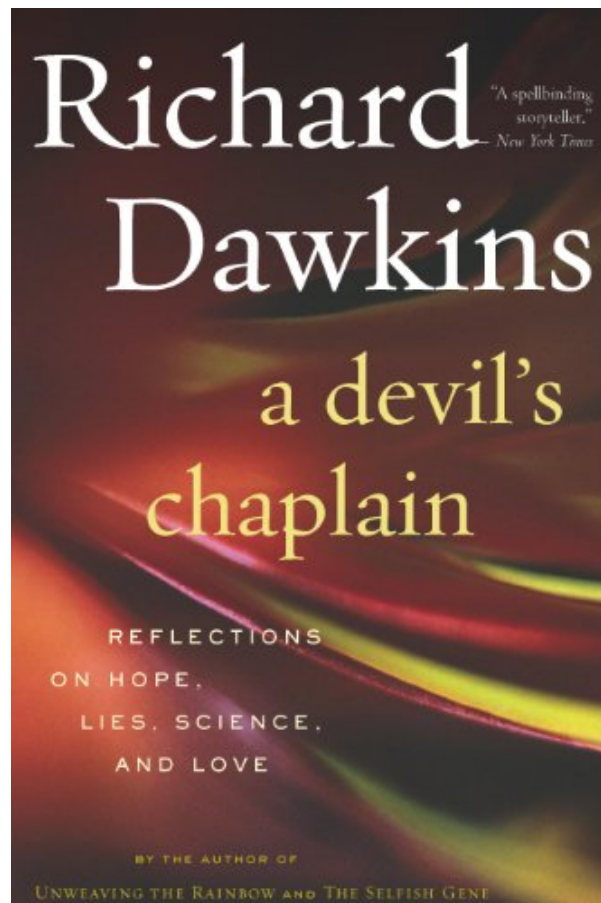
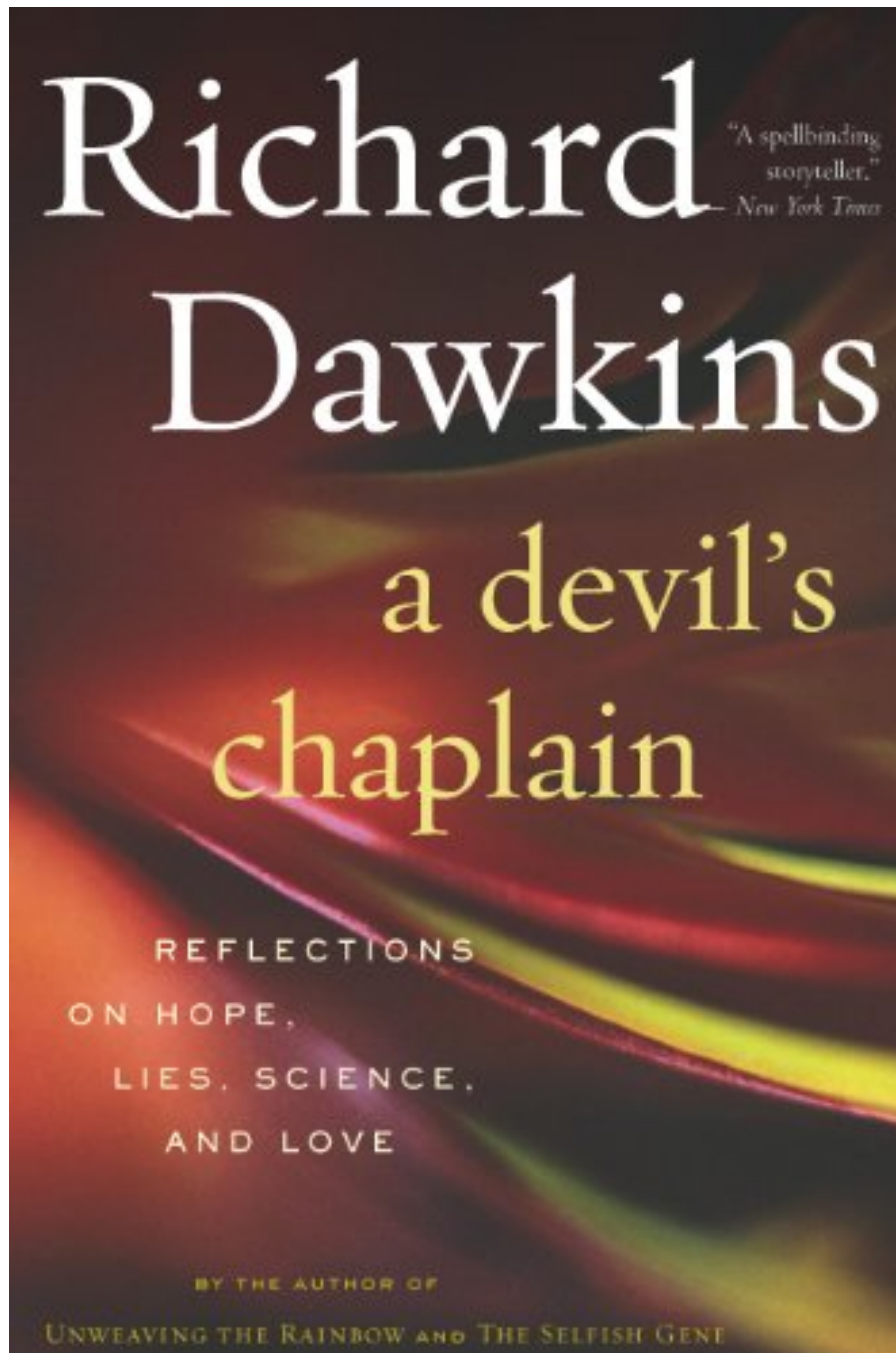


