

Should We Fear That We Are Deluded? **Comments on Dawkins' *The God Delusion***

John B. Howell III
Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary
Fort Worth, Texas
jhowell@swbts.edu

Introduction

The website for The Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science offers the following mission statement:

MISSION: Support scientific education, critical thinking and evidence-based understanding of the natural world in the quest to overcome religious fundamentalism, superstition, intolerance and human suffering.¹

While at first glance this statement seems rather innocuous, in fact Dawkins identifies virtually all religious belief with fundamentalism and sees it as mutually exclusive of the type of critical thinking he supports. In the mission statement, Dawkins is being uncharacteristically subtle. He campaigns against faith in all of its forms because “the teachings of ‘moderate’ religion, though not extremist in themselves, are an open invitation to extremism.”²

The most famous and well-read of Dawkins’ expressions of these ideas is his 2006 book *The God Delusion*. Since in many ways Dawkins serves as the spokesperson of the new atheism, in many ways *The God Delusion* serves as its manifesto. Dawkins is an eloquent writer when the subject is science, but although it contains scientific elements,³ *The God Delusion* is not a scientific work. It is better classified as an attempt at theology or philosophy or ethics or an amalgam of all three, but as scholarship in these areas it is an abject

¹<http://richarddawkins.net/> (Accessed 23 August 2011).

²Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), 306. Further references will appear parenthetically. I doubt that I or any of my colleagues at Southwestern would fall into the “moderate” category on Dawkins’ definition. As with all terminology of this sort, the user of the language becomes the measure—thus Alvin Plantinga’s rather humorous treatment of the pejorative use of “fundamentalist” in *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 244–45.

³Dawkins’ description of why moths will fly into open flames is eloquent and borders on beautiful. See Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 172–74.

failure. Dawkins' tone is so vitriolic that it will distract most readers who do not already agree with him from the argument he attempts to make, and this despite his hope that "religious readers who open [the book] will be atheists when they put it down" (5).⁴ In fact, in places it seems that Dawkins is aiming more at inflammation than argumentation. This style of writing, however, is right in line with one of the major points of the book, namely that religious belief deserves no respect. Consider Dawkins' comparison of theology with mythology and the scholarly study of fairy stories:

The notion that religion is a proper *field*, in which one might claim *expertise*, is one that should not go unquestioned. That clergyman [a particular one interacting with Einstein] presumably would not have deferred to the expertise of a claimed "fairyologist" on the exact shape and colour of fairy wings (16).

Thanks in no small part to *The God Delusion*, Dawkins is a public figure, and a culturally influential one at that. Thus it behooves Christians and pastors in particular to be aware of the arguments found in the book (since no doubt they will hear these arguments from the culture and the individuals within that culture to whom they seek to minister), as well as to have some idea of how to respond. To provide the readers of this journal with both of these abilities is the purpose of this essay.⁵

Dawkins' Failure to Comprehend the Religious Mind

One of the reasons that Dawkins' attempted assassination of religious belief, and Christianity in particular, should not be successful is his complete lack of understanding of religious belief. What Dawkins presents as true of religious believers *en masse*, and particularly Christians, is a straw man of which the Scarecrow in *The Wizard of Oz* would be proud. One way to respond to Dawkins' work is simply to clarify the Christian position and point out his mischaracterizations. The purpose of this approach is not to convince the skeptic, but rather the much more modest task of illuminating Dawkins' missteps in order to make clear the positions Christians in fact do hold. The fact is, Dawkins' mind and the Christian mind operate quite differently, and the way in which we think makes as little sense to him as the way he thinks makes to us. And, incidentally, this should not surprise us. As the Apostle Paul reminds us, fallen humanity cannot, apart from a work of the Holy Spirit, understand the things of God (1 Cor 2:14). We should not

⁴Perhaps Dawkins makes this comment tongue in cheek. He recognizes that to convert the religious is boundless optimism, given that "dyed-in-the-wool faith-heads are immune to argument" thanks to practices of indoctrination developed over centuries.

⁵For a book length treatment of *The God Delusion*, see John Lennox, *God's Undertaker: Has Science Buried God?* (Oxford: Lion, 2007).

expect Dawkins (or anyone else outside of the faith) rightly to characterize Christianity.⁶

“The God Hypothesis”

Dawkins defines the God Hypothesis, not in terms of any particular religious faith (all of which he finds absurd) but in more general terms which are “more” defensible, though only slightly: “there exists a superhuman, supernatural intelligence who deliberately designed and created the universe and everything in it, including us.” Dawkins in turn says he will advocate a different view: “any creative intelligence, of sufficient complexity to design anything, comes into existence only as the end product of an extended process of gradual evolution” (31). While Dawkins’ definition of the God Hypothesis is a generally accurate description of theism, he fails to use it consistently. In fact, his characterization of the God Hypothesis as “a scientific hypothesis *about the universe*, which should be analysed as sceptically as any other” (my emphasis), is flawed because it fails to take into account the transcendence of God. Dawkins’ arguments are directed at belief in a god who is a part of the universe, not the transcendent God who is responsible for the very existence of the universe.

