
AN INTRODUCTION TO LOGICAL FALLACIES

DAWKINS' *THE GOD DELUSION*

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Abstract

“I have assumed that the layman has no special knowledge, but I have not assumed that he is stupid” says Richard Dawkins, the talented popularizer of Biology, in his *Selfish Gene*. Yet, he seems to change his opinion regarding the layman in *The God Delusion*, as the book is filled with all kinds of fallacious arguments. Dawkins’ preference to attack arguers rather than the arguments and his misrepresentation of the opponents’ views are some, but not all, of the fallacies committed throughout the book. The logical fallacies in the book show how ideology can lead to faulty logical reasoning and turn a world famous scientist into an ordinary propagandist. This article aims both to reveal some of the book’s logical fallacies that constitute perfect examples of weak reasoning and also to contribute to the possibilities of a better, more productive debate.

Keywords: The God Delusion, logical fallacies, celestial teapot

1. Introduction

The author of *The God Delusion* seems to be a dedicated warrior of his case who wants to convince his readers to share his faith by using any weapons available, whether just, right, fair or not. The main problem with this dedication is that the book is a bestseller that targets the layman as its reader group. It seems Dawkins presumes the layman is uneducated in detecting fallacious arguments. Throughout the text he does not hesitate to show his skills in building straw men and then knocking them down with great enthusiasm. Again he, as a scientist, must have known that ad hominem – that is, attacking his opponents’ personalities rather than their views - is not the best way to persuade those readers who can differentiate a good argument from a fallacious one. Whether he is aware of the fact that his book is filled with perfect examples of various logical fallacies, Dawkinsian arguments should be put to the test of logical reasoning in order to be taken into consideration by serious scientists, philosophers, theologians, and the educated layman. Unless Dawkins’ venomous anti-religious attitude is questioned, his ideas will remain dogmatic and fundamentalist, appealing only to the hearts of his atheist disciples. Aiming

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to reveal the flawed logic in Dawkinsian thought, this article is separated into several parts in which certain fallacies committed in Dawkins' book *The God Delusion* will be illustrated.

2. Fallacies

2.1. Genetic fallacies and *ad hominem*

A genetic fallacy is committed when the arguer focuses on the source of the argument to evaluate the validity of the argument. If the source of a certain belief is weak, the belief should be ignored; strong arguments, the fallacious mind dictates, are those with a trustable source. To illustrate, we commit this fallacy if we conclude that a notable scientist who asserts that God does not exist must be right without bothering to support the argument with a logical proof. Dawkins commits this fallacy by trying to persuade the reader that Einstein was not a believer. Even if Einstein speaks of God, he does so, Dawkins argues, in a "purely metaphorical, poetic sense" [1]. Dawkins thinks that his position will be strengthened by quoting from a Rabbi who argues that Einstein's views were not appreciated by Judaism [1, p. 16]. Now, whether Einstein was a believer or not, Dawkins was wrong in implying that Einstein's religious views undergird the non-existence of God. Einstein's views regarding God or religion do not bear any meaning unless they are supported by strong arguments - no doubt stronger than a quotation from a letter of one Rabbi. Similar examples of this fallacy are ubiquitous in Dawkins' book. The argument that Hawking is as much a non-believer as Einstein [1], again provides a crystal-clear message: if great physicists have made their decisions about God, who are we to oppose their views?

Another version of genetic fallacy is committed when Dawkins tries to deprecate the arguments of those scientists who were rewarded with the Templeton Prize. Dawkins is very sceptical about this reward and does not try to hide his suspicions about the objectivity of these scientists. They are far from being honest scientists, Dawkins asserts, and also claims that they serve religious ends for the sake of money and prestige. Indeed, this fallacy is a perfect example of *ad hominem*, a type of genetic fallacy. In this version, the arguer attacks the personality of his opponent to denigrate his views. Dawkins attacks Flew - an earlier ardent advocate of atheism who declared his belief in God in 2004 - by stating that "maybe Flew's alleged conversion will be rewarded with the Templeton Prize" [1, p. 82]. Yet, Dawkins does not launch an attack on any of the views that had led Flew to faith.

Finally, Dawkins evaluates psychological factors for believing in God, particularly those gathered during our childhood. As children, we try to find a meaning in every event, even if such meaning does not exist. Many do not abandon this tendency at adulthood and thus, Dawkins concludes, those people believe that we are here for a reason, to fulfil a God-given purpose [1, p. 180]. Now, even if Dawkins and the theories to which he refers are correct in

assuming that faith has psychological roots, this in itself does not negate belief in God. We cannot invalidate any belief just because that belief has psychological roots. It is logically possible to argue that God created human psychology and programmed human beings to search for a meaning in their lives. Seen thus, the psychological roots of religion cannot be used as an argument against religious belief.

