

# The Unfinishable Scroll and Beyond:

Mark Sharlow's Blogs, July 2008 to March 2011

## About This Document

This document is an archive of Mark F. Sharlow's two blogs, *The Unfinishable Scroll* and *Religion: the Next Version*. The archive covers the first two and a half years (more or less) of the blogs' existence. Some of the posts cover ideas and topics not found in Sharlow's papers. Subject areas include religion, science, mind, ontology, epistemology, and politics.

The blog posts here are arranged in chronological order (oldest to newest) for each blog. This differs from the ordering of the original blogs, which were in reverse chronological order. There is an index for each blog (see links below). There also is a third index that covers a key part of the first blog. All these indices retain the original reverse chronological order.

References are indicated by square brackets (for example, [gtnv], [improb], or [1]) or occasionally by asterisks. Many of the reference notes are at the end of the document, but some are within individual posts. Some of the references were in the original blogs; others were added later. Some links that originally pointed to external sites now point to the references at the end of the document. The posts have been reformatted for inclusion in this document.

Many links have been changed to make the document self-contained. However, some of the links in this document still go to external sites. Please exercise customary caution with these sites.

The author's website, at the time of this writing, was located at <http://www.eskimo.com/~msharlow>. The blogs were located at <http://www.eskimo.com/~msharlow/cgi-bin/blosxom.cgi> (*The Unfinishable Scroll*) and <http://www.eskimo.com/~msharlow/cgi-bin/rel/blosxom.cgi> (*Religion: the Next Version*).

Please report any issues (including broken links) to Mark Sharlow at [msharlow at usermail dot com](mailto:msharlow@usermail.com).

**To begin reading, choose one of the following links:**

[Part I. \*The Unfinishable Scroll\*](#)

[Part II. \*Religion: the Next Version\*](#)

---

## Part I. *The Unfinishable Scroll*

---

### Index for *The Unfinishable Scroll*

<u>Date</u>	<u>Link to Article</u>	<u>Category</u>
03/02/11	<a href="#"><u>Some Closing Remarks on "The Anti-Dawkins Papers"</u></a>	religion/atheism/god_delusion
10/13/10	<a href="#"><u>Why There Very Probably Is a God - but Not the Kind Some People Want</u></a>	religion
10/12/10	<a href="#"><u>Some Thoughts on the Ontological Argument</u></a>	religion
10/03/10	<a href="#"><u>The Trouble with the Supernatural</u></a>	religion
10/01/10	<a href="#"><u>Let's Change the Subject and Talk About...Snails!</u></a>	nature
09/30/10	<a href="#"><u>Announcing Sharlow's Scratchpad</u></a>	general
05/02/10	<a href="#"><u>How Real Spiritual Experience Might Work</u></a>	religion
05/02/10	<a href="#"><u>Mind Is to Brain as Digestion Is to Digestive Tract. Oh, Really?</u></a>	mind
05/01/10	<a href="#"><u>Am I Really Defending Religion?</u></a>	religion

05/01/10	<a href="#"><u>The Hidden Tension Within Belief in God</u></a>	religion
04/08/10	<a href="#"><u>A Final Word on Leprechology and the Courtier's Reply</u></a>	religion/atheism
04/02/10	<a href="#"><u>The Courtier's Reply Exposed: Why Dawkins Still Needs Theology</u></a>	religion/atheism
03/17/10	<a href="#"><u>Why Dawkins Needs to Study Theology - Especially if There Is No God</u></a>	religion/atheism
02/21/10	<a href="#"><u>Say It Isn't So, Mrs. Obama! The New War on Fat Children</u></a>	political
01/12/10	<a href="#"><u>What Is an Atheist (and Are You One)?</u></a>	religion/atheism
01/11/10	<a href="#"><u>Evolution Has No Purpose. So What?</u></a>	religion/science_and_religion
01/11/10	<a href="#"><u>Why I Don't Believe in So-Called Intelligent Design Theory</u></a>	religion/science_and_religion
12/25/09	<a href="#"><u>Happy Holidays! (And Incidentally, Science Can't Disprove Religion)</u></a>	religion/science_and_religion
12/17/09	<a href="#"><u>Is Everything Abstract?</u></a>	ontology
12/15/09	<a href="#"><u>Beyond Atheism, Theism, and Agnosticism: What Am I?</u></a>	religion
11/06/09	<a href="#"><u>My Other Blog Is Now Complete</u></a>	religion
09/01/09	<a href="#"><u>Study Does Not Show that Fat People Are Brain-Damaged</u></a>	political
07/14/09	<a href="#"><u>Anti-Dawkins Paper No. 11: A Summary of the Papers, and What It All Means</u></a>	religion/atheism/god_delusion
07/13/09	<a href="#"><u>Anti-Dawkins Paper No. 10: Hate by Any Other Name?</u></a>	religion/atheism/god_delusion
07/09/09	<a href="#"><u>Anti-Dawkins Paper No. 9: Of Science and Miracles</u></a>	religion/atheism/god_delusion
07/08/09	<a href="#"><u>Why Science Cannot Disprove the Afterlife</u></a>	religion/science_and_religion

07/06/09	<a href="#"><u>Anti-Dawkins Paper No. 8: Are Scientists and Other Smart People Atheists?</u></a>	religion/atheism/god_delusion
06/25/09	<a href="#"><u>Anti-Dawkins Paper No. 7: Dawkins Misrepresents Some Opposing Ideas and Thinkers</u></a>	religion/atheism/god_delusion
06/24/09	<a href="#"><u>Anti-Dawkins Paper No. 6: Does All Religion Cause Evil?</u></a>	religion/atheism/god_delusion
06/22/09	<a href="#"><u>Anti-Dawkins Paper No. 5: The Causes of Religion Cannot Prove Religion False</u></a>	religion/atheism/god_delusion
06/20/09	<a href="#"><u>Anti-Dawkins Paper No. 4: Evolution and the So-Called Illusion of Design</u></a>	religion/atheism/god_delusion
06/19/09	<a href="#"><u>Anti-Dawkins Paper No. 3: Dodging the Issue of Personal Religious Experience</u></a>	religion/atheism/god_delusion
05/26/09	<a href="#"><u>Anti-Dawkins Paper No. 2: Why Dawkins' Main Argument Against God Is Wrong</u></a>	religion/atheism/god_delusion
05/18/09	<a href="#"><u>Anti-Dawkins Paper No. 1: Overlooking the Idea of God</u></a>	religion/atheism/god_delusion
05/03/09	<a href="#"><u>The Unfinishable Book Is Now Free</u></a>	general
03/19/09	<a href="#"><u>Drawing a Blank: In Search of Empty Consciousness</u></a>	mind
02/13/09	<a href="#"><u>Merry Darwinmas - Now Let's Get Evolution Right!</u></a>	religion/science_and_religion
12/31/08	<a href="#"><u>The Worst Atheist Argument in the World?</u></a>	religion/atheism
10/29/08	<a href="#"><u>What's New on My Site in October 2008</u></a>	general
09/24/08	<a href="#"><u>Why Libertarians Should Tolerate the Big Bailout</u></a>	political
09/06/08	<a href="#"><u>New Political Manifesto Goes Online</u></a>	political

08/07/08	<a href="#">Spirit without the Supernatural</a>	mind
07/26/08	<a href="#">Announcing New and Republished Books in Philosophy</a>	general
07/23/08	<a href="#">New Ebooks on Science and Religion</a>	general
07/23/08	<a href="#">Confused about Science, Religion, or Morality? Lets TOK!</a>	knowledge
07/11/08	<a href="#">Still No Disproof of Free Will</a>	mind
07/03/08	<a href="#">Welcome to my Blog!</a>	general

---

---

---

## ***The Unfinishable Scroll* Starts Here**

---

---

07/03/08

### **Welcome to My Blog!**

The Unfinishable Scroll is open for browsing, controversy and fun. Politics? Religion? Science? Snails? I plan to talk about all of 'em and more. Stay tuned...

---

---

07/11/08

### **Still No Disproof of Free Will**

Has science debunked free will? A recent article *Nature Neuroscience* [1] tells of some research that suggests the answer is "yes." An article in *The Wall Street Journal Online* [2] explores this research - and its implications for free will - in less technical terms.

According to the research, our brains can show specific kinds of activity about 10 seconds before we make conscious decisions. The findings suggest that when you make a conscious decision, your brain already has "decided" as much as 10 seconds earlier. So what is the role of your conscious decision? Does your act of deciding do anything? It seems as if your feeling of conscious decision is just a side effect of brain activity that already has happened. As one of the researchers pointed out (in [2]), this makes things look bad for free will.

It seems as if science might have debunked free will.

But wait a minute! Things just aren't that simple.

There is a way of understanding these findings that does NOT rule out free will. Maybe your brain starts a decision a while before you consciously decide. However, you can believe this and still believe in free will. All you have to do is admit that your actual consciousness includes more than your so-called conscious mind.

Psychologists (especially psychoanalysts) have long claimed that people have unconscious minds as well as their ordinary conscious minds. Philosopher Ned Block [3] has suggested that contents of the so-called unconscious might actually be conscious in a sense. This raises the possibility that your so-called

unconscious mind might not truly be empty of consciousness, but might have a consciousness of its own. This would be a consciousness that you normally can't think or talk about - but that is a real part of you anyhow. (I've explored this idea further in my book, *From Brain to Cosmos* [4] [\[fbtc\]](#).)

Now what if you made a decision, but the decision happened in your unconscious mind? Since your unconscious mind is part of you, the decision truly would be your own - just as if you had made it with your ordinary conscious mind. For all we know, it could even be a free choice. (Some of the people who commented on the Wall Street Journal article made these two points about the unconscious. [5]) But what is really interesting is that your so-called unconscious choice might really be a *conscious* choice. This would happen if the so-called "unconscious mind" has some consciousness. Even if this were the case, you might not be able to think or say that you had decided, or act on the decision.

This might be what is happening in the study in *Nature Neuroscience*. The brain events that happen 10 seconds before the "conscious" decision might really be, or contain, the person's own free decision, involving conscious processing of a sort. However, it is a decision that he or she cannot yet think or talk about, or act upon.

In other words, free will and conscious choice might exist even if the neuroscientists' findings are right. The findings might show that we don't understand ourselves as well as we think. Specifically, they might show that the unconscious parts of ourselves are much more important than we usually suppose them to be. But the findings cannot debunk free will.

Just think about that!

(The argument I used in this post is not new. It's based on the one in my paper, "Yes, We Have Conscious Will." [6] That paper is a response to another line of argument against free will - not the same as the one discussed here, but in the same vein. If you're interested in the details of my argument, in further references on these topics, and in some other rebuttals to arguments against free will, read that paper.)

## References

[1] Chun Siong Soon, Marcel Brass, Hans-Jochen Heinze and John-Dylan Haynes, "Unconscious determinants of free decisions in the human brain," *Nature Neuroscience*, 11, 543-545, April 2008.

[2] Robert Lee Hotz, "Get out of your own way," *The Wall Street Journal Online*, June 27, 2008, p. A9.

[3] Ned Block, "How can we find the neural correlate of consciousness?", *Trends in Neurosciences* (Reference Edition) 19, 456-459.

[4] Mark F. Sharlow, *From Brain to Cosmos*. Parkland, FL: Universal Publishers, 2001. (See further reference [here \[fbtc\]](#).)

[5] WSJ.com Forums, linked from reference [2].

[6] Mark F. Sharlow, "Yes, We Have Conscious Will," 2007. Available at <http://philsci-archive.pitt.edu/archive/00003778> . (See further reference [here \[conscwill\]](#).)

*Slightly modified 10/9/2010 (one link updated).*

---

07/23/08

## **Confused about Science, Religion, or Morality? Let's TOK!**

Have you read all the news stories about the physicists' search for a Theory of Everything - also known as a TOE? This theory, if found, would describe the tiniest parts of matter and the natural laws that govern them. The discovery of a correct TOE would be a huge achievement for science.

There's another theory that might be as important, in the long run, as the TOE. This is the *theory of knowledge* - which we might as well call "TOK" to keep it short.

Let's talk about TOK for a few minutes.

TOK is not a single theory. It's a whole branch of knowledge that studies how people know things, and that tries to find the limits of what we can know. TOK is like a science, but it isn't exactly a science, because it deals with problems and questions too basic and slippery to solve through scientific methods alone. Instead, TOK is considered a branch of philosophy. Like other branches of philosophy, TOK uses logic and reason, more than experimental facts, to try to answer questions about human knowledge.

TOK is not new. People have been studying the theory of knowledge for a long time. In fact, philosophers have given TOK a second name that comes from ancient Greek - because the ancient Greeks studied some of the questions of TOK. (I'll mention the other name at the end of this post. For now I'll just say it starts with an *e*.)

Here are some of the questions that people who study TOK have wondered about:

- Does all human knowledge come from the senses? Or is there some other way to find knowledge, without information from the senses?
- Can reasoning alone give us any knowledge, without help from the senses?
- Besides sense experience, are there any other kinds of experience that can give us knowledge? (For example, how about the emotional insights of artists and poets? Are these really knowledge?)
- There are many things that people believe, but that they don't really know. So, what's the difference between knowledge and belief?

These few questions should give you some idea of what TOK is about. TOK is the study of knowledge - where knowledge comes from, how we can find knowledge, and what we can and cannot know.

Does all of this stuff matter? What does the study of knowledge have to do with you, right now, today?

TOK matters because you probably already have opinions about it - even if you have never heard of TOK

before. What is more, those opinions help to decide what you can think and believe about many other things!

TOK is not just a game for philosophers. Nearly everyone has opinions on some of the questions that TOK asks.

For example, some people don't believe anything that isn't scientifically proven. (You've probably known people like that. I sure have.) That's an opinion about what we know - the opinion that if it's not scientifically proven, we don't truly know it.

Other people like to rely on their intuition, and feel that intuition is more dependable than rational thought. That's also an opinion about knowledge - the opinion that intuition is a more dependable source of knowledge than reason.

Some people believe that the teachings of religious faith are a form of knowledge. Others strongly disagree.

All of these opinions are about the sources and limits of knowledge - so all of these opinions are part of TOK.

So why does TOK matter to you?

TOK matters to you because it affects what you believe about other things *besides* knowledge. Your opinions about knowledge affect how you think and feel about other things. Here are some examples:

- If you think that faith can be a legitimate source of knowledge, then you also can believe there is a God.
- On the other hand, if you don't think there's any knowledge besides science, then it will be hard for you to believe there is a God - because scientists don't use the concept of God in their theories.
- If you think that feelings and emotions sometimes give us knowledge, then you might also believe that art is more than just something pretty. Instead, art may be a major source of knowledge, side by side with science.
- If you think feelings and emotions sometimes give knowledge, then you also might believe that the *conscience*, or moral feelings, can teach you something. This makes it much easier to believe there are real moral standards - that morality is not just arbitrary.

Your opinions about knowledge can have a huge impact on your opinions about some very important issues. Many of the ongoing disagreements in today's world are partly fights over TOK, though they seem to be about something else. The prime example is the debate between science and religion. This might not seem like a disagreement about TOK - but that's mostly what it is!

Atheists who deny all religion, but who believe in science, actually hold a strong opinion about the nature of knowledge - whether they realize it or not. They believe that conclusions of science are real knowledge, but the doctrines of religious faith are not. Thus, science-based atheism actually is a thinly veiled opinion about TOK.

Those who believe in religion, but who deny parts of science (like the seven-day creationists), also hold an opinion about the nature of knowledge. They believe that faith, or religious revelation, is a more dependable source of knowledge than is science. That's an opinion about knowledge, so it's a position on TOK.

Some religious people don't emphasize faith, but instead rely on personal spiritual experiences to answer their spiritual questions. This is especially true of adherents of Eastern teachings that emphasize meditation. If you think that you can know something important through meditation, that is an opinion about the sources of knowledge - so it's an opinion about TOK.

It's beginning to look like the "war" between science and religion is mostly a scuffle between different ideas about TOK!

The study of TOK might even help us understand religious fanaticism - a problem which, of course, is sadly relevant to today's world. Religious fanatics often think the traditions of some religious sect are so important that it's OK to harm people for those traditions. On the other hand, a normal, nonfanatical religious believer usually has some sympathy or compassion for others. Such believers tend to ignore or soften any cruel traditional beliefs, instead of following those beliefs strictly. Thus, the normal believer often trusts moral emotions, like compassion, as sources of knowledge about how to behave. The fanatic does not take these emotions nearly as seriously as he takes the literal words of his religion. The difference between the normal believer and the fanatic is a difference of character and heart - but it also involves a hidden difference in TOK.

Yes, TOK can be that important!

This brief foray into TOK teaches us some lessons. Perhaps the main one is this: *We cannot get our ideas about morality and religion straightened out until we get our assumptions about knowledge straightened out.* The endless debates about religion, atheism, and science will never cool down as long as we fail to think clearly about what knowledge is and where knowledge comes from.

If we want less confusion in our world, let's start by having more TOK!

---

*P.S.:* The other name for theory of knowledge, or TOK, is "epistemology" (e-PIS-ta-MAHL-uh-jee). Philosophers use "epistemology" and "theory of knowledge" to mean the same thing - and I've even seen some of them call it "TOK."

---

07/23/08

### **New Ebooks on Science and Religion**

Interested in science and religion? I've written two short ebooks on this subject. To buy them, or to buy my longer book *From Brain to Cosmos*, [follow this link \[ebooks\]](#).

---

07/26/08

### **Announcing New and Republished Books in Philosophy**

Two of my full-length books, *The Unfinishable Book* and *God, Son of Quark*, are now available for sale as PDF ebooks. [Visit this link \[ebooks\]](#) to find out where to get them.

Also, my short ebook *Poetry's Secret Truth* has been re-released. [Visit the same link \[ebooks\]](#) to find out more.

---

08/07/08

### **Spirit without the Supernatural**

Is matter the only reality?

Is there anything in the cosmos beyond physical substances and forces?

Religious teachings usually answer "no" to the first question and "yes" to the second. Most religions claim that the universe contains spiritual things, or spirits, as well as physical things.

Most Western religions teach that God is a spirit. Most of these religions also teach that the human soul (the innermost self of a person) is a spirit.

Different religious teachings have different ideas about spirit. Many believers seem to think of spirit as a substance or stuff that is invisible but real. This substance supposedly can act on matter, producing the connection between body and soul.

This idea of spirit is interesting, but it has a serious drawback: it depends almost completely on faith.

Science hasn't found any need for the idea of spiritual items or substances that affect the material world. Instead, scientific findings suggest that the human brain "runs itself," in the sense that it doesn't need a separate soul to make it work properly.

Some people claim that parapsychology provides evidence of a soul, but this claim is extremely controversial.

Philosophy has more to say about the soul, but still not enough. Some rationalistic philosophers, such as the brilliant Descartes, have believed in a separate soul that influences the body. However, there is no widely agreed-upon rational line of argument for such a soul.

This leaves religious believers in a pickle. If they believe in spirit, they must rely on faith to support their belief. This makes their position unconvincing to those who don't happen to believe the same way. It also makes them vulnerable to atheists, who can simply laugh at the whole idea. Many modern atheists believe that science is the only important form of knowledge, and that faith should play no role in human thought. According to today's science-based antireligion, the mind is only a property of the brain, and therefore there is no soul and there is nothing spiritual in human nature.

This disagreement between believers and atheists rests partly on a mistake. Neither side seems to realize that the universe, as known to science, *already* contains items that are not physical objects. We don't have to believe in these items through faith; they are right there in the scientists' universe. What is more, if the mind is a property of the brain, then the human self is one of those remarkable items!

What are these remarkable items?

To find out, let's start with some basic observations.

The universe contains physical objects, like sticks, stones, stars and atoms. However, those objects never exist alone. Each physical object has properties: its shape, color, weight, and so forth. In other words, there are not just physical objects. There also are *properties* of physical objects.

A round stone has the property of roundness. A yellow star, which gives off mostly yellow light, has the property yellow. (Colors, after all, are properties.) A hexagonal snow crystal has the property of hexagonality. (It might not be a perfect hexagon, but still it has that property.) A diamond has the properties of solidity and transparency.

Roundness, yellowness, hexagonality, solidity, and transparency. These are not physical objects. They are *properties* of physical objects. They are not physical objects - yet we find them in the real world.

We don't live in a world of physical objects alone. We live in a world of physical objects plus their properties.

There are at least two kinds of items in the universe - (1) physical objects, and (2) properties.

Someone might object to this statement by arguing that properties really don't "exist" at all. Maybe there are only physical objects, and although we can talk as if the properties existed, it's only the physical objects that really exist.

Philosophers have been debating this question for thousands of years. The debate goes back at least to Plato and Socrates in ancient Greece. Philosophers have a name for this question (I'll mention it at the end of this post), but the name doesn't matter. The question is: *Do properties really exist?*

I think this question depends on confusion about the meaning of the word "exist." If someone asks whether properties exist, I'll answer the question with another question: What do you mean by "exist"?

If you think "exist" means "be a physical object," then the answer is no - properties don't exist, because they are not physical objects.

But if you think "exist" means "be something" (be any kind of item at all), then properties do exist.

I've written a [philosophical paper on this subject \[realism\]](#), where I went into more detail and covered some points that I've skipped over here. The main lesson of that paper: We can safely assume that properties exist.

Properties exist for all practical purposes. The people who have to work with properties act as if properties are real. Colors are properties. No painter would dare to claim seriously that there are no colors in the world! No weather scientist would claim that ice crystals are not really hexagonal, just because some philosopher said the property of being hexagonal doesn't exist.

To insist that properties don't exist is to cut off the idea of existence arbitrarily - to limit existence artificially to concrete, individual objects like physical objects. If existence includes everything found in the universe, instead of just concrete physical objects, then properties exist. They exist *as properties* instead of *as physical objects* - but that's just another way to be real.

So properties are real for all practical purposes.

The world in which we live is not a world of physical objects alone. It is a world of physical objects *plus* the properties of physical objects. The properties are real items too - just as real as the physical objects, but existing in a very different way. The properties are not simply globs of matter and energy, like physical objects. Instead, they are qualities, features, or patterns in the physical world. They are real items that are found in physical objects, but that are different from physical objects. (For example, the property of roundness can be found in the sun, the moon, or a coin - but roundness is not the sun, the moon, or a coin. It's a property that all these objects have.)

What does all this have to do with spirit?

If properties are real, then spirit doesn't have to be a substance or stuff. Instead, it can be a property!

Instead of being an invisible substance, spirit might be a property of physical objects. As a property, it would be every bit as real as the redness of a sunset, or the hexagonal shape of a snowflake, or the brilliance and transparency of a diamond.

If spirit is a property, then the human brain could indeed have a soul. Science suggests that your personality or self is a property of your brain. If so, then that property might be your soul.

The nice thing about this idea of the soul is that it's hard for skeptics and atheists to attack. If you believe the soul is a property, then the skeptical argument that "the self is just a property of the brain" doesn't disprove the soul.

Skeptics try to debunk the soul by claiming that the self is "only" a property of the brain. The skeptics had better watch out! They are making a serious mistake!

The skeptics begin with the idea (suggested by science) that the self or personality is a property of the brain. From this, they argue that the soul is nothing - that there is no soul.

But wait a minute!

The skeptics say the self is a property of the brain. However, we have found that a property is not just nothing. In its own way, a property is quite real!

If the self is a property, then the self has a real existence of its own - just as real as if it had been a real ghostly substance. By saying that the self is only a property of the brain, the skeptics are admitting that the self is real. Worse yet for them, they are admitting that the self has a type of existence that goes beyond the existence of physical objects!

The skeptics might not realize they are admitting all this. However, if properties are real in any way at all, then this is where their "skepticism" leads.

Without realizing it, the skeptics have painted themselves into a corner, and admitted that people have souls of a sort!

Granted, these souls are a little different from what most religions teach. They are properties, not ghostly supernatural objects. But the important point is that *they are real*.

Once we admit that properties are real, then the skeptical view that the self is a property of the brain becomes almost the same as the religious belief that people have souls distinct from their bodies. The property of the brain that we call the self is an entity different from the matter of the brain - just as the yellowness of the sun is different from the sun itself.

So it appears that the skeptics and the believers are not as far apart as they seem.

Religious believers might have a big problem with this idea of soul-as-property. They might think that if the soul is a property of the brain, then the soul cannot be immortal. Skeptics often use this argument to debunk the idea of an afterlife: if the self is a property of the brain, then it must cease with the brain.

But things are not so simple!

I'm not going to make an argument for (or against) the afterlife here. I just want to point out that if the soul is a property of the brain, then the soul still might be immortal.

How?

After the end of the brain, another brain could have the same property!

Most religions believe either in a nonmaterial afterlife, like Heaven, or in reincarnation. If you believe in

reincarnation, the idea of your self ending up in another brain is nothing new. If you believe in Heaven, then you still can believe that the soul is a property - if you are willing to believe that there are bodies of some kind in Heaven, with brains of some kind!

I'm not suggesting that any of these beliefs are true. I'm not going to take a stand for or against belief in the afterlife. My point is just this: that the property version of the soul does not rule out belief in an afterlife. It also doesn't force you to believe in an afterlife. It just leaves the question of the afterlife open, for you to decide for yourself.

So we don't live in a world of things alone. We live in a world of things and properties. Once we realize that, and take the reality of properties fully to heart, we begin to see what spirit might be. The world of spirit might not be supernatural at all. Instead, it might be a part of the world of properties - the part that contains a mysterious and complex property of each of us, the property that we call the self.

---

## Notes

I'm including these notes to thank the sources of some of the ideas in this post, and to fill in some technical details that students of philosophy might find interesting.

This post uses ideas from two of my philosophical papers. These papers are available [here \[abstraction\]](#) and [here \[abstself\]](#). Another relevant paper of mine is [here \[qualia\]](#).

The name of the question of the existence of properties and such is "the problem of universals." (Technically, the question "Do properties exist?" is only part of the problem of universals, but it's the most important part.)

My position that properties are real is a milder version of what Plato thought about properties (the so-called "Platonic realist" view). However, you don't have to believe everything Plato said to accept my view of properties! (See [this paper \[realism\]](#) for details.)

The idea that the soul is a property of the body, but still is an item distinct from the body, is a version of what philosophers of mind call "property dualism." (Property dualists usually don't use the idea of "soul" - often their position is that conscious experiences are nonphysical properties of the brain.) Property dualism is different from "substance dualism" - the idea that the soul or self is a kind of mental substance associated with the body. Descartes was a "dualistic interactionist" - a substance dualist who thought the soul could act on, and be acted on by, the body.

The idea that the soul could be immortal even if it is "only" a property of the brain is not new. Plato thought of the soul as something sort of like a property (an "abstract object" as philosophers would call it today). Plato thought of the soul as immortal. See [this paper of mine \[abstself\]](#) for my take on Plato's view of the soul. The idea that the self, as an abstract object, might be potentially immortal comes up in modern thought, for example in Daniel C. Dennett's book *Consciousness Explained*. (I disagree with Dennett on some important points - see [this paper \[abstself\]](#) - but this idea is interesting.)

