

Dawkins' godless delusion

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Abstract A philosophical assessment of Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion*, exposing some errors of reasoning that undermine part of the foundation of his atheism. Distinctions between theism, atheism and agnosticism are also provided and explored for their significance to Dawkins' argument.

Keywords Agnosticism · Atheism · Richard Dawkins · J. L. Mackie · Bertrand Russell · George Santayana · Theism

Heresies are systems that inherit all the claims of orthodoxy with only a part of its resources... The truth is often ugly or terrible, and almost always less simple and unqualified than our love of eloquence would wish it to be—George Santayana¹

Most men prefer to go through this world with their eyes open—even though it may be true that many of us pride ourselves on having them open while they remain really closed—P. A. Schilpp²

In studying Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion*, one is left with the impression that he is on an evangelistic mission to “go into all the world and preach the gospel” of scientific atheism so that his readers might be delivered from the delusional tenets of theism.³ However, it is unclear that Dawkins' self-described brand of atheism is genuinely atheistic in the first place. But even if it is atheistic, it is implausible. At most,

¹ Santayana (1915, p. 62).

² Schilpp (1924, p. 211).

³ The rhetorical tone of Dawkins' verbiage seems to remind one somewhat of T. H. Huxley, who was referred to as “Darwin's Bulldog” (Peacocke 2004, p. 50).

what Dawkins' argument supports is an atheology relative to orthodox Christian theism. But this is atheism only for those who are parochially Western in their thinking about God, a problem (ironically) with which Dawkins saddles orthodox Christian theism. So while it might be true that orthodox Christian theism is delusional, for all Dawkins argues, he himself suffers from the *Godless* delusion of wrongly reasoning that the defeat of orthodox Christian theism justifies atheism, properly construed. Indeed, I shall argue that agnosticism is a more intellectually responsible and respectable position to adopt than Dawkins' atheism. Thus I shall turn Dawkins' reasoning on its head, exposing his *Godless* delusion.

While one might agree that orthodox Christian theism suffers from a level of delusion for reasons that Immanuel Kant, David Hume, Bertrand Russell, J. L. Mackie and Kai Nielsen and some others have provided, I shall explain how atheism suffers from the delusion that it is not the case that God exists. What is not delusional is to embrace some version of agnosticism, which is a view quite unlike Dawkins' tirade against traditional Christian theism which shows no significant appreciation for the several rather respectable attempts to deal with various problems of God's existence.⁴ What is not delusional is to take the question of God's existence sufficiently seriously that one does not simultaneously commit straw person, bifurcation, and hasty conclusion fallacies in investigating philosophically these matters of ultimate concern. If it is true that in order to refute a view one needs to properly understand it, and if it is also the case that in order to properly understand a position one must have an appreciation and grasp of at least some of the depths of the most plausible and charitable version of the view, then Dawkins fails in his assessment of theism. It is, moreover, as a result of this failure that Dawkins' brand of atheism is problematic.

Evidence of Dawkins' poor reasoning is found in his dealing with agnosticism by conveniently distinguishing what he declares are two forms of it: "...the legitimate fence-sitting where there really is a definite answer, one way or another, but so far we lack the evidence to reach it" from a more permanent kind of position of this sort of fence-sitting.⁵ One might concur with Dawkins that the former position is more acceptable than the latter, as the latter leaves no room for the future discovery of the fact of the matter about God's existence one way or the other. But why Dawkins' reasoning does not lead him to adopt the former view instead of the one he does adopt is mysterious in light of the evidence and his own arguments. One wonders, then, whether the title of that section of his book ("The Poverty of Agnosticism") ought rather to read: "The Plausibility of Agnosticism." Moreover, he deliberately, or perhaps out of ignorance of alternative theisms developed by certain philosophers and theologians in recent decades, focuses his attention on one of the weakest or most easily refutable of Christian theisms. While this tactic sells books among those unaware of the fallacies underlying such rhetorical shenanigans, it does nothing to advance serious discussion of the important issues at hand. No doubt a significant motivation for Dawkins' reasoning is activist in that he is sincerely concerned with the well-being of societies (both human and nonhuman) and realizes that traditional

⁴ Some such attempts to bring greater philosophical and scientific respectability to theism are discussed in Corlett (forthcoming).

⁵ Dawkins (2006, p. 47).

