



The Dawkins Letters - 5. Arguments for God's Existence

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Dear Dr Dawkins,

We are getting closer to your 'proof' that God is a delusion. But before you come on to your 'big argument' you try in this chapter to deal with some of the arguments that theists put forward for the existence of God. What I would like to do in this letter is deal with the topics that you raise in chapter three, with the exception of the argument from design and the first three of Thomas Aquinas's Proofs, which are all essential to your core argument in chapter four. Again this chapter was disappointing – it deals at a very superficial level with some of the main arguments, puts minor arguments as major and leaves out some of the major.

Your understanding of Christian theology is shockingly bad. For example you argue "If God is omniscient he already knows 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". I can hardly believe that a professor at Oxford wrote such a juvenile argument! If you really want to go down that line

here are a few more for you. Can God create a stone heavier than he can lift? Can God make a square circle? These may be amusing 'problems' for a teenage class in metaphysics but as a reason for believing that God cannot exist? As Mr McEnroe would say "You cannot be serious!" Let me put it in the simplest terms. A Sunday school teacher once asked the children in her class "is there anything that God cannot do?" Not having a particularly good grasp of theology either, she was horrified when a small boy held up his hand and answered 'yes'. She challenged him by asking him what. "Lie" was the short, succinct and accurate reply. Saying God is omnipotent is not saying that he can do what is immoral or inconsistent with his own nature.

Your discussion of Anselm's Ontological argument is short and largely one with which I would agree. Anselm's view that the greatest thing we can conceive of must exist because otherwise it would not be the greatest thing we could conceive of is a neat philosophical argument but it is only that. However you spoil your discussion of that with a list of nonsensical satirical 'proofs' from 'godlessgeeks.com' (glad to note that you choose your sources so carefully!) and a vicious attack on the atheist backslider Anthony Flew. Professor Flew was until recently the world's most influential atheist but has apparently had a change of heart and now accepts that there must be a Designer. Your attack on him in a footnote in this chapter (and in some of your public speeches) comes across as 'bitchy' – unnecessarily implying that advancing old age must have something to do with his conversion from atheism, that he is not really a great philosopher (contrasted with Bertrand Russell who was a great philosopher and won the Nobel Prize) and that his flawed judgement is shown by his acceptance of the Phillip E. Johnson award for Liberty and Truth. Could you not allow for the possibility that he may have changed his mind, not because of senility or because that all along he was never really a great philosopher, or because he is seeking the Templeton Prize, but rather because of the evidence and the facts? I guess any atheist who changes his mind needs to know that they will face the wrath of Richard but please put the claws away. It is very unattractive.

You then deal with three of the major arguments for God – beauty, personal experience and

scripture.

Beauty - You state this argument really badly. For me it is one of the arguments that is central to proving the existence of God. You reduce it to someone asking: 'How do we account for Shakespeare, Schubert or Michelangelo?' But it is much more than that. It is not so much the fact that 'there is beauty' – but 'why do we as human beings have a sense of beauty'? I'm sure you will account for that by stating that it is a chemical reaction in my brain caused by millions of years of evolution. But that seems to me at best a partial explanation. Beauty is part of consciousness and it remains one of the great unanswered questions in evolutionary philosophy – where does consciousness come from? When I see the beauty of a sunset over the river Tay, or hear Beethoven's sixth (substitute any beautiful experience), then I cannot grasp nor believe that this is just instinct or impulse that comes from ultimately nowhere. The words of Solomon fit so much better "He has made everything beautiful in its time" (Ecclesiastes ch.3 v.11).

By the way is it not a bit of a cheap shot to state that Raphael or Michelangelo only produced their great work because they were paid to? And imply that if they were living today they would be producing the *Evolution Oratorio*. Out of interest where are the great atheist composers, artists etc? I have no doubt that human beings who are not believers can produce great works of art – but that is because they are *Imago Dei* – created in the image of God. Their creativity is, whether they acknowledge it or not, a reflection of the creativity of their creator. The ugliness of much modern art is that it has lost its connectivity with the divine and the wonder of beauty. Can I suggest that you read Hans Rookmaaker *Modern Art and the Death of Culture* for a fascinating and enlightening discussion on this topic? Meanwhile the argument from beauty remains one of the most powerful arguments for God. The fact that you neither understand nor agree with it hardly constitutes a rational argument against.

