

Dawkins's Best Argument The Case against God in *The God Delusion*

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Richard Dawkins's *The God Delusion* is an enthusiastic, popular-level defense of atheism.¹ Philosophers might wonder if Dawkins's book is the sort with which they ought to engage. He is not a philosopher, and his book is marked by some significant philosophical mistakes. I think philosophers ought to pay attention to his work in spite of these concerns. For one thing, Dawkins is very influential. As philosophers, we have a stake in entering the public discourse in order to clarify and correct some of the public perception of important issues. Second, it is worth thinking hard about whether there are some arguments of substance that can be found in a treatise such as Dawkins's. Although some who have engaged Dawkins's work have not found much that warrants investigation, as I shall argue below, I believe there is at least one argument that is well worth careful inquiry.

I think the case Dawkins presents can be organized fairly around four distinct lines of argumentation. The first line of argument includes his criticisms of traditional arguments for the existence of God. A second involves the explicit arguments that he develops against the existence of God. In a third line, he attempts to give a Darwinian account of the rise and the nature of religious belief. Finally, he argues in various ways that the effect of religion in the world is and has been mostly negative. Although each of these lines of argument is important and worthy of attention, in this essay, I will direct my attention to the explicit arguments against God's existence. In fact, I will look only at two of these arguments. They are what I call his favorite argument and his best argument.

ABSTRACT: Richard Dawkins's best argument against the existence of God aims to show that the universe fits better with atheism than with theism. The fact that complex life developed gradually over a long period of time is required by an atheistic view but is not required by a theistic view. This fact, then, supports the atheistic view. This argument does raise the probability of atheism. I discuss four analogous arguments that point towards theism. I conclude that Dawkins's argument lends some support for atheism, but his strategy suggests sufficient arguments to see that the total case points in the opposite direction.

1. Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006).

The God Hypothesis

Before turning to the arguments themselves, I want to clarify a few points with respect to what Dawkins calls the “God Hypothesis.” He explains the God Hypothesis as the view that “there exists a superhuman, supernatural intelligence who deliberately designed and created the universe and everything in it, including us.”² He contrasts this with an alternative hypothesis: “any creative intelligence, of sufficient complexity to design anything, comes into existence only as the end product of an extended process of gradual evolution.”³ Dawkins acknowledges that the God Hypothesis comes in many forms but he does take most of his energy to argue against the traditional monotheistic versions found in the Abrahamic faiths.

What sort of claim is it that God exists? Dawkins often calls this claim a *scientific* claim. He writes, “Either God exists or he doesn’t. It is a scientific question; one day we may know the answer, and meanwhile we can say something pretty strong about the probability.”⁴ and “Contrary to Huxley, I shall suggest that the existence of God is a scientific hypothesis like any other. . . . God’s existence or non-existence is a scientific fact about the universe, discoverable in principle, if not in practice.”⁵ It is not always clear what Dawkins means by calling the existence of God a scientific claim. In the first quotation, for example, he seems to mean that it is a claim that has a truth value. What he is calling a scientific question, then, turns out to be a factual question, taken in a realist sense. Thus Dawkins is claiming that there is a true answer to the question and that the answer is independent of any person’s or **group of person’s** particular views.

In other places, such as the second quotation, it seems as though Dawkins also wants to say that the truth of the question of God’s existence can be or has to be determined *scientifically*. The claim seems to be that it is only or largely in the scientific realm that confirmation or disconfirmation is to be sought. In spite of Dawkins’s claim that the question of God’s existence is a scientific question, I do not believe that he means to limit the means of investigating this question to scientific means alone. The arguments Dawkins himself raises against the existence of God, although they draw upon scientific issues, are primarily *philosophical* arguments. I am not sure that he recognizes the fact that these arguments are philosophical. Since some of the premises he appeals to are supported by scientific considerations, he might think that his arguments themselves are scientific. Dawkins’s stated position is that the question of the existence of God is one for which there ought to be evidence, specifically, the sort of evidence that is available to scientific

2. Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 31.

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.*, 48.

5. *Ibid.*, 50.

methodologies. He does not state that only scientific evidence is relevant to the question.

Dawkins is on the right track in his use of philosophical argumentation. The claim that “there exists a superhuman, supernatural intelligence who deliberately designed and created the universe and everything in it, including us” is a claim that is not primarily about an empirical object. Such a being is not a physical thing and since it is supposed to have created the universe (and it is within the universe that the laws of physics work) it lies outside the domain of the methodologies of science. The scientific method cannot even pretend to encompass such a being *directly*. While God’s effects in the world (or the lack of such effects) can be studied empirically, his own being or nature is beyond empirical observation.

It is not unreasonable, however, to think that if God exists, there might be or there should be some empirical evidence for that fact. So even if God himself cannot be discovered directly by observation, there ought to be some traces of the existence of God in the universe he made that provide clues to his existence.

