etiquette. But what I

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based upon the Tetragrammaton); Aristotle, though not familiar with the Hebrew and independently of that tradition, equates God with Being in his *Metaphysics*, 1072a21–1075a10.

<sup>6</sup>Ludwig Wittgenstein, “A Lecture on Ethics,” *The Philosophical Review* 74 (1965): 3–12.

understand by this is precisely the problem with Dawkins's approach. What I believe his Cambridge critics are saying "in code" (as he says), is that the nineteenth century saw a wave of scholarly investigations, such as Julius Wellhausen and his "Documentary Hypothesis," which seriously challenged and undercut doctrinal opinions of God and the authority and origin of the Bible. But the twentieth century saw a burgeoning of scholarly works on biblical interpretation as well as comparative mythology which resuscitated modes of religious belief and illuminated underlying powers of the mythic narrative. The brilliant insights of such greats as Carl Jung, Joseph Campbell, Mircea Eliade, Roland Barthes, Claude Levi-Strauss, Marcel Detienne, Jean-Pierre Vernant, et al. dispelled a number of facile, even distorted "modern" misconceptions of religion and ritual and opened up fertile and fascinating vistas for the age of modernity to explore the meaning and significance of religion. Dawkins, by contrast, leaves no room for any allegorical, metaphoric, or other nonliteral interpretations of the Bible or God or religious ritual and then he goes on to ferociously attack fundamentalists/literalists. Based on his narrow understanding of theists (and his clumping in with them anyone who believes in God), he finds *all* religion to be simple-minded fundamentalist/literalist extremism, and therefore worthy of "enlightened" scorn and ridicule.

In this way Dawkins is really nothing new. Similar understandings of religion have been proffered by greater minds with more interesting insights. One might mention in this regard Freud's *The Future of an Illusion* and *Civilization and its Discontents*, or even Mordecai Kaplan's *Judaism as a Civilization*. Of course the greatest, most subtle, most complex critic of religion, particularly Western religions, is Friedrich Nietzsche.<sup>7</sup> Compared to these predecessors, who admittedly did not write manifestoes intended for popular consumption, Dawkins is but a pale shadow and a distant and weak echo.

However, it must be noted, that of the religious apologists, the illustrious scholars mentioned above are themselves following in a long tradition of intelligent interpreters of the Bible and religion generally. From Philo of Alexandria through to the Muslim scholars mentioned above, as well as such canonical thinkers as St. Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, there has been a long history of Biblical interpretation as well as a development of methodological approaches to interpretation. Even such a stalwart figure in Jewish tradition as Moses Maimonides says plainly that the Bible is like a golden apple set in a filigree of silver.<sup>8</sup> In other words, there are (at least) two meanings to the Bible, an external and an internal, or a literal and a metaphoric. Jewish tradition later developed the hermeneutic method of PaRDeS, which is an acronym (in Hebrew) for: literal, metaphoric, moral, and mystical meanings, all of which can be found to exist simultaneously in the text.

Dawkins says of this intelligent way of reading the Bible, "Of course, irritated theologians will protest that we don't take the [Bible] literally any more. But that is my whole point! We pick and choose which bits of scripture to believe, which bits to write off as symbols or allegories" (p. 238). (This sentence is basically as deep as he gets into possibilities other than the literal interpretation of the Bible, as if religious fundamentalists of the Southern Baptist Creationist variety, or the Wahabi, were the

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<sup>7</sup> See, for instance, *Nietzsche and the Divine* by John Lippitt and Jim Urpeth (Manchester: Clinamen Press, 2000) in order to gain an appreciation for the complexity of this critique.

<sup>8</sup> Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, Introduction to the First Part, pp. 6b-7a, trans. Slomo Pines (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 11-12.

only valid representatives of religion over the centuries.) What Dawkins misses in this criticism is what the word “tradition” means. As Jon D. Levenson, Professor of Jewish Studies at Harvard Divinity School, likes to point out, “A religious tradition is *not* a smorgasbord.” In other words, as Dawkins has forgotten (and many “religious” people as well have chosen not to remember), a religious tradition and its rules (including its rules of hermeneutics) are not a matter of “personal decision” or “flying by the seat of [one’s] pants,” as Dawkins says. Love the tradition or hate it, agree with it or disagree, there are rules of the game which, if one chooses to play the game, one must follow. As Robert Frost once said about free verse, it’s like playing tennis without a net. It’s fun, but it’s not tennis. The same could be said of people who claim to be within a tradition, but who pick and choose based on personal decision and preferences.

