

Existence of God

- arguments, reflections and conclusions

SETTING THE SCENE

Aims of this session:

- To discuss the classical arguments for the existence of God and their usefulness
- To engage with current arguments against the existence of God posed by Richard Dawkins and 'The New Atheists'
- To reflect on this debate in relation to our own questions of belief/disbelief

Introduction to belief in God

- 88% of world population believe in God, down from 96% in 2000 (Cambridge Uni, 2005)
- 92% Americans believe in God (Pew Forum survey on religion 2009)
- 35% Britains believe in God, but 71% identify as Christian (British Census 2001)
- 2.3% world population are Atheists and 11.9% are non-religious (Encyclopædia Britannica 2007)

Reflections

- Be aware of wording with surveys. The Pew Forum survey was worded: 'Do you believe in god or a universal spirit' for example.
- There is general agreement that belief in God is falling, certainly in the UK, if not worldwide.
- In the Pew Forum survey the issue is raised that belief in God and religious affiliation are two different things, we'll come back to this.
- Atheists are very much in the minority

THE CLASSICAL ARGUMENTS FOR THE EXISTENCE OF GOD

From the earliest times there were objections from Christian thinkers to the influence of Greek philosophy in the development of Christian apologetics: what has Athens to do with Jerusalem? (Tertullian c190 CE). Quite a lot, it seems: many of the classical arguments were theories developed more to work within Greek-derived philosophical debate than to address the personal God of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures

Ontological Argument ¹

Ontological arguments aim to derive from reason alone, rather than (for instance) observation of the world, to reach the conclusion that God must exist. The first was proposed by St Anselm of Canterbury in the 11th Century CE, then taken up by successive theologians and philosophers, notably Descartes, in the 17th, Leibniz in the 18th, and among many, Kurt Gödel and Alvin Plantinga in the 20th / 21st centuries.

¹ See Evans 46-50, Dawkins 80-85



- God is defined as the greatest thing there could be
- Something out there in the world is inherently better than something that exists only in your imagination
- Existence is better than non-existence
- Because God is the best thing there is existence must be one of God's properties
- Therefore God exists

Criticisms:

- It's like saying: "A pixie is a little man with pointed ears. Therefore a pixie actually exists."
- The argument only works if you assume the definition that 'God is something than which nothing greater can be thought' (Anselm). The logic of this argument is strongly contested.
- The argument makes an assumption which it does not justify, namely that existence is better than non-existence. (It has been argued - see Dawkins 80-83 - that for God to create the world without existing would be even more impressive than it is for a God who does exist to create the world. So perhaps not existing is "better" than existing?)
- Ontological arguments are simply not persuasive if one does not accept the premise that there exists a perfect being: modern versions tend to concentrate on the idea that such arguments are reasonable and philosophically coherent rather than that they are 'proofs' of God's existence. The Christian philosopher Richard Swinburne says "I think that ontological arguments for the existence of God are very much mere philosophers' arguments and do not codify any of the reasons that ordinary people have for believing that there is a God" (2004, 9)

Moral Argument ²

- There is wide agreement across history and cultures on the existence of "right"/"wrong"
- There is a high degree of agreement (though some differences) over what constitutes right and wrong behaviour
- Moral behaviour & the existence of altruism don't make sense unless:
 - Either there's something that "polices" moral behaviour
 - Or there's something, which leads us to believe that the world is a moral place where moral behaviour is valuable
- In either case the "something" must itself be moral in some way
- Human conscience is a sign of our link with a moral God

Criticisms:

- Cultural relativism (different cultures deem different actions to be (im)moral) or individual relativism (what counts is what I think is (im)moral) - but in practice there is significant similarity between basic moral beliefs across cultures and in practice we do have a sense of justice, at least where we are concerned ourselves
- There are other good reasons for moral behaviour and altruism

² Dawkins ch 6 see also Swinburne



- In the end it's for one's own good (eg "honesty is the best policy"), but people can make extreme sacrifices, eg dying in an attempt to rescue others, which doesn't seem to arise from self-interest
- Evolutionary reasons³ - in pre-human kinship groups or in ancient village life, co-operating with and protecting relatives increases the chance of your genes being passed on
- Altruistic behaviour is a shrewd investment - "one good turn deserves another" so your own altruism will one day be reciprocated
- More generally, building up a reputation for moral behaviour and altruism is beneficial
- Generosity towards others helps consolidate status and power - only a dominant animal or human has the resources to be generous
- You don't need a moral code handed down by a God unless you want to operate in absolutes

These criticisms are partly at least addressed to the questions of whether "we need God to be moral" or to tell us which moral code to live by (Dawkins 231) not so much to the question of whether our moral sense might hint at another dimension to human existence.

