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NEW ATHEIST APPROACHES TO RELIGION

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Serious argument depends on mutual respect, and this is often hard to engender when disagreements turn vehement.

(Dennett 2006/2007: 66)

If you encounter people who think it might still be intellectually respectable to believe in God in any literal sense, direct them to *The God Delusion*, where they will get their heads dismantled – and reassembled with a different perspective.

(Dennett 2006/2007: 64)

The advent of the twenty-first century brought with it a number of publishing crazes. While many of these were less than cerebral – often involving teens, wizards, and vampires – a more intellectual movement which came to be known as ‘the New Atheism’ produced a number of best-selling books (Dawkins 2006a; Dennett 2006; Harris 2004, 2006; Hitchens 2007). This led, in turn, to both a host of lesser, look-alike atheist volumes (Barker 2008; Loftus 2010; Mills 2006; Stenger 2007) and numerous anti-New Atheist tomes (Berlinski 2008; Crean 2007; Feser 2008; Hart 2010; McGrath and McGrath 2007). Despite the voluminous literature from the New Atheists, the most serious argument against God’s existence they have advanced has received surprisingly little attention from academic philosophers of religion, perhaps because the arguments tend to get lost in a flurry of rhetoric and one-upmanship. However, it is the job of serious philosophers to isolate and evaluate the important arguments. In this chapter, we therefore focus on the central argument from the New Atheism.

Taking a step back, one reason for little more than a hint of interest in the arguments of the New Atheists from philosophers of religion may be that of the four principal figures – Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Christopher Hitchens, and Sam Harris – only Dennett is a philosopher, and even he does not work in philosophy of religion. In addition, the theistic arguments of leading philosophers of religion like Richard Swinburne and Alvin Plantinga are conspicuously absent from their texts. In the five seemingly canonical works of the New Atheism, Plantinga is only mentioned in two footnotes of Dennett (2006: 406–7, 409), while Swinburne appears, but is repeatedly dubbed a ‘theologian’ in Dawkins (2006a: 58, 63, 65, 147), despite multiple appointments in philosophy, including nearly two decades at Oxford. Their lack of training and

neglect of key literature are surely among the reasons why the New Atheists are largely seen as bush-league by professional philosophers of religion.

Moreover, philosophers' reviews of the most well-known New Atheist work, Dawkins's *The God Delusion*, were highly critical. One might have expected unsympathetic reviews from theists. Plantinga (2007: 24), for instance, said it 'is full of bluster and bombast, but it really doesn't give even the slightest reason for thinking belief in God mistaken, let alone a "delusion"'. But some naturalists like Thomas Nagel also complained. 'Since Dawkins is operating mostly outside the range of his scientific expertise, it is not surprising that *The God Delusion* lacks the superb instructive lucidity of his books on evolutionary theory' (Nagel 2006: 25). Even many non-religious allies in Dawkins's own evolution community were quite harsh. H. Allen Orr (2007: 22) criticizes Dawkins for failing 'to engage religious thought in any serious way' – adding that while he used to think of Dawkins as a 'professional atheist', he's 'forced, after reading his new book, to conclude he's actually more an amateur'. And Michael Ruse (2009) claimed that Dawkins 'would fail any introductory philosophy or religion course'; and for this reason Ruse says *The God Delusion* made him 'ashamed to be an atheist'. With these sorts of attitudes toward the work of the New Atheists abounding, it is easy to see why philosophers of religion, both theists and naturalists, have paid so little sustained attention to their arguments. But we should not be too quick to dismiss them, for, in our view, even their failure may be quite instructive. And in this case, Dawkins at least seizes on the right *kind* of problem. This can lead to helpful clarification of key issues.

To be fair, the New Atheists sometimes claim that their works are intended as consciousness-raisers for average folk (Dawkins 2006a: 1); they are 'not an attempt to contribute to the academic micro-discipline of philosophical theology' (Dennett 2007: 59). But we assume here that insofar as they are intended to convince anyone, the arguments of the New Atheists are proffered as sound. Therefore, there is nothing unfair about evaluating them from a logical perspective. As Dawkins writes, 'If this book works as I intend, religious readers who open it will be atheists when they put it down' (Dawkins 2006a: 5). Presumably he doesn't just want such readers to become atheists as a result of having a stroke while reading, but, rather, wants them to be convinced by his reasoning. And, we further assume, he doesn't want anyone convinced by bad reasoning, whether his or someone else's. In what follows, we examine in detail the most formidable argument against God's existence to emerge from the New Atheism: Dawkins's Ultimate 747 Gambit.

