

# D'Souza defends the afterlife; falls short on evolution

A review of  
*Life After Death: The Evidence*  
by Dinesh D'Souza  
Regnery, Washington,  
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When a book claims to argue scientifically for the existence of an afterlife, and when that book is praised by such a diverse group as 'new atheist' Christopher Hitchens, pastor Rick Warren, and Oxford University philosophy professor Daniel Robinson, it seems that the book is a force to be reckoned with. In *Life After Death: The Evidence*, Dinesh D'Souza explores the philosophical arguments and scientific evidence which he argues points to an afterlife.

## Atheistic ignorance

D'Souza starts by examining the atheists' arguments against life after death, which mainly stem from materialistic philosophy. He points out that when it comes to the presence or absence of a post-death existence, the atheists know nothing more than anyone else. In fact, he argues that believers are on stronger ground than the atheists because believers claim the testimony of an unimpeachable authority—God Himself (p. 22).

The atheist usually will claim to rely on reason to discard belief in life after death, but D'Souza shows that there is nothing inherently unreasonable about the belief in life after death. The first atheist argument he demolishes is that there is no evidence; just because we haven't *found* evidence says nothing

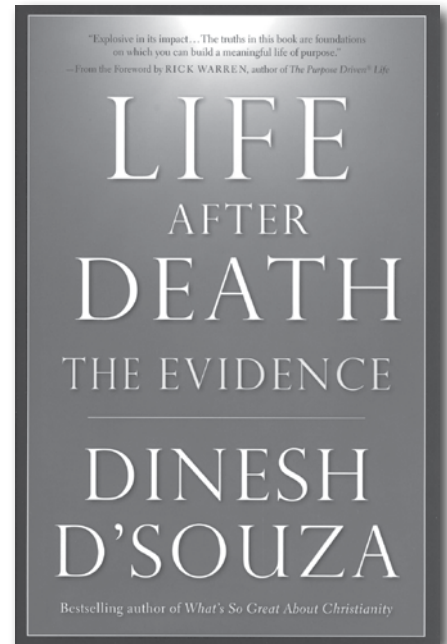
about the truth or falsehood of life after death. He argues that the atheist *cannot* use reason based on experiences in this life to make any statements about life after death because reason only operates in the realm of our experience. It tells us nothing about a realm to which we have no access (pp. 30–31).

D'Souza also demolishes the idea that the belief in life after death is simply wish fulfillment—most cultures' conceptions of life after death do not make the afterlife any more desirable than this life, and some are substantially worse, like the Fang people in Cameroon who "believe in an afterlife dominated by witches and evil spirits who take relish in eating people" (p. 32). In any case, someone wishing something says nothing about the reasonableness of the wish. And the case of wish fulfillment fails on atheists' own terms, since they believe we evolve: it would be strange if evolution routinely favored those who developed inaccurate beliefs.

## The universal belief

Atheists see the belief in life after death as primarily religious, but D'Souza shows that the idea is also found in Western philosophy as far back as Plato. He sees the universal agreement among the world's religions that there is life after death (although they differ substantially with regard to the details of post-mortem existence) as strong evidence for the truth of the idea, since it isn't the sort of idea that one would *expect* to gain universal acceptance, because it "seems impossible to confirm through experience" (p. 40).

Atheists see the rise in belief in life after death, along with other religious beliefs, as an attempt by primitive



peoples to explain reality. But to ask questions about *why* reality is a certain way only makes sense when one assumes that nature is governed by rational laws, a conception that ancient peoples did not seem to have. D'Souza argues that ancient people sought explanations on a different level—modern science asks how things happen, but ancient people really wanted to know *why*. He argues that "the roots of humanity's religious impulse are not in scientific ignorance but in ... 'the sense of the numinous'" (p. 42).

## Near death experiences— a 'view from the edge'?

While D'Souza examines the evidence for reincarnation and finds that it probably is not a real phenomenon, he somewhat uncritically accepts near death experiences (NDEs) as valid. As a Christian,<sup>1</sup> he should be gauging the validity of these experiences from Scripture's teaching. He recounts incidents of atheists having peaceful NDEs, including philosopher A.J. Ayers (1910–1989), which clearly goes against the biblical picture of what nonbelievers experience after death. Another researcher, Gary Bates, notes that the subconscious mind records more than we can

readily recall, and these subconscious memories could be part of the NDEs, for instance, recalling details of procedures or conversations. Also, subconscious ‘memories’ could be planted from an outside source, and then recalled as if it was a genuine memory. Peace and goodwill are common feelings after hypnosis, so something similar could be going on in the subconscious with NDEs.<sup>2</sup>