One other observation is important. There is an important sense in which the God hypothesis is not really a single hypothesis. Rather it is a worldview or a metahypothesis that allows for a variety of particular hypotheses. There are many different concepts of God, but the plurality of hypotheses goes further than the issues raised by religious pluralism. Even given similar concepts of God, there are many hypotheses about *particular* issues such as the way that moral reality is related to the nature and purpose of God or the notion of how it is that human beings can and should come to know about God. The no-God hypothesis is not a single hypothesis either. There are many different and incompatible hypotheses about the nature and origin of moral claims, for example, that are each consistent with the no-God hypothesis. Examples of these hypotheses include such diverse theories as the dialectical materialism of Marx and the atomism of Democritus. We can think of theism and of atheism, then, as setting parameters around the resources that are available for explaining other elements of reality. They mark out boundaries that surround families of hypotheses about more particular detailed concerns. This fact explains why there is not just one theistic view of how, for example, mathematical truths are grounded or of what is required to have well grounded beliefs about God. Nor is there only one atheistic view on what morality is all about or the nature of artistic experience. This clarification will become important in our investigation of Dawkins’s best argument.⁶

6. I defended the claim that the existence or nonexistence of God is best thought of as providing parameters around possible hypotheses rather than being a specific hypothesis in Gregory Gansle, “God and Evil,” in *The Rationality of Theism*, ed. Paul Copan and Paul Moser, (London: Routledge, 2003), 259–77.

Dawkins's Favorite Argument

Before I look at what I think is Dawkins's best argument for the existence of God, I want to address what seems to be his favorite argument. Dawkins's favorite argument consists of the simple claim that God cannot serve as an adequate explanation for the universe or for life or for human beings because God himself would also require an explanation. The chain of explanations, then, cannot end in God. Dawkins makes this claim at numerous points throughout his book.⁷ It comes up in his critique of arguments for God, and it comes up as a separate argument against the existence of God.

Dawkins's argument here would count strongly against certain forms of arguments for the existence of God. For example, it would be a good rebuttal to either of the following arguments:

Argument I

- (1) Everything that exists needs to be explained by something outside of it.
- (2) Therefore the universe needs to be explained by something outside of it.
- (3) Therefore, God exists.

Argument II

- (1) Everything that exists is caused to exist by something else.
- (2) Therefore the universe is caused to exist by something else.
- (3) Therefore, God exists.

Each of these arguments would fall to Dawkins's favorite argument. If *everything* needs to be explained or caused to exist by something else, then God, if he exists, would need to be explained or caused by something else. No serious argument for the existence of God, however, falls to this kind of objection. Serious arguments for God's existence *qualify* what it is that requires explanation or a cause.⁸ So, some arguments use the premise that every *contingent* thing requires an explanation outside itself. God would not require an explanation outside himself if God is not a contingent thing. Another argument might begin with the claim that, "Every thing that *comes into existence* is caused to exist by something else." This claim does not apply to God, if God exists, because God exists everlastingly or eternally.

Simply asserting that God is not the sort of being that requires a cause or an explanation, however, might not be enough. Dawkins provides the kernel of an argument for the claim that God, if he exists, is the sort of being that *requires* an explanation. Such an argument would go as follows:

- (1) If God, exists, God is a complex intelligent being.

7. Dawkins explicitly appeals to this claim on pp. 77, 78, 109, 120, 121, 125, and 143.

8. Perhaps this fact explains why few philosophers who are atheists defend the sort of argument Dawkins offers here.

- (2) Any complex intelligent being requires an explanation outside of itself for its existence.
- (3) Therefore if God exists, he requires an explanation outside himself for his existence.

Dawkins writes, “A designer God cannot be used to explain organized complexity because any God capable of designing anything would have to be complex enough to demand the same kind of explanation in his own right. God presents an infinite regress from which he cannot help us to escape.”⁹ It is not clear what Dawkins means by claiming that God would be complex. Certainly he does not mean that God is a complex physical thing made of different parts. He must mean that God’s life requires a complex mental structure—albeit a nonphysical one.¹⁰ Suppose that the structure of God’s mental life is complex. Does it follow from this claim that God requires an external explanation?

There are reasons to think that the existence of God is not the sort of fact that would need to be explained by appeal to any other fact. Most facts do require an external explanation. For example, the location of some tree is a fact that depends on, among other things, where the acorn was planted. The acorn could have been planted in different places and the location of the tree would have been different in each case. Most facts depend on other facts in similar ways.

Suppose we think about the inverse-square law. That is, the fact that the force of gravity between two objects is proportional to one over the distance between two objects squared. This fact obtains at every place in the universe. It is also a fact that is contingent. It is contingent upon the laws of physics. If the laws of physics had been different, the inverse square law might not be true. So physical laws, even though they are universal, are contingent because it is at least logically or metaphysically possible that they turned out to be different than they in fact are.