The New Atheists on the traditional arguments for God's existence

A surprising fact about the chief works of the New Atheists is the dearth of arguments one finds against the existence of God. One finds a number of attempts at *undercutting* defeaters for theistic belief – for example, evolutionary explanations of the origin of theistic belief in terms of certain cognitive mechanisms (Dawkins 2006a: 161–207; Dennett 2006: 97–246).¹ In addition, one finds a great deal about *particular* religious beliefs the New Atheists find silly, the scientific ignorance of swaths of the faithful, and the repeated assertion that belief in God is *unnecessary* (to be moral, to have a fulfilling life, etc.). But, unlike the professional literature (e.g., Schellenberg 2006; Draper and Dougherty 2013), one finds very little in the way of candidates for *rebutting* defeaters – i.e., positive argumentation against God's existence (or the probability thereof). A notable and commendable exception to this comes in Dawkins (2006a).

From the beginning, the God whose existence Dawkins seeks to disprove is not conceived as philosophers typically conceive him (i.e., as the omni-God of classical theism) but rather as 'a supernatural creator that is "appropriate for us to worship"' (Dawkins 2006a: 13). It is unclear

whether Dawkins thinks it appropriate to worship, for instance, a really good but not morally perfect Creator, a contingently perfect Creator, etc. Regardless, the hypothesis he targets claims that

(God Hypothesis) *there exists a super-human, supernatural intelligence who deliberately designed and created the universe and everything in it, including us.*

(Dawkins 2006a: 31)

He later clarifies that ‘Goodness is no part of the *definition* of the God Hypothesis, merely a desirable add-on’ (Dawkins 2006a: 108). This is an assumption in need of a great deal of defence, however, if he wishes his reasoning to apply to sophisticated theisms. According to Swinburne (1994: Chapters 6–7, especially 151ff), for example, God’s goodness follows from his being omniscient and omnipotent, along with a certain theologically neutral thesis in ethics: motivational internalism. According to motivational internalism, which finds its first major supporter in Socrates, when an agent conceives something as good, they are motivated to pursue it. Only weakness of will could prevent pursuit of the good. God, being omniscient, always knows what is good, and, being omnipotent, is always rightly motivated by it. Thus God’s perfect goodness is entailed by these two fundamental properties and included in his essence (and therefore his definition).

Before Dawkins presents his case against God’s existence, he is so kind as to discharge – in a mere thirty-three pages, no less – his ‘responsibility to dispose of the positive arguments for belief that have been offered through history’ (Dawkins 2006a: 73). And it is right that he do so. For even if he proffered an argument against the existence of God, theism might still be probable on the whole if there are good positive arguments. While space does not permit a detailed consideration of his ‘disposal’, it is worth noting that his limited understanding of God at the outset affects his ability to understand, let alone actually refute, these arguments. For example, Dawkins dismisses Thomistic regress arguments from motion/change, causation, and contingency, claiming that they ‘make the entirely unwarranted assumption that God himself is immune to the regress’ (Dawkins 2006a: 77). Dawkins’s summaries and interpretations of Aquinas’s arguments are grossly inadequate and uncharitable. He fails, for example, to understand that Aquinas’s third way is not a regress argument from physico-temporal existence but from *contingent* existence. Dawkins (2006a: 77) complains that even if the argument were conceded there is no reason to endow the regress terminator with God’s other properties like omnipotence. But attentive readers will recall that, in Aquinas’s work of natural theology *Summa Contra Gentiles*, the five ways come at the beginning of a lengthy four-book series. Aquinas then proceeds to argue for this being’s other properties like eternity, goodness, and intelligence as corollaries of more basic properties like aseity.²

When Dawkins sees an ‘unwarranted assumption’, philosophers of religion will quickly see a failure to understand the properties God is thought to possess. God has been thought to be pure actuality or being itself; so he is a pretty good candidate for stopping the change and causation regresses in that he doesn’t need something further to actualize his potential. God exists with *aseity* (i.e., he exists necessarily rather than receiving his being from another); thus he is a pretty good candidate for stopping the contingency regress – a far better candidate than Dawkins’s preferred solution of a “‘big bang singularity”, or some other physical concept as yet unknown” which is presumably still contingent (Dawkins 2006a: 78). In short, Dawkins’s failure to appreciate what philosophers and theologians have traditionally meant by ‘God’ seriously hampers his ability to engage the classical arguments for God’s existence in a decorous manner. Dawkins likewise evaluates the ontological argument without considering modern versions (e.g., Plantinga 1974b). This may be because modern versions are presented in modal logic, in which Dawkins has no training. One would expect, however, that whereof one cannot speak,

thereof one should remain silent. Also absent are arguments engaging modern arguments from religious experience; he doesn't consider a single piece of contemporary religious epistemology like Alston (1991), Plantinga (2000), or Swinburne (2004: 293–327).

