



Rejecting Dawkins' Rejection of the God Hypothesis

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Abstract: While not a philosopher by profession, Richard Dawkins ventured into the realm of philosophy of religion in *The God Delusion*, and attacked the God Hypothesis, i.e., the belief that “there exists a superhuman, supernatural intelligence, who deliberately designed and created the universe and everything in it including us.” Most theists and atheists agree on the meaning of the God hypothesis. Controversies arise when atheists, like Dawkins, assert that this hypothesis is a scientific hypothesis, and should be subjected to the scientific method.

This paper is a philosophical analysis of the logic of rejecting the God hypothesis on the basis of the assertion that it is not scientific. The first part is a reconstruction of the evidential support provided in Dawkins' *The God Delusion* where he shows that the God hypothesis is unnecessary. The second part consists of counterarguments against Dawkins' position, with the goal of providing grounds for rejecting his claim. In the end, it will be shown that the God hypothesis is a philosophical hypothesis, and like some other hypotheses that are not scientific, a plausible one.

This paper is intended to contribute to the philosophical debate on the rationality of belief in God. The objective is to demonstrate the acceptability of the affirmative side of the debate, primarily by providing a defeater to one of the more popular positions belonging to the negative side.

Key Words: God; God hypothesis; Richard Dawkins

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper is a philosophical analysis of the logic of rejecting the God hypothesis on the basis of the assertion that it is not scientific. What this shows is that the God hypothesis is unnecessary. The second part consists of counterarguments against Dawkins' position, with the goal of providing grounds for rejecting his claim. In the end, it will be shown that the God hypothesis is a philosophical hypothesis, and

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2. THE GOD HYPOTHESIS



In recent years, Richard Dawkins rose to prominence on account of his controversial attack on God, faith and religion. While not a philosopher by profession, Richard Dawkins ventured into the realm of philosophy of religion in his very popular work, *The God Delusion*, and attacked the God Hypothesis, i.e., the belief that “there exists a superhuman, supernatural intelligence, who deliberately designed and created the universe and everything in it including us” (Dawkins 2006:58).

Most theists and atheists agree on the meaning of the God hypothesis. Richard Swinburne, a theist, explains that the said hypothesis claims that there is a God who has the “power to create, conserve, or annihilate anything, big or small... God is not limited by the laws of nature, he makes them and he can change or suspend them – if he chooses.” (Swinburne 1997) In an earlier work, he states: “The hypothesis of theism is that the universe exists because there is a God who keeps it in being and that laws of nature operate because there is a God who brings it about that they do. He brings it about that the laws of nature operate by sustaining in every object in the universe its liability to behave in accord with those laws.” (Swinburne, 1986: 9)

Theists and atheists alike concede that the existence of God makes a lot of difference. “A universe with a supernaturally intelligent creator is a very different kind of universe from one without” (Dawkins 2006). This is explained partly in terms of the belief that a supernatural agent designed the universe we inhabit, sustains it, and even intervenes in it with miracles. Statements like these do not appear objectionable to a rational theist.

Controversies arise when atheists, like Dawkins (2006:50), assert that this hypothesis is a scientific hypothesis, and should be subjected to the scientific method. Hence, the rejection of the claim that science and religion are two separate magisteria; i.e., “science must be completely silent about religion’s central existence claim.” God is not invulnerable to science. “God’s existence or non-existence is a scientific fact about the universe, discoverable in principle if not in practice.” He went as far as question why scientists are “so cravenly respectful towards the ambitions of theologians, over questions that theologians are certainly no more qualified to answer than scientists themselves?” Hence, the God hypothesis is “a scientific hypothesis like any other.”

3. A SCIENTIFIC HYPOTHESIS?

Among the various sciences, we can identify those that rely heavily on empirical observation, on the one hand, and those that are more speculative as they rely more on mathematical models, on the other. Whichever category a particular science may belong to, it is standard that the hypothesis it puts forward would rely on public observation of the behavior of entities involved and of phenomena that are repeatable, and testable under controlled conditions, and can generate specific predictions. If a scientific hypothesis cannot be tested under these conditions, it is not accepted as a scientific hypothesis.

Dawkins claims that the God hypothesis is a scientific hypothesis, and cites *the Great Prayer Experiment* as an attempt to scientifically ascertain the power of intercessory prayer in the field of medicine. Borrowing from *Alice in Wonderland*, he asks, “What is the use of God who does no miracles and answers no prayers?” It is as if he is saying that if indeed there is a God, this God would be answering the prayers of his faithful believers.

Dr. Herbert Benson of the Harvard Medical School and his team conducted a large-scale controlled randomized research, a scientific study about prayer, dubbed as “Study of the Therapeutic Effects of Intercessory Prayer (STEP)”. It involves 1802 patients in 6 hospitals, all of whom received coronary bypass surgery. Patients randomly assigned to one of three groups: 604 patients received intercessory prayer after being informed they may or may not receive prayers (Group 1); 597 patients did not receive prayer after being informed they may or may not receive prayer (Group 2); and 601 patients received intercessory prayer after being informed they would receive it (Group 3). Congregations of believers in Minnesota, Massachusetts and Missouri included in their prayers the phrase “for successful surgery with a quick healthy recovery.”