Now, suppose God exists and, as Dawkins says, he is “a superhuman, supernatural intelligence who deliberately designed and created the universe and everything in it, including us.” If this is true, then God set up the laws of nature. They are contingent on the way God set them up. God himself is not subject to them. What is it, then, that God’s existence could be dependent on? It does not seem that there is anything outside God on which he could depend. Whether or not he existed would not depend upon how the universe turned out. So God’s existence, if he exists, is best thought of as necessary. The fact that he exists does not depend on anything outside him. It does not rely on any external explanation.

9. Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 109.

10. Many theists think that God is not complex at all. Rather he is metaphysically simple. If this is the best way to think about the nature of God, then Dawkins’s argument is undermined. I do not want to employ this strategy because the metaphysical simplicity of God is controversial among philosophers.

The notion that God is a necessary being is not an *ad hoc* move designed to counter modern arguments against the existence of God. The history of thinking about the nature of God is nearly unanimous in thinking that God is a necessary being. In fact, I cannot think of an exception to this, at least in the Christian theological and philosophical tradition. Of course, there is a lot more to be said, but I have at least sketched why it is plausible to think that Dawkins's favorite argument—even in its best form—is not strong. God, if he exists, is simply not the sort of being that needs external explanation. He does not come into existence and therefore does not need a cause.

Dawkins's Best Argument

Dawkins's best argument is built on the claim that a universe made by God would be different than one that is a product only of natural processes. This claim is part of Dawkins's insistence that the claim that God exists is a scientific claim. That is, it must make some difference that is empirically detectable. He claims: "A universe with a creative superintendent would be a very different kind of universe from one without."¹¹ To hold that God's existence would make no difference to what we observe about the universe, Dawkins thinks, would render the theistic position anemic.

Given that a theistic universe should be different from an atheistic one, which does our universe look like? Dawkins claims that our universe fits well within the parameters of an atheistic worldview. It is quite different, he insists, than what fits with the view that God exists. Our observations about the world show that it has the marks of an atheistic universe rather than the marks of a theistic one. We can sketch Dawkins's argument as follows:

- (1) A universe made by God would be different than one made by natural occurrences.
- (2) Our universe fits better with a naturalistic universe than with a theistic universe.
- (3) **Therefore** our universe is more likely to be a naturalistic universe than it is to be a theistic universe.

Before I interact with this argument, I want to make some preliminary observations. First, why do I think this is his best argument? For one thing, this argument is the philosophically most fruitful of the arguments presented or alluded to. It is an argument that pushes us to think hard about the various degrees to which an observation either fits or does not fit with a worldview. I will aim to clarify these degrees in such a way that will shed light both on Dawkins's argument and on what I take to be the best response below. Second, I think the argument does support the conclusion to a degree. There

11. Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 55.

are aspects of the universe as we know it that do fit better with a naturalistic worldview than with a theistic worldview.

The second observation is that this argument does not aim to *prove* that God does not exist. Rather it aims to show that it is more likely that God does not exist than that he does. It is an *evidential* argument. The evidential nature of the argument is one of its strengths. Dawkins is right when he insists, that he is not providing a watertight proof that God does not exist. In fact, it has become something of a slogan that one cannot prove God's existence or nonexistence.¹²

I agree that there are no watertight proofs for the existence of God or for the nonexistence of God. The reason that watertight proof is not to be found is not because claims about God have some special status. Quite the opposite is the case. It is because arguments for the claim that God exists (or does not exist) are philosophical arguments, and philosophical arguments are almost never watertight proofs. Watertight proofs are found largely in mathematics and logic. Most other disciplines are evidential, as well. In any evidential argument, there are premises that are not established beyond the possibility of doubt.

Not only are philosophical disputes evidential in nature but they are cumulative. In investigating the case for some philosophical claim such as the existence of God, we take all of the evidential arguments together and try to determine in which direction the total case points. Some arguments or lines of evidence point in one direction and others point in the opposite direction. The cumulative nature of arguments is common throughout the disciplines as well. There is rarely one line of argument that by itself establishes some significant claim with a high degree of confirmation. Dawkins is right to develop this argument along evidential lines in this way.

Third, this argument is one about *fittingness*. The argument claims that ours is the sort of universe that fits better with the view that there is no God. It also claims that the universe as we find it does not fit as neatly if we take the existence of God to be a fact. In this way, we can test our two worldviews. We can figure out what sort of universe best fits with each and we can look and see through scientific and other empirical means whether the nature of the universe fits better with one theory or the other.