Other New Atheists are similarly dismissive of theistic arguments for God's existence. Dennett considers and rejects the classical theistic arguments in only seven pages (Dennett 2006: 240–46); fails to consider modern versions of the ontological argument (Dennett 2006: 241–42); and attacks the weakest possible version of the cosmological argument (Dennett 2006: 242). Hitchens, like Dawkins before him, contends that arguments such as Aquinas's five ways fail miserably for essentially the same reason Dawkins cites. He informs us that the metaphysical claims of religion are clearly false to those who only know how to apply Ockham's Razor to first-cause arguments. God, he alleges, is simply superfluous. First-cause arguments fail because

a cause will itself need another cause. ... Thus the postulate of a designer or creator only raises the unanswerable question of who designed the designer or created the creator. Religion and theology ... have consistently failed to overcome this objection.

(Hitchens 2007: 71)

Unlike Dawkins, Hitchens does not do readers the courtesy of laying out the logic of regress arguments for God's existence; nor does he bother to defend the proposition that it is possible for an infinite series of essentially ordered efficient causes or contingent beings to exist. Regardless, some versions of the cosmological argument do not assume the impossibility of such an infinite regress. Needless to say, the classical arguments deserve a bit more credit. But importantly, as we will see below, Hitchens is in great accord with Dawkins's emphasis on Ockham's Razor and the problem of the origin of any potential designer.

Dawkins on why there almost certainly is no God

Let us consider now Dawkins's positive case against God's existence. Dawkins kindly summarizes the six major points of his argument (Dawkins 2006a: 157–58). What Dawkins calls The Ultimate 747 Gambit³ begins with the frank admission that the greatest human minds have consistently puzzled over the origin of the appearance of design in the universe. Second, Dawkins notes the continual allure of attributing this appearance to the actual design of a designer. Third, however, this temptation should be suppressed, for only bottom-up explanations truly explain complexity.⁴ Fourth, Darwinian biology has shown that there is a bottom-up explanation for all such things in biology and thus that the appearance of biological design is only an appearance. Fifth, we don't really have an equivalent design-denying theory in physics, though there are possibilities like the multiverse theory. Yet, sixth, given the anthropic principle, even *possible* bottom-up explanations are obviously better than positing a designer. (Throughout the actual argument, however, the claim is much stronger: God is no explanation for the universe's apparent design *at all*.)

This argument, he claims, 'demonstrates that God, though not technically disprovable, is very improbable' and makes 'the God Hypothesis ... untenable' (Dawkins 2006a: 109, 158). This master argument, he maintains,

is a very serious argument against the existence of God, and one to which I have yet to hear a theologian give a convincing answer despite numerous opportunities and invitations to do so. Dan Dennett rightly describes it as 'an un rebuttable refutation, as devastating today as when Philo used it to trounce Cleanthes in Hume's Dialogues two centuries earlier'.

(Dawkins 2006a: 157)

Like Dennett, Harris (2006: 73) champions Dawkins's argument by name, and Hitchens (2007: 71) argues along similar lines. It is possible, of course, that Dawkins and company have not found a refutation of this argument because it is rather difficult to discern exactly how the argument proceeds, even with the major points summarized. Ganssle (2008) and Wielenberg (2009), for example, formalize the argument quite differently. The following is our best reconstruction:

- (1) If (i) God is no explanation at all of the apparently designed features of our world, and (ii) there are possible naturalistic explanations of the apparently designed features of our world, then God almost certainly does not exist, unless there are other good arguments for God's existence.
- (2) There are no good arguments for God's existence.
- (3) Thus, if (i) God is no explanation at all of the apparently designed features of our world, and (ii) there are possible naturalistic explanations of the apparently designed features of our world, then God almost certainly does not exist.
- (4) Any explanans more complex⁵ than its explanandum is no explanation at all of the explanandum.⁶
- (5) God, if he exists, is more complex than the apparently designed features of our world.⁷
- (6) Therefore, God is no explanation at all of the apparently designed features of our world.
- (7) There are possible naturalistic explanations of the apparently designed features of our world.
- (8) Therefore, God almost certainly does not exist.

There is much to be said here. But it is of utmost importance to observe that nearly all the heavy lifting is done by the underlying (and seemingly unexamined) principle of explanation seen in premise (4) and its crucial substitution instance in premise (5). As such, our discussion below will centre on these premises.

At this point, however, pause to consider how little of a burden Dawkins thinks an argument for atheism actually bears. Atheism need not even have very plausible or detailed stories about the naturalistic evolutionary pathways followed by many of the complex things in the biological domain; nor need it really have an explanation for the origin of the first life, the universe, consciousness, or the fine-tuning of the laws of physics. If God is no explanation at all for life or other apparently designed features of the universe, any *possible* naturalistic story will suffice to show that God is very unlikely to exist. This goes to show the very strong nature of the explanatory principle in premise (4).⁸ To put it another way, according to Dawkins (and the New Atheists who seem to approve of his argument), the atheist need not rely upon any empirical observations to show that God probably doesn't exist. After all, if God, by this explanatory principle of premise (4), is no explanation at all for apparent design, then no matter what the empirical facts, no matter how implausible current or future naturalistic explanations, God (the Creator) probably does not exist. This should indicate to the reader that while this argument appears to carry all the trappings of modern science and the prestige of sophisticated empirical investigation, at heart Dawkins's gambit is a philosophical argument relying upon an *a priori* principle about the nature of explanation. Thus we turn our attention to such principles.

