

DAWKINS: THE GOD DELUSION

The Criticism of Religion which has Become a Polemic Without Limits

JAVIER MONSERRAT
Universidad Autónoma de Madrid

Dawkins bases his criticism of the religious on the consideration that Darwinism eliminates all rationality regarding the belief in God. Another grand contemporary biologist, Michael Ruse, considers that Darwinism and Christianity are compatible. In his book, «Can a Darwinist be a Christian?», he responds affirmatively and offers us the following characterisation of the radicalism of Dawkins, from whom he differs radically, «He is a man who takes his atheism seriously, so much so that, in contrast, the grand Scottish philosopher of the XVIII century, David Hume (who was described memorably as “the greatest gift of God to the unbelievers”), seems moderate».

The biologist Richard Dawkins holds the Charles Simonyi Chair for the «Public Knowledge of Science», at the University of Oxford. He studied zoology at Oxford and, after accessing academic life, he soon began to stand out within the framework of Evolutionary Biology. His fundamental contribution consisted of contributing to the theoretical interpretation of the genes in evolutionary selection, through what we could call a «genetic» reading of traditional Darwinism. These ideas can be followed through the books of reference: *The Selfish Gene* (1976) and *The Extended Phenotype* (1982). For Dawkins the genetic-evolutionary mechanism is interactive with the environment as the medium are the «genes». Among other things, he introduced the concept of «meme» for the first time, therefore, the idea of «memetics» (see *Breaking the Spell* by Daniel Dennett).

Apart from his contributions to Theoretical Biology, Dawkins became famous for his work in the scientific divulgation of Darwinism and as a critic of religion. Although his criticism of religion is omnipresent, we can highlight two of his works of divulgation: *The Blind Watchmaker*, *Climbing Mount Improbable*, *Unweaving the Rainbow* and *A Devil's Chaplain*. Here we plan to analyse and evaluate his scientific work. We only refer to his criticism of religion, and limit ourselves to *The God Delusion* (the latest and most complex of his works).

Moreover, we will focus mainly on the scientific arguments although we will not ignore other types of evaluations of a humanistic, sociological and existential nature. Dawkins endeavours to make «science», but, in reality, he only makes «philosophy» mixed with subjective social evaluations and a picturesque set of anecdotes.

FROM WHERE CAN DAWKINS BE EVALUATED?

We believe that the following considerations are important:

- 1) Christianity has a long history. The way to argue the rationality (sense or signification) of religious behaviour has also varied throughout history. For example: in Thomism (the famous «five ways»). Different ways of thinking have also appeared: thus, the Catholic world is not the same as Evangelical Theology (which would lead to the modern version of Karl Barth, for example). Therefore, we can speak of a «ancient Christianity» whose reasoning is maintained at the present time by conservative groups.

However, together with this, today there is a «critical Christianity» which is made up of Catholic, Evangelical, Anglican thinkers, etc., who try to seriously rethink the sense of religious beliefs from the image of the universe, of life and of man in science. Dawkins only refers to the «ancient Christianity», and even presents a caricature of its approaches.

In other words, he completely ignores (does not explain, weigh up or discuss) the arguments of this «critical Christianity» which he should refer to if he really plans to discuss religiosity at the present time. Although he quotes some of the authors of this «critical Christianity», rather «rhetorically» (perhaps so that nobody can say they were not quoted), the impression he gives is that he almost entirely ignores their world of arguments and reflections.

Let us give an example. If we propose today the question, «Is Marxist philosophy defensible in the light of the results of current science?», it is not right to go to the arguments constructed in the time of de Marx-Engels (the middle of the XIX century) and confront these with science today. The correct thing would be to go to the current Marxist authors who have reformulated Marxism in the light of modern science and discuss this interpretation. To evaluate the rationality of religion today requires discussing with the authors «in the vanguard» at the present time; it is not sufficient to discuss with a simplified caricature of the past which we (Dawkins in this case) have created.

2) For the authors of this critical Christianity it is common today to admit that the universe is, in the final analysis, an enigma which has not yet been finally and securely deciphered. We do not deny that a response could be atheism. Its arguments, its personal honesty and, obviously, its right to express its opinions and endeavour to convince others within the framework of open dialogue in a free society are respected. Atheism is a rationally possible free option; this is not discussed.