As I mentioned above, it is important to clarify the notion of fittingness that is at work. The issue of whether some observation fits or does not fit with a claim or a theory can be called an *issue of connectedness*. An observation connects more or less well with the theory or claim in question. Con-

12. In discussing agnosticism, Dawkins locates himself on a scale of confidence in the non-existence of God by saying, "I cannot know for certain, but I think God is very improbable." (51). A few pages later, he says, "That you cannot prove God's non-existence is accepted and trivial, if only in the sense that we can never absolutely prove the non-existence of anything. What matters is not whether God is disprovable (he isn't) but whether his existence is *probable*" (54).

nectedness comes in degrees. There is little precision here, but I think we can recognize different general levels of connectedness and, consequently, different strengths of connectedness claims. For example, to say that some theory *requires* that some claim be true or that some fact requires that a certain theory be true is a tight level of connectedness. We can find such a tight level positively or negatively. For example, some philosophers have argued that the existence of God *requires* that the universe have no evil in it at all. This claim means, of course, that the existence of evil is *incompatible* with theism.¹³ This kind of requirement is the highest level of connectedness that can be proposed.

A more moderate level of connectedness involves *expectations*. Any theory leads us to expect certain things to hold and other things not to hold. These things may not be required (so that their not holding is incompatible with the theory), but the expectation can be strong. For example, if theism is true, we would expect that our sensory faculties are generally reliable. I am not sure that such a connection is *required* by theism, but we would expect it. One rule of thumb that may indicate that some feature is to be expected if a theory is true is if the lack of that feature would be at all surprising given the truth of the theory. It would be surprising that our sensory faculties were unreliable, if theism were true.

There is a level of connectedness that is even less tight than expectation. This is the level that Dawkins's argument trades on. It is the level of *fittingness*. Certain observations fit better with one theory than with another, even if the theory would not lead us to expect the details of the observation. Fittingness is the sort of connectedness that is often appealed to in human interaction. You may have no reason to *expect* to see me in Starbucks on some random occasion, but it certainly fits with what you know about me (if you know anything about me at all!).

These distinctions are important to make so that we attribute to Dawkins's argument no more than is appropriate. His argument does not require the incompatibility of theism with the gradual development of life through a long process such as natural selection. If it did, it would be easy to refute. We would only need to show that theism is not incompatible with natural selection. Dawkins's argument, because it argues for a *weaker connection*, is a *stronger argument*.

To argue that, if atheism is true, we would *expect* complex life to emerge via a long process something like natural selection seems to be too strong. If atheism is true, we would not expect complex life at all. Given that there is complex life of the sort we observe, perhaps the most we can claim is the development of life by a process like natural selection fits better with atheism than it does with theism. (This is exactly the way Dawkins's argument is put

13. For the standard example, see J. L. Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence," *Mind* 64 (1955): 200–12. Few philosophers today defend the claim that theism requires a universe without evil.

forward.) So too on the theistic theory, we might not expect that God would create conscious beings because we have little ground to know what to expect about what God would create. That there are conscious beings, very well may fit better with the theistic view, or so I will argue.

Having explained some important background observations, I want to turn to the argument itself. Each of the two premises must be investigated. If they are both true, then the argument works and the conclusion is established. The first premise is the claim that a universe made by God would be different than one made by natural occurrences. It is obvious that a universe made by God is different than one not so made in virtue of its having been made intentionally by a supernatural person. This sort of difference is not sufficient to get the argument going. If the argument is to progress, the difference between the theistic universe and the atheistic universe must be a detectable difference. It is in this way that Dawkins claims that the existence of God is to be treated as a scientific hypothesis. It is a claim that has, he thinks, detectable implications.

If the argument proceeds from the claim that a theistic universe differs in detectable ways from an atheistic universe, we ought to think a bit about what makes something detectable. Dawkins is disposed to think of detectability in terms of sense experience and the methods of the natural sciences. Something that is, in principle, subject to scientific investigation is detectable. The sort of observations on which they reflect, then, tend to be empirical observations. We ought to wonder if other sorts of observations can show us that there is a detectable difference between theories.

For example, it seems reasonable that ethical theories can differ from each other in detectable ways. If one theory prohibits lying in every circumstance while a second theory allows lying under specified conditions, there is a detectable difference between them. This is not the sort of detectable difference that decisively falsifies one of the theories. We would have to have a sense already that lying is permitted in some circumstances in order to use this difference to choose between theories. The difference between the theories is not due to some empirical observations. This difference is due to observations in the form of inferences from the claims of the theories in question.

Psychological theories also might have differences that are detectable in ways that are not empirical. I can imagine a research project designed to map different sorts of fear onto kinds of causes and fear behavior. The researcher would have to rely on the introspection and first-person reports of the subject to understand the different sorts of fear. This introspection is not empirical in a public, scientific sense.