Simplicity: syntactic and ontological

Dawkins requires a strong principle like that seen in premise (4) if his argument is to succeed. Recall premise (4):

- (4) Any explanans more complex than its explanandum is no explanation at all of the explanandum.

Notice that a substantive conclusion is derived from this principle. Thus it is a substantive epistemic principle leading to a conclusion about what we should believe; it is not simply a methodological principle saying that for practical purposes we should work with simpler theories. As we will see, this premise raises a host of difficult issues.

We should begin by pointing out that in science and philosophy of science the virtue of simplicity is typically treated as *one of many* virtues that a theory or explanatory entity might possess. Kuhn (1977: 321–22), for instance, famously lists several explanatory virtues, including accuracy, consistency, breadth of scope, simplicity, and fruitfulness. Dawkins appears, however, to see simplicity as *the* overriding theoretical virtue – a virtue so compelling that if an explanans lacks simplicity, or a sufficient degree of simplicity, the putative explanans is no explanation at all. This is a serious mistake. Considerations of simplicity do not typically arise until it is thought that the explanans possesses other virtues like empirical adequacy. If simplicity is a truth-indicator at all rather than a pragmatic rule of thumb – which has been the subject of on-going debate in the professional literature (Swinburne 1997; Swinburne 2001: chapter 4; Lycan 2002: 414; Rescher 2003: 232–33; White 2005; Grünbaum 2008) – then it is only a secondary virtue, not an automatic trump card.

In the literature, there are two closely related but distinct notions of simplicity which need careful disambiguation. It is not at all clear which Dawkins has in mind. He neither specifies what theory of simplicity he subscribes to nor cites any of the relevant literature, so we are left to speculate or, as we are doing here, systematically treat the major options. One sort of simplicity has been dubbed ‘syntactic simplicity’, a mathematical version of which is sometimes called ‘elegance’. This sort of simplicity consideration refers to the simplicity of the *theory* which supposedly explains a given phenomenon. That is, ‘it measures the number and conciseness of the theory’s basic principles’ (Baker 2011: 1). Throughout the history of science, many have thought it an important virtue of scientific theories that they explain a wide scope of phenomena from relatively few basic principles.

What then are we to make of the substitution instance in premise (5) if we understand premise (4) as a principle of syntactic simplicity/complexity? Is the God Hypothesis syntactically more complex than the phenomenon it is supposed to explain? Dawkins considers several natural phenomena that God is often thought to explain: the origin of life, the complexities of intra-cellular life, the fine-tuning of the physical constants, the origin of the universe itself, etc. At first glance, Dawkins’s own formulation of the God Hypothesis is so simple that it can be stated in a single sentence, some parts of which are superfluous:

(God Hypothesis) *there exists a super-human, supernatural intelligence who deliberately designed and created the universe and everything in it, including us.*

(Dawkins 2006a: 31)

And Dawkins is not alone in thinking that the God Hypothesis can be expressed concisely. The Anselmian tradition, for instance, thinks of God as ‘the greatest conceivable being’, or ‘the maximally perfect being’ (i.e., one that possesses all compossible positive perfections). In order to make the case that the God Hypothesis is more syntactically complex than the relevant explananda, Dawkins would need to specify how syntactic complexity should be assessed – which information-theoretic model, for example, should be utilized. Given that he makes no attempt to do so, it seems that he has another sort of complexity in mind.⁹ Dawkins appears less concerned with the complexity or simplicity of the God Hypothesis than with the complexity or simplicity of God himself.

The second major kind of simplicity seen in the literature has often been called ‘ontological simplicity’ or ‘parsimony’ – ‘roughly, the number and complexity of things postulated’ (Baker

2011: 4). Ockham's Razor, the dictum that we should not multiply entities beyond necessity, typically aims at capturing this latter understanding of simplicity. But again simplicity must be balanced against other virtues like explanatory power and fit with other data.¹⁰ Paul Thagard (1978: 87–89), for example, argues that an explanation with greater ontological commitments may well be preferable to simpler rivals if it holds greater concision with other known facts. When expressed carefully, parsimony principles contain *ceteris paribus* clauses to indicate that they are to be invoked only when other things (e.g., explanatory power) are equal. In this regard, if God has the causal power to explain the origin of the universe while Dawkins's multiverse does not (depending on which universe-generating mechanism he adopts), then it is not clear that other things are equal and thus not clear that a principle of ontological simplicity even comes into play. That is, it is not clear that Dawkins has proposed an alternative causally sufficient explanation, and so there is no tie for simplicity considerations to break.