The American Heart Journal (April 2006) published the research output where it was reported that there was no difference between patients who were prayed for and those who were not. There was difference between those who knew that they were prayed for and those who did not know. Those who knew that they were prayed for suffered significantly more complications than those who did not. The John Templeton Foundation (2002-7) which funded the largest study of intercessory prayer in medicinal settings in the world with its two million dollar



award, said in its official statement: “The largest study of third-party remote intercessory prayer suggests prayer (is) not effective in reducing complications following heart surgery.” It also noted that “the null results obtained by the methodologically rigorous STEP experiment appear to provide a clear and definitive contrasting result to an earlier published finding (Byrd study) of a positive effect for patient-blind distant intercessory prayer in a prayer experiment involving recovery of patients in a cardiac care unit.”

Treated as a scientific hypothesis, the God hypothesis was tested under controlled conditions. The experiment failed to generate a verifiable outcome that shows that the One to whom people pray would listen to prayers and is powerful enough to configure, re-arrange or even suspend the laws of nature to answer what the congregation prayed for.

However, it is interesting to highlight what the researchers themselves thought about their project: “Our study focused only on intercessory prayer as provided in this trial and was never intended to and cannot address a large number of religious questions, such as whether God exists, whether God answers intercessory prayers” (Benson et al, 2006).

Theists could easily shrug off that experiment as totally unnecessary, because at least for most theists, the God hypothesis is not a scientific hypothesis that can be tested under controlled conditions. The God hypothesis finds good company among hypotheses that are not scientific.

4. A NONSCIENTIFIC HYPOTHESIS

There are lots of hypotheses that are not scientific. Keith Ward (2008: 26-7) explains how this is the case for the discipline of history. A historian makes a hypothesis when he explains the origins of war by reference to a set of economic and/or social factors, and even motives of power and greed of politicians and leaders. Hypotheses like these make no predictions about future events. These are not repeatable events that can be repeated or controlled for verification or confirmation by independent experimenters. Attributions of motives, desire and intentions to long-dead people cannot be proved by any set of public observation. “There are no history laboratories.” (Ward 2011)

There are other factual hypotheses that are not scientific. Suppose I had a dream last night. What the dream is all about -- the content of the said dream -- might be known to me but there is a genuine possibility that I might not share it. I might enjoy my privileged access to my first-person experience. Brain activity during sleep can be subjected to scientific confirmation. There is no way, however, that the content of my dream can be publicly observed, or make predictions as a result of it. These instances establish the fact that many historical and autobiographical claims are not repeatable, not publicly observable now or in future.

The God hypothesis is similar, in a limited way, to these hypotheses which are not scientific, in that it cannot be tested by public observation in controlled conditions. The God hypothesis, however, does not make factual claims that may be conclusively verified by interested parties in the near future.

There is agreement between theists and atheists alike that “a universe with a supernaturally intelligent creator is a very different kind of universe from one without” (Dawkins 2006:52). There are several possibilities allied with this assertion. First, a universe without God, unlike what we perceive to be the case for our universe, might be without any general laws of nature, purpose, morality or personal goal. It might not even contain any conscious life, moral agents, or beings that could appreciate beauty and intelligibility of nature. There is a second, quite opposite, possibility. The universe could be a universe without God that had reliable laws of nature, even a purpose of sorts, an objective morality, conscious life, responsible agents and even an appearance of design, due to natural selection.

From above, it appears that the difference that the presence or absence of God makes, seems something that can be settled by experiment. It is tempting to say that the God question can be subjected to scientific experimentation. But there are reasons for not venturing into such endeavors. First, we tend to agree with Ward (2008) that in human relationships, we rule out experimenting on our friends and loved ones to find out if they truly care for our well-being. It bothers us to find out that the people around us seek the proof and evidence of our commitment to their well-being, and are severely wanting in trust. This seems more generally acceptable, although we cannot preclude the possibility of people experimenting on people they



love and would prefer to say "Under condition C, person P will most likely do A if P is a true friend, or is genuinely concerned with his family."

Secondly, if the God hypothesis entails belief in divine consciousness as ultimate reality, then no evidence can be sufficient to confirm or deny the hypothesis. While evidence can be marshalled for or against it, it will never be conclusively settled (Ward 2008). Any attempt towards scientific determination of its truth is misdirected because the God hypothesis is not a scientific hypothesis.

Finally, the God hypothesis is a metaphysical hypothesis. It attempts to explain the reality in which we live in relation to the ultimate reality, God. Rational answers to many of our questions concerning the nature of reality depend on general philosophical views, moral views, personal experience and judgment, and the God hypothesis directs us to the very core of our inquiry.

5. CONCLUSION

In *The God Delusion*, Dawkins' argued for the rejection of the God hypothesis on account of its being non-scientific. Our analysis showed that Dawkins' position is untenable because like some other hypotheses that are not scientific, the God hypothesis is a plausible one.

6. REFERENCES

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