2.2 Irrelevant appeals

The God Delusion illustrates several examples of irrelevant appeals that are mostly used to persuade the reader without using any relevant evidence about the foregoing discussion. For instance, when Dawkins wants the reader to imagine a religion-free world, he reminds us of the 9/11 attacks, Crusades and witch hunts. These are perfect examples of 'Appeal to Pity'. Dawkins tries to create sympathy towards those people who are supposedly killed by religions. Even if Dawkins is right in his superficial claims, this would not show that God is a delusion.

Despite the frequent use of 'Appeal to Pity' in his arguments, Dawkins' favourite irrelevant appeal is surprisingly 'Appeal to Popularity'. It is surprising because as a "standing tall to face the far horizon" [1, p. 3] scientist, Dawkins should not be interested in how popular a certain belief is among the masses. The validity of atheism will not be enhanced by the number of atheists, exactly for the same reason the number of believers will not prove the existence of God. Dawkins perceives no problem with attacking the 'Appeal to Popularity' when it is committed by believers, but then points to the belief of the masses as a proof when the masses are atheists. After stating the popularity of atheism among educated people, he explains his dream to make atheists step forward and show the rest of the population that they far outnumber many religious groups, including Jews [1, p. 4]. Dawkins is not satisfied with the popularity of atheism among educated people to convince his readers that atheism is right and thus he gives a further example: the popularity of atheism among eminent scientists. After strengthening his case with numbers, Dawkins concludes, "This overwhelming preponderance of atheists is almost the exact opposite of the profile of the American population at large, of whom more than 90 percent are believers in some sort of supernatural being." [1, p.100]

Dawkins thus defends his argument by claiming that the popularity of a certain belief among scientists is superior to the popularity of a certain belief among the ordinary masses. He contends that the popularity of atheism among scientists is an argument for atheism. Thus he also commits the fallacy of 'Appeal to Authority'. An argument needs to be sound and strong in order to be accepted, no matter who supports it. Arguments from expertise should be respected but the reader of *The God Delusion* does not know whether the scientists Dawkins refer to are experts or at least well trained in commenting on the existence or non-existence of God.

It is obvious that Dawkins' aforementioned insistence on the personal beliefs of Einstein and Hawking are perfect examples of the 'Appeal to Authority' fallacy. The same fallacy is committed when Dawkins tries to persuade us that the founding fathers of the American republic were genuine atheists [1, p. 38]. Dawkins makes this contention by analyzing their writings, especially by reading between the lines of their writings. This kind of reasoning is fallacious because a belief might be right or wrong regardless of who holds it. If Dawkins thinks that the faith of the founding fathers is misrepresented by the believers, he has the right to say so. Yet, it is fallacious to use their alleged disbelief as an argument against the belief in God.

Dawkins adds 'Appeal to Antiquity' to his fallacy collection when he argues - based on James Haught's *2000 Years of Disbelief: Famous People with the Courage to Doubt* - that there were atheists before Darwin [1, p. 98]. Dawkins, like many other atheists, criticizes believers for their dogmatic beliefs by arguing that this is not based on proper scrutiny. He may be right in assuming that some believers do not ponder upon their faith, yet he is betraying his own idea when he uses the antiquity of atheism to disprove the existence of God. Even if atheism may date back to thousands of years, this tells us nothing about the validity of atheistic arguments.

'Appeal to Consequences' is committed when any belief is accepted or rejected because of the unpleasant/pleasant consequences it will lead to. Such reasoning is fallacious since an argument may be right, yet unpleasant, at the same time. Dawkins does this exactly when he asserts that the abolishment of religion would be beneficial for the whole society since religious fantasies are "time-consuming, wealth-consuming, hostility-provoking..." [1, p. 166] Yet, on the other hand, being atheist "is something to be proud of... for atheism nearly always indicates a healthy independence of mind and, indeed, a healthy mind" [1, p. 3]. Obviously, the benefits and harms of atheism or theism are irrelevant to the argument against God.