Christian theism is so influential in the world and that it must be stopped because of its history of delusion and wrongdoing. This aim and sentiment is quite understandable, and even commendable. But this is no excuse for fallacious argumentation, confused analysis, and weak scholarship. Even given Dawkins' general purpose in addressing the God hypothesis to a general audience as a public intellectual, there is no justification for drawing poor inferences, especially amidst readers several of whom might be influenced by them. If what Dawkins propounds is sound, then sound argument can be garnered to support it, regardless of his intended audience. But it is somewhat pernicious to use poor reasoning to attempt to persuade one's audience to adopt one view in place of another—even if it is true that the view targeted for criticism is for various reasons problematic and unworthy of continued acceptance. I believe, however, that Dawkins genuinely believes what he writes and argues. So he does not suffer from the fatal error of propagating views he believes to be false, being unconcerned with the truth of matters.⁶ But some of his main arguments suffer from fundamental fallacies of reasoning.

Dawkins rightly insists that reason, not revelation, must guide our deliberations of the possible existence of God. But when we take reason sufficiently seriously, we shall find the weaknesses of Dawkins' atheism. Moreover, agnosticism, properly and not merely conveniently construed, is the best all relevant things considered position to accept at this time. And this is true even though some like Dawkins are careful enough to define their positions in terms of probabilities. In this way, Dawkins commits the very same errors that he accuses agnostics of committing, namely, that of conflating atheism with agnosticism. While Dawkins charges agnostics with not recognizing that they really are in practical terms atheists, it is Dawkins who is playing fast and loose with these categories given the proper and common sense understandings of "atheism" and "agnosticism." In the end, Dawkins is the one who—we shall see—creates a seven-fold category scheme of theisms, agnosticisms and atheisms that conveniently places himself as an atheist through linguistic and conceptual fiat.

Fundamental to Dawkins' argument for atheism is his taxonomy of positions on the problem of God. Dawkins is careful to draw distinctions on a scale between "strong theism" ("100 per cent probability of God"); "*de facto theism*" ("very high probability but short of 100 per cent"); "agnostic but leaning towards atheism" ("higher than 50 per cent but not very high"); "completely impartial agnosticism" ("exactly 50 per cent"); "agnostic but leaning towards atheism" ("lower than 50 per cent but not very low"); "*de facto atheism*" ("very low probability, but short of zero"); and "strong atheism" ("I know there is no God").⁷ Dawkins opts for *de facto atheism*, stopping short of but "leaning towards" strong atheism as he apparently believes that the existence of God cannot be disproven. Of course, Russell (one of the greatest public intellectuals of the 20th century) already made that point decades ago.

The reality is that Dawkins is a kind of agnostic, and even if he accurately portrays his own position as atheistic, his reasoning does not allow him to accept atheism in any meaningful sense of the term. This is the case for at least two reasons. First, from the

⁶ Otherwise, that would constitute "bullshit," according to Frankfurt (2006).

⁷ Dawkins (2006, pp. 50–51).

supposition that traditional Christian theism is in the end implausible it hardly follows logically that atheism is sound. Second, while it is true that there are degrees of belief in general and degrees of belief or disbelief in God in particular, atheism, being the logical negation of theism which affirms “God exists,” is the view that “It is not the case that God exists.” This is the relatively uncontroversial and conventional understanding of theism and atheism in philosophy of religion and in theology, regardless of Dawkins’ attempt to stipulatively re-describe atheism probabilistic terms. Dawkins leans toward but fails to embrace this construal of atheism, perhaps recognizing that his arguments do not adequately ground it.

As I point out elsewhere,⁸ there are different species of theism, agnosticism and atheism. But Dawkins works explicitly with an epistemological version of atheism, namely, one that endorses the claim that “I know there is no God.” But one might not *know* there is no God and yet God might also not exist, and this poses problems for Dawkins’ position as it is substantially weaker than the traditional atheistic claim, unacknowledged by Dawkins: “It is not the case that God exists.” First, Dawkins never explains what he means by “know,” a rather technical term in epistemology loaded with conceptual possibilities. For instance, does it imply certainty about God’s non-existence, or probability (and how much?), or something else? Dawkins’ own words suggest a probability reading, but he provides no indication as to how high a probability is required for even his own atheism to be plausible. So his own position on what atheism amounts to suffers from a fatal case of ambiguity. For Dawkins to claim that he knows that it is highly unlikely that God does not exist is a bit misleading, then, without careful qualification. Second, even if Dawkins did supply a workable and plausible notion of “know” for purposes of this category of strong atheism, it is unclear that his position is strong enough to warrant the label “atheism” for the reason noted. This makes his position misleading, to say the least, especially since orthodox atheism is the claim that “It is not the case that God exists,” with no epistemic qualifier. Also, Dawkins’ own de facto atheism is indistinguishable from what a typical agnostic would hold, or could very well hold without misleading herself or others. The agnostic can easily embrace de facto atheism’s claim that there is a “very low probability” of God’s existence, “but short of zero.” And this is because for the agnostic there are degrees of belief or lack thereof in God’s existence, and hence a range of the extent to which one falls under the category, agnostic based on the range of skeptical reasoning employed to reach agnosticism. Thus Dawkins’ position that he conveniently labels “atheism” is a rather weak version compared to traditional atheism, and his own position is indistinguishable from what has traditionally and widely been understood as agnosticism, a position Dawkins believes is “poverty”-stricken. Dawkins demonstrates the tell-tale signs of someone who is unfamiliar with issues that have been a part of philosophy of religion and theology for generations. And this does not bode well for the credibility of his arguments or his authority in these fields of inquiry. He is quite unlike Russell who carefully steered clear of such hyperbole when he so often addressed the very same issues in public forums.

