



A Devil's Chaplain: Reflections on Hope, Lies, Science, and Love

Richard Dawkins

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The first collection of essays from renowned scientist and best-selling author Richard Dawkins.

Richard Dawkins's essays are an enthusiastic testament to the power of rigorous, scientific examination, and they span many different corners of his personal and professional life. He revisits the meme, the unit of cultural information that he named and wrote about in his groundbreaking work *The Selfish Gene*. He makes moving tributes to friends and colleagues, including a eulogy for novelist Douglas Adams; he shares correspondence with the evolutionary biologist Stephen Jay Gould; and he visits with the famed paleoanthropologists Richard and Maeve Leakey at their African wildlife preserve. He concludes the essays with a vivid note to his ten-year-old daughter, reminding her to remain curious, to ask questions, and to live the examined life.

A Devil's Chaplain: Reflections on Hope, Lies, Science, and Love Details

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Richard Dawkins**

From Reader Review A Devil's Chaplain: Reflections on Hope, Lies, Science, and Love for online ebook

Hadrian says

Delightfully stimulating essays about a good variety of topics. Some (justified!) distrust of relativism and pseudoscience, but also tender loving parts and waxing philosophical about science, his friends, and family.

Olaf Brungot says

The book started out ok, with several good essays. The final chapters with the book reviews and eulogies is mostly the reason why the rating is so low. The last chapter, a prayer for my daughter is recommended reading. All in all, not the best book by Richard. I prefer his science books.

Michelle says

A Devil's Chaplain is an excellent collection of Dawkin's writing, ranging across the topics of genetics, memetics, pseudoscience, religion, terrorism and the nature of life itself. This is a field trip through Dawkin's mind, including letters to the prime minister, introductions to the books of others, and pieces that have appeared in popular print. His eulogy for his good friend Douglas Adams is particularly touching, and no less so is his treatment of his late rival, Stephen Jay Gould. But the best is saved for last, with his incredible piece entitled A Prayer for my Daughter, in which he tries to prepare his young child for the world of deception that lies ahead, and arm her against it.

This is the quintessential introduction to Dawkins, and shows that he is more than just an outspoken advocate of humanism and reason - he is a loyal friend, an attentive father, a loving husband, and when the occasion calls for it, a fierce champion for the truth. If you have never read Dawkins before, I would highly recommend that this is where you start.

Alethleia says

Cuando decidí leer el Capellán del diablo tenía la idea que sería un libro de ataque a las religiones, por el título y tomando encuentra que es de uno de los jinetes del ateísmo, pero me equivoqué totalmente es mucho mejor, me topé con un libro lleno de ciencia, explicando el maravilloso de la evolución, la vida abriéndose paso por miles de años, echando por el piso una teoría tan débil como el diseño inteligente, la vida actual de nuestras especies y ecosistemas son el conjunto de errores tras errores que se han acumulado y sobrevivido.

No hay nada más estimulante que leer a un científico apasionado.

James says

As you would expect, this is a stimulating sets of essays, reviews and recollections from evolution's finest advocate. As an introduction to the theory of evolution, its impact on the other sciences and the necessarily complications for dogmatic thinking in other fields it has created through the ages - and still does - it is first class. His short shrift with 'Intelligent Design' and 'Alternative Medicine' is delightfully to the point.

Many of the pieces, though, show a more 'human' side (Dawkins as father, friend or pupil rather than scientist), and it these that make the collection much more than a pop-science anthology. His eulogies, letters and forewords reveal that his ongoing fight to see "Darwin Triumphant" is not a matter of intellectual ego, academic oneupmanship or institution-bashing. The fight is about our freedom to choose a life for ourselves.

Philip says

Some excellent essays. A touch too close to being a bit racist here and there, but perhaps that was inaccuracy of language. For the first time I think I actually understand something about evolution. His point about the 98% figure of genetic similarity with chimps was well made. He cited the fact that if you compare two books, there will be a lot of common letters and the figure would suggest similarity. But if you were to compare them sentence by sentence, they would probably share only a tiny fraction of commonality.