Personal Experience – You also seem to be having enormous difficulty with this argument reducing it to those who hear voices (whether audibly or within their heads) or see visions. You cite one of your 'cleverer' undergraduates who was ordained at least partially because of an

experience he had of hearing the devil whilst camping on the Scottish Isles. This was apparently a 'Manx Shearwater' bird. Yet this 'clever' man was stupid enough to see it as a call to the ministry! Which puts him on a level with others you mention – those who have experienced a pink elephant (have you met any such?), Peter Sutcliffe hearing Jesus telling him to kill women, George Bush telling him to invade Iraq (again what is your source for this information?) and people in asylums thinking they are Napoleon or Charlie Chaplain! According to you the only difference between those locked up in asylums and religious people is that religious people are more numerous. Now of course there are people who hear voices and see visions and these are nothing more than simulations. But does that mean that every such experience is such? I am very wary of people telling me that God has told them something – more often than not they are at the fringes of belief and often do have mental health problems. Nonetheless I would never be so arrogant as to assume that that is the case for everyone.

Furthermore you completely misstate the argument from personal experience. The vast majority of Christians do not believe because they have heard a voice or seen a vision – indeed I am struggling to think of anyone I know in that category. Yet personal experience does play a major part (after all it is the experience we know best). There are many other kinds of personal experience which at the very least point us towards God. Answered prayer, a sense of God (truly God is amongst you), experience of the miraculous, experience of the truths and truthfulness of the Bible and the experience of being filled with the Spirit, to name but a few. From my own experience I can recall clear, specific and direct answers to prayer, an overwhelming sense of the presence of God, and the Word of God being used to speak to my mind, heart and soul. I am sure you and your followers will manage to diss and explain away all these things and I for one would not argue that I believe in Jesus Christ solely because of any one of them. But the cumulation of these experiences in addition to the truth of the Bible and the observation of history, creation and society, add up to a very powerful personal apologetic. And not one that can just be dismissed by talking about those who hear voices in their heads. All I

have seen teaches me to trust the Creator for all I have not seen.

The Bible - As you also cover this in chapter seven I will resist the temptation to comment too much on what you say in this section. However there are a couple of points that really do need to be addressed. Astonishingly you begin with a critique of C. S. Lewis's claim that as Jesus claimed to be the Son of God he must have been a Lunatic, a Liar or Lord (Mad, Bad, or God). You write, "a fourth possibility, almost too obvious to need mentioning, is that Jesus was honestly mistaken". But that is precisely what Lewis addresses when he makes the point about Jesus being honestly mistaken in his claim to be the Son of God, being equivalent to a man who was honestly mistaken in thinking he was a poached egg – it is the lunatic part of the equation. You have obviously not read Lewis. Can I suggest you start with *Mere Christianity*? It is normal when one cites an argument or critiques an author to do them the courtesy of actually reading what they have written.

You then go on to declare: "In any case, as I said, there is no good historical evidence that he ever thought he was divine"; which being translated meaneth "there is no evidence which I have read in *Free Inquiry* or my other atheist 'how to' books". Just what historical evidence have you evaluated? Please note that using *Free Inquiry*, A. N. Wilson and Robin Lane Fox as your sources on biblical material is like me suggesting that those who want to find out about evolution should only go to the *Answers in Genesis* website! The historical evidence for the claims that Jesus made is quite clear. The Gospels make it explicit. And it was after all the reason he was crucified – because he blasphemed by claiming to be God.

You also illustrate the truth of the saying that 'a little knowledge is a dangerous thing'. For example you cite as conclusive proof that the gospel of Luke is not historical the fact that a census took place in AD 6 after Herod's death. And yet there is evidence that the census in AD 6 was the second such census and that the first probably took place in 5 BC. The problem is not that there are not significant questions and problems in the Bible (there are). The problem is that you, with all the certainty of the fundamentalist delighting in proving his opponents

wrong, seize upon the flimsiest of evidence and without any further investigation make sweeping statements that this proves the Bible wrong.