⁸ Corlett (forthcoming).

But neither does his view that God most probably fails to exist enjoy adequate support in and of itself (whether or not it is atheistic or agnostic). For *how can Dawkins embrace with logical credulity a position of denying with high probability the existence of God when he has considered and refuted only the most obviously non-existent but alleged divinity having hyperbolic attributes?* What Dawkins' arguments support is the idea that a certain rather popular notion of God is implausible, and for a variety of reasons that have been noted (for the most part) for centuries by philosophers from at least Kant to Hume and beyond. But this neither defeats theism itself (not even the strictly supernaturalistic theism that Dawkins claims to refute) in its more plausible and interesting formulations nor adequately buttresses his alleged atheism—not even his probabilistic variety.

Even supposing that Dawkins defeats traditional Christian theism, he infers from some miraculous feat of logic that he has defeated all reasonable claims to God's existence (otherwise he would not call himself an atheist rather than an agnostic). After disposing of the Thomistic proofs for God's existence,⁹ Dawkins in the span of only a few pages each¹⁰ discards the ontological argument and related arguments because they are essentially question-begging,¹¹ the aesthetic argument due to its questionable logic,¹² the existential argument because religious experience admits of psychological explanation,¹³ the argument from religious texts due to its questionable veracity regarding certain crucial questions of theology and religion,¹⁴ the argument from scientific authority because it constitutes a dubious appeal to authority,¹⁵ Blaise Pascal's famous wager because it discounts the value of questioning,¹⁶ and the probability argument in that the probability of God's existence is far less than is imagined by theists.¹⁷ However, Dawkins omits several details of intricate argumentation and analysis (Why, after all, trouble folk who you think are too simple to understand the details of such argument and analysis if they are sufficiently gullible to accept traditional Christian theism in the first place? Or, is it that Dawkins himself truly does not know the details? Or, is it both?). This leads Dawkins into a somewhat protracted discussion of the teleological argument.

The argument from design, being a particularized version of the cosmological argument, argues from the perception of intricate design in the world to a Grand Designer, God. William Paley offered this argument along the lines of a watch's requiring a maker, thus God being the Watchmaker of the world. Dawkins has argued at length that the argument at best shows that if there is a Watchmaker, that the Watchmaker is

⁹ Dawkins (2006, pp. 77–79).

¹⁰ Careful scholars of theology and philosophy of religion know that these and other arguments for God's existence usually attract much more serious attention from critics than Dawkins provides.

¹¹ Dawkins (2006, pp. 80–85).

¹² Ibid., pp. 86–87.

¹³ Ibid., pp. 87–92.

¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 92–97.

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 97–103.

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 103–105.

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 105–109.

terribly “blind” or defective in light of the many natural problems that exist.¹⁸ But it is Dawkins’ more general assault on the God hypothesis that concerns me here. For it is his response to the argument from design that leads him to clarify and adopt his self-described atheism.

