

BOOK REVIEW
of
Thomas Crean,
God Is No Delusion: A Refutation of Richard Dawkins,
Ignatius Press, 2007.

April 2010

This review is by Larry D. Paarmann.

One of the characteristics of the New Atheists is that they write book-length arguments defending the superiority of atheism over theism. That is, they are not just personally embracing atheism, but are attempting to make the argument for atheism almost evangelistically. That, perhaps with rare exceptions, the old atheists did not really do. The new super-confident approach by atheists has resulted in a string of bombastic, pro-atheism books being published, and well received by the public. The de facto leader of the New Atheists is Richard Dawkins, and his most pro-atheist book is *The God Delusion*. In this fairly long book by Dawkins, Thomas Crean really only finds one main argument against theism and for atheism. In this book under review, Crean takes this argument by Dawkins seriously and refutes it, and along the way also discusses other complaints raised by Dawkins. Thomas Crean is a Dominican friar of the Priority of St. Michael the Archangel, Cambridge.

The book under review contains a Preface and nine chapters. Chapter 1 is titled *Professor Dawkins' Argument*. Chapter 2 is titled *Professor Dawkins and St Thomas Aquinas*. Chapter 3 is titled *Professor Dawkins and Miracles*. Chapter 4 is *Professor Dawkins and the Gospels*. Chapter 5 is *Professor Dawkins and the Origins of Morality*. Chapter 6 is *Professor Dawkins and the Origins of Religion*. Chapter 7 is *Professor Dawkins, Morals and the Bible*. Chapter 8 is *Professor Dawkins and the Catholic Church*. And Chapter 9 is *The Two Ways*.

In Chapter 1, Crean reviews Dawkins' main argument against God in his book *The God Delusion*, and points out what is wrong with Dawkins' argument. The problem for most readers of either Crean or Dawkins is that this argument is philosophical and, I suspect, will not really interest most. The argument has to do with the complexity of God. Dawkins makes the argument that given that the universe is very complex, that then any designer-God would have to be even more complex, and that therefore postulating God does not move us in the direction of explaining anything. If we presuppose the God of the Bible most of us will likely not see a problem with God being more complex than the universe that He has created. This would be a simple extension from our personal experience. We see no problem with an architect being more complex than the building that he has designed. We assume that the engineers that designed a Boeing 747 are more complex than the airplane itself. In fact, most of us would not only see no problem with such conclusions, we would likely find it difficult to imagine otherwise. So what is the difficulty that Dawkins finds, and others, with a God more complex than the universe that He has created? I think it is because of the kind of God that they are looking for. Scientific laws provide something that unifies and at least in part explains observed phenomena. Certain philosophical concepts likewise unify and at least in part explain a wide range of other philosophical ideas or observations. The illusive theory of everything attempts to unify all knowledge. In each case, the law, the philosophical concept, and the theory either explains or describes in simple terms other much more complex phenomena. So the kind of God that Dawkins may be looking for perhaps has more in common with the Force of *Star Wars* than with the God of the Bible.

That is, philosophically speaking, the solution to the question of the origin of the universe, according to some, must be something more simple, not more complex. Crean observes that hidden within Dawkins' argument is the assumption of materialism, but before I write more on this it should be noted that many have made the argument, and Crean does as well, that God is indeed simple. This may seem silly, and perhaps even offensive, but before it is dismissed it should be noted that Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas and others have made the argument that God is simple. A good introduction for this argument is found in the online Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/divine-simplicity>

The basic concern is that God Himself is not caused. Crean writes on page 10: "I have claimed that Professor Dawkins offers only one philosophical argument for atheism. It could be called 'the argument from complexity.' His idea is this: if a being existed with the attributes generally said to belong to God, such a being would be complex, and therefore would require a cause." Crean begins his response on page 14: "'So long as we remain within the realm of bodily things, complexity of producer increases with complexity of product.' But according to the theist, of course, God is not a bodily thing. He is Spirit. The Professor's induction is therefore entirely irrelevant. The complexity of the universe has no tendency to show that a designer of the universe who was not a bodily thing would be complex." On page 16 Crean writes: "Professor Dawkins would have been correct if he had stated, not that the designer of a complex product must himself be complex, but rather that a designer must be at least as *perfect*, at least as 'rich in his reality' as the thing that he designs." This statement helps those of us with a tendency to think that suggesting God is simple is impious to realize that philosophically *simple* means something other than we may have imagined. On pages 30 and 31 Crean explains further: "Even within the kinds of knowledge proper to human beings, increased powers go hand in hand with greater simplicity. A musical genius such as Mozart can grasp the whole movement of a symphony at a stroke, in a single moment of artistic inspiration. The student who studies this same symphony will have to go through it laboriously, bar after bar, multiplying his thoughts in order to grasp Mozart's musical idea, and even so his knowledge of it will no doubt be far inferior to its composer's." This insight of Crean's is not only helpful to properly understanding the concept of philosophical simplicity, it also gives insight into the mind of musical genius. Crean then observes that "Far from supposing, then, that a being perfect enough to know and design the entire universe must be extremely complex, we ought to suppose that he would be extremely simple." As difficult a pill as this may be to swallow, at least we can hopefully follow the argument. The argument for God being simple (if you can, along with me, swallow hard) is that human beings are complex because of our lack of integrity, our indecisiveness, our internal conflicts, or in summary because of our sin, but God has perfect integrity, perfect knowledge, perfect love, and is therefore simple in all of His acts. However, I doubt whether Dawkins would be impressed with any of this line of argument.

