Fighting fire with fire

A review of
Deluded by Dawkins?
A Christian Response to
The God Delusion
by Andrew Wilson
Kingsway Publications,
Eastbourne, 2007

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When Richard Dawkins writes a book, people take notice. With his recent *The God Delusion*,[1] a *lot* of people took notice, and the book jumped to first place on the best-seller lists. Dawkins' audacious attempt to deliver a definitive collection of arguments to defeat belief in God caught the public attention, of those both for and against his position. Responses issued forth quickly by distinguished scholars.[2] Among the book-length responses is *Deluded by Dawkins?*, a small volume written by Andrew Wilson, minister at King's Church in Eastbourne, UK. This unpretentious book is concise and well written, in many respects a good example of how to give an effective 'answer' to the critics (cf. 1 Peter 3:15).

Narrow the issues

Those who have read Dawkins and come to Wilson for clarification will notice at once the number of issues Wilson does not cover. Yet this is part of the strategy. To answer a large volume with a small one, you must narrow the issues, cutting away much that is interesting to get at the core that is directly on point. Wilson defines the issue as the existence of God, and in particular, the Christian God. This is well taken. If God exists, if Dawkins did not prove his case on this basic issue, the rest of Dawkins' book is ill-founded. To weed through the 400 pages of *The God Delusion*, Wilson summarizes Dawkins' arguments in a neat chart that spans seven pages, characterizing each as

'agrees', 'disagrees', 'unsubstantiated' or 'irrelevant'. Wilson is clearly a gifted communicator, for few charts are as fun to read as this one.

Consider a few examples. In Dawkins' section on the 'argument from admired religious scientists', Wilson summarizes Dawkins: 'Most scientists in the UK aren't Christians'. Wilson's comment: 'Yes, but neither are most people' (p. 26). (This is an example of what Wilson classifies as an 'irrelevant' argument on Dawkins' part.)

In Dawkins' section on the 'ultimate Boeing 747', Wilson summarizes Dawkins: 'Assuming the non-eternity of God, God is more improbable than the world.' Wilson's comment: 'What an (unstated) assumption!' (p. 27).

When analysed in this way, a host of Dawkins' arguments are completely irrelevant to the issue of God's existence. Whether Einstein or the American founding fathers believed in a personal God, or whether religion provides consolation or inspiration to people, or whether there are other sources for consolation or inspiration (such as science), are irrelevant to whether God exists. Wilson eliminates them as unnecessary (though not uninteresting or unimportant) for further consideration in this context.

Distil the arguments

In the process of narrowing the field, Wilson also shows himself skilled in distilling arguments. He can distil pages of Dawkins into a couple of main propositions or into simple syllogisms, in witty style all the time. There is a danger of oversimplifying Dawkins' points, and Wilson includes a disclaimer to this effect (p. 31). Wilson sincerely wants to be fair to Dawkins—which is more than can be said of Dawkins' dealings with many of his theistic critics.

Yet this caution for fairness does not deter Wilson from answering Dawkins' substantive arguments with vigour. He gives some biting comebacks and engages in some 'gentle mockery'
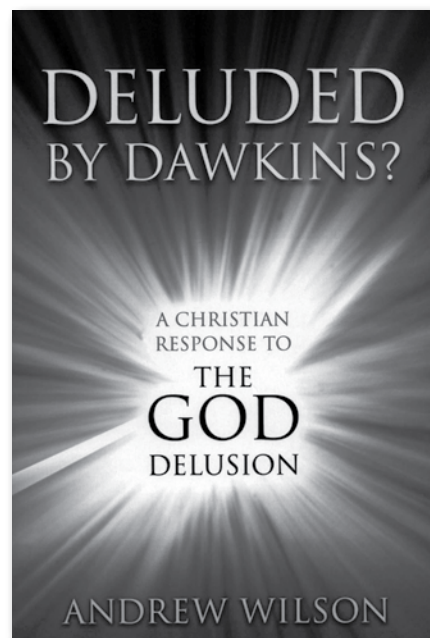
(pp. 36), which is really quite fair for answering 'a fool according to his folly' (Proverbs 26:5).