What I still don't understand about theorists on evolution is how they still discuss superiority or desirability for breeding in terms of strength, speed, size etc. After many hundreds of thousands of years during which human cooperation in agriculture, shared civilisation and eventually technological change has transformed the success rate of the species, why are qualities of cooperation, constancy or intellect now not also included in the factors that influence natural selection? Perhaps they are. Maybe I should read late Darwin.

The idea that atheists just go one God further was also a point well made. Many of us would admit to being atheists when it comes to Mithras, Zeus, Thor, etc etc. Of all the Gods, most people who claim not to be atheists probably only admit a belief in one and thus reject thousands of other. It's a bit like claiming to be a vegetarian on the grounds that you don't eat duck, but do eat all the rest of the animal world.

The point about cloning and identical twins was made a few too many times, I think, but then it was a collection of essays. It is a point, however, that the non-scientist would find it hard to relate to, since for someone from that starting position the twins are "natural" and the "clone" is not, despite the fact that genetically they represent identical concepts. The position would be really interesting, however, if the twins, or triplets or quads etc arose as a result of in vitro fertilisation and then implantation, and hence were not "natural".

Mohamedridha Alaskari ???? ??? ??????? says

What excellent material in this book, first when I started reading this book I found some mysteries I could not understand some of it but then by completing the section one by one I found an explanation of each mystery.

This book giving a very clear idea about the sciences, mysteries, myths and reality. His articles make sense

for me at most.

Most important section is the last one.

Very recommended for the skeptics in the science researches. Thank you Richard!

David Siemer says

As a fan of Dawkins, this is somewhat repetitive with other books I really liked - such as *God Delusion* and *Greatest Show on Earth*. I would only recommend this one for serious fans.

Hellen says

Okay, this review is going to be a little about the book as a whole and a lot about an irritation about one of Dawkins' habits.

First off, the good stuff. My favorite essays were *The Great Convergence*, *The 'Information Challenge'*, the eulogies for Douglas Adams and Hamilton and lastly *Good and Bad Reasons for Believing* (A Prayer for My Daughter), which is how I found out about this book in the first place. It was heart warming to see how Dawkins' passion, which so often is expressed in a stern voice towards religion, creationists and apologists, translates into equally powerful warmth when speaking about people he respects.

The format was nice, though the content is nothing new really if you've read all of Dawkins books before, or even just a few.

Now for the other 95% of the review.

It can be very disappointing when someone you respect opposes your own views. It is even more disappointing however, when your ideals and opinions are being portrayed a certain way; not just unflattering, but simply falsely.

I'm referring to the following fragment, which is the sole reference Dawkins uses to categorize feminism as a relativism in the chapter 'What is True?':

"Women's Studies students are now being taught that logic is a tool of domination ... the standard norms and methods of scientific inquiry are sexist because they are incompatible with 'women's ways of knowing'... These 'subjectivist' women see the methods of logic, analysis and abstraction as 'alien territory belonging to men' and 'value intuition as a safer and more fruitful approach to truth."

Oh, come on now. I don't doubt that are feminists who believe such things, same as that I don't doubt there are atheists who have irrational ideas about other things than religion, but to present a single quote with such (thankfully!) rare an opinion, is just using a straw man and beneath someone I respect as much as Dawkins.

The misrepresentation is not all of it. The source used, at the time of publication of *A Devil's Chaplain* is at the time of publication already a nearly 35 year old book (first published in 1970), probably only used

because of the religious term in the title ("Professing Feminism"), which nota bene is a book written by feminist scholars who try to distantiate the academic feminism from the nonsense in women's studies they've come across, which is totally admirable (note also how the students referred to in the quote are not even called feminists).

Another point of criticism of the choice of just this quote is that the quote isn't just not representable, but also against what many feminist scholars strive for. Yes, there is in part the promoting of the female representation in history, which was up till recently largely absent, similar to accounts from poorer classes and other races, and there's also the earning respect for feminine (not necessarily female!) qualities. These goals are however more prominent in older waves of feminism. In more modern times, you see the cutting loose of human qualities from their "masculine" and "feminine" labels, to make them accessible for everyone (e.g. to facilitate the acceptance of men very involved in the care of their children, the ambitious woman, the stay-at-home father, the female president). I'm sure that I am biased as I work in academia (not women's studies - by the way, is it even still called women's studies..?), but the feminism I am in contact with most *does* adopt empiricism and would never attach itself to a statement as the one above, because it's exactly the dichotomy it tries to get away from. And as an atheist reading this book, retracting rationality from me is pretty much as grave an insult as they come.

