

Richard

DAWKINS

GREAT THINKERS

RANSOM H. POYTHRESS

Foreword by John Lennox

“Before the ‘New Atheism,’ it would have been easy to dismiss Richard Dawkins as an anachronism—a devotee to a hyper-authoritarian, hyper-reductionist kind of science worship that rose and fell in rough unison with the Soviet Union. Instead, he reminds us that in an age when so many are creating gods after their own image, atheism will always have some appeal. With great care and kindness, Ransom Poythress reveals the Dawkins deception for what it is, offering practical ways to dialogue with people who have come under its spell.”

—**Douglas Axe**, Author, *Undeniable: How Biology Confirms Our Intuition That Life Is Designed*

“Do we really need yet one more critique of Richard Dawkins and the ‘New Atheists’? When you have read this splendid volume, you will have no doubts: we do, and this one fills a need not yet filled. Poythress examines the dilemma often presented—Christian faith or science—and says, no: it’s Christian faith and good science, or, better, good science because of Christian faith. While he interacts with the scientific claims made by doctrinaire evolutionists (Poythress is a trained biologist), the book goes far beyond, and explores the historical, psychological, and spiritual reasons that draw people to atheism. And then even beyond that, the book presents the Christian alternative in a winsome and convincing manner. It deserves a wide readership, both by scientists and by laypersons.”

—**William Edgar**, Professor of Apologetics, Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia

“The ‘New Atheists’ have terrorized many Christians by invoking modern science and philosophy to debunk Jesus and the Bible. Richard Dawkins has been one of their most effective voices, focusing especially on the doctrine of evolution, which most academic and media writers assume to be true. Ransom Poythress is

well qualified to respond to Dawkins and more generally to the New Atheist movement. He writes knowledgeably about evolution, science, philosophy, and theology, devastating the arguments and conclusions of the New Atheists. His presentation is powerful, but also gracious and winsome. I recommend this book to anyone who seeks knowledge of these issues and reliable guidance through the conceptual thicket.”

—**John M. Frame**, Professor of Systematic Theology and
Philosophy Emeritus, Reformed Theological Seminary

“The New Atheism is now an established feature of the intellectual landscape of our age. Richard Dawkins was one of the chief architects and intellectuals of the New Atheists. Ransom Poythress has written an accessible introduction to Dawkins’s life and thought and a compelling refutation of his arguments against Christianity. This is an enormously helpful resource.”

—**R. Albert Mohler Jr.**, President, The Southern Baptist
Theological Seminary

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“After a long eclipse, intellectual history is back. We are becoming aware, once again, that ideas have consequences. The importance of P&R Publishing’s leadership in this trend cannot be overstated. The series *Great Thinkers: Critical Studies of Minds That Shape Us* is a tool that I wish I had possessed when I was in college and early in my ministry. The scholars examined in this well-chosen group have shaped our minds and habits more than we know. Though succinct, each volume is rich, and displays a balance between what Christians ought to value and what they ought to reject. This is one of the happiest publishing events in a long time.”

—**William Edgar**, Professor of Apologetics, Westminster
Theological Seminary

“When I was beginning my studies of theology and philosophy during the 1950s and ’60s, I profited enormously from P&R’s Modern Thinkers Series. Here were relatively short books on important philosophers and theologians such as Nietzsche, Dewey, Van Til, Barth, and Bultmann, by scholars of Reformed conviction such as Clark, Van Riessen, Ridderbos, Polman, and Zuidema. These books did not merely summarize the work of these thinkers; they were serious critical interactions. Today, P&R is resuming and updating the series, now called Great Thinkers. The new books, on people such as Aquinas, Hume, Nietzsche, Derrida, and Foucault, are written by scholars who are experts on these writers. As before, these books are short—around 100 pages. They set forth accurately the views of the thinkers under consideration, and they enter into constructive dialogue, governed by biblical and Reformed convictions. I look forward to the release of all the books being planned and to the good influence they will have on the next generation of philosophers and theologians.”