Dawkins' first substantive argument that Wilson attacks is that nothing supernatural happens. Wilson writes,

'The space-time continuum, he [Dawkins] assumes, is closed, brooking no intervention from a deity; therefore "miracles" never happen by definition; therefore God does not exist. But, as he would no doubt say of theists, this argument is damagingly circular, for it assumes that which it sets out to prove' (pp. 41–42).

Dawkins' argument is basically that of Hume, 'which may explain why so many accuse [Dawkins], much to his annoyance, of being "nineteenth century"' (p. 44). Hume's argument has been often refuted,[3] and Wilson does an excellent job exposing its assumptions in an easy-to-read format.

Wilson gets into somewhat more controversial territory as he mentions several miraculous healings that he has 'personally witnessed in the last month' (p. 47). He recognizes, 'All stories are open to be responded to sceptically, and these as much as any. My point is that to insist *a priori* that none of these things … can possibly have happened is to fly in the face of very
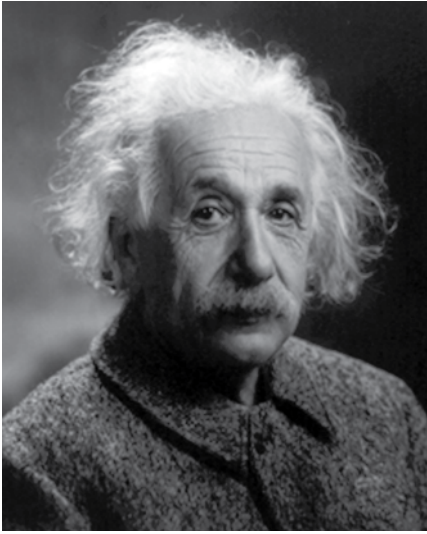
Did Einstein believe in God? An interesting question, to be sure, but entirely irrelevent to whether God in fact exists. Weeding through such irrelevant issues allows Wilson to stick to a few core issues raised by Dawkins in *The God Delusion*.

strong empirical evidence' (p. 48). All this is true enough, but such anecdotal arguments are probably ill-advised. Even among Christians affirming a fairly strong form of divine activity in the world today, arguments based on claimed 'miracles' impose a heavy burden of proof indeed on one claiming to have seen a genuine, miraculous intervention,[4] and are always easily dismissed by sceptics. But Wilson's overall point is well-taken—to dismiss all reports of miracles (including biblical accounts) as impossible because we know miracles don't happen assumes rather than proves the antisupernaturalist premise, and Wilson's cogent presentation should drive this home well.[5]

The next substantive issue Wilson covers is Scripture, again answering Dawkins with vigour: 'For an intelligent and educated man, Dawkins makes a surprising number of errors … Ignorance is no more virtuous in theology than in science' (p. 63). He goes on to cite a string of arguments offered by Dawkins as errors, inconsistencies and absurdities in the Bible (primarily the Gospels), all of which are examples of sloppy argumentation and out-of-date scholarship.

Design confusion

The final substantive issue is 'improbability'. 'Dawkins rests a huge amount of weight' on this argument, Wilson writes, and he proceeds to outline the three prongs to the argument (p. 87).

First, is God 'the most improbable being that could exist'? Dawkins says yes, because the appearance of an infinitely complex deity is massively improbable, 'the ultimate Boeing 747'. Wilson responds by pointing to the unstated assumption, which is the non-eternity of God.[6] God didn't have to make an 'appearance' because He eternally existed.[7] He suggests that the probability argument could be turned on its head at this point: assuming the eternality of God, the universe is much more likely to have come about by creation than by naturalism, on the terms of which 'the world as it is would be spectacularly improbable, as Dawkins (grudgingly) allows' (p. 90).