To his credit Dawkins devotes seven pages to discussing NOMA, an acronym coined by Stephen Jay Gould for “non-overlapping magisteria.” The basic concept is that religion and science are like non-overlapping parts of a Venn diagram; the former deals with “questions of ultimate meaning” and the latter with “the empirical realm” (p. 55). It seemed that, with the recognition of different modes of discourse or different “registers” of speech, Dawkins would clarify for the reader early in his text why it is preposterous to utilize scientific criteria in order to prove or disprove assertions about religious belief. But, unfortunately, no sooner does Dawkins introduce this important concept than he begins to ask such ridiculous questions as “Did Jesus have a human father, or was his mother a virgin at the time of his birth? Whether or not there is enough surviving evidence to decide it, this is still a strictly scientific question with a definite answer in principle: yes or no. Did Jesus raise Lazarus from the dead? Did he himself come alive again, three days after being crucified? There is an answer to every such question” (p. 59). And he concludes that the very idea of NOMA “is a joke” and “NOMA is popular only because there is no evidence to favour the God Hypothesis.” (Ibid.)

Here Dawkins is not only (willfully) blind to other approaches and interpretations of the Bible, he is as guilty of a simplistic, face-value, literalist reading of it as any radical fundamentalist. But furthermore, Dawkins shows his complete ignorance of the different registers of language. As Joseph Campbell and others have gone to great lengths to explain, there is a difference between metaphor and propositional speech, between poetry and quantitative analysis, between myth and empirical fact, in a word, between (“spiritual”) truth and (empirical) truth.

This naiveté reminds me of a story told by Campbell in *Thou Art That* where he relates a radio interview he had on the topic of myth. The interviewer began with:

“The word ‘myth,’ means ‘a lie.’ Myth is a lie.”

So I replied with my definition of myth. “No, myth is not a lie. A whole mythology is an organization of symbolic images and narratives...”

“It’s a lie,” he countered.

“It’s a metaphor.”

“It’s a lie.”

This went on for about twenty minutes. Around four or five minutes before the end of the program, I realized that this interviewer did not really know what a metaphor was. I decided to treat him as he was treating me.

“No,” I said, “I tell you it’s metaphorical. You give me an example of a metaphor.”

...Finally...he rose to the occasion and said, “I’ll try. My friend John runs very fast. People say he runs like a deer. There’s a metaphor.”

As the last seconds of the interview ticked off, I replied, “That is not the metaphor. The metaphor is: John *is* a deer.”

He shot back, “That’s a lie.”

“No,” I said, “That is a metaphor.”

And the show ended.<sup>9</sup>

Dawkins with his questions regarding “the truth” of the Bible is as daft as the radio host.

To continue with insights gleaned from Campbell, there is a world of difference between the “truth” we expect of a respectable newspaper and the “truth” we find in great works of literature. If a reporter for the *Wall Street Journal* reports on July 4, 2007, that a triple homicide was committed in a certain neighborhood of Manhattan, we can take measures to verify the “truth” of the journalist’s reporting. We can send independent fact checkers to interview possible witnesses, we can check police reports, we can go to the morgue to investigate, etc. This type of “truth” is empirical truth—in substance, the same kind of truth with which science is concerned and the same kind of truth that a correspondence theory of truth in propositional logic espouses. But this is very different from one person saying of *Moby Dick* that it contains “great truths.” It is as if Dawkins heard a person say this about the novel, then read it and found it hard to believe and so he proposed to set out from Gloucester, Mass., on a fishing expedition in search of the White Whale in order to either prove or disprove the “truth” of the text. The difference between the newspaper and the novel is so apparent that we almost take it for granted that halfway intelligent people are able to discern between the different uses of the word “truth” as applied to each of the mediums of communication. Furthermore, the “truth” of the newspaper is only for *now*. It will not be “true” tomorrow. But the “truth” of a great novel like *Moby Dick* corresponds to a truth of the human condition and so can, with some generosity, be called an eternal truth.

To drive home the point yet again, I wonder what would happen if Dawkins’s son or daughter came home from grammar school one day and said, “My teacher gave us an assignment today to write a piece of fiction.” Would Dawkins then turn to the child and say, “And what, dear, is a work of fiction?” “The teacher said it is a story about something that didn’t really happen.” Would Dawkins retort with, “What?! Your teacher told you to write down a rotten pack of lies?! Your teacher is teaching you to be a fibber!?” After all, what is a novel but a bunch of lies strung together which, in the best cases, create a “truth”? I don’t think that Dawkins is so obtuse as to miss this, but his pointed criticism of any and all metaphorical understanding of the Bible and his outright rejection of NOMA certainly leads him down this philosophical path.