Sadly, I find Dawkins doing this another time in *ADC*. Later in the book, there's another exotic quotation presented in a context where sure, it is just quoted from a "feminist 'philosopher'" and mentioned in the company of other apparently "feminist truths" (they were news to me) such as Newton's *Principia* being a rape manual (?) and $E=mc^2$ being a 'sexed equation' (!!).

"The privileging of solid over fluid mechanics, and indeed the ability of science to deal with turbulent flow at all, she attributes to the association of fluidity with femininity. Whereas men have sex organs that protrude and become rigid, women have openings that leak menstrual blood and vaginal fluids ... From this perspective it is no wonder that science has not been able to arrive at a successful model for turbulence. The problem of turbulent flow cannot be solved because the conceptions of fluids (and of women) have been formulated so as necessarily to leave unarticulated remainders."

If you've read the previous of my review on why such quotations are an issue carefully, I'm sure you can pinpoint yourself what exactly is the issue with the quote above.

This is not a matter of cutting off unpopular limbs to distantiate myself from those that are exposed to criticism, but basically what happened here is the equivalent of a Christian lumping all atheists together with Hitler, or using a church bulletin distributed within a village with 100 inhabitants in some edge of the world as a source for the definition of Christian beliefs. Criticism against feminism, totally fine. But do it in the same thorough way as you treat anything else you're looking at critically; thorough, use representative sources, no cherry picking, and report transparently. And really, there's no room for that in Dawkins' work. So either stick to atheism or write a book dedicated to criticizing feminist theory. And I think we all agree we'd prefer him to spend his precious time on his own fields, where he's of the greatest value.

Mohammed-Makram says

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David says

This collection of essays, written before Professor Dawkins succumbed to the pomposity that is sadly so often an accompaniment to fame, and started to confuse intellect with wisdom, is one of my favorites. Most of the thirty or so essays in the book display the charm, erudition, and clarity of exposition that are characteristic of his earlier work, though some of the pieces dealing with religion prefigure his subsequent descent into shrillness and condescension.

The tone of the final essay, "A Prayer for my Daughter" (Good and Bad Reasons for Believing) is blessedly free of any hint of shrillness, however.

His eulogy to Douglas Adams is particularly affecting, but if I had to pick a favorite, it would probably be the hilarious skewering of the pomo set in "Postmodernism Disrobed". An easy target, granted, but Professor Dawkins's demolition job is masterful.

Arun Divakar says

A retired senior bureaucrat from the Kerala administrative service had once written a column about how people are being exploited in the name of their beliefs. In his words, almost 60% of the population wakes up every day with this tinny little voice ringing at the back of their minds - '*Somebody please con me !*' And so on television we have advertisements for seashells that can fix all problems, powders that help you seduce anyone you want, magicians who will bestow all the good things in life on you...yada yada. Voices like Richard Dawkins's are quite rare to come by in the oceans of such obvious nonsense and yet it is a relief to know that such thinkers are active in the public space. The book is a collection of his essays that give us a glimpse into his mind which is tuned to the voices of science and reason and is quick to point out the illogical and idiotic things that one encounters in life.

The essays in the book cover a lot of ground with genetics, evolution and general science making a lot of appearances. Dawkins does not hold his fire when he deals with creationist theories, quacks and alternate medicine. There is a scathing essay in which he makes mincemeat out of alternate medicine. There are also reviews of books, eulogies and the occasional autobiographical piece in here. Two of the articles are really outstanding. The first is Dawkins's piece for *The Guardian* as a response to the death of famed novelist Douglas Adams. This article is not well thought through, it is not elaborate and neither is it objective. It is a

knee jerk reaction from a man who has lost a dear friend and colleague and hence it is a very touching piece in an otherwise dispassionate book. The second is Dawkins's letter to his daughter as she enters her teenage years. It is a candid observation on the nature of beliefs and how much a rational mind can help you in understanding the world better. He does not bash religion and beliefs all that brutally here but tells his daughter to make an informed choice when she feels equipped for it. Unlike his other articles, he does not elucidate things to a great extent and sticks to a bare bones evaluation of thought processes that might help an adult live a no-nonsense life.