Second, has natural selection *qua* Darwinism[8] removed the 'illusion' of design in the natural world? Dawkins of course says yes, evolution can and has 'created' the natural world, and therefore God is unnecessary and the probability of His existence is reduced. Wilson first responds by suggesting that Dawkins is unfairly pinning the 'god of the gaps' label on irreducible complexity arguments. Wilson is certainly right, as irreducible complexity does not imply the existence of a designer because we are unable to imagine how the complexity was produced, but rather because we know enough about what it *would* take to produce the complexity that we recognize evolutionary scenarios are in principle unable to arrive at the end result.[9] Wilson unfortunately settles for a weak response:

'… there are a number of examples [of complexity] … which, while not provably irreducible, nevertheless do not fit well within our current understanding, to say no more for the present' (p. 92).

Wilson is quite right to point out that Dawkins illegitimately rebukes critics for assuming a stage

in evolutionary development is not advantageous without argument, while he himself assumes that each stage *is* advantageous without argument. Still, this misses the point of the irreducible complexity argument, which is that we know enough (in the positive sense) to say that evolution could not do it. Apparently fearful of stepping into the scientific debate over design, Wilson seriously weakened a very strong and important argument.

And despite hints of support for at least an Intelligent Design perspective, Wilson weakens his point further by resorting to an argument from Stephen Jay Gould:[10] the existence of theistic evolutionists demonstrates that Darwinism does not necessarily have the atheistic implications Dawkins foists upon it. It is certainly true that one *can* be a Darwinian and a theist, and a Christian; the real question is whether this is in any way *consistent*. Evolution either implies that God did not create as He said; *ergo*, the Bible is not trustworthy; *ergo*, God (at least the god of the Bible) does not exist (at least not as He has revealed Himself in His supposed Word). Or else, to save God from the dishonesty charges and save Christian theism from that *reductio*, a reinterpretation of Genesis is necessary; once this is done, I have yet to see a consistent reason to suggest that a naturalistic reinterpretation of the Resurrection is not also necessary, and this again would be a *reductio* of at least Christian theism.[11] It is strictly true that you cannot reason straight from Darwinism and 'God is unnecessary' to atheism and 'God doesn't exist.' However, the issues of consistency are real and serious. Given that Dawkins raises some of these issues, Wilson does not help matters by his use (even though it is personally non committal) of theistic evolutionists as arguments against Dawkins.

Returning to the three-part answer to Dawkins, the third issue is, does the universe as a whole require a designer? Dawkins of course says no, and builds on the previous points. As Wilson summarizes Dawkins' view:

'(1) we know from Darwinian evolution that things don't have

to be designed to *look* as if they have been, and therefore we should intuitively favour a non-design explanation; (2) although life on earth is spectacularly improbable, it is less improbable than the existence of God' (p. 97).

As Wilson already argued (and could have shown even more strongly if he had not been so timid in dealing with Darwinism), Dawkins has not really established either (1) or (2). Dawkins' musings on the anthropic principle at this point are easy targets: without the earlier arguments to prop it up, it appears patently absurd to postulate (as Dawkins does) a 'multiverse' as a more 'probable' and parsimonious alternative to the existence of God. After a cursory review of the improbability of our station in the universe, and Dawkins' multiverse explanation, Wilson comments, 'The weaknesses of his argument here are so obvious that it is remarkable to find him making it—it may suggest a naïve credulity in any explanation offered, as long as it is nothing like the God of the Bible' (p. 104).

Presuppositions predominant

This goes to the heart of our concern as Christian apologists in answering someone like Dawkins. Dawkins has a presuppositional commitment to a non-Christian interpretation of the universe because, as Romans 1:18 ff. tells us, the natural (unregenerate) man suppresses the truth in his unrighteousness. Wilson recognizes this in Dawkins, but does not fully recognize the importance of an epistemologically consistent biblical presupposition for his own apologetics. As an evidentialist, Wilson is not alert to the dangers of pinning a doctrinal stance to the current status of a scientific theory,[12] hence his weak stance on Darwinism and design (based on his own misunderstanding of irreducible complexity). While we should be cautioned against adopting Wilson's philosophical evidentialism in apologetics, Wilson's practical responses to Dawkins are for the most part sound,[13] and set a good example for us in several respects.