As far back as Aristotle (cf. *Posterior Analytics* 86a), simplicity has been considered an explanatory virtue. And invoking ontological simplicity has been quite common. Think for instance of Lavoisier arguing that chemistry can be explained just as well without an ontological commitment to phlogiston and that the theory with lesser ontological commitment is to be preferred. Yet even within ontological simplicity, we must make a distinction between what has been called quantitative parsimony and qualitative parsimony. Both kinds of parsimony tell us to prefer explanations with fewer ontological commitments. But quantitative parsimony considers theories committed to the existence of fewer *individual* things to be a virtue while qualitative parsimony considers theories committed to the existence of fewer *kinds* of things to be a virtue. Let's consider quantitative parsimony first.

Quantitative parsimony

Quantitative parsimony has not always been considered an explanatory virtue. David Lewis (1973: 87) and others dismiss this constraint on explanation. Is the hypothesis that a particular human brain contains x number of brain cells really automatically superior to the hypothesis that it contains $x+1$ cells? These philosophers insist that such *a priori* considerations have no place in the empirical domain. Still, perhaps Dawkins might have this understanding of the virtue of simplicity in mind in premises (4) and (5).

Recall that complexity is a comparative notion in premises (4) and (5). It is perhaps one thing for God to be postulated to explain a single complex feature of life on Earth, e.g., the advent of consciousness in evolutionary history. But recall now that Dawkins mentions many such features which have long appeared to be the product of design. If quantitative parsimony is what Dawkins has in mind, then God seems an especially parsimonious explanation for all of these features conjoined; even if we are only trying to explain the designed-looking features of the world Dawkins mentions, the number of entities entailed by such features far outnumber a single God. Just think of his definition of the God Hypothesis which says that there is one entity which explains '*the universe and everything in it*' (Dawkins 2006a: 31).¹¹ Moreover, compare the God Hypothesis with Dawkins's postulation of separate contingent explanations for all of the various designed features of life and the cosmos. Think of his multiverse hypothesis – a huge ballooning of ontological commitments¹² – to explain away some apparently designed features of only one universe (viz., ours). In other words, if premise (4) is a principle of quantitative parsimony, Dawkins's own explanation may be no explanation at all.

Perhaps Dawkins might object that we are counting the quantitative complexity of entities incorrectly. Dawkins objects, for instance, to Swinburne's claim that God is a simple hypothesis because he is a single substance (Dawkins 2006a: 148). In *The Blind Watchmaker* Dawkins

develops his view of complexity more thoroughly, arguing that a complex object (i) ‘has many parts’ (which he says is ‘a necessary condition’ for complexity), (ii) these ‘constituent parts are arranged in a way that is unlikely to have arisen by chance alone’, and (iii) the combined parts achieve some end (Dawkins 1996: 11–16). So Dawkins might argue that God still seems quantitatively complex (and more so than the relevant explananda) in that God has many parts.¹³ But of course in the most literal and obvious sense, God does not have any parts at all. In *The God Delusion*, Dawkins seems to grant that God does not have literal parts but still maintains that God is complex. He cites with approval the view of Keith Ward that, ‘It is quite coherent ... to suppose that God, while indivisible, is internally complex’, and that of Julian Huxley, who ‘defined complexity in terms of “heterogeneity of parts”, by which he meant a particular kind of functional indivisibility’ (Dawkins 2006a: 150). Like Mackie (1982: 144), McGinn (1999: 86–87), and others, Dawkins may think that while God does not literally have parts he must be psychologically complex in some sense. God’s activity (both mental and in the world), argues Dawkins, entails his complexity:

A God capable of continuously monitoring and controlling the individual status of every particle in the universe *cannot* be simple. His existence is going to need a mammoth explanation in its own right. Worse (from the point of view of simplicity), other corners of God’s giant consciousness are simultaneously preoccupied with the doings and emotions and prayers of every single human being – and whatever intelligent aliens there might be on other planets in this and 100 billion other galaxies.

(Dawkins 2006a: 149)

Yet it is still unclear exactly why God’s *activity* entails his *complexity*. Perhaps Dawkins thinks God’s way of knowing – for instance, his way of knowing ‘the emotions and prayers of every single human being’ – makes him complex in that God performs a complex process of ratiocination. But of course many theologians have thought that God must not reason discursively as we reason but in a simple manner. Following Augustine, Aquinas thinks God knows everything that can be known in a single timeless act and has a single all-conjunctive thought (cf. *Summa Theologica* Ia.14.7; Zagzebski 1991). Dawkins could quibble with the theology, but this just shows that one simply can’t do philosophy of religion without doing theology; and he does not seem ready, willing, or able to do the requisite theology. Also, Swinburne (1997; 2004: 55) argues in some detail that attributing infinite power is simpler than attributing any finite quantity and illustrates this from the history of science. Regardless, neither God’s world-sustaining activity nor his ability to hear prayers are part of Dawkins’s God Hypothesis. So they cannot be used to claim that God is necessarily complex.

