

Wrestling with Old Testament Holy Wars, Pt. 1: The Moral Indignation of Richard Dawkins

A few years ago, evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins, one of the most prominent and vocal atheists in the world, refused to debate philosopher and Christian apologist William Lane Craig. Ostensibly this was because of the latter's defense of the following passage from Deuteronomy:

However, in the cities of the nations the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance, do not leave alive anything that breathes. Completely destroy them—the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites—as the LORD your God has commanded you. (Deuteronomy 20:16-17)

In a [published explanation](#) for his decision, Dawkins charged God as being guilty of “horrible genocides” and “divine bloodlust.” His appraisal of Craig is similar. Following a handful of quotations from arguments Craig has made elsewhere ([here](#) and [here](#)), he writes:

Would you shake hands with a man who could write stuff like that? Would you share a platform with him? I wouldn't, and I won't. Even if I were not engaged to be in London on the day in question, I would be proud to leave that chair in Oxford eloquently empty.

And if any of my colleagues find themselves browbeaten or inveigled into a debate with this deplorable apologist for genocide, my advice to them would be to stand up, read aloud Craig's words as quoted above, then walk out and leave him talking not just to an empty chair but, one would hope, to a rapidly emptying hall as well.

How should Christians respond to something like this? Certainly the Deuteronomy passage and accompanying biblical history presents a challenge that must be faced squarely. But before taking up that particular gauntlet, it might be worth thinking a bit more about Dawkins' approach. First, he seemingly believes that God's command in Deuteronomy, as well as anyone who defends it, is so reprehensible, and that the case against them is so obvious, that no one needs even to take it up. But if the issue is that simple, why not show up and humiliate Craig before a watching world? Wouldn't that substantially advance the cause of atheism and get us all closer to throwing off what Dawkins believes to be the shackles of ignorance associated with religious belief? Who wouldn't want to participate in such a smashing victory?

Or perhaps merely asserting that something is so obviously reprehensible doesn't make it so. Maybe, just maybe, thinking through the issue demands more than rhetorical bombast in a newspaper piece and an “eloquently empty” chair.

Of much more significance, however, is a second point. I find it deeply ironic that Dawkins would express such moral outrage at God and/or Craig. After all, this is a man who insists that God doesn't exist. Fair enough coming from a man with Dawkins' worldview. But if God really isn't there to provide the standard by which we make moral judgments, then how do we claim that something is genuinely "right" or "wrong"? Who decides? And on what basis? I'm certainly not the first to ask such questions. Nor am I the first to maintain that, after the dust settles from all the attempts to answer them, any kind of *objective* morality remains untenable without God. Instead we're left only with glorified preferences...and the question of why we should care about those of Dawkins or, for that matter, anyone else. You say tuh-may-toe, I say tuh-mah-toe.

In fact, for anyone like Dawkins who wishes to express such moral condemnation, denying that God exists is to saw fiercely on the branch where one stands.

But there is another significant reason that Dawkins' moral indignation seems misplaced. If a strictly naturalistic worldview is correct, aren't we to explain the actions of human beings in the same way as we do other natural processes? After all, aren't we all just collections of matter and energy behaving in certain predictable ways over time? Sure, we have brains and make "decisions," but haven't we come to understand those are explainable solely through a combination of physical and chemical processes? Why do I choose to eat pepperoni pizza or show kindness to a stranger? Simply because certain natural stimuli set in motion a given series of those processes in my particular body.

But if all this is true, weren't the Israelites merely following their "natural programming" when they (a) believed—albeit mistakenly—that God existed, (b) understood this fictitious God to command them to rid their Promised Land of the Canaanites, and (c) attempted to do exactly that? Moreover, aren't William Lane Craig and others defending these actions thousands of years later because of similar natural programming? Even Dawkins' severe denunciations, both here and against God and religious people in general, are themselves nothing more the inevitable results of natural causes and their effects. In a purely mechanistic world, everyone—the Israelites, Craig, Dawkins, etc.—is merely playing their role. We can no more offer genuine moral objections to any of them than we can express outrage at a lion killing an antelope or, for that matter, oxygen and hydrogen combining to form water. In a naturalistic world, what happens is simply what happens. And the universe, being impersonal, simply doesn't care.

Imagine my surprise when, after nearly completing these paragraphs, I came across a notable atheist who seems to agree with my criticisms. His name is Richard Dawkins. Philosopher Paul Copan quotes from Dawkins' *River out of Eden: A Darwinian View of Life* (last italics mine):

If the universe were just electrons and selfish genes, meaningless tragedies...are exactly what we should expect, along with equally meaningless *good* fortune. Such a universe would be neither evil nor good in intention.... The universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, *no evil and no good, nothing but blind pitiless indifference*. (132-33)

As Copan goes on to point out, Dawkins is, in essence, “helping himself to the metaphysical resources of a worldview he repudiates” (*Is God a Moral Monster*, 210). To put it another way, Dawkins is writing moral checks that his beliefs can’t cash.

The website for the Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science states its mission is “to support scientific education, critical thinking and evidence-based understanding of the natural world in the quest to overcome religious fundamentalism, superstition, intolerance and suffering.” This statement is itself worth a thorough discussion. But here I’ll simply suggest that, in this particular case at least, Dawkins hasn’t thought critically enough.

Next time, we’ll begin to wrestle in earnest with the challenges presented by God’s command in Deuteronomy 20.