—**John M. Frame**, Professor of Systematic Theology and
Philosophy Emeritus, Reformed Theological Seminary,
Orlando

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DAWKINS

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Ransom Poythress


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To the glory of God,
and to my parents,
who taught me to appreciate God's glory
as revealed in Scripture and creation

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SERIES INTRODUCTION

Amid the rise and fall of nations and civilizations, the influence of a few great minds has been profound. Some of these remain relatively obscure, even as their thought shapes our world; others have become household names. As we engage our cultural and social contexts as ambassadors and witnesses for Christ, we must identify and test against the Word those thinkers who have so singularly formed the present age.

The Great Thinkers series is designed to meet the need for critically assessing the seminal thoughts of these thinkers. Great Thinkers hosts a colorful roster of authors analyzing primary source material against a background of historical contextual issues, and providing rich theological assessment and response from a Reformed perspective.

Each author was invited to meet a threefold goal, so that each Great Thinkers volume is, first, *academically informed*. The brevity of Great Thinkers volumes sets a premium on each author's command of the subject matter and on the secondary discussions that have shaped each thinker's influence. Our authors identify the most influential features of their thinkers'

work and address them with precision and insight. Second, the series maintains a high standard of *biblical and theological faithfulness*. Each volume stands on an epistemic commitment to “the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27), and is thereby equipped for fruitful critical engagement. Finally, Great Thinkers texts are *accessible*, not burdened with jargon or unnecessarily difficult vocabulary. The goal is to inform and equip the reader as effectively as possible through clear writing, relevant analysis, and incisive, constructive critique. My hope is that this series will distinguish itself by striking with biblical faithfulness and the riches of the Reformed tradition at the central nerves of culture, cultural history, and intellectual heritage.

Bryce Craig, president of P&R Publishing, deserves hearty thanks for his initiative and encouragement in setting the series in motion and seeing it through. Many thanks as well to P&R’s director of academic development, John Hughes, who has assumed, with cool efficiency, nearly every role on the production side of each volume. The Rev. Mark Moser carried much of the burden in the initial design of the series, acquisitions, and editing of the first several volumes. And the expert participation of Amanda Martin, P&R’s editorial director, was essential at every turn. I have long admired P&R Publishing’s commitment, steadfast now for over eighty-five years, to publishing excellent books promoting biblical understanding and cultural awareness, especially in the area of Christian apologetics. Sincere thanks to P&R, to these fine brothers and sisters, and to several others not mentioned here for the opportunity to serve as editor of the Great Thinkers series.

Nathan D. Shannon
Seoul, Korea

FOREWORD

Even though Richard Dawkins's star may no longer be in the ascendant, his influence, particularly in generating an antitheistic attitude among young people, is still sufficiently pervasive to merit the consideration given to it in this short and accessible book. Poythress provides the reader with a clear map of the so-called New Atheist belief system to which Dawkins is committed and explains why its narrative appeals to so many people.

The author then dives beneath the surface and subjects that narrative in a fair and intelligible way to an intense yet fair and thoughtful scrutiny. He illuminates its factual falsehoods, illogical statements, inconsistencies, and failings in the handling of evidence with the result that the reader is left with a clear idea why atheism is not the only possible viewpoint for an intelligent, literate person to hold. A particularly helpful feature of the book is the practical guidelines it gives for entering into discussion with atheists.

Dawkins's attempts to use the cultural authority of science to deny the existence of God met with a strong and entirely justified response. Indeed, it could be argued that Dawkins may deter

young people from studying science by saying that science and God do not mix, when the history of modern science shows the exact opposite—that far from belief in God hindering science, it was the motor that drove it. Poythress's discussion of science and God forms an important antidote to Dawkins's scientism, as well as his failure to come to grips with the nature of God in any sensible way.

I welcome and recommend Poythress's book and trust that it will not only inform people but give them the courage to get involved in the debate themselves.

John C. Lennox
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Emeritus Fellow in Mathematics and Philosophy of Science
Green Templeton College
University of Oxford

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INTRODUCTION

WHO IS RICHARD DAWKINS, AND WHY IS HE IMPORTANT?