However, critical Christianity thinks that this enigmatic universe could also be understood by reference to the hypothesis of a Divinity, the basis of being and creator. Thus, it puts forward its arguments, aware that these are «philosophy» and must be understood in the framework of restrictions of modern Popperian and Post-Popperian epistemology. What critical Christianity requests from Atheism is quite simply that atheism respect the free rational evaluation of theism (faced with an enigmatic universe) in the same way as theism rationally and morally respects atheism (and agnosticism).

CRITICAL CHRISTIANITY, EVOLUTION, DARWINISM

3) Critical Christianity today admits, without reservations, that the evolution of the universe, of life and of man is the result of a unitary process in which some states arise from previous ones. The explanation of this «unitary and continuous process» is diverse, but flows together: the initial ontology of matter (it should be noted that Dawkins completely ignores the current discussions on the physical causes of sensitivity-consciousness, as well as proposals such as the Hameroff-Penrose hypothesis, authors who are not even mentioned), Darwinism (classical, modern bio-chemical or genetic: that is to say, in any of its versions on condition that these can be reconciled with each other), the principles of self-organisation of matter and organisms along the lines of Stuart Kauffman (who Dawkins does not mention either), etc.

Therefore, the ideas of authors such as Demski or Behe who have contributed to promoting the defence of an «intelligent design» (with special incidence in American fundamentalism and creationism) have nothing to do with critical Christianity. Critical Chris-

tianity has avoided all reference to a «jerry builder» God, God-of-the-gaps (who has to intervene in the process of evolution, for example, in order to achieve that the immunological system or the human eye begin to function).

4) This means that critical Christianity has a very clear idea of the autonomy of the cosmic process: that is to say, that this can be explained in itself. This does not mean that theism does not argue that a cosmic rationality may be discovered, a global cosmic design which leads to man. This is the rationality of the design of an autonomous cosmos in which the process leads to human freedom. The idea of the «Christian anthropic principle» of Ellis (previously advanced by other authors) is the theist reading and interpretation of how an autonomous cosmos is related to a hidden God and human freedom.

Along these same lines, another author, Philip Hefner, reconciled the autonomy of the cosmos with the creating design of God speaking to man as «created co-creator». Thus, the cosmos would also be a «co-creator of itself» (autonomous). These authors are ignored by Dawkins and their ideas are unknown; their approaches, however, in our opinion, should have been discussed (not only the medieval ideas of God) if a serious discussion on religion from modern rationality had been addressed.

THE ARGUMENTS OF DAWKINS: DARWINISM

The third chapter of *The God Delusion* attempts to explain the arguments in favour of the existence of God. First it refers to the proofs of Saint Thomas (the five ways), then the arguments of Saint Anselm, the argument of beauty, of the experience of God (Dawkins refers to those who state that they had had «visions» or «apparitions» of God), the argument from Scripture (God exists because this can be deduced from the Scriptures, *sic*), and some other questions. Everything is a simple, caricaturesque synthesis of «ancient Christianity», with no serious reference to what we mentioned before as «critical Christianity». The truth is that it would be a waste of time, in our opinion, to present and discuss this caricature of Dawkins. It is better that we see his positive arguments on the non-existence of God directly.

The fourth is titled: «Why is it almost sure that there is no God». The first argument is from biology (the speciality of Dawkins). It is clear that the supposition of Dawkins is the following: then theists consider that their «grand argument» in favour of God is the complexity of the biological world. This complexity cannot be explained without a creator designer. The simile he uses is the Boeing 747: its enormous complexity makes it impossible to explain by chance, therefore, the theist postulates a designer constructor.

Against this, Dawkins explains how Darwinism has proposed a theory which explains perfectly how complexity came about: events, small changes, or genetic mutations, progress and more small steps. The complexity increases little by little, progressively and plausibly. Therefore, if complexity is explained by Darwinism, it is not necessary to have recourse to God. God does not exist is an unnecessary explanatory hypothesis. The biological world is there and explains itself.

This argument is read with perplexity by modern critical theism as it fully assumes Darwinism and the functional autonomy of the evolutionary process (remember the aforementioned book of Michael Ruse). Dawkins, however, ignores this and seems to think only of what interests him: the creation of a fictitious enemy (the «jerry-builder» God, ancient Christianity, fundamentalist creationism, perhaps Behe and Demski) and dedicates his efforts to combating this. The perplexity arises from the security, aplomb and

triumphalism with which Dawkins is capable of explaining this argumentation which is so ignorant of current critical Christianity.