Cosmological Argument: (the argument from 'first cause')

- The world is full of things causing other things
- Something must have set the whole causation in motion: an 'uncaused causer'
- God is the self-caused causer
- Therefore God exists

A recently revived argument used by early Christian theologians to refute the Greek doctrine of the eternity of matter and further developed by medieval Muslim and Jewish scholars is the 'Kalam Cosmological Argument':

- Whatever begins to exist has a cause of its existence.
- The universe began to exist.
- *Argument based on the impossibility of an actual infinite:*
 - An actual infinite cannot exist.
 - An infinite temporal regress of events is an actual infinite.
 - Therefore, an infinite temporal regress of events cannot exist.
- *Argument based on the impossibility of the formation of an actual infinite by successive addition:*
 - A collection formed by successive addition cannot be actually infinite.
 - The temporal series of past events is a collection formed by successive addition.
 - Therefore, the temporal series of past events cannot be actually infinite.
- Therefore, the universe has a cause of its existence

Criticisms

- Does everything have a cause? People and animals move and change in and of themselves without outside causation.

³ See Dawkins 209-233



- It contradicts itself. If nothing causes itself then how can there be a first cause, which doesn't require a cause also? Why can't there be an infinite series of causes?
- Is there only one chain of cause and effect? Why not multiple chains? Is there only one self-caused causer?
- Is the uncaused causer an entity or an event? God is not an event. But if you are happy with the idea of an uncaused entity then why should that uncaused entity be God? It might as well be the world.
- Even if we agree that this argument proves the existence of a first cause, why should that first cause be God? And if it is God, why should it be the kind of God Christians believe in?⁴ A number of scientists and philosophers believe in some kind of G/god but not a personal involved God

Teleological Argument:⁵ (the argument from design, purpose or goal)

- The universe is so complex it couldn't have come about by chance or accident.
- Evolution is neither purposeful nor intelligent. Evolution is cruel and full of death.
- William Paley's (1743-1805) watch analogy - if we find a watch we assume it has been made by a watchmaker.
- The complexity of a house couldn't be achieved by a brick factory blowing up; similarly Fred Hoyle's argument, which Dawkins (113) outlines as follows: "the probability of life originating on Earth is no greater than the chance that a hurricane, sweeping through a scrap yard, would have the luck to assemble a Boeing 747".

Criticism

- The example of the house and the Boeing 747 work within the law of physics where as we are talking about the universe which includes laws of physics
- You can't make a comparison between houses/aeroplanes forming and universes forming.
- The whole point of Darwin was to explain complexity and variation, not to fob off these questions by invoking chance or God. Given enough time, natural selection does explain how great complexity can evolve - and indeed more complex organisms evolve from less complex organisms, ie the opposite direction from that assumed by this argument.
- The house/aeroplane wasn't immediately formed. They evolved brick by brick as eco-systems do.
- Who designed God? God must be even more complex than the creation. That is like saying Bach is more complex than his most complex arrangement – you are not comparing like with like.
- To say the design-producing being is God is to take a leap beyond the evidence of design. Why not a whole gang of gods working together to produce the universe? The designer and God could have worked together – God creating possibilities in which evolution can happen.

⁴ See Dawkins p 77

⁵ From the Greek word *telos* meaning 'purpose'



CONTEMPORARY ARGUMENTS FOR AND AGAINST THE EXISTENCE OF GOD

Intelligent Design ⁶

- Related to the design-teleological argument above but developed as Intelligent Design (ID) in 1980s/early 1990s
- Believes that “certain features of the universe and of living things are best explained by an intelligent cause, not an undirected process such as natural selection”
- Does not entirely reject evolution but believes it is not the whole story: “the dominant theory of evolution today is neo-Darwinism, which contends that evolution is driven by natural selection acting on random mutations, an unpredictable and purposeless process that ‘has no discernable direction or goal’...”
- Claims to be able to analyse organisms and in some cases detect design (eg “in irreducibly complex biological structures, the complex and specified information content in DNA”). The mechanisms of natural organisms, such as the complexity of the eye, bacterial flagella, blood clotting, the immune system, are ideally suited to their purpose but don’t appear to have any other uses, so could not have evolved from less similar but less complex mechanisms since there was never any need for less complex versions to exist.