Now Dawkins may counter that to say “John is a deer” is very nice and poetic, but it really just means “John is fast.” If one uses a metaphor, one can drop the metaphor and say the fact that stands behind it. And if one can say a fact, then that fact can be empirically investigated as to its truth. So, what is the fact behind “Jesus died on

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<sup>9</sup> Joseph Campbell, *Thou Art That: Transforming Religious Metaphor* (Novato, Calif.: New World Library, 2001), 1–2.

the cross and rose from the dead three days later”? To which I would respond that Dawkins must never have been in love. For love, among a whole host of other powerful “realities” in human experience, is one of those strange things for which we find all language inadequate to express the reality. Love is a very real phenomenon; however, when we try to express what it is we feel, we find ourselves reduced to inarticulate cooing and humming in a sort of baby talk. When we try to put these garbles into meaningful speech we end up with phrases such as “My love is a red red rose.” Were I to say this about my love to Dawkins and then, sometime later, introduce him to my wife, he probably would expect to be pricked by a thorn upon shaking her hand. Point being that there are certain realities “behind” the metaphors which, though very real, are not empirical “facts.” Though Dawkins may again retort that love is merely a certain chemical reaction in the brain or the complex development of the sex drive through evolutionary biology and natural selection (he actually makes this claim in the book, pp. 184–6). Such a reductionist explanation falls far short of adequately articulating my experience of love. Such explanations are like trying to explain the beauty of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony as heard on the radio by explaining how the radio was constructed, where it was built, and the nature of radio and sound waves. Such inquiries only explain the “material cause” (as Aristotle would say) of the sound, but never say a word about *music* or what distinguishes the Ninth Symphony from the static of poor reception.

With regard to God or “the religious experience,” as both Campbell and Wittgenstein, among others, say, we are constantly talking in metaphors, but when we attempt to drop the metaphor we find that “behind” it are no “facts” in the same sense that there is a fact behind the sentence “John is a deer.” For God, as Being, is not a fact, not even the totality of facts. Being is not a noun. It is not a verb. As Martin Heidegger points out, Being is a participle, that is, it participates as both noun and verb. We use it in language as a noun, but we should understand it as a verb—it is a happening. Our language and concepts attempt to fossilize the constant flux of experience, and thereby falsify it. As Alan Watts has said, communicating this experience is like trying to put water in a paper envelope and mailing it to a friend for him to experience wetness.<sup>10</sup> To understand religious language in the register of propositional correspondence theory is like seeing a sign which reads “Boston” and has an arrow pointing in the direction of the city and then climbing up the sign and sitting on the word ‘Boston’ and thinking you’ve arrived. Or again, no matter how many times one says the word “fire,” one’s tongue never gets burned. (The astute reader will notice how many similes I’ve had to rely upon in trying to explain this.) Thus, religious texts, instead of speaking about the truth of God, say rather that God *is* truth. But this again is just a metaphor.

Another possible mode of expression, though also inadequate, is the development of negative theology, which negates and dismisses any and every metaphoric, representational, conceptual thought and expression of God. Thus, in both Eastern as well as certain mystical Western religious traditions, one is led to a realm beyond language in order to experience God for oneself. *Zazen*, or sitting meditation—without thought, concept, or representation of Being, without will, without striving,

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<sup>10</sup> Alan Watts, *The Wisdom of Insecurity: A Message for an Age of Anxiety* (New York: Vintage Books, 1951), 13–14.



without attempting to *do* something—is the experience of letting Being be and of fully being the Being that one already is.

### III. Morality

When discussing various “morally objectionable” passages from the Bible, a text which he admits he finds to be “just plain weird,” Dawkins raises a valid objection to the alternate understanding of truth which I described above. Dawkins looks at the passage of Abraham’s “Binding of Isaac,” and remarks that:

Once again, modern theologians will protest that the story of Abraham sacrificing Isaac should not be taken as literal fact. And, once again, the appropriate response is twofold. First, many many people, even to this day, do take the whole of their scripture to be literal fact, and they have a great deal of political power over the rest of us, especially in the United States and in the Islamic world. Second, if not as literal fact, how should we take the story? As an allegory? Then an allegory for what? Surely nothing praiseworthy. As a moral lesson? But what kind of morals could one derive from this appalling story? (pp. 242–43)

In responding to Dawkins, the response is also twofold. First, he is quite right when he says that many people take (their religious) scripture as literal fact. Whether we are talking about Bible-thumping fundamentalists in the U.S. or radical Islamic Jihadists in Afghanistan, ultra-orthodox Jews in Israel, or radical Hindus in Kashmir, those who read holy writ as they would read a (modern) history book or a geology book are as delusional as a person who reads the front page of the newspaper and looks for its deeper mythical and mystical meaning. The above section was an attempt to clarify this confusion. By now, that should be clear. However, Dawkins’s second concern is far more important. If this is a metaphor or an allegory or a ‘moral lesson,’ what does it have to teach us? This is the question that every religiously concerned person who takes the Hebrew Bible as a holy book should ask him or herself. Does not the text demand this of the reader?<sup>11</sup>

Throughout the ages, responsible religious readers have attempted to answer this question and each age, even each reader, has its own answer. That there is not one unambiguous, definitive answer is a testament to the depth and complexity of the text, not a testament of its flaws. To briefly touch on two such answers, I shall paraphrase suggestions from both the Jewish and the Christian traditions.