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Editors of Scientific American

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## A DEVIL'S CHAPLAIN BY RICHARD DAWKINS PDF

The first collection of essays from renowned scientist and best-selling author Richard Dawkins is an enthusiastic declaration, a testament to the power of rigorous scientific examination to reveal the wonders of the world. In these essays Dawkins revisits the meme, the unit of cultural information that he named and wrote about in his groundbreaking work *The Selfish Gene*. Here also are moving tributes to friends and colleagues, including a eulogy for novelist Douglas Adams, author of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*; correspondence with the evolutionary biologist Stephen Jay Gould; and visits with the famed paleoanthropologists Richard and Maeve Leakey at their African wildlife preserve. The collection ends with a vivid note to Dawkins's ten-year-old daughter, reminding her to remain curious, to ask questions, and to live the examined life.

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Editors of Scientific American

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Startling Sermons

By Rob Hardy

Charles Darwin said that there was grandeur in his view of life produced by natural selection, but it was not all a pretty picture. He wrote his friend Joseph Hooker in 1856: "What a book a Devil's Chaplain might write on the clumsy, wasteful, blundering low and horridly cruel works of nature." Richard Dawkins has taken the quotation for the title of a collection of his writings, *A Devil's Chaplain: Reflections on Hope, Lies, Science, and Love* (Houghton Mifflin). Darwin also wrote of a particular wasp: "I cannot persuade myself that a beneficent and omnipotent God would have designedly created the Ichneumonidae with the express intention of their feeding within the living body of caterpillars." But as Darwin (and Dawkins) would remind us, the evolutionary process has produced wonderfully designed creatures, and a wasp who cares for its young by letting them hatch within a hapless caterpillar is simply doing a competent job of getting the young off to a good start. It might be distasteful to us (and should have been to a supreme being), but nature just doesn't care. It isn't kindness of the mother wasp, or cruelty to the caterpillar, but simply amoral nature.