The problem here is Dawkins’ limited ability to think metaphysically. For Dawkins, all that exists is matter—his metaphysics is naturalistic and materialistic through and through, so the only god Dawkins can conceive of is one that would have to exist within the confines of the natural universe, and thus be subject to its laws and parameters just as we are.⁷ In short, he cannot

⁶I am not suggesting that there is no type of evidence or argument that can bridge this epistemological gap, nor certainly that we should give up on an evidential apologetic. God can work through reason and evidence as well as through any other means. The work of William Dembski and others in the Intelligent Design (ID) movement is indicative of this type of effort. But as the reaction to ID of Dawkins and his colleagues shows, bridging this gap is quite difficult. Argument and evidence work best in confirming the truth of the gospel, not in establishing it. Dembski is referred to exactly once in *The God Delusion*, when Dawkins quotes Daniel Dennett, who calls Dembski simply “the American propagandist” (68). Certainly Dembski’s qualifications and accomplishments merit more respect than this, but this recognition will not be forthcoming from the new atheist camp, providing further confirmation of the gap of which Paul writes. On the role of evidence in apologetics, see Dembski’s “How to Debate an Atheist—If You Must” in this volume. See also William A. Dembski and Jonathan Wells, *The Design of Life: Discovering Signs of Intelligence in Biological Systems* (Dallas: Foundation for Thought and Ethics, 2008); Stephen C. Meyer, *Signature in the Cell: DNA and the Evidence for Intelligent Design* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2009); and Susan Mazur, *The Altenberg 16: An Exposé of the Evolution Industry* (Berkeley: North Atlantic, 2010).

⁷In an attempt to mock the sophistry of theology, Dawkins describes Arius’ denial of Jesus’ consubstantiality with the Father (Dawkins says God, but I will correct his imprecision for the sake of clarity) and queries, “What on earth could that possibly mean, you are probably asking? Substance? What ‘substance’? What exactly do you mean by ‘essence’? ‘Very little’ seems the only reasonable reply” (33). There are two possibilities here. First, Dawkins could be completely ignorant of the entire history of philosophy and metaphysics, such that the very language of “substance” makes no sense to him. For the sake of charity I will assume that this is not the case. The other possibility is that Dawkins cannot conceive of the possibility of

conceive of a transcendent being, and thus cannot conceive of God. But as Jesus informed the woman at the well, God is Spirit (John 4:24). Unfortunately, Dawkins never gives reasons to accept his metaphysical assumptions, and thus, his arguments against religious belief only make sense if one begins with the assumption that the God Hypothesis is false. Dawkins' claim that the God Hypothesis is monumentally improbable not only depends upon a misconstrual of the God Hypothesis, but relies heavily on his metaphysical assumptions, which rule out the truth of the God Hypothesis as a matter of course. This is a classic form of begging the question—Dawkins cannot reasonably expect us to accept his arguments if he includes his conclusion as one of the philosophical foundations of his premises.

No doubt Dawkins at this point would appeal to empirical data and evidence for his metaphysical presuppositions. But, putting aside the question of whether or not we have empirical evidence for the God Hypothesis or substances other than matter,⁸ such an appeal again begs the question, this time in favor of a certain epistemology. For Dawkins, the only way human beings can know anything seems to be by inference from empirical evidence. At least this is the view of knowledge acquisition that appears to be an unquestioned assumption of *The God Delusion*. But this perspective simply assumes a strict empirical evidentialism without argument.⁹ In fact, Dawkins seems to ignore a whole range of epistemological positions which depend upon the proper functioning or general reliability of a host of cognitive faculties in addition to that which evaluates evidence. Many of these externalist epistemologies (so-called because the necessary conditions for knowledge are primarily external to one's awareness) make a distinction between first and second order knowledge (knowing as opposed to knowing

divine substance, or Spirit. Now Dawkins is not the first to have trouble conceiving of Spirit as substance—there are no doubt materialists who are materialists because no other types of substances make sense to them. But Dawkins offers no argument for his materialism. Instead, he seems to take it as obvious that there is no substance other than matter. Unfortunately for him, those of us to whom the notion of Spirit does make sense have been given no reason to doubt our intuitions.

⁸Dawkins considers the testimony of religious experience, and dismisses it out of hand as either personal or mass hallucination (87–92). But he gives little argument for this improbable explanation other than his metaphysical presuppositions (if nothing exists but matter, if there is no God, then one cannot have experience of him), and believers in God have no reason whatsoever to accept them.

