

What Richard Dawkins Gets Wrong in, “The God Delusion”

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Before proceeding, please allow me to issue two very important disclaimers: First, while I am aware that there are many books that have been written in reaction to *The God Delusion*,¹ I have not read any of them. Consequently, what I argue below may appear somewhere in these works. I wanted to write down my thoughts. Second, and more importantly, from this title and the fact that I am arguing *against* Dawkins, the reader should in no way presume to know my religion, or that I have one at all, or think that I am somehow, by objecting to Dawkins, arguing that God does exist. My personal religious views are irrelevant here.

Now for my thesis: I dispute one of Dawkins’ central claims in his book, *The God Delusion*, that: “the existence of God is a scientific hypothesis like any other” (50). Let me give Gould’s rationale as to why science and religion have different realms, or magisteria:

The net, or magisterium, of science covers the empirical realm; what is the universe made of (fact) and why does it work this way (theory). The magisterium of religion extends over questions of ultimate meaning and moral value. These two magisteria do not overlap, nor do they encompass all inquiry possible (consider, for example, the magisterium of art and the meaning of beauty). To cite the old clichés, science gets the age of rocks, and religion the rock of ages; science studies how the heavens go, religion how to go to heaven (55).

While I agree with Gould that science and religion have different domains, I disagree that the best way to state the difference between them is that religion’s purview are questions of ultimate meaning and moral value. Instead, I would claim that religion might concern an entity that is eternal (outside of time) and immaterial, and a matter of faith (so that no proof is possible of the being except perhaps personal experience thereof, which should count as no proof to anyone else). But perfectly reasonably, science is concerned with what is in space-time, physical, and falsifiable (or disprovable, disconfirm-able, or testable) in an experiment; science’s purview is to explain nature. Simply put, there is no way to set up a science experiment to try to disconfirm the null hypothesis of an eternal, immaterial being that is a matter of faith.²

Worse yet for Dawkins, I submit that even if God *were* thought of as being a physical being (perhaps also in time), as some hold God to be, this hypothesis would not be scientifically testable either. Why? First, contemporary astronomers hold that the universe is infinite. There is no physical way to cover all of space (even with the ability to pop in and out of wormholes, say) to disconfirm the “God is physical” hypothesis. Second, even if we started out on that journey to find a physical God, assuming God is trying to remain unseen, since the universe is infinite (or *at least* extremely large!), one would think that God could avoid being seen by anyone if God so chose. Lastly, even Dawkins concedes that science “may know” the answer about God scientifically (48), but this implies that we may not scientifically know God does not exist someday. This leads me to my next point.

Related to Dawkins’ claim that the God hypothesis is a scientific one, he states, “What matters is not whether God is disprovable (he isn’t) but whether his existence is *probable*. That is another matter” (p. 54). The problem with this statement is that it is contradictory to what’s above: That is, Dawkins asserted that the issue of God is a scientific matter, which implies that it is falsifiable (or disprovable); that is precisely what makes an hypothesis a scientific one. But here, he states that God is not disprovable, so Dawkins admits that God is not a scientific question, hypothesis or issue.

¹ Dawkins, Richard (2006). *The God Delusion*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company.

² Here I leave aside the idea that someone who does not believe in God can also develop an ethical theory, under the assumption that the study of, practice of, and judgments about morality might be possible without God. But note that Dawkins himself admits, “we can
² Here I leave aside the idea that someone who does not believe in God can also develop an ethical theory, under the assumption that the study of, practice of, and judgments about morality might be possible without God. But note that Dawkins himself admits, “we can all agree that science’s entitlement to advise us on moral values is problematic” (57).

Lastly, Dawkins responds to the Gould quotation I quoted above about the two magisteria of science and religion as follows: “This sounds terrific – right up until you give it a moment’s thought. What are these ultimate questions in whose presence religion is an honoured guest and science must respectfully slink away?” (55) By way of concluding, my humbly-submitted answer to Dawkins is that these ultimate questions from which science must slink away are questions about an eternal, immaterial being where one is not claiming the ability to prove its existence deductively, but who admit that it might be a matter of faith.³

Perhaps now we can leave science and religion to their respective areas, and let their practitioners choose to work together, which is perfectly possible, or for some of them to continue to attempt to supercede, negate, or argue against the other. Perhaps not.

³ Note that I am not claiming that a belief in God based on faith is better or stronger than knowledge that God exists, or even rational belief that God exists; I am only claiming (against Dawkins) that science cannot help us investigate the specific hypothesis I mention above.