(This post was slightly reformatted after posting.)

---

09/06/08

### **New Political Manifesto Goes Online**

The left wing and the right wing are not the world's only political choices. Go beyond left and right - to the future!

For further details, read my new political statement, [Manifesto of the Good Society](#) [manifesto]. The document is in PDF format.

Be sure to visit [the rest of my political site \[politics\]](#) too.

---

09/24/08

### **Why Libertarians Should Tolerate the Big Bailout**

As readers of [my political website \[politics\]](#) know, I lean toward libertarianism. Libertarians usually oppose government intervention in markets. However, I think the U.S. government's impending Wall Street bailout is OK if it's done the right way.

Why would I think this?

Because the bailout would *reduce*, not increase, the effects of government interference in markets.

Corporations, as we know them today, are creations of governments. They are extremely powerful creations. Corporations are legal "persons" with powers and privileges that no real person can possibly have. For example, corporations can own other "persons" of their own kind, and potentially can exist forever. The special legal status of corporations is the main force that lets some companies become tremendously large and powerful.[1]

Some so-called libertarians seem to think a "free market" is a market in which corporations are allowed to run wild. This is *not* what real libertarianism is about! A truly free market, with only a minimum of government intervention, would not contain state-created corporations at all. A market dominated by state-created corporations is not even close to being free.

In today's world of state-created corporations, corporations have a big advantage over individuals. Workers need corporations much more desperately than corporations need workers. The corporations' extra power

originally comes from the state. This extra power lets corporations grow much larger and more powerful than a truly free market would likely allow.

Today, some corporations are so large and powerful that their collapse would be a humanitarian disaster. Their failure would affect the markets in ways that could damage the lives of countless hardworking people.

Is the government justified in trying to prevent this collapse? Yes. True, a government bailout is a violation of the free market. However, the bailout is a way of correcting the effects of an earlier, and much worse, violation of the free market: the government's own creation of corporations.

The government entity that bails out the corporations need not be the same one that granted the corporate charters. There are Federal and state governments, and different departments within each of these. The point is that government power created corporations, and now government power is being used to mitigate some of the effects of that creation.

Like all modern corporations, the corporations being bailed out were not part of a free market to begin with. They were created with the help of government power. By preventing the bad effects of their collapse, the bailout would reduce the effects of government power more than it would increase those effects. Paradoxically, the bailout could make the market more like a free market.

So, should libertarians tolerate the big bailout? Yes. The bailout is a government intrusion into markets, but it will reduce the damage from a worse government intrusion that is built into our present economic system. The bailout is the lesser evil.

This toleration of the bailout comes with one warning: the bailout must be done right. It must be done in a way that prevents damage to working people, not in a way that simply lets the ultra-rich get richer.

Aside from the bailout, this same logic holds for many of the laws designed to regulate corporations. Such laws are designed to restrain corporate power that originally comes partly from the state. Viewed in this light, regulation of corporations can be a way for the state to help undo some of its own excesses.

Ideally, our society would be able to do without state-created corporations and their excess powers. [This is not an impossible dream \[principles\]](#). The libertarian economist Murray Rothbard described a business structure, not backed by state power, that is like a corporation in some respects.[2] Perhaps this structure, or other arrangements, will replace the modern corporation. But unless and until this sweeping reform happens, careful government regulation of corporations will prevent a bad situation from becoming even worse.

-----

#### Notes

[1] On the expansion and dangers of corporate power, see especially: Ted Nace, *Gangs of America* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2003), and Walter Lippmann, *An Inquiry into the Principles of the Good Society* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1937), pp. 13-19, 308-310.

[2] Murray N. Rothbard, *Power and Market* (2nd ed.; Kansas City: Sheed Andrews and McMeel, 1977), pp. 79-80.

10/29/08

## What's New on My Site in October 2008

I've added a lot of new material to my main site, [Brain, Time and Cosmos \[main\]](#). Things to look for (all in PDF format):

- In "[God: the Next Version](#)" [[gtnv](#)] I propose an alternative idea of God — an idea friendly to real rationalists and religious poets alike. (Watch out, atheists!)
- "[Progress: the Boundless Quest](#)" [[progress](#)] is an essay on progress.
- "[The Meadow, the Sky and the Vision](#)" [[meadow](#)] is a semi-poetic meditation on the prospects of progress.
- "[Forward to Freedom](#)" [[forward](#)] is a longish political document that digs into the faults of existing legal systems, among other topics.
- "[Anti-Postmodernist Paper #1](#)" [[seemsthat](#)], also known as "[Seemsthat](#)", is just what its first title sounds like. Hold on to your hat! (Watch out, deconstructors!)
- In "[Religion and Beyond](#)" [[relbeyond](#)] I explore some ideas of the world's religions, and argue that there's no real cause for conflict.

As of the date of this post, these writings all are listed in the ["What's New?" section of my home page \[main\]](#).

Stay tuned...

---

12/31/08

## The Worst Atheist Argument in the World?

One of the standard arguments for atheism goes like this:

"Religion is responsible for many of the world's evils (the 9/11 attacks, the Inquisition, the Crusades, oppression of women, abuse of children, and so forth). Therefore, the world would be better off if people did not believe in God."

This argument comes up again and again in discussions of atheism. Atheists state the argument in various

ways - some short, some long - but all the forms of the argument amount to the same thing.

No matter what the atheists tell you, this is one of the most preposterous arguments in the world.

The main problem with this argument is obvious: not every form of belief in God promotes the evils blamed on religion. The atheist argument only hits the forms of religion that do promote evils like these. The argument might work if aimed at fanaticism, extremism, or cruelly strict and prudish forms of religion. However, it can say nothing about more reasonable forms of belief that do not promote these evils. This fault in the atheist argument has long been known, but some atheists just don't seem to get it.

It is possible to believe in God and also deny most of the dogmas of conventional religion.

You can believe in God and also be against all forms of war. (Pacifist Quakers do this today.)

You can believe in God and also reject the use of force to spread your religion. You might even think God wants people to believe only through a free, uncoerced decision to believe, and not through any kind of force. Some believers think that way.

You can believe in God and also believe in human equality, kindness, and mercy. You can believe in God and support the quest for an end of oppression in the world. Martin Luther King did that.

You can believe in God without believing in religious doctrines that are likely to promote cruelty. You don't have to believe in hell. You don't have to believe that only members of your religion go to heaven. You don't have to believe that God wants us to be afraid. You can believe in God without believing in a cruel God-image derived from the earlier books of the Bible.

It's possible to believe in God, and yet reject all the evils done in the name of religion. It's possible to believe that God disapproves of these evils.

It's possible to believe in a God of love, goodness, beauty and freedom, instead of a God who promotes suicide bombings, sexual repression, and bigotry.

So what happened to the atheist argument? When you think carefully about it, the argument just goes away! It stops being convincing - like a magic trick once you see how it's done.

It is vitally important that we oppose the evils done in the name of religion. However, belief in God is not the real source of those evils - and atheism is not the solution to them.

02/13/09

## **Merry Darwinmas - Now Let's Get Evolution Right!**

Yesterday was the two hundredth anniversary of the birthdays of two important historic figures: Abraham Lincoln and Charles Darwin. Lincoln's legacy is stronger than ever today, especially since the election of America's remarkable new president, Barack Obama. While Lincoln's well-deserved fame continues to grow, Darwin's reputation has been tarnished somewhat by the world's failure to understand his theory of evolution.

Two main problems plague the theory of evolution today. One is the persistence of antievolutionist beliefs, with seven-day creationism as the extreme example. The other problem is the stubborn misunderstanding of the meaning of evolution by so-called skeptics and rationalists. Scientists have done a good job trying to address the first problem by explaining the massive evidence for evolution to the public.

In honor of this anniversary of Darwin's birth, I'd like to say a few words about the second problem - the misinterpretation of evolution by those who claim to think rationally. Some of what I will say here has been said before, but it bears repeating because many seem to have ignored it.

The theory of evolution is not a philosophy or a religion. It is a scientific theory that explains how types of living organisms come into being. It is a theory supported by massive and convincing evidence. The theory of evolution shows how new species can develop without the help of supernatural acts of creation. However, the theory of evolution does not contradict the basic religious ideas that there is a supreme being and that the universe is meaningful.

The theory of evolution does NOT say there is no God. It says that natural events, not supernatural miracles, created living things - but that is not the same as saying there is no God.

As I explained in my ebook *[God and Darwin: Buddies!](#)* [gadb], there are at least two ways that God could have created the universe even if evolution is true. (I'm talking about the real, scientific, Darwinistic version of evolution - not so-called "intelligent design," which is watered-down creationism.) God could be the creator of the universe even if there are no violations of natural law (not even at the Big Bang!) and no interruptions of the flow of natural causation by divine doodling. Religious believers are free to adopt this alternative view of creation if they wish. Evolution does not rule out the possibility of a creator of the universe. It only rules out certain ancient, literalistic beliefs about that creator.

What is more, there can be a God even if there is no supernatural creator at all! In my online article "[God: The Next Version](#)" [gtnv] I presented an idea of God that does without the supernatural. The God I portrayed there is a real God - not just a fancy name for the physical universe (as in some forms of pantheism), but an ideal being who embodies the supreme good. You don't have to believe in any supernatural beings or forces to believe in such a God.

When skeptics claim that evolution rules out God or makes God obsolete, they are talking baloney. The concept of God is a philosophical idea that can take many forms. Not everyone's idea of God is incompatible with evolution!

Evolution also does not imply that humans are "only" animals. Yes, we are animals - but the difference between humans and other animals is so obvious that we don't need God or Darwin to help us see it. Humans are animals, but humans are special. We are special, not because of where we came from, but because of

what we are right now - and specifically, because of what our brains are. No discovery about our origins can make us less special. The discovery that our "specialness" resulted from evolution makes us all the more remarkable.

Finally, evolution does not imply that the universe is meaningless. Our experiences of meaning and value may be truthful experiences that reveal real, objective meaning and value in the world. The fact that evolution gave us the ability to have these experiences does not make them any less important. The questions of whether existence has real meaning, and of whether values are objectively real, are philosophical questions that cannot be answered through scientific methods alone.

I hope these remarks will clarify some of the common confusions about the meaning of evolution. Let's celebrate Darwin's two hundredth birthday by finally getting the implications of his theory right!

---

03/19/09

### **Drawing a Blank: In Search of Empty Consciousness**

Think about your conscious experience as it is right now - everything that's going on in your inner mental world.

Now imagine the items in that world (sights, sounds, thoughts, the feeling of time passing, and so forth) disappearing one by one, until there's nothing left.

The result is a totally blank inner world - a mental world with no impressions or other contents at all.

What is left over? Just your consciousness - a "pure" consciousness, with no contents.

Now ask yourself a question: Is this any different from no consciousness at all?

What is the difference between a completely empty consciousness and no consciousness? Is there a difference?

This mind-bending question might seem purely theoretical. After all, how often does anyone have a pure, empty consciousness? Perhaps this happens sometimes during states near to unconsciousness, or during deep meditation - or perhaps not. In either case, empty consciousness seems to have little to do with our ordinary mental lives.

If you think about it further, the question of empty consciousness turns out to be important. This question might bear on the puzzle of the mind-brain relationship. Here's why.

If an empty consciousness is not possible, then the absence of conscious experience - the lack of a "stream" of impressions and other mental contents - is the absence of consciousness itself. If (as we usually suppose) the brain is responsible for creating these contents, then consciousness is entirely dependent on the brain.

On the other hand, if an empty consciousness is possible, then the absence of conscious experience might *not* spell the complete absence of consciousness. All the contents caused by brain activity could stop for a while, and some residue of consciousness - an empty consciousness - would remain. This empty consciousness would exist without any of the contents that correspond to brain activity. This raises the possibility that consciousness itself, in the form of an empty consciousness, might exist even in the absence of brain activity. In other words, maybe the mind is not simply reducible to the brain.

It is hard to see how scientific evidence could rule out this possibility. We can use scientific observations to study behavior, mental activity, and the processing of information in the brain. However, it is hard to imagine how science could test for the existence of a hypothetical "pure" consciousness in which no mental events happen. Suppose that a comatose person or a really good meditator were truly devoid of mental contents for a while. What observations would you do to tell whether this person was truly nonconscious or was in a state of empty, contentless consciousness? No set of scientific observations could tell the difference. Science studies consciousness by collecting and interpreting data about behavior (including verbal reports) and the functioning of the nervous system. The absence of behavior, and of the kind of brain activity associated with experiences, would point to the absence of any impressions, thoughts, feelings, or the like - any contents. However, if there were an empty consciousness, it would not be associated with any impressions or experiences. There is no compelling reason to expect that such a consciousness would be evidenced by any behaviors, or by any happenings at all. To use a colloquial English phrase, such a consciousness would be "nothing doing." Even if there were some type of observable brain activity associated with empty consciousness, how could a scientist decide whether this activity is associated with *empty* consciousness or with *nonconsciousness*? The subject would behave the same way in either case. From a first-person standpoint, neither empty consciousness nor nonconsciousness would involve any distinguishable experiences, so the subject would not have any grounds for making different reports. Thus, the question of the existence of an empty consciousness does not seem to be an empirical question at all.

Why should we even worry about empty consciousness? It seems like an outlandish possibility - the stuff of thought experiments at best. So why worry about this possibility? One potential answer comes from the strange world of mathematical logic. If we apply a little formal logic to the question of empty consciousness, we find that empty consciousness might have to exist, even if science cannot decide its existence one way or the other!

The most striking feature of consciousness is the existence of a way things seem - an "inner world" of facts that seem, to the conscious subject, to be true. If you are conscious right now, things seem a certain way to you. This "way things seem" is different from the objective, external world in many ways. Things can seem to be the case that are not the case (as when illusions occur), and many things really are the case that do not seem to anyone to be the case. The important fact is that *there is a way things seem*. For any conscious subject, a fact may seem to be the case or may not seem to be the case. These "subjective facts" of an observer's consciousness can be quite different from the facts of the objective world.

If you are conscious, you have a world of subjective facts. A "conscious" system that does not have such a world is not really conscious at all.

In my book [\*From Brain to Cosmos\*](#) [fbtc], I used ideas from modern logic to explore the idea of subjective fact. I stressed the fact that consciousness defines what logicians call a *modality*.

The idea of a modality is somewhat involved. To show what a modality is like, I'll present two examples of modalities. (For more information, see a book or encyclopedia article on modal logic.)

\*\*\*\*\*

**Example 1: Possibility.** Given any statement, you can create a new statement by adding the words "It is possible that" to the beginning of the statement. The new statement then describes what is *possible* instead of what is *actual*. For example, you could begin with the statement "There is a zebra in Moscow." From this you can form a new statement: "It is possible that there is a zebra in Moscow." This statement describes what is *possible* - what might possibly be true. This statement can be true even if there actually is no zebra in Moscow. After all, the mere fact that there is no zebra in Moscow doesn't rule out the possibility that a zebra might end up there!

The phrase "It is possible that" stands for an important modality - the modality of *possibility*. (Philosophers recognize several different kinds of possibility, but I won't explore those details here.)

\*\*\*\*\*

**Example 2. Pastness.** For any statement, you can make a new statement by adding the words "It was the case that" to the statement. The new statement then describes what was true in the past, instead of what is true now. For example, you could begin with the statement "There is a zebra in Moscow." From this you can form a new statement: "It was the case that there is a zebra in Moscow." A less awkward and more grammatical way of saying this is: "There was a zebra in Moscow." This statement describes what was true in the past. This statement might be true even if today there is no zebra in Moscow. If today there is no zebra in Moscow, this doesn't rule out there having been a zebra in Moscow in the past!

The phrase "It was the case that" stands for an important modality - the modality of *pastness*. (Philosophers also recognize several other modalities having to do with time. The mathematical subject of "tense logic" makes use of these modalities.)

\*\*\*\*\*

These two examples illustrate what a modality is. It's like a function that changes a statement into a statement of a different kind. Phrases like "It is possible that" and "It was the case that" change ordinary statements about the actual, present world into statement of other kinds - statements about possibilities and about the past, respectively. You can think of a modality as *a way in which propositions can be true*. A proposition (like the proposition that there is a zebra in Moscow) might be *actually true* - but it also might be *possibly true*, or *true in the past*. Even a proposition that isn't actually true can be "true" in one of these other ways.

Students of logic know of many different modalities. For our purposes here, the important thing is that *seeming* is a modality. The phrase "It seems to me now that" changes a statement about how things are into a statement about how things seem. If I say "It seems to me now that there is a blue door," I am making a statement about how things seem to me now - in other words, about my experience. This statement does not imply that there really is a blue door. Maybe I'm looking at a window and misinterpreting it as a door, or maybe I'm only dreaming about a blue door. Or maybe I really am seeing a blue door. In any of these cases, *it seems to me* that there is a blue door.

Now, what does all this talk of modalities have to do with the problem of empty consciousness?

Suppose that you really did attain a period of empty consciousness, like I described earlier. Would there be anything of your consciousness left over during that period?

Yes, there would. Even if you were having no experiences, there still would be a modality of seeming. There would be the modality of how things seem to you now - and this modality is an important element of your consciousness!

At any given moment during your period of empty consciousness, there still would be the modality of *seeming to be the case for you now*. This modality, like all modalities, is a way that propositions can be true. Even if there currently are no propositions that are true in this way (that is, nothing seems to be the case for you now), there still is this modality of seeming to be the case for you now. We still can make meaningful statements using this modality, even if nothing seems like anything to you. At very least, we can make the statement "It is not the case that it seems to you now that P," where P is any proposition at all. (Translation of this statement into plain English: "Nothing seems like anything to you now.") If you are conscious of nothing at all, then the statement "It is not the case that it seems to you now that P" is true, and describes an actual state of affairs. The statement could not be true in this way if the phrase "It seems to you now that" were meaningless. We know what this phrase means; it means the same as it meant before you went blank! Since that phrase still has its meaning, it follows that there still is a modality of *seeming to be the case for you*.

The bottom line is that there is something left of your consciousness even if your consciousness is absolutely empty! This "something" is a modality of seeming - a modality that is essential to being conscious. Even if you are not conscious of anything, there still is such a modality.

Of course, the modality is not an extra thing that exists besides your brain activity. The modality isn't a "thing" at all. It's an abstract logical item, just as are the other modalities like possibility and pastness. The important fact is that the modality of seeming does not go away just because your consciousness is empty. It continues being what it was before: just a modality.

Now we can answer the question that started this post. Is there any difference between an empty consciousness and no consciousness at all? Yes, there is! With an empty consciousness, there still is a modality of seeming, similar to the one that the conscious subject used to have when his/her/its consciousness was not empty. This applies to a subject whose consciousness didn't used to be empty, but is empty now. This situation is very different from the existence of no consciousness at all. If a physical system (like a rock) has no consciousness at all, then there is no modality of seeming associated with that system. There simply is no way that things seem for that object - not even an empty, blank, void way.

The fact that seeming is a modality suggests that there can, in principle, be an empty consciousness. There is no fundamental logical reason why an empty consciousness of some kind cannot exist. This is true because there is more to consciousness than just the contents of experience. There also is the modality of seeming - which is equally real whether or not consciousness has any contents.

Earlier I pointed out that if empty consciousness is possible, then consciousness has a feature that science cannot detect. Since empty consciousness is possible in principle, we are stuck with an interesting conclusion: that there is at least one fact about consciousness that science cannot know. This conclusion may seem dangerous to the scientific approach to nature, but actually it is not dangerous at all. Mathematics constantly deals with facts beyond the reach of scientific methods - for example, the fact that the Pythagorean theorem follows from the axioms and postulates of plane geometry. No one thinks that such formal mathematical facts are threats to science. The existence of an untestable feature of consciousness is a fact of much the same sort. It is a formal fact that becomes apparent when we apply modal logic (a type of mathematics) to the idea of consciousness. The facts of mathematics and logic are not threats to science - so the fact that empty consciousness is possible cannot be much of a threat either!

-----

*(Post updated slightly 10/18/2010 - one link changed)*

---

05/03/09

### **The Unfinishable Book Is Now Free**

One of my main e-books, *The Unfinishable Book*, is now [available for free download \[unfin\]](#). (The usual Internet connection charges still apply, but the price of the book is a great big zero.) The book is in PDF format.

---

05/18/09

### **Anti-Dawkins Paper No. 1: Overlooking the Idea of God**

Richard Dawkins' book *The God Delusion* is one of the cornerstones of the so-called New Atheism. After reading this book, I found that it utterly fails to build a convincing case for atheism. I'd like to offer my opinions on this book in a series of posts to this blog.

The most serious flaw in *The God Delusion* is that it misses the idea of God almost completely. Dawkins focuses on one particular idea of God: that of a supernatural creator of the universe, as presented in traditional theism and deism (pp. 11-15, 18-19, 31). He admits that he is trying to debunk only the supernatural idea of God (pp. 15, 31). The only other idea of God that Dawkins even considers is pantheism, which he equates to the poetic use of the word "God" to describe the physical universe or its laws (p. 18). By leaving the reader with only these choices, Dawkins bypasses the many well-considered philosophical conceptions of God that do not fit either of these categories. Thus, he cannot debunk these other ideas.

Dawkins begins this mistake by ignoring all forms of pantheism that do not fit his narrow definition of "pantheism." Dawkins' description of pantheism fits some versions of pantheism, but is grossly inaccurate for other forms. Among these other forms are the pantheistic viewpoints of Schelling, Heraclitus, and Bruno, and Eastern philosophies such as Advaita Vedanta. In various ways, these philosophies identify God or the divine with the whole of reality or with the underlying principle of the universe. However, they do not equate God to a universe regarded as a mere collection of material particles. Some forms of pantheism depict the mental and spiritual features of reality as real and significant — at least as significant as the physical features of the cosmos. Thus, they do not reduce God to a mere poetic name for the physical universe known to science.

Dawkins' handling of Spinoza is especially revealing. Spinoza probably is the best known of Western pantheists. His philosophy, born in the early days of modern science, stressed the unity of nature and the

immutability of natural law. Dawkins mentions Spinoza and notes that Einstein approved of Spinoza's idea of God (p. 18). However, this mention of Spinoza seems ironic, because Spinoza's pantheistic philosophy simply does not fit Dawkins' narrow definition of "pantheism." Spinoza identified God with nature, but he also held that nature has mental as well as physical properties [1]. According to Spinoza, the natural universe itself is not merely a physical system, but also is intrinsically spiritual. Spinoza's God is impersonal, but has mental and spiritual features, making it a bit more like a "someone" than a mere "something." After reading Spinoza's *Ethics*, it would be silly to equate Spinoza's pantheism to "sexed-up atheism" — which is Dawkins' characterization of pantheism (p. 18). Indeed, Spinoza himself denied that he would equate God to nature if nature were thought of as strictly material [2]. Spinoza's God is impersonal and natural, but is a real supreme being, not merely a sexed-up collection of lumps of matter. Despite the sharp differences between Spinoza's view of God and the standard Christian views, the Christian writer Novalis had good reason to label Spinoza "the god-intoxicated man" [3].

Besides neglecting most forms of pantheism, the book also ignores many other philosophical conceptions of God. There are ideas of God that portray God as something besides the physical universe, but that do not involve (or could exist without) belief in miraculous supernatural action. Some philosophers have proposed theories of God like this; offhand, the names of G. H. Howison, Charles Hartshorne and Aristotle come to mind [4]. Dawkins' polemic bypasses these ideas almost as if they did not exist. He simply sorts ideas of God into two bags — the supernatural, miracle-working creator from traditional religion (together with its simpler variant, the God of deism), and the poetically described material world with no real God. Any form of belief in God that doesn't fit into one of these two bags simply fades from view.

By ignoring all these philosophical conceptions of God, Dawkins forfeits any claim to have built a case against God. At most, he has shown that traditional Western religious conceptions of God are inadequate. This does not imply atheism. At most, it implies that those who believe in the traditional version of God should either become atheists *or* adopt improved ideas about God. (Whether Dawkins has accomplished even this much is a separate topic.)

This slighting of non-supernatural ideas of God contributes to Dawkins' high-handed treatment of Stephen Jay Gould's NOMA concept (pp. 54-61). According to NOMA, science and religion each have their own areas in which they are authoritative. If NOMA is right, then religion should not dictate about matters in the area of science, such as evolution and cosmology, and science should not dogmatize about matters of the meaning of existence, which belong to religion. The NOMA idea is quite reasonable. It is close to what many liberal, modernist believers in God already believe. (If you think the Genesis story can't be literally true because it contradicts science, then you already are practicing NOMA to some degree.) Of course, most religions today do not obey NOMA. Instead, they postulate literal miraculous happenings that science might, in principle, be able to evaluate. Dawkins correctly recognizes this, and observes that a religion that follows NOMA would be quite different from most religions practiced today (p. 60). Dawkins could have taken this observation to some reasonable conclusion. For example, he could have claimed that today's religions need to be reformed and modernized, leading to liberal forms of religion that take miracle stories to be spiritual lessons instead of physical facts. Instead, he uses the occasion to rake NOMA over the coals. He even makes the nasty suggestion that Gould was insincere in his embrace of NOMA (pp. 57-58). To support this putdown of the brilliant Gould, Dawkins trots out the claim that Gould personally was skeptical of the existence of God (p. 58). Needless to say, Gould's personal belief or disbelief in God is totally irrelevant to Gould's sincerity in embracing NOMA. One can believe that religion is a legitimate field of study and still come to a personal decision to be an agnostic or an atheist in the field of religion. (It's much like studying a particular field of physics and finally embracing a theory that denies some commonly accepted concepts in that field. No insincerity required!) None of Dawkins' overheated criticisms of NOMA cast any doubt on the rational acceptability of NOMA. Of course, making NOMA look bad is useful for Dawkins, because if NOMA were right his science-centered polemic against God might lose its grip.

The main line of argument in *The God Delusion* is an attempt to debunk supernatural concepts of God, especially those that involve supernatural creation or intervention. Because not all concepts of God require supernatural happenings or even a supernatural God, the book does not succeed in debunking God. It fails as a polemic for atheism. The most this book can do is undermine traditional religious conceptions of God, then leave us on our own to decide about the conceptions of God put forth by philosophers and reason-friendly religionists. Whether the book can do even that much is a separate question.

Why does Dawkins ignore almost all philosophical conceptions of God? It might be a symptom of a more general problem: a striking failure to handle philosophical ideas correctly [5]. One can catch a whiff of this failure at various points in the book. I'll give a few examples here.

In a discussion of traditional Christian ideas about the Trinity (p. 33), Dawkins refers to a teaching of Arius that makes use of the philosophical concepts of "substance" and "essence." Philosophers (including atheistic ones) are likely to have some idea of what these terms mean, for philosophers have thought about puzzles involving substance and essence since the time of the ancient Greeks. However, when Dawkins asks rhetorically what these terms mean, his answer is "'Very little' seems the only reasonable reply" (p. 33). This is simply wrong. One can love or hate theology, but either way, the terms "substance" and "essence" do mean something. They are standard philosophical terms with real meanings.