2.3. Weak analogies

Dawkins' arguments can also be criticized for the weak analogies they involve. These arguments seem to be convincing if the reader is not capable of recognizing the dissimilarities in the examples given. An important example of the fallacy of 'weak analogy' is committed when Dawkins refers to the *celestial teapot* of Russell. Suppose someone tells you that there may be a very small teapot between the Earth and Mars. It is impossible for you to prove or disprove this claim, thus you should take an agnostic stance regarding the existence of the celestial teapot. Yet, we know that no rational being would be agnostic in such a situation. Instead, we would assume that such a teapot does not exist. Thus, "in practice, we move away from teapot agnosticism towards a-teapotism" [1, p. 52]. By the same token, we should move from agnosticism to atheism despite the fact that atheism is not such a philosophically defensible position. "None of us feels an obligation to disprove any of the millions of far-

fetches things that a fertile or facetious imagination might dream up.” [1, p. 53] These arguments sound quite impressive if one ignores the vital fact that our lack of evidence in one issue cannot be used as a proof for an argument. In real life situations, we may support an argument for practical reasons; here, Dawkins refers to this kind of a practical decision. Yet, the problem is that he confuses the practical decision with reality. His practical decision to reject the existence of a teapot tells us nothing about the reality. Despite the absurdity of the existence of a teapot between the Mars and the Earth, our intuitions may be wrong. This is the first problem in this example. Now, before explaining the other problem in the teapot analogy, I will create an alternative example to check the Dawkinsian tendency to turn agnostics into atheists. Suppose your phone rings when you are sleeping. The person on the other end of the line tells you that he is a doctor calling from a certain hospital and that your daughter had had a deadly accident approximately one hour earlier while driving home. Now, will you call and check the hospital, or will you just ignore the news about your daughter and go back to sleep since you cannot be 100% sure that you were not being scammed? Will you turn into a-accidentism from accident agnosticism? Probably not. This example illustrates that the practical decision to leave the agnostic position and embrace the atheist position depends on the practical importance of the issue at stake. If the existence of a teapot is at stake, we may turn into a-teapotism very easily. Yet if the life of a loved one is at stake, we will not turn into a-accidentism that easily. Now, after stating that the matter at hand has an impact on our tendency to change our practical positioning, the relevant question is the following: Is the existence of God more similar to a loved one’s possible accident or the existence of a teapot, if we take the practical importance of each case for our lives into account? Definitely, the existence or the non-existence of God has far stronger implications for our lives than a loved one’s accident – if the hope for eternal life is valued over the guarantee of a genetic heritage. Certainly, it is not possible to compare the implications of the existence of God with the implications of the existence of a teapot. The third problem with the teapot analogy is the selection of a teapot as a metaphor. Russell was a very smart philosopher and his selection of a teapot instead of - let’s say - a planet was probably intentional. A teapot is a human invention and thus the analogy from the very beginning leads the reader to believe that a teapot, as a human invention, cannot exist between Mars and the Earth, since no man has as yet succeeded in going there. But if the question was the existence of a small planet between Mars and the Earth, we would not intuitively reject the existence of this subject. In that situation it would be a hasty decision to turn into a-planetism from planet scepticism unless further data are gathered. Here, the existence of God is more similar to the existence of a planet between Mars and the Earth than the existence of a teapot or any other manmade thing. Thus again, the analogy between the celestial teapot and God is weak.

2.4. No true Scotsman

Another interesting fallacy committed by Dawkins is called ‘No true Scotsman’. In this fallacy the arguer tries to save his argument from objections by restating it. Thus, the arguer protects his argument from the objection despite the fact that the argument is different from the original one. Dawkins commits the fallacy when he defines believers as anti-evolutionists. If he encounters a believer who believes in evolution, he claims that a ‘true believer’ would not believe in evolution. In other words, according to Dawkins, a believer who states his belief in evolution cannot be telling the truth. So the new definition of a believer includes an ‘anti-evolutionist’ stance. Dawkins changed the definition of a believer by rejecting the possibility that a believer may believe in evolution. The Pope’s claim that evolution may be right was not honest since Pope John Paul is a man of superstition and evolution is a theory that requires rational minds [1, p. 67]. Another example of the same fallacy is committed when Dawkins regards the possibility of a true scientist (or philosopher) who believes in God as problematic. Flew, Dawkins argues, is not a genuine believer and indeed his ‘alleged conversion’ can be explained with factors like a prospective Templeton Prize [1, p. 82]. A true believer cannot believe in evolution and a true scientist/philosopher cannot believe in God. Any counter example is invalid.

2.5. Straw man

It is difficult to select a few straw men out of dozens Dawkins builds up. He misrepresents virtually everything about religion(s). He highlights the examples that could be used in favour of atheist arguments and neglects those that may weaken his mission. Yet, arguments that target straw men do not prove or disprove anything.