However, one might claim that minds necessarily have certain mental ‘components’ which, even though they are not literal parts, make a mind complex. Perhaps minds are the sorts of things which necessarily have a Platonic or Freudian tri-partite structure. On nearly any psychological model, even ones with many more sub-structures, it is still far from obvious that God is more complex than the explananda of the God Hypothesis – namely, absolutely everything that exists in the universe, including all of the billions of stars, all of the atoms, the many layers of sub-atomic particles, etc. If you doubt this, jot down on paper all the properties of God you can think of and all the possible sub-units of his psychology – every single one. Defying Dawkins’s understanding of God, you can even list all the desirable add-ons, if you wish. On a separate sheet of paper, list all of the attributes of everything in the natural world. Begin with aardvarks. Now compare lists. If the former list is really longer than the latter, perhaps you have reason to think that God is more complex than everything in the natural world conjoined. But

our guess is that your list of God's properties is much shorter. Lastly in this regard, note that the divine properties may not be logically independent from each other but reduce to one or a few properties. In fact, Swinburne (1994: 154) argues that because God's essential properties all flow from his having 'pure, limitless, intentional power', he is 'the simplest kind of person there can be'.¹⁴

Yet even if we count God's 'parts' in this strained way, and even if we grant *arguendo* that God is more complex in this quantitative sense, and even if God's properties are logically independent of each other, is it true that an entity which is more quantitatively complex than its explanandum is no explanation at all, as premise (4) claims? It would appear not. Scientists posit new entities routinely, when the data call for it. Consider, for example, the postulation of a unique and comparatively quite complex, hitherto unobserved object like Neptune to account for a few simple perturbations in the orbit of Uranus. Neptune has its own origin which needs explanation; it has a unique and highly specified orbit, a multi-faceted material composition, atmosphere, climate, moons, etc. Not only has science postulated entities more complex than their explananda, but it has repeatedly done so as part of the best kind of science.

Qualitative parsimony

At this point Dawkins might suggest that we count in yet another manner to discern the ontological complexity in favour of explanatory entities. As we mentioned, some philosophers reject quantitative parsimony for qualitative parsimony. Dawkins might reply that his postulation of the multiverse still counts as a simple explanation, because the right way to count entities here is not by individual tokens but by new *kinds*. While the multiverse postulates more token entities, for instance, they are fundamentally the same kind as our universe. Thus our ontology is no larger than before we postulated the multiverse.

This is, to say the least, an unusual way to count, and the claim of Lewis and others that only the introduction of new kinds can bloat an ontology is disputed in the literature (Nolan 1997; Huemer 2009: 216). Further, note that counting by kinds is notoriously difficult to do. Are new species of plants and animals or different fundamental particles new kinds? If so, different universes are likely to have *many* new natural kinds indeed, and Dawkins' multiverse will far outstrip the ontological commitments of the average theist. But if these don't count as new kinds, why not? What principled way is there to decide what counts as a new kind given that everything resembles some other thing in *some* way?

Yet even if we accept this possible reply from Dawkins and interpret premise (4) as a principle of qualitative parsimony, there is no guarantee that God is a new kind and thus that premise (5) is true. Most of us accept the fact that consciousness or mind is present in our world. Given this, the burden would be on Dawkins to explain why God (who has always been seen as a conscious mind) is a fundamentally new kind of entity. Dawkins even calls him superhuman – that is, like a human but greater in power. God's mental powers may be of an unimaginably greater strength than ours, but it is far from obvious that an unimaginably great and powerful intelligent agent is a new *kind* of intelligent agent in the relevant sense. In fact, the great monotheistic traditions have always believed that human beings were created as conscious, rational beings in the image and likeness of a conscious, rational being. It is difficult to see, then, why God is necessarily a new kind.¹⁵

Mackie (1982: 100) appears to think that a disembodied mind like God would be a radically new kind of person. Physicalism has fallen on hard times in recent years (Chalmers 2010; Gillett and Loewer 2001; Kim 2005; Koons and Bealer 2010; Ney 2008), and it would be a disadvantage if Dawkins's super-argument *logically required* physicalism as a premise. It would further show that the argument is much more philosophically driven than scientifically driven.¹⁶ And even if

physicalism is true, it is far from clear that Cartesian minds would be new kinds of minds in the relevant sense.

But for the sake of argument, let us slice kinds finely and concede that God is different in kind from the intelligent agents we know. We might still wonder whether it is true that science never postulates fundamentally new kinds. Is it illegitimate for physicists to postulate superstrings, virtual particles, or five-dimensional membranes? Such hypotheses, we think, are clearly explanatory despite postulating new kinds (where kinds are sliced finely). Dawkins could still insist that God is a radically different kind than anything else we know simply because he is supernatural. But is this not precisely what Newton's detractors said? Gravity, with its action at a distance, was decried as an 'occult force', inappropriate to scientific explanation and too different in kind from truly scientific hypotheses. Ultimately, we must postulate a cause that is adequate to explain the data. And when our explananda include the origin of the entire universe or the existence of contingent beings – the whole natural order – a radically different sort of cause may be the only adequate one. We conclude, then, that even if Dawkins's premises (4) and (5) are understood as referring to qualitative simplicity, these premises remain false.