Another example of bad philosophy (and also of substituting ridicule for thought) is Dawkins' discussion of the ontological argument for the existence of God (pp. 80-85). This is a famous argument put forth by Anselm of Canterbury in the Middle Ages. Dawkins' treatment of this argument is both emotional and coarse. He calls the argument "infantile," and then gives a silly scenario in which children on the playground argue about God using some of the same words used in the real argument (p. 80). Despite the tone of snide self-assurance in that passage, Dawkins gets the ontological argument wrong! Scholars have known for decades that Anselm wrote down at least two distinct versions of the ontological argument [6]. The first version was more or less preliminary; apparently Anselm himself was dissatisfied with it, for he presented a second version in the next chapter of his book. The second version is more sophisticated and is not nearly as vulnerable to attack. The full analysis of this second version requires modern techniques of logic. However, the version that Dawkins quotes is the *first* version (p. 81). It is pretty clear that his ridiculous playground scene also is based on this first version. As Hartshorne pointed out in 1965, many past philosophers made the mistake of critiquing the first version of the argument and ignoring the second [7]. However, there is no excuse for this mistake today; we simply know better. Dawkins either does not know or does not bother about the second version of the argument. He just goes ahead and quotes and ridicules the weak first draft of the argument, as if that were an effective attack on the ontological argument.

Toward the end of his attack on the ontological argument, Dawkins mentions the time he presented a bogus argument, resembling the ontological argument, to a meeting of philosophers and theologians. Dawkins says: "They felt the need to resort to Modal Logic to prove that I was wrong." (p. 84; capitalization in original). Read in context, this remark seems snide, as though forcing the philosophers and theologians to use modal logic were a gloating victory. Does Dawkins even know that modal logic is a respectable mathematical discipline, and that modal logic is necessary for the rational analysis of almost *any* argument about possible entities that might not be real? To me at least, the book gave no answer to this question.

Still another example of a crude approach to philosophy comes from Dawkins' discussion of mind-transfer scenarios (p. 180). Dawkins mentions two fictional stories in which people find that they have swapped minds, with the mind of one now existing in the body of the other. Dawkins claims, without much argument, that "the plot makes sense only to a dualist" and that such stories could happen in real life only if the personality is somehow distinct from the body (p. 180). A little philosophical reading shows that the truth is not so simple. In real life, philosophers have studied mind-transfer scenarios in great detail — and some *materialist* philosophers have seriously considered that they might be logically possible [8]. One can be a

materialist, with no belief in a nonphysical mind, and still find it possible for the mind of person A to enter the body of person B. All one has to do is suppose that the two persons' brains are reorganized in a way that makes one of the brains continue the memories and conscious life of the other. Needless to say, this experiment would be an enormous feat in real life. Today's science is nowhere near being able to do it. However, this feat would be possible in principle even if dualism is false. If Dawkins offered any real argument for his opposite opinion on this topic, I might take his opinion seriously — but he offers no real argument.

These examples are far from my original topic of the idea of God. I mention them only to show that Dawkins' book contains some strikingly crude treatments of philosophical ideas. Perhaps this helps to explain why the most interesting ideas of God — the philosophically well-considered ones — are almost entirely absent from this book.

---

## Notes

Page numbers for *The God Delusion* refer to the edition listed under "Works Cited," below.

- [1] Spinoza, *Ethics*. See especially Part 2 Proposition 7, including the following "scholium" or note, and Part 2 Proposition 13, especially the following note. Also see Durant, pp. 134-143.
- [2] See the excerpt from Spinoza's letter, in Durant, p. 132.
- [3] Quoted in Durant, p. 149.
- [4] The works of Aristotle are well-known. Hartshorne's ideas are well-known too, within the rubric of "process theology." His idea of God is discussed in his several books. Howison also is important in the history of philosophy, but appears to be less well-known than Aristotle and Hartshorne. His main work is *The Limits of Evolution and Other Essays*.
- [5] I am not the first to comment on Dawkins' inadequate treatment of philosophical ideas. Plantinga has mentioned Dawkins' "jejune" and "sophomoric" handling of some philosophical matters (see Plantinga, "The Dawkins Confusion").
- [6] See Hartshorne. The first version of Anselm's ontological argument is in Anselm's *Proslogium*, Chapter 2. The second version is in Chapter 3.
- [7] Hartshorne, especially pp. 12-18.
- [8] See Shoemaker, pp. 108 ff.

## Works Cited

- Anselm. *Proslogium*. Trans. Sidney Norton Deane, ed. Paul Halsall. [<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/anselm-proslogium.html>], accessed 5/18/09. In: Paul Halsall (ed.), *Internet Medieval Sourcebook* (cited below).
- Dawkins, Richard. *The God Delusion*. (Boston and N.Y.: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006)
- Durant, Will. *The Story of Philosophy*. (N.Y.: Simon and Schuster, 1953)
- Halsall, Paul (ed.) *Internet Medieval Sourcebook*. [<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/sbook.html>], accessed 5/18/2009.
- Hartshorne, Charles. *Anselm's Discovery*. (LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 1965)
- Howison, G. H. *The Limits of Evolution and Other Essays*. (N.Y.: The Macmillan Co., 1901)
- Plantinga, Alvin. "The Dawkins Confusion." *Books & Culture*, March 1, 2007, [<http://www.christianitytoday.com/bc/2007/marapr/1.21.html>], accessed 5/10/2009.
- Shoemaker, Sydney. "Personal Identity: a Materialist's Account." In: Sydney Shoemaker and Richard Swinburne, *Personal Identity*. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984)
- Spinoza, Baruch. *Spinoza Selections*. Ed. John Wild. (N.Y.: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958)
- N.B.: Spinoza's *Ethics* comes in several versions. Durant's chapter on Spinoza is a valuable introductory discussion of this philosopher. See especially Section 2, "Matter and Mind."

(Post slightly updated on 22 May 2009.)

---

05/26/09

### **Anti-Dawkins Paper No. 2: Why Dawkins' Main Argument Against God Is Wrong**

In [my earlier anti-Dawkins post](#), I explained why Richard Dawkins' conception of God, as presented in his book *The God Delusion*, is too narrow to be of much use. In this post I will confront Dawkins' most important argument against God: what he calls the "argument from improbability."

The "argument from improbability" is the main argument in *The God Delusion*. The gist of the argument is

that God, if there is one, would have to be extremely complex. According to the argument, only a very complex being could create the universe or do the other tasks that God is thought to do (such as answering prayers). However, a highly complex being is very statistically improbable. Therefore (the argument goes) it is very probable that there is no God. What is more, using God to explain the complexity in nature is useless, because the assumption that God exists just adds to the complexity that it supposedly explains. (This is only a brief summary of the argument; the original is in *The God Delusion*, especially in chapter 4.)

Unfortunately for Dawkins, the argument from improbability is wrong. The argument might appear convincing at first glance, but it turns out to be hopelessly weak once you see the illogical spots. It is like a magic trick: the believability goes away once you notice how the trick is done.

I started to write a post explaining the flaws in the argument, but the post got rather long, so I turned it into a paper. [Here is the link to that paper \[improb\]](#). (The paper is in PDF format.)

Of course, this paper is not a disproof of atheism or a proof of the existence of God. However, it debunks one seemingly "good" reason for being an atheist. If you are going to be an atheist, you will have to find a better reason than the argument from improbability.

---

06/19/09

### **Anti-Dawkins Paper No. 3: Dodging the Issue of Personal Religious Experience**

This post continues my [critique](#) of Richard Dawkins' book *The God Delusion*. In this post I will look at Dawkins' argument against personal religious experience.

Dawkins tries to debunk personal experience as a source of religious knowledge (pp. 87-92). He builds his case in the weakest possible way: by giving flawed examples of so-called "religious" experiences. Some of the examples are experiences of real things wrongly interpreted. For example, someone hears the "diabolical" cackling of a bird (the Manx Shearwater) and thinks it is the voice of the Devil (p. 87). Other examples involve hallucinations, such as supposed ghosts or voices in one's head. Dawkins attributes these phenomena to the "simulation software" of the brain (pp. 88-90).

Despite Dawkins' apparent fascination with them, these experiences are not "religious" in any interesting sense. If Dawkins wants to build a rational case against religion, instead of merely a noisy case, he should know better than to use examples like these. Scholars of religion know of other kinds of experiences radically different from, and much subtler than, these simple mistakes. Some of these other experiences cannot be mere illusions or hallucinations, for reasons I will explain below.

There is one type of experience that, in a sense, cannot be wrong. I am referring to the experience of a *property* or a *quality*. [1]

Take, for example, Dawkins' example of the Manx Shearwater. The people who heard the noise certainly did not experience the Devil. They did not experience anything that really was devilish; the bird was not devilish,

though it sounded that way. However, they did experience a sound which, as they perceived it, *sounded diabolical*. This quality of *diabolicalness* - of seeming devilish or overpoweringly sinister - is a real quality that some sounds have. This quality is not fundamentally mysterious. Presumably we could analyze it in terms of the reactions of the human nervous system, just as scientists do with other perceptible qualities of sound, like pitch, dissonance, or the phonetic qualities of speech. [2] Cultural factors, as well as physiological ones, may figure in this. Certain sounds seem devilish to some people under some circumstances. That much we know.

The people who heard the cry of the Manx Shearwater did not actually experience the Devil. However, *they really did experience the quality of diabolicalness*. They did not experience an evil being. They did experience a bird, but only tangentially (they didn't know it was a bird). But whatever else they experienced, they really did experience a *quality*. The sound really did seem devilish to them.

Experiences of qualities happen all the time in much less dramatic ways than this. When you see a red brick, you have experienced the color red, which is a quality. When you see one side of that brick, you see that it is rectangular; you perceive the quality of rectangularity. The interesting thing about perceptions of qualities is that, in some cases at least, the experience can contain a strong element of illusion and still be right. Suppose that the red brick turned out not to be red. Instead, it was yellow, but odd lighting and bright colors nearby, together with your expectation that bricks are red, made it look red. When the simulation software in your brain created the experience, it registered the brick as red instead of yellow. What happened here? You saw a brick; the brick was not actually red; but still, *you really saw the color red*. The property or quality of redness was, for a moment, an object of your awareness. The same idea works for rectangularity. Even if the brick did not really have rectangular sides (maybe some sides were trapezoidal but the brick was tilted), the property of rectangularity still was present to your mind.

Experiences of a quality may be reliable even if the object that seems to have the quality isn't there. To repurpose Dawkins' pink elephant example (p. 88), I would add that if you get drunk and experience a pink elephant, you have not really seen an elephant - but even though you did not see an elephant, you did experience the color pink.

What do these examples tell us about religious experience? Perhaps a lot - for, as it turns out, the only religious experiences worthy of the name are experiences of *qualities*. Based on what we know about colors, shapes, and the like, it's possible that these experiences really show what they seem to show, even if they also contain a strong element of illusion.

The best examples of these experiences come from a family of special states of mind known by several names: "poetical," "transcendental," "enlightened," "illuminated," or "mystical." (I prefer not to use the word "mystical," because people use that word for all kinds of silly things, including sheer occult folly.) Here I will stick with the more neutral term "spiritual experience." [3] Real spiritual experiences are not the silly experiences that Dawkins calls "religious." Instead, they are deep, refined states of mind that may happen even to the best scientists and artists. A spiritual experience is a subjective experience that seems to bring a powerful intuitive insight into the ultimate meaning of existence.

Real spiritual experiences do not happen only in connection with religion. Often they happen to poets and artists, to alert observers of nature, or to lovers. They may be called poetic insights, artistic inspirations, or moments of transcendent awareness.

Most spiritual experiences have several features in common. One of these features is the sensation of a *supreme goodness or beauty* that pervades or underlies the universe. Some spiritual observers come away from their experiences with the conviction that the universe is basically good, or that something perfectly and supremely beautiful lies behind the universe we see. Usually the observer also feels that he or she has gained

a momentous knowledge of the true nature of reality - a knowledge that cannot be put fully into words. Interestingly, spiritual observers often feel far more awake or alert than normal. These spiritual states are not mere dream states. It feels as if consciousness expands to take in a truth deeper than anything that ordinary awareness can reach.

Can an experience like this be true? Can it give the observer genuine knowledge about reality? Elsewhere I have shown that the answer is "yes." Some experiences of this kind do yield knowledge of reality - and even knowledge that science cannot reach.

My argument for this point is laid out in my e-book [God: the Next Version](#). (Those who want to criticize this post should read that e-book first; my full, unabridged argument is there, not here.) In that book I pointed out a way in which experiences of sublime beauty or love can give rise to experiences of a perfect being. At bottom, this perfect being is an abstract entity (actually a quality!) instead of a physical object or a ghostly "spirit." Just as with other abstract objects like redness and rectangularity, we can experience this abstract entity authentically, regardless of what in our brains is causing the experience.

Because this perfect being isn't supernatural, it doesn't fit Dawkins' definition of God. However, I showed in [an earlier post](#) that Dawkins' definition of God (p. 31) is hopelessly inadequate - it just doesn't capture most actual ideas of God. In [God: the Next Version](#) I showed that the perfect being has mental characteristics of a sort, and also encompasses the physical universe. If we regard this perfect being as God (and I think that is a logical thing to do), then some spiritual or poetic experiences really do yield knowledge of God.

This conclusion may sound mysterious at first. Certainly it will make the professional skeptics angry. However, there is nothing supernatural about all this - it's just a matter of logic! Perceptions like this can happen because the perfect being is partly an abstract entity. This brings us back to the most important part of my argument: the fact that some experiences of an abstract entity can be trustworthy, in the sense that if it seems that you have experienced the abstract entity, then you really have experienced it. I should say a few more words about this potentially upsetting idea.

The reason that even an "illusory" experience of an abstract entity can be right is that you can experience an abstract entity *by means of the internal information processing that happens naturally in your brain*.

Think about it this way. Ordinary sense experiences involve energies from the perceived object that cause events in the observer's brain. For example, when someone sees something, light travels from the object to the observer's eye, causing nerve impulses that in turn influence the observer's brain. For hearing, it is sound that causes events in the brain; for touch, stimuli like pressure do it; for taste and smell, chemicals cause the events. This is the way we perceive concrete physical objects with our five senses: the objects cause events in our brains.

However, not all experiences work this way. When you experience an *abstract* object, like a pattern or a relationship, the abstract object does not need to cause anything. Instead, your brain knows about the object by processing information that already is in your brain. One good example of this is the perception of a Moire' pattern in a print of a digital photograph. When you look at the photo, the colored toner on the print reflects light and causes events in your brain. You see the colored areas on the photo. You also notice the Moire' pattern. You don't have to reason about the pattern to see it. You just *see* the pattern, suddenly and intuitively. The pattern itself doesn't cause anything; only the colored toner on the print is causing events in your brain. However, you still can perceive the pattern. Your brain does this by processing information that's already in your brain from what you saw. In this way, you can verify that the pattern exists and learn much about the pattern - without once receiving a stimulus from the pattern instead of from the colored material.

Another example of knowledge without signals from an object is the understanding of a theorem in

mathematics. No new sense experiences are needed. The brain just mulls over the information it already has, and a new insight emerges. In this instance too, you learn about abstract objects and relationships by processing information that's already in your brain. Your brain gains new knowledge by processing and analyzing information that it already has.

Neuroscience strongly suggests that the human self is an abstract object (a feature of the brain) instead of a separate soul. (See [here](#) and [here](#) for my take on this.) In *God: the Next Version* [gtnv] I argued that God also is an abstract object, combined with the physical and abstract objects that exemplify or show that object. If spiritual items like God and the self are abstract objects, then we should be able to learn a lot about spiritual realities the same way we learn about other abstract objects - through the brain's processing of existing information. In this way, spiritual intuition and illumination can occur without supernatural intervention. (This conclusion, by the way, is independent of my particular ideas about the nature of God and the self. If God and the self are at least partly abstract objects of any sort, then we might be able to know about spiritual realities through abstract intuition of some kind.)

The lesson from all this is that some "religious" experiences can be for real. Subjective personal experiences can indeed yield knowledge about the existence of God. *I want to emphasize that there is nothing supernatural about this.* It's all a matter of logic, and of the brain's capacity to recognize abstract features in existing information. Once again, the details of this line of argument are in *God: the Next Version*. Other relevant ideas are in my other blog, with the kindred title *Religion: the Next Version*.

As if I haven't said it enough, I wish to emphasize it again: Real, qualitative spiritual experience is completely different from Dawkins' silly examples of "religious" experience, such as cackling birds and voices in the head. Dawkins' attempt to debunk all religious experiences with these examples is simply too shallow and biased to go unlaughed at. Even an experience cooked up by the brain's simulation software can be a source of knowledge, as long as we focus on the qualities it shows and ignore the concrete objects it seems to reveal.

Incidentally, a correct view of spiritual experience also demolishes the argument that Dawkins gives in the section titled "The Argument from Beauty" (pp. 86-87). Dawkins points out that people often feel that the beauty of art shows there is a God. He dismisses this feeling on the grounds that no one has stated a logical argument for this link. Well, we just found the argument! Perceptions of beauty can lead to real spiritual experiences, and according to the argument in *God: the Next Version* [gtnv], these experiences can disclose a perfect being. Perhaps the people who put forward ill-formed arguments from beauty are having spiritual experiences caused by beauty, but they just can't put their experiences into words. Dawkins' suggestion that the argument from beauty arises from "jealousy of genius" (p. 87) is as fanciful as it is nasty.

Spiritual experiences frequently give other insights besides the existence of a perfect being. For example, poets and mystics often feel that reality is unified in some deep way ("all is one"). Some mystics, mostly Buddhist meditators, get the impression that the physical universe is empty and impermanent. I won't say much about these other insights here, except to point out that they have a basis in fact. The natural world really is one, in the sense that everything is interconnected. A careful observer of nature can begin to realize this fact; no supernatural knowledge is required. A poet who focused intensely on this unity might have a sudden flash of insight that nature is One. The Buddhist who sees the universe as Void might seem to be in contradiction with the nature mystic who sees the universe as One. However, the Buddhist also is right: all physical things are impermanent, and since all physical things depend on other things for their existence, they are empty of any permanent and stable existence. The viewpoint of science and everyday consciousness, which tells us that the world is a collection of objects, also is right. Each of these three perspectives reflects a one-sided and biased view of reality, but each of them is correct in its own way. (Aren't all human experiences biased and one-sided?) Interestingly, the experiences of unity and of emptiness both involve a kind of abstract intuition: the discovery of new features in a universe that we already know.

Ironically, Dawkins comes close to recognizing the true nature of spiritual experiences. Judging by his book, he has had at least one such experience himself. Dawkins admits to having had a "quasi-mystical" experience of the natural world (p. 11). He describes his poetical attitude toward the physical universe (pp. 11-12), which could just as well be called mystical or near-mystical. The first chapter of his book is significantly titled "A Deeply Religious Non-Believer."

Dawkins obscures the link between religion and spirituality when he claims that his own deeply poetic attitude toward nature should not be called "religion" (p. 12). Dawkins is wrong about this. The poetic attitude, and the experiences that it fosters, can reveal deep aspects of reality and even can disclose the divine. What could be more religious than that? The professor whom Dawkins mentions on p. 12 was right: such experiences are indeed religious. Dawkins might have been able to figure this out if he didn't insist on a narrow definition of God that makes God supernatural (pp. 12-13, 31). Apparently, Dawkins thinks we are confused if we connect transcendent experiences to belief in God (pp. 12-13). In reality, the connection between spiritual experiences and God is real and perfectly logical. Experiences of the sublime and transcendent in nature actually are experiences of God, whether we know it or not. The God that they show us is a perfect being - not just a poetical name for the scientists' universe, as Dawkins finds some pantheists using the word "God" (p. 18). However, there is no reason to think that the God of spiritual experience is a *supernatural* being. Therefore, He, She or It is not quite the "God" that Dawkins is against. (Incidentally, a poet can use any of these three pronouns.)

In this post I have only begun to touch on the subject of religious experience. It took many words to do even that much. The important point is this: if Dawkins wants to address the subject of religious experience, he should concentrate on real religious or spiritual experiences, not on obviously flawed experiences. He should take into account the remarkable experiences discussed in the writings of contemplatives of East and West. He should take special account of the experiences that do not involve simulated visual or auditory images. Those experiences are the most likely to disclose something real. Dawkins also should study the insights of romantic poets from all over the world. Their poetic experiences often are spiritual to the core.

Whatever one thinks of real spiritual experiences, they are not the same as the simplistic mistakes, illusions, and mental simulations that Dawkins deploys as examples. These bogus experiences are nothing but straw men - easy to knock down if one wants to hide from the real intellectual challenge that religious experience poses. The problem of the validity of religious experience is a complex topic with many nontrivial philosophical angles. One cannot simply handwave away the whole subject, as Dawkins tries to do in *The God Delusion*.

Before wrapping up this post, I should mention my own view of the relation between spiritual experience and religion [4]. In my opinion, personal spiritual experience is the most important aspect of religion. It is the human mind's main method for exploring spiritual realities. I suspect that it also is the original source of most of the world's major religions. Here is how a religion might start. Some brilliant teacher, a spiritual genius, has personal experiences of the divine. This teacher, or his/her followers, write down what the teacher learned from these experiences. Since it is almost impossible to put these experiences into words, the writings are easily misunderstood. Thus we have the beginnings of an organized religion - a body of people who, though possibly well-intentioned, don't really know how to keep the original teacher's insights alive. If the original writings contain poetical words of inspiration or exhortation, these words are misunderstood and turned into dogmas and rules. Fear replaces love, and irrational faith replaces the spark of intuitive insight. In this way dogmatic religions are born - irrational systems of thought which are corrupted versions of great teachings, but which nevertheless contain grains of truth that a perceptive believer may be able to pick out from amidst the errors.

Such might be the origin of today's major world religions. Since you and I weren't there, who knows?

-----

## Notes

[1] Note to philosophers: I am bypassing the philosophical debates about infallibility and incorrigibility. If you read on, you will find out what I mean when I say that experiences of qualities "cannot be wrong." Feel free to interpret this according to your own ideas about infallibility and the like.

[2] Dawkins mentions the brain's handling of sounds and speech (p. 90).

[3] The general information on spiritual experience that I am using in this post has been distilled from the literature of religious mysticism and related topics, and also from the insights of poets. Most of the ideas are not attributable to any single source, but are part of general knowledge on these topics.

[4] My guess about the origin of religions is not original. It owes much to ideas widely held among experience-friendly thinkers on the subject.

---

06/20/09

### **Anti-Dawkins Paper No. 4: Evolution and the So-Called Illusion of Design**

This post continues my critique of Richard Dawkins' book *The God Delusion*. You can find the entire critique [here](#).

One of the main ideas in *The God Delusion* is that the apparent design in the biological world is only an "illusion of design" (p. 2 and chap. 4; see also p. 79). Dawkins is convinced that evolutionary theory shows there is no real design in the biological world. He trots out the old claim that Darwinism refutes the design argument for the existence of God (p. 79). Chapter 4 of *The God Delusion* is partly a rehash of the old argument that evolution shows there is no design in the biological world.

No matter how it is stated or obscured, the central idea of the evolutionary argument against design runs along the following general lines. The evolution of life is simply a resultant of small natural events involving living organisms and their genes. None of these events involves any design; each of them is mechanistic, fully obeys all natural laws, and is caused by other natural events. Therefore, the products of evolution cannot really be products of design.

This argument sounds good at first, but there is something deeply fishy about it (evolutionary pun intended). To see how questionable the argument is, compare it to the following argument about the human brain: Human thought is simply a resultant of small natural events involving neurons and their connections. None of these events involves any design; each of them is mechanistic, fully obeys all natural laws, and is caused by other natural events. Therefore, the products of human thought cannot really be products of design.

If we applied the skeptics' standard for design to the human brain instead of to Earth's biosphere, we would

conclude that humans never designed anything! So much for Michelangelo and Edison! According to the scientific view of the mind and brain, human thought processes are neither more nor less than sum totals of small physical events, no single one of which itself involves any design. To avoid the absurd conclusion that humans never designed anything (which is really just an abuse of language, twisting the meaning of the word "design"), we have to admit the possibility that a natural process, composed of small unplanned physical events, *can* add up to a process of design. Once we admit this possibility, the argument that nature's design is an illusion ceases to be convincing. As with human feats of design, the fact that evolution is purely mechanistic and natural does not imply that its products can't be real designs. Nothing supernatural is required.

Another common argument for the illusion of design points to the flawed and conflict-ridden nature of many of the products of evolution. These faults, according to the argument, show that the designer, if there is one, must be far from perfect. It's more reasonable just to assume the products are not designed. Dawkins pulls this gambit (p. 134). However, this argument is even shallower than the above argument about small natural events. By the standard of this second argument, we should conclude once again that human creations are not designed - this time on the grounds that the human brain often (even usually) produces flawed products and preliminary versions instead of perfect final products.

I will not continue this line of rebuttal here, since I already have done that elsewhere. For the rest of my argument, see [this document \[design\]](#) - and if you like, also read my book *God, Son of Quark [gsoq]*. For now I will just point out that the argument for an "illusion of design" is not as strong as it seems. In fact, it unravels at the slightest touch.

Can those who believe the orthodox scientific version of evolution (as I do) live with this conclusion? Is there any alternative to the "illusion of design" besides supernatural tinkering? Yes! To learn what the alternative is, read the two documents of mine that I just mentioned.

---

06/22/09

### **Anti-Dawkins Paper No. 5: The Causes of Religion Cannot Prove Religion False**

This post continues my critique of Richard Dawkins' book *The God Delusion*. You can find the entire critique [here](#).

In this post I will comment on Dawkins' ideas about the causes of belief in God.

In Chapter 5, Dawkins points out several causes that might make people tend to believe irrationally in God or religion. Some of the causes have to do with evolutionary biology, mostly focusing on religion as a "by-product" (p. 172) of evolved tendencies or behaviors. Other causes are cultural; they have to do with the spread and persistence of beliefs and ideas in societies. By proposing these explanations of religion, Dawkins is trying to counter the common view that religion must be right because it is so widespread (see pp. 2 and 159).

It's interesting to watch how Dawkins prejudices the debate by using biased language to describe these phenomena. He uses the term "misfiring" to describe situations in which something in the brain starts to perform a new function that supports religion (p. 188). Regardless of this word's scientific connotations, it clearly suggests there is something wrong. (Why not use "redirection" or some other, more neutral word? Elsewhere Dawkins acknowledges that "misfiring" isn't always a bad word (p. 221). He sure doesn't insist on that point when he discusses religion.) When the alleged cause of religion is cultural, Dawkins often describes it in terms of the spread of "memes" (pp. 191-201). This post isn't the place for a debate on the merits of the meme concept in general. However, it is interesting that Dawkins uses language that paints mental pictures of the automatic spread of a disease germ. He even compares religion to a virus (pp. 186, 188). By using these loaded metaphors, Dawkins marginalizes the fact that the spread of an idea involves conscious, and sometimes even thoughtful, decisions by human thinkers. If you voluntarily decide to change your religious beliefs, that is *your* decision. The fact that you can make this one decision for yourself is more important than any amount of talk about how beliefs spread. The possibility that human behavior is predictable does not make this fact less significant [1].