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<sup>11</sup> Dawkins spends a lot of time railing against indoctrination of children into religions. He says that “Christianity, just as much as Islam, teaches children that unquestioned faith is a virtue” (p. 306). This may in fact be the case, but growing up in the Jewish faith, which has a long history of not making distinctions between theology, philosophy, and jurisprudence, my experience was that no questioning (of religion or faith or text) was ever discouraged in any way. It may in fact be that this very passage from Genesis and the interpretation provided below is so paradigmatic in the Jewish tradition that it influenced the openness to interrogation that has characterized Judaism for centuries. If Abraham could question and challenge God, then *a fortiori*, we can, even should, do the same.

In Judaism, the figure of Abraham is of supreme importance, equaled or surpassed, perhaps, only by Moses. The story of the Binding of Isaac needs to be read in context, not, as Dawkins does, as an isolated narrative. It follows after two other major events; the Noah story and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. In the story of Noah we are told that human beings were so evil that God chose to destroy them, except for Noah, who was “righteous in his generation” (Gen. 6:9). When God told Noah of the plan to flood the world and that Noah should build an ark for himself and his family, Noah unquestioningly obeyed. By contrast, when Abraham was informed of the impending doom of the city of Sodom, Abraham did not respond with a shrug and a comment to the effect of “Boy, it sucks to be them.” Rather, Abraham, in a dangerous gambit and a startling show of *chutzpa*, dared to argue with God. “That be far from Thee to do after this manner, to slay the righteous with the wicked, that so the righteous should be as the wicked; that be far from Thee; shall not the judge of all the earth do justly?” (Gen. 18:25). This seems to be some improvement over his predecessor Noah, and we might expect Abraham to ask God to save the righteous and only kill the wicked. But Abraham defies our expectations and he requests that the *entire city* be spared if he is able to find 50 righteous people in it. Rather than strict justice, Abraham seeks mercy. He intervenes on the part of the evildoers, the sinners of the city.<sup>12</sup> According to certain Jewish interpretations, it was this arguing with God and pleading on behalf of the guilty that earned Abraham the merit of being the Covenantal partner with God. In order for that Covenant to be fulfilled, Abraham had to have progeny. According to Jewish tradition, the Covenantal son was Isaac. So when God told Abraham to bind Isaac on a mountain and sacrifice him, this was indeed an odd request. Even more odd is that Abraham did not petition on behalf of his son like he did on behalf of the sinners of Sodom. Why not? Because unlike then, now Abraham would be a beneficiary of such a petition. Before, Abraham took his life in his hands and was prepared to sacrifice it on behalf of the sinners. Now, such pleas would appear selfish. To follow through with the command from God proved Abraham’s selflessness.

A similar, yet radical and (so it has turned out) fully modern interpretation of the same story is provided by Soren Kierkegaard in his *Fear and Trembling*. In this interpretation, Kierkegaard attempts to articulate, through the ‘allegory’ of Abraham and Isaac, how the individual, in an experience of religion which is radical in its individuality, can and perhaps must transcend the social morality which Dawkins and his evolutionary biology prescribes for humanity. Dawkins seems to be blissfully oblivious to either of these interpretations, nay, any religious interpretation which is anything but “deplorable.”

To his credit, Dawkins repeatedly returns to attacking any nonliteralist interpretations of the Bible with slightly different shades of the same argument. These repeated attempts at discrediting allegorical or metaphoric interpretations suggest that perhaps nonliteral interpretations of the Bible present a formidable challenge for

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<sup>12</sup> This is startlingly different from the modern “righteous” whom Dawkins cites who make such claims as AIDS is a modern plague from God upon sinners, those who perished in the World Trade Center deserved it because they were heathens, those who were swept away by the tsunami in Southeast Asia deserved it due to their ungodliness, and the city of New Orleans brought on hurricane Katrina by hosting a gay pride parade. These modern “moralists” should read their Old Testament a bit more carefully.

Dawkins's position. Thus, after citing another violent passage from the Bible (Exodus 34:13–17), he states:

I know, yes of course, of course, times have changed, and no religious leader today (apart from the likes of the Taliban or the American Christian equivalent) thinks like Moses. But that is my whole point. All I am establishing is that modern morality, wherever else it comes from, does not come from the Bible. Apologists cannot get away with claiming that religion provides them with some sort of inside track to defining what is good and what is bad—a privileged source unavailable to atheists. They cannot get away with it, not even if they employ that favourite trick of interpreting selected scriptures as 'symbolic' rather than literal. By what criterion do you *decide* which passages are symbolic, which literal? (pp. 246–47)

Besides one obvious oversight with this claim—that much of our modern, Western morality does, in fact, come from the Judeo-Christian tradition (and for an insightful tracing of this, as well as a scathing critique of said morality, read Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morals*)—as I mentioned in Part II of this paper, Dawkins fails to appreciate what is meant by a religious tradition. Religious traditions, whether Jewish, Christian, or Muslim, have, over the centuries, established not only certain sanctioned modes of interpretation, but also canons of law and ethical behavior. Dawkins again (willfully?) disregards such venerated canons of Biblical scholarship as the Jewish Talmud and Midrash, Catholic canon law, and Muslim *Sharia* and *Fiqh*.

