

# THE GOD DELUSION: A RESPONSE FROM RICHARD SWINBURNE

## INTRODUCTION

Since the release of Dawkins', *The God Delusion*', numerous theologians and philosophers have spoken out or written a response to Dawkins' ideas. This resource will consider Richard Swinburne's (1934-) response.

Richard Swinburne is an English Emeritus Professor of Philosophy at the University of Oxford. He has spoken out against Dawkins' ideas, pursuing philosophical arguments for the existence of God. Indeed, he is a leading Christian apologist, at the forefront for presenting arguments that faith in God is rational and coherent in a rigorous philosophical sense.

Swinburne is a proponent of cumulative apologetics. He has stated that he accepts that none of the arguments put forward proved God's existence on their own, but maintains that, when viewed together, they do show reasonable possibility that God exists.

He has written a number of books on the subject, with *The Christian Sense* (1994) detailing his key idea that belief in God is not logically necessary, but metaphysically necessary. In addition, his book, *Is There a God?* (1996), further sets out his arguments for the existence of God. As with many other Christian apologists, Swinburne views science and religion as perfectly compatible.

## THE KEY COUNTER ARGUMENTS TO *THE GOD DELUSION*

1. Dawkins: God is a complex being.

His response to Dawkins' argument - that God has to be a complex being - is to suggest that Dawkins' view is unfounded. Aside from his statement that for God to have created the world he had to be at least as complex as the world - if not more so - Dawkins doesn't say or offer evidence as to what brings him to this conclusion. Other than the '*it makes sense*' argument.

As Swinburne states, in order for a hypothesis to be seen as even possibly true, the hypothesis should have data to back it up. In other words, you can't just go around arguing something is true based on what you dictate as logic.

Also, Dawkins makes a mistake in his assumption that God is like us, complete with a body and brain, which is very complex. He fails to take into account that God is a very different sort of being. This causes a serious weakness in his argument for God's complexity. God is neither material nor composed of material parts. Many apologists, including Aquinas, claim that He is a simple unity of attributes, which combined, make up a single reality of pure perfection.

2. Dawkins: Human ability to create beautiful works of art offer no proof that God exists.

Swinburne focuses on the natural world, and the beauty therein, when he states:

*'God has reason to make a basically beautiful world, although also reason to leave some of the beauty or ugliness of the world within the power of creatures to determine; but he would seem to have overriding reason not to make a basically ugly world, beyond the powers of creatures to improve. Hence, if there is a God there is more reason to expect a basically beautiful world than a basically ugly one. A priori, however, there is no particular reason for expecting a basically beautiful rather than a basically ugly world. In consequence, if the world is beautiful, that fact would be evidence for God's existence. For, in this case, if we let  $k$  be 'there is an orderly physical universe',  $e$  be 'there is a beautiful universe', and  $h$  be 'there is a God',  $P(e/h.k)$  will be greater than  $P(e/k)$ .'*

(*'The Existence of God'*, 2nd Edition, 2004)

He goes on further to add that the beauty and order of the world are undeniably beautiful, which has inspired poets, writers, musicians, painters and others since the beginning of time. Therefore, he argues, it is wrong to restrict the argument from beauty to the inanimate things of the world, but rather should include all artistic works.

3. Dawkins: Personal experiences do not prove God exists / Swinburne: Principles of Credulity and Testimony

Swinburne wholeheartedly disagrees with Dawkins on this matter. He backs his beliefs up with two key principles:

- The Principle of Credulity
- The Principle of Testimony

#### *The Principle of Credulity*

Swinburne argues that we should trust our own religious experiences. He calls this the Principle of Credulity. In his own words:

*'We ought to believe that things are as they seem to be, until we have evidence that we are mistaken.'*

(*'Is There a God?'*, 1996)

So rather than being irrational, Swinburne argues, it is entirely a *rational* thing to believe in God if we have these experiences and that *denying* the Principle of Credulity would be the irrational thing to do.

#### *The Principle of Testimony*

The Principle of Testimony maintains that, generally speaking, religious people do not have the intention of deceiving people with their stories of, for example, being healed, seeing visions, being set free from addictions, etc. Therefore, in the absence of valid reasons for believing that these stories are made up or that the person is mistaken, then it is surely reasonable to accept their experiences as real.

### *Different types of religious experience*

Swinburne furthers the argument for personal experience by expanding its definition. He sets out five types of personal – or religious – experience. These are:

1. The numinous experience – witnessing something in nature, for example a stunning sunset, which leaves you with a sense of God's presence.
  2. Interpreting a public object – for example, the resurrection – in a supernatural, faith-based, way.
  3. A personal experience which could be described easily, using everyday language – for example a dream or answer to prayer.
  4. A personal experience which cannot be described easily – for example, a vision or being healed supernaturally.
  5. A personal experience which is not tangible, but nevertheless, the believer feels they have come into contact with God – for example feeling forgiven or being given courage to do something.
4. Dawkins: The cosmological and teleological arguments do not provide evidence that God exists.

Swinburne naturally disagrees with Dawkins. Using the regularity of the universe, he points out the essential order of it to support the teleological argument. He states that there are two types of regularity in the universe:

Regularities of co-presence (spatial order) – the way in which things come together in orderly patterns.

Regularities of succession (temporal order) – the way in which everything works together the same way every time, for example the ecosystem.

He argues, *'The universe might so naturally have been chaotic, but it is not.'* (*The Existence of God*, 1979)

5. Dawkins: The anthropic principle doesn't prove God exists; it just provides sound evidence in support of evolution.

Our world is particularly well-suited, that is an indisputable fact. According to Dawkins this doesn't prove that an intelligent being was involved in its design. Richard Swinburne proposes the concept of regularity, whereby evolution is perfectly valid but at the same time it can't account for the fact that, through chance, humans were produced.

*'The very success of science in showing us how deeply, orderly the natural world, is, provides strong ground for believing there is an even deeper cause for that order.'*

- *Simplicity as Evidence of Truth*, 1997

**TASKS**

1. In your own words, summarise Swinburne's response to Dawkins.
2. *'Religious faith is not based on reason!'*

Do you agree? In your response refer to Dawkins and Christian apologists' viewpoints. Which do you find to be the most convincing? Why?