Dubious language aside, Dawkins' argument about the causes of religion is irrelevant to the question of whether there is a God. His suggestions about evolutionary and cultural causes for religion are interesting, and may even be wholly or partly right. Dawkins' proposed causes of religion may indeed help to explain why religion is so widespread. However, these claims about the causes of religion have little bearing on the truth of belief in God. Why? Simply put, people sometimes arrive at correct beliefs for the wrong reasons - so the mere fact that a belief has irrational causes doesn't imply that the belief is wrong.

As Dawkins and many others know well, some widely held religious beliefs are grossly wrong. The idea that the world was created in seven literal days is one example. It is easy to imagine that beliefs like these gain their force from irrational causes like the ones Dawkins discusses. However, the vagaries of evolution and culture sometimes cause us to hold *true* beliefs, too. Evolution created the features of our brains that enable us to recognize that one plus one equals two. The fact that evolution prompts us to believe this does not make  $1+1=2$  false! Cultural processes, like evolutionary ones, don't just perpetuate false beliefs. They also perpetuate true beliefs. Probably you haven't personally verified every single "fact" that your teachers taught you in school. Perhaps you accepted most of these "facts" when they were taught to you - yet most of these alleged "facts" really *are* facts. (Dawkins recognizes that children absorb truth, as well as error, from authority figures; see pp. 174-176.) The fact that authority or irrational tendencies tilt us toward certain beliefs does not make those beliefs wrong. To think otherwise is to commit the *genetic fallacy* - a logical mistake in which a thing (or a belief) is assumed to have the features of its source or cause.

If we want to find out how much of religion is true, we must examine specific religious beliefs to find out whether they are true or false. Finding out why we tend to favor these beliefs is not the same as finding out whether the beliefs are true. If we find that we are holding a belief for a stupid reason, then the belief still might be true. After all, people sometimes hold true beliefs for the wrong reasons. The important question is not "Where did it come from?", but "Is it right?"

In one especially funny place (pp. 184-186), Dawkins compares religion to falling in love. He suggests (mentioning Dennett as a source for the idea) that religion may be a side effect of the evolved mechanisms that produce romantic love. My first reaction when I read this was: Well, duh! Many [mystics](#) have known of the kinship between religious and romantic experience. This is not a new discovery, nor is it an argument against religion. Mystics of many different traditions know that emotions related to sex and love can be harnessed to produce unusual states of consciousness and spiritual insights. The Tantric tradition, especially its Hindu branch, offers some extreme examples of this. The [romantic poets](#) of all nations and traditions offer other examples. If Dawkins thinks the link between sex, romance and religion is a new discovery, he has some studying to do. Likewise if he thinks this link is evidence against religion.

Dawkins' arguments about the causes of religion cannot help to discredit religion. To think that they can is to commit a logical fallacy, and to ignore a basic fact about evolution and culture: "irrational" forces sometimes shape organisms so that the organisms hold true beliefs.

Dawkins' supposed causes of religion might form part of the reason why people believe. However, I'd like to offer another possible cause for the stubborn persistence of belief in God. (I've already said something about this subject, and the origin of religions, near the end of [an earlier post](#).)

As I've explained [elsewhere](#), certain subjective personal experiences seem to offer deep insights into reality that ordinary experiences do not provide. (I'm not talking about Dawkins' silly examples of so-called "religious" experiences (pp. 87-92); see [here](#) for the differences.) Often these deeper experiences show the world to be a unity, or "one," in an unexpected way. These experiences can reveal an awesome goodness and beauty in the universe - a goodness and beauty so perfect that one's immediate emotional reaction is one of soaring love. What is more, some of these experiences are accurate in a certain sense: they contain true insights even if they also contain an element of illusion.

A spiritual experience of this sort might prompt a person to believe that there is a single ultimate reality underlying the universe, or a supreme good that encompasses all other goods, or a supreme beauty of which all other beauties are visible manifestations. In other words, these experiences can lead people toward belief in a supreme being of some kind. This being isn't the same as the supernatural God that Dawkins likes to bash (defined on pp. 12-13 and p. 31), but it is a supreme entity nonetheless - and an entity that is not just "dead" matter, but is full of meaning, value, and other "mindlike" qualities.

If people have these experiences and understand them, that is real spirituality. If people have these experiences and *misunderstand* them, the result might well be belief in a dogmatic supernatural idea of God. A person with a limited background of ideas to choose from might confuse a perceived supreme good with a ghostly spirit of some kind, or with a mythical humanoid creator figure. This would be especially likely to happen in the early days of the human race, when mythological and supernatural explanations were the rule.

As I've argued in [God: the Next Version](#) [gtnv] and [elsewhere](#), some real spiritual experiences actually do disclose a being worthy to be called "God." It isn't hard to imagine how people who have heard secondhand of these experiences might invent distorted supernatural beliefs about God. Eventually, when the original experiences are forgotten, confused or malicious people might hijack the resulting belief systems, and invent tragic perversions such as fundamentalism and fanaticism in the name of an imagined superbeing. The best response to these perversions is not atheism, but an effort to reproduce and understand the original experiences.

Many people have had legitimate spiritual experiences. Many have had them without even knowing what they had. (Perhaps they thought they only had a breathtaking moment of romantic love, or of amazement at the vastness of the cosmos, or of "being at one with nature.") If the possibilities of human nature include these spiritual experiences, that might help to explain why belief in God is so persistent.

Dawkins' explanations of religion might form part of the reason why we tend to believe in God. However, there might be another, nobler reason as well. People tend to have real spiritual experiences, and those experiences can show us a supreme being - even if we are not always smart enough to understand what that being is like.

-----

## Notes

[1] Note that I am *not* begging the question of the predictability of human action. Whether your decision was predictable or not, it was your voluntary decision. (Many philosophers think predictability is compatible with free will. This idea is called "compatibilism." See my own compatibilist article [here \[conscwill\]](#).)

---

06/24/09

### Anti-Dawkins Paper No. 6: Does All Religion Cause Evil?

This post continues my critique of Richard Dawkins' book, *The God Delusion*. You can find all posts in this critique, including the present one, [here](#).

One of the main lines of argument in *The God Delusion* is the argument that religion leads to evil. The book is chock-full of descriptions of the evils of religion. However, these examples, dramatic as they are, prove absolutely nothing about the existence of God. The examples do not show that belief *in* God leads to evil. They only show that certain beliefs *about* God lead to evil. You don't need to hold these particular beliefs to believe in God.

It is silly to jump from the premise that religion has caused evil, to the conclusion that belief in God causes evil. A careful observer of religions should be able to figure out that *belief in God, by itself and without other beliefs, does not force you to do evil*. What causes the evil is not belief in God, but certain beliefs *about* God. Specifically, the evil comes from two kinds of beliefs about God: *beliefs that imply that people should harm others*, and *beliefs that cause harm to the people who believe them*.

Here are a few examples of beliefs that imply that people should harm others:

- The belief that God has ordered us to force our religion on others.
- The belief that God has ordered believers to kill infidels.
- The belief that God has ordained cruel laws and punishments.
- The belief that God has ordered women to obey men.
- The belief that God has told us to beat our children.

Here are two example of beliefs that cause harm to the people who believe them:

- The belief that sinners or unbelievers go to an eternal hell. (Dawkins is right when he shows this belief can cause horrible unnecessary misery right here on earth (pp. 317-322).)
- The belief that committing a sin makes God want to punish you, or otherwise puts some kind of

spiritual stain on you. (Guilt about sin is one of the *greatest* of all evils inflicted in the name of religion. It lies at the basis of many of the other evils. I'm not talking about the simple moral belief that wrongdoing should be avoided. I'm talking about the theological idea of *sin* with all that it entails.)

Dawkins' book contains references to these beliefs and more. However, you can believe in God without accepting any harmful beliefs of these two kinds. It is these other beliefs that cause problems - not belief in God as such. Belief in God is not the cause of the evils that Dawkins points out. At most, Dawkins has built a case against religion as it exists today, with its many and sometimes strange beliefs. He has not built a case against the simple belief in God as such. That is something different.

Dawkins has failed to build a case that belief in God is evil. Has he built a convincing case that *religion* is evil?

Dawkins' examples of the evils of religion form a strong case against *bad religion* - that is, religious beliefs that deny fact (as creationism does) or that deny sensible, humane moral feelings (as jihad does). His examples do not form a case against *good religion* - that is, personal views of the meaning of existence that do not try to overrule testable fact or decent morality. Dawkins' book is not friendly to distinctions between good and bad religion (see, for example, pp. 301-308), but the difference is real. Some liberal, moderate personal interpretations of religion are examples of good religion. Whether or not these good interpretations are right, they are not causes of evil behavior, provided that they actually respect fact and real morality. A belief system that respects ordinary human decency (including the rejection of murder and cruelty) cannot approve cruel or murderous behavior, because its moral outlook frowns on such behavior. A belief system that respects scientific facts (including evolution) cannot endorse superstition, because its very essence is to deny superstition.

Do genuinely moral and fact-respecting forms of religion exist? Yes! Many religious believers already are following this kind of religion. They may claim that they belong to some traditional sect or other, but if so, they interpret the teachings of their sect in a humane and realistic way. I have known many Christians and Jews of this kind. I am confident that they have counterparts in all the other major religions. I have known Christians who focused almost exclusively on the Golden Rule and on the universal love that Jesus symbolizes. They believed in a good God, ignored the nasty stuff in the Old Testament and in Paul's writings, and did not really believe in hell. A skeptic might accuse such people of being selective about their scriptures (compare the example of nonviolent Muslims on p. 307). However, this complaint, even if true, pales beside the fact that these believers put kindness and reason ahead of authority and dogma. In any case, selective reading of scriptures can make sense if you do not believe your scriptures are literally true.

Dawkins also claims that faith is bad, even in liberal religions, because if people are encouraged to believe things on faith then they are more likely to become extremists (pp. 301-308). This argument ignores the obvious fact that faith does not have to be unquestioning *blind* faith. There also is such a thing as *informed* faith. Informed faith respects science, reason, and humane moral sentiments. It does not challenge these, but only takes stands on questions that science, reason, and ethics cannot answer. Examples of such questions might include the ultimate meaning and purpose (if any) of existence. Taking an optimistic stand on this question might be a desirable thing to do from the standpoint of human life, even if we don't know the answer. [1]

Faith might not even be necessary for belief in God. I've argued [elsewhere](#) that there are ways to know about God without faith. The God we find this way might not fit Dawkins' [overly narrow idea of God](#), but still it is a supreme being.

Dawkins shows a tendency to carp on bad forms of religion and to downplay more plausible and rational forms. His book is full of examples of crazy or strange religions: cargo cults, militant sects, and the rest.

Suggesting that these represent religion is like suggesting that a newspaper horoscope represents the science of astronomy. Just as there is good science and bad science (or pseudoscience), so also there is good religion and bad religion. Dawkins focuses on bad religion and thinks he is building a case against good religion too. You can't prove much about religious beliefs in general by focusing on the bad examples.

Has Dawkins built a convincing case against religion? No. Has he built a convincing case against ignorant and cruel forms of religion? Yes - but thoughtful believers already know these forms are wrong, without being lectured by an atheist.

-----  
**Notes**

[1] The philosopher William James made essentially this same point about faith, and argued it very well. See "The Will to Believe," in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (Dover Publications, 1956).

---

06/25/09

**Anti-Dawkins Paper No. 7: Dawkins Misrepresents Some Opposing Ideas and Thinkers**

This post continues my critique of the ideas about religion found in Richard Dawkins' book *The God Delusion*. You can find all posts in this critique, including the present one, [here](#).

There are many things wrong with the line of argument in *The God Delusion*. Besides the [faults I discussed earlier](#), there are two passages that misrepresent opposing thinkers so grossly as to strain belief. I will take up these two passages in turn.

**1. Some Silliness about Dualism**

One of the ideas that Dawkins criticizes is dualism - the view that the mind is something distinct from the body (pp. 179-180). This criticism is not surprising, since dualism is unpopular in academic circles today. Dualism was more popular among scientists and philosophers in the past. The great philosopher-scientist Descartes was a dualist, as was the Nobel Prize-winning brain scientist John Carew Eccles [1]. Even today, "property dualism" (a mild form of dualism) remains under consideration among philosophers.

In light of these facts about dualism, consider the following two utterly amazing statements by Dawkins (p. 180):

"Dualists readily interpret mental illness as 'possession by devils' [...]"

"Dualists personify inanimate physical objects at the slightest opportunity, seeing spirits and demons even in waterfalls and clouds."

When I first read these incredible statements, I thought, "Which dualists could Dawkins have in mind?" The answer came quickly: not any philosophical dualist I've heard of! The most prominent dualist philosopher of all time was Descartes. Descartes believed that humans were the only animals with non-bodily minds. To accuse Descartes of "personify[ing] inanimate physical objects at the slightest opportunity" is sheer claptrap. The same can be said about other serious dualistic thinkers besides Descartes.

What Dawkins calls "dualism" in this passage is not dualism, but *animism*. [2] Animism is a feature of some tribal religions. Animism is dualistic, but it is not a reflective or philosophical form of dualism. Scientifically aware dualists are not animists. You can like dualism or hate it, but either way, confusing dualism with animism is simply nonsense.

I don't pretend to know why Dawkins made this mistake. I wish I could give him the benefit of the doubt, and assume that he just goofed and used the wrong word, taking "dualism" to mean what's usually called "animism." Alas, his characterization of dualism on the previous page (p. 179) shows that things are not so simple. He knows the approximate definition of dualism, but he confuses dualism with animism anyhow. The resulting passage in the book makes dualists look far more foolish than any rational criticism could make them appear.

This confusion is rhetorically convenient. If real philosophical dualists believed in waterfall spirits, then dualism would be oh-so-easy to debunk!

## **2. Nonsense about a Major Psychologist**

In another place (p. 50-51), Dawkins makes unsupported statements about the noted psychoanalyst C. G. Jung.

First, Dawkins makes it sound as though Jung were an unshakable believer in a supernatural creator. Dawkins repeats a famous quote, attributed to Jung, about the existence of God: "I do not believe, I *know*." From this quote, Dawkins infers that Jung was a theist and was 100 percent certain that there is a God (p. 50). (Earlier, Dawkins defines a theist as a believer in a supernatural God of a certain sort (p. 18).)

There are two things glaringly wrong with this reading of Jung's statement.

First, Jung almost certainly did not believe in the kind of God that Dawkins is trying to disprove. Jung's idea of God is not the God concept of theism as defined by Dawkins. Anyone who has studied Jung knows that Jung regarded God as having a *psychological* reality, in the sense that belief in God arises from a deep part of the unconscious mind. According to Jung, the God images of myth and religion arise from the conscious mind's contact with unconscious parts of the psyche (what Jung called the "archetypes"). These unconscious parts of the mind are not actually the gods of religion and mythology. Instead, they are elements of our inherited mental capacities. Their presence in us makes us tend to believe in God or gods and to have religious experiences. In Jungian psychology, "God" is "real" in the sense that the part of the mind upon which God-images are based has an objective psychological reality. It's safe to suppose that this psychological reality is what Jung had in mind when he said that he knew God was real. To suppose otherwise is to ignore the entire thrust of Jung's psychological theory.

Whether Jung personally believed in the supernatural is a difficult question. Like many scientists in his time,

he was interested in so-called paranormal phenomena, but he tried to understand these as parts of nature. However, this distracting side issue has little bearing on his idea of God. Jungian psychological theory, and even Jung's idea of God, could exist perfectly well without the "supernatural" as Dawkins understands that word. Jung's concept of a psychological God, found in the depths of the human mind, is very far from the supernatural concept of God that Dawkins is trying to refute!

As if this confusion were not enough, Dawkins does something even sillier: he reads Jung's "*I know*" as meaning that Jung was 100 percent sure there is a God (p. 50). Why 100 percent sure? Why not assume instead that Jung was confident to a high level of probability, but less than 100 percent? This is what scientists normally mean when they say they "know" something. They do not usually mean they are 100 percent sure. So, why does Dawkins take Jung's "*I know*" to mean that Jung was absolutely certain? I don't claim to know the answer to this, but once again the confusion is rhetorically convenient. Jung's psychological theory, with its strong strain of spirituality, is a threat to Dawkins' antireligious world view. It's easier to make Jung look foolish if you paint him as a 100 percent confident True Believer.

I'd like to know exactly what Dawkins was thinking when he accused Jung of "holding a belief without adequate reason to do so" (p. 51). Has Dawkins studied Jung's clinical and historical research on the psychological basis for the God concept? I don't know, but based on what I know of Dawkins' ideas, I have serious doubts. If Dawkins is accusing Jung of unreasoned belief without first looking at Jung's reasons, then Dawkins is making an unreasoned claim. Jung, on the other hand, was trying to be scientific. Whether Jung succeeded is a separate question, but he did build up an interesting body of supporting information for his ideas.

Dawkins then attributes another belief to Jung: "that particular books on his shelf spontaneously exploded with a loud bang" (p. 51). Dawkins states this in a context that makes Jung seem silly. The truth about these so-called exploding books is far more complex, and far less helpful to Dawkins.

As far as I can tell, Dawkins' exploding-books claim is based on a well-known story found in one of Jung's books [3]. The story, in summary, is this: Jung and Sigmund Freud were in a room when Jung began to feel an odd physical sensation. Then Jung and Freud heard a loud popping noise in a bookcase. After the first noise, Jung felt strongly that there was going to be a second noise, and said so. Then there was a second bang. Jung's feeling that there was going to be a second bang is the only spooky thing about this incident. The bangs themselves, which seem to worry Dawkins, could have had many possible natural causes, such as accumulations of flammable dust from old books, or overloaded weak bookshelves. (A confirmed skeptic like Dawkins is not likely to be troubled by Jung's odd feeling of things to come, for a skeptic always can dismiss strange events as coincidences.)

If this really is the incident Dawkins had in mind, then he has reduced this incident (with two witnesses!) to a mere *belief* of Jung's. He mentions the affair in an inaccurate way that makes Jung seem foolish. Why? History supports the view that Jung did not merely believe in the noises; he heard them. So did another observer, Sigmund Freud, who is known to have had a skeptical streak. You don't have to be deluded to witness peculiar events. You don't even have to be religious.

Why does Dawkins portray Jung's ideas and experiences in such a bad light? Again, I don't know why (for I am not Dawkins). It's possible that Dawkins' misreading of Jung is just a random mistake. However, we must not forget who C. G. Jung was. Jung was a psychoanalyst who was not only scientifically inclined, but also took the spiritual side of human nature seriously. He thought the findings of psychology lent some credence to human spirituality. Jung saw grains of truth in the world's religions and mythologies, and he collected some facts in support of his position. If Jung was right to any degree at all, then his ideas represent a threat to Dawkins's fire-breathing antireligious crusade. Once again, the mistake is rhetorically convenient!

### 3. Concluding Personal Opinion

These gross misinterpretations of some of Dawkins' opponents - the dualists and Jung - helped to convince me that *The God Delusion* is off the map intellectually. It is good policy not to believe anything said in *The God Delusion* without first investigating the facts for yourself. Of course, that is good policy when reading any book tagged as "nonfiction." It is especially important for a book as problem-ridden as this one.

-----

#### Notes

[1] Curtis, D.R., and Anderson, P. "Biographical Memoirs. John Carew Eccles 1903-1997." Australian Academy of Science. <http://www.science.org.au/academy/memoirs/eccles.htm> (accessed June 25, 2009).

[2] The word "animism," like many philosophical terms, has been used to describe more than one idea. Here I am using the most common meaning: the belief that natural objects are inhabited or controlled by spirits.

[3] Jung, C.G. *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*. Ed. Aniela Jaffe'; trans. Richard and Clara Winston. Rev. ed. (pbk.) N.Y.: Vintage Books, 1989. The story is on pp. 155-156 of that edition.

---

07/06/09

#### Anti-Dawkins Paper No. 8: Are Scientists and Other Smart People Atheists?

This post continues my critique of Richard Dawkins' ideas about religion as found in his book, *The God Delusion*. You can find the whole critique [here](#).

Dawkins' claim that most good scientists are atheists (pp. 97-103) does not provide one shred of support for atheism. The majority of scientists might be atheistic, or appear to be atheistic, for reasons having nothing to do with the truth or falsity of atheism. I can think of four such reasons without even trying very hard.

##### Reason 1. Academic politics.

This explanation for scientific atheism is crashingly obvious to those of us who have observed the rise of other persistent academic fads, like postmodernism. If the top layers of the scientific profession contain lots of atheists, then it might be hard for religious scientists (even liberal ones) to move up in their fields. Over time, this process of selection would make atheism more and more common among scientists. This mechanism alone could explain the abundance of atheists in science.

Of course, this explanation will work only if there was an initial surplus of atheists to start the process. It isn't hard to see where that surplus could have come from. There could have been a temporary surge of atheism among scientists in the wake of some scientific discovery that seemed to support atheism. Evolution is one candidate for such a discovery. (Evolution doesn't actually support atheism, but it rules out some simplistic beliefs about God, and it *seems* to support atheism. See [here](#) and [here](#) for relevant ideas. Also see my e-books [God and Darwin - Buddies!](#) [gadb] and [God, Son of Quark](#) [gsoq].) Another possible source for the initial surplus of atheists is pure chance. For example, the top universities might have happened to recruit more atheists than usual for a short time. (This is what mathematicians call a statistical fluctuation.) No matter how the atheistic trend got started, it easily could have become self-perpetuating and stubbornly hard to reverse.

## **Reason 2. Philosophical ignorance and "philosophobia."**

In my personal experience, I have found that many scientists are frighteningly ignorant of philosophy. Some even speak as if they held preposterous beliefs about philosophy - like the belief that philosophers think the physical world is only a dream. A few scientists are downright hostile to philosophy in spite of knowing little about it. Worse yet, most scientists are not skilled in the kind of reasoning used in philosophy - the subtle, nuanced analysis of ideas and shades of meaning, so different from the visual thinking and physical intuition that pervade most scientific reasoning.

This ignorance about philosophy might seem to be a simple case of overspecialization. It might seem to have nothing to do with religion. However, this ignorance easily could trap scientists into becoming atheists or agnostics. Here's how that could happen.

Scientists are highly educated. Because of this, they know that many traditional religious beliefs are wrong. The most obvious example of such a belief is the doctrine that God created each living species through a special supernatural act. When people become educated enough to reject a lot of beliefs like that, they will lose faith in the old-time religion they grew up with. What outlook will they adopt instead? There are only two real choices. Either they will abandon religion, or they will try to find a more rational type of spiritual belief. How can one find those better forms of belief? Only through philosophical reasoning - the kind of fine-grained qualitative thinking, often about unvisualizable concepts, that is typical of philosophy. You don't have to be a philosopher to figure out rational alternatives to the old-time religion. However, you do need to be able to think like a philosopher. Scientific reasoning, with its emphasis on pictorial thinking about visible things, is not the right tool for this job. When confronted with ideas like [the various personal and impersonal concepts of God](#), scientific reasoning will simply draw a blank. Scientists who no longer believe what they were told to believe, but who can't think philosophically, will not find any rational alternative besides unbelief.

For this reason, a scientist who can't think philosophically is likely to feel that religion is wrong, period. Without the background to think out better answers, what else can a scientist do?

## **Reason 3. Atheism of convenience.**

Maybe the statistics about atheism among scientists aren't as accurate as they seem. Dawkins hints that people of earlier times (including scientists) may have pretended to be religious for political or social reasons (see p. 98). This seems like a very reasonable assumption. However, in today's scientific community, atheism and not religion is the fashion. Thus, the opposite deception might occur. I wonder how many scientists pretend to be atheistic for the sake of their careers, when really they are believers!

This mechanism could not account for all scientific atheism. I think most scientists are more or less honest about their beliefs. However, this mechanism could increase the apparent number of atheists in science.

#### **Reason 4. Mislabeled.**

I wonder what scientists and those who observe them really mean when they label scientists as atheistic. If they take "atheism" to mean disbelief in a personal God or in a supernatural God, then a scientist might be labeled an atheist and still believe in a full-fledged supreme being! (See [my earlier post](#) on alternative ideas of God.) Perhaps some scientists are not really atheists, but are just skeptical of traditional ideas about God. Also, I wonder how many "atheistic" scientists really are agnostic instead of atheistic. Do the scientists, with their typically inadequate philosophy backgrounds, fully understand the difference?

These four sociological mechanisms, acting together, easily might explain why scientists tend to be atheists or to be labeled as atheists.

These sociological mechanisms don't affect only scientists. They also could explain Dawkins' observation that educated and intelligent people in general are more likely to be atheistic (pp. 101-103). To explain that fact, we don't have to assume that the idea of God is so irrational that only dumb people fully accept it. (Dawkins doesn't quite make that assumption in *The God Delusion*, but his selective carping on the stupidest examples of religion strongly suggests it.) The fact that scientists and other educated people tend to be atheistic does not prove anything interesting about the real world.

Incidentally, professional philosophers (like other educated people) could be affected by these sociological mechanisms. Can reason 2 apply to them? Philosophers, by definition, are not ignorant of philosophy. However, they still can suffer from a kind of partial "philosophobia," because present-day philosophy is so deeply fragmented into subdisciplines. One easily can imagine a philosopher of science or a philosopher of mind being ignorant of the philosophy of religion, and thinking there must be something fishy about it because it has to do with religion.

---

07/08/09

### **Why Science Cannot Disprove the Afterlife**

#### **Part 1. The Afterlife and the Scientific Argument Against It**

One of the important beliefs of traditional religions is the existence of an afterlife. Some religions teach that humans have immortal souls that leave the body at death and continue to exist afterwards. Other religions teach that there is no persisting soul, but that a person's mental life, or some aspect of it, starts up again in a new body. (This second view is typical of Buddhism.)

Science-minded skeptics often reject the idea of an afterlife out of hand. Their standard argument against the afterlife goes like this: The mind is only a process in the brain. Therefore, the mind cannot survive the death of the brain.

Is this argument against the afterlife sound? No, it is not. The reason is simple: a process can continue after its physical medium is destroyed. A process that exists in one medium now can continue in a different medium later. Therefore, the fact that the mind is a process in the brain does not imply that the mind must end with the brain. Instead, the mind might continue later in a new brain or in some other physical medium. [1]

There are many examples of processes that start on one medium and continue in another. Examples of these processes are water waves, computations, and fires.

An ocean wave is a process. A single wave can pass from one part of the ocean to another. In doing so, the wave first occupies one stretch of seawater, then another, then another. The water molecules themselves move around in place; they do not travel with the wave. If the part of the sea where the wave started were removed (say, displaced by a big ship), the wave might continue as if nothing happened - provided that the wave already had traveled to a *new* piece of water.