Today a lot of attention has been focused on the Muslim community, criticizing its literal interpretation of the Koran, its radical extremism, and its violence. It has been portrayed in the media as a religion of hate and war. Some lip service has suggested that the vast majority of Muslims are “moderate” and espouse peace and harmony. But by far the popular conception of Islam is that it is the religion of Osama Bin Laden and his ilk and so it must be a completely immoral religion. What we in the West forget or wish not to remember is that for centuries there were great “universities” throughout the Islamic world, particularly in the Middle East, which were centers for study of these religious canons. (And in its Golden Age, Islamic study not only flourished in the realm of theology, but *all* the arts and sciences, of which the West is so proud, were developed in these Islamic universities. Were it not for Islamic scholars who preserved and advanced the knowledge of the ancient world, just about all those texts would be lost to us and there would have never been an Enlightenment to bring the West out of the Dark Ages!) However, during the age of Western colonization, the imperial powers *intentionally* destroyed these learned institutions, resulting in a catastrophic vacuum of Islamic scholars and educated, institutionally ordained religious authorities. The upshot of this is that today anyone with a website can claim to be a religious authority and those with the most vehement anti-Western rhetoric tend to gain the most adherents.<sup>13</sup>

Now Dawkins may, and in fact does, contend that despite all these “traditions” and “canons,” “laws,” and “ethics,” organized religion is responsible for much evil. In fact, Dawkins devotes at least two full chapters to detailing the evils of religion. Anyone

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<sup>13</sup> For a concise account of this, see Reza Aslan, “The War for Islam,” *Boston Globe*, 10 September 2006.

with a familiarity with Western history is well aware of the role that organized religion has played in increasing human suffering of all kinds, physical as well as psychological. I don't propose to refute any of these accusations. However, it is also the case that political entities (which many religions were and are) also can contribute to great intellectual and theoretical achievements, such as the Constitution of the United States or even the Constitution of the Soviet Union, but fail to live up to the ideals and standards so created. Repeatedly the United States has fallen short of its own laws and purported values. On numerous occasions U.S. actions in the world have led to great suffering while the rhetoric at home has been to the contrary. As just one instance of this, though our political leaders herald democracy and claim that people have a right to vote for their representatives in government, and we are even sending troops to foreign nations to lay down their lives for this form of government, at the same time we refuse to acknowledge the democratically elected majority of Hamas by the Palestinians and we publicly and secretly support dictatorships such as the Saudi royal family.

Now, I am not trying to make excuses for organized religions by comparing them to other unsavory institutions and policies. However, contrary to the one-sided portrayal in *The God Delusion*, we should also remember that attempts at defining "a just war," implementing fairness in the marketplace, articulating and defending women's rights and protections, as well as many, many other legal and ethical concepts that we (modern, Western secularists) have come to expect of a civilized society, all have their origins in the three great Abrahamic religious traditions. To give just one example among thousands which could be used of how off-base Dawkins is in his criticism of the "barbaric" and archaic injunctions of the Bible, contrary to the literal interpretation of the famous "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" (Lev. 24:20), the Jewish Rabbinic *tradition*, as found in the Talmud, interprets this as meaning monetary compensation of damages for intentional or unintentional torts (Baba Kamma 84a–b).

There is, however, a real and substantial risk involved in emphasizing the nonliteral interpretations of the Bible. If one follows this trajectory to its inevitable conclusions, one encounters a serious challenge to the religion itself. In Part I of this paper I suggested that the entire Bible is a metaphoric attempt to speak about the ineffable, about God as Being. In Part II I then suggested that the empirical concept of "truth" is not applicable to the Bible, which speaks in metaphors, and so, to look for the Garden of Eden in Iraq or Noah's Ark on a mountaintop, or evidence of a large population of Hebrew slaves in Egypt, or even to try to find the Holy Grail are all completely absurd endeavors performed by people who fail to understand the "register" of Biblical language. Now, in Part III of this paper I am suggesting that the Biblical injunctions, even one as clear as "an eye for an eye," do not mean what they say, but are rather code which needs to be deciphered by interpreters in order to establish an ethical system of behavior. But with all this emphasis on metaphor and interpretation, aren't we in danger of interpreting the Bible and its foundation for religions right out of meaningful existence? In other words, if the Jewish religion, as a religion, is based upon the special relationship between Abraham and God, the Covenant, the being taken out of slavery in Egypt by the "strong hand and outstretched arm" of God, the giving of the tablets of the Law to Moses on Sinai, etc., then doesn't reading all of this as metaphoric and not literal put the chosenness of the Chosen People in serious doubt, if not undermine it altogether? Doesn't a metaphoric reading of the Bible render the *actual*

“transubstantiation” of Communion for Catholics just as metaphoric an act as it is for Protestants? Doesn’t the metaphoric reading of the Koran negate Muhammad’s authority as the last Prophet of Allah? In other words, does all this emphasis on metaphor remove any and all claims to some transcendent and revealed foundation of religion?