On page 19 Crean discusses Dawkins' materialism. "By materialism, I mean the following philosophical position: 'Everything that exists is either matter or else a property of matter.'" I doubt that Dawkins would object to this definition, nor do I doubt but that he would agree that he is, as defined, a materialist. However, Crean continues: "Note first that this is indeed a *philosophical* position. It is not, in the modern sense of the term, a scientific one." Of course, Dawkins claims that he investigates the existence of God scientifically, and this yields one of the most telling criticisms of Dawkins, made by Crean as well as others. Dawkins seems to be very philosophically unsophisticated, to put it in a generous way. Even apart from Scripture and the history of Christianity, not only modern philosophers but also those of ancient Greece such as Socrates, Plato and Aristotle concerned themselves with the existence of God. Crean complains on page 32 that "it is well to point out that his [Dawkins'] quarrel is not only with 'religion', but also with the greatest minds of antiquity." If one accepts Dawkins' position that God must be more complex than the universe that He has created, and therefore the existence of God must then be explained, then it would seem that an adequate response could include the argument from design, or one of the other classical arguments for God's existence, or perhaps an historical argument for the accuracy and reliability of Scripture or for the historicity of the resurrection. If, on the other hand, one does not accept Dawkins' position but rather argues for the simplicity of God, as is done by Crean and others, then, either way, Dawkins' argument seems weak at best. From someone of the stature of Dawkins I think one should be able to expect a more compelling argument. And this one brief argument is gleaned from a quite long book by Dawkins filled mostly with incomprehensible drivel by the distinguished Oxford professor.

In Chapter 2 Crean criticizes Dawkins for his lack of knowledge of Aquinas. This is perhaps not a fair fight, since Crean is quite knowledgeable of Aquinas and Dawkins probably doesn't think Aquinas even worthy of being read. Crean begins this chapter by discussing two paths to God: "We can distinguish two paths by which one comes to know that God exists, one ordinary, the other extraordinary. The ordinary path starts from the natural course of events and rises to the knowledge of an unchanging, intelligent cause of the world around us. This path can be pursued philosophically, using learned language, as it was, for example, by Aristotle and St Thomas Aquinas. Far more often, however, people pass along this path quite spontaneously. They simply say, in these or similar words, 'there must be something behind it all.' It is not

necessary to be a student of philosophy to reach God by this path. It is enough to have an intellect unhampered by sophistry or prejudice.” On page 36 Crean continues: “Professor Dawkins wishes to close off both these paths to God; or rather, he claims that neither path is worth following.” Crean discusses two of the ways described by Aquinas.

Aquinas’ first way is an argument that God is the first cause upon which everything depends, and that God Himself is uncaused. On page 39 Crean writes: “Such is St Thomas’ ‘first way’. Fifteen centuries before him, Aristotle had followed it to the same conclusion. It doesn’t reach an absentee ‘god’, who is supposed to have given an initial fillip to the universe, and then left things to take their own course. It reaches the First Cause on whom everything now depends. Without such an unchanging First Cause, nothing could happen.”

The second way that Crean discusses is Aquinas’ fifth way (Crean does not discuss Aquinas’ second, third, and fourth ways). Dawkins refers to this fifth way, as do many others, as the argument from design. Crean objects that Dawkins, as well as most others who discuss this fifth way, assume that the argument is that since the world and many features in it appear to be designed that there must be a designer, and that designer is God. Crean’s first concern is that design may well imply a designer, but that does not necessarily lead to God. That is one of the concerns with the Intelligent Design movement. Who the designer is, is not known. It may not necessarily be God. But Crean’s primary concern is that this misses the point of Aquinas’ fifth way. According to Crean on page 43, Aquinas’ point in the fifth way is that “some things act even though they don’t know what they’re doing.” That is, the universe acts according to the so-called laws of physics and chemistry. Why should things act in a predictable way? On page 45 Crean answers the question: “the presence of an intelligence behind the material world, for a law can only be instituted by a mind. . . . scientific laws by themselves, of course, cannot do anything.” Crean concludes Aquinas’ fifth way on page 47: “Just as there must be an unchanging cause of change, so there must be an ‘orderer’ that is not itself ordered by anything else. Some intelligence must exist that does not need to have an activity assigned to it. This is only possible if this intelligence *is* its own activity. The fifth way, then, brings us to a first intelligence that is one, unchanging, subsistent act of understanding. And this is God.”

In the remaining chapters of the book, Crean takes on Dawkins’ misunderstandings and misrepresentations of miracles, the Gospels, morality, origins of religion, the Bible, and the Catholic Church. The thing that stands out the most to this reviewer is that Crean has taken seriously the criticisms of Dawkins and has dealt with them in a carefully reasoned and responsible way. Many Christians who have read Dawkins, including this reviewer, are so dumbfounded and baffled by almost everything that Dawkins has written in *The God Delusion* find it difficult to even attempt a reasoned response. Crean is to be highly praised that somehow he has risen above this reaction and has given an excellent response. I have concluded with a similar comment before but I’ll do it again here: There are many good books challenging the New Atheists, and it has given Christians an open door to present the case for Christianity to a new generation, and this book by Crean is one of those that I would warmly recommend.