Given that there ought to be detectable differences between the claim that the universe is theistic and the claim that it is not theistic, even if these differences do not have to be empirically detectable, we can grant that the

first premise of the argument is true. It remains to investigate the second premise. Does the universe as we observe it fit better with the theistic story than it does with the atheistic story? We must make careful observations to see whether there are good reasons to think that the second premise is true.

Although Dawkins does not spell out the way our universe fits with atheism precisely, he does point in the direction of what he has in mind. His view is that any naturalistic universe with complex life would include a long period of biological development through a process something like natural selection. This notion is built into his articulation of the naturalistic worldview that is an alternative to the God Hypothesis. Remember, he states that position as, “any creative intelligence, of sufficient complexity to design anything, comes into existence only as the end product of an extended process of gradual evolution.”¹⁴ Furthermore, I think he holds that a theistic universe would most likely *not* include a long process of biological development. He does not make this claim explicitly in connection with this argument but it seems to lie behind his approach. In this case, his argument is that natural selection does not fit as well in a theistic universe, but it fits neatly in a naturalistic universe. Since the evidence for gradual development through natural selection is overwhelming, the probability that the universe is naturalistic is very high.

To what degree does biological development through natural selection fail to fit neatly with a theistic universe? I do think there is a degree to which it *does* fail to fit. In a theistic universe, the origin of various life forms is not restricted to processes that are gradual. God could use any process he wants to create living things. It is perfectly possible, if God exists, that he just brings living things into existence in all their variety at one moment. He is not restricted to processes that run over long periods of time. In this way our expectations about the development of biological life in a theistic universe ought to be wide open. Theism does not *rule out* a long process of biological development, but theists are not restricted to such theories by their theistic commitments.

An atheistic universe, in contrast, lacks the resources for instantaneous creation of all life forms. It would be completely baffling if complex life emerges instantly in a universe without God. Complex life would require some kind of long developmental process. This process would not need to be through genetic variation and natural selection, but it would need to be gradual. It turns out that it would need to be something very like the way we find it.

Since the theistic universe is compatible with a variety of mechanisms for the development of complex biological life. The fact of natural selection does not provide specific evidence for theism. Since the naturalistic universe *seems to require* some kind of long term biological process for complex bio-

14. Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 31.

logical life, the fact of natural selection *does* confirm the naturalistic universe. This aspect of the universe we find, then, does support the claim that there is no God. It is important that we recognize that natural selection provides evidence for atheism even though it is the case that it is not incompatible with theism.

That natural selection lends evidence to the claim that the universe is naturalistic is part of what makes this argument the best one Dawkins offers. If the only relevant fact in the universe concerned the development of complex biological life, his case would be quite strong. A philosophical case for any worldview will be, as we said, a cumulative case. As a result, we need to look at a broader set of observations before we draw our conclusion. It turns out that there are other aspects of the universe as we find it that point in the opposite direction. There are at least four major elements of our universe that fit significantly better with a universe in which God exists than in the atheistic universe. These elements are: the fact that the universe is ordered and susceptible to rational investigation, that it is a world with consciousness, that it is a world with significant free agency, and that it is a world with objective moral obligations. Each of these aspects fits neatly into a theistic world but is not at home in a naturalistic world. It is not that they are incompatible with naturalism, but they do not fit neatly into the naturalistic world.

I want to be very clear about the structure of the argument I am developing here. I do not mean to argue directly from these four features of the world to the claim that God exists. I am trying to put forward an argument structured in a way that is strongly analogous to Dawkins's argument. If the fact that the gradual development of complex life through natural selection is something that fits better with naturalism than with theism gives support to the claim that God does not exist, then the features of the world that fit better with theism than with naturalism support the claim that God does exist. If the structure of these arguments is strongly analogous, then one of two results follows. It may be, on the one hand, that Dawkins's original argument is not very strong after all. It may be, on the other hand, that the universe as we find it points more clearly in the direction of theism than it does atheism. I am not going to commit myself to the latter claim here.

1. A world that is ordered and susceptible to rational investigation fits better in a theistic universe. If God exists, the universe is the product of purposeful action. It is made by an intelligent mind for reasons. The fact that the universe is made by a mind for reasons leads us to expect that it will be something that can be grasped rationally. It makes sense that there would be stable laws that allow predictions to be made and inferences to be drawn. It is not merely the case that an ordered universe fits better with theism, the level of connectedness is stronger than that. An ordered universe is what we would expect if God exists. If God exists and made the universe for reasons, it would be surprising if that universe exhibited none of the order that would

make it susceptible to rational investigation. If it would be surprising that it would not be ordered, then its being ordered is something we would expect on the view that God exists.

A naturalistic universe, however, would not have to be susceptible to rational investigation. It fits perfectly well with a naturalistic universe that it be wildly chaotic. Of course, being susceptible to rational investigation is not incompatible with a universe without God, but the theory that God does not exist allows the universe to exhibit any one of a wide variety of descriptions as far as order is concerned. The fact that our universe is in fact ordered and susceptible to investigation fits better with the claim that God does exist.