The favourite - and indeed the most vulgar - example that can be analyzed under this type of fallacy is Dawkins’ description of religion with references to the misanthropes who call themselves ‘religious’. The examples of devout people range from the person who attacked abortion clinics and killed a doctor [1, p. 295] to another who sent a letter titled, “Burn while we laugh” to an atheist author [1, p. 211]. Dawkins brings up the second example while he was analyzing the possibility of morality without God and with this example he tries to show the reader that religious people may be extremely wicked. It is indisputable that this argument is not more sophisticated than showing the deadly actions of atheists like Stalin to argue against atheism.

Yet, argues Dawkins, those crimes cannot be ascribed to religious people alone. After stating that “devout people have died for their gods and killed for them” [1, p. 164] Dawkins changes his target and focuses his attention more on religion. What is the benefit of religion for humanity? Dawkins seems to be sure about the absence of such a benefit. Religion is killing people through religious wars, stealing their money [1, p. 1], wasting their time and provoking hostility

through rituals [1, p. 166]. Besides, it has no rational ground [1, p. 23]. One may find the provision of a response to Dawkins' criticisms as irrelevant, since it is not hard to find multiple references to charity, humanitarianism, honesty, modesty, love, peace, etc. in religions, especially in Abrahamic religions.

Herein lies another important point that Dawkins intentionally ignores. Suppose Dawkins is right about his definition of religions. If moral values like kindness, altruism, generosity, empathy, pity are just misfires and illusionary since they have no value for natural selection as Dawkins declares [1, p. 221], how can we judge or blame religions that force their followers to do violence? What makes pity superior to ruthlessness? What will be our judge? Our conscious, which is shaped by our society and family? Our brain, which is nothing more than a biological machine? Obviously the relationship between religion and morality is a complicated topic that cannot be covered in this article. Yet, Dawkins should have touched upon these questions and should have tried to base his ethical theory on a more solid ground than misfires before attacking the alleged unethical behaviours promoted by religion.

Dawkins argues that he does not find arguments for God's existence persuasive at all. He must be so unsatisfied with the theists' argument that he makes references to an atheist internet site that makes fun of the arguments for the existence of God. Dawkins quoted several 'funny' proofs such as 'Argument from sheer will' in which a believer shows his belief in God as a proof to the existence of God. In another so-called proof called 'Argument from non-belief' the arguer claims that the majority of people do not believe in Christ, and this is what Satan wants, thus God exists [1, p. 85]. Dawkins may desire to come to grips with God proofs as such, however he has to deal with real arguments if he wants to be taken as a serious thinker. He may, for instance, start with addressing the criticisms to the atheist version of the anthropic principle, a concept used by Dawkins in favour of atheism. He should read John Leslie's firing squad analogy [2] and try to answer that analogy instead of dealing with God 'proofs' which are not - and have never been - voiced by any serious thinker. No doubt, Dawkins is familiar with Leslie's analogy and knows what it means, but he ignores it intentionally since he has no satisfactory answer against it. Straw men are easy to build and just as easily knocked down.

2.6. Slippery slope

The fallacy of slippery slope is committed when the arguer asserts that a certain action will end up with a series of other actions that are unwanted. Therefore the first action must be prevented so that the harm caused by the other actions is avoided. Here the logical problem lies in the (non)existence of a causal link between the first and the following actions. If there is no necessary link between the first and the other actions, and if the first action does not necessarily lead to other actions why should we try to prevent it?

Dawkins uses slippery slope examples throughout his book. His favourite is the assertion that once anyone embraces a moderate version of religion, he will end up being an extremist. Similarly, according to Dawkins, respect in religious faith will lead to respect to Osama bin Laden [1, p. 306]. This is quite wrong since one may start with being religious and neglect extremist versions of religion, which indeed is the attitude embraced by the majority of Jews, Christians and Muslims all over the world. It is possible to respect religions and religious people as long as they do not promote violence. Indeed if Dawkins is consistent he has to support the prohibition of science since it has the potential to create Nazi eugenics.

3. Conclusion

This article does not intend to blame Dawkins for his beliefs or mission. The problem is Dawkins' assertion that his book presents rational, logical and scientific arguments against the existence of God. Since he preferred to base his arguments on weak reasoning and oversimplifications, his claim becomes baseless. With those weak arguments and hasty generalizations it is impossible to persuade an educated reader to accept his bold claim that there is almost certainly no God. Besides, Dawkins' book adds little of value to the literature since he prefers to keep asking the same questions, rather than analyzing the answers theists have given to those questions. As a result, archaic questions like "who designed the designer" [1, p. 121] keep playing a crucial role in Dawkinsian thought.

References

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