In this regard I am astounded at how out of touch you are with modern biblical scholarship. You write "Ever since the 19th century scholarly theologians have made an overwhelming case that the gospels are not reliable accounts of what happened in the history of the real world". Unless you are adopting the phrase 'scholarly theologians' as a euphemism for 'those who happen to agree with me' your statement is just plainly and demonstrably false. Can I suggest that you ask your Oxford colleague Alister McGrath, Principal of Wycliffe Hall, why he is ignoring this overwhelming case? Perhaps you should read his *Introduction to Christian Theology*. I am sure it would be enormously helpful to you and prevent you making the kind of gaffes that you pour out here.

Your position reminds me of a debate that was held in the Dundee Contemporary Arts Centre concerning *The Da Vinci Code*. During the course of the evening the most heated opposition came from a couple of people who made the same claim that scholars no longer accepted the gospels as historical accounts. When challenged on this and told that he was being 'so 20th century' (although he was in actual fact being so 19th century) he struggled to name one modern scholar who took that position. Eventually he came up with the name Bultmann whose main work was done in the first half of the 20th century. On the other hand I can think of at least 20 major biblical scholars at 'real' Universities today (not Mickey Mouse tin hut Bible colleges) who would argue for the basic historicity of the Gospels. At the very least your position that the scholarly position is that the historical evidence for the Bible is the same as that for *The Da Vinci Code* is at best ignorant and at worst downright deceitful. Indeed it is so breathtaking in its audacity that it reminds me of Goebbels' maxim that the bigger the lie (and the more it is stated with absolute conviction) the more people are likely to believe it.

Religious Scientists - You also attribute a somewhat strange argument to theists, 'The Argument from Admired Religious Scientists'. I say strange because I have never heard anyone say that they believed in God because such and

such a scientist believes. However what we do say is that the atheist attempt to set science against religion is one that is fatally undermined by the considerable number of scientists who are also believers. And I guess that is what bothers you and why you are so disparaging about the ones you identify. You neatly dismiss all pre-Darwinian scientists by claiming that it was normal for people to profess belief and that they would come under pressure if they did not. Indeed such is your disdain for your fellow scientists who are believers that you even hint that those who profess to do so may be doing so because of social or economic factors. Furthermore you state that they are so rare that 'they are a subject of amused bafflement to their peers in the academic community'. So Asa Gray (American Botanist), Charles D. Walcott (discoverer of Burgess Shale fossils), T. Dobzhansky (Russian Orthodox evolutionary biologist), R. J. Berry (Professor of Genetics at University College London), Owen Gingerich (Professor of Astronomy and History of Science at Harvard) and Francis Collins (Head of the Human Genome Project) are all 'sources of amused bafflement'? I think nothing illustrates your arrogance and almost pathological hatred of God and religion than this dismissive, patronising and 'who's not for us is against us' view of your scientific colleagues.

Incidentally, I noted with interest your footnote contrasting the 'administrative' head of the American branch of the Human Genome Project with 'the brilliant and non religious buccaneer' of science, Craig Venter. It is an interesting contrast, not least because of the descriptive language you employ. However what fascinates me is the different way that the different world views impacted how they wanted to use their science. Whereas Francis Collins, the Christian, wanted to keep the Human Genome Project in the public domain and the information available and accessible to all, your 'brilliant and non religious buccaneer' wanted to privatise the whole project to make money. His company, *Celera*, wanted to file patents on many of the genes and would only allow the data to be available to those who paid large sums of money. I think that is an apt metaphor for the difference between two very different world views. On the one hand there is an alliance of science with those who seek to use it for the public good of all (and not just private profit), who recognise its limits and who believe

that they are accountable to God for what they do with his gifts. On the other there is an alliance of science with a godless morality and materialism which seeks to use knowledge for personal gain and private profit. I think we have been down this scientific materialistic route before – I believe that Stalin, Mao and Hitler all thought that their societies should be governed with such 'science' and morality. I am sorry if that offends you and I am not trying to equate your 'nice' atheism with the nasty, but I honestly believe that this is where your atheistic hatred of God will eventually lead society. Indeed it is one of the reasons that I believe in the God of the Bible – because without that biblical worldview I have no real explanation of, nor defence against, the evil that humans are capable of.

And finally let me finish by pointing out that you missed out the most important argument of all for the existence of God – the person and work of Jesus Christ. I have no space left but I have to say that the number one reason I believe and trust God is because of Jesus Christ. "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word..." (Hebrews 1:1-3, NIV). The presence, power and perfection of Jesus Christ is no delusion.

Yours etc

David

Read Part 6.

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