2. *A world with consciousness fits better in a theistic universe.* Human consciousness involves several features that are difficult to fit with naturalism. Two of these features are the first-person experience and the intentionality of some of our mental states.¹⁵ The first-person experience is illustrated by the fact that I own certain mental states and you own other mental states. More importantly, we seem to have a special kind of access to our own mental states. For example, we never walk into a room and say, “There is a wicked headache in this room. I wonder if it is mine.” If I have a wicked headache, I know that I do so. I know it in a way that you cannot. I alone have a privileged access to my headache. In the same way, I know that I am thinking about coffee at a particular time. I may not know what you are thinking about. My access to your thoughts is indirect. You can tell me you are thinking about coffee, or I can deduce it from your behavior or your habits; but I can know my own thoughts directly.¹⁶ There is an ownership of my own first person perspective.

The intentionality of mental states involves the feature that our thoughts represent or are about things in the world, things in the past and even things that do not exist. So right now, we can think about Niagara Falls, even though it may be hundreds of miles from where we are. We can think about Pickett’s Charge in the battle of Gettysburg, even though it occurred over 140 years ago. We can think about whether Santa Claus has any children, even though there is no Santa Claus. How is it that something inside me, my mental states, can be about something outside of me? This is the puzzle of intentionality.

Intentionality sometimes does not seem mysterious to us because we are language users. Noises articulated by a person or marks on a paper also can be about things in the world. That a string of marks such as “There is a hot cup of coffee in the kitchen” can express (truly or falsely) a fact about

15. Robert Van Gulick lists seven features of consciousness including the qualitative character of conscious experience, the phenomenal structure, the intrinsic subjectivity of consciousness, the self-perspectival organization, and the unity of conscious experience. See, Robert Van Gulick, “Consciousness,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/consciousness/>.

16. To be sure, we do not know directly all of our mental states. All I need for my claim, here, is the fact that we have privileged access to some of our mental states.

the world is due, however, to the prior activity of conscious minds. We assign meaning to language. Its meaning is, then, derivative. Particular strings of marks or articulate noises are meaningful because of the conventions of communities of conscious minds. Explaining how the English word “coffee” came to refer to the drink is an interesting and complicated story. Behind the story always lie various communities of conscious beings. Their thoughts do much of the work in explaining how certain words came to pick out certain items. Figuring out how human minds can think of objects is more complicated still. Both the first person perspective and the intentionality of mental states are some of the challenges for contemporary philosophy of mind.

If God exists, then the primary thing that exists is itself a conscious mind of unlimited power and intellect. This mind has its own first-person perspective, and it can think about things. The notion that such a mind, if it creates anything, would create other conscious minds that have their own first-person perspectives and can think about things is not a great mystery. Is the existence of created conscious beings something that we ought to *expect* if theism is true? I am not sure I want to say that we ought to expect there to be conscious beings if theism is true.¹⁷ We could attempt to support such an expectation with an argument that consciousness is a good thing and a God who is good would have reason to create other conscious beings. If this line of thought is strong, then we would have reason to expect other conscious beings to exist if God does. I do not want to press this line because I do not need to. All I need is to argue that the existence of conscious minds *fits better* with theism than with the view that the universe is naturalistic.

The view that there is no God includes the claim that any complicated living things that exist are the product of a long natural process of development from simpler living things. On this view, any species of animals that have conscious minds originate ultimately from species that have no conscious minds by processes that are not executed by any conscious mind. If atheism is true, it is somewhat unusual that there would be any conscious minds.¹⁸

I am not arguing that no naturalistic theory of consciousness can be plausible.¹⁹ Rather, I am arguing that the phenomena itself is not something

17. The following discussion owes much to cautions and suggestions put forward in conversation with Bill Alston.

18. In this paper, I am comparing only the hypotheses that Dawkins is considering, the God Hypothesis and the Alternative Hypothesis (atheism). There are, to be sure, many other worldviews, and things like conscious beings will fit with some of these more than they fit with atheism. E.g., the existence of conscious beings can be said to fit fairly well with Buddhism, with some forms of Hinduism, and with panentheism.

19. There are some who do argue in this way. E.g., J. P. Moreland, *Consciousness and the Existence of God* (London: Routledge, 2008); “The Argument from Consciousness,” in *The Rationality of Theism*, 204–20; and Charles Taliaferro, “Naturalism and the Mind,” in *Naturalism: A Critical Analysis*, ed. William Lane Craig and J. P. Moreland (London: Routledge, 2000), 133–55.

that fits easily into a naturalistic world. The attempt to explain consciousness within the parameters of naturalism has been designated the *hard problem* of consciousness.²⁰ The difficulty is indicative of, among other things, the lack of fit between atheism and the existence of conscious beings. The existence of conscious beings, like the order of the universe, is a detectable feature of the universe that confirms theism as contrasted with atheism.