A computation is a process. It can start on one processor and finish on another. If the computation isn't going to use the first processor anymore, then the first processor normally can be shut off with no harm to the computation.

A fire is a process. It can start on one chunk of fuel and continue on another. Once the fire reaches the second piece of wood, the first piece might already be destroyed. However, the fire can continue to burn. The fire needs fuel, but the fire's existence doesn't depend on *any particular* piece of fuel. A different piece of fuel will do just fine. (The analogy between the spread of a fire and the continuation of the mind occurs in Buddhist thought. Apparently the old-time Buddhists understood the behavior of processes better than do today's skeptics.)

A process can continue even after the demise of its original medium. Therefore, the common "scientific" argument against immortality is neither scientific nor convincing. Even if the mind is only a process in the brain, the mind might still continue after death by continuing in another brain, or in some other physical system capable of supporting mental processes.

This finding isn't an argument for the existence of an afterlife. It is only a rebuttal to the standard "scientific" argument against the afterlife. The skeptics who use this argument are way off track. The mind may be a process in the brain, but this fact alone does not tell us whether the mind can continue to exist after the brain is gone. If the skeptics want to think that the afterlife is impossible, they are going to have to find better reasons than that one!

## **Part 2. Of Toads and Timing: How Might the Mind Survive Death?**

It's possible for a process to outlast its medium. How could this happen for the human mind?

This question brings us to the many scientific speculations about artificial immortality. Scientists, philosophers, and science fiction writers have asked whether we might be able to become immortal by transferring our minds into new brains or into computers. This kind of artificial mind transfer is one way that the mind might outlive its brain. (I discuss an even wilder variation on this in note [2].)

Artificial immortality is an exciting prospect, but it isn't what I want to write about in this post. I am thinking about *spontaneous* immortality - a mind's survival of death *without* artificial means. Spontaneous immortality is similar to what present-day religions believe in. Is spontaneous immortality logically possible and compatible with modern scientific knowledge?

The simple answer is YES. Nothing in logic or in science rules out the possibility of a mind spontaneously starting up again after the death of its original brain. For this to happen, the mind would have to start up again in some other brain spontaneously, without artificial intervention. We have no proof that this happens, but nothing we currently know rules it out. I'll spend most of the rest of this post justifying this answer.

Could an old mind really start up again spontaneously in a new brain? How could this happen?

If it happens, it might work something like this. The mind stops operating when the brain dies. Then a new mind, starting up naturally in a newly formed infant brain somewhere, happens to have some crucial features of the old process. In fact, it is so much like the old process that the two processes constitute *the same mind*. The new process in the new brain acts as a continuation of the old process in the old brain.

If something like this happened, then a kind of "rebirth" could occur without the need for anything controversial like persisting souls. It wouldn't require any objects besides human bodies and their brains.

Does this scenario even make any sense? Yes! We already know of many physical processes that restart like this. They stop happening for a while, and then start happening again later.

One prime example is a computation. Someone can set up a computer program to do a specific task (for example, calculate pi to 1 million decimal places). If the program saves its in-progress data to the hard disk, then if the program is interrupted (say by a hardware reboot), the program can be started up again later and finish the same task. There is no reason to think of the second part of the computation as a totally new computation. It is part of the same computation as the first part.

Other examples of such processes come from the migration of animals. Many types of animals migrate from one geographical area to another. Perhaps the movement is caused by external stimuli alone, or perhaps internal "clocks" and interactions among animals play roles - but in any case, the result is a process that we call a *migration*. Now imagine a migration in which the animals' movement is triggered by external stimuli alone. Imagine further that these particular animals are not very excitable, so that only one animal is traveling at any given time. If you want a specific example, imagine a bunch of toads moving across the landscape - and imagine that the toads are rather placid, so it happens that only one toad is hopping at any given time. This process (if it really happened) would be a perfectly good example of an animal migration. However, it would not be a continuous process, but would be a frequently interrupted one. At any given time, a single toad is moving - but in between times, no animals are traveling at all. In spite of the gappy and disconnected nature of the movements, the sum total of these movements is a process of migration. A migration really is happening. It would be an abuse of language to say there is no "migration" just because the migration consists of discrete jumps. [3]

These examples show that a single process can be made up of several consecutive subprocesses or stages ("hops"), each of which spans a different interval in time and space. It's possible for a process to stop and then start up spontaneously later, even if some time elapses between the stages of the process, and even if the restart happens in a different place from the stop.

What does that tell us about the mind? The toad and computer examples show that a process can be made of several stages that happen in sequence, with time gaps (and even space gaps) separating the stages. The stages don't have to be connected directly together to make up a single process. Thus, the process that we call the mind could (for all we know) consist of several separated stages. The fact that the mind is a process in the brain does not rule out the possibility that this process has more stages later, in other brains. When a mind stops, some later process that starts up in some other brain might be *a future stage of the same mind*. We have no proof that this happens, but we can't rule it out by shouting that tired old skeptical battle cry, "the mind is only a process in the brain"!

If minds really could start up again like this, then after you die, your mind might start up again in the brain of some new baby who is just beginning to gain consciousness. (Babies appear to become conscious gradually, not all at once - but still they do become conscious, so we can speak of the experiences that happen as a baby becomes conscious.) In other words, you might die, then wake up as a new baby somewhere in the world. This would be a modern version of the ancient doctrine of reincarnation or rebirth. Of course, there would be nothing that actually "reincarnates," because there is no substantial soul to pass over to the new body. There also would be none of those so-called "past-life memories" that bemuse so many New Agers. Instead, your mind during this life would be only one time-phase of a larger process, which has gaps and also includes the mind of a future brain. This larger process would be your mind as a whole. Your mind as it exists during this life would be only part of your mind - a single stage.

The Buddhist idea of rebirth is much like this: a kind of restart of one's inner life in a new body, without any substantial soul to pass over to the new body. However, the idea I am proposing here is much simpler. Among other differences, my idea can do without the belief in karma, which is important to the Buddhist view.

### **Part 3. The Perils and Possibilities of Persons**

So far I have been talking about an abstract logical possibility: a single mind that exists in two or more different bodies, one after the other. Before we can consider this a real possibility, we need to think about a huge question: Why would the mind of a new body - a body born after you die - be *your* mind? What would make a particular new mind a continuation of *you*, instead of just a new person? Could anything do that?

Offhand, it doesn't seem as if the mind of a later body could be your mind. The very idea seems bizarre. After all, the baby born after you die doesn't have your memories, and probably no information or influence has passed from you to the baby! This kind of "rebirth" isn't exactly like a fire passing from one stick to another, where the first phase of the fire causes the second phase to begin. It's more like our migration of toads, where two independent hops can be stages of the same overarching process. It's just you (hop number 1) and a future infant (hop number 2) - with no important influences passing in between.

Could the baby be the same person as you? I don't have a final answer to this question, but I do know a possible way to an answer. This way is the *theory of personal identity* - a field of philosophy that uses logic to analyze questions about the persistence of persons through time. Let me explain this a bit. I won't go into personal identity theory in depth here (there already are many books on that topic), but I'll try to indicate what the field is about, drawing on general background knowledge about the field. Those interested in a deeper treatment are invited to explore the many books and articles on personal identity.

During your present life, your mind and body continue through time. As they continue, you undergo many different moments and stages of life. All these time-phases of your life are stages of a single history of a unique person. There is a *unity* to your history; the history isn't just a scattered series of random experiences or disconnected moments of existence. There must be some shared feature that the stages have in common, or some relationship among the stages, that unites all the stages into the history of a single person. Philosophers studying personal identity have created various theories, ideas and guesses about the nature of the unifying feature or relationship.

Let's look at a few known ideas about personal identity, and what they say about the possibility that a new baby, born after your death, might be you all over again.

*(Note to philosophers:* As a philosopher, you might agree or disagree strongly with some of the theories I'm hinting at here. Remember that I am *not* advocating a specific theory of personal identity. I only want to show that different views of personal identity can give very different verdicts on the idea of rebirth. I am well

aware that there are arguments for and against each of these views. If an objection is standard, I've probably already heard it.)

### ***Idea 1. Essentialism.***

According to so-called "essentialist" views of personal identity, what unites the stages in your life is a set of essential characteristics. These would be the characteristics that make you uniquely you, and that differentiate you from all other persons.

If persons or their minds really have essential characteristics like this, then a baby might be born who is literally a *continuation of you*. People are born with many different sets of characteristics as a result of chance and the genetic lottery. Given any possible set of essential characteristics, some future baby might happen to be born with that same set of characteristics, just by chance. The longer the time after your death, the more likely such an infant will be born somewhere. Thus, you might be "reborn" in the future by virtue of raw chance. In effect, the chance genetic processes that created you in the first place might accidentally create you again!

### ***Idea 2. Continuity of experience.***

According to other views of personal identity, what unites your stages into one history is the *continuity of experiences* in your life. At each conscious moment, you have certain experiences (sensations, feelings, etc.). These experiences give way to each other as you go along, creating what's called a "stream of consciousness."

If this apparent continuity is what ties your life together, then a baby might be born who is literally a continuation of you. A baby, once conscious, can have various experiences. Some of these experiences (perhaps most of them at first!) will be dreamy and unreal - so they will include experiences of things that aren't really present. Given the vast complexity of brains, some of these dreamlike experiences might even be rather random. What if the baby's earliest experiences started with impressions that just happened, by chance, to duplicate your last moments - either in detail, or at least in certain crucial respects? That might be enough to make the new baby's consciousness count as a continuation of yours.

### ***Idea 3. Continuity of viewpoint.***

Each of us has what philosophers call a "first-person point of view" - a unique standpoint from which one experiences the world. As philosophers often have pointed out, conscious experience has a subjective "feel"; it has an inner, subjective, felt aspect as well as an outer, behavioral one. [4]

This provides a clue to another way that a new baby could be literally a continuation of you. As I pointed out under Idea 2, a baby's earliest experiences may be partly random. What if the baby's earliest conscious moments just happened, by chance, to feel as though *your* last experiences had just happened? Given certain ideas about first-person viewpoint, that might make the baby's first-person viewpoint a continuation of yours. [5]

This idea is especially relevant if a first-person perspective is a kind of abstract object. (Elsewhere I have suggested that the first-person perspective at any given moment of awareness is a kind of *modality*, which can be taken to be an abstract object. See reference [6] and also [here](#).) If a first-person perspective is an abstract object, then it might be possible for a brain not physically connected to yours to realize the same

abstract feature.

#### ***Idea 4. The abstract self***

As I have pointed out [elsewhere](#), it's reasonable to assume that the self is an abstract object - a feature or property of the brain or of the brain's activity. (This idea isn't a theory of personal identity, but it has a similar impact on the rebirth scenario we are discussing.)

If this idea is true, then a new baby might be literally a continuation of you. How? The baby's brain might have the same feature that served as a self when your brain had the feature!

By presenting these four ideas about personal identity or the self, I'm not arguing for any of them. Nor am I arguing for any of the four possibilities for rebirth. Those who think they have fatal objections to one or more of these ideas need not be too upset. I know that much of what I have said is speculative. (Critics, pay attention to the preceding sentence before writing.) All I am trying to show is that it is not out of the question for a later human organism to be the same person as an earlier human organism. Nothing illogical, supernatural, or antiscientific is required. These four scenarios for survival of death do not violate the scientific principle known as Occam's Razor; they do not assume any extra objects (like ghostly souls) or extra complexity in the physical world. (The only objects required are human bodies and brains, with all their usual properties and features.)

Note that these four proposals do not add up to proof of an afterlife, or even to proof that an afterlife is likely. (I repeat: I am *not* claiming to have a proof of the afterlife.) Besides the four views of personal identity that I've hinted at here, there are other views that make spontaneous survival very unlikely. Examples are views based on the continuity of bodies or on the continuity of most of a person's memories. I am not going to argue for or against any of these theories here. I have presented the above four ideas to make one point: that we can't disprove the afterlife merely by stating that the mind is nothing but a process in the brain.

These examples also teach us another important lesson: if the mind is a process in the brain, then the possibility of an afterlife is a philosophical question, not a scientific one. If the mind is a process in the brain, then the answer to the question "Can a person spontaneously survive death?" depends on the solution to the problem of personal identity. That problem is philosophical, not scientific. Science cannot decide among alternative logically consistent solutions to that problem, for we cannot make that decision using only physical facts about bodies and their behavior. We also need philosophical analysis of concepts, such as the concept of a person. No matter which view of personal identity is right, the physical facts about bodies, brains and behavior will look exactly the same.

#### **Part 4. Some Parting Remarks (pun intended)**

What lessons have we learned from this merry romp through philosophy, logic and life? There are two.

**1. The standard scientific argument against the afterlife is wrong.** It might be possible for persons and their minds to survive death, even if the mind is "only" a process in the brain and the self is "only" a feature of the brain.

**2. If the mind is a process in the brain, then the existence of the afterlife is a philosophical question, not a scientific one.** If the mind is indeed a process in the brain, then only the philosophical analysis of personal identity can settle the question of the afterlife rationally - if anything ever can settle that question rationally.

At very least, science cannot disprove the existence of the afterlife. Science can test particular ideas about the afterlife (such as beliefs about ghosts or past-life memories), but it cannot show that there is no afterlife of any kind.

If the mind is a process in the brain, then the standard "scientific" argument against the afterlife is not scientific. To present this argument as science is to practice pseudoscience! The argument is not scientific, but all too often it gets passed off on the unwary as science.

Before finishing, I should touch on the subject of religion. The ideas I have presented about the afterlife do not support any particular religious view of the afterlife. (For that matter, they don't support other specific religious beliefs either. An atheist can accept these ideas just as well as a theist can.) The ideas presented here come closer to Buddhist views than to any other religious teaching on the afterlife. However, adherents of other religions might want to speculate on the relevance of this post to their own beliefs. (For example, could "heaven" be interpreted as rebirth in some alternate universe?) Discussing these possibilities would take me too far into the realm of faith, where I do not want to go right now. My aim in this post is not to prove any part of any religion, or any specific picture of the afterlife. I only want to show that the standard "scientific" argument against the afterlife is wrong. And that, I would suggest, I have done.

-----

#### Notes

[1] As I will mention in a moment, the Buddhists recognized this fact long ago. It is amazing that the proponents of the skeptical argument do not take this old discovery into account.

[2] Combine artificial immortality with time travel - another staple of science fiction - and you raise the possibility of artificially continuing the minds of people who already have died. Some physicists have seriously asked whether time travel might be possible. If it were possible, and if it could take us to any past time, then why not start resurrecting everyone? The result would be every bit as good as the "general resurrection" that some religions believe in. (Liberal Christians often interpret "creation" in a non-supernatural way as the process of evolution. They might also be interested in the idea of a resurrection without supernatural miracles!)

[3] There is little question that an animal migration counts as a single process. The migration as a whole has specific overall effects on regional animal populations and on the natural environment in general. It plays a role in the natural world that goes beyond any of the individual activities of its component hoptoads. To deny that the migration is a real process, while also claiming that *only* the individual hops of the toads are real, would be silly.

[4] To better understand this idea, see the classic article "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?" by Thomas Nagel (*The Philosophical Review*, 83 (1974):435-450).

[5] See the treatment of "conscious subject identity" in chapter 5 of my book, [From Brain to Cosmos](#) [fbtc]. (Sharlow, Mark F. *From Brain to Cosmos*. Parkland, FL: Universal Publishers, 2001.)

[6] [From Brain to Cosmos](#) [fbtc] (cited above), chapter 3 and especially pp. 65-66.

07/09/09

## Anti-Dawkins Paper No. 9: Of Science and Miracles

This post continues my critique of Richard Dawkins' ideas about religion as found in his book, *The God Delusion*. You can find the entire critique [here](#).

In this post I will take on one of Dawkins' claims about miracles. This post is not an argument for belief in miracles. I am only trying to show that the topic of miracles is not as simple as Dawkins makes it seem.

The line of thought in *The God Delusion* is unfriendly to miracles. Dawkins even claims that "miracles, by definition, violate the principles of science" (p. 59). What "definition" does Dawkins have in mind? Is there a hard-and-fast definition, written down somewhere, that dictates the "principles of science"? No, there is not.

Science is a set of methods that have proven extraordinarily useful in understanding and controlling the natural world. Scientists follow certain working rules because those rules have proven useful. However, science does not bow and kneel before any *a priori* list of inviolable principles. If a miracle ever happened, no so-called principle would bar scientists from studying it! If scientists ever did confirm that there was a miracle (in the sense of an event that violates natural laws), they would not say "Well, we have conclusive evidence for this miracle, but we still can't believe it happened, because believing it would violate The Very Principles of Science Itself." At least scientists who have thought it over would not say that! If scientists ever gained conclusive evidence for a miracle, they would have to accept that some natural laws have occasional exceptions. However, science would not collapse. Science would not even have to change in any fundamental way. A thoughtful scientist might say "Well, there's an exception to one of our known natural laws. Now we know that this particular law isn't invariably true. Instead of holding all the time, it only holds *statistically* - it's usually reliable but can be violated on occasion." Scientists already know of statistically true natural laws. The law of entropy in thermodynamics is not invariably true, but only statistically true. The allowed violations of the law of entropy are not miracles; instead, these stunningly rare violations have a known physical basis. However, the statistical nature of the law of entropy does show that a natural law doesn't have to be 100 percent right to be useful. In layman's terms, stuff happens!

Science does not resort to miracles to explain puzzling facts. This scientific policy has proven itself useful, and is indispensable as a working rule. (If we explain something odd by assuming it's a miracle, then we might be missing some other, non-miraculous explanation that we haven't thought of yet.) But does science really rule out miracles?

Imagine a miracle that only happens once, with no advance warning and with no closely similar miracles before or after. Such a once-off unrepeatable miracle would be no threat to science at all! As far as science is concerned, such a miracle probably would be *undiscoverable*. Here's why. If scientists found apparent evidence for such a miracle, they would favor the simplest, least extravagant possible explanation for the evidence. (The working rule of scientific method called Occam's Razor says this is the appropriate thing to do.) However, *any* non-miraculous explanation would be less extravagant than the hypothesis that a miracle had occurred. Therefore, scientists would not conclude that there was a miracle, even if there was no other apparent explanation for the evidence.

What does this mean? It means that if a single unrepeatable miracle really happened, scientists would have no intellectual obligation to believe that it happened! Scientists would be justified in acting as if there were

no miracle. A once-off, unrepeatable miracle would pose no threat to our scientific knowledge. It would not even touch our scientific knowledge. The miracle would not have to be incorporated into our scientific knowledge, even if it really happened. Science can simply ignore the possibility of such a miracle.

It's all too easy to forget that science deals with *repeatable* phenomena and with hypotheses that are *testable through scientific methods*. Science does not necessarily encompass *all* possible phenomena, and ignores hypotheses that *cannot* be scientifically tested. An unrepeatable event can be of scientific interest, but scientists will try to explain it using laws that have repeatable consequences. Ignoring some phenomena and beliefs may be the correct thing for scientists to do, even if they risk missing something that way.

Science does not trade in miracles. That is as it should be. However, science does not force us to believe dogmatically that there are no miracles. A once-off miracle might not be scientifically confirmable. Note that we *cannot* say this about a *repeatable* miracle (for example, if certain prayers were answered dependably). Such a miracle might well be subject to scientific testing. (Dawkins gives an example of this sort of testing in his section on "the Great Prayer Experiment" (pp. 61-66). In that case, the miracle turned out not to be there.) However, an unrepeatable miracle might be impossible to pin down scientifically.

This is not an argument for belief in miracles. As readers of [my writings \[gtv\]](#) may have noticed, my own view of spirituality does not require miracles, if a "miracle" means a violation of natural law. I only want to point out that the relationship between science and miracles is not as hostile as it seems. Science can operate perfectly well without an absolute assumption that there are no miracles. If you believe in miracles, that doesn't automatically make you an enemy of science. Whether miracles really happen is a separate question.

---

07/13/09

### **Anti-Dawkins Paper No. 10: Hate by Any Other Name?**

This post continues my critique of the ideas in Richard Dawkins' book, *The God Delusion*. You can find the whole critique [here](#).

Until now, I have concentrated on factual and logical problems with *The God Delusion*. However, one of the main problems with the book is neither a factual nor a logical problem, but an ethical one. I am referring to the book's extremely mean-spirited tone. (I am not the first to comment on this mean-spiritedness [1].) Early in the book, Dawkins says he wants to remove the respect traditionally accorded to religion (pp. 20-27). This part of the book even bears the title "Undeserved respect" (pp. vii, 20). In the rest of the book, Dawkins does not merely remove the undeserved respect. He spews a stream of hostile and corrosive rhetoric, mercifully interrupted by stretches of more level-headed material. If language as hostile as that in *The God Delusion* were found in a book on race or ethnicity, it might well get condemned in some quarters as hate speech.

I will not try to point out all the instances of vitriolic or insulting language in *The God Delusion*. There are far too many instances for that. Instead, I will just point out a few telling examples.

- Dawkins quotes from a speech by noted religious physicist Freeman Dyson, made while Dyson was

accepting an award (pp. 152-153). In between the lines of Dyson's speech, Dawkins inserts made-up words that Dyson never said, making it look as if Dyson were speaking insincerely. Dawkins admits that the added italicized words are not Dyson's, but still he puts them into Dyson's mouth, making Dyson look insincere. This attack on the brilliant Dyson is not simply a criticism of Dyson's beliefs. Instead, it amounts to a below-the-belt personal attack. Later, Dawkins seems to be trying to cover himself when he characterizes Dyson as "way above being corrupted" (p. 153). However, this quick disclaimer does little to reduce the suggestive power of the fabricated words, or the impressions of Dyson that those words leave in the reader's mind.

- In his discussion of Stephen Jay Gould's [NOMA concept](#) (which tries to reconcile science and religion), Dawkins surmises that Gould really did not believe NOMA at all, and was merely "bending over backwards to be nice to an unworthy but powerful opponent" (p. 57). In other words, he is suggesting that Gould lied. Again, a below-the-belt attack - but this time against a deceased man who cannot even answer back.
- At one point (p. 108), Dawkins suggests that those involved with theology "are often chronically incapable of distinguishing what is true from what they'd like to be true." In other words, if you are on the other side of the debating table from Dawkins, there's a good chance you are living in a fantasy world. Rational argument indeed!

These few examples are enough to expose the ratty tone of the book's rhetoric. Just imagine these examples multiplied many times over. The book leaves the impression that if you think differently from Dawkins, then you are insincere or cowardly at worst, ignorant and confused at best - and perhaps senile to boot (p. 98 n.). It is sad to see such rhetoric in a book whose author is known as a distinguished scientist.

Perhaps the most hateful aspect of *The God Delusion* is its constant carping on the evils of religion. I have dealt with these examples of bad religion collectively in an [earlier post](#). There I showed that these examples prove nothing about the existence of God or about the goodness of religious thought in general. These examples only show that some particular religious beliefs are desperately wrong. (You don't need to be an atheist to figure that out; you just need to watch the evening news.) However, the failure of Dawkins' polemic against religion is not its worst defect. Even though it does not succeed in proving anything, Dawkins' insistent ranting about the evils of religion has the potential to whip up rage against ordinary religious people.

Imagine what would happen if the author of this book were not an atheist criticizing religion, but a member of a particular faith criticizing another faith. Suppose, for example, that a Christian wrote a book against Judaism with the same degree of hostility and ridicule that Dawkins uses to attack religion in general. Suppose further that this Christian author hinted that unconverted Jews constitute a danger to humanity. What would we say about such a book? Many of us would consider it a work of hate. The author of the anti-Jewish book might try to defend himself by saying: "But I wasn't attacking Jews, I was only attacking their *beliefs!*" That argument would not wash well with many of us. Anyone who portrays adherents of a belief as menaces to humanity is attacking the people, not just the belief. That kind of criticism goes beyond mere criticism of ideas.

Dawkins does almost the same thing as our imaginary Christian. The main difference is that he attacks a different group of mostly good people. (The two groups - religious believers and Jews - even overlap.) Dawkins doesn't only attack religious criminals, such as al-Qaeda or child-abusing priests, though he does criticize these (see especially pp. 303-304, 315-318). Instead, he portrays *all* religion as a menace (chap. 8) - and he does so in a way that suggests religious people are vehicles of that menace. (He even likens religion to a contagious virus (pp. 176, 186-188).) In effect, he portrays religious people, not only religious ideas, as a problem for the world. Why should Dawkins get a free pass? Why are we afraid to call *The God Delusion* a hateful book? As I pointed out in my [earlier posts](#), the book is full of faulty arguments. What makes this book

significantly better than, say, a fiery Christian polemic against Judaism that uses weak arguments as talking points?

I suspect that many readers give *The God Delusion* more respect than it is worth because they are afraid to question the opinions of a well-known scientist. However, this fear should not stop them from using their reason. Personally, I am a lifelong supporter of science, but even an ardent admirer of science must admit that scientists are not perfect. Occasionally a scientist messes up just as badly as anyone else could. The Nobel Prize-winning physicist Philipp Lenard became a follower of Adolf Hitler and served as "Chief of Aryan or German Physics" for the Nazi Party. [2] The tragic stories of eugenics and of lobotomies provide other examples of scientific error. These errors eventually got corrected, but not in time to prevent harm. I am not suggesting that Dawkins would embrace errors as gross as these. I am only pointing out that his scientific credentials do not guarantee that his ideas always are right. Critical thinking is necessary in this imperfect world. You need it even when reading a book by a "big" scientist.

Another reason people might take *The God Delusion* seriously is that Dawkins is a good writer. It's true that he's a good writer, but of course this says nothing about the truth of his ideas. It is unfortunate for humanity, but nevertheless true, that people who hold lousy ideas sometimes write well.

Still another possible motive for undue reverence toward *The God Delusion* is the sheer density of information in the book. This book is packed with scientific and historical information and ideas. The reader may get the feeling that the book is full of new insights, perhaps even revelations. However, this does not tell us anything about the book's truth. A good science fiction novel can create the same feeling, and can be just as full of ideas and information. That doesn't mean that the plot of the novel is factually true. (The difference, of course, is that the science fiction novel is not *meant* to be true.)

I suggest that we abandon any undue reverence toward *The God Delusion*, and start telling it like it is. *The God Delusion* is not a book that a rational thinker should believe. For reasons discussed here and in [my earlier posts](#), the book does not succeed in building a credible case for atheism. It's still possible for a thinking person to be an atheist - but if you are going to be one, you need to find better reasons than the faulty arguments and misguided rhetoric in *The God Delusion*.

-----

## Notes

[1] See, for example, Alvin Plantinga's comments on the nastiness found in *The God Delusion*. (Plantinga, Alvin. "The Dawkins Confusion." *Books & Culture*, March 1, 2007, [<http://www.christianitytoday.com/bc/2007/marapr/1.21.html>], accessed 5/10/2009.)