### Multiple universes

D’Souza takes the ideas of dark energy and matter, as well as multiple universes, and uses them to support the idea that there are other dimensions which science doesn’t know anything about, and therefore life after death is plausible as we argue it occurs in another dimension. But this assumes that there are, in reality, other universes, and that dark matter and energy actually exist. Multiple universes is a theory which by definition can’t be proved by science, as we only have access to *this* universe.<sup>3</sup> As such, an argument based on multiple universes can be an interesting philosophical or even theological argument, but it cannot be scientific. Dark matter and energy also have not been observed.<sup>4</sup> D’Souza’s use of scientific fads to argue for life after death disturbingly parallels old-earth creationist Hugh Ross’s (mis)use of science in his books.<sup>5</sup> Scientific fads which are heavily dependent on evolutionary assumptions are simply taken at face value, and then used to argue for a ‘biblical’ point of view, when in fact the hypotheses themselves should be received far more critically.

### Teleological evolution?

If there is anything that disproves a plan to life, the atheist would say that it is evolutionary theory. But D’Souza argues precisely the opposite; that there is a natural teleology that works through evolution, which leads molecules to turn into cells, cells into animals, and caused one group of animals, humans, to grow a soul. D’Souza’s uncritical acceptance of

secular science is especially apparent here. Things which make life possible, like the earth’s distance from the sun, the gravitational force of the moon, and the properties of water, are interpreted as preconditions of Darwinian evolution (p. 98).

D’Souza states that the scientific quest to find a naturalistic origin for life is simply part of the “*modus operandi* of science” (p. 101). But this assumes naturalism *has* the explanation, while the Bible teaches a *supernatural* origin to life. If this is the case, then *any* naturalistic explanation for the origin of life on Earth will be flawed. D’Souza argues that there is a “natural teleology” which has played out through Earth’s history. But evolution cannot have any teleology—natural selection cannot see past the current generation. It doesn’t matter if a particular mutation when combined with one that might come about in 500 years will make an animal more fit; if the current mutation does not make the creature more fit by itself, it will not be selected for. D’Souza also does not propose a way that evolution could add the sort of genetic information that would be required if amoebae were to evolve into animals then humans. Furthermore, natural selection can work only with self-reproducing entities; it can’t explain the origin of *first* life.

### Body and mind

In the next part of his book, D’Souza tackles the interrelationship of the physical human body and the mind. Humans experience two worlds—the outer physical world and the inner world of thoughts and ideas. They are completely different sorts of ‘worlds’, but to the one experiencing it, the inner world is just as real as the physical world around him.

D’Souza accepts the dualistic explanation, because although we don’t know exactly how the mind interacts with the physical body, it seems to deal with what we do know about the mind and the brain better than the materialistic explanation. And if the mind is not the same thing as the brain, but a non-physical entity

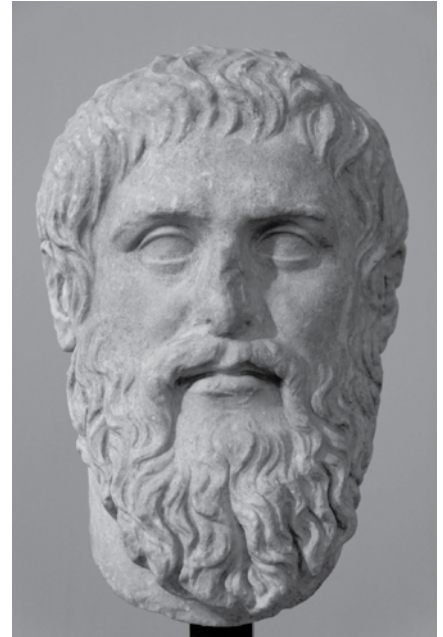


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The belief in life after death in Western philosophy can be traced back to Plato.

which only uses the brain as a vehicle through which to influence the body, then it is entirely possible that the mind could survive the death of the body and the breakdown of the brain, and go on to survive in a disembodied state or in a different body. The mind is incredibly powerful—“mental activity not only affects physical outcomes, but ... reconstitutes and reprograms the neurons in our brains” (p. 129). D’Souza argues that if the mind is powerful enough to reprogram the brain, then it could very well be able to survive the death of the brain (p. 131).