⁹Dawkins' nearsighted preference for evidentialism above all other epistemological options is nowhere more evident than in his visceral reaction to Richard Swinburne's statement that "There is quite a lot of evidence anyway of God's existence, and too much might not be good for us." Dawkins replies, "Read it again. *Too much evidence might not be good for us*. Richard Swinburne is the recently retired holder of one of Britain's most prestigious professorships of theology, and is a Fellow of the British Academy. If it's a theologian you want, they don't come much more distinguished. Perhaps you don't want a theologian" (65). Dawkins fails of course to recognize the value of anything but evidence, especially ignoring the value of faith (he instead views faith as an evil and misunderstands it as belief without good reason). Dawkins likely is able to make no sense of Jesus' declaration to Thomas that "blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed" (John 20:29).

that one knows). No doubt evidential evaluations are particularly helpful when it comes to confirming what one knows, but that does not mean that they are always necessary for knowledge *simpliciter*. For example, perhaps I am just constructed in such a way that upon viewing the grandeur of the Alps or Victoria Falls I simply find myself believing the God Hypothesis to be true.¹⁰ If these epistemologies are plausible, then the one who accepts the God Hypothesis can appeal to these means independent of or in connection with any evidence he may possess. Dawkins appears to ignore blindly these epistemological possibilities, and insofar as the believer rejects his strict evidentialist epistemology, he has reason to reject Dawkins' metaphysical assumptions as well.

Furthermore, the believer has reason to reject Dawkins' contention that the God Hypothesis is merely a scientific hypothesis to be tested like any other. For while one may view the God Hypothesis in this way and test the validity of belief in it by means of evidence alone, unless Dawkins is correct about the acquisition of knowledge being so narrow, one does not have to do this. The way in which human beings actually acquire knowledge may belie Dawkins' assertion that "there is no reason to regard God as immune from consideration along the spectrum of probabilities" (54). Again, this does not preclude the believer from claiming that God does in fact serve as an explanation for much if not all of the natural phenomena observed by science in his capacity as Creator and providential Sustainer of the natural order. But one's belief in God does not have to be dependent upon the explanatory power of the God Hypothesis, for one has other avenues, other cognitive faculties which produce that belief, a belief which, if true, will satisfy the conditions for knowledge.¹¹

Dawkins contends that "in any of its forms the God Hypothesis is unnecessary" (46). While I think Dawkins is deluded about this, even if he were right, I would hardly be troubled, for the God Hypothesis being explanatorily necessary has little to do with its being true. I suspect that very few of those who claim to believe in God also would claim that they do so because the hypothesis of God best explains some set of data. Instead, the vast majority of testimonies concerning religious belief appeal not to the explanatory

¹⁰John Calvin calls this belief producing faculty the *sensus divinitatis*. For accounts of the production of religious belief of this sort, see Alvin Plantinga's aforementioned *Warranted Christian Belief*, as well as his *Warrant and Proper Function* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993). For similar epistemological accounts, see C. Stephen Evans, *The Historical Christ and the Jesus of Faith* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996), and William Alston, *Perceiving God* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), among others. This, again, is not to say that one cannot know the God Hypothesis on the basis of evidence—but it may be the case that one need not know the God Hypothesis on the basis of evidence. That is, there may be other avenues for arriving at this knowledge. Belief in God may be over determined. Appeals to evidence are no doubt particularly helpful in apologetics, but unnecessary in the grounding of belief.

¹¹For the Christian, these faculties will produce beliefs above and beyond the God Hypothesis, including belief in the Trinity, the incarnation, and the atonement. Here things like Scripture, faith, and the work of the Holy Spirit come into play epistemologically.

power of the God Hypothesis, but to a particular experience of God Himself, and an experience that is usually linked to the work of the Spirit and the revelation of God contained in Scripture. This appeal is only problematic if one assumes a strict evidential epistemology as Dawkins does—such an assumption creates a necessary and exclusive connection between explanatory power and truth which religious believers should not allow to go unquestioned. While those of us who believe in God think that the idea of God is in fact explanatorily powerful, likely few of us believe in Him because of the explanatory power of the idea of Him. Instead, the explanatory power serves as a confirmation of our belief acquired by other means.

Arguments for God's Existence

While the believer in the God Hypothesis may appeal to evidence for his belief, he need not do so in order to be justified in believing. But if one wishes to appeal to evidence in support of the God Hypothesis in order to justify his belief to others, the traditional arguments for God's existence are a good place to begin. Dawkins dismisses all of Aquinas' Five Ways and Anselm's famous ontological argument in a total of nine pages. He dismisses any argument from Scripture in five pages, concluding with the claim that the Gospels are religious fiction. I do not have the space to deal with all of Dawkins' "arguments" in detail, but I do feel compelled to say a few things about his treatment of Anselm, Scripture, and Pascal's Wager.¹²

Anselm's Ontological Argument. Unfortunately, about the only thing Dawkins gets right about Anselm's famous ontological argument is Anselm's name, the phrase by which one usually refers to the argument, and the date of publication of the *Proslogion*, the work in which one finds the various formulations of the argument. Dawkins commits a major gaffe in providing the context of the argument. He writes, "An odd aspect of Anselm's argument is that it was originally addressed not to humans but to God himself, in the form of a prayer (you'd think that any entity capable of listening to a prayer would need no convincing of his own existence)" (80). Dawkins does not seem to be writing tongue-in-cheek, and, most disconcertingly, no doubt many of his readers simply take this characterization as the gospel truth. While the context of the argument is indeed a prayer to God (a fact often overlooked in study of the ontological argument, and unfortunately so), Anselm's purpose is not to convince God that He exists (which would of course be absurd); in fact, the purpose is not even to convince Anselm or anyone else that God exists (although the argument could do this). Instead, Anselm follows closely the medieval program of philosophical theology: faith seeking understanding. Anselm believes and knows God exists, but wants a deeper knowledge and understanding of God, and so prays and asks God for illumination, for a single argument that will teach him not only more about God's existence, but