[2] *Nobel Lectures, Physics 1901-1921*, Elsevier Publishing Company, Amsterdam, 1967, [[http://nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/physics/laureates/1905/lenard-bio.html](http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/physics/laureates/1905/lenard-bio.html)], accessed 7/8/2009.

07/14/09

## Anti-Dawkins Paper No. 11: A Summary of the Papers, and What It All Means

This post is the last in a series that I call "The Anti-Dawkins Papers." Together, these posts form a critique of the main ideas in Richard Dawkins' atheistic book *The God Delusion*. You can find the entire critique [here](#). (Actually, the papers aren't against Dawkins; they are only against some of his ideas.)

Will I add more to the critique after this post? Is this *really* the last of the Papers? Those are open questions. (*Update*: I've written more about Dawkins' ideas elsewhere. See the note at the end of this post.)

In the previous ten posts, I refuted the main arguments from *The God Delusion*. Here are summaries of what I did.

- In [post 1](#) I showed that Dawkins' concept of God is hopelessly inadequate. Dawkins' definition of God describes only one idea of God among many possible ideas. Therefore, *The God Delusion* is not really a line of argument against God at all. Even if the arguments in the book were right, the book would be a refutation of one traditional concept of God - not of the idea of God as such. In post 1 I also showed that Dawkins' attack on Gould's NOMA concept is unjustified, and that Dawkins' grasp on philosophy, at least as deployed in this book, is weak.
- In [post 2](#) I refuted Dawkins' central argument: the argument from improbability. (Actually I did not do this in the post, but in a [paper](#) [improb] to which I linked from the post.) The argument from improbability is Dawkins' best atheistic argument; he even suggested that it might be "unanswerable" (p. 113). Since that argument is the central argument of *The God Delusion* (see pp. 157-158), its downfall effectively guts Dawkins' case for atheism. So much for unanswerability! After disposing of this argument, I also undermined Dawkins' critique of agnosticism.
- In [post 3](#) I addressed Dawkins' criticisms of personal religious experience. I showed that Dawkins' examples of religious experience were stunningly poor examples. I pointed out that real spiritual experience also exists, and can be a good source of knowledge whether or not there is anything supernatural. Also, I suggested that religions might grow out of legitimate spiritual experiences, and then become irrational when those experiences are forgotten and misunderstood.
- In [post 4](#) I showed that Dawkins' argument against design in nature is surprisingly weak. I gave links to some of my writings that describe an alternative view. According to this alternative view, evolution is exactly as science says it is (with no Intelligent Design theory or other aberrations), but there still can be real design in nature.
- In [post 5](#) I showed that Dawkins' ideas about the origins of religion are irrelevant to the truth of belief in God. Even if religion comes from lowly evolutionary sources, it may still turn out to be partly true. Also, I offered my own suggestion for a source of religious belief.
- In [post 6](#) I took on Dawkins' claim that religion causes evil. I pointed out that his many examples of religious evil are examples of "bad" religion (as defined in the post). These examples show that "bad" religion causes evil, but they tell us absolutely nothing about "good" religion (also defined in the post).

Also, I showed that Dawkins' polemic against faith works only against unreasonable, morally insensitive forms of faith.

- In [post 7](#) I pointed out two places where Dawkins grossly misrepresents the ideas of opposing thinkers. These examples don't bear directly on arguments about God, but they raise doubts about the credibility of the book.
- In [post 8](#) I showed that the higher percentage of atheists among scientists and other educated people proves nothing about the truth or rationality of atheism.
- In [post 9](#) I rebutted Dawkins' claim that science rules out miracles. I did not argue for the reality of miracles, but I showed that some miracles might be compatible with science.
- In [post 10](#) I exposed Dawkins' harsh anti-religious rhetoric for what it is: a form of discourse which, if used in other circumstances, might be considered hate speech. Also, I pointed out some bad reasons why people might find *The God Delusion* convincing.

From the arguments in these posts, we can conclude that Dawkins has failed to make a convincing case against God. We are back where we started before Dawkins wrote his book: with the question of God's existence wide open. Belief in God remains a reasonable option for thinking people; so do atheism and agnosticism. Dawkins may have succeeded in debunking fundamentalism, religious extremism, and other unreasonable forms of belief - but you do not have to be an atheist to see that these are wrong. (Incidentally, those interested in rational approaches to spiritual issues may want to [peruse my website \[main\]](#), and especially the documents of mine that I cited in [these posts](#).)

On the dust jacket of my copy of *The God Delusion* (the edition I cited in [post 1](#) and used throughout the posts), a quote from Steven Pinker challenges those who hold some particular beliefs to "see if you can counter Dawkins's arguments." Well, we've done it! We have shown that the most important arguments in *The God Delusion* are wrong. Even if you don't agree with my counterarguments, the fact that it's possible to find substantive rational objections to Dawkins' arguments shows that he has not conclusively settled the question of God. Dawkins has not delivered any unanswerable final stroke in the debate over God's existence. Instead, he has just added his two cents' worth to that debate. (And a nasty two cents' worth it is!)

Despite the nastily self-assured tone of his book, Dawkins is not a voice of reason (or of Reason). As far as religious thought is concerned, he is only another purveyor of opinion in the age-old debate over the existence of God - and his arguments for his opinion aren't even convincing. It's time for rational thinkers to reject *The God Delusion* and move on to more rewarding pursuits.

-----  
*Note added after posting:* In the time since I posted "The Anti-Dawkins Papers," some criticisms of my arguments have shown up on the web. So far, the criticisms I have seen have not been convincing. I'm answering these criticisms, as time permits, on a separate [rebuttals page](#) [rebuttals]. Also, I've written more about Dawkins' ideas since I wrote "The Anti-Dawkins Papers." These new writings are in the [atheism category](#). Those interested in my views on religion in general are invited to explore the [religion category](#) as a whole.

*Post updated 2/7/2011*

---

09/01/09

## **Study Does Not Show that Fat People Are Brain-Damaged**

A recent study published in the journal *Human Brain Mapping* [1] suggests that obesity and overweight are statistically linked to brain degeneration in elderly people. The LiveScience news website reported these results in a way that suggests that all obese people have brain damage [2]. The LiveScience article's title, "Obese People Have 'Severe Brain Degeneration'," is enough to create this misunderstanding. Other news outlets, such as FOXNews.com [3], have reported the same story in a similar manner.

### **DO NOT BELIEVE EVERYTHING YOU READ ABOUT THIS STUDY!**

**The study does NOT prove that fat people are brain damaged.**

**The study does not even show that being fat causes brain degeneration in the elderly.**

The study suggests there is a statistical correlation between a high body mass index (BMI) and certain kinds of brain deterioration in elderly people. This is **not** the same as saying that being fat causes anything. One part of the original journal paper suggests that high BMI is not likely to be the actual cause of the observed brain changes, and that something else might be causing both the high BMI and the brain changes ([1], p. 9).

Misinformation about this study is a serious matter. If the media present this study the wrong way, people might take it to mean that all fat people are brain-damaged. This misunderstanding is sure to increase the widespread hatred of fat people, and to worsen the abuse of fat children, who often suffer vicious bullying, teasing, and social rejection because of their size. Even though the study involved elderly people and not children, the idea that being fat causes brain damage plays right into the "fat kids are stupid" stereotype, which already causes great harm to children who are genetically heavier than average.

There are at least two possible ways to explain the study's results without assuming that fat causes brain damage.

One explanation, which the paper already mentions, is that something could be causing both the high BMI and the brain changes. The paper mentions "reduced exercise" as one such possible cause ([1], p. 9). If this were the real cause, then fat people who get enough exercise should be able to avoid the brain problems. (Despite the widespread belief that fat people don't exercise, in reality many fat people do exercise - and some remain fat even when they are exercising a lot. [4])

Another possible explanation is that social stress and isolation are causing the brain problems. Fat people experience serious discrimination in our society, and this discrimination can affect health. (See reference [5] for relevant information.) Few thin people can fully imagine how much teasing, bullying, loneliness, and employment discrimination many fat people go through. It's no secret that social stress has bad effects on physical and mental health. Maybe some fat people develop brain problems because of a lifetime of social stress. If this is the explanation, then discrimination, not fat, is the cause of the brain problems. We can address this cause by working to end the discrimination.

In view of these possible explanations of the study's results, **THERE IS NO BASIS FOR THE BELIEF THAT ALL FAT PEOPLE ARE BRAIN-DAMAGED OR THAT BEING FAT IS A CAUSE OF BRAIN DEGENERATION.**

Aside from the misleading media coverage, the study itself contains a feature that can be called into question. This is the study's use of BMI as an indicator of overweight and obesity. Although it is common to use BMI this way, BMI does not appear to be a very good measure of fatness or of poor health. (See references [5], [6] and [7] below for relevant information.)

Any scientific study is subject to future criticism by other scientists; results sometimes fade in the light of further studies. However, even if this study withstands the test of time, it does not show that fat people in general are brain-damaged.

**These same warnings apply to any study that suggests that fat people of any age have brain problems. Studies of this sort do not automatically show that fat causes brain damage, or that fat people are stupid.** The cautionary remarks given here might well carry over to other studies also.

-----

## Notes

[1] Cyrus A. Raji, April J. Ho, Neelroop N. Parikshak, James T. Becker, Oscar L. Lopez, Lewis H. Kuller, Xue Hua, Alex D. Leow, Arthur W. Toga, and Paul M. Thompson. "Brain Structure and Obesity". *Human Brain Mapping* (2009). Published online in Wiley InterScience ([www.interscience.wiley.com](http://www.interscience.wiley.com)). DOI: 10.1002/hbm.20870. Accessed 8/25/2009.

[2] "Obese People Have 'Severe Brain Degeneration'". (<http://www.livescience.com/health/090825-obese-brain.html>). Posted 8/25/2009. Accessed 8/29/2009.

[3] "Study: Obese People Have 'Severe Brain Degeneration'". (<http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,542480,00.html>) Posted 8/25/2009. Accessed 8/29/2009.

[4] For relevant information, see the following article on a U.S. government website: Marcia Wood, "Health At Every Size: New Hope for Obese Americans?" (<http://www.ars.usda.gov/is/AR/archive/mar06/health0306.htm>) Published in *Agricultural Research* magazine, 3/2006. Accessed 8/29/2009. See also *The Obesity Myth* (reference [5] below).

[5] Paul Campos, *The Obesity Myth* (New York: Gotham Books, 2004).

[6] Raj Jayadev. "Muscle vs. Fitness". *Metroactive*. From *Metro* (newspaper), December 1-7, 2004. (<http://www.metroactive.com/papers/metro/12.01.04/weight-0449.html>) Accessed 8/29/2009.

[7] "Science of HAES". (<http://www.sizediversityandhealth.org/content.asp?id=21>). Accessed 8/29/2009. Includes articles by Dr. Paul Ernsberger.

11/06/09

## **My Other Blog Is Now Complete**

The blog you are now reading is not my only blog. I have another blog, named "[Religion: the Next Version](#)." I created that other blog for one specific reason: to explore some ideas about a rational approach to religion.

"Religion: the Next Version" is now a completed work. I have done what I set out to do there. I plan to continue my blogging about religion (and everything else) on the blog you are now reading. I will leave "Religion: the Next Version" in place as a finished document. (There's a tiny chance that I might still add something to "Religion: the Next Version," but that's not in my current plans.)

Be sure to visit "[Religion: the Next Version](#)" today. The ideas you will find there might prove irritating to theists and atheists alike. However, visionary poets and true rationalists might find those ideas rather friendly.

---

12/15/09

## **Beyond Atheism, Theism, and Agnosticism: What Am I?**

Sometimes people ask me whether I am an atheist, a theist, or an agnostic. Instead of giving simplistic answers to these questions, I'm going to take a few minutes to explain what I really think.

### **1. Am I a theist?**

Theism is the belief that there is a supernatural God who created the universe and intervenes in it. Some people use the word "theism" to mean belief in a deity of any kind at all. However, this isn't the way the word usually gets used today. Usually "theism" is used to mean belief in a supernatural God who created and intervenes in the universe. Here I'll use "theism" in that sense.

According to this "standard" definition, I am not a theist. My problem with theism is not with the idea of a supreme being of some kind; my main problem is with the idea of [the supernatural](#). I'll say more about that later.

Now that I've said this, I can almost hear the atheists printing my membership card. But wait! Things aren't as simple as they seem...

## 2. Am I an atheist?

I have a one-word answer to this question. However, the answer would be very misleading if I didn't explain a few things first.

The word "atheist" gets flung around rather freely today. However, labeling someone an "atheist" can be philosophically tricky. The problem with the word "atheist" is that the meaning of the word depends on which idea of God you accept. For example, a Christian might call an unbeliever in the biblical God an "atheist" just because that person accepts a concept of a supreme being different from the biblical God. [Modern atheists](#) sometimes make a similar mistake. They define the word "God" to mean a supernatural creator. Then, when they argue against belief in a supernatural creator, they think they are debunking God. The truth is more complex: **you can believe in God without believing in a supernatural creator.**

Philosophy and religion, both Eastern and Western, contain several different ideas of a supreme spiritual reality or supreme being. Some of these ideas do not portray the supreme being as a supernatural creator. I don't mean just the well-known "scientific" pantheism that equates God to the physical universe. There also are other ideas of God that don't involve supernatural creation but that don't equate God to the physical universe. Some of these ideas can do without belief in the supernatural. ([Click here](#) and [here \[gtnv\]](#) for further details.) Those who define the word "God" to mean *only* a supernatural creator, and who refuse to admit that there are other views of God, are just redefining the word "God." The idea that God is a supernatural creator is only one way to think about God. There are other ways.

Although I don't accept theism (defined as above), I am not anti-spiritual. I think the universe has a spiritual aspect to it. This spiritual aspect is [not supernatural](#); humans can learn about it through the rational methods of philosophy (no religious faith required). I even think there is a *supreme* spiritual reality of sorts. This is not supernatural, but it fits pretty well with the philosophers' definition of a "greatest possible being" - a definition that I consider crucial to the idea of God. For more details, read [this document \[gtnv\]](#).

So, do I believe in God? Those who insist on defining God as supernatural will conclude that I don't believe in God. However, I have a different answer: I do believe in God. Not the supernatural God of theism, but a supreme spiritual reality that's worthy of the name "God." My one-word answer to the question "Am I an atheist?" is "No."

If you think "God" can *only* mean a supernatural creator, then you might prefer to call me an atheist. My feelings won't be hurt, but I'll tell you that your definition of God needs some repairs!

## 3. Am I an agnostic?

My answer to the atheism question shows that I am not agnostic about the existence of a supreme spiritual reality. I think reason supports that idea. However, I am an agnostic of sorts about the existence of the supernatural. I don't believe there is anything supernatural (though there might, of course, be things in nature that *seem* supernatural to us). However, I don't know of any convincing argument for the nonexistence (or even the extreme improbability) of the supernatural. Thus, I am neither a believer nor a hard-core disbeliever in the supernatural. Followers of supernatural religions might want to consider me an agnostic for this reason. But I am not agnostic about the existence of some kind of supreme spiritual reality.

For further information, read [this document \[gtnv\]](#), and explore the rest of this blog and [this other blog](#).

12/17/09

## Is Everything Abstract?

In my past writings I have had a lot to say about the reality of abstract objects. I have argued that these entities are real, though not in the same way that concrete things (like tables and chairs) are real. This is one of the standard philosophical positions about abstract objects [1]. One of the main lines of argument against this position is that accepting abstract objects adds unnecessary new things to the world. (In other words, accepting abstract objects supposedly violates Occam's Razor.) I do not believe that abstract objects pose any threat of this sort. The claim that abstract objects exist tells us little beyond what we already know when we say that objects have properties or relationships. See my earlier writings ([here \[realism\]](#), [here](#) and [here \[unfin\]](#)) for more about these ideas.

In this post I'd like to explore another, far more daring question about abstract objects: **Might everything be abstract?**

The speculation that everything might be abstract has precedents in philosophy. One precursor is the idea that the world is basically mathematical. This goes back to Greek philosophy (especially the Pythagoreans). The idea that the world might actually be a mathematical object occurs in modern times [2]. At first glance, the possibility that *everything* might be abstract seems implausible. How could everything be abstract when there's this solid, obviously concrete world around us? How could physical objects be abstract when abstract objects seem to be placeless, timeless, and devoid of the ability to cause events? (These are negative features that philosophers often attribute to abstract objects [3].) Also, how could everything be abstract when abstract objects are mainly just features of concrete objects? Wouldn't there have to be some concrete objects to begin with?

These worries become less pressing if we can begin to overcome the habit of picturing all abstract objects as intangible, ethereal, or not quite real. The worries might lose force even more when we explore the relationship between ordinary physical objects and their properties.

Before starting this exploration I'll make a few preliminary remarks about abstract objects.

If we accept the reality of abstract objects, then our picture of reality has room for many different kinds of existence. Tables and chairs are real, but so are properties like shapes and colors. Stars and galaxies are real, but so are relationships like *being more massive than* and *being hotter than*. Atoms and molecules are real, but so are mathematical items, like the *set* of all atoms in a DNA molecule (not the same as the molecule itself!) and the *number* of atoms or nuclei in a hydrogen molecule.

Mathematical logicians often think of abstract objects as forming systems of "logical types," or domains of abstract objects of different levels. For example, we might take physical objects to have logical type 0. Then a property of physical objects (like rectangularity) is of logical type 1. A property of a property of physical objects (like the property of being a shape property) is of logical type 2. And so on through type 3, 4,.... There also can be other types not in this series, such as types of relations. Logicians sometimes visualize an endless tower of logical types starting with the world of concrete things. Set theorists use a more flexible idea of levels, but the core idea is the same.

Often it's convenient to think in terms of towers of types, but we shouldn't get stuck thinking that *every* abstract object has to belong to one of these types. We need to keep an open mind and consider other possibilities - like sets that are members of themselves, or properties that are properties of themselves, or perhaps even two sets that are members of each other. Some logicians and mathematicians study things like these, mostly under the banner of "non-well-founded sets."

With these preliminaries in mind, I'd like to ask a key question: Where is the dividing line between concrete things and abstract objects?

I tried to answer this question in a talk called "Abstract Objects and Physical Reality," which you can find in a book of mine called [\*The Unfinishable Book\*](#) [unfin]. (As of the date of this post, the book is downloadable for free - where "free" means "free except for the usual internet charges.") The gist of my answer is that **there is no uniquely determined boundary between concrete objects and abstract objects.**

This idea is not really new. Both Carnap's *Aufbau* [4] and Quine's thesis of ontological relativity [5] recognized that the choice of a domain of "concrete" entities might not be unique. However, what I'm proposing here is different from these earlier ideas. I am not embracing Quinian ontological relativity, and I am not proposing to use logical constructs, *Aufbau*-style, as substitutes or ersatzes for anything. I am only proposing that there is no unique domain of objects which alone are objectively "concrete."

Here is a brief introduction to the argument.

First, a bit more background on abstract objects. Concrete physical objects seem to be very different from abstract objects. However, when we begin to analyze physical objects, we find out that a physical object is an item that unites, or joins together, several properties and relations. A physical object has properties and relations which determine what the object is like. A physical object without properties and relations would be essentially "nothing." The most useful thing we could say about such an indefinite object is that it is able to hold several properties and relations together.

If we mentally distinguish a concrete object from its properties and relations, what is left of the object? Almost nothing! There would be only the factor that unites the properties and relationships.

Some philosophers have held that this uniting factor is a "bare particular" - a sort of simplified concrete object that does little more than hold together its properties and relations. Other philosophers (the "bundle theorists") deny bare particulars and view the uniting factor as something abstract, like a class.

Now here is the key insight behind my answer: It's hard to believe that a "bare particular" really is a concrete object. A bare particular looks more like a special **property**, shared in common by the properties and relations that it unites. I would argue that there is no significant contrast between a bare particular and a special property of this kind. Thus, if there is a bare particular, a concrete object is, at bottom, an abstract object. If there is no bare particular (and bundle theory is right), then a concrete object is, at bottom, abstract too. Either way, a concrete physical object can be analyzed into a combination of abstract objects of some kind.

If this view of existence is true, then there is no strong dividing line between the concrete and the abstract. The difference depends on where you begin your analysis. If you take concrete physical objects as the starting point, and don't try to analyze them into entities of other kinds, then you get the usual picture of abstract objects. You find that there are concrete objects, and then there are the various properties, relations, properties of properties, etc. of those objects. However, if you start your analysis with entities usually called abstract, you can portray concrete objects as properties or classes of *them*.

An obvious (but weak) objection to this view is that it can lead to circles of attribution, in which a physical object is a feature or class of abstract objects, while abstract objects are in turn features of physical objects. I don't think we should worry about these circles. They aren't vicious. They are no more illogical than the non-well-founded sets that I mentioned earlier. We can always postpone the circle in practice, by taking some fixed domain of objects as "concrete" and building up from there. The fact that everything is analyzable into other items doesn't make anything less real.

Another obvious objection is that physical objects have features that abstract objects don't have. For example, physical objects have spatial and temporal locations and causal powers - features that philosophers often deny to abstract objects. I don't think this objection is fatal either. Bare particular and bundle theories have to face this objection too. (Where is a bare particular located, when its spatial location has been stripped away along with its other properties? The "bundle" in bundle theory is an abstract object such as a class; how can it "be" a locatable, causality-ridden physical thing?) If this objection is not fatal to those theories, then it is not fatal to what I am proposing here.

For further details of the above argument, read Talk #9, called "Abstract Objects and Physical Reality" in [\*The Unfinishable Book\*](#) [unfin].

What, then, is the answer to our initial question, "Might everything be abstract?" The answer is "yes - in a way." Any given thing might be analyzable in a way that shows it to be an abstract object. However, that wouldn't prevent us from labeling some objects as concrete and using them as a "ground floor" for defining further abstractions. Normally we use physical objects as the concrete objects, but do we have to? Physical objects are the objects that seem most concrete to us - but perhaps that's just because we can detect many of them through our sense organs, which also can be analyzed as abstract objects if we have the nerve! (Pun intended.)

\*\*\*\*\*

*Concluding Cryptic Remark:*

And now, for something really strange to think about.

Normally we equate the "world" to the world of concrete physical objects. We tend to regard other entities as mere features of that world. To borrow a term from mathematics, this amounts to taking a kind of "section" through the universe - picking out a preferred set of objects and treating them as basic. Usually the entities we treat as basic are the concrete physical entities. We regard them as the basic "world," with all other things mere features of that world.

What if we broke away from this unnecessary practice? What if we took a different "section" by choosing some different family of abstract objects as basic? What if we regarded all other entities, including our familiar physical objects, as mere features of those other objects? What would the resulting view of reality be like? Can we even do this without inconsistency?

This proposal sounds a bit like certain relativism-soaked ideas in philosophy - I'm thinking especially of Quine's ontological relativity thesis. However, it's not the same, because my proposal begins with a domain of real entities. All the abstract objects really exist, each in its own way. What is "relative" is the classification into abstract and concrete.

A conjecture: I suspect that if we began with data structures in the human brain as basic objects, we might arrive at a picture of reality in which the "basic" entities are experiences or their contents, and the physical world is a system of features of experiences or of their contents [6]. This would be a form of metaphysical

idealism. However, this idealism would be *fully compatible with naturalism*, because both these viewpoints are just alternative analyses of the same world. See Chapter 13 in my book [From Brain to Cosmos \[fbtc\]](#) for my early thoughts on the possibility of a naturalistic idealism.

*End of Cryptic Remark.*

-----

## Notes

[1] The position that abstract objects are real is called *ontological realism* or *platonism*. My version of it is a modest version.

[2] Rudy Rucker wrote about the idea that everything is a set. See pp. 200-201 in Rucker's book *Infinity and the Mind: the Science and Philosophy of the Infinite* (Boston, Basel and Stuttgart: Birkhäuser, 1982).

[3] See the following article: Rosen, Gideon, "Abstract Objects", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2009 Edition)*, Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = [\[http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2009/entries/abstract-objects/\]](http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2009/entries/abstract-objects/).

[4] Carnap's *Aufbau* exists in several editions, including the following: Carnap, Rudolf (1928). *The Logical Structure of the World*. In *The Logical Structure of the World; Pseudoproblems in Philosophy*, trans. R. A. George (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1969).

[5] Quine, W.V.O. *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969).

[6] This seems reminiscent of what Carnap tried in the *Aufbau*, but actually it's different from the ground up (pun intended again). We aren't substituting logical constructions for anything. There is just a domain of objects, and there are different ways of classifying them.

---

12/25/09

## **Happy Holidays! (And Incidentally, Science Can't Disprove Religion)**

It's the holiday season again. Christmas is here, and Hanukkah is recently past. For many people today these holidays have a significance that is purely cultural. However, many others still observe these holidays as religious occasions.

I'd like to take this opportunity to spread some "Joy to the World" by stating an important point about religion - not any particular religion, but religion in general. Here it is:

## Science has not debunked religion and never will succeed in debunking religion.

The reason is simple: the most important claims of religion cannot be tested by scientific means. Science can't prove these beliefs right or wrong, or even prove them highly improbable. Today's noisy militant atheists might not like this fact, but it is a fact nonetheless.

Science can pass judgment on religious beliefs that are scientifically testable. For example, science has ruled out creationism - the belief that living species and the Earth are results of miraculous acts of creation instead of products of natural processes like evolution. Clearly science can debunk *some* religious beliefs. Many traditional religious beliefs have gone out the window for this reason. We can expect some more to go out the window in the future. However, science cannot debunk the *really important* ideas in religious thought.

Here's an example.

For many religions, the most important religious doctrine is the belief that there is a God. Who, or what, is God supposed to be? There are different opinions. Some people think of God as a ghostly being, perhaps cruel and violent, who created natural objects through supernatural acts. Some believers picture God this way; so do some atheists. But is such a "God" really worthy of the name "God"? Is he (or she, or it) worthy of our unswerving love? And why should we believe in those miraculous acts of creation when science offers better explanations of natural phenomena? People of conscience and reason often have trouble with this idea of God - and well they might!

If we think about the religious feelings of the more conscientious and thoughtful believers, we find that the God they believe in is not an angry ghost. Instead, their God might be described as a *supremely good being* - a being embodying great love, kindness, and spiritual beauty. [If there is such a being \[gtnv\]](#), then He, She or It is indeed worthy of our love. (Believers who think of God this way often also believe that God is a supernatural creator. However, this other belief is not really indispensable to their thinking. They could believe in a good God even if God didn't create the universe. What matters in their daily lives is not how the universe started, but that God is good.)

Science can't debunk the idea that there is a supremely good being. The reason is simple. This idea of God depends on the idea of the good - and science, acting alone, cannot make judgments about what is good!