COSMOLOGICAL DARWINISM

Dawkins draws attention to the fact that, evidently, «in order to demonstrate» that there is no God, biology is not sufficient (Dawkins knows the arguments of the defenders of the «anthropic principle»). Biology must be founded on the universe, whose evolution and properties must also be explained naturally without God. To do so, he extends his thought towards what we would call cosmological Darwinism. In the same way as there are a multitude of biological events, there are also a multitude of planets and infinite universes: by chance we are on the planet and in the universe which have made us possible. Thus, Dawkins refers to billions of planets within our universe and «infinite» multi-universes, supported by the ideas of Martin Rees and the Darwinian model of multi-universes of Lee Smolin; however, in all the book he does not mention string theory which could have helped him in his attempt to make multi-universes likely.

The consequence is also evident for Dawkins: cosmological Darwinism also makes the hypothesis of God unnecessary, therefore, there is no God. However, Dawkins ignores the decisive fact that the theory of multi-universes, and string theory, are pure theoretical speculation, with no empirical or experimental evidence in their favour. The idea of the universe founded on empirical facts is today known as the «standard cosmological model» which describes a universe arising from a singular *big bang* and which will probably end up dying technically in a far off future of indefinite expansion (the standard cosmological model is admitted by almost all scientists, but is discussed by minorities who follow the stationary universe of Hoyle, Arp's quasars, or the plasma universe).

Moreover, relevant authors of Christian critical theism, such as George Ellis and William Stoeger, defend the theory of multi-universes (just as many defend string theory). For them, the fact that God might have wanted to create through multi-universes would form part of the creative design of a «co-creator» cosmos, of an autonomous process oriented to concealing God and freedom. Richard Dawkins also ignores all this.

ATHEISM AND THEISM

We insist that critical theism considers that atheism is not only feasible, but is also honest. Even despite the imbalance of the standard cosmological model, it might be thought that multi-universes and string theory open up theoretical horizons in order to make hypotheses on an eternal self-sufficient universe which has produced life by internal mechanisms (Darwinism). This atheism is hypothetical, philosophical and even metaphysical. But it is legitimate and honest as we see in society.

The point is that the same universe is very complicated and others can construct an alternative hypothesis: the theist hypothesis, whose feasibility is also socially beyond doubt. For these, the standard cosmological model of the universe is patently self-sufficient as regards philosophical or metaphysical consideration. Moreover, the autonomous evolutionary process of the universe (which could include multi-universes) as a whole presents a reason for design (we do not refer to the «jerry-builder» God of Dawkins) which would make the hypothesis that everything is explained from the basis of a divine creator and designer of human freedom likely.

In a metaphysically enigmatic universe (remember the critical, non-dogmatic and hypothetical principles of modern epistemology of science) both hypotheses, atheism and theism, are feasible as shown by sociology. To situate oneself in one or the other is the result of the capacity for the free and honest, rational evaluation of each human being.

PROBABILITIES AND APPEAL COURT

Richard Dawkins also endeavours to analyse the probability of both hypotheses, the atheistic and the theist. He argues that the probability of atheism is almost absolute. That is why his title for chapter four is, «Why is it almost sure that there is no God?». He tries to show that his atheistic interpretation is the more probable if we attend to scientific objectivity and evidence, with almost absolute probability. Theism, on the other hand, has hardly any probability of being certain.

He tries to show that «scientific objectivity», «science», is always on the side of atheism. However, in reality, atheism and theism are not science, but philosophy (although they are founded on reflections based on science). Nevertheless, Dawkins does not realise that the evaluations of «objectivity» and «probability» are «his» (or of atheists in general). It is logical that the atheist thinks that atheism is much more probable and he sees this «very clearly»; that is why he is an atheist. However, the theist makes a different, personal, honest, free evaluation, and thinks that theism is more likely and is inclined more to that. He also sees this «very clearly».

Is there an «appeal court» which might decide on who is more objective and what is more probable? The truth is that we do not know this. The naivety of Dawkins is considerable as his grounds for becoming an appeal court and dogmatically deciding in favour of atheism are his own analysis. He seems to work apart from the most elementary reflections of the modern epistemology of science.