### Arguments from philosophy

Having dealt with what he interprets to be scientific and medical evidence for the afterlife, D’Souza next tackles a number of philosophical arguments for life after death. Atheists claim that science tests the natural world, and therefore the natural world is the only scientific reality. But a number of philosophers have argued that science does nothing of the sort. In fact, they argue that the dichotomy between reality ‘out there’ and reality inside our minds is false, because *the only reality we have access to is that of our own perceptions*.



Arthur Schopenhauer developed a non-religious philosophical argument for the afterlife.

Kant argued for a distinction between the “noumenon”, the world as it actually is, and “phenomenon”, the world as we experience it. All of human experience, including scientific knowledge, is phenomenal, in that it can only deal with human perceptions of reality, and not necessarily reality *as it actually is*. We can know that the noumenal world exists because otherwise there would be no phenomenal experience. But the noumenal, according to Kant, is not bound by the constraints of space and time and the scientific laws which are all part of the phenomenal reality.

While Kant argued that we can't know anything about the noumenal realm because it is outside our experience, Schopenhauer distinguished between knowing something and knowing about it. It is possible to have knowledge about something without having direct access to it; one can make the claim that the Sahara desert is hot and dry regardless of whether they've been there. Schopenhauer argued that the noumenal realm is undifferentiated—that is, everything *as it actually is* exists in a state of transcendental oneness. This is because for objects to be distinct from each other, they must be so within either space or time. But if space and time are solely part of

the phenomenal experience and not the noumenal, then there is no way for reality to be differentiated outside phenomenal experience. This leads Schopenhauer to advocate an afterlife which is decidedly non-Christian, but D'Souza uses Schopenhauer's philosophy as an example of a non-religious philosophical argument for life beyond death.

### Presuppositional argument

One of D'Souza's strongest arguments for the afterlife is the presuppositional argument—if one presumes the existence of an afterlife, things which are otherwise difficult to explain make sense. Humans uniquely recognize two sorts of ‘laws’, the physical laws which govern the natural world, but also moral laws which govern the way things *should* be, even though we have never experienced a world where the moral ideal is realized. D'Souza recognizes that while evolution can explain why humans might be selfish, or lie and cheat to end up ahead, it cannot explain why humans would consistently hold the belief that one *shouldn't* do so, and routinely despise people who make gains in that fashion (p. 167). The best explanation for these moral laws is that there is a reality in which those laws are fully lived out.

Some evolutionists argue that morality came about because at some point, a tribe of people recognized that it would be mutually beneficial for everyone to share their resources, or something along those lines. A group where each member makes sacrifices for the whole will be stronger than a more ‘individualistic’ group who only look out for themselves. But D'Souza argues that this argument has a fatal flaw—a cheat in the group who takes advantage of the efforts of the whole without contributing anything will be better off still, so evolution still ends up supporting selfish behavior, and is unable to explain self-sacrifice.

‘Kin selection’, where seeming self-sacrifice makes the propagation of

ones genes more likely, could explain some things, like why a mother would run into a burning building to save her children, who each carry half her genes, or why one would make sacrifices for one's own community, but it does not explain altruism towards strangers. D'Souza argues that his view that human moral ideals find their source in a realm where those ideals are actually lived out makes the best sense for how humans actually act, even though we do not routinely live up to these ideals.

### The beneficial nature of belief in life after death

The most practical question one can ask about belief in life after death is whether it is good for the individual or for society. After the September 11 attacks in 2001, Richard Dawkins famously wrote a column claiming that the Muslims' belief that they were going to be greeted by beautiful virgins in paradise was behind their attacks.<sup>6</sup> D'Souza argues that atheists who didn't believe in an afterlife have committed even worse atrocities, the majority of people who believe in an afterlife aren't compelled to kill themselves or others, and that the belief in an afterlife wasn't the key conviction that led to any of the Muslim terrorist attacks in any case.

On the other hand, there is a lot of evidence that the belief that humans have immortal souls is beneficial, both to individuals and society as a whole. The whole idea that humans have rights is based on the assumption that humans have souls and are somehow more than beasts. This belief led Francisco de Vitoria, a Dominican theologian, to argue against the enslavement of American Indians by Spanish conquistadors, regardless of the possible economic benefits to Spain, even though the Indians were not Christians. Opposition to slavery of any sort was developed entirely in Christian circles, and throughout history the only nations to voluntarily abolish slavery are those which were largely Christian.