Photo by Jason P. Robertson, www.wikipedia.org

The astronomer Fred Hoyle likened the probability of random chance assembling a single cell to a tornado assembling a Boeing 747. Dawkins attempts to turn this argument on its head, but Wilson sets it right side up again by highlighted Dawkins' unstated assumptions.

First, pick your battles. Wilson chose to answer a core argument from Dawkins ('God doesn't exist') and not divert his or his readers' time answering all of Dawkins' 400 pages. Second, style is a virtue. Wilson managed to say quite a lot in a few pages, with a winning style that made the logic clear, as well as interesting and palatable to a broad readership.

Finally, engaging the culture is a biblical mandate. This is the message of both his opening and closing chapters. Christians miss out on a great opportunity if they fail to engage the culture—particularly when it is so interested in the questions of God's existence. Even more strongly, we have a mandate to take thoughts and philosophies 'captive' to Christ (2 Corinthians 10:4–5):

'The answer [to sceptics] is not to drift into a sort of private piety, closed to question because it is so devoutly held. Nor is it to resort to a liberal take-it-or-leave-it philosophy, whereby we keep the bits of Christianity our culture accepts and throw away the rest, with the result that the gospel becomes ever smaller and more irrelevant. It is to fight fire with fire: to challenge the foolishness of the world with the wisdom of the cross … We must listen; we must debate; and we must fight intellectual battles, waging war on every argument that sets itself up against the knowledge of Christ, and taking each thought captive to him' (p. 110).

This is a credo for any Christian apologist. Despite some shortcomings, Wilson has given some fine examples of fighting fire with fire in this little book.

References

1. See Bell, P., Atheist with a mission: A review of *The God Delusion* by Richard Dawkins, *Journal of Creation* **21**(2):28–34, 2007; <www.creationontheweb.com/content/view/4900/>.

2. One of the best is Plantinga, A., The Dawkins Confusion: Naturalism *ad absurdum*, Christianity Today *Books and Culture*, March/April 2007, <www.christianitytoday.com/bc/2007/002/1.21.html>.

3. For an excellent recent example, see Earman, J., *Hume's Abject Failure: The Argument Against Miracles*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2000.

4. A good example of analyzing these types of claims is Sarfati, J., Near death experiences? What should Christians think? 11 July 2000, <www.creationontheweb.com/nde>.

5. For a more rigorous, but still popular-level, analysis of miracles, see the feedback response: Sarfati, J., Miracles and science, 1 September 2006, <www.creationontheweb.com/miracles>.

6. See Sarfati, J., If God created the universe, then who created God? *Journal of Creation* **12**(1):20–22, 1998. The only alternative to an eternal God is an eternal universe, which is seriously problematic. See Craig, W.L., The existence of God and the beginning of the universe, *Truth: A Journal of Modern Thought* **3**:85–96, 1991, <www.leaderu.com/truth/3truth11.html>. Also Copan, P. and Craig, W.L., *Creation Out of Nothing: A Biblical, Philosophical, and Scientific Exploration*, Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, MI, ch. 6, 2004.

7. It is worth noting that Dawkins has also inappropriately assumed that God is 'complex' in materialistic terms, which is of course absurd, as pointed out by Bell, ref. 1, and Plantinga, ref. 2.

8. 'Natural selection' is not the same as 'Darwinism', and creationists accept the former as they reject the latter. After all, creationists like Edward Blyth thought of natural selection before Darwin. For an introduction to the creationist view, see Wieland, C., Muddy waters: clarifying the confusion about natural selection, *Creation* **23**(3):26–29, 2001.

9. Bell, ref. 1. See also Meyer, S.C., Teleological evolution: The difference it doesn't make, 1 January 1999, <www.arn.org/docs/meyer/sm_teleologicalevolution.htm>, 16 September 2007.