In short, Dawkins quite rightly argues that the creationist’s almost addictive habit of attributing natural complexity to God where there are gaps in natural evolution (the “God of the gaps” way of thinking, a criticism that traces back at least as far as Alfred North Whitehead) is highly problematic in that Charles Darwin’s theory of natural selection serves as the inference to the best explanation of the creationist’s illicitly bifurcative alleged dilemma (an *embarrass de choix*, if you will) between natural evolutionary chance and the God hypothesis.¹⁹ In fact, Dawkins argues that it is more probable that natural selection answers problems of evolution than the existence of God as Creator does. And this is especially true, Dawkins argues, in light of the phenomenon of accumulation in natural selection.²⁰ And while some creationists might concede these points, they tend to argue that natural selection cannot serve as the basis of a plausible cosmology.²¹ Dawkins points out that this is true, but unlike the orthodox Christian creationist who simply offers the existence of God as the Creator of all things, including the multiverse,²² the anthropic principle in physics serves as a viable alternative to creationism. It is more likely to best explain the origin of the multiverse than is the God hypothesis. Why? Because the God hypothesis, argues Dawkins, leads to an infinite regress,²³ as critics of the cosmological argument have pointed out long ago.²⁴ While it is understandable that humans attribute the origin of the multiverse and the goings on of nature to God, that hypothesis is far less probable than truly scientific ones. And it is not simply that the postulating of God as the Creator of the multiverse and all that is in it ends in an infinite regress. It is also that the nature of such must be inordinately complex, contrary to traditional Christian theism: “A God capable of continuously monitoring and controlling the individual status of every particle in the universe *cannot* be simple.”²⁵ Thus the orthodox Christian doctrine of divine simplicity is called into serious question.

While one might concur with Dawkins on several points he raises against traditional Christian or even traditional theistic thinking, he is not entitled to draw the inference that atheism is the most reasonable alternative explanation of fundamental issues of cosmogony and cosmology. For it might well be the case that a neo-orthodox Christian or non-Christian theism or agnosticism is most reasonable, all relevant things considered. To see this, it is necessary to consider his taxonomy of possible positions about the existence of God.

¹⁸ Dawkins (1986).

¹⁹ Of course, this point is found in theists such as Peacocke (2004, pp. 60–61).

²⁰ Dawkins (2006, pp. 120f).

²¹ For example, see Jones (2007).

²² “Human beings are the inhabitants, not of one universe, but of many universes” (Huxley 1962, p. 2).

²³ Dawkins (2006, p. 141). It is noteworthy, however, that an atheistic cosmology meets the same objection, as argued in Jones (2007, p. 24).

²⁴ One such account is found in Kenny (1969).

²⁵ Dawkins (2006, p. 149). The core of Dawkins’ case for atheism is found on pp. 157–158.

One might concur with Dawkins that “it is a common error” of reasoning “to leap from the premise that the question of God’s existence is in principle unanswerable to the conclusion that his existence and non-existence are equiprobable.”²⁶ Indeed, one might even agree that “the existence of God is a scientific hypothesis like any other” in the sense that it can, in principle, be shown to be true or false.²⁷ And one might further grant him that “even if God’s existence is never proved or disproved with certainty one way or the other, available evidence and reasoning may yield an estimate of probability far from 50 per cent.”²⁸ One might even grant that the arguments, not necessarily the ones he offers, against the traditional arguments for the existence of God count heavily against the plausibility of those traditional “proofs.” But in granting Dawkins all of this, one can still legitimately deny that he is entitled to infer that some credible version of atheism is sound. The reason for this is that he has brought into the debate a bifurcation fallacy.

While on occasion Dawkins seems to admit that there might be alternative theisms that might plausibly evade powerful criticism, he has nonetheless presumed that they are for some reason not worthy of addressing (perhaps because he is totally ignorant of them and too busy to study them, or perhaps because he is so driven by his emotive brand of atheistic propaganda and ideology that he is fearful of pursuing theism to its more plausible depths).²⁹ Whatever the case, Dawkins is not warranted in inferring atheistic conclusions until he has, like a good scientist, conducted a more in-depth investigation into the alternative theistic hypotheses that would render theism significantly more plausible than its traditional Christian version. If such an investigation is conducted thoroughly and fair-mindedly, and if theism is still found wanting, *then* Dawkins is in a suitable epistemic position to claim that atheism, properly construed, is the most reasonable position about the God hypothesis. Until that time, however, Dawkins’ atheism is unwarranted because it is based on a complex fallacy of a hasty conclusion based on inadequate data and a bifurcation fallacy that assumes that either the God of orthodox Christian theism exists, or atheism is sound.