But as chaplain, Dawkins notes that while wasps and caterpillars can do nothing about such amorality, we can. "At the same time as I support Darwinism as a scientist, I am a passionate anti-Darwinian when it comes to politics and how we should conduct our human affairs." There is no inconsistency here any more than in the physician who studies cancer, but is bent on eliminating it. And as devil's chaplain, Dawkins urges us to use our evolution-given brains, reject the pacifiers of faith in immortality, and rejoice in our short lives because they are all we have. Dawkins, you see, besides being an eminent Darwinian whose books like *The Blind Watchmaker* have wonderfully well laid out what evolution means, is also possibly the world's most famous atheist. You will find here his views on religious beliefs and creationists (or their newest incarnation as advocates of Intelligent Design), of course, but on "alternative medicine," crystal healing, homeopathy, and so on. Besides the rants, there is good humor and some warm tributes to friendship, especially in his memorials to his friends Douglas Adams and Stephen Jay Gould. The final chapter, "A Prayer for My Daughter," is a letter he wrote to her when she turned ten, to let her know how he thought she should select

what to believe. The great question to ask in all disputes: "What kind of evidence is there for that?" Readers will be reminded of the belligerence of Thomas Henry Huxley, "Darwin's Bulldog," but evolution is only one theme here. Included is his hilarious review of the book by the hoaxer Alan Sokal who submitted a nonsense paper to a postmodern journal and had it accepted. He rages against postmodernism, with its "all views are equal" stance making his scientific view equivalent to a voodoo view. He expresses his doubts about the jury system, and in a wonderful chapter ("Genes Aren't Us") discounts just how important genes are for personality. Another chapter makes us wonder at just how close we are to our ape cousins. Throughout, he is witty, and above all informative on a wide-range of subjects, not just on his refusal to accept what he sees as the diverse delusions of most of the world. Anyone who has admired his previous writings of science popularization will find these personal essays to be very appealing sermons from an accomplished chaplain.

113 of 122 people found the following review helpful.  
A revealing collection of essays by a passionate scientist  
By Dennis Littrell

One of the wonderful things about this book is the sense that one gets of a distinguished scientist letting his hair down, as it were, and discoursing informally on a number of interesting subjects including some outside his area of expertise. In the game of "Who would you invite to dinner if you could choose anybody?" Oxford University Professor Richard Dawkins, author of *The Selfish Gene*, and other important works on evolution, would be near the top of my list.

Not that I agree with everything he says. Indeed, that is part of the fun. Dawkins is adamant on some subjects, religion being one of them. A goodly portion of this book is devoted to letting us know exactly how he feels about the "God hypothesis," "liberal agnostics," and the so-called miracles recognized by especially the Catholic Church. The title of Chapter 3.3, "The Great Convergence" (of science and religion), for example, is used ironically. He sees no convergence; in fact, he calls such a notion "a shallow, empty, hollow, spin-doctored sham." (p. 151)

Clearly Dawkins is not a man to mince words. But his insistence on a restrictive definition of "God" as "a hypothetical being who answers prayers; intervenes to save cancer patients...forgives sin," etc., is really the problem. He considers the "religion" attributed to scientists like Einstein, Carl Sagan, Paul Davies and others (and even himself!) to involve a misuse of the term, calling such a definition "flabbily elastic" and not religion as experienced by "the ordinary person in the pew." (p. 147)

But what Dawkins is really railing against is the illegitimacy of believing in the supernatural and science at the same time.

While I think Dawkins makes a good point with this argument, I think it would be better to make a distinction between fundamentalist religion, which has been, and continues to be, the root cause of much of the horror in the world, and the more progressive varieties which recognize the limitations of the barbaric "Bronze-Age God of Battles." See Chapter 3.5 "Time to Stand Up" in which Dawkins rightly condemns the hatreds and violent history of the three middle eastern religions. At the same time I think he needs to realize that it is legitimate to define "God" as God is defined in, for example, the Vedas; that is, as *The Ineffable*, which has no attributes, about which nothing can be said.

However it is exactly his point that there is no evidence for the God hypothesis and that to partially accept such a notion, or even to be "agnostic" is to depart from a purely scientific viewpoint. In this I think the atheistic Dawkins is mistaken. Absence of proof is not proof of absence, period. And as far as religion, per se, goes, I would add that not only is religion part of human culture (for better or for worse), but is also part

of the so-called "extended phenotype" of human beings, and not something that is going to be argued away.

I also have some reservations about his reasons for not debating with creationists. He believes that to debate with them gives them a legitimacy they don't deserve. In Chapter 5.5, he reveals a letter he wrote to Steven Jay Gould expressing such a view. I don't debate creationists either, but my reason is that creationists don't really debate. They have already made up their minds and are not capable of being influenced by evidence. Theirs is purely an exercise in propaganda. Furthermore, as Dawkins discovered himself (in Chapter 2.3 on the Australian film crew that he allowed into his house for an interview), it is often the case that creationists don't play fair.