To some extent, this question is raised, though not directly or forcefully, by Dawkins. He quotes John Hartung’s essay “Love Thy Neighbor: The Evolution of In-Group Morality”:

The Bible is a blueprint of in-group morality, complete with instruction for genocide, enslavement of out-groups, and world domination. But the Bible is not evil by virtue of its objectives or even its glorification of murder, cruelty, and rape. Many ancient works do that—The Iliad, the Icelandic Sagas, the tales of the ancient Syrians and the inscriptions of the ancient Mayans, for example. But no one is selling the Iliad as a foundation for morality. Therein lies the problem. The Bible is sold, and bought, as a guide to how people should live their lives. And it is, by far, the world’s all-time best seller. (p. 258)

Along these very same lines, Dawkins does advocate teaching the Bible *as literature* in schools, perhaps on par with the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, as well as Shakespeare and Milton, as part of our “treasured heritage” (p. 344). And if the Bible is *just* metaphor, and if the religious traditions were important, but now obsolete, predecessors to our modern, secular, civilized society with its justice systems and morals, then why not get rid of religion (except for in the interest of a historical curiosity) and teach the Bible and other religious literature coextensively with other great “myths” (in the Campbellian sense) of the world? Indeed, it would seem that all this emphasis on metaphor and interpretation has had the same effect as the humorous parable of Kafka’s:

Many complain that the words of the wise are always merely parables and of no use in daily life, which is the only life we have. When the sage says: “Go over,” he does not mean that we should cross to some actual place, which we could do anyhow if the labor were worth it; he means to some fabulous yonder, something unknown to us, something that he cannot designate more precisely either, and therefore cannot help us here in the very least. All these parables really set out to say merely that the incomprehensible is incomprehensible, and we know that already. But the cares we have to struggle with every day: that is a different matter.

Concerning this a man once said: Why such reluctance? If you only followed the parables you yourselves would become parables and with that rid of all your daily cares.

Another said: I bet that is also a parable.

The first said: You have won.

The second said: But unfortunately only in a parable.

The first said: No, in reality: in parable you have lost.<sup>14</sup>

To the challenges that interpreting the Bible as metaphor, allegory, parable, etc., pose for established religions, I respond that we must recall what religion, *primarily and ultimately*, is about: the relationship (or, more literally, the “binding”) between God and humanity. Claims about history, jurisprudence, morality, even political affairs are all secondary, tertiary, derivative. What is important is that the religion and its rituals assist the individual in having an experience of the divine. Joseph Campbell, citing Carl Jung, ironically says that all religion and religious ritual has one aim in mind: preventing the individual from having an authentic religious experience!<sup>15</sup> The “authentic religious experience” is so profound, so powerful, so overwhelming that it is dangerous and could even prove deadly. Thus the rituals act as an insulator from this high-voltage contact. By the same token, one could view the religion and its rituals as time-tested facilitators to that authentic religious experience. If one says, “Go out and experience God directly!” most people would be at a loss for how to do this. (Perhaps because the way to this experience is so ubiquitous that one does not see it as a way. As the Buddhist saying goes, it is like one who takes a lantern out in search of fire.) Religious ritual, as the Jewish mystics say, provides a form (a container) in which one can pour the content of the experience (the sparks of the divine). Hence religion, religious ritual, and tradition are important in order to fulfill the *raison d’être* of religion—any religion. If one reads the Bible *merely* as literature, if one removes all the religious “accoutrements,” one thereby also loses a potent venue for experiencing God for oneself.

One could say, quite validly, that rather than painting religion out of existence through the metaphorical reading of the Bible, the only “damage” one does to one’s religion is remove its special, privileged status among the world’s religions. One’s religion is still unique, but it is not, on this reading, the *only* way, truth, and light. Other religions are equally valid conduits to the divine. Though some theologians, entrenched in their own traditions, may have qualms about this claim, just about every religion’s mystical traditions make such claims. Read, for instance, Rumi, Lalleshwari, Rabbi Nachman of Bratislava, or Meister Eckhart, *inter alia*.<sup>16</sup>

As to the supposed “glorification” of sex and violence, found in the Bible as well as many other ancient texts (such as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*), a careful reader of these texts will find that the overall message is not a glorification of violence, but rather a condemnation of it. This argument would be too lengthy to defend here, but allow the example from the Noah to Abraham episodes (*supra*) to suffice as a taste of such a reading of the text. Yet it is accurate to say that these ancient texts do have, to a high

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<sup>14</sup> Franz Kafka, *The Complete Short Stories*, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer (Reading, U.K.: Minerva Press, 1996), 457.