It is impossible to prove or disprove moral judgments, like "mercy is good" or "hate is bad," by means of scientific methods alone. The same goes for aesthetic judgments, like "This meadow is beautiful." It isn't possible to confirm or disconfirm such statements through scientific methods alone, without resorting to other ways of knowing, such as moral and aesthetic reasoning. This isn't news to philosophers, but nowadays it's too easily forgotten. The possibility that values are partly a matter of opinion doesn't change all this. Even if someone claimed (implausibly) that *nothing* has objective value, that claim still wouldn't be scientifically testable. Needless to say, scientists can make value judgments on their own, as human beings. However, no one can succeed in making value judgments using scientific methods alone. Science can study some questions about morality, like what makes people behave in ways commonly regarded as moral. However, science cannot say whether any moral standard (regardless of its origin) is objectively right.

Now back to the subject of God. We have seen that the idea of a supremely good being is one idea of God - and such a God is much more admirable than the angry ghost. So here's the big question: How can science prove that there's no supremely *good* being, when science, acting alone, can't even tell us whether anything is good or evil? The answer is simple: it can't. The very idea of science proving that there is no supremely good being is silly. It's like trying to prove scientifically that pulling the cat's tail is naughty. Any "scientific" argument that pretends to prove such conclusions must involve hidden side assumptions that are not scientific. Any plausible argument for or against God will be philosophical rather than purely scientific.

Some atheists [have tried to debunk God \[improb\]](#) on scientific grounds by arguing that God would have to be a very complex being, and that very complex beings are intrinsically improbable. This argument [\[improb\]](#) [starts from an inadequate concept of God](#), but the argument also has another, more glaring flaw. The argument overlooks the fact that the improbability of complex beings is a consequence of the laws of nature. If the laws of nature had been different, things might have had probabilities vastly different from the ones they actually have. If we take God to be supernatural (as many people do), then we don't know whether the laws of nature apply to God - so we have no way to tell whether God would be improbable or not. If, on the other hand, God is natural (as some people believe), then the complexity of God is just all or part of nature's complexity. Either way, the argument that God is too complex to be believable is bad logic on a monumental scale. This objection to the argument certainly doesn't prove there is a God, but it shows that one "scientific" line of argument against God is wrong. For the details of this objection, and for some other objections to the same argument, see [this paper \[improb\]](#). Similar problems face any argument that compares God to "[Russell's teapot \[improb\]](#)" or other improbable natural objects.

Until now I've been using the idea of God as an example of a scientifically untestable religious belief. Certain other important religious beliefs are like this too.

For example, there is the idea of an afterlife. Scientists often seem to think that science has debunked the afterlife once and for all. They argue that science has proven the self or personality to be a feature of the brain. Therefore (the argument goes) the self must disappear when the brain dies. But does this argument really work? Even if your self is only an attribute of your brain, why can't another brain have the same attribute after the end of your present brain?

It's nothing special for an attribute of a physical object to occur later in another physical object. Here's an example: Suppose that there were only one object having a certain shade of green. Then that object is destroyed. Later, a painter mixes new paint and just happens to create an object having exactly that same shade of green. In this example, one object has an attribute (a particular color) for a while - and later, after a delay, another object has the same attribute. Yet nothing passed between the two objects, and nothing miraculous happened.

If your self or identity is an attribute of your brain, couldn't that attribute occur again later in another object (brain)? The answer isn't obvious; [when you begin to think carefully about the question](#), the question turns out to be quite complicated. The important thing is that when we look at the afterlife this way, we find that the scientific view of the mind cannot rule it out. Even if the self is an attribute of the brain, it's still logically and physically possible that there is an afterlife. What is more, the existence of an afterlife doesn't have to involve any kind of complexity that would make it statistically improbable. ([See here](#) for more details.) This certainly doesn't prove there is an afterlife - but it shows that the scientific view of the mind doesn't rule out an afterlife of some kind. The existence of the afterlife is a philosophical question, not a scientific one.

This post is not meant to persuade anyone to believe in God or in an afterlife. (Fanatical atheists, take note of this last sentence before you start calling me a hack, a fairy believer, and all your other usual hate words.) Also, I'm not asking anyone to believe in standard forms of religion. (As you know if you perused my website, my own ideas about religion aren't exactly standard and tend toward the disgustingly logical.) I'm just trying to point out that science cannot debunk the essential ideas of religion. Science can dispose of some outdated forms of belief, but science has little to do with the most important ideas at the heart of religion. So-called "scientific" disproofs of religion are simply pseudoscience. Away with them, along with the flat earth theory!

Now go have a very happy holiday season. Of course, this might be difficult if you are a militant atheist. In that case, you might prefer to spend the time putting the evil eye on me - an act just as rational as any so-called "scientific" argument against God.

---

01/11/10

### **Why I Don't Believe in So-Called Intelligent Design Theory**

In case anyone is wondering, I do not believe in so-called "Intelligent Design" theory. I believe in the conventional scientific version of evolution.

My main objection to Intelligent Design theory is not new; others have stated this objection in various forms. Put simply, the problem with Intelligent Design (ID) is that it proceeds by jumping to conclusions. The best arguments for Intelligent Design that I've seen begin with the fact that we don't understand how some particular biological structure evolved. From that, the ID-ers infer that there probably is an external intelligent designer. But this is NOT a good inference! The mere fact that we can't explain something doesn't allow us to assume that some specific explanation is true. Even if a natural phenomenon has us completely puzzled, it's still illogical to infer from this that one particular explanation, or type of explanation, is right. The ID-ers tend to assume a specific explanation, or type of explanation, just because we don't have an explanation. There's a nonscientific name for this kind of reasoning. It's called "jumping to conclusions."

It's like assuming that because we don't know who stole the golf balls, the neighbors' cat *must* have done it.

This objection to ID is not original with me, though I may have stated it in a slightly different way. It's one of the standard objections to ID - perhaps the most standard objection. But I have not yet seen the ID theorists overcome this objection.

(While I'm on the subject of ID, I should mention that the question of whether nature has an external designer has almost no bearing on the question of the existence of God. This assertion might seem surprising. It has the potential to embarrass ID-ers and creationists - and many atheists too. See [this document \[gtnv\]](#) for further details.)

---

01/11/10

### **Evolution Has No Purpose. So What?**

One sometimes hears the following argument about evolution: "When we examine evolution carefully, it shows no sign of aiming for a purpose. Therefore, the apparent design in nature is not really design." Some versions of this argument are more thorough and detailed, but they all boil down to the same idea: no purpose

to evolution, therefore no design in nature.

Now I am going to do something that will make certain people angry. I am going to show that this particular line of argument against design doesn't work. Just so there's no misunderstanding, I will state up front that I am *not* going to give an argument *for* design in nature. In this post, I am only showing that one particular argument *against* design is fallacious. Also, I am not going to shed any doubt on evolution, in which I firmly believe, or give any support to creationism or so-called "Intelligent Design" theory, in which I firmly disbelieve. Instead, I am going to show that one particular argument against design is useless. If you want a positive argument for the belief that there is no design in nature, you need a better argument.

The argument against design that I summarized two paragraphs ago makes use of an unstated assumption. Here is the assumption: *an object without a purpose is not a designed object*. Stated differently: *everything that is designed is designed for a purpose*.

Human experience shows that this assumption is false. Here's how.

Consider the set of objects created or used by humans. Because of their relationship with humans, these objects are examples of purpose and design. Some of these objects are human artifacts; they exhibit design (by humans) and have purpose (for humans). Other objects are not humanly designed but still serve human purposes; natural objects used as found tools are like this.

Now take note of an interesting fact: among human artifacts, there are some objects that are designed but do not have any particular purpose.

The objects I have in mind are certain works of art. Artists often have conscious purposes when creating a work of art. These purposes can vary widely, ranging from the purely artistic to the economic. However, a work of art does not need to have a specific purpose of this kind. An artist might make a wild work of abstract art with no particular aim in mind - just for the heck of it, as the saying goes. There might be an ulterior motive (such as a profit motive or a desire to do something new), but there does not have to be. The creative process might "just happen," fueled by half-unconscious impulses, a lively imagination, or sheer nervous energy.

This is especially likely for some (though not all) pieces of children's art. A child might make a pattern of colors with crayons, not because of a desire to achieve any aim or to represent anything, but just because of a restless inner urge. Some artwork driven by mental illness or drug use might be even more aimless, arising from stray mental visions and impulses. Of course, this doesn't change the fact that mentally healthy, sober adult artists also can produce works without a specific aim.

Doodles - figures drawn while a person is paying attention to something else - provide other examples of purposeless design. Sometimes doodles seem to pour forth just because a person is nervous or bored - not for any conscious (or perhaps even unconscious) purpose. This is especially likely to happen at long business meetings. However, these doodles can be quite complex - obviously products of design and not of mere chance.

Artworks of these unplanned and aimless kinds clearly are examples of design. They are designed in human brains. The process of designing them is part of the conscious and/or unconscious functioning of those brains. The designs might be strange at times, and art critics might not like them - but still, these artworks really are *designed*. They are designed, but not created for any predetermined purpose. (Someone might want to ask how much design exists in art that involves randomness, like certain kinds of splatter art. But even splatter art is not completely random.)

Along with designed objects that lack purpose, there are objects in the human world that have purpose but are not designed. I've already mentioned an example: a found tool, like a branch or stone that someone picks up and uses to do a task. Such objects have purpose for humans, but they are not designed.

So, what's the connection between design and purpose? There may be connections, but there is no tight coupling between the two. If an object can have purposeless design or designless purpose, then what becomes of the argument we started with: that *if* nature has no purpose, *then* nature is not designed?

This argument against design just doesn't hold water. If you want to argue that the universe isn't designed, you need a better argument than that.

(A warning to skeptics: Don't bother to write to tell me that I am trying to shift the burden of proof for design in nature. If you had read this post, you would know that I am not doing that.)

By now you may be wondering what I think of the traditional "argument from design," which supposedly points to a supernatural designer of nature. For my opinion on this argument, [read this document \[design\]](#). The argument from design is wrong - but neither theists nor atheists know the real reason *why* it is wrong. If they understood what's really wrong with that argument, they might have to change their views on design and purpose from the ground floor up.

---

01/12/10

### **What Is an Atheist (and Are You One)?**

These days many people claim to be atheists. What is an atheist? Are you one?

Atheism is the belief that there is no God. It is different from agnosticism, which is the position that you don't know whether there is a God. Agnosticism is a suspension of judgment; atheism is a type of belief. Atheist belief may be certain (a belief that there definitely is no God) or merely probable (a belief that there probably is no God).

To decide who is an atheist, you first have to know what the word "God" means. What exactly is it that the atheists are denying?

This question is not easy as it seems. The problem is that there are many different ideas of God in human thought. Serious, informed thinkers (and some less serious and informed ones as well) have held a spectrum of different ideas about God. The mental picture of God that you grew up with is not the only possible idea of God.

Some atheists seem to think that the only idea of God is the Biblical idea, and that the word "God" means a supernatural creator of the world. Although many people believe in this idea of God, those who regard it as a *definition* of the word "God" are on the wrong track. Some philosophers have arrived, through reason, at ideas of God that can be true even if there is nothing supernatural. Some religions have taught that God is not

the creator. According to some concepts of God, God is not very humanlike, and is not even what we usually think of as a "person." I've written elsewhere ([here \[gtnv\]](#), [here](#) and [here](#)) about various ideas of God, so I won't try to list all the ideas again here.

What do all these ideas of God have in common? The differences can be great. However, most ideas of God (at least most of the well-thought-out ones) have a common core. In one way or another, most of these ideas portray God as a *greatest possible being* [gtnv]. They depict God as a being or reality that is greater, better, or more perfect than anything else. What is more, these ideas portray God as having *mindlike properties* of some kind - mental, spiritual, or moral properties. These ideas don't just equate God to something physical, like matter or energy. Instead, they portray God as being a bit more like a "someone" than a mere "something." This is true even of ideas that deny that God is a "person" in the usual sense of the word.

Pantheism is one form of belief in God that is different from the supernatural-creator idea. In its basic version, pantheism equates God to nature or to the physical universe. Some critics claim that pantheism is only a disguised form of atheism, but [they are wrong about this](#). Some forms of pantheism might amount to atheism, but other forms amount to a real belief in God. However, pantheism is not the only possible form of belief in God that denies that God is a supernatural creator. As I pointed out elsewhere, there are other such beliefs. (See [here](#) and [here](#).)

The God of real religious thought is very different from the "God" of Biblical fundamentalism. The God of the fundamentalists is a very humanoid, and sometimes very mean, fellow who makes a habit of violating the laws of nature. Other, more reasonable religious thinkers long ago rejected this idea of God. Some of these other thinkers still consider God a supernatural creator - but that isn't the most important part of their understanding of God. These believers could continue believing in God even if it turned out that [God was not a supernatural creator \[gtnv\]](#).

[Some atheists](#) try to define "God" as a supernatural creator of the universe. Then they try to debunk God by proving there is no supernatural creator. The big problem with this line of argument is that it doesn't tell us much about God! At most, it hits one concept of God: the idea that God is a supernatural creator. Even if this atheistic line of argument worked, it would not disprove God. At most, it would disprove the supernatural-creator concept of God. Some sincere believers in God rejected this concept long ago - but they didn't have to give up believing in God.

The atheist trick of defining God as a supernatural creator pins the "atheist" label on anyone who accepts a different idea of God. By claiming that God *must* be a supernatural creator, the atheists are playing with words. They are defining into existence a whole bunch of "atheists" who might not be atheists at all. This atheist ploy is much like defining the word "dog" to include the concept of being lime green in color. Once you buy into that definition, you can say that lime green dogs are the only *real* dogs - and anyone who disbelieves in lime green dogs is actually a disbeliever in dogs. (This covers a lot of people, even people who have dogs, because lime green dogs are rather easy to disbelieve in.)

It's easy to label anyone an "atheist" if they disagree with your particular idea of God. However, the fact that you have stopped believing in the Bible, in religion, or in the supernatural isn't enough to make you an atheist. You don't have to become an atheist just because you don't believe in these things. There is another option: rethink your idea of God - and think for yourself.

Some people who think about religion call themselves "atheists" just because they don't believe in a supernatural creator. If that describes you, then you might not really be an atheist at all!

---

02/21/10

## **Say It Isn't So, Mrs. Obama! The New War on Fat Children**

As everyone has probably heard by now, Michelle Obama is starting a crusade against childhood obesity. This crusade is disastrously wrong. Unless it is changed or stopped, it will likely cause untold harm to children.

Kate Harding's [article on the subject](#) in Salon.com, and [this letter](#) by a group of health and nutrition professionals, tell exactly what is wrong, scientifically and socially, with Mrs. Obama's "Let's Move" crusade. I don't really need to say more. Indeed, part of what I am going say here will overlap with what those authors said. However, I want to talk louder about it. Why? Because "Let's Move" isn't just wrong; it's *desperately* wrong.

I am not saying that the proposed health measures in "Let's Move" are all bad. Some of these ideas are good. However, as Harding clearly points out, the campaign's emphasis on "obesity" instead of on good health for all will lead to problems. My guess is that it will lead to disaster.

You cannot generalize much about heavy children. Some of them have unhealthy habits, just as some thinner children do. However, a high body weight in children is not always the result of bad habits. Some children are naturally heavier than average. It is sheer folly to assume automatically that a child's high body weight must be a matter of overeating or laziness. This assumption is especially silly when "obesity" is defined by BMI, which (as Harding points out) is an undependable measure that ignores many individual differences. [1]

Michelle Obama, like many other Americans, needs to get used to a simple fact: some people are naturally heavier than others. Plus-sized people are not pathological cases or problem people just because of this single personal trait.

American society contains many different kinds of diversity. Thoughtful people usually respect diversity. Yet as a society, we seem to be too stupid to realize that there is such a thing as diversity of weight. Given the genetic variability of the human body, how could there fail to be a normal diversity of fat content, BMI, and weight? We seem to think that slight variations in weight are acceptable, but that any large difference on the high side is a crime.

The most disastrous problem with "Let's Move" is that it will lead to more cruelty against large-sized children. Harding points this out clearly; she recognizes that this initiative is likely to increase discrimination (including bullying) against large children. Here I'd like to go further in pointing out how monstrous the results of "Let's Move" could be. In our society, fat children suffer *tremendous* bullying and teasing. As a schoolchild I witnessed many vicious acts - including a child being pushed off the top of a piece of climbing equipment, and taking a long fall to the ground, for being too fat. (Who did this? *His fellow kindergarteners*. American children learn fat hatred at a young age.) Now imagine some kids doing an act like that or worse, and then giving the teacher the excuse that "the President's wife says kids shouldn't be fat." If "Let's Move" isn't stopped or seriously altered, such things are bound to happen.

According to a quote in Harding's article, Mrs. Obama mentioned the problems of "teasing and bullying" that large-sized children face. Doesn't Mrs. Obama realize what her crusade *really* will do to large-sized children? As Harding's article points out, "Let's Move" portrays large children as a problem to be eliminated, and this portrayal can contribute to prejudice. When you think about it, how could the initiative *not* trigger bullying? Telling the school bullies that fat kids are a problem could fan the flames of schoolyard violence beyond anything seen today.

Harding points out, correctly, that "it's not ideal" to try to stop the bullying of fat children by getting the children to change instead of by fighting the discrimination. I'd like to add that it's more than just non-ideal - it's downright evil. If we were talking about any other oppressed group besides fat people, the idea of making the people look different instead of fighting the prejudice would be condemned. Yet Mrs. Obama's approach to large-sized children plays into this bigoted mindset.

One can only guess that the First Lady has been influenced by the widespread but wrong beliefs that only thin people are normal and that fatness is a matter of bad personal behavior. In reality, high body weight has a strong genetic component, and does not always equal bad health. The fact that some thin people gain weight by overeating or being inactive does not imply that all fat people get fat that way. For many children, their natural weight is simply heavier than what the obesity warriors will accept. These children are not to blame for being "fat" - and neither are their parents.

Labeling and hounding children for their weight differences will not lead to anything positive. The fact that some fat people have been able to lose weight - usually only temporarily, or else because they are genetically cut out to be thin - does not change this. It is time to face reality: weight diversity is a part of normal life.

The list of links near the end of this article will provide some alternative ways to think about fat people. The truth is different from what you might have been told. Prejudices run deep in our society. Even doctors and nurses can have them.

The main point of Harding's article is that Mrs. Obama should campaign for good health for all, instead of against "obesity." Harding is exactly right about this. Campaigning for good health is not the same as fighting against the existence of fat children! It is immoral and cruel to start a crusade against large-sized children in the name of "health."

Michelle Obama's campaign against the bogeyman of childhood obesity is sure to backfire. Sadly, this campaign will only increase anti-fat hatred - a hatred that has roots in shallow ideals of beauty, in class prejudice, and even in racism. [2]

**Mrs. Obama, for the sake of America and of human dignity, don't persecute the fat kids!**

-----

### **A Few Links to Read and Think About**

[Kate Harding's article](#)

[The letter that I mentioned early in this post](#)

[ASDAH](#) - the professional organization that issued that letter

[NAAFA](#) - a civil rights organization for people of size

[ISAA](#) - an organization working against size discrimination

[Big Fat Facts](#)

-----

## Notes

[1] On the poorness of BMI as a measure of health, see these references:

(a) Raj Jayadev, "Muscle vs. Fitness". Metroactive. From *Metro* (newspaper), December 1-7, 2004. (

<http://www.metroactive.com/papers/metro/12.01.04/weight-0449.html>) Accessed 2/18/2010.

(b) Richard Telford, "Measure for measure, BMI has big flaws". *The Age*, May 22, 2009.

(<http://www.theage.com.au/opinion/measure-for-measure-bmi-has-big-flaws-20090521-bh2s.html>) Accessed 2/18/2010.

[2] See Paul Campos, *The Obesity Myth* (New York, Gotham Books, 2004), regarding the sources of anti-fat prejudice.

*Minor update 4/28/2010*

---

03/17/10

## Why Dawkins Needs to Study Theology - Especially if There Is No God

One of the standard criticisms of Richard Dawkins' atheist crusade is the charge that Dawkins doesn't pay enough attention to theology. The two most important atheist replies to this criticism are Dawkins' comparison of theology to "leprechology" [1] and PZ Myers' "Courtier's Reply" [2]. In this post I will point out why the criticism against Dawkins is right - and why the leprechaun argument and the Courtier's Reply are wrong.

Why should Dawkins learn something about theology before debunking God? The reason has nothing to do with whether theology is true, false, or silly. The reason is simple: **theological writings tell us what religions really mean by "God."** If you don't know what religious teachings mean by "God," then you can't make a credible rational argument against the God that people believe in. You might not even know what would count as evidence for that God, so you can't claim, with any confidence, that there is no evidence for that God. This is the case whether or not any of the beliefs stated in the theological writings are true.

Let's get back to basic logic here. Before you can prove that something doesn't exist, or that there's no evidence for something, you must at least know what you're trying to disprove. If you don't know what the God of religion is supposed to be, and you try to debunk that God, then you don't even know what you are debunking. You can't even argue convincingly that there's a lack of evidence for God, because the kind of evidence you would need depends on what "God" means. And like it or not, theological writings reflect what real religious teachings take God to be.

Let me explain these points in more detail.

Despite what some angry atheists have said on the Web, theological writings aren't just collections of silly religious beliefs. Along with any silly beliefs (or serious ones), those writings also disclose something much more important. The theological writings of a religion contain the religion's *definition* of God - what sort of entity the religion's believers, and especially its scholars, have in mind when they say "God." This might not be a formal definition; it could be just a rough idea of God instead - but still it serves to define the alleged being called "God." We can learn this definition from theological writings regardless of whether the beliefs stated in those writings are true or false. Even if you think theology is factually wrong, reading about theology is a good way to tell what religious thinkers actually believe God to be. Theology, whether we believe it or not, tells us what religious teachings *mean* by "God." And that is important for all of us, atheists or believers, to know.

Why is it important for atheists to know what "God" means to believers? It's important because you can't very well debunk something without knowing what it is that you're trying to debunk. If you're trying to debunk the God that religions promote, but you don't even know what the religions mean by the word "God," then you might be debunking some so-called "God" that religious people don't even believe in. You might be debunking some special concept of God that's in your head, maybe left over from your churchgoing days, instead of the concept of God that actually matters to any particular religion. If you don't know what God is supposed to be, then you can't even know what kind of evidence would count for or against God. No matter how good your grasp of scientific methods and standards of evidence, you don't know with any confidence what kind of evidence you should be looking for. You might end up thinking that there's evidence for God, or that there isn't any evidence for God - and you might well be wrong. (Later in this post I'll fill in more details about how this can happen.)

Here's an analogy to illustrate this point. It's inspired by Dawkins' well-known comparison between leprechauns and God [1].

Suppose you are trying to decide whether leprechauns exist. To do this rationally, you first have to know what leprechauns are supposed to be. If you grasp the idea of leprechauns - small humanoid beings of a type mentioned in Irish folklore, who typically wear green and guard pots of gold - then it's easy to decide that there is no credible evidence for those beings. However, if you have no idea what "leprechaun" means, or have only a hazy idea of leprechauns, then you could easily make a wrong decision about whether they exist.

Here's an example of this last point. Suppose that someone (call him Hawkins) thinks that "leprechaun" means a being who wears green and protects a supply of gold. In Hawkins' view, a leprechaun is defined *only* by these two traits; he doesn't think of leprechauns as especially Irish, or as having any other familiar leprechaun traits. Then according to Hawkins' definition of leprechauns, some coin collectors would qualify as "leprechauns." If Hawkins met a collector of gold coins who happened to be wearing green, then Hawkins might conclude that leprechauns exist!

Of course, Hawkins would be wrong - but not because he lacks evidence for leprechauns. He would be wrong because he doesn't even know the standard meaning of the word "leprechaun." He doesn't know what the word "leprechaun" means to informed users of that word. Because of this gap in his knowledge, he can't

even know what kind of evidence would count as evidence for the existence of leprechauns (as they usually are conceived). He could easily be wrong about whether he has evidence for leprechauns. In this example, he thinks he has evidence for a leprechaun, but he does not.

If Hawkins tries to defend his wrong conclusion by saying "Well, my conclusion is right according to *my* idea of a leprechaun," then he is admitting that his idea of leprechaun is different from the one that other people use. Hawkins' conclusion about leprechauns might be true according to *his* definition, but probably it is of no interest to anyone but Hawkins.

Before you can debunk something, you have to know what that "something" is supposed to be. This obvious principle holds for leprechauns, the Loch Ness Monster, and Russell's famous orbiting teapot. It holds just as well for God. Suppose you are trying to decide whether God exists. To decide this rationally, you first need to know what God is supposed to be. If you're trying to debunk the God that the religions promote, you first have to know what *that* God is supposed to be. In other words, you have to know what the religions *believe* God to be. You need to know this regardless of whether religion is true and regardless of whether there is a God. If you want to decide rationally whether the God of religion is real, then you must first know what the God of religion is supposed to be. Otherwise you don't know what you are talking about.

How do you find out what real religions take God to be? One way is to ask average, ordinary believers. This is a start. However, average believers usually don't know their religion's teachings very well. (This isn't a putdown; I have known many believers who admitted freely that they didn't really care about the technicalities of doctrine.) In any case, the rank-and-file believers, though important, are not the *only* important group in a religion. There also are the intellectual movers and shakers of the religion. I don't mean the organizational leaders. I mean those who shape and systematize the teachings of a religious tradition. This group includes the theologians.

I'm not claiming here that theology is true. That's a separate question. My point is not about the truth, falsity, or preposterousness of theology, but about what people believe. If you don't know what the theologians of a religion say about God, then you don't know what that religion actually teaches about God. Even if theology isn't true, it's still part of what many religious people believe. If you want to know what the religions really say about God, part of what you have to know is what their theologians have said about the nature of God.

This is why atheists need to learn some theology before trying to debunk God. Even if theology is nonsense, Dawkins still needs to study it - because one can use it to glean information about what religious people mean by "God." And that information can make or break an atheistic argument.

You don't need to be an expert on theology before arguing against God. You certainly don't have to *believe* theology. However, you do have to be familiar with some of the key ideas in theological thought. You have to study something that explains theological ideas - unless you happen to have learned some of those ideas already. And you have to study ideas from *more than one* religious tradition, or else you won't know what people (except for those in a particular tradition) think God is like.

Personally, I think it's much more important to study philosophy of religion than to study theology. Philosophers of religion analyze the ideas of religion rationally; they can present theological ideas in ways that are of interest to rational thinkers. These philosophers also explore *philosophical* ideas of God - ideas based on reason, which aren't the same as the faith-based theological ideas. But no matter which subject you focus on, you need to understand some theological ideas. (By "philosophy of religion" I mean real philosophy of religion, in which the ideas of the religions are analyzed rationally. I do not mean writings that pretend to explain why people believe in God but refuse to analyze religious concepts. Those tracts aren't philosophy of religion; they're more like speculative psychology.)

Here are some questions that someone might ask at this point:

1. Do I really need to know what those silly theologians think of God before I decide whether there's a God?
2. Isn't God like Russell's teapot - something that we can safely disbelieve in because of a lack of evidence?
3. Isn't it enough just to show that there is no supernatural creator? Wouldn't that show that there is no God, even if we don't know the details of what God is like?

