

An Examination of Religion's Moral Function Based on the Views of Richard Dawkins and Alister McGrath

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Abstract

Basing ethics on an evolutionary foundation which proposes the idea of a "moral zeitgeist", Richard Dawkins, who is a British evolutionary biologist and one of the major proponents of modern atheism, sought to deny the moral functions of religion. By contrast, defending the moral functions of religion, Alistair McGrath, who is a contemporary biologist and theologian and one of the most prominent critics of new atheism, has criticized Dawkins's atheistic approach and positions. McGrath considers Dawkins' approach to cultural and moral evolution to be a continuation of the ideas and claims of Edward Wilson. He thinks that reductionism is not justified, and that Dawkins's theory contains the defects of disregarding the element of human intentionality and failing to provide a conclusive argument. In this article, I aim to draw a distinction and contrast between the views of these two philosophers. After indicating the origins and foundations of Dawkins's ideas and McGrath's objections to them, I critically assess their approaches and attitudes towards each other. It is remarkable that although McGrath's critiques are, in general, useful and effective, he has not offered sufficient and comprehensive explanations in some cases.

Keywords

Richard Dawkins, Alister McGrath, evolutionary ethics, moral zeitgeist, moral function of religion.

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