¹²For those particularly interested in the Cosmological or Design Arguments, I commend Dembski's work mentioned above, as well as William Lane Craig, *The Cosmological Argument: From Plato to Leibniz* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1980).

about his nature and attributes. In an attempt to find this argument, Anselm adopts “the role of someone trying to raise his mind to the contemplation of God and seeking to understand what he believes.”¹³

Anselm’s argument is an a priori argument, one which does not depend upon experience or empirical observation in its premises. From the idea of God as “that than which nothing greater can be conceived” Anselm concludes that God must exist. For when someone hears the phrase “that than which nothing greater can be conceived” uttered, he understands what it means and that thing exists in his understanding simply because he understands it. But a perfect being could not exist only in the understanding, for one can easily conceive of that perfect being existing in the real world as well, which would be a being greater than the one existing in the understanding. So the being existing in the understanding would not qualify as the greatest conceivable being. Anselm’s argument has earned the respect even of many who reject it.¹⁴

As to the argument itself, Dawkins describes it as “infantile” and “aesthetically offensive.” These comments, along with a restatement of his commitment to an empirical evidentialism (he notes his response is “an automatic, deep suspicion of any line of reasoning that reached such a significant conclusion without feeding in a single piece of data from the real world”) (82), serve as his major responses to the argument. This suspicion, he also notes, “Perhaps . . . indicates no more than that I am a scientist rather than a philosopher” (82). So once again, Dawkins’ major concern is the absence of empiricism, evidentialism, and the application of the scientific method. But for those of us who are more theologically or philosophically minded, this concern holds little weight.

To be fair, Dawkins does mention, in a single paragraph, the criticisms of Hume and Kant. But he treats these criticisms as obviously decisive. Even if Kant’s and Hume’s criticisms do apply to the version of Anselm’s argument mentioned above (which is debatable), they may not apply to another version, which depends upon the concept of necessary existence, not existence, as a perfection. In fact, it is this modal version of the ontological argument that is most discussed in contemporary philosophy of religion. Dawkins fails to recognize (or perhaps appreciate) this distinction. He describes one instance (he has forgotten the details) when he “piqued a gathering of theologians and philosophers by adapting the ontological argument to prove that

¹³Anselm, *Proslogion*, trans. Thomas Williams (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1995), 93.

¹⁴William L. Rowe, himself an atheist, thinks the argument fails, but still hails it as “one of the high achievements of the human intellect.” See his *Philosophy of Religion: An Introduction*, 4th ed. (Belmont, CA: Thomson Wadsworth, 2007), 51. Dawkins does quote Bertrand Russell, who was convinced by the argument in his early life, and famously noted that “It is easier to feel convinced that [the ontological argument] must be fallacious than it is to find out precisely where the fallacy lies” (81). Of course he also insults Russell by noting that he was “over-eager to be disillusioned if logic seemed to require it” (82). This comment again indicates Dawkins’ rejection of the possibility of any access to knowledge outside of empirical evidence.

pigs can fly. They felt the need to resort to Modal Logic to prove that I was wrong” (85). This statement further indicates Dawkins’ extreme arrogance, an arrogance that goes far beyond the question of God’s existence and into the value of any number of academic disciplines other than the hard sciences. Almost any philosopher (or probably mathematician or theoretical physicist, for that matter) would be shocked to learn that Modal Logic is something one “resorts to.” This accusation would be akin to faulting a molecular biologist for “resorting to” the use of a microscope.

The Argument from Scripture. Not surprisingly, when it comes to Scripture Dawkins swallows the historical critical method entirely, and particularly its most liberal conclusions. He does this of course without providing any argument for that method or any of its philosophical presuppositions. Thus we are told authoritatively by Dawkins that Jesus never claimed to be divine, that the Gospels should not be read as history and are historically unreliable (theological agendas being all-corrupting), and that no serious sophisticated “Christian” takes them as such. Furthermore, the Gospels in the canon were chosen “more or less arbitrarily” out of a dozen or so legitimate possibilities.

For Dawkins there is no chance that historical accuracy or eyewitness testimony transmission had anything to do with the formation of the canon, although he does argue that “the gospels that didn’t make it were omitted by those ecclesiastics perhaps because they included stories that were even more embarrassingly implausible than those in the four canonical ones” (96). So while there was some concern for plausibility, there was not enough to motivate Christians to give up the entire “embarrassingly implausible” charade. Perhaps by this time Christians were “pot-committed” as poker players would say—they had committed so much to this world-changing bluff that they might as well stay in the hand and hope the bluff paid off. Of course, this does not explain why, for example, the apostles committed themselves in this way. The Apostle Paul, for instance, inexplicably gave up a promising Pharisaical career persecuting Christians to become one of their most famous spokesmen. Of course, as many other writers and students of Scripture have noted, one of the more plausible explanations for the apostles’ behavior after the death of Jesus and into the founding of the church is that Jesus indeed was raised from the dead, and thus they realized that rather than bluffing, they were holding an unbeatable hand. Such possibilities go unmentioned by Dawkins.