For those who might think that Dawkins’ position of de facto atheism makes his position immune from my criticism, I would ask how can it be said plausibly that “there is a very low probability” of God’s existence if one has not investigated much more plausible notions of the nature and function of God? Is that not akin to refuting a truly bad idea and concluding that no alternative way of conceptualizing it could be probable? How would one know unless one has shown that to be so? It is a bit akin to a political leftist defeating the ideology of G. W. Bush and then inferring that she has cast sufficient doubt on political conservatism to justify leftism. Surely she must realize that some conservatisms in politics are more worthy than others, especially Bush’s. Dawkins’ is a kind of atheism by default, as he commits precisely the same kind of error in logic that the creationist does in assuming that only God could fill the gaps of evolution (a *godlessness* of the gaps, as it were). Dawkins assumes without

²⁶ Dawkins (2006, p. 51).

²⁷ Ibid., p. 50.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ One author accuses Dawkins of caricaturing theism in the form of fundamentalist Christianity (Jones 2007, p. 1).

independent argument that the only conceptual options worth addressing are traditional Christian theism and atheism, and that if he refutes the former, that he is warranted in adopting atheism. A more careful mind would not have made such a mistake, but rather would have delved into more sophisticated theologies that explicitly attempt to accommodate the various concerns raised about traditional theism.

In short, Dawkins commits the “atheist’s errors,” named such because they are frequently found in the atheistic literature, philosophical or otherwise. The errors of atheism often involve the committing of a bifurcation fallacy, a straw person fallacy, and a hasty conclusion. Dawkins commits a bifurcation fallacy to the extent that he does not consider arguments for alternatives to traditional Christian theism and atheism, and he is dismissive of agnosticism as a possible means to evade the fallacy in question. Yet there are more than the two alternatives he suggests. There are alternative supernaturalistic theisms, as well as agnosticism, neither of which Dawkins considers seriously. Furthermore, Dawkins falls prey to the straw person fallacy in that he is guilty of refuting a theology that is so outmoded and implausible that few competent, non-fideistic scholars would endorse it. Indeed, even Thomas Aquinas, hardly a radical Christian theologian, doubted some of the hyperbolic (yet orthodox) divine attributes. Perhaps Dawkins is unaware that entire schools of Christian (or quasi-Christian) theism have been developed over the past half-century or so that attempt to address precisely many of his concerns—and then some! Undoubtedly, his reason for addressing orthodox Christian theism is because of its popularity in the West, and as a public scholar he is diligently attempting to raise consciousness about natural selection and its power to explain various phenomena. This much is understandable. However, for Dawkins to draw the conclusions he draws without at least delving somewhat into such alternative theologies is misleading, if not irresponsible.³⁰ For it gives readers the impression that atheism must be the best answer to the problem of God when in fact Dawkins has not justified this claim. Finally, Dawkins commits by implication a hasty conclusion insofar as he assumes that his refutation of traditional Christian theism can be generalized as the refutation of all supernaturalistic theisms. For if he did not assume this generalization, he would not in light of his argumentation be able to claim himself to be an atheist as opposed to an agnostic.

When carefully combined, certain process and liberation theologies can go a long way toward addressing many of Dawkins’ concerns with theism, making theism a more live option than Dawkins ever considers it to be.³¹ And even if in the end they are

³⁰ It is, however, unsurprising given his lack of respect for theology as a discipline, as captured by his remark that: “I have yet to see any good reason to suppose that theology (as opposed to biblical history, literature, etc.) is a subject at all” (Dawkins 2006, p. 57). How in the world could this kind of crass assertion be justified? Does Dawkins mean that it is somehow illegitimate to devote reason and even science to the study of the possibility of God’s existence? But this presumes, does it not, that the existence of God has already been disproven, something Dawkins himself denies! Could it be that Dawkins is peddling an atheistic ideology while he commits the very same kinds of excesses of dogmatism that he accuses of traditional theists? Dawkins entertains the possibility that “there are some genuinely profound and meaningful questions that are forever beyond the reach of science” (p. 56). But why then does he rule out the importance of theological investigation?

³¹ The project of synthesizing these views in order to address this very problem is found in Corlett (forthcoming).