This short volume seeks to equip lay readers with a brief historical and cultural context, as well as an understanding of the major themes, arguments, and flaws in Richard Dawkins's thinking. Additionally, I want to make a positive, strategic case for how Christians can confidently and lovingly interact with the growing population of atheists who think like Dawkins. Being a Christian means not only being able to give an answer for the hope we have (1 Peter 3:15), but also pursuing others, so that by God's grace we may win them for the kingdom (1 Cor. 9:22–23). You do not need a Ph.D. to dialogue effectively, concisely, and intelligently with an atheist like Dawkins. This book will increase your knowledge of atheist thinking and where it is misguided. More importantly, it will prepare you to use the tools given to us by the Creator to converse with the questioning teenager *and* the college professor. If this book accomplishes what I hope, by the end you will feel equipped to humbly and persuasively engage and challenge atheistic belief.

In recent years, atheism has seen a bold and aggressive revival

known as the New Atheist movement. The writings of the British biologist and author Richard Dawkins are typical of the arguments and style of this new movement. His rise to prominence is due in no small part to the success of his book *The God Delusion*, published in 2006. The book became a *New York Times* best seller and has sold more than three million copies in more than thirty-five languages.¹

I saw the popularity of Dawkins's writings firsthand during my early years of graduate school in Boston. Dawkins is a scientist by trade, specializing in evolutionary biology. However, *The God Delusion* clearly made ripples that extended far beyond the ivory towers of scientific elites. I remember sitting on the local Boston subway line, the "T," and observing a variety of people intently reading his book: young men headed into the financial district, silver-haired gentlemen peering through bifocals, and a young mother with a baby in a stroller.

The religious response to Dawkins ran the gamut from outspoken condemnation and retaliation, to detached, indecisive silence, to despairing acceptance. Some Christians who were already nervous about the intersection of science and faith became hypersensitive to any mention of science.

Writers and others in the media produced a flurry of blog posts, editorials, reviews, and responses. The book machine accelerated into overdrive, and, in a few short years, published a small library of responses to Dawkins.² Mainstream and social media fueled the controversy, and a number of debates took place. These debates continue with decidedly less frequency, but no less fanfare.³

1. Richard Dawkins, *Brief Candle in the Dark: My Life in Science* (London: Bantam, 2015), 173.

2. A sampling of these can be found at <https://www.catholic.com/magazine/print-edition/dawkins-debunkers>.

3. For an example, see the commotion surrounding the debate between Ken Ham and Bill Nye on February 4, 2014.

The secular and scientific communities showered Dawkins with accolades. In 2007, *Time* magazine named him one of the “Top 100 Most Influential People.”⁴ The *Daily Telegraph* ranked him number 20 in the top 100 living geniuses in 2007.⁵ More recently, *Prospect UK* proclaimed Dawkins the top thinker in the world in 2013.⁶ It has been more than a decade since the publication of *The God Delusion*, and with the publication of his second memoir in 2015, there is no denying Dawkins’s intellectual impact on this world. In light of his impact, it seems appropriate for responsible Christians to reflect on his life, thinking, and contributions.

Despite his renown, there are puzzling inconsistencies. He has begun losing popular support. The same magazine that named him the top thinker in 2013 did not include him at all in 2014.⁷ Other atheists are distancing themselves, disavowing his extreme polemics.⁸ Dawkins has been disinvited from several speaking engagements⁹ as people are increasingly distressed by his sharp, blunt, and frequently indelicate language.¹⁰ Even some

4. http://content.time.com/time/specials/2007/time100/article/0,28804,1595326_1595329_1616137,00.html.

5. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1567544/Top-100-living-geniuses.html>.

6. <http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/features/world-thinkers-2013>.

7. Jonathan Derbyshire, “Richard Dawkins Was No 1. Now He’s off the List of the World’s Best Thinkers,” *The Guardian*, March 22, 2014. Accessed online at <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/mar/22/goodbye-richard-dawkins-hail-pope-francis-prospect-magazine>.

8. Chris Sosa, “I’m Finally Breaking Up with Richard Dawkins,” *The Huffington Post*, February 1, 2016. Accessed online at http://www.huffingtonpost.com/chris-sosa/im-finally-breaking-up-with-richard-dawkins_b_9102116.html.