3. *A world with significant free agency fits better in a theistic universe.* Many philosophers, perhaps not a majority but a sizeable minority at least, believe two things about human freedom. They believe that if an act is determined in any way, it cannot be free, and they believe that human beings have a significant degree of freedom. They are incompatibilists and libertarians. Freedom is not compatible with determinism, and we do have some significant freedom. Other philosophers are incompatibilists but not libertarians. They believe that freedom and determinism are not compatible but that we are not free in the relevant sense. Such philosophers are often called hard determinists.²¹ Still others (perhaps the majority) are compatibilists of one sort or another. They believe that an action can be both determined and free. Determinism, on their view, is no hindrance to the kind of freedom normally thought to ground moral responsibility. We own our actions in a manner sufficient to guarantee that we are responsible for them, even if they are determined ultimately by events outside our control.²²

Those philosophers who are libertarians generally think that the kind of freedom that could be compatible with determinism is not sufficient to allow for moral responsibility. In addition, they point to our experience of choosing as a reason to believe that certain choices are up to us in this more robust sense. I think that the libertarian view of human freedom is the correct one. If the libertarians are right, then not everything about human beings is causally determined. Thus the world of people is not a causally closed world.

If human beings are free in the sense that I am describing, then this fact is another feature of the universe that fits much better with theism than it does with atheism. In a naturalistic universe that is ordered enough to have complex life, we would expect events to proceed from previous events. Whether this universe is determined or not, we would not expect the sort of beings that can purposely initiate actions that result in new chains of events. Yet,

20. David J. Chalmers, "Facing Up to the Problem of Consciousness," *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 2 (1995): 200–19; and *The Conscious Mind* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

21. An example is Derk Pereboom. See his *Living without Free Will* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

22. For examples of the compatibilists see *The Oxford Companion to Free Will*, ed. Robert Kane (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

this is the sort of agency we may have. That there are persons with libertarian agency does not seem to fit if the universe is naturalistic.²³

If God exists, however, he acts for reasons. He chooses, among other things, to create the universe, the stars and planets, and to create other minds, plants and animals. He creates these things because he wants to do so. He did not have to do so. He causes them to come into existence. He is not constrained to do so by factors outside himself. God himself is free in a libertarian sense. It is not mysterious that God would create beings who are free in the same sense. In a way similar to our discussion of consciousness, we see that the primary thing that exists in the theistic universe is a being with libertarian agency. That we find ourselves with this sort of freedom, then, is something that fits well into the theistic story. The connection between a theistic universe and the existence of other agents who are free in a libertarian sense may even be stronger. If God's reasons to create human beings include his purposes for their moral and spiritual development, the existence of libertarian freedom is even more to be expected. To be sure, many thinkers do not think we have this sort of freedom. They may be right, but the case for libertarian freedom is strong enough to strengthen the sort of argument I am presenting.

4. *A world with objective moral obligations fits better with a theistic universe.* It seems clear that there are moral obligations that are objective in the sense that they hold whether or not one wants them to hold or one wants to fulfill them. A claim such as "It is wrong to torture a person to death just for fun" seems to be true and the obligation it prescribes seems to be binding on all human beings. It is hard, after all, to imagine that such an obligation is binding only because of the desires or goals of an individual person or of society. It is, then, at least reasonable to think that objective moral obligations exist.²⁴

If there are such obligations, they make up another detectable feature of the universe that does not fit well within a naturalistic worldview. Philosopher John Mackie in his rigorous defense of atheism, admits that such values would ground a strong argument for God:

[Objective moral values] constitute so odd a cluster of qualities and relations that they are most unlikely to have arisen in the ordinary course of events, without an all-powerful god to create them. If, then, there are such intrinsically prescriptive objective values, they make

23. See Peter Unger, "Free Will and Scientificalism," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 65 (2002): 1–25; and Stewart Goetz, "Naturalism and Libertarian Agency," in *Naturalism: A Critical Analysis*, 156–86.

24. Of course a full defense of the reality of objective obligations would have to engage all of the alternative theories. Such a defense is far outside the scope of this essay. It is enough to note that many people do think there are such obligations.

the existence of a god more probable than it would have been without them.²⁵

Philosophers who might be concerned about the theistic implications of objective moral obligations can go in one of two directions. The first direction is to argue that there are no moral obligations that are objective in the way described. This view is held by Mackie and others.²⁶ Attempts to develop such arguments have to overcome a significant challenge. It is difficult to make plausible the claim that our fundamental moral claims are either simply mistaken or just a matter of preferences.