problematic, they are far more plausible and deserving of our respect and perhaps even our rational assent or consideration than is orthodox Christian theism. This implies that neo-orthodox or unorthodox Christian theism, and if not this brand of theism, then agnosticism, is more probable than Dawkins leads one to believe. While Dawkins seems to admit that science can lead one to agnosticism,³² he does not explore this possibility. And while Dawkins' arguments can serve rightly to awaken many traditional Christian theists from their dogmatic slumbers, Dawkins' own thinking, ironically, suffers from a dogmatic and rather limited understanding of theism that prevents him from taking theism as seriously as it deserves to be taken. Indeed, Dawkins' way of thinking about the possibility of God's existence might well be described in George Santayana's description of philosophical heresies, namely, as a "whole plague of little dogmatisms"³³ strung together into one larger one. Perhaps Dawkins ought to take Santayana's advice and not "substitute the pursuit of sincerity for the pursuit of omniscience."³⁴ In this respect, then, Dawkins' quoted words from Peter Medwar's review of Teilhard de Chardin's *The Phenomenon of Man*³⁵ applies to Dawkins' *The God Delusion*: "its author can be excused of dishonesty only on the grounds that before deceiving others he has taken great pains to deceive himself."³⁶ Dawkins, as a self-described scientist-activist exhorting the public to adopt a particular scientific ideology³⁷ (some of which is sound) has deceived himself into drawing an invalid inference perhaps because he is either unacquainted with the basics of logic and proper reasoning, or unconcerned with the genuine truth of the matter about God's possible existence. For if Dawkins were truly concerned about whether or not God exists, he would have taken much more seriously the depth of argumentation and analysis that the most respectable nontraditional (some even Christian) theologies proffer. Instead, he ignores or is totally ignorant of philosophies of religion or theologies that are not so easy prey for his scientific criticisms that work so well against traditional and outmoded theologies. Instead of admitting that his criticisms do not address particular theologies of a more sophisticated nature, such as some that I address elsewhere,³⁸ Dawkins gives the impression that he is only addressing supernatural ideas of God,³⁹

³² Dawkins (2006, p. 71).

³³ Santayana (1915, p. 563).

³⁴ Santayana (1915, p. 564). Perhaps, in the midst of his atheistic fervor, Dawkins is "proud to be a radical, [though] he can not imagine that he is a dupe" (p. 566). In reading Dawkins, one forms the unmistakable impression that the following description of the dogmatist applies to him: "He bends all his powers to justify his belief in some particular conception that he has espoused; he is looking, not in general, but for some one explaining principle upon which he has set his mind and heart" (Sheldon 1927, p. 393).

³⁵ de Chardin (1959); Also see de Chardin (1964, 1961).

³⁶ Dawkins (2006, p. 154).

³⁷ "If this book works as I intend, religious readers who open it will be atheists when they put it down" (Dawkins 2006, p. 5). Precisely how this exemplifies a spirit of "open-minded" inquiry of free spirits that Dawkins claims he supports (p. 6, and elsewhere) is a bit unclear.

³⁸ Corlett (forthcoming).

³⁹ "I am calling only *supernatural* gods delusional" (Dawkins 2006, p. 15). Furthermore: "I am not attacking any particular version of God or gods. I am attacking God, all gods, anything and everything supernatural, wherever and whenever they have been or will be invented" (p. 36). Dawkins also loads the term "God" with such preposterous notions that only a traditionalist would accept (p. 18). Moreover, his

implying that all there is to reality is that which can be tested and measured by the sciences. But this simplistic worldview is unfair to legitimate science which fully understands the chasm of methodological differences that lie between science and religion. And no amount of Dawkins' dogmatically presumed logical positivism can bully its way past the logic that prohibits his view from establishing itself unless and until certain conceptual barriers are surpassed.

Dawkins is correct to ask, "What is so special about religion that we grant it such uniquely privileged status?"⁴⁰ He asks this important question in the context of his discussion of how religion has for centuries gained a privileged status in various societies, and he is right to do so. But this question can also be raised in the context of scientific investigation, even by those of us who in large part embrace the sciences but simultaneously seek independent evidence for our conclusions wherever evidences for competing views do not easily admit of unbiased investigative methods. Yet Dawkins fails to address this methodological issue as he presumptuously proceeds as if scientific methods are unproblematic in the context of the discussion about God's existence. This is especially curious as he himself explicates that he is only concerned with supernatural notions of God.

footnote continued

definition of what counts as atheism seems to rule out some leading and well-respected theological views that attempt to reconcile in legitimate ways good science and plausible theology. For example, Dawkins states:

An atheist in this sense of philosophical naturalist is somebody who believes there is nothing beyond the natural, physical world, no *supernatural* creative intelligence lurking behind the observable universe, no soul that outlasts the body and no miracles – except in the sense of natural phenomena that we don't yet understand. If there is something that appears to lie beyond the natural world as it is now imperfectly understood, we hope eventually to understand and embrace it within the natural (p. 14).