9. See, for example, <https://kpfa.org/blog/statement-decision-cancel-richard-dawkins-event/>.

10. Sophie Elmhirst, “Is Richard Dawkins Destroying His Reputation?,” *The Guardian*, June 9, 2015. Accessed online at <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2015/jun/09/is-richard-dawkins-destroying-his-reputation>. Adam Lee, “Richard Dawkins has lost it: ignorant sexism gives atheists a bad name,” *The Guardian*,

of the most liberal media pundits have condemned his extreme language.¹¹

Although the general populace may still conceive of Dawkins as a “great thinker,” why have prominent intellectuals been abandoning him recently? Why is there so much variation in how people view him and his ideas? Does he deserve the “great thinker” moniker? How does one define “greatness” in thinking or in anything else? Is it just a popularity contest?

What is actually new about Dawkins and his philosophy? What is the same? How has Dawkins contributed to the way we think today? Is it even fair to try to make these assessments at this juncture in time?

The editors and I asked these questions as we struggled to decide whether Dawkins should receive inclusion in the Great Thinkers series. In the end, although the quality, vigor, and depth of Dawkins’s thinking may not qualify as “great,” his work has undoubtedly left an indelible mark on popular sentiment. The powerful force of his thinking lies partially in presentation, packaging, and passionate appeal.

A significant number of the existing Christian responses to Dawkins seek to address the specifics of his arguments. Although those responses are necessary and enlightening, there is little discussion of how to talk about Dawkins with others. Where do we go from here? How do we engage with those of his particular strain of belief? As more and more people are adopting atheistic or antireligious views founded on Dawkinsian rhetoric, how can we positively interact with them? I believe our shared creation as

September 18, 2014. Accessed online <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/sep/18/richard-dawkins-sexist-atheists-bad-name>.

11. Mary Elizabeth Williams, “Stop Pouting, Richard Dawkins: Sharing a Rape ‘Joke’ Targeting an Activist Is a ‘De-platforming’ Offense,” *Salon*, January 28, 2016. Accessed online at http://www.salon.com/2016/01/28/stop_pouting_richard_dawkins_sharing_a_rape_joke_targeting_an_activist_is_a_de_platforming_offense/.

humans and the truth revealed in Scripture and nature provide the necessary points of contact for productive dialogue.

In what follows, I aim to provide a palatable, clear, and simple presentation of Dawkins that is accessible, yet thorough and informed. By the end, the reader should be able to understand the relevant issues and feel confident to approach and engage Dawkinsian thinking wherever it is encountered.

1

DAWKINS REVEALED

To learn the specifics of Dawkins's colorful life, you can read his weighty and detailed memoirs. He chronicles his early years in his first memoir, *An Appetite for Wonder* (2013). His second memoir, *Brief Candle in the Dark* (2015), focuses on the later years, including his books and public influence.

Clinton Richard Dawkins was born in Kenya in 1941. Although he was raised with a sense of religious duty by Anglican parents,¹ he claims to have emphatically rejected religion fairly early, due to discomfort with doctrines like original sin and supernatural claims.² For Dawkins, learning about Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection hammered the final nail in God's coffin.³

Dawkins studied at Balliol College (Oxford, UK) and

1. Richard Dawkins, *An Appetite for Wonder: The Making of a Scientist* (London: Bantam, 2013), 103.

2. *Ibid.*, 139–40.

3. Comments from his debate with John Lennox at the University of Alabama on October 3, 2007.

received a doctoral degree from Oxford University in 1966.⁴ He researched ethology (animal behavior) and evolutionary biology under Nobel Prize winner Niko Tinbergen. He focused on ways to mathematically model the pecking decisions of chickens.⁵ After a brief stint of teaching at the University of California–Berkeley, he returned to Oxford as a lecturer in zoology, a position he held for twenty years.