If the resurrection is an historical event and the accounts of it in the Gospels can be trusted, it seems very likely that the rest of the Gospel accounts are accurate as well. There is not space in an essay of this length to go into a detailed historical examination of the accuracy of the Gospels. But thankfully in Dawkins’ case this is not necessary. All of Dawkins’ treatments of Scripture, as I mentioned above, are dependent upon a view of biblical scholarship of

which orthodox, Bible-believing Christians should be suspicious.¹⁵ Most historical critics begin with philosophical and metaphysical assumptions which make the historical accuracy of Scripture impossible. For example, if one begins with the assumption that because of the physical laws of the universe dead men do not come back to life, in one's historical scholarship one will conclude that the resurrection accounts cannot be historically accurate.¹⁶ Once again, this strategy amounts to nothing more than a question-begging assertion of the superiority of the modern scientific mind and the limited epistemological perspicacity associated with it.

Pascal's Wager. The French mathematician Blaise Pascal argues that it can be rational for one to believe in God absent any evidence.¹⁷ He begins by noting that reason alone cannot decide whether one should believe in God or not: "Let us then examine this point, and let us say: 'Either God is or he is not.' But to which view shall we be inclined? Reason cannot decide this question. . . . Reason cannot make you choose either, reason cannot prove either wrong."¹⁸ But Pascal further argues that the choice is forced: one cannot abstain, for abstaining is tantamount to making a choice. For example, if, say, Jesus is the only name on earth by which men are saved, then making no decision about God's existence is equivalent to believing that God does not exist. Given this, Pascal says, let us consider which bet is in one's best interest.¹⁹ If one bets that God exists and one is right, one wins everything (eternal salvation). Given that the payoff of betting on God is infinite, one should risk everything on God's existence since the odds of his existing are above zero.

¹⁵I am not of course saying that the historical critical method cannot deliver anything of worth in biblical studies. But I am saying that with this method, as with any, one should be aware of the philosophical and theological presuppositions with which it begins, and evaluate its efficacy in light of those presuppositions.

¹⁶For a detailed philosophical defense of the historicity of the incarnational narrative, see Evans, *The Historical Christ and the Jesus of Faith*. For Evans' treatment of historical biblical scholarship, see 170–202. On this theme, see also Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 374–421, where Plantinga argues that the deliverances of historical biblical scholarship, like those referenced by Dawkins, do not serve as defeaters for orthodox Christian belief. Note also Peter van Inwagen, "Critical Studies of the New Testament and the User of the New Testament," in *God, Knowledge, and Mystery* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995).

¹⁷For the purpose of his argument, Pascal emphasizes God's uniqueness and transcendence, comparing him to infinite number, the nature of which we can know little about. This does not mean Pascal rejects revelation as a source of knowledge about God (when asked "is there no way of seeing the cards" he responds, "yes, Scripture and the rest")—he is simply considering what we can know about God from pure human reason alone. Pascal agrees with Dawkins that natural theology is a failure (and in this I think he proves a bit shortsighted), but disagrees with Dawkins that there are no other means by which one might know God exists, thus avoiding the dogmatic evidentialism which plagues Dawkins.

¹⁸Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. A.J. Krailsheimer, rev. ed. (New York: Penguin, 1995), 122.

¹⁹Pascal's choice of a betting metaphor is important given the context of his life and writing. Pascal lived in the midst of seventeenth century French libertinism, and his peers were all intelligent and wealthy French aristocrats who spent most of their time drinking, gambling, and chasing women. Failing to find a compelling argument for belief in God in the realms of drinking and chasing women, he turned to a gambling metaphor.

The odds of course are much better than that—since reason cannot decide the issue, Pascal puts them at fifty-fifty. Given the infinite payoff, then, and the even odds, only a fool would bet that God did not exist. Add to this the possibility of hell if one bets that God does not exist and one is wrong and the force of the argument becomes that much greater.²⁰ Pascal argues that given the equal probability of theism and atheism and the associated rewards and punishments, the rational thing to do is bet that God exists.