In Chapter 1.5 "Trial by Jury" Dawkins presents his reservations about "one of the most conspicuously bad good ideas anyone ever had." I understand his demurral, but would like to point out that juries dispense a social justice; that the tribe makes its decisions based on what it perceives as good for the tribe now, not necessarily what's true in an objective or scientific sense.

Interesting enough, Dawkins demonstrates his knowledge of other scientific subjects, including physics, and he does it very well. I was particularly impressed with his explanation of entropy and how it effects the evolutionary process in Chapter 2.2. (See especially page 85.) He also does a fine job of elucidating why Lamarckism cannot work without a "Darwinian underpinning" since there must be a mechanism for selecting between the acquired characteristics that are improvements and those that are not. (p. 90) Good too is his characterization of genes as constituting "a kind of description of the ancestral environments through which those genes have survived." (p. 113)

On his tiff with Gould, Dawkins attempts to make amends by reprinting some semi-gracious and mostly positive reviews of some of Gould's books; however it is obvious that his professional and emotional differences with Gould remain.

One of the most important points that Dawkins reaffirms here is his belief that we humans, because of our unique insight into ourselves and our predicament, "can rebel against the tyranny of the selfish replicators." (p. 11) What Dawkins means is that we do not have to take biology as destiny or to take Darwinism as a template for our morality--a point often missed by his critics.

There is much, much more of interest in this refreshingly personal collection of essays by one of our most original evolutionary thinkers, some of it first rate, and some of it rather ordinary; yet taken in total reveals a lot about Richard Dawkins, scientist, science writer, teacher, and human being that I was pleased to learn.

Incidentally, the title is from Charles Darwin who speculated on how such a personage might regard "the clumsy, wasteful, blundering low and horribly cruel works of nature." (p. 8)

That "devil's chaplain" here is Richard Dawkins himself who mostly directs his ire toward the stupidities of human beings.

--Dennis Littrell, author of "The World Is Not as We Think It Is

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A Devils Chaplain

By E. Silva-herzog

Richard Dawkins is one of the most influential and controversial essayists of today. A renowned evolutionary biologist, he currently holds the Charles Simonyi Chair at Oxford University. In his book A

Devils Champlain he brings together 25 years and some of his best and most polemic essays (some previously unpublished) with subjects dealing with everything from love to evolution.

He employs his analytical passion to raise some mind-blowing questions and does not back down from challenging what many people consider as fundamental truths. He analyzes very intricate topics and situations through a scientific lens and is able to do it with clarity and simplicity. Although he has been criticized for some strong anti-religions standpoints and instances where his bias affects his writing; I believe that his work, even if you don't agree with it, is worth reading for he definitely makes some very valid points.

I believe Richard Dawkins is one of the elite essayist because of his ability to take on such complex beliefs, break it down systematically and with the use of some philosophy prove his point; all while keeping a clear and simple style. He displays mastery in several subjects including, but not restricted to physics, biology and philosophy.

This book is divided into seven sections, each with a preamble. These sections are themselves made up of short and varied articles enabling reader is also able to jump from section to section and read different pieces since the order is not overly central. This complemented by his concise style making for a very easy read.

This book is not only a great read but it could change the way you think about some of the most basic things in you're life and will force you to re-analyze several aspects of today's society. I trust that this book made me a more knowledgeable person and taught me to question everything, extending to the things society considers self evident.

My favorite article titled "Trial by Jury" scientifically analyzes the system of trial by jury. This is a system in which the vast majority of the world ardently believes in, and is regarded as the closest humanly possible method of reaching justice. Growing up in America I was a firm believer that it was the ultimate system but after having read the article, in which Dawkins makes some undeniable points against it, I have come to question this system. However, this is the same reaction I had to many of his other articles where he questions things such as truth, religion, and the existence of god.

It is definitely a great introduction to anyone that is interested in Richard Dawkins work. It is one of his more concise pieces in which he reaches concert solutions, and a great prologue to his more intricate and ideological works.

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