During his time as a professor at Oxford, he published his first book, *The Selfish Gene* (1976). In that book, he posits that evolution is not driven by what is best for a group of organisms, but rather by what is best for individual genes. He argues that “we, and all other animals, are machines created by our genes.”⁶ A scientific reader may see the direct correlation between this reasoning and Dawkins’s study of chicken pecking. The thinking goes something like this: “If we can program a computer to accurately predict a chicken’s behavior, then what is the difference between a chicken and a complex computer? By extension, what is the difference between a human and a very complex computer? Therefore, humans are nothing more than gene machines, doing what they need to survive.” Although we may not agree with this extrapolation and the assumptions contained within it, we can at least develop a plausible understanding of where these ideas came from.

The Selfish Gene changed the way people thought about evolution, and Dawkins has since capitalized a great deal on the success and renown of that book. It still impacts biology more than forty years later,⁷ even being voted recently as more inspiring

4. Dawkins’s CV, available online at http://www.fontem.com/archivos/usuarios/cv_521.pdf.

5. Richard Dawkins, “The Ontogeny of a Pecking Preference in Domestic Chicks,” *Zeitschrift für Tierpsychologie* 25 (1968): 170–86.

6. Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), 2.

7. <https://www.edge.org/documents/archive/edge178.html>.

than Darwin's *Origin of Species*.⁸ Dawkins followed with roughly one book every four years, expanding on the ideas in *The Selfish Gene*. What began as an effort to solidify evolutionary biology gradually morphed into an anti-theist ideology. Dawkins argues that if evolution is true, then certain consequences naturally follow. Not only is a Creator unnecessary for ultimate explanations, but evolution actually provides evidence *against* a personal God. He argues in *The Blind Watchmaker* (1986) that "evolution reveals a universe without design."⁹

In the volumes that followed *The Blind Watchmaker*, Dawkins vehemently contends that evolution "solves" religious questions that were unanswerable until now. For example, he is convinced that the beauty he sees and the wonder he feels in the world are more magnificently attributable to natural causes than to a personal God. *Unweaving the Rainbow* (1998) is an ode to this very sentiment.

The slow march from atheism toward anti-theism reached its culmination in 2006 with the printing of Dawkins's *The God Delusion* and the dawn of the New Atheist movement. *The God Delusion* was published at about the same time as several other anti-theist books by other authors:

- *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason*, by Sam Harris (2004)
- *Atheist Manifesto: The Case against Christianity, Judaism, and Islam*, by Michel Onfray (2005)
- *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*, by Daniel Dennett (2006)
- *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, by Christopher Hitchens (2007)

8. <https://royalsociety.org/news/2017/07/science-book-prize-poll-results/>.

9. Richard Dawkins, *The Blind Watchmaker* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1986).

- *God: The Failed Hypothesis—How Science Shows That God Does Not Exist*, by Victor Stenger (2007)

Since then, Dawkins has spent a good deal of his time campaigning for his reasoning in *The God Delusion*, including speaking tours, interviews, and public debates. New Atheism landed cover stories in *Time* magazine¹⁰ and *Wired*.¹¹ At this point, the reader may want to pause and ask: “We know that atheism has been around for a long time, so what is really new about New Atheism? And what has made it so attractive now?” I will try to address the first question here, and tackle the second question in the next chapter.

At its core, there may not be anything new about New Atheism. One critic contends that, while Dawkins’s “book is written with rhetorical passion and power, the stridency of its assertions merely masks tired, weak and recycled arguments.”¹² So why the “New” moniker? One possibility is that the title “New Atheism” helps fix it as a particular movement at a particular time in history. However, I believe there is more to it than that.

There are at least three new aspects of New Atheism. First, Dawkins has been mostly a popularizer, gaining at least temporary cultural sway by influencing the masses. He does this by being clear, concise, and simple—to the point of being simplistic. He has not restricted himself to technical treatises for niche communities. He has been active with op-ed articles, Twitter,¹³ and a number of other popular forums, employing wit, sarcasm, and withering criticism to draw a clear line in the sand. He understands

10. November 13, 2006: <http://content.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,20061113,00.html>.

11. November 1, 2006: <http://archive.wired.com/wired/archive/14.11/>.

12. Alister E. McGrath and Joanna Collicutt McGrath, *The Dawkins Delusion?* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 12.

