

# THE GOD DELUSION: SUMMARY

## INTRODUCTION

Professor Richard Dawkins (1941-) is arguably the most prominent atheist apologist of recent times. An ethologist, teaching at Oxford University, he has written many books, both populist and academic.

He is famous for his gene-centred view of evolution: the theory that transmissible information is passed from generation to generation almost exclusively by DNA, therefore natural selection and evolution are best considered from the perspective of genes. The name he gave to this idea is '*meme*'.

He has written a number of books about his views of the arguments for God's existence. Arguably his most famous book is '*The God Delusion*'. First published in 2006, Dawkins maintains within it that to believe in God is illogical. He backs this up by analysing and critiquing:

- religion's role in history
- arguments that have been given in support for the existence of God, for example scripture, morality and the cosmological argument

Dawkins states that these traditional arguments are redundant in our scientific age, when we can have a clear, scientific understanding; science explains so much that we have ascribed to God in the past. He concludes that the idea of a God does offer consolation, but that this power to console doesn't mean that God exists.

## THE KEY ARGUMENTS IN *THE GOD DELUSION*

### 1. The God Hypothesis

The key people in history, the ones who have shaped society, were not religious. They merely cloaked themselves in the respectability of Christianity to achieve their political goals. Therefore, societies have been shaped by a bunch of fakes, promoting religion as it serves their purposes.

Stephen Gould's concept of NOMA, '*non-overlapping magisterium*' - the idea that science address the '*how*'; religion addresses the '*why*'. Dawkins disputes this and states that it is perfectly acceptable to for science to question the '*why*'. He slams this '*artificial wall*' of NOMA, which he claims is built by theists when they can't explain the '*how*' properly. Dawkins believes that religion has no place in the debate as there is no tangible evidence.

## 2. Theist Arguments for God's Existence

### A. *St Thomas Aquinas' 'Five Ways'*

Dawkins takes the cosmological and teleological arguments and turns them on their head; if God exists because something or someone had to create or cause the world into being – after all nothing just appears on its own – then who caused God to exist? If nothing existed, then how did God exist?

Also, if we are to accept that the world had an intelligent designer – that it didn't just happen by chance – we must accept that God, as this designer, would be as complex as the world he created. Which of course begs the question: who designed God? A being as complex as God couldn't happen by chance, thus rendering the teleological argument highly improbable. Further, Dawkins argues that evolution – with its process of natural selection – offers the best counter to 'the world couldn't have happened by chance.' Evolution, not God, shaped the world.

Ultimately, the key weakness of the cosmological and teleological arguments is their dependence on the unnecessary assumption that there can be no infinite regress. Plus, the assumption that if even if this were true, if there was something or someone to halt this regress, who's to say this person has the characteristics of a deity?

### B. *St Anselm's Ontological Argument*

'*That which is most perfect must exist*' forms the basis of the ontological argument. Dawkins refutes this, arguing that there's no evidence that existence is more perfect than non-existence, therefore this argument cannot possibly be used to support an idea that God exists.

### C. *Beauty*

Dawkins disputes that the argument for beauty, that the achievements of human artists are evidence for the existence of God. He states that the capacity for artistic genius is within humans and doesn't need a God to inspire it.

### D. *Personal Experience*

Dawkins doesn't doubt the reality of religious experiences to the believer, rather he questions the divine element of it.

As he puts it himself in '*The God Delusion*':

*'If you've had such an experience, you may well find yourself believing firmly that it was real. But don't expect the rest of us to take your word for it, especially if we have the slightest familiarity with the brain and its powerful workings.'*

### E. Scripture

Christians believe that scripture is the inspired word of God. Dawkins disputes the Bible's accuracy, as he says that there is not enough evidence the Bible is reliable. He further claims that it doesn't reflect real events that are mentioned, dispute timelines for example.

He concludes that because of these 'hole's that the Bible is a work of fiction and cannot be used to provide evidence for God's existence.

### F. Religious Scientists

There are scientists who claim to have a faith, Albert Einstein (1879-1955) being arguably the most famous. These have suggested that science and religion can work together, sometimes they have suggested that science supports the idea that God exists.

Einstein famously stated:

*'Science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind.'*  
(*'Science and Religion'*, 1954)

Theists have also suggested that because there are so many scientists who believe in God, therefore – as these are seen as an authority – this provides support for the argument that He must exist.

Referencing research, Dawkins maintains that the higher the IQ or educational level, the more likely you are to be an atheist. The implication being of course, that anyone who does believe in God is not nearly as clever as an atheist, a fact that many theist academics would reject! Dawkins states that, before Darwin in fact most scientists were theists. This was the cultural norm, so he discounts pre-Darwinian scientists, such as Newton. However, he remains baffled at how eminent scientists in today's society – such as John Polkinghorne, Arthur Peacocke and Russell Stannard – adhere to a belief in God.

### G. The Anthropic Principle (aka The Goldilocks Principle)

The notion that because conditions for life on earth are perfect for it to flourish is another argument that Dawkins critiques. He maintains that, once again, evolution holds all the answers, that there doesn't need to be a God to explain how this perfect climate came into being. Life started as a chemical event occurring in water, and the main ingredient is DNA. This then sparked the rest of creation, which evolved over time to adapt to the environment we know today.

He points to all the planets in our universe and states that statistically, life was always bound to occur somewhere.

### H. Morality Argument

Cultures around the world have their own specific set of set moral standards. He argues that this supports the idea that morality is a result of the evolutionary process. All society has rules, laws and behavioural codes. He concludes that this proves moral sensibility is inbuilt and independent of religious belief and God.

### 3. Religion

Dawkins argues that religion is a social construct, evolved over the centuries, passed down from family to family. He talks about religion as being a *'meme'*, something that self-replicates on an ideological level, the same way genes do on a physical level.

He believes that human belief in mind and body duality, and the idea we need a purpose in life, has given rise to religious tendencies.

### 4. Religious Behaviour

Dawkins gives examples of cruel behaviour from people throughout history who claim to be Christians and to be *'doing God's work'*.

He also references different events from the Bible in his arguments against God. For example, he references Noah, where he destroys the world with a flood, but saves Noah and his family. He disparages the doctrine of atonement for original sin. These atrocities are enough to persuade him that God doesn't exist.

He cites the behaviour of American fundamentalists with their hate campaigns against gay people and bombing abortion clinics, in his outrage at what people have done in the name of God.

He states that rather than offering cohesion, religion is in fact a divisive force, having caused, he believes conflict all over the world, for example in Northern Ireland.

This all leads him to conclude that religion fosters a form of fanaticism, leading to people who are blinkered; unwilling or unable to consider a rational approach to the world.

According to Christian apologists, there are many flaws in Dawkins' arguments. They cite poor logic, inaccuracies in the facts presented, misquotes and other such things. Further, people have criticised the aggressive nature of the book. You can read more about these apologists' views elsewhere in this module.

## TASKS

1. After having read through this summary of the book, conduct your own independent research on Richard Dawkins' *'The God Delusion'*. Read the book if you can. In your own words, summarise Dawkins' key points about why he doesn't believe in God.
2. Which, if any, of his arguments do you find to be the most convincing? Explain your answer.
3. Which, if any, do you find to be the least convincing? Explain your answer.