Criticisms ⁷

- Claims to be scientifically based but its claims of intelligent intervention in the past are not verifiable or falsifiable and it has no predictive power so cannot be tested
- As scientists learn more ID’s examples of “irreducible complexity” eg blood clotting, mammalian eye have been shown to be compatible with gradual development from intermediate stages of lesser complexity. Compare for instance light sensitivity in flatworms; light sensitivity plus a pinhole in nautilus; light sensitivity plus jelly in other organisms.
- Not everything seems optimally designed eg anatomy of eye, human spine not ideal for vertical life
- ID is in danger of using God to fill (ever decreasing) gaps in our knowledge

Anthropic Principle ⁸

- Many variables in the universe however the nature of planet earth is just right for life to have formed here
- That cannot be chance
- Someone must have set it all up this way

Criticisms

- We are in a position to raise this question only because we happen to be in a perfectly tuned universe on a planet suitable for life. By definition, if we are here and asking the question, conditions are suitable - so we can’t claim that the suitable conditions are remarkable

⁶ See <intelligentdesign.org> website

⁷ See Collins 181-195. Dawkins 117-134

⁸ Caution - this term is used in a number of different ways! See Dawkins 141-143, Collins 71-78



- Also by definition, any life that is flourishing here has evolved gradually by natural selection to flourish here:
 - *At planetary level:* since there are 1 to 30 billion planets in our galaxy and 100 billion galaxies in the universe, a perfect planet was bound to happen some time, however small the likelihood statistically.⁹
 - *At universe level:* maybe there is only one way a universe could ever be, so no intervention is needed to set the variables correctly and we are just lucky that they happen to suit life.
- Maybe there are, or have been, or will be, multiple-universes (“multiverses” “megaverses”) with different combinations of the key variables; we are in a position to observe only this one, which suits us perfectly.¹⁰

“It is tempting to think (and many have succumbed) that to postulate a plethora of universes is a profligate luxury which should not be allowed. If we are going to permit the extravagance of a multiverse, so the argument runs, we might as well be hung for a sheep as for a lamb and allow a God... The key difference between the genuinely extravagant God hypothesis and the apparently extravagant multiverse is one of statistical improbability. The multiverse, for all that it is extravagant, is simple. God, or any intelligent, decision-taking, calculating agent, would have to be highly improbable in the very same statistical sense as the entities he is supposed to explain. The multiverse may seem extravagant in sheer number of universes. But if each one of those universes is simple in its fundamental laws, we are still not postulating anything highly improbable. The very opposite has to be said of any kind of intelligence.”¹¹

Arguments from Balance of Probability

Although precursors may be found from Plato onwards, the first and most famous of these is Blaise Pascal’s (1623 -1662) *Pensées* (published posthumously in 1670). Unimpressed by traditional theoretical arguments for the existence of God, and arguing that we should distinguish the personal God of the believer from the God of the philosopher (God is “God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, not of philosophers and scholars”).

Pascal developed three arguments, known as ‘Pascal’s Wager’.¹² Pascal asserts that:

- As we cannot know whether or not God exists. We must ‘wager’ one way or the other. Our decision on which side to wager can be based on the expected outcome.
- Your reason is no more shocked in choosing one rather than the other, since you must of necessity choose
- Let us weigh the gain and the loss in wagering that God is. If you gain, you gain all; if you lose, you lose nothing; wager then, without hesitation that God exists.

⁹ Dawkins 134-5

¹⁰ Dawkins 141-151

¹¹ Dawkins 146-147

¹² Which combines justification of theism with early expositions of ‘Decision theory’ and ‘Probability Theory’



Effectively:

- Wager for God = Gain all if God does exist, lose nothing if God doesn't exist
- Wager against God = Misery if God does exist, gain nothing if God doesn't exist

However this only works if you consider that there is some probability that God exists and that you consider the proposition rationally: ¹³

- Either God exists or God does not exist, and you can either wager for God or wager against God.
- Rationality requires the probability that you assign to God existing to be positive, and not infinitesimal.
- Rationality requires you to perform the act of maximum expected utility (positive outcome, when there is one).
- Conclusion 1: Rationality requires you to wager for God.
- Conclusion 2: You should wager for God.

Arguments from probability are central to Plantinga's rejection of 'atheistic naturalism', to Richard Swinburne's apologetics, and Keith Ward's argument in, 'Why There Almost Certainly Is a God - Doubting Dawkins', and indeed Richard Dawkins himself.