Dawkins' criticisms of Pascal are in line with those often offered, but generally miss the point. First, Dawkins notes that one cannot force oneself to believe anything, and so one may swear repeatedly that one believes in God, but no amount of swearing will make one believe when one does not. Thus, "Pascal's wager could only ever be an argument for *feigning* belief in God. And the God that you claim to believe in had better not be of the omniscient kind or he'd see through the deception" (104). Fair enough. At this point there does seem to be something disingenuous about the Wager, as if one is trying to put one over on God, not to mention making the decision purely out of self-interest. But Pascal does not stop there. Instead, he interacts with an imagined interlocutor who objects that he "is so made that [he] cannot believe." Here Pascal draws a distinction between reason and the passions, and argues that oftentimes our passions are what get in the way of belief even when our reason is convinced. In cases of this sort, the solution is not simply to lie and act as one believes when one does not. Instead, Pascal recommends that one seek to reduce the influence of the offending passions. The way one does this is by pursuing spiritual disciplines even before one comes to believe:

You want to find faith and you do not know the road. You want to be cured of unbelief and you ask for the remedy: learn from those who were once bound like you and who now wager all they have. These are people who know the road you wish to follow, who have been cured of the affliction of which you wish to be cured: follow the way by which they began.²¹

For the one who is convinced by the Wager but is unable to believe, Pascal recommends immersing oneself in Christian community. Attend worship and try to worship, read Scripture, and fellowship with those who do believe, and try to pray. These activities can be done genuinely, without deception, and Pascal thinks, over time, these practices will be blessed by God and result in the diminution of one's rebellious passions, and thus one will believe. Although Dawkins would probably just refer to this as brain-washing or indoctrination, the point holds: Pascal is not arguing one should feign belief when true belief is not present.

²⁰Pascal, *Pensées*, 123–24.

²¹*Ibid.*, 124–25.

Dawkins also clearly misrepresents the argument when he claims that Pascal “wasn’t claiming that his wager enjoyed anything but very long odds” (104). But as noted above, Pascal puts the odds around fifty-fifty if one considers the deliverances of human reason and nothing else. What he does say is that because of the reward of believing in God, even if the odds were very long in favor of God’s existence, belief would still be the correct bet. Dawkins further makes what is known as the “Many Gods Objection”: “Doesn’t the sheer number of potential gods and goddesses on whom one might bet vitiate Pascal’s logic? Pascal was probably joking when he promoted his wager, just as I am joking in my dismissal of it.”²² Again, fair enough. There are many religions which promise a heaven, and many gods at the head of those religions. But this objection fails to take into account the context of the Wager.²³ Pascal designed his Wager as a convincing argument for a particular group of people in a particular historical context.²⁴ He never intended it as an argument to convince all people in all places in all situations. For that matter, it is not really an argument for God’s existence; instead, it is an argument that one should believe in God’s existence. And for people in a certain situation, those who are struggling between theism and atheism, the Wager still has something significant to say.

“The Big One”: Dawkins’ Argument from Improbability

Even many of the positive arguments Dawkins makes for the conclusion that God does not exist suffer from a misunderstanding and mischaracterization of the theistic or Christian position. This is even true of what Dawkins refers to as “The Big One”: his argument from improbability. This argument, according to Dawkins, “comes close to proving that God does *not* exist” (113). In order to make this argument, one must understand natural selection and its power: “Natural selection not only explains the whole of life; it also raises our consciousness to the power of science to explain how organized complexity can emerge from simple beginnings without any deliberate guidance” (116).²⁵ Natural selection defeats Intelligent Design according to Dawkins because only natural selection offers an explanation for the statistical improbability associated with life—Intelligent Design only compounds

²²By this last comment, Dawkins means that he is somewhat joking about the seriousness of Pascal’s argument by even taking the time to mention it. Pascal undoubtedly was not joking in his proposal, just as he was not joking in the remainder of the *Pensées*, which are a collection of notes that Pascal was going to use to write a mammoth Christian apologetic. Unfortunately for us all, he died before he was able to do so. Perhaps Dawkins wishes Pascal was joking given his impressive intellectual credentials, and Dawkins’ insistence that no really intelligent people believe in God.

²³For a more detailed treatment of this objection, see the piece by John Laing in this volume.

²⁴See footnote 20

²⁵Here one finds another example of Dawkins’ lack of precision. Later on he will admit that natural selection cannot explain “the whole of life”; in particular, it cannot explain the origin of life.

the problem by offering up an incredibly complex form of life (God) for which there is no explanation. The existence of God “immediately raises the bigger problem of his own origin” (120). I would like to elaborate upon the argument for The Big One which Dawkins offers, but unfortunately, there just is not much to elaborate upon. Dawkins’ grand argument which is supposed to prove God’s existence to be so improbable that it almost proves He does not exist is simply the assertion that a being who designed the universe would be very complex and would therefore need an explanation himself.

Here Dawkins continues to demonstrate that he is indeed a scientist and not a philosopher or theologian. The Big One is only going to be convincing if I accept as a precursor Dawkins’ metaphysical (naturalism) and epistemological (empirical evidentialism) view of the world. Furthermore, it will only be persuasive if one has allowed Dawkins to ignore transcendence in his naturalistic perversion of the God Hypothesis. Thomas Nagel, himself no great friend to religious belief, recognizes the category mistake in Dawkins’ thinking in his review of *The God Delusion*:

But God, whatever he may be, is not a complex physical inhabitant of the natural world. The explanation of his existence as a chance concatenation of atoms is not a possibility for which we must find an alternative, because that is not what anybody means by God. If the God hypothesis makes sense at all, it offers a different kind of explanation from those of physical science: purpose or intention of a mind without a body, capable nevertheless of creating and forming the entire physical world.²⁶

Dawkins’ big argument begs the question again by assuming exactly what he is trying to prove: that nothing exists but matter, and that knowledge comes only by way of evidence derived from empirical observation. But, as Nagel, points out, no one means by “God” the kind of natural entity in need of explanation assumed by Dawkins. That said, traditionally there has been an explanation of God’s existence offered by theologians.