Simplicity and the primitive

Perhaps what bothers Dawkins most about theism is that it leaves the ultimate origin of the world – mind – unexplained. (This is so on Swinburne's view, anyway.¹⁷ On Plantinga's view, God is a logically necessary being.) But as Plantinga reminds us, all explanations, whether theistic or naturalistic, must end somewhere (Plantinga 2011: 27–28). Something must be posited as fundamental. Still, there may be a final important comparison between naturalism and theism vis-à-vis simplicity in this regard: which theory is simpler with respect to the number of *brute* entities and properties posited? An analogy: any logical system with any useful degree of power has an infinite number of theorems. However, materially equivalent systems can be axiomatized differently, and it is considered a breakthrough when the finite axiomatic base can be reduced by showing that one of the putative axioms is a theorem of some subset of the other axioms. Both naturalism and theism may have ever so many entailments and consequences. However, the right way to assess them is to compare their axiomatic bases in terms of their most fundamental postulates.

Theism postulates *one* brute fact, and everything else follows from it in conjunction with necessary truths about value and an appeal to the most familiar kind of explanation: personal explanation. Bare theism's brute fact is the existence of a person with two properties – knowledge and power¹⁸ – held in the simplest possible way (i.e., they are held essentially, with no limitations in power or duration). The explanation of every contingent truth is a function of the goodness of the corresponding state of affairs. Since there is no best world, at times an arbitrary choice must be made as to which initial world segment to actualize among sufficiently good initial world segments.

Naturalism lacks this kind of fundamental explanatory simplicity and systematicity. There will be quite a number of brute facts, not least of which is the existence of massive quantities of contingent beings: the fundamental particles out of which the physical universe is composed. Counting up the number of brute facts in naturalism will be difficult, but it seems that inevitably it postulates more than one brute existent with only two properties held in the simplest way. The only way to have a simpler theory, on the axiomatic theory of simplicity, is to postulate one entity with a *single* property held in the simplest way (and if many theologians are right and God only has one property, it would then be a draw). There is currently no naturalistic theory which meets that criterion. And if there were, it would have to be a very unfamiliar kind of property indeed. Moreover, as Swinburne (2004: 107) points out, even if there were a

naturalistic hypothesis of equivalent simplicity, by its very nature as an inanimate explanation it would seem to lack the explanatory power of theism – that is, it would not lead us to expect all of the general features of our universe that theism does.

For naturalists, positing God as the ultimate explanation of our universe would be an increase in ontic complexity in the sense that there would be one more entity in our shared ontology. As J.J.C. Smart (1985: 275–76) reminds us, however, increases in ontic complexity are often acceptable. If they were not, we should all be forced into anti-realism about the theoretical entities of physics and much else, indeed, eventually solipsism. The real question, according to Smart, is whether the existence of the postulated entity makes the *whole system* (our whole worldview) simpler and more unified. It is plausible that in positing fewer *fundamental* entities theism accomplishes this task of unification better than naturalism. At the very least, this possibility would have to be systematically addressed before Dawkins's argument, the most precise version of a widespread and central sentiment throughout the New Atheists, could be considered even potentially successful.

Conclusion

We have raised a serious concern for Dawkins's super-argument. It appears that no matter which of the major understandings of simplicity we apply, premises (4) and (5) are false. Whether the simplicity involved is construed as syntactic or ontological, as qualitative parsimony or quantitative parsimony, it is simply too strong to claim that any explanans more complex than the explanandum is either no explanation at all or automatically a bad explanation. In addition, we gave reason to think that theism is as simple as (or more so than) naturalism in terms of the number of *fundamental* entities and properties it postulates. Thus, if there is any merit in Dawkins's Ultimate 747 Gambit, it is yet to be shown. And as Dawkins's Gambit appears to be the strongest argument against the existence of God to emerge from the New Atheists, it is highly questionable if the movement provides any reason at all for the proposition that God does not exist.

In the end, one gets the sense that Dawkins just thinks that God is a counter-intuitive and mysterious entity unworthy of taking seriously in a scientific age. Yet Dawkins himself has argued that scientific explanations are often highly counter-intuitive without being objectionable on that account (Dawkins 2000: 178–79). It may be that, as Quine (1948: 23) said, some people 'have a taste for desert landscapes'. But The Ultimate 747 Gambit leaves the unfortunate impression that something about the nature of explanation in general or scientific explanation in particular gives this aesthetic preference the force of law. In *Unweaving the Rainbow*, even Dawkins acknowledges that scientific explanations themselves often lead to even deeper mysteries further up the causal chain. The discovery of the light spectrum, for instance, might have solved the puzzle of the rainbow. But as it led to the mind-boggling discoveries of Maxwell, Einstein, and others, it may have uncovered more mysteries than it resolved. 'Mysteries do not lose their poetry when solved. Quite the contrary; the solution often turns out more beautiful than the puzzle and, in any case, when you have solved one mystery you uncover others, perhaps to inspire greater poetry' (Dawkins 2000: 41). As it is in ordinary scientific explanation, so too it may be in ultimate explanation.¹⁹

Notes

- 1 For recent arguments on both sides of this debate, see Schloss and Murray (2009).
- 2 For an accurate introduction to these Thomistic arguments, see Copleston (1955: 114–30). And for a closer treatment, see Wippel (2000: 442–500).