10. Who famously suggested that science and religion could be reconciled by relegating them to 'non-overlapping magisteria'. See Gould, S.J., Nonoverlapping magisteria, *Natural History* **106**:16–22, March 1997; Gould, S.J., *Rocks of Ages: Science and Religion in the Fullness of Life*, Ballantine, New York, 1999; and see critique in Sarfati, J., *Refuting Evolution 2*, Master Books, Green Forest, AR, pp. 38–41, 2002.

11. For an excellent example of proceeding from a rejection of Genesis to a rejection of the Resurrection, see Ruse, M., *Darwinism and Its Discontents*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, p. 280, 2006, and review: Weinberger, L., Still discontent, *Journal of Creation* **21**(3):32–36, 2007.

12. Sarfati, J., Presuppositionalism vs evidentialism, 6 June 2005, <www.creationontheweb.com/presupp>.

13. Although he would have had a range of other, and even more potent, arguments available to him if he were presuppositionally self-conscious, such as undermining Dawkins' belief in his own rationality. See generally Bahnsen, G.L., *Always Ready*, Booth, R.R., (Ed.), Covenant Media Foundation, Nacogdoches, TX, 1996.

A foundation with a few cracks

A review of
Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview
by J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig
Inter-Varsity Press, 2003

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This massive tome is the product of two of the leading Christian philosophers from the evangelical tradition. Both Moreland and Craig are philosophy professors at Talbot School of Theology, Biola University. Their book aims to present a rigorous philosophical justification for not just the existence of God, but the existence of the God of the Christian Bible. In doing so, the authors also expound the basic underlying concepts of knowledge, rationality, morality, truth, good and evil, mind and body, which make it possible to know and to reason.

The book is divided into six parts: Part I provides an introduction to philosophy, argument and logic. Part II discusses epistemology—the concept of knowledge and the possibility of knowing. Part III explores metaphysical questions—what exists and what is real? Part IV examines the philosophy of science. Part V considers the philosophical bases behind various theories of ethics, and part VI expounds the philosophical basis for Christian theism.

Why discuss philosophy?

The mere mention of the word 'philosophy' usually causes most people to switch right off. What is even more disturbing is that, when Christians hear this word, many turn antagonistic! It is unfortunate that many Christians today have—for a variety of reasons—tended toward anti-intellectualism: an open disparaging of intellectual and academic endeavours.
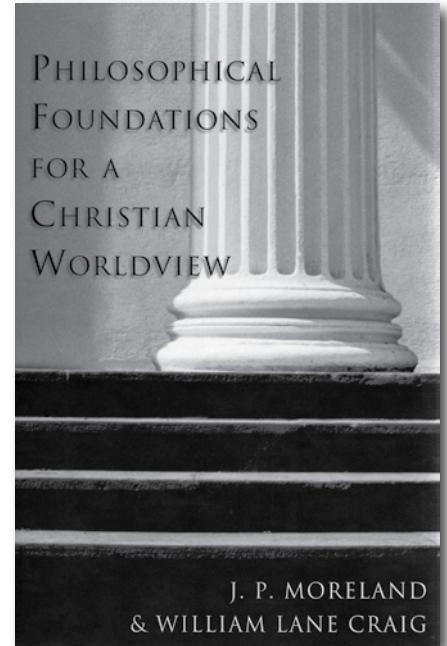
Thus, it is not surprising that the authors begin by highlighting the value of philosophical study. The truth is that everyone is influenced by philosophical ideas—either their own or someone else's—whether they realise it or not. Belief in God is a philosophical idea. Reading the Bible (or any other book for that matter) in the belief that it communicates intelligible information (as opposed to gibberish) assumes the truth of a number of philosophical concepts. Ultimately, our views about life, death, reality, good, evil, right, wrong, justice, psychology, mathematics, education, society, etc. are all informed by philosophical ideas and discussions—even if we are not aware of it. This is precisely why it is essential for all Christians to have at least some knowledge of the philosophical foundations of their faith. Those who do not will either fall away, become insulated and ineffectual witnesses, or—even worse—hold syncretistic and heretical views which they then propound throughout the church as being the Christian or biblical view.

This book is extremely detailed and comprehensive (it is 654 pages in length), and space does not permit a thorough