But this line of reasoning is curious. For if the only theological ideas that are sound are those that can be confirmed by scientific investigation, then Dawkins has from the outset effectively and dogmatically set the terms of investigation in favor of scientific verification (and perhaps even falsification). But this position, reminiscent of logical positivism, suffers from the flaw of question-begging methodology. Even though I concur that what we accept ought to, *as far as methodologically possible*, be verifiable or falsifiable by legitimate scientific means of investigation, it is nonetheless a methodological bias that cannot legitimately be imposed, no matter what dogma or ideology one wished to persuade others of, without exposing itself to proper criticism. But even worse is Dawkins' claim that "if there is something that appears to lie beyond the natural world as it is now imperfectly understood, we hope eventually to understand and embrace it within the natural." This seems to imply that Dawkins' own scientism amounts to a dogma in itself—one that, not entirely unlike the traditional Christian dogma he seeks to dissuade others of, lies beyond the realm of independent verification or falsification! He also attempts, illegitimately of course, to win the argument by definitional fiat. For Dawkins desires to illicitly categorize anything in the future that can be known by scientific means as not theistic. But why not think that it is theistic, properly construed? Again, Dawkins' simple-minded notion of theism prevents him from understanding what several respected theologians have known for some time now, namely, that science is a good means by which the wonders of God can be discovered, a position that Dawkins' ironically wonders why theists seem not to want to accept: "...if God really did communicate with humans that fact would emphatically not lie outside science" (p. 154). But in spite of Dawkins' incredible theological ignorance, several theists in fact do.

⁴⁰ Dawkins (2006, p. 27). This is hardly an original idea, however, as many Christian theologians themselves have raised this issue in the name of religious pluralism. Indeed, this point is made with particular regard to the manner in which Christianity is given preferential treatment throughout U.S. history (See Jr. Deloria 1994, Chap. 12).

One might think that Dawkins' somewhat careful statement that he is only targeting supernatural forms of religion allows him to escape the criticism that there are alternative nontraditional theisms that do not run afoul of his scathing critique. But this depends on what is meant by "supernatural," and whether or not it can be shown whether all that exists can be measured by scientific methodologies. This is surely a question I do not intend to answer as it is beyond my intended purview. But it is reasonable to wonder whether or not good science even claims what Dawkins implies here. And so it is Dawkins, not only the traditional Christian theist, who must defend certain assumptions that are quite controversial. Dawkins' construing "supernatural" and its cognates to mean something like "beyond the natural world and what is observable by the sciences" simply begs the question against supernaturalistic religions. For he attempts by some form of intellectual coercion to win the debate about God's existence by a kind of definitional fiat: Only that which the sciences can measure is real; God cannot be measured by the sciences (because God is spirit and beyond the natural world); therefore, God is not real (does not exist). If this is not a classic case of question-begging, then no such example exists. Surely atheism has better arguments on which to rely than some of those set forth by Dawkins.

Dawkins' construal of theism is so extreme that he sees what he refers to as "Einstein's religion" as metaphorical and pantheistic and "light years away from the interventionist, miracle-wreaking, thought-reading, sin-punishing, prayer-answering God of the Bible, of priests, mullahs and rabbis, and of ordinary language."⁴¹ Once again, Dawkins sees things in simplistic and bifurcatively fallacious terms: either God exists as something totally congruent with what most think God is, or God does not exist at all and that reality is totally explicable in scientific terms. This, coupled with his committing the error of wrongly inferring the superiority of atheism over theism when all he refutes is a popular form of theism, means that Dawkins commits a straw person fallacy as well. So we have in Dawkins' reasoning one logical fallacy heaped onto another, a feat that one would think is beyond the reach of serious science, theology and philosophy. One wonders, then, why Dawkins is so arrogantly confident in his pronouncements against theism. One would think that such confidence ought only to be grounded in sound reasoning and conceptual clarity.

Finally, just as Dawkins accuses some theologians or religious folk of "intellectual high treason" in that they confuse the metaphorical sense of "God" with the more literalist sense, Dawkins himself seems to commit intellectual high treason. To paraphrase what one well known and respectable religious leader once said: one must be careful not to point out the sliver of wood in someone else's eye lest the beam in one's own eye leave oneself blinded (and delusional). This point applies to theists, agnostics, and atheists alike.⁴² Apparently, Dawkins has in great measure strayed from

⁴¹ Dawkins (2006, p. 19).