The second direction is to try to ground the objectivity of morality apart from God.²⁷ This direction, I think, might be fruitful. The important point here is that even if objective moral obligations are not incompatible with a naturalistic worldview, they can be shown to be more fitting with a theistic position.

If God invented human beings, he did so for a reason or reasons. Some of these reasons may ground moral obligations. For example, if God made us with moral ends in mind—if he made us so that we would embody certain virtues, for example—his setting up moral reality the way he did makes a good deal of sense. If God has spiritual purposes for us—that we would find a relationship with him and experience him as our highest good—he may set up moral rules as guidelines for how best to do that.

Whatever God's purposes are, it makes sense that he would make us the kinds of beings that are subject to moral truths and that can understand and act on them. If God's purposes are for our good, as many religious traditions affirm, then the fact that following moral reality tends towards our flourishing also makes sense. God's existence, then, is a better explanation for the nature of morality than any view that does not include an unconditional purpose. Morality, then, fits well with the theistic worldview.

Paul Draper, an agnostic philosopher, makes a similar point. He writes, "A moral world is, however, very probable on theism."²⁸ In other words, if

25. J. L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 115–16.

26. Besides *The Miracle of Theism*, chap. 6, see his *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (New York: Penguin, 1977). For a variety of views that seem to deny the objectivity of obligations see Simon Blackburn, *Spreading the Word* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984); *Ruling Passions* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998); Allan Gibbard, *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990); and Mark Timmons, *Morality Without Foundations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

27. Some examples include Richard Boyd, "How to Be a Moral Realist," in *Essays on Moral Realism*, ed. G. Sayre-McCord (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), 181–228; David Brink, *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); and Peter Railton, "Moral Realism," *Philosophical Review* 95 (1986): 163–207. Theistic philosopher Richard Swinburne also wants to ground moral obligations apart from God. See *The Existence of God* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1979), chap. 9.

28. Paul Draper, e-mail to author, October 28, 1999, quoted in Gregory E. Ganssle, "Necessary Moral Truths and the Need for Explanation," *Philosophia Christi* 2 (2000): 105–12.

theism is true, we ought to expect a moral world, that is, a world with objective moral obligations. In contrast, such obligations do not fit as well in an atheistic world.

Sizing Up My Response to the Argument

Dawkins's best argument against the existence of God goes as follows:

- (1) A universe made by God would be different than one made by natural occurrences.
- (2) Our universe fits better with a naturalistic universe than with a theistic universe.
- (3) **Therefore** our universe is more likely to be a naturalistic universe than it is to be a theistic universe.

The main work is done by the second premise, that our universe fits better with a naturalistic universe than it does with a theistic universe. The detectable feature he points to that is an indication of this better fit is the fact that complex life developed over a long period of time through natural selection. In a universe with no God but with complex life, we would expect there to have been a long process of development. The fact that life did develop in this way, then, lends confirmation to the atheistic hypothesis. One virtue of Dawkins's best argument, then, is that it does identify one way in which the universe that we observe points to the conclusion that no God exists. I have identified, however, four other detectable features of our universe that are relevant to premise two of the argument. Each of these four features fit better with a theistic universe than they do with an atheistic universe.

Many philosophers have developed theories to show that these features of the universe are compatible with a naturalistic worldview. Some of these strategies are pretty good. If these attempts are successful, however, it does not undermine the strength of my criticisms of Dawkins's argument. My criticism does not depend on the failure of such strategies. Regardless of the compatibility of these features with naturalism, they still fit better with the view that God exists.

At the risk of repeating myself, I want to be clear about what I have done here. I have not put forward an argument from these four features of the universe to the claim that God, in fact, exists. Perhaps fairly strong arguments of this kind can be developed but it is beyond the scope of this essay to do so. I identify these features as a response to Dawkins's argument. The four features I identify show that there is good reason to reject the second premise of Dawkins argument. Either this premise is not true or, at the very least, Dawkins has not given us very strong reasons to think that it is true.

Dawkins presents a variety of arguments either that God does not exist or that belief in God is rationally suspect. In this essay, I looked at both his favorite argument and at the one I think is his best. Although, Dawkins does

identify one feature of the universe that does fit better with atheism, the overall argument is not strong. The reader of Dawkins's work, therefore, is left with the conclusion that the case against God, as presented, is not sufficient to worry a believer. Nor ought it challenge one who considers belief in God for the first time.²⁹

29. An earlier version of this essay was presented at St. Anthony Hall at Yale University. I would like to thank Sebastian Cano-Besquet for coordinating that event and Troy Cross, Brendan Dill, Don Smedley, and Heidi Lockwood for subsequent discussions. I also gained some insight and encouragement through discussions with Sam Bagg, Jonathan Gilmore, David M. Miller, David Horner, Luke Potter, and Bill Alston. I would also like to thank the referee for *Philosophia Christi* for providing helpful comments.