SOCIOLOGY OF ATHEISM AND THEISM

Dawkins repeats the theist argument that great scientists have been believers. Obviously he is trying to put forward the contrary argument. For example, with no further explanation, he argues that Einstein was an atheist, and does not give the specific weighting of his religiosity, as is normally done by the important students of the theme. He refers to the survey made among scientists of the National Academy of Sciences, in which only 7% declared that they were believers. The most intelligent were atheists. He scorns another wider survey made among scientists, also made by *Nature*, in which 40% were believers, 40% non-believers and the rest abstained, clearly, this includes scientists who are not so clever.

He begins his analysis with a quotation from Bertrand Russell: «The immense majority of intellectually eminent men do not believe in the Christian religion, but conceal this fact in public, perhaps because they are afraid they will lose their earnings» (*sic*). Within this framework programme he refers specifically to his friend Martin Reed to tell of «private» conversation (we suppose that with his authorisation) in which Reed told him that he went to the religious services only because it was traditional. He also says that Freeman Dyson is also basically atheist, however, in order to receive the Templeton Prize, he has played an obliging role (that is to say, he let himself be bought undignifiedly, *sic*).

He repeatedly accuses the Templeton Foundation (which has the right to dedicate its capital to the purposes it freely decides on) of dishonestly buying the will of people and constructing a falsification which is a social fraud. Not to mention the rest of non-scientific humanity: humanists, historians, economists, politicians, all kinds of professionals, many of whom are prestigious, and the rest of humanity, the majority of whom are religious. All the individuals and institutions are undignified to the extent that they can be bought, intellectually infantile, ignorant, dominated by memetic behaviour and worthy only of scorn. However, basically he grants them something «positive»: all of them want to be «atheists» and demonstrate this socially.

RELIGION THE SUMMUM OF ALL EVILS, WITH NO SIGN OF GOODNESS WHATSOEVER

After the scientific and philosophical criticism, the classical criticism of religion always explained why men have insisted on being religious for no reason at all: these are the so called «theories of alienation». Dawkins also deals with humanistic, ethical and social questions from the fifth chapter of the book. Religion is the origin of all evil: wars, hatred, judicial proceedings, injustice, abuses of all kinds, elimination of freedom, pederasty, ignorance, superstition, etc.

However, he himself puts forward one objection, Hitler and Stalin? They were not religious, nevertheless, they gave rise to evil. How is this possible? The solution which Dawkins proposes is that the evil they did was not done as «atheists» but as «men». Obviously this leads to the question: as regards many of the problems produced by religion in the past and in the present, «Does the human condition not play a role, together with the global context of persons, cultures and history?».

It is very difficult to address an evaluation of the thought of Richard Dawkins without becoming polemic. However, Dawkins himself offers ideas which are polemic in themselves due to their content and form for public consideration.

These are polemic due to their radicalism (taken to the extreme, with no nuances), due to being indiscriminate (he does not distinguish forms of religiosity, especially modern ones, but for him the religious is always the same unequivocal, archaic, caricaturesque and pejorative conduct, with no nuances), due to its offensive character (against very specific persons and institutions), due to his generalised scorn for human beings (who are mostly religious), due to his dogmatism (ignoring the critical principles of modern epistemology), due to his argumentative imprecision (where he mixes the scientific with the philosophical, the data on the problem are unknown and there are no evaluation and epistemological nuances), due to his intolerance (as his attitudes lead to a type of intolerant society where there is no respect only scorn).

Have we not gone too far? The truth is that the objective analysis of the content and form of Dawkins lead us to consider that, surprisingly and regrettably, this is how it is. It could not be otherwise, it is our subjective evaluation; others might make another evaluation which we respect. We have summed up the arguments which endorse our opinions.

Dawkins himself warned that he might be too aggressive and naively tells us what his colleagues at Oxford told him. It is easy to imagine sensible professors telling him, «But, Richard, don't concern yourself so much with religion, leave it alone...». It is true that religion has treated atheism with radicalism (and, what is more, with the «burning at the stake»). Perhaps radicalism continues today (although not in critical theism which respects atheism, as we explained above).

However, in the case of Dawkins, I believe he has gone beyond the border of the sense and prudence which should be expected from a professor of Oxford: to accuse persons and institutions of fraud and dishonesty is serious. To scorn millions of believers who live their religiosity honestly, many of these with a perfect knowledge of science and culture, is senseless and a considerable humanistic indignity. He could have explained atheism in a more dignified and competent fashion as many others have done.

[Texto básico publicado en Tendencias21.net,
por la Cátedra CTR, Escuela Técnica Superior de Ingeniería,
Universidad Comillas, Madrid]

JAVIER MONSERRAT