<sup>15</sup> Joseph Campbell, *Thou Art That*, p. 60. In Campbell’s text he claims that the reason why institutional religion prevents one from having an authentic religious experience is because one can only experience it *for oneself*, in one’s own way, and thus the tradition (which, strictly speaking, is not one’s own) is diametrically opposed to such authenticity.

<sup>16</sup> Thanks to the editors for pointing out to me that “there is an important difference between saying that since religious language is metaphorical, many religious idioms are valid and saying that since all religious language is metaphorical, all religious metaphors point to the same thing.” This comment has given me pause and though I acknowledge the formal possibility of a variety of referents to the religious metaphors, it is beyond my ken to either affirm or deny this claim.

degree, a lot of sex and violence in them. But so do many of our modern-day, “civilized” television shows, movies, plays, operas, and even Disney fairy tales. This certainly does not make any of this excessive sex and violence right, but one can ask, Why such a predilection for sex and violence? One answer could be that it is ingrained in our human nature. I’m sure Dawkins would find evolutionary evidence and ‘memes’ to explain this. But no matter how it got into our human nature, the fact of the matter is that, just as children grow out of their contentment with Barney and Dora the Explorer and grow into much more complicated, violent, and sexually mature drama, so too, with the Bible. If the Bible were, in actuality, the way it is portrayed to children in “Sunday School,” or “The Children’s Bible,” our adult problems, concerns, fears, and desires would find as little to mine from the Bible as we find to glean from *Aesop’s Fables*. We would, indeed, outgrow its usefulness, much as many people who have had limited religious education feel that religion does not address their weighty, mature problems. But when one actually does open up an unabridged Bible, one finds a plethora of complexities which millennia of study have not exhausted.

It seems that Dawkins and Hartung and their ilk would like to see a Bible which never attains any more complexity than such morality plays as *Everyman*, where good and evil are distinct and good always triumphs over evil. But the Bible is much more like the complex development of these morality plays, in the form of Shakespeare’s tragedies, where good and evil are not easily distinguished and violence and sex as well as complicated psychology and plots rivet our attention. Could it be that the Bible, like Shakespeare, like Homer, like the *Bhagavad Gita*, is just too complex, too sophisticated, too *intelligent* for most “modern” readers today, including the hordes of Bible-thumping fundamentalists and Dawkins, Hartung, et al.<sup>17</sup>

In contrast with morality derived from the Bible (where Dawkins again uses his blunt powers of analysis, determining that any and every Biblically based morality must be absolutist about good and bad, right and wrong, in its judgments, which is far from the case, for instance in Judaism), Dawkins proposes his own theory of morality.

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<sup>17</sup> Alan Watts proposes another interesting suggestion as to the “unbelievable” and miraculous stories of the Hebrew Bible, but in a different context. In *Beyond Theology*, pp. 26–7, and *The Way of Zen*, p. 37, he suggests that the outlandish tales of the Vedas are so outlandish precisely so that no one would make the mistake of taking them as literal truth. In this cunning fashion, the authors of the Vedas found a mode of language to speak about the Divine (Brahman) other than the negative theology of Sankara, or the silence of meditation. This seems plausible given the statements that are made in the later Vedas, the Upanishads, about Brahman. Could, perhaps, the same hermeneutic be applied to the Hebrew Bible?

It is interesting to note that the outlandishness, the exaggerated to the point of ridiculous, the extreme violence and sexual exploits are all toned down in the New Testament. In a similar way the later period of the Vedas, the Upanishads, are much less “mythological” in nature, and the texts relating to the Buddha are of a very different nature than previous Hindu literature, just as the works of Plato are far different in nature than the works of Homer. To generalize, we see a movement in these literary traditions that seems to switch from the violent, sexually explicit, “mythological” epic to a hagiography that emphasizes a more peaceful and just comportment of the central figure. Could this, perhaps, have something to do with the change in grammar which roughly coincides with this change in literary style (from the more complex Homeric Greek to the simpler koinê, and from the Hebrew of the Old Testament to the grammatically more simple Rabbinic Hebrew)?

Nietzsche has a very different suggestion for why all the ancient “myths” are so violent and sexual. He claims, in *The Birth of Tragedy*, that this art reflects the primordial suffering and contradiction in the heart of Being.

Basically he outlines a very rudimentary theory of “The Roots of Morality,” grounded in Darwinian natural selection. He then seems to propose that, in the absence of God, we are not left with a Dostoevskian egoistic world of crime. Finally he proposes his own theory of the history of morality—all within 68 pages!