Anselm considers the possibility of an explanation for God’s existence, and in doing so explicates the doctrine of aseity—the idea that God’s existence is dependent upon himself, within his own nature, and not on anything else. Anselm argues that everything must have an explanation (a point with which Dawkins would agree), but that God cannot be explained by something outside of himself (for then he would owe his existence to that thing and thus be inferior to it), so that his existence must be explained by himself. Understanding how this could be so is difficult, but Anselm provides an analogy: consider a rock near a campfire. If one were to ask for an explanation of the rock’s being warm, it would be ridiculous to answer that the explanation comes from within the rock itself (obviously the fire has made

²⁶Thomas Nagel, “The Fear of Religion,” *The New Republic* (23 October 2006), <http://www.tnr.com/article/the-fear-religion> (Accessed 6 September 2011).

the rock warm). But if one were to ask the same question about the fire, such an answer would not seem ridiculous—it simply is the nature of fire to be warm, and it simply is the nature of God to exist.²⁷ Such is the traditional explanation of God’s existence.²⁸

Furthermore, Dawkins fails in his own right to consider seriously the need for explanation when it suits him. He makes much use of the anthropic principle in explaining the few statistical improbabilities beyond the reach of natural selection: the origin of life (both on our planet and in the universe as a whole), the eukaryotic cell, and consciousness. The anthropic principle simply states that despite the statistical improbability of life arising on this planet in particular, “however small the minority of planets with just the right conditions for life may be, we necessarily have to be on one of that minority, because here we are thinking about it.” But this of course is no more an explanation of why life arose here or at all than is claiming the fact that I won the lottery explains why I won the lottery. Nagel similarly recognizes this response as explanatorily unhelpful hand-waving:

But the problem that originally prompted the argument from design—the overwhelming improbability of such a thing coming into existence by chance, simply through the purposeless laws of physics—remains just as real for this case. Yet this time we cannot replace chance with natural selection. Dawkins recognizes the problem, but his response to it is pure hand-waving. . . . But at this point the origin of life remains . . . a mystery—an event that could not have occurred by chance and to which no significant probability can be assigned. . . . Yet we know that it happened. That is why the argument from design is still alive.²⁹

²⁷Rowe, *Philosophy of Religion*, 11–13. Note that Anselm’s analogy is not an argument but an explanation of what it might mean for God’s existence to depend upon Himself, and thus a way of making the coherence of the idea evident.

²⁸Another potential response, which there is no room to explore here, would be that God is not a complex being, but a simple one, and thus needs no explanation according to Dawkins’ criteria. Dawkins simply assumes that God must be complex because he cannot conceive of God being simple (he offers no real argument here). But many theologians have thought the opposite. The doctrine of divine simplicity has a long and complicated history, which is why I only mention this solution in passing. For other dismissals of Dawkins’ Big One along the lines of Nagel, see the review of *The God Delusion* by Antony Flew, *Philosophia Christi* 10.2 (2008): 473–75 (Flew’s review is centered around the charge that in the book Dawkins has proved himself “a secularist bigot” unconcerned with the truth); Gregory E. Ganssle, “Dawkins’s Best Argument: The Case against God in *The God Delusion*,” *Philosophia Christi* 10.1 (2008): 39–56 (it turns out Dawkins’ Big One is not his best argument—here Ganssle is extremely charitable); and Erik Wielenberg, “Dawkins’s Gambit, Hume’s Aroma, and God’s Simplicity,” *Philosophia Christi* 11.1 (2009): 111–25 (Wielenberg, himself an atheist, argues that Dawkins’ argument fails rather spectacularly, but offers what he thinks is a stronger Humean atheistic argument in its place).

²⁹Ibid.

Two points need to be made here. First, on Dawkins' understanding of explanation, the anthropic principle is no more an explanation than God is. Second, one might think that the anthropic principle itself cries out for an explanation (thus the so-called fine-tuning argument for God's existence). Of course, Dawkins could just insist that the anthropic principle is a brute fact without explanation—but then he is in no better position than the defender of the God Hypothesis (who is free to do the same thing), and that by his own lights. If God needs an explanation as Dawkins insists He does, then so does the anthropic principle.

Conclusion

At this point I have said something about just over half of *The God Delusion*. Dawkins' Darwinian explanation for the existence of religious belief (chapter 5), his discussion of the roots of morality and his excoriation of biblical ethics (chapters 6 and 7),³⁰ his description of the societal dangers of religion (chapter 8), and his characterization of religious education as a form of child abuse (chapter 9) have not been addressed. But many of the implications he draws in the second half of the book depend upon the arguments offered in the first half, which are dependent upon a question-begging and reductionistic view that Christians have no reason to accept. So, in conclusion, I would like to point out something I find odd about Dawkins' epistemological conclusions given naturalism and natural selection, and then re-emphasize a point made at the beginning regarding the difference between Dawkins' perspective and that of the Christian.