This is more of a sneak peek at Dawkins's enormously productive oeuvre and ergo recommended.

Michael says

I highly recommend this book. It covers a wide range of topics from various matters of evolutionary biology, memes, religion, postmodernism etc. Classic Dawkins from cover to cover, really providing a rounded, inclusive selection of Dawkins' interests. Many of these essays are both brilliantly written and about extremely interesting stuff!

Jim Razinha says

Richard Dawkins more often than not is labeled arrogant, whether in print, in lecture or in person. Having read, listened and talked to Dawkins, I would be hard pressed to argue the contrary. Nevertheless, I still like him and what he has to say, even if I don't understand everything.

The Devil's Chaplain is a collection of essays published in 2003, that according to the backleaf of the paperback, is "an enthusiastic declaration, a testament to the powers of rigorous scientific examination to reveal the wonders of the world." Well, I think it is a wonderful collection ranging from the pedantic to the candid, from righteous to humble (if you look close, you'll see this). He can be wittily entertaining and maddeningly academic, but never boring. And he doesn't pull punches (no expects that anyway).

Dawkins grouped his essays into six (actually seven) sections and provides a foreword to each, explaining his choices for inclusion.

In "Science and Sensibility" he talks about Darwin (of course). He examines the relativity of truth as related to perspective, with science as the only real truth. He looks at the human ape family tree, ethics in genetic studies, relates his experiences as a jury member (prompting me to rethink the jury concept). Two of my favorite essays in this section look at quackery of new age crystal proponents and a brilliant review of "Intellectual Impostures" by Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont (published in the US as "Fashionable Nonsense") offering Dawkins' Law of Conservation of Difficulty and a web link to a hilarious site: The Postmodernism Generator (<http://www.elsewhere.org/cgi-bin/post...>) that "will spontaneously generate for you, using faultless grammatical principles, a spanking new postmodern discourse, never before seen."

In "Light Will Be Thrown", the chapters look at Darwinism's effect outside biology and Darwinism as a universal truth. He also relates with palpable distaste his experience with the "murky underworld of creationist propaganda." Within that chapter is a fascinating look at information transfer, one of the best, if dry, reads in the book.

In "The Infected Mind", Dawkins concentrates all barrels on religion. He revisits memes and his view of

religions as viruses of the mind. He dismisses claims of the convergence of science and religion, and does a number on the tendency to afford religious spokesmen a “privileged platform”, such as including their opinions in scientific discussions where they have no place.

“They Told Me, Heraclitus” is a collection of tributes and eulogies to Douglas Adams, W.D. Hamilton and John Diamond, the last exposing some of the snake oil masquerading as “alternative medicine.”

“Even the Ranks of Tuscany” blows the lid off the exaggerated conflict between Dawkins and Stephen Jay Gould. Dawkins freely admits he was neither close friends with Gould nor in agreement on their respective views of evolution, but he was highly respectful of Gould’s scientific approach and laudatory of Gould’s writing. The chapter contains some reviews of Gould’s books, both favorable and unfavorable, and concludes with a sad recounting of a final collaborative effort against the intelligent design movement that was cut short before publication by Gould’s death.

After a chapter on Africa, he concludes with a moving letter to his (then) ten year old daughter entitled “Good and Bad Reasons for Believing”

Chris says

I'm not partial to collections of an author's shorter, previous writings. Although they can give an overview of the subject's thoughts, too often they are hodgepodes of ideas better formulated in the author's major published works. Objectively, *A Devil's Chaplain: Selected Essays* does give the reader general insight into Dawkins' thinking from the groundbreaking *The Selfish Gene* (1976) until he began writing the greatly important *The God Delusion* (2006). Practically, most readers will want to pick and choose which items to read in this collection, then, if interested, go to the related major work for a more complete explication.

Everything we know of Dawkins is represented here: science, Darwinian evolution, religion, a bit of Africa, book reviews—mostly on books which I suspect few readers will have read. There are also obituaries, a letter to his daughter, and email correspondence with the contradictory evolutionist Stephen Jay Gould. Fans of Dawkins surely will find something of interest.