13. Dawkins has more than 2.5 million followers on Twitter: <https://twitter.com/RichardDawkins>.

the importance of imagery, analogy, storytelling, and linguistic clarity. These all appeal to the public consciousness and imagination. Followers are not always won by making the best argument, but by making the argument in the best way. Throughout history, the people who have amassed devoted adherents have been those with charisma, passion, zeal, and vision. Dawkins and the New Atheists have a story to tell, and even though their story may be flawed, it paints a convenient and alluring picture.

Second, Dawkins uses new tools to support old arguments, including a mass of new data from biology that substantiates, he believes, a purely evolutionary story of life. The last few decades have brought tremendous advances in our understanding of genetics and of molecular and cell biology. Dawkins, in particular, with his training as a biologist, seeks to interpret this data to his advantage through storytelling. Later, we shall examine whether this storytelling is complete and coherent, or if Dawkins selectively ignores and distorts evidence to fit a preconceived mold.

Finally, Dawkins is “new” in his tone and goals. He is novel “in the intensity of [his] ridicule of religion, not the substance of [his] criticism.”¹⁴ His followers are stridently evangelistic. Dawkins says in his preface, “If this book works as I intend, religious readers who open it will be atheists when they put it down.”¹⁵ Dawkins has an almost sweeping intolerance of religious tolerance,¹⁶ including agnostic positions. “Dawkins does not merely disagree with religious myths. He disagrees with tolerating them.”¹⁷ The unambiguous goal is the abolition of religion from the planet.

14. Alister McGrath, *Why God Won't Go Away* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2010), 43.

15. Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2006, 2008), 28.

16. John F. Haught, *God and the New Atheism* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 10, 37.

17. Gary Wolf, “The Church of the Non-Believers,” *Wired*, November 2006. Accessed online at <https://www.wired.com/2006/11/atheism/>.

During a symposium in La Jolla, California, in November 2006, physicist Steven Weinberg said, “Anything that we scientists can do to weaken the hold of religion should be done, and may in fact be our greatest contribution to civilization.”¹⁸ Dawkins pursues this goal, writing with a passion, zeal, and certainty that would be labeled proselytizing if it came from any other religious tradition.

So after all the podium preaching, letter writing, tweeting, arguing, blogging, and publishing, where do we stand more than a decade after this resurgence of atheism?

In many respects, nothing has changed. There are still atheists, and there are still Christians. Scientists still wrestle with the intersection of science and religion. Questions remain unanswered. There is no majority consensus. Secular biologists possess no testable scenarios for the origin of life;¹⁹ secular physicists possess no testable scenarios for the origin of a complex universe; and secular philosophers possess no explanation for the origin of complexity itself.

Yet the landscape has altered in some ways. The militant crusade against religion has relaxed somewhat when met with public resistance and the growing realization that its claims don’t reflect reality. Opposition from within the ranks of atheists has contributed to a more tolerant stance. Passion and eloquence may initially stir up zealous followers, but in order to sustain the movement, Dawkins has found it necessary to court favor using opinions more in line with public sentiment.

The seeds of discontent were visible in 2006 during the initial burst onto the scene. At the California symposium mentioned above, attendees agreed that science was losing out to religious

18. Statements at the Science Network’s symposium “Beyond Belief: Science, Religion, Reason, and Survival,” La Jolla, CA, November 5, 2006.

19. Leroy Cronin and Sara Walker, “Beyond Prebiotic Chemistry,” *Science* 352, no. 6290 (June 3, 2016): 1174–75. Accessed online at <http://science.sciencemag.org/content/352/6290/1174.full>.

belief and debated what strategy should be adopted to rectify the situation. Hardliners like Dawkins wanted to go after religion, guns blazing, but others pointed out that such methods might be offensive and ineffective.²⁰ The blunt, antagonistic vernacular of Dawkins has actually driven some away from atheism to Christianity.²¹ Even atheist philosophers like Michael Ruse take exception to much of what Dawkins has done: “Richard Dawkins in *The God Delusion* would fail any introductory philosophy or religion course. Proudly he criticizes that whereof he knows nothing. . . . *The God Delusion* makes me ashamed to be an atheist.”²² Clearly, Dawkins does not speak for all atheists.