Atheists who do not believe in God or life after death often try to have it both ways, to keep the Christian morality without the Christian beliefs. But Nietzsche recognized that once one does away with God, which D’Souza sums up: “you must also give up the ideas of equality, human dignity, democracy, human rights, and even peace and compassion ... none of them can long survive without the assumptions that made them tenable” (p. 208). He argues that the benefits of believing in the afterlife, and the risks of not believing in the afterlife, make belief the more beneficial and reasonable course for the individual.<sup>7</sup>

### The One who rose again

In the first 200 pages of his book, D’Souza was not overtly Christian in his argumentation; in fact, one could wonder at points whether he was going to adopt some sort of Platonic dualism or even Eastern oneness. In the last chapter of his book, he claims that the Christian view has the best evidence of all, because Christianity is the only

religion that can claim the witness of someone who has actually died and come back to life: Jesus Christ. It stands to reason that

“if the Christian claim is true, it immediately rises above the pack; in fact, it renders every other afterlife theory an ‘also ran’” (p. 222).

He argues for the historicity of Jesus’ resurrection, summarizing N.T. Wright’s argument made famous in a mammoth work.<sup>8</sup> If Christ actually died and rose from the dead, this makes Him a uniquely reliable source on the afterlife. D’Souza ends the book with a lovely presentation of the Gospel that includes a biblical view of Heaven and Hell, and a plea to make a decision about the issue thoughtfully.

### Ignorance and evolutionary assumptions

D’Souza is clearly not a theologian, and this leads him to make some rather interesting statements, such as saying that immortality of the soul is the “unofficial” view held in Christianity, the view that the body dies while the soul lives on in an eternally disembodied state (p. 42). But the soul is only disembodied during the *intermediate state*;<sup>9</sup> it is not the *final* state. Paul argued vehemently against such a disembodied eternal existence in 1 Corinthians 15; so *bodily resurrection* is the only orthodox view of Christianity.

Furthermore, the book is riddled with evolutionary assumptions from start to finish. He accepts an age for the universe of 13.5 billion years (p. 31), believes the big bang was the beginning of the universe (p. 83), and makes statements throughout the book distancing himself from creationists.

D’Souza only advocates a distinctively Christian afterlife in the final chapter of *Life After Death*. Most of the book, despite D’Souza’s

claim to the contrary, reads like a comparative religions book on the subject of life after death, not taking a stance on which belief is *true* until the very last chapters. While this provides quite an effective contrast, I would have liked to see this Christian view of life after death elaborated on more; the entire last chapter is only 15 pages.

This is a useful book in that nearly everyone who reads it will disagree with something that is asserted in it, but it forces people to think about their own philosophy and views on the afterlife. D’Souza’s conversational style makes it an easy read, despite the weighty subjects being discussed, though, as with his former book,<sup>1</sup> it would have been a much better work if he had avoided the evolutionary areas that he simply does not understand well enough to argue from.

### References

1. See *What’s So Great About Christianity?* Regnery, Washington DC, 2007; reviewed in Cosner, L., Mostly masterful defence of Christianity; pity it’s slack on creation, *J. Creation* 22(2):32–35, 2008.
2. Bates, G., *Alien Intrusion: UFOs and the Evolution Connection* (4<sup>th</sup> printing), Creation Book Publishers, Powder Springs, GA, 2006.
3. See Sarfati, J., *By Design*, ch. 15, Creation Book Publishers, Australia, 2008.
4. See Hartnett, J., Dark matter and a cosmological constant in a creationist cosmology? *J. Creation* 19(1):82–87, 2005.
5. See Sarfati, J., *Refuting Compromise*, Master Books, Green Forest, AR, 2004; Cosner, L., More of the same old compromise: A review of *More Than a Theory* by Hugh Ross, *J. Creation* 24(1):35–38, 2010.
6. Dawkins, R., Religion’s Misguided Missiles, *The Guardian*, 15 September 2001.
7. See also Parris, M., As an atheist, I truly believe Africa needs God, *The Times Online*, 27 December 2008; creation.com/atheists-credit-christianity.
8. Wright, N.T., *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, Augsburg Fortress Publishers, Minneapolis, MN, 2003.
9. Before the final Resurrection, there is biblical evidence of the soul’s conscious survival after death of the body; e.g. Luke 16:19–31, Phil. 1:21–23, Rev. 6:9–10.



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Because Christianity has the testimony of Jesus, who rose from the dead, it is the best source of evidence for the afterlife.