First, that which I find odd. Alvin Plantinga has famously argued that naturalistic evolution is epistemologically self-defeating: that is, if naturalistic evolution is true, then we have good reason to doubt the reliability of our cognitive faculties generally, and thus good reason to doubt our ability to produce true beliefs, including our belief in the truth of naturalistic evolution. So, if naturalistic evolution is true, we should be Humean skeptics, doubting all of our beliefs, including our belief in naturalistic evolution (and even our skepticism).³¹ Generally the response to this argument has been to pan it with something like, "But we know naturalistic evolution is true, so our belief in it proves to be reliable." The problem with this response of course is that according to Plantinga's argument, if naturalistic evolution is true, it is that very fact which imperils the reliability of our cognitive faculties, and

³⁰Dawkins is thoroughly utilitarian, although he seems to misunderstand certain key points of utilitarian moral theory and, for that matter, moral theory in general. Commentary on Dawkins' thoughts on morality would deserve an essay in its own right.

³¹This is just what I take to be the very basic gist of the argument. For the full treatment see Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function*, 194–237 and Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 217–40. Plantinga also briefly makes the argument in his review of *The God Delusion*, "The Dawkins Confusion: Naturalism 'ad Absurdum'," <http://www.booksandculture.com/articles/2007/marapr/1.21.html> (Accessed 6 September 2011).

thus prevents our belief in naturalistic evolution from meeting the criteria for knowledge.³²

What I find odd is that Dawkins' book contains multiple admissions that on a naturalistic evolutionary view, there are whole chunks of our beliefs which turn out to be false. All of our beliefs in religion, for example, are explained as by-products of a naturalistic evolutionary process, but are still unreliable. Dawkins readily admits that the whole world appears to be designed, and that one of the glories of naturalistic evolution is that it can create this grand illusion. So, naturalistic evolution has, on Dawkins' view, developed us in such a way that we perceive design throughout nature where in fact no design is present. These false beliefs (along with the false ascription of intention) contribute to our survival (and even deeper understanding of the natural world), and thus the goal of naturalistic evolution (181–13). Of course, that naturalistic evolution produces such significant false beliefs, and that these false beliefs contribute to survival, serves as a kind of empirical confirmation of Plantinga's argument, and thus should perhaps lead us to mistrust many if not all of our other beliefs, including a belief in naturalistic evolution. This point is routinely missed by Dawkins and his ilk. Of course, if theism is true, then we can rest easier. The reason we perceive design in the natural world is because there is in fact a designer: design is not a grand illusion perpetrated upon us by an unguided master to give us an evolutionary advantage.

Finally, recall the point made earlier in this essay about the difference in ways of thinking between Dawkins and the Christian. Dawkins' view can be viewed as a movement toward a society where scientists are our clergy and nature is our god, where all of our consciousnesses have been raised by natural selection. Dawkins says throughout that "a universe with a supernaturally intelligent creator is a very different kind of universe from one without" (58). No doubt he is right about this, but since we can only perceive the actual universe, we cannot make the comparison. What is obvious is that we see the universe very differently than Richard Dawkins. Where he finds comfort and purpose in the idea that his life is an almost immeasurable speck and nothing more in the vastness of time and space, I find despair and nihilism. And although Dawkins would not like it, the Christian has an explanation for this difference: sin. Paul describes the process through which fallen humans abandon God the Creator for an idolatrous naturalism in Romans 1:18–25.³³ Dawkins admits something of what Paul is talking about when he notes that "a quasi-mystical response to nature and the universe is common among

³²While Dawkins and many others do not argue that the production of true beliefs is necessary for survival and thus seem to miss the point of Plantinga's argument, others do not make this mistake. See James Beilby, ed., *Naturalism Defeated? Essays on Plantinga's Evolutionary Argument Against Naturalism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002). For additional criticism in the context of Plantinga's epistemology, see James Beilby, *Epistemology as Theology* (London: Ashgate, 2006).

³³Dembksi's treatment of this passage in "How to Debate an Atheist—If You Must" is commended to the reader.

scientists and rationalists. It has no connection with supernatural belief” (11). As a personal statement, Dawkins is correct—his response to nature has no connection to God. But as a statement of fact, Dawkins here reveals the delusion that comes as a result of sin. Because, like all of us, he is fallen and rebellious, he rejects the obvious connection between that which has been created and the One who created it. Our response, unlike some people whose letters he prints, should not be to revel in the thought of Dawkins burning in hell. Instead, our response should be to defend our faith against his attacks and pray that he will come to understand the truth not just of Romans 1, but of Romans 5 as well. Until then, as I hope this essay has argued well, we have no reason to fear the delusions of Richard Dawkins and his new atheist brethren.