

## Engaging New Atheists, Part 2: Three consolations on reading Dawkins



### Editor's Introduction

When the New Atheists began producing books that quickly became bestsellers, I was interested to listen to what they were saying. I began by reading *The God Delusion*, by Oxford scientist Richard Dawkins. When I got to the third chapter in which he counters the traditional arguments that have been proposed by philosophers and theologians over the centuries to demonstrate the existence of God, I immediately thought of Fiona Grooms.

I've known Fiona for most of her life, and have been impressed with her thoughtful and deeply committed understanding of the truth of Christianity. And since she is a philosopher by calling and vocation, I asked her to respond to Dawkins' chapter, "Arguments for God's Existence." Here is her response, and I offer it to you, very pleased to be able to welcome her voice to the pages of *Critique*.

### Three consolations on reading Dawkins

In the space of 32 pages, Richard Dawkins summarily refutes, to his own satisfaction, two thousand years worth of arguments for the existence of God. His treatment of each of the arguments is so cursory that it would take a good deal more than thirty pages to begin to explain how Christian philosophers have understood these arguments. For Christians who have read and been dismayed by Dawkins' *The God Delusion*, I can offer three sorts of consolation.

First, we should notice that Richard Dawkins is an expert in zoology, the science that deals with the

classification of animals. He is not an expert in philosophy of religion, much less in the science of philosophy itself. I suspect that most of the readers of Dawkins' book are at least unfamiliar, if not entirely unaware of the philosophical arguments for God's existence so that their first encounter with the arguments comes through Dawkins. This is a bit like learning about the inner workings of a computer from someone raised by confirmed Luddites. If someone who has not used a computer, never cared to use a computer, and hates the idea of a computer explains to you how computers work, you shouldn't think yourself now an expert on computers. The Luddite has no training in computer technology and has an avowed dislike of the machine. If he knows something about computers, his vision is so distorted by his dislike of them that he's hardly a reliable source about them. Having learned about computers from a reliable source, we might then learn something about the possible problems with computers and computer use from the Luddite.

Having passed through the first chapter of his book, the reader can have no doubt that Dawkins is like our Luddite in that he has only the deepest dislike and aversion to God. Dawkins' goal is not to find out whether or not God exists. His goal is to show that He does not. Those who are truly interested in understanding the philosophy of God should not look to Dawkins to instruct them; as a non-philosopher and confirmed atheist, he is neither intellectually nor dispositionally qualified for the task.

Second, it is worth thinking about the nature of philosophical arguments for a moment. Dawkins appears to hold two common assumptions about arguments: that the failure of arguments to prove the existence of God shows that it is irrational to be a theist and that we need arguments to be rational in believing that God exists. Neither of these assumptions is true. Consider your own existence. Do you have an argument supporting your belief that you exist? Do you need an argument for your own existence to believe that you exist? Likely not. If you think that you do, you have read too much bad philosophy. Philosophical proofs or demonstrations are hard to formulate and often difficult to understand; most people go merrily through life with many true▶

beliefs for which they could never give an argument. All this is not meant to imply that the arguments cannot be given or that they are not important for a defense of theism, but only to show that they are certainly not required for rational belief.

Notice too that an argument's failure does not mean that its conclusion is necessarily false. Here's an example:

Human feet would look funny without toes.  
Nature does not make things that function properly and look funny. Therefore, human feet must have toes to function properly.

This is a bad argument. But the conclusion is true. I can generate endless bad arguments for the conclusion that human feet must have toes to function properly but the proliferation of bad arguments will not, in itself, show anything about the truth of the conclusion. If it is true, though I don't think it is, that all of the arguments humans have ever made for God's existence fail, it still does not follow that the conclusion, that God exists, is false. It just means that we haven't come up with a good argument for a true conclusion yet.

Finally, there are the arguments themselves to consider. It is difficult to take Dawkins' criticisms of most of these arguments very seriously as he shows, in his dismissal of each argument, that he has not taken the argument seriously. He dismisses Thomas Aquinas's arguments for God's existence by pointing out what he takes to be an obvious logical flaw. Omniscience and omnipotence, he argues, are clearly logically 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 can't change his mind about his intervention, which means he is not omnipotent." This dismissal is vexed in several ways. To begin with, it shows that Dawkins did not bother to do his philosophical homework. Thomas Aquinas held that God is eternal and outside of time. He acts in the spatiotemporal world, but He is not bound to it. So, although from our perspective His actions are spread out in time, from His perspective, they are not spread out in time. There is no time for God: for God, there is an eternal now. We can't quite wrap our minds around it, but we should at least notice that, for Aquinas, God knows how He will intervene in our future because to Him our future is present. His knowledge of his action and his action are always simultaneous. 'Foreknowledge' is only 'fore' with respect to us. For God, all knowledge is knowledge of now. Those who are puzzled by this need not worry; God's eternity is a deep and difficult philosophical issue. The superficial point to understand here is just that Aquinas has reason for not worrying about God's omniscience and omnipotence of which Dawkins is apparently entirely unaware. At the very least, Dawkins ought to have done his homework. If he had, he might have found that some philosophers object to the idea that God is outside of time. But

their objection would not have helped him very much, as it is founded on the notion that God, as He reveals Himself in Scripture, seems to be changeable in a way that is not compatible with His being outside of time.

There is not space to address all of Dawkins's objections in such detail nor is there a need. Christian philosophers have written extensively about all these arguments already. They are more trustworthy than Dawkins for two reasons.

First, unlike Dawkins, they are qualified intellectually for the task in that they are trained in the discipline of philosophy. As good philosophers, they are not interested in giving poor arguments and they often disagree with each other. Look, for example, at Thomas Aquinas's argument against the ontological argument. He has a far better grasp of the argument than Dawkins and his criticism is thus the better of the two.

Second, whereas love moves us towards the object we love, hatred moves us away from it: The mushroom lover has eaten many mushrooms and knows intimately their flavor and texture. The mushroom hater has tried mushrooms once and won't go near them again. The mushroom lover is the one to ask if you want a detailed account of what mushrooms are like. If God exists, and God is truth, then those who love Him love and know the truth. The one who hates God rejects truth; the further he moves from God, the more his mind is darkened. Dawkins begins his book with his face set against God; it is of little surprise, then, that his grasp of the truth about divine things is so tenuous. My hope for Christians or seekers who are interested in arguments for God's existence is that they will look to Christian philosophers to teach them, not to an atheistic scientist. ❖

#### SOURCES

Dawkins from *The God Delusion* (New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin; 2006) p. 78.

#### READING SUGGESTION

For more on God's eternity, see Eleonore Stump's "Eternity" (with Norman Kretzmann), *Journal of Philosophy* 78 (1981) 429-458. Her paper is available online: <http://pages.slu.edu/faculty/stumpep/onlinepapers.html>

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