For me, the best essay is the angry newspaper editorial “Time to Stand Up”, written shortly after the 9/11 attacks. I don't know if this tragedy was the trigger for him to eventually write *The God Delusion*, but I wouldn't be surprised: that 2001 editorial is a powerful call to change the way we uncritically accept religion.

Here's a quote from *A Devil's Chaplain* that I love—they're not Dawkins' words, but from a teacher he respects—which seems to apply quite well to him, but only wishfully to me since I sit in my chair reading too much:

“I agree with Nietzsche that 'The secret of a joyful life is to live dangerously.' A joyful life is an active life – it is not a dull state of so-called happiness. Full of the burning fire of enthusiasm, anarchic, revolutionary, energetic, demonic, Dionysian, filled to overflowing with the terrific urge to create – such is the life of the man who risks safety and happiness for the sake of growth and happiness.”

Kieran says

What a great collection of essays, for the most part. The only reason I did not hand over five stars is that I got horribly lost in the collection of prefaces to other books and eulogies for people I had never heard of. In saying that, the two pieces on Douglas Adams were wonderful (though I have read them elsewhere). I suppose in their own right these pieces were brilliant, though I am not sure that putting them in this collection gave them the context they deserved! The strong ending, supported by Dawkins' letter to his daughter, did however make up for all of this; the style of writing is reminiscent of his more recent work 'The Magic of Reality'.

Jon says

I prefer it when Dawkins sticks to the science and leaves out the philosophy, not because I think he's so incorrect, but because I think his arrogance distracts from his correctness.

Stephen says

Charles Darwin mused that a devil's chaplain might write quite a book on the clumsy, wasteful, blundering low, and horridly cruel works of nature. A Devil's Chaplain is not quite that book, however, though it does include a mention of fantastically inefficient bio-planning on nature's part, as well as a paragraph or two on parasitic wasps. Dawkins uses the title to collect various articles, prefaces, and reviews he has written, all pooling in either biology or skepticism. Those familiar with Dawkins will find no surprises: he writes on the role of wonder in science, champions skepticism and evidence-based thinking, addresses religion with teeth bared in the wake of 9/11, and expands on his notion of cultural ideas being transmitted like genes, as "memes" -- an originally serious word that is now applied to pictures with words on them, from captioned cats desirous of cheeseburgers to political commentary. There's also a considerable section dedicated to the then recently-late Stephen Jay Gould, with whom Dawkins had professional disputes. (Dawkins defends their relationship as more professional than adversarial.) Because the collection is so varied, it's rather hard to rate; here's a chapter on genes and wasps, there's an appraisal of a novel set in Botswana. Most of the book is on biology and critical thinking, and there he had me; when he moves to morals and culture, however, I found him wanting.

I raised my first eye when Dawkins praised Peter Singer, who sees no reason to value a room of babies over a room of puppies, and asserts that religion only sustains itself by having its adherents instill the beliefs in their children. Of course, religions like any other cultural element are maintained through that kind of transmission -- language, for instance. They also sustain themselves, however, by providing something people need or want: meaning at the individual level, and tribal cohesion and (in some cases) some degree of public morality at the social level. Dawkins' understanding of religion as expressed here is simplistic, but part of his argument is fair: material facts should be believed on the basis of evidence, not desire or authority. Dawkins writes at the beginning that one bit of an advice a devil's chaplain can provide, looking at the spectre of nature red in tooth and claw, is that while we are composed of selfish genes, we are not limited by them. Our intelligence gives us the ability to overcome the amoral logic of the jungle (or the savannah, no less savage). On the whole, however, amoral logic seems to have the edge; if a man can't favor a room of babies over a room of animals, there's something vital missing.

Mary Storm says

The essay on Postmodernism is a delightful skewering of that pretentious twaddle dished out in so many social science departments.

Marijan says

Knjiga je zbirka eseja pisanih kroz desetljeće i više i podijeljenih u nekoliko cjelina. U niima se Dawkins, u svom beskompromisnom stilu dotiče uobičajenih i manje uobičajenih tema- biologije, znanosti, tradicije, odnosa s drugima- i lucidno razjašnjava stvari. Sapienti sat.