To briefly sketch the more obvious problems of Dawkins’s approach to morality, first and foremost, he never articulates what, exactly, he means by “morality.” He does list a “New Ten Commandments” which he got off a Google search on the Internet, to which he amends four more commandments (pp. 263–4). The main virtue of this list, he says, is that “it is the sort of list that any ordinary, decent person today would come up with”(p. 264). This, however, is exactly what is wrong with it, but perhaps it is an inevitable consequence of being an evolutionary biologist that he would see this as a virtue. Whether one reads Nietzsche or Kierkegaard, the underlying critique of morality *as such* is that it is herd mentality, the least common denominator, the “wisdom” of the mediocre which, far from Darwinian natural selection, leads to the dominance, not of the highest and best types, but of the Lilliputians. Anyone—and perhaps this includes Dawkins—who attempts to stand out from this herd mentality, to criticize it, to *improve* it, is subject to ridicule, ostracism, and, in the worst cases, destruction at the hands of the herd.

Next, he claims that morality, without God, is real morality. By setting up religious straw men and straw arguments, he claims atheists are more moral than religious adherents. However, he never even attempts to claim that in the absence of *both* God and the police, people would not resort to the worst sorts of selfish behavior, nor does he attempt to explain *why*, in such absence of any form of external punishment, we *should* be just. In other words, he falls far short of doing what Socrates does in the *Republic*: explain why it is better to be just than not, even if it does not promote you or your kind.

Lastly, his own theory of morality is really just an impoverished Hegelian theory of history which suffers from all the ailments of Hegel’s theory of Spirit and History, without any of its brilliance. Dawkins’s theory is totally teleological and ethnocentric, not to mention lacking in any real engagement with history. For instance, he says of “The Moral *Zeitgeist*” (his term for what Hegel just called *Geist*, “Spirit”) that “the advance is not a smooth incline but a meandering sawtooth. There are local and temporary setbacks....But over the longer timescale, the progressive trend is unmistakable and it will continue” (p. 271). And “The shift [of the Moral *Zeitgeist*] is in a recognizably consistent direction, which most of us would judge as improvement” (p. 268). These comments betray an underlying belief in some sort of aim or final goal of this *Zeitgeist*, such as Absolute Morality, Total Perfection, Unerring Judgment. But they also betray an ethnocentrism and, for lack of a better term, temporal-centrism, a myopic view which sees our current age as the best of all possible ages and judges all other ages by *our* (Western, twentieth century) standards. Would not a monk in thirteenth-century Germany feel the exact same way about his times and place, though there is not necessarily any moral improvement in his age over fourth-century B.C.E. Athens or contemporaneous Byzantium?

In his chapter on morality Dawkins states, “My main purpose here has not been to show that we *shouldn’t* get our morals from scripture (although that is my opinion). My purpose has been to demonstrate that we (and that includes most religious people)



as a matter of fact *don't* get our morals from scripture" (p. 249, emphasis in original). That may be so, but the greatest thing that Dawkins proves in this chapter is that he is no moral philosopher, historian, or sociologist.

## Conclusion

Dawkins's strongest claims in his book are also the most banal and hackneyed. To accuse organized religion of perpetrating many evils, to point to religious fervor as a motivating factor in humanity's most horrific atrocities, to accuse religions of indoctrinating and bullying rather than engaging and convincing, are all themes which are in need of very little "consciousness raising," except by the most obtuse who wouldn't be reading Dawkins's book anyhow. On these topics, as well as his criticism of fundamentalism and literalism, I agree with Dawkins very much. However, the divine is in the details. From the above critique, it should be rather clear that I feel that for someone who deals with microscopic organisms and molecules in the laboratory, Dawkins is rather coarse when it comes to dealing with fine points, following strands of arguments, and tracing genealogies of societal phenomena.

Now, the sheer length of the above critique of Dawkins may give the impression that Dawkins is a formidable adversary of religion and "theism," and that, by writing a response, I am a staunch apologist for religion and theism. This interpretation, however, would be a delusion. I do not find Dawkins's arguments to be formidable, unique, or insightful, in any way except one. Just as, in his citation of the "New Ten Commandments," Dawkins attempts to bring to light the psychology of the "ordinary" person, the "everyman" of today, it seems to me that Dawkins's book is a clear, concise, and articulate formulation of the most common understanding of God and religion prevalent in educated, secular, economically privileged, Western society today. He is their spokesman. And rather than "converting" people, it is my suspicion that, if one were to do a sociological study of those who buy Dawkins's book, one would find that his audience, for the most part, is those on whose behalf, and whose opinions, he speaks. In this regard his work is very helpful in bringing these vulgar views into the realm of intellectual discussion and debate. It is with the aim of elevating this intellectual discussion that the above critique was written.