Arguments from Consciousness and Morality ¹⁴

Richard Swinburne contends that though there is little force in the argument for God's existence from the existence of morality, "the human awareness of significant moral truths" is a different matter,

"...there is no great probability that moral awareness will occur in a Godless universe, and an increasingly large improbability, as we consider more and more phenomena, that they will all occur – for example, not merely will there be a universe, but it will be governed by simple laws, etc., etc., and contain conscious beings with moral awareness" (p 218)

In conjunction with the classical argument from morality, and drawing on John Locke (1690) Swinburne has developed the argument from consciousness. While acknowledging that consciousness derives from 'brain events', he argues that it is not in itself physical but more akin to what traditionally has been described as the 'soul' which is inexplicable by simple mechanics.

The Argument from Providence ¹⁵

Swinburne develops an argument from Providence, which he defines as "the opportunities we have for making significant differences". It is an argument which requires the existence of actual evils, and the 'significant probability' that a God would create 'humanly free agents' able to choose to provide for ourselves and for others, whether selfishly or altruistically and in line with our responsibilities. As such it is a useful argument in

¹³ Table from Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy

¹⁴ See Swinburne (2004) ch 9

¹⁵ See Swinburne (2004) ch10



discussion of one of the main objections to faith, 'The Problem of Evil', outlined below in these notes.

WHERE ARE THE CLASSICAL ARGUMENTS NOW?

Can they still work?

- When belief in God is not so generally accepted?¹⁶
- When modernity requires foolproof evidence, which assumes nothing?¹⁷
- When post-modernity is less interested in evidence and logical argument?¹⁸

Maybe:

- They can show theism is not unreasonable
- They may be important for some
- They connect with the growing consensus that belief is part of all knowledge and we accept many things as "fact" without actually proving every assumption from first principles¹⁹

Michael Polanyi says we know the world from within it, as we live within it and interact with it. And there are things we know or understand without being particularly aware that we know them or able to explain reasons for what we know. So for Polanyi there's no such thing as a pure fact untainted by the knower or the act of knowing. And there's also no scope for doubting everything - in practice a great many things are assumed by scientists, for instance the reliability of measuring something as a guide to reality, so all knowledge is based on a whole set of beliefs.

Polanyi is quite explicit about the implications of this for religious faith. Religious faith is only a particular kind of knowledge that requires even more in the way of personal commitment:

"Admittedly, religious conversion commits our whole person and changes our whole being in a way that an expansion of natural knowledge does not do. But once the dynamics of knowing are recognized as the dominant principle of knowledge, the difference appears only as one of degree..."²⁰

- They can only ever be part of the story: for a Christian, Jesus must be the key source for thinking about God
- Christian faith is not about intellectual assent to arguments but about learning the craft of discipleship as part of a community of discipleships.²¹

Karen Armstrong suggests this is the case for all religion: "Today's literal reading of scripture by fundamentalists and the new atheists alike is unprecedented... in the history

¹⁶ See See Hauerwas, *With the Grain*, 26-35

¹⁷ Hauerwas, *With the Grain*, 26-35

¹⁸ See Beattie, 132-133

¹⁹ So Michael Polanyi (Hungarian-British scientist and philosopher of science, 1891-1976

²⁰ See Polanyi *Faith and Reason*

²¹ See Hauerwas *How We Lay Bricks*



of faith and ignores the fact that religion is a practical discipline rather than an intellectual doctrine.”²²

She compares religion with learning to cook, drive or play a board game. You cannot learn these skills simply from a recipe, the Highway Code and a car ‘Owner Manual’ or from the board game rules. Rather you learn from “constant, dedicated practice”.

“Religion... was not primarily something that people thought but something that people did. Its truth was acquired by practical action... religion is a practical discipline... The early Taoists saw religion as a ‘knack’ acquired by constant practice... In the pre-modern world people believed that God exceeded our thoughts and concepts and could only be known by dedicated practice. We have lost sight of this important insight and, I believe, this is one of the reasons why so many Western people find the concept of God so difficult today.” (3-9)

THE NEW ATHEISTS: WHO ARE THEY AND WHAT DO THEY SAY?

