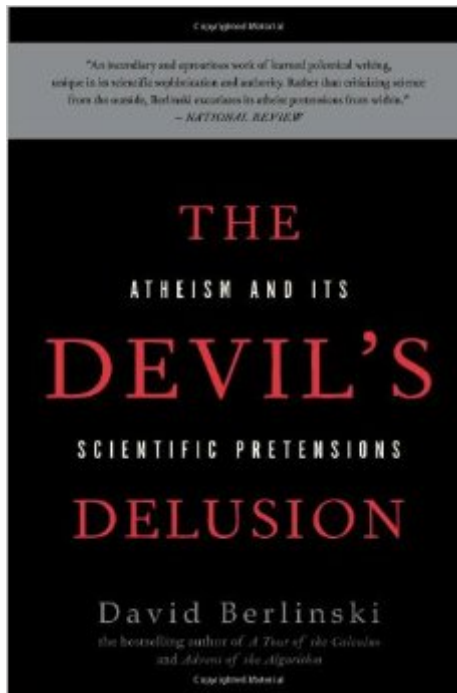


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The Devil's Delusion: Atheism And Its Scientific Pretensions



Synopsis

Militant atheism is on the rise. In recent years Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett, and Christopher Hitchens have produced a steady stream of best-selling books denigrating religious belief. These authors are merely the leading edge of a larger movement that includes much of the scientific community. In response, mathematician David Berlinski, himself a secular Jew, delivers a biting defense of religious thought. *The Devil's Delusion* is a brilliant, incisive, and funny book that explores the limits of science and the pretensions of those who insist it is the ultimate touchstone for understanding our world.

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Customer Reviews

I suppose most people like to at least appear to be open-minded, but sometimes I wonder how often (say) a conservative Republican sits down to read Noam Chomsky's political screeds, or a dedicated leftist sits down to enjoy Adam Smith. I picked up "The Devil's Delusion" in just that spirit, fully expecting to find a book which would argue against most of my own beliefs. I wasn't really expecting something as brilliant, challenging, and engaging as this. If you think that the only people who don't believe in evolution are Fundamentalist knuckle-dragging Georgia swamp-dwellers, you're in for a big surprise. Berlinski himself is an agnostic of Jewish descent, an astonishingly erudite man and a brilliant thinker. He also writes frightfully well. And it is often hard to disagree with him. As he notes in the opening pages of this book --- concerning religion, God, and the rest: "I do not know whether any of this is true. I am certain that the scientific community does not know that it is false." You might want to read those two sentences again, because they form the logical heart and

soul of this book. Berlinski is not on a mission to preach religion; his task is to make plain just how little we actually know about the universe, and to try and re-awaken our sense of wonder. In this, he succeeds brilliantly. The book cannot really be summarized in a brief review, but let me try to show you at least his thoughts about cosmology and the Big Bang.

Any book by David Berlinski is bound to be fun. He is simply one of the most erudite writers in popular science and mathematics today. Those who particularly like seeing sacred cows treated with a hint of sarcasm and irreverence will enjoy his writing on almost any subject, but this book, attacking the "new atheism" as it does, is especially delightful if for no other reason than for how pompous writers like Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, and Christopher Hitchens are in their approach to this subject. In brief, Berlinski's argument boils down to three main points: there is nothing in science proper that undermines religion (a point that used to be widely recognized and even extolled by writers like SJ Gould), most of the new atheists badly misunderstand even the most rudimentary arguments of theology and are not logically consistent, and finally that much of science has become rather dogmatic, like a new religion. I think Berlinski does an excellent job addressing all three of these points, the first of which should be more or less self evident. Claims, for example, that one "should" only believe in physical or visible evidence are not, in and of themselves, empirical claims. Indeed, I have friends who resolutely insist that materialism is "all there is" while remaining blissfully unaware of the fact that such a statement could not arise from strictly empirical observation. Regarding the new atheist approach to Aquinas, Berlinski correctly notes that the critics of St. Thomas really do not understand his arguments. Take for example the famous cosmological argument of Thomas Aquinas. In its simplest form, this argument takes the form of a syllogism. Everything that begins to exist has a cause. The universe began at some point. Therefore the universe has a cause.

In the documentary movie *Expelled* by Ben Stein, one of those interviewed was David Berlinski, author of the book under review, for his assessment of evolution, intelligent design, and the dogmatic opposition to any criticism of Darwinism by the scientific establishment. As far as I know, this book is Berlinski's first book-length criticism of Darwinism and especially of what has come to be known as scientism (the atheistic religion that pretends that it is based on science). The interesting title of Berlinski's book comes from an amalgamation of Richard Dawkins' book *The God Delusion*, McGrath's response *The Dawkins Delusion?: Atheist Fundamentalism and the Denial of the Divine*, and another book by Dawkins titled *A Devil's Chaplain: Reflections on Hope, Lies,*

Science, and Love. Berlinski describes himself as a "secular Jew," and says that his "religious education did not take. I can barely remember a word of Hebrew. I cannot pray." Although he does not, to my knowledge, say he is an agnostic, it seems that that must be what he is. He has a Ph.D. from Princeton University and has taught mathematics and philosophy at universities in the United States and in France.

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