This brings us to the latest developments: Dawkins’s publication of two memoirs, totaling roughly 750 pages, in the space of about a year. What is the unspoken goal of these memoirs appearing at this point in time? As noted previously, Dawkins’s reputation has recently been declining. His public has become less tolerant of his religious intolerance. Dawkins’s marginalization increases as he seeks to be consistent and truthful with his atheism and its unpleasant implications. He must choose either to be truthful and disliked or, by compromising, to be influential and well-liked in the court of public opinion. Dawkins may need to pander to the changing cultural mandates more than he would like to admit, since popularity is tantamount to influence and legacy. His memoirs may be an attempt to help solve this public

20. George Johnson, “A Free-for-All on Science and Religion,” *New York Times*, November 21, 2006. Accessed online at http://www.nytimes.com/2006/11/21/science/21belief.html?_r=1.

21. Eryn Sun, “Former Dawkins Atheist Richard Morgan Continues to Praise God,” *The Christian Post*, March 24, 2011. Accessed online at <http://www.christianpost.com/news/former-dawkins-atheist-richard-morgan-continues-to-praise-god-49558/> and <https://www.christiantoday.com/article/richard.dawkins.response.to.suggestions.he.may.actually.be.converting.people.to.christ.oh.dear/36844.htm>.

22. <http://www.beliefnet.com/columnists/scienceandthesacred/2009/08/why-i-think-the-new-atheists-are-a-bloody-disaster.html>.

identity crisis. By describing himself in his own words, Dawkins can paint the softened picture he wants everyone to see.

Unfortunately, the memoirs read like the chronicles of a man trying to pat himself on the back for a job well done and convince himself and the world that he is a decent guy. He gives himself the title of a “natural collaborator”²³ and describes himself as humorous, friendly,²⁴ compassionate, sensitive, and kind.²⁵ He frequently name-drops and praises those he has worked with. It sounds more like an acceptance speech for winning a lifetime achievement award from an elitist club than a personal, introspective memoir.

The last half of Dawkins’s second memoir is a defense of his books and ideas and a response to critics. In a cultured, gentlemanly tone, he tries to “patch up” public relations issues²⁶ and explain his sometimes aggressive demeanor in public debates²⁷ and writing: “I like to think it’s a humorous and humane book, far from the angry and strident polemic that is sometimes alleged. Some of the humour is satire, even ridicule, and it’s true that the targets of such humour often have a hard time distinguishing good-natured ridicule from hate speech.”²⁸ His self-defense ends up looking more like rationalization than genuine humility.

Therein lies one of the startling omissions of his books: Dawkins does no wrong. At a time when he feels pressured to defend his legacy, he fails to admit to serious mistakes. He cannot accommodate any blunders that may mar his carefully crafted image. He avoids discussion of any real weakness or shortcoming. For example, as a man who has been married three times,

23. Richard Dawkins, *Brief Candle in the Dark: My Life in Science* (London: Bantam, 2015), 64.

24. *Ibid.*, 160.

25. *Ibid.*, 169.

26. *Ibid.*, 212–16.

27. *Ibid.*, 255–62.

28. *Ibid.*, 421.

there is a glaring omission of information about the first two unions. Additionally, he seems to completely ignore debates or encounters that did not end entirely favorably for him.²⁹

Though this may seem nonessential, familiarizing ourselves with how Dawkins thinks of himself and how he presents himself *is* essential as we seek to interact with Dawkins and atheists like him. I believe there is a pattern of inconsistency and compromise among atheists. In fact, these traits are necessary hallmarks of their lives and beliefs. Why? Because being fully consistent, committed, and unwavering in godlessness ultimately leads to irrationality, chaos, and despair. Atheists do not *appear* to be hopeless because their actions reveal functional beliefs that are actually inconsistent with their confessed beliefs. This is reflected not only in their stated philosophy, logic, and argumentation, but in the way they live their lives, remaking beliefs and attitudes to make them more palatable to ever-changing public preferences. We will see this as we examine Dawkins's beliefs in more detail in later chapters.

29. A transcript of his 2007 debate with John Lennox can be found at <http://www.protorah.com/god-delusion-debate-dawkins-lennox-transcript/>.