Recent writings

These three books:

Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* 2006

Christopher Hitchens, *God is Not Great*, 2007

Sam Harris, *The End of Faith*, 2004

- Went straight to the bestseller lists in Britain and US, except ‘End of Faith’ only in the US.
- ‘The God Delusion’ sold more than 1.5 million copies.
- According to Amazon, in 2007 these books led to a 50% growth in their sales of books on religion and spirituality (including anti-religious books) and a 120% increase in the sales of the Bible.²³
- ‘The End of Faith’ is about the clash between religious faith and rational thought, and the problems of tolerance towards religious fundamentalism.
- Harris began writing the book in what he described as a period of "collective grief and stupefaction" following the September 11, 2001 attacks. The book consists of a wide-ranging criticism of all styles of religious belief.²⁴
- ‘The End of Faith’ was awarded the PEN/Martha Albrand Award for First Nonfiction
- In ‘God is Not Great’ Hitchens contends that religion is "violent, irrational, intolerant, allied to racism, tribalism, and bigotry, invested in ignorance and hostile to free inquiry, contemptuous of women and coercive toward children"(56) “Hitchens supports his position with a mixture of personal stories, documented historical anecdotes and critical analysis of religious texts.”²⁵

²² See BBC Radio 4 website, Start the Week 6th July 2009

²³ The Observer, Sunday 12 August 2007

²⁴ Quote from Wikipedia

²⁵ Quote from Wikipedia



'The God Delusion': A brief overview

▪ Main argument:

- After Darwin's theory of evolution and in the light of modern science, it is no longer rational to believe in God.
- Other traditional arguments for the existence of God can also be countered.
- Belief in God qualifies as a delusion, which Dawkins defines as a "persistent false belief held in the face of strong contradictory evidence"(5).
- Religion is responsible for most of the violence in history; it has a corrupting influence on values and ethics. To bring up children with religious identity is tantamount to child abuse. Religion is unjustifiably privileged in our society.
- We don't need religion to be happy, moral, fulfilled beings.

▪ Outline:

- The book starts with a quotation from The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy): "isn't it enough to see that a garden is beautiful without having to believe that there are fairies at the bottom of it too?".
- The book contains ten chapters. The first few build a case that there is almost certainly no God, while the rest discuss religion and morality. (Wikipedia)
- Dawkins begins by making it clear that the God he talks about is the Abrahamic concept of a personal God who is susceptible to worship.
- Dawkins looks briefly at the main philosophical arguments in favour of God's existence, focusing mainly on the argument from design. He concludes that evolution by natural selection can explain apparent design in nature.
- In the second half of the book he proposes an evolutionary theory as to why religion has spread across human cultures. He explains it as an accidental by-product, which we now need to eradicate.
- He then looks at morality, maintaining that we do not need religion to be good. He argues that religion subverts science, fosters fanaticism, encourages bigotry, and influences society in other negative ways. He is most outraged about the indoctrination of children. He equates the religious indoctrination of children by parents and teachers in faith schools to a form of mental abuse.
- The book concludes with the question whether religion, despite its alleged problems, fills a "much needed gap", giving consolation and inspiration to people who need it. According to Dawkins, these needs are much better filled by non-religious means such as philosophy and science. He suggests that an atheistic worldview is life affirming in a way that religion, with its unsatisfying "answers" to life's mysteries, could never be.

▪ Dawkins' key goals in 'The God Delusion' (page numbers in brackets)

- To show that it is intellectually credible to be an atheist (1)
- To encourage people not to settle for unconsidered agnosticism but work on the questions till they reach atheism (46-54)
- To critique philosophical arguments for the existence of God (chapters 3,4,6) and against the more recent Intelligent Design movement (chapter 4)



- To show that the balance of probability is against the existence of God (51, 69, 109) - although logically non-existence can never be absolutely proved (51, 54, 109)
- To show that atheism is not a belief, but the only reasonable response to the facts (51, 69, 283)
- To suggest that atheists are usually more intelligent and probably more moral than believers (3, 5,6, 102, 229, 284)

▪ **Criticism of The God Delusion**

- Lack of engagement with theology and biblical scholarship
- No clarification around 'religion'
- Failure to acknowledge limitations of science
- Polemical
- Culturally specific
- Lack of engagement with theology and biblical scholarship

Other comments:

- Andrew Brown reviewed it for Prospect as: "Incurious, dogmatic, rambling and self-contradictory"
- Dawkins is explicitly dismissive of theology in The God Delusion, "there is hardly a serious work of philosophy of religion cited in his extensive bibliography" John Cornwell
- Terry Eagleton says Dawkins writing on theology is like "someone holding forth on biology whose only knowledge of the subject is the Book of British Birds" (LRB review) Dawkins himself replies to the charge of inadequate scholarship in the preface to the new edition of the book. He asks, "Do you have to read up on leprechology before disbelieving in leprechauns?"
- Antony Flew commented in a review of 'The God Delusion' that "The fault of Dawkins as an academic ... was his scandalous and apparently deliberate refusal to present the doctrine which he appears to think he has refuted in its strongest form" - Dawkins claims not to be setting up a caricature/weakest possible version of his opponent (or straw man) in order to demolish it more easily (31). He also tries to head off the argument "The God Dawkins doesn't believe in is a God that I don't believe in either. I don't believe in an old man in the sky with a long beard" (36) by saying that he is attacking God or gods in general not one particular God. However, in criticising the "unpleasant" (31) God of the NT he does not engage with Christians' attempts to deal with their own difficulties with this picture of God.
- Many Christians would gladly concede that they cannot prove God. But, having believed in God, they believe they can give a reasoned and reasonable account of that faith. Dawkins does not engage with this approach - but seems willing to allow moral philosophers a similar approach in his discussion of morality. Dawkins quotes Robert Hinde's description of moral philosophy's agreement that "moral precepts, while not necessarily constructed by reason, should be defensible by reason" (232).
- The version of Christian faith which Dawkins criticises is creationist/ID and broadly fundamentalist/literal in its view of scripture (eg 237-248) and doesn't acknowledge the attempts of other Christians to wrestle with issues like the violence in the Hebrew Scriptures.
- He does not engage either with views of God put forward by writers such as William Placher, Jürgen Moltmann, Paul Fiddes or by a number of contributors in the book 'The



Openness of God'. These approaches suggest a God more willing to take risks and give away power than the kind of God Dawkins dismisses. (And to the extent that Dawkins considers a God who chooses natural selection as the best way of achieving creation, he dismisses this God as lazy.) But maybe a God who chooses the risk and vulnerability of incarnation, temptation, rejection and death as a way of meeting human need might also choose randomness and natural selection as God's way of creating.

▪ **No clarification around 'religion'**

- Dawkins deals primarily with Christianity but uses 'religion' as a catch-all phrase to describe everything that doesn't fit within his scientific world-view. There is little or no mention of Judaism, Buddhism or Hinduism, let alone all the many strains within these major religions.
- He doesn't accept that those who share his scientific world-view could be religious or believe in God. Side steps the challenge of Einstein (by counting Einstein as deist not theist).
- Doesn't acknowledge the huge violence that has been done by atheist regimes, such as Nazism and Stalinism.

▪ **Failure to acknowledge limitations of science**

- Similarly Dawkins doesn't recognise that science isn't all good. Pollution, weapons. Human wickedness arises from a complexity of human motivations, to blame it on religion is to find a scapegoat.
- Dawkins constantly belittles belief in God by saying it is childish, like a belief in Santa Claus, or the tooth fairy. But, argues Denys Turner (1-22), the child asks why, and truly off-beat questions that the adult can't predict. They ask until science, knowledge, reality and language have run out of things to say. That is where theology begins (according to Aquinas) with a question so childish that adult answers are irrelevant. Why is there something rather than nothing? To be an atheist you have to resist asking questions if you do not know in principle that they can be answered. It requires a powerful mental asceticism.
- Dawkins is willing to believe in luck at a few key junctures in the history of the universe. (See Varghese's preface to 'There Is A God' (xvii) and the Flew/Wiker interview.) Dawkins: "[Natural selection] needs some luck to get started" (141). Dawkins explains this "initial stroke of luck" (140) for the origin of life, which he deals with by "postulating a very large number of planetary opportunities". Similar "[o]ne-off events" are the origin of eucaryotic cells and the origin of consciousness (140). Again these are explained by postulating billions of planets, so many that even events with the tiniest of probabilities were bound to happen somewhere eventually. At this point Dawkins rules out design but does not address other ways in which God might be involved in these processes.
- Darwin assumes that disproving creationism and Intelligent Design also disproves God. However many believers (eg Francis Collins, head of the Human Genome Project, in his book *The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief*) accept evolution, reject intelligent design and yet believe in God.
- Scientific theories can't tell us the stories that we need to live by. Though the scientific theory of evolution can also function as a myth which tells us about our place in the world. Mary Midgley argues that evolution, as well as having a place in science, has



also become “a powerful folk-tale about human origins”, by which atheists confer meaning on the world (cited in Beattie 11-13). Atheism is a faith position.