- 3 The name is a reference to the alleged statement of Sir Fred Hoyle, the famed English astronomer and mathematician, that the probability of life's naturalistic origination on Earth was little greater than the probability of a tornado sweeping through a junkyard and assembling a Boeing 747.
- 4 As he does elsewhere, at this point Dawkins confuses the question of the *origin* of the designer ('Who designed the designer?') with his more important claim that top-down explanations of complexity are not explanations at all. As the origin of the designer 'problem' seems to evaporate with the classical understanding of God as a necessary being – one who exists in all possible worlds – in what follows we will focus solely on the issue of what makes for a good explanation. It is noteworthy, however, that Dawkins's own naturalistic multiverse proposal, unlike a necessarily existing being, may actually require an explanation for its origin (Collins 2005b: 658–60). For a discussion of who designed the designer, see Collins (2005a).
- 5 Dawkins repeatedly treats 'complexity' and 'improbability' as synonymous. We will only speak of complexity, for if Dawkins really intends improbability here, then his argument raises concerns of circularity.
- 6 'It is obviously no solution to postulate something even more improbable [or complex]' (Dawkins (2006a: 158, emphases added). Positing theism's complex God is, then, a 'total abdication of the responsibility to find an explanation' (155).
- 7 This is clearly Dawkins's central premise in the 'Ultimate 747' argument (2006a: 120, 148–50, 154–57).
- 8 Oppy (2006a: 183–84) raises a related objection to a version of Paley's design argument, worrying that the God Hypothesis makes no explanatory progress. Paley's argument is put specifically in the language of function and suitability of constitution to function. We are not here defending any design argument let alone a specific version of a specific person's design argument. Oppy does not explicitly endorse any general principle about simplicity and explanation. Of course, a human has more by way of unexplained function and suitability of constitution to function than a hammer, until we have an explanation of humans. Yet that does not prevent us from appealing to humans as explanations of hammers. And since God has his nature non-contingently (the person who is President didn't have to be President, but the person who is God couldn't have failed to be God), so, according to this natural pattern, God is a more natural stopping point in explanation than a complex universe.
- 9 Our discussion of syntactic simplicity is woefully truncated. But given (i) that it seems unlikely that Dawkins is thinking of syntactic simplicity here, and (ii) our spatial limitations, this is unfortunate but necessary.
- 10 It is plausible that fit with other theories can be reduced to either simplicity or explanatory power. This is the approach Swinburne takes. Others maintain a multiplicity of virtues (Thagard 1978; Harman 1965; Lipton 2004).
- 11 It would be open to Dawkins to argue that the entirety of nature is just one, single substance, but this seems ad hoc and inconsistent with other things Dawkins says, such as that there are trees and birds. Perhaps he would bite the bullet and say that there really are no trees and birds because they are just modes of the One Substance. But we will not pursue this suggestion further here.
- 12 There are two ways to think of the multiverse hypothesis: either it increases the number of universes or it increases the complexity of the one mega-universe. On either way of proceeding the view is anything but quantitatively parsimonious.
- 13 While it may at first glance appear otherwise, when Dawkins alleges that God is more complex than that which he is invoked to explain, he is not taking issue with the doctrine of 'divine simplicity'. He shows no awareness of the distinction (or lack thereof) between God's essence and his existence.
- 14 Anselm, Aquinas, Leibniz and others all argued for a similar unity among the divine properties.
- 15 There is the slight complication that Aquinas and others thought that God *is* his nature. But because Dawkins denies God's simplicity in any sense, this seems to be of no help to him.
- 16 Objection: Physicalism is science-driven. Reply: (i) that is a very contentious claim; (ii) current physics, via various quantum routes, is more mind-friendly than past physics, and there is simply no telling how mind-friendly future physics might be.
- 17 This section is a greatly condensed version of Dougherty's contribution to Draper and Dougherty (2013).
- 18 Unlimited power plausibly entails perfect freedom, and as noted earlier, Swinburne (2004: 99ff) argues that God's perfect knowledge, power, and freedom entail his perfect moral goodness and other essential divine attributes. See Swinburne (2010) for his latest on God and simplicity.
- 19 We wish to thank Brad Monton for helpful feedback.