⁴² Perhaps Dawkins means to imply that a certain amount of dogmatic confidence is permissible by those who embrace science in the way that he does. Perhaps he means also that this point applies only to contexts of evolutionary explanations of the world. But not even Dawkins' refutation of the "Argument from Personal Incredulity" and the "Divine Knob-Twiddler Argument" of the crude creationist entitles him to any kind of arrogant dogmatism. For dogmatism simply has no place whatsoever in serious philosophical, theological, or scientific investigation.

one of his own statements: “. . . we on the science side must not be too dogmatically confident.”⁴³

In the end, I think, we ought to follow also Russell’s advice: “I cannot believe that mankind can be the better for shrinking from examination of this or that question.”⁴⁴ And while “. . . complete skepticism would, of course, be totally barren and totally useless,”⁴⁵

The question is how to arrive at your opinions and not what your opinions are. The thing in which we believe is the supremacy of reason. If reason should lead you to orthodox conclusions, well and good; you are still a Rationalist. To my mind the essential thing is that one should base one’s arguments upon the kind of grounds that are acceptable in science, and that one should not regard anything that one accepts as quite certain, but only as probable in a greater or less degree. Not to be absolutely certain is, I think, one of the essential things in rationality.⁴⁶

But Russell admits that “No sensible man, however agnostic, has ‘faith in reason alone.’”⁴⁷ And it is, on his view, not impossible to reconcile science and religion, if “religion” means something akin to a system of ethics as opposed to some form of dogma.⁴⁸ Moreover, agnosticism can be reconciled with a version of Christianity that amounts to a kind of morality.⁴⁹ This point is made humorously when Russell states the following in answer to the question: “Can an agnostic be a Christian?”

If you mean by a “Christian” a man who loves his neighbor, who has wide sympathy for suffering, and who ardently desires a world free from the cruelties and abominations which at present disfigure it, then, certainly, you will be justified in calling me a Christian. And, in this sense, you will find more “Christians” among agnostics than among the orthodox.⁵⁰

Kai Nielsen argues exactly the opposite point, namely, that fideist theists are in a real sense agnostics insofar as they insist in the mysteriousness of God.⁵¹ In any case, Russell asserts:

We want to stand upon our own feet and look fair and square at the world—its good facts, its bad facts, its beauties, and its ugliness; see the world as it is, and be not afraid of it. Conquer the world by intelligence, and not merely by being slavishly subdued by the terror that comes from it. The whole conception of God is a conception derived from the ancient Oriental despotisms. It is a conception

⁴³ Dawkins (2006, p. 124).

⁴⁴ Seckel (1986, p. 89).

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 76–77.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

⁵¹ Nielsen (1985, p. 16f).

quite unworthy of free men....We ought to stand up and look the world frankly in the face. We ought to make the best we can of the world, and if it is not so good as we wish, after all it will still be better than what these others have made of it in all these ages. A good world...It needs a fearless outlook and a free intelligence.⁵²

Dawkins' view is stated much more eloquently decades ago by Mackie, whose alleged atheism amounts to a kind of probability claim to the effect that the "balancing of probabilities" favors atheism over the God-hypothesis:

This conclusion can be reached by an examination precisely of the arguments advanced in favour of theism, without even bringing into play what have been regarded as the strongest considerations on the other side, the problem of evil and the various natural histories of religion...the extreme difficulty that theism has in reconciling *its own* doctrines with one another in this respect must tell heavily against it. ... The balance of probabilities ... comes out strongly against the existence of a god.⁵³

Thus Mackie commits the atheist's error⁵⁴ as he fails to remain within the parameters of what his own argument allows him to conclude. For Mackie's conclusion, as stated probabilistically, can also be held by the agnostic, and like Dawkins' position, does not amount to the claim that it is not the case that God exists. Quite simply and to the point: "It is not the case that God exists" does not have the same informational content as "The balance of probabilities ... comes out strongly against the existence of a god." So we can trace Dawkins' error in contemporary times to Mackie. The substantive difference between them is that Mackie, unlike Dawkins, at least gives some amount of attention to some alternatives to traditional Christian theism, and Mackie's criticisms of the traditional arguments for God's existence is far more detailed and responsible than Dawkins', while it should be pointed out that Dawkins provides a much more detailed scientific assessment of the teleological argument for God's existence. Some of this is likely due to the facts that Mackie is a philosopher and Dawkins is a scientist, explaining the differences in their approaches to the problem of God's existence and their relative familiarity with the literatures of philosophy of religion and theology out of which the subject arose.

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⁵² Seckel (1986, p. 71).

⁵³ Mackie (1982, p. 253).

⁵⁴ This cluster of errors is discussed in Corlett (forthcoming).

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