- Science cannot fully describe reality. Francis Collins “If we are using the scientific net to catch our particular version of truth, we should not be surprised that it doesn’t catch the evidence of spirit” (229). It’s one thing to ask what caused the world or to describe it in scientific terms, and quite another to ask what it means or claim that the scientific description is the only valid one. Dawkins doesn’t discuss other things, which are not fully described or explained in scientific terms alone, such as love, beauty, art, literature etc, and he appears to deal with questions about human meaning and purpose by discounting them (100)
- Dawkins demands proof of God’s existence, for only that which we can prove beyond reasonable doubt is worthy of belief he says. But we can no more prove God than we can prove the existence of love, beauty or hope. I cannot prove my best friend loves me, that Mozart’s music is sublime or Monet’s paintings are beautiful but it is not irrational or deluded to believe so (Beattie, 12)
- “[O]ur capacity to believe in intangible truths such as goodness, love, and beauty is the source of our most creative human endeavours.” (Beattie, 12)
- Dawkins himself hints at this in his last chapter about quantum physics where he discusses how little we know and understand about the physical universe and its laws. It seems to undermine his whole point that our secure knowledge of the real world makes belief in God unreal and therefore irrational.
- Dawkins doesn’t address the question of our fundamental beliefs for which we don’t require proof (and on the basis of which we learn and evaluate other things). These things are self-evident to us. So for instance, if I have a headache or see a tree, I don’t look for evidence before concluding that I have a headache or seeing a tree. I simply know that I have a headache and see a tree and accept that as a given. And I know that $1 + 2 = 3$. The philosophical term for these “givens” is “basic beliefs”. Alvin Plantinga claims that the key difference between theists and atheists is not that they start with the same basic beliefs but then draw different conclusions as to whether God exists or can be proved but that they have different sets of basic beliefs. For a theist, belief in the existence of God is “basic”.²⁶

Plantinga further makes the contentious argument from the unreliability of human cognition,²⁷ that to believe in Naturalism (“crucial to metaphysical naturalism, of course, is the view that there is no such person as the God of traditional theism”) is not compatible with acceptance of theories of evolution, in direct opposition to Dawkins and others. In summary; the randomness of the naturalist universe, while leading to behaviours and traits helping organisms to survive, cannot be said to hold true for beliefs, or reliability of our ‘rational’ thought. For the theist, being made in the image of God leads to a much stronger probability that our rational beliefs are reliable.²⁸

²⁶ See Plantinga *Reason and Belief in God* p 46, 80-82, 90

²⁷ First explored in Chapter 12 of *Warrant and Proper Function* (1993), also in a recent article in Christianity Today (2008)

²⁸ It is extremely important to see that naturalism itself, despite the smug and arrogant tone of the so-called New Atheists, is in very serious philosophical hot water: one can’t sensibly believe evolution and naturalism are not merely uneasy bedfellows; they are more like belligerent combatants. One can’t rationally accept both evolution and naturalism; one can’t rationally be an evolutionary naturalist. See Christianity Today: Books and Culture Jul/Aug 2008



▪ **Polemical**

“In the preface to *The God Delusion* Dawkins declares that his intention is to convert religious believers to atheism by helping them to overcome their ‘childhood indoctrination’ in order ‘to break free from the vice of religion’.” (Beattie, 3) He sets himself up as a saviour to fight for souls in the clutches of evil. In this very testosterone-charged debate scientists are taking over from Christians as the custodians of the one and only truth. (Beattie, 10) Dawkins also sets up a utopia – the glowing promise of happiness when religion is wiped from the earth.

- John Cornwell, one of the Dawkins refuters, writes a letter to *The Sunday Times*, from God to Dawkins, ending: “You have not heard the last of me”. This sums up “the perennial stag-fight between men of Big Ideas” (Beattie, 9), using God on their side.
- New Atheism uses loaded language, labels its enemies, is intolerant of differences and focuses only on the negative, painting a skewed picture of religion. Their belief that acceptance of evolution leaves no room for God is an assumption, an article of faith as much as any religious world-view.
- Dawkins sets up *The God Delusion* as a serious, scientific book, but the blurb on the dust-jacket features Philip Pullman, Brian Eno, Derren Brown. These popular figures suggest a genre not of science but of blockbuster, preacher, propagandist.

▪ **Culturally specific**

- New Atheism is primarily British and American. It is, according to Eagleton (LRB review) “a very English brand of common sense that believes mostly in what it can touch, weigh and taste.” This is because all forms of belief are a product of their social and historical environments. Hitchens himself confesses to a ‘Protestant atheism’ (11) – “from the intellectual environment associated with white conservative men” (Beattie, 5), primarily concerned with evidence, proof and rationality.
- The New Atheists apparently react against the particular versions of the Christian faith in which they have been brought up (Beattie 128 on Dawkins, 31)

Do the New Atheists have a point?

▪ **Facing realities**

- Religion certainly has a lot to answer for in the way that it has distorted truth and manipulated people.
- Yates said, “Hatred of God may bring the soul to God”, the disturbing questions may actually bring people closer to the truth
- Don Cupitt says, “The dissolution of God, and our attainment of perfect union with God, are one and the same thing”
- Christians must acknowledge many criticisms and affirm some aspects of Dawkins’ challenge, they fail to do so at their peril.
- The church has often created and presented a distorted image of God



▪ Religion has a lot to answer for

- Religion has been used to create fear, bigotry, hatred and violence. The threat of hell has been used like a story of the big bad wolf to prevent straying into the woods.
- Christians do pick and choose which bits of scripture to believe and which to ignore. There has been a great deal of dangerous sexual repression.
- Darwin has posed a challenge to the Design Argument.
- The New Atheists have missed a trick in not properly discussing the challenges made by Marx and Nietzsche. Both sought to oppose the influence of religious power on humankind. Nietzsche took the side of Jesus against his inadequate followers, of God against the priestly caste (Kee 1999, p166). Religion can and has made people docile and subservient to the ruling classes. Belief in God may stop people from finding their own superman within, but relying on a saviour to save them from themselves.
- Religious groups are often privileged in public life eg ethical debates, House of Lords, Radio 4 Thought for the Day, national mourning etc
- The problem of indoctrination – Dawkins (51-54) quotes Bertrand Russell: if he believed in a china teapot that was orbiting between the Earth and Mars, too small to be revealed by telescopes, we would think he was nuts. If the teapot was affirmed in ancient books, taught as truth every Sunday and instilled into children at school you would be seen as eccentric for not believing in it. Indoctrination is very powerful and the fear of questioning in a lot of churches is worrying.

▪ Christians must acknowledge criticism

- Defensive Christians are in danger of failing to take aspects of Dawkins' challenge to take the question of (a)theism seriously
- Christians can be inconsistent. Dawkins accuses Christians of seizing on some scientific discoveries as endorsing Christian claims and dismissing those that challenge their views by saying that science cannot adjudicate on matters of faith (59).
- Some Christian approaches use God to fill in the gaps in scientific knowledge ("God of the gaps"), rather than having a holistic understanding of faith and science.
- Christians should affirm Dawkins' insistence that agnosticism can be intellectually honest only as a temporary stage until one reaches a conclusion.

▪ Church has often presented a distorted image of God

- When the philosophers try to prove the existence of God, there is a particular God they have in mind – an omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent God, the God of Greek philosophy and of a church often close to power and the establishment. When the New Atheists try to disprove the existence of God, they have the same God in mind. They are both complicit in a cosy, mutually reassuring idolatrous domesticity by which they emphasise what God is like by how they argue about him. This is why they fail. But their very questioning can lead us to break down false representations of God. Anyone who thinks they know what God is is guilty of idolatry, according to Denys Turner.
- Because Divinity has so often been associated with masculinity in Christianity, beliefs about God are influenced by masculine fantasies and projections. The New Atheists are reacting to this projection of the very worst excesses of masculine power and violence. But there is a distant echo of the God they reject in the image they present of themselves. (Beattie 126-128)



- The church has created and presented a monstrously distorted image of God. Terrible things have been done in the name of God imagined this way. Addressing this would benefit Christians as well as giving resources to engage with the arguments and challenges of the New Atheists.

CONCLUSIONS

- God's existence can not be proven or disproved
- There is a modest place for classical and other arguments for the existence of God - it is helpful to have some (classical or other) arguments to show that Christian faith is not only internally coherent but also reasonably consistent with the world as we find it, and to give constructive ways of responding to Dawkins and others
- Belief in God is less about logic, more about a felt sense.
- Religion and belief in God have an intimate and intricate relationship
- For Christians belief in God must be centred on Jesus and be belief in a God seen most clearly in Jesus
- There are lots of challenges around what kind of God we profess to believe in and how we go about arguing for or against God. Taking Jesus as the starting point and centre for their faith in God may help Christians address the challenges of atheist arguments which:
 - Are fuelled by the abuses of religion
 - Seek to disprove a more abstract or distorted view of God than one that starts from Jesus

Questions

1. What do you find the most challenging aspect of the New Atheist engagement with people of faith?
2. What have the new Atheists missed and what are their main weaknesses?
3. How would you teach children and young people about faith and the existence of God in a way that would enable them not only to develop a mature spirituality, but also to be able to dialogue creatively and confidently with atheists new and old?

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