The answers to these questions are:

1. Yes, you do have to know something about what theologians think - at least if you want to make your decision rationally. If you don't know what the theologians think, you might well be debunking something besides the God of religion.
2. Maybe God is like Russell's teapot, or maybe not - but in either case you can't apply the teapot argument to God if you don't even know what "God" means! Even if the teapot argument is right, it doesn't generalize to things that aren't defined correctly. We can safely disbelieve in Russell's teapot because we know what a teapot is - and because we know that it isn't the kind of object that would just happen to turn up in deep space. If we got the concept of a teapot wrong, the argument wouldn't necessarily give true results. (If we thought "teapot" meant "small piece of rock," then we could conclude that there probably is at least one "teapot" orbiting the Sun - and we could conclude this without observing a single one of these "teapots," just on the basis of general scientific knowledge about space.)
3. No, it isn't enough to show that there is no supernatural creator. According to some ideas of God, there can be a God even if there is nothing supernatural and even if no one literally created the universe. Showing that there is no supernatural creator isn't the same as showing that there is no God. At most, this would show that God, if there is one, is not a supernatural creator. (That would be a painful discovery for some believers, but it wouldn't logically rule out God.)

I've written a lot about various ideas of God elsewhere (see [here](#), [here](#) and [here \[gtnv\]](#), for example), so I won't repeat it all in this post. Here I'll just mention that the ideas of God I am talking about are not confined to a metaphorical pantheism that merely renames the physical universe as "God." I'm talking about real ideas of a supreme being or ideal being - including ideas that do not imply that God is a supernatural creator, and ideas that could survive with minor changes even if God were not a supernatural creator. For more details, start with the links I just gave.

Dawkins, in his book *The God Delusion*, defines God as a supernatural creator of a certain sort [3]. Then he tries to debunk God. [Dawkins is making the same mistake](#) as our friend Hawkins. He is using a limited definition of "God" that doesn't adequately capture the religious usage of the word. It's true that most believers think of God as a supernatural creator. However, others have believed in a God who did not make our present world, or who is a spiritual reality within nature instead of a supernatural ghost. Many religious thinkers have thought of God as a "perfect being" or a "greatest possible being" - scholarly jargon for a certain philosophical concept of God. It appears that scientific evidence can neither confirm nor disconfirm such a being, but that there still might be rational ways to decide whether such a being exists. (See [here](#), [here \[gtnv\]](#) and [here](#) for some further discussion of ideas like these.) Also, many believers in a supernatural

creator might be able to keep believing in God even if they learned God was not a supernatural creator - as long as they still could believe in a God who was ideally good and worthy of our highest love. Their faith would be badly shaken if they learned that God is not the creator, but they could continue believing in a supreme being.

The evidence needed to show that there is a God depends on what idea of God you have in mind. For a supernatural creator, you would need to find traces of a supernatural creative act (such as design in nature that can't be explained naturally). Many of us don't think there are such traces. However, for a perfect being, there wouldn't have to be any supernatural design at all. The evidence would have to rest on value judgments more than on facts. And for a God who pervades nature, the complexity of God might be the same as the complexity in nature, so Dawkins' complexity argument against God would be useless. (That argument is useless anyhow, [as I've shown elsewhere](#).) Clearly it's not enough to just say "there is no supernatural design, therefore there is no God." Things just aren't that simple. Again, for the details, start with the links in the previous paragraph.

Dawkins, responding to the claim that he should learn theology, once said: "Would you need to read learned volumes on leprechology before disbelieving in leprechauns?" [1] The flaw in Dawkins' response should now be clear. Whether God is real or not, there is a difference between belief in God and belief in leprechauns. The difference is in our background knowledge about these two sorts of alleged beings. Most people have a fairly good idea of what leprechauns are. You don't have to learn more about them to figure out that there's no evidence for them. However, most people do not have a very clear idea of what God, as presented in religious teachings, is supposed to be. They might need to read up on something before making a rationally supported judgment about the existence of God. (These same comments apply to variations of the leprechology remark that put fairies, monsters, etc. in place of leprechauns.)

This same problem affects the "Courtier's Reply" argument of PZ Myers [2]. The Courtier's Reply tries to compare God to the emperor's invisible clothing in the traditional story of "The Emperor's New Clothes." The essential point of the Courtier's Reply is that you don't have to read up on theology to decide whether God exists, any more than you have to read up on the emperor's clothes before deciding that they don't exist. This analogy fails for the same reason that Dawkins' leprechaun reply fails. We all have enough knowledge about clothes to enable us to tell, if we met the emperor, that he has no clothes. We don't need to read anything new before doing that. However, we do *not* all know enough about God to make a rational decision about the existence of that controversial being. To make that decision, we might well need to read the writings of religious thinkers - whether or not we find those writings believable.

-----

## NOTES

[1] Richard Dawkins, "Faith and facts", Letters, *The Independent*, 17 Sep. 2007.  
(<http://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/letters/letters-faith-and-facts-464374.html>) Accessed 2/13/2010.

[2] PZ Myers, "The Courtier's Reply," in *Pharyngula* (blog), 12/24/2006.  
([http://scienceblogs.com/pharyngula/2006/12/the\\_courtiers\\_reply.php](http://scienceblogs.com/pharyngula/2006/12/the_courtiers_reply.php)) Accessed 2/13/2010.

[3] Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston and N.Y.: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006), pp. 11-15, 18-19, 31.

(Post slightly updated 3 Apr 2010.)

---

04/02/10

## **The Courtier's Reply Exposed: Why Dawkins Still Needs Theology**

Critics of Richard Dawkins' atheism sometimes claim that Dawkins should pay more attention to theology in his arguments against God. I've already written about this criticism [in an earlier post](#), where I showed why the critics are right. The reason they are right doesn't depend on whether theology is true or whether there is a God. The reason is that theological writings, whether right or wrong, tell us what religions *mean* by the word "God." You can't debunk God rationally if you don't bother to learn what the word "God" means. To debunk the God of a religion, you have to at least know what believers in that religion mean by "God." If you don't know that, then you don't even know what kind of being you are trying to debunk. In the worst case, you might not even know what kind of evidence counts as evidence for that being. Your knowledge of science won't necessarily help you out of this quagmire, because when you argue against God you really won't know what you are talking about. This is the case regardless of whether there's any truth to theology. Atheists have to face this fact just as much as believers do. For further details, [read my earlier post](#).

The claim that Dawkins needs to consider theology boils down to the claim that you can't debunk something unless you know what that "something" is. In other words, you should know what you're talking about before arguing against it. This standard seems reasonable - but it didn't stop Dawkins. Nor did it stop his fellow atheist PZ Myers from inventing the "Courtier's Reply." [1]

The Courtier's Reply is a takeoff (pun intended) on the well-known story of "The Emperor's New Clothes" from the writings of Hans Christian Andersen. In the original story, a boy notices and says that the Emperor is naked, even though almost everyone else believes (or pretends to believe) that the Emperor is dressed in invisible clothes. In the Courtier's Reply, an imperial courtier says that Dawkins shouldn't call the Emperor naked without first studying complicated writings about the Emperor's wardrobe. The main point of the Courtier's Reply is that you don't need to study detailed writings or doctrines about something unreal (the Emperor's clothes, or in Myers' opinion, God) to decide that it's unreal.

Judging by the internet traffic, the Courtier's Reply seems to have impressed a lot of Dawkins' camp followers. However, if you actually think about Myers' argument instead of just believing it, you find that it's a hopelessly bad argument. I've already said what's wrong with it [in my earlier post](#). Here I'm going to analyze Myers' argument at length and in gory detail - enough detail to show exactly how the trick is done.

First a bit of terminology. From now on I'll call Myers' story about what the courtier said the "Courtier's Reply." I'll call Myers' argument against Dawkins' critics, based on the Courtier's Reply story [1], the "Courtier's Reply argument."

The Courtier's Reply argument depends on an analogy between two assertions:

1. The assertion, made by critics of Dawkins, that you need to read up on theology before you can decide rationally whether God exists.

2. The assertion, made by Myers' fictional courtier, that you need to read up on the Emperor's clothes before deciding whether the clothes exist.

The second assertion obviously is false. The boy in the story can decide whether the Emperor has clothes without referring to any detailed writings about the alleged clothes. The Courtier's Reply argument suggests that one can decide about the existence of God the same way - without absorbing any detailed writings about God.

The analogy between the two assertions is extremely weak. Why? Because the two decisions involved - deciding whether the Emperor's clothes exist, and deciding whether God exists - require background knowledge of very different kinds.

To see what this means and why it's important, consider the following four points about the decision that the Emperor has no clothes.

1. The required decision is about the existence of the Emperor's supposed clothes.
2. To decide whether the Emperor has clothes, you need some knowledge. The first thing you need to know is what clothes are - or in other words, what the word "clothes" means. If you don't have a clear idea of what clothes are, then you can't decide with confidence that the Emperor has them or doesn't have them. For example, what would happen if the boy in the story thought "clothes" meant "pigtails," and the Emperor was naked but had pigtailed? The boy would conclude that the Emperor has clothes - but that conclusion would be wrong. In general, you can't decide rationally whether something exists (or whether there is evidence for something) unless you know what that "something" is. You need to know what entity it is that you're trying to decide about.
3. For most of us, including the boy in the original story, this need for background knowledge is not an obstacle. Why? Because we already know what clothes are! We have a working knowledge of clothes that lets us tell whether someone is wearing them. We acquired that knowledge from the culture in which we grew up. Even without an exact definition, we know well enough what the word "clothes" means.
4. If you know what clothes are, it's easy to figure out how to detect clothes on a person. If you look at a person's body (or touch it if necessary) and find no clothes there, then you can safely assume that the person does not have clothes on. We can assume this because clothes, whatever else they might be, are physical objects that cover parts of the body.

Now consider what happens when we change these four points by replacing the Emperor's clothes with God.

1. The required decision is about the existence of a supposed being known as God.
2. To tell whether God exists, you need some background knowledge. The first thing you need to know is what the word "God" means. Once again, you have to know what something is supposed to be before you can decide whether it exists. Just as with the word "clothes," if you don't have a clear idea what "God" means then you can't decide rationally that there is, or is not, such an item as God.

So far, the decision about God seems to work the same way as the decision about the Emperor's clothes. But...

3. Point 3 is where the analogy falls apart. Here's the problem. Practically everyone has a very good idea of what clothes are - but most people do **not** have a very clear idea of what the word "God" means in

the world's religious teachings. Whether we believe or disbelieve, most of us have an idea or mental picture of God that doesn't reflect what the word "God" actually means in religious thought. The mental picture of God that some of us picked up in church doesn't give us the whole story. This limitation affects believers and unbelievers alike - and even those fanatics who claim to know all about God. I'll say more about this in a moment.

4. For point 4, the analogy falls apart again. Even if we knew what God was supposed to be, we might not know automatically how to determine whether there is a God. For all we know, God might be much harder to detect than are clothes. (The idea that something important might be hard to detect is not silly. Some physical particles and forces are very hard to detect. In mathematics, you can't prove a theorem by "detecting" anything; there are other ways to know whether a theorem is right.) In this respect also, God is not like clothes.

Point 3 about God is the most important point, and also perhaps the most surprising. This point needs some explaining. It isn't nearly as radical as it sounds. I'm not claiming that most people lack an idea of God. Needless to say, most people have a concept or mental picture of God, and can explain to you what they mean by the word "God." However, an individual person's mental picture of God usually is *not* the same as what that person's religious tradition, or any other tradition, means by the word "God." I've already explained this in [my earlier post](#), so I won't repeat it all here.

What's the upshot of all this? Here it is: To understand what the word "God" means to real people (not only yourself but others too), you probably have to learn something that isn't part of your present knowledge. It isn't enough to take the mental picture of God you picked up in Sunday school and run with it. If you're like most people (even scientists), you have to learn something new. You need to learn ideas that you don't pick up automatically in church, in school, at atheist meetings, or in everyday life. Of course, if you want to be careless, you can take an oversimplified mental picture of God, debunk it, and claim that you have debunked God. ([Some people do that.](#)) But if you want to make a careful argument about that conjectural being called "God," you have to study what real people mean by that word. These people aren't limited to the silly Bible-chuckers and addled "theologians" that Dawkins carps on. There also are a lot of serious religious scholars out there - scholars who actually think, and think hard, about religious issues. And one way to find out what God this group believes in is to read some theology.

Now we can see what's wrong with the Courtier's Reply argument - and why atheists, like everyone else, should ignore it. To figure out whether the Emperor has clothes, you don't have to learn anything new. To figure out whether there's a God, you probably *do* have to learn something new. You need to learn what people actually think God is. The best way to get that knowledge is by reading something - and what you read should include some theology. You don't have to believe theology. You don't have to be an expert on theology. In fact, you could read books on the philosophy of religion instead of on theology, and probably pick up all the theological ideas you need. (Philosophers of religion try to analyze religious and theological ideas rationally.) But whatever you read, you do need some of those theological ideas.

In case anyone missed it, I'll say it again: **you don't have to believe theology to learn something from it.** You can think theology is utter claptrap if you like - but you can't run away from the fact that theology cues us in to the meanings of religious terms. The Courtier's Reply argument suggests that if you take theology seriously, you are nothing but a fawning servant of religion. That is nonsense. Theology can be of interest to atheists and believers alike - not because it's true, but because it tells us something important about what people believe.

Now I will propose my own variation on the Courtier's Reply. This version takes into account the fact (apparently missing from the arguments of Dawkins and Myers) that you actually have to know what you're talking about before you can make a rational decision about a conjectured item's existence.

A boy comes from an island where everyone wears a loincloth - and that's all they wear. For this boy, a loincloth isn't just one form of clothing - it *is* clothing. For him, the word for loincloth also *means* clothes. The language of his island has a word for loincloth, which is the only word in that language for body covering. (In this boy's experience, there is no difference between the two.) Because of his past experience, if he saw a shirt, or trousers, or socks, he wouldn't label them as clothes. He is not stupid - in fact, he's rather smart - but he has a very limited idea of clothes, because nobody in his land ever wore any clothes besides a loincloth. In fact, the people there don't have the words to distinguish between loincloths and clothing in general.

This boy comes to visit the emperor of a country where people wear complicated outfits. This emperor doesn't wear a loincloth. For now we won't bother to say exactly what he wears. He might be wearing trousers or a kilt - or less. The important thing is that he does not wear a loincloth.

The boy says: "Hmm. The Emperor has no clothes on!"

Upon hearing this, a courtier takes him aside and says:

**"Wait a minute. You came from a country where they have a very narrow idea of clothing. In your land, they don't even have separate words for clothes and for loincloths. So, allow me to inform you about what the word 'clothes' means to people elsewhere who use that word and its equivalents.**

**"You are right in using the word 'clothes' to refer to a loincloth, but there also are other forms of clothes. It's true that the Emperor has no loincloth, but don't decide too hastily that the Emperor has no clothes. You don't yet have a general idea of clothes, or even a decent rough-and-ready mental picture of what clothes are. Thus, you are premature in deciding that the Emperor has no clothes.**

**"One way to learn what clothes are is to *read our books about the Emperor's clothes*. You don't have to believe everything in those books, or even anything. Just use them to learn what people mean when they talk about "clothes." Another way is to wander around in the empire for a while, talk to people, and pick up what different people mean by that word. And there may even be other ways to learn what you need.**

**"I'm not going to tell you whether you should think the Emperor has clothes. Read, discuss, and learn the general idea of clothes first. Then decide for yourself!"**

-----  
NOTES

[1] PZ Myers, "The Courtier's Reply," in *Pharyngula* (blog), 12/24/2006. ([http://scienceblogs.com/pharyngula/2006/12/the\\_courtiers\\_reply.php](http://scienceblogs.com/pharyngula/2006/12/the_courtiers_reply.php)) Accessed 2/13/2010.

04/08/10

## **A Final Word on Leprechology and the Courtier's Reply**

Recently I wrote two posts debunking two arguments by atheists: Richard Dawkins' comparison of theology to leprechology, and PZ Myers' "Courtier's Reply" argument. I showed that these two arguments are logically unsound regardless of whether God exists. (The same goes for other versions of the leprechology comparison, using fairies, monsters, and the like instead of leprechauns.) In my posts ([here](#) and [here](#)), I analyzed those arguments at length and in great detail, with a logician's eye. I included a lot of detail because I wanted to pinpoint exactly what is wrong with those arguments.

However, you don't need that much detail, or that many words, to see that the two arguments in question are wrong. All you need is some logic. With the leprechology remark and the Courtier's Reply, Dawkins and Myers are pulling a cheap and very old debating trick: refusing to listen to your opponent's arguments.

It's clear why some of Dawkins' opponents want him to study theology. His opponents think that specific theological teachings and writings contain ideas that undermine Dawkins' arguments. By telling Dawkins to consider some theological points, his opponents are making rebuttals to Dawkins' position - rebuttals that take the form, not of brand new arguments, but of arguments and ideas that already are in the literature.

Instead of hearing these rebuttals and demolishing them, Dawkins simply *claims he doesn't need to understand them*. This is, in effect, what he is doing when he says he doesn't need to learn theology. He is ignoring these rebuttals instead of showing why they are wrong.

I'm not talking about rebuttals that don't need further attention - like when creationists bring up the same old shallow arguments against evolution. The answer to such repetitive arguments is simple: just say something like "I've already addressed that objection in my writings." These particular objections based on theology aren't like that. They are *new* objections - ones that Dawkins never addressed in the past. (Obviously he didn't, or he wouldn't be claiming that he doesn't have to understand them.)

In the past, Dawkins has done a splendid job of debunking objections to evolution. In that case, he didn't ignore the rebuttals to his position - he destroyed them. He also has tried to answer many objections to his atheism. Why can't he just do the same thing again, this time with the rebuttals he's currently ignoring? Why doesn't he just understand and refute them? By failing to do this, he leaves atheists and believers alike wondering whether he *can* refute these objections. He undermines his credibility severely.

You can't settle any debate by plugging your ears and singing to drown out your opponent's arguments. That is what Dawkins is trying, in effect, to do.

That's what Dawkins' avoidance of theology amounts to. The problem is not his disbelief in the theological writings. (As an atheist, he's certainly entitled to disbelieve them.) The problem is that his opponents have offered rebuttals to his arguments - rebuttals that happen to make reference to technical ideas in the theological writings. By deliberately shunning those writings, he is refusing to answer the rebuttals. For all practical purposes, he has resigned from the debate.

From his leprechology remark and similar statements, we can guess what Dawkins presumably has in mind

when he handwaves away theology. Since he doesn't believe there is a God, he finds it unnecessary to read books that assume there is a God or that purport to describe God. This reaction seems reasonable from an atheist - until you think about it. Actually, the nonexistence of God wouldn't reduce the need for Dawkins to take theology into account. The reason Dawkins needs to learn some theology is not that God exists or that theology is true. The reason is that **his opponents are offering counterarguments to his position - and to grasp those counterarguments, he needs to learn a few ideas from theology.** To refuse to answer those counterarguments is to give up the debate. Yet this is what Dawkins is doing by claiming that theology is irrelevant.

He might as well just plug his ears and sing.

Someone might argue that we can debunk God without knowing theology, on the grounds that God is a supernatural creator and any kind of supernatural creator is implausible. Perhaps this is what Dawkins was thinking when he chose to ignore theology. However, this argument doesn't help Dawkins in the least. Most religions teach that God is a supernatural creator - but that isn't their *definition* of God, or even the most important part of their idea of God. Most religions regard God first of all as a supremely good or perfect being, or as the most complete or all-encompassing possible being. This means that if the supernatural creator were debunked, the religions (except for the fundamentalist sects) could consistently go on believing in God! If the religions had to drop the belief that God is *literally* a supernatural creator, they still could believe in a supreme being. They would have to change some of their doctrines, but the most important part of their idea of God would survive. No doubt this change would come as a shock to many believers. However, the believers could go on worshipping God just like before. In fact, some believers seem to have made this change already. One sometimes meets Christians who believe that the universe probably had natural causes, but that the event of creation nevertheless reflects the glory of God. Most religions teach that God is a supernatural creator - but a "God" *defined* as supernatural creator, and as that alone, has little to do with the God of religion.

Also, there are philosophical ideas of God that don't involve a supernatural creator in the first place. (I don't only mean a poetical pantheism that relabels the physical universe as God. I mean alternative concepts of a real supreme being.) I've written about these elsewhere ([here](#), [here](#) and [here \[gtnv\]](#), for example), so I won't repeat them all here.

By defining God as a supernatural creator and ignoring other parts of the idea of God, Dawkins has created a God concept that is almost useless for him to debunk. At most, he's proving that God, if there is one, is not a supernatural creator. Even if he were right about that, it would not imply that there is no God. How could he fix his argument? Use a definition of God closer to the ones the religions really use. And to find out what they use, he would have to study a little bit of (gasp!) theology.

Needless to say, none of what I have written here is an argument for the existence of God or against atheism. You can be an atheist and still recognize that leprechology-type arguments and the Courtier's Reply are bunk. I have only shown that these two particular lines of argument are useless. In view of the popularity of those arguments among Dawkins' followers, this may be an important point to make.

Richard, stop playing with the leprechauns and hit those books!

05/01/10

## The Hidden Tension Within Belief in God

There is a hidden tension within most religious believers' idea of God. Most believers hold two different concepts of God without realizing it. On the one hand, they believe that God is the creator of the universe. ("Our Maker" is one of the most common designations for God.) On the other hand, they think that God is the supremely good being - a being who is worthy of our highest love, and who, in some sense, loves us. Both of these ideas of God perform functions in the believer's life. When you ask believers who God is, they will likely say "the creator of the world." However, in times of personal crisis, they find solace and strength in the idea of a God who is good - a God who is lovable and who somehow represents love itself.

If you asked an average, good-hearted believer which of these is his or her idea of God, he or she would tell you that God is both of these things. There's no need to decide between the two, because both of them are the same being - God. But what if the believer found out that these two beings - the creator and the supremely good being - were *not* the same? Which one of them would the believer consider to be "God"?

By asking this question, we pinpoint the tension within the idea of God. The common idea of God is not one idea, but two. And which idea is more fundamental? If the creator and the supremely good being were not the same (or if one or the other did not exist), which one should we call "God"?

We can approach the answer by thinking about the role of God in people's lives at times of crisis. We find that the supremely good being is the more important of the two ideas of God. A soldier who derives strength and comfort from his faith is relying on a supremely *good* being for emotional support. At the moment of danger, the question of how the universe started really doesn't matter to him. In fact, he probably couldn't care less how the universe started. The important thing is that the thought of a supremely loving God is giving him inner strength. He might also be praying to God for a miracle - suggesting an idea of God closer to the miraculous creator. However, if he experiences a seeming "miracle," it won't really matter to him whether the miracle had natural or supernatural causes. He will see the "hand" of God in it - a sign or reminder of God's goodness - even if a natural explanation is found later on.

This soldier's idea of God is a mixture of creator and supremely good being. However, it is the thought of a supremely good being that ultimately keeps the soldier going. The same can be said for other situations in which belief in God is a help. A parent praying for a sick child couldn't really care less how the universe started. (String theory? Quantum vacuum? Intelligent act? That was a long time ago - what difference does it make right now?) Instead, it is the idea of a supremely good being that gives the parent strength. And although the ability to pray to God for a good outcome is comforting, this comfort doesn't depend on God's ability to violate natural laws. The important thing is that the required "miracle" might happen, either through God's action or with the help of the inner strength and determination that prayer can provide. To pray to God is either to ask for a suspension of natural laws, *or* to focus one's mind on working for the good outcome that natural laws allow - or both. Either way, prayer is a comforting and potentially beneficial act.

What is it in the idea of God that really matters to people? The idea of a creator is familiar, but it is not as important as it seems. It is the idea of God as a supremely good being that makes all the difference in a caring believer's life.

If it turned out that no one made the universe, would humanity still be able to believe in God? Yes - provided we remembered that the important part of the idea of God is not the creator, but the Supremely Good Being.

If you think there is such a being, then that being can be the focus of your spiritual thoughts and feelings no matter what caused the universe. A believer can see the reflection of that goodness - the metaphorical "hand" of God - in all that is good, regardless of whether life's "miracles" are exceptions to the laws of nature or expressions of them.

-----

## REFERENCE

[God, the Next Version \[gtnv\]](#)

---

05/01/10

### **Am I Really Defending Religion?**

Some readers of my writings might wonder whether I am defending religion or attacking it. I can see how someone might be unsure about this.

On the one hand, I have argued that the cosmos has a spiritual aspect - an aspect that is real, not merely imaginary. On the other hand, I am doubtful about anything labeled "supernatural."

On the one hand, I have criticized several common religious beliefs, and I rely on reason instead of faith to support my opinions. On the other hand, I have said that the essential truths of religion are valid and should be preserved.

On the one hand, I have argued that there is an ultimate being that can sensibly be called "God." On the other hand, I have said that I don't fit the definition of a "theist."

So, which am I - a defender of religion, or a critic?

The answer is that I am a defender of what is true and sensible in all religions, but a critic of the mistakes made in the name of religion. Religion, like all human institutions, is full of errors that result from human folly. Some of what passes for "religion" today is half true at best, sheer superstition at worst. However, that doesn't mean that religion itself is bad, or that religion can't change for the better. I disagree fervently with fundamentalism. I even disagree with some of the ideas of more moderate forms of religion. But I am not going to deny probable truth where I find it. And often I find it in the world's religious teachings.

Here are a few of the points where religion gets it right.

Human beings are more than just blobs of matter. Our existence is something more than the existence of a material body. We have characteristics that give us worth and dignity. We even have some characteristics

that pass beyond what's normally called the "physical." I disagree with many religious sects in that I don't think any of this is "supernatural." However, the religions are perfectly right when they claim that we are more than just our bodies. And the fact that our minds are products of our brains doesn't change this in the least.

The physical universe is full of meaning. It might not have a prearranged purpose imposed from outside - but still it has real meaning that is not just a product of our imaginations. The meaning of existence is much more than the imaginary, illusory "meaning" that existentialists and hardcore atheists pretend to "find" in things. When a child is saved from cancer, that event really is meaningful. It really matters. It doesn't only matter to you, and it doesn't only matter to me - it *really does* matter, period. Some things really matter and really are meaningful. They seem meaningful to us, but they are objectively meaningful too. Meaning is much more than a matter of opinion.

Goodness is objectively real. There are events and acts that really are good, and other events and acts that really are bad. An act of genocide is bad; an act of saving a child from cancer is good. These acts are not just good or bad in your opinion or in my opinion. They really are good or bad. Their value or disvalue is objective. What is more, the ideas of good and bad are more than just resultants of our evolutionary history. Some modern authors have claimed we have evolved a social tendency to be nice or to cooperate. Our tendency to behave morally may well have come from such sources. (After all, it must have come from somewhere - and we did arise from evolution.) However, that is not all there is to morality. There also are objective facts about what is moral. Perhaps morality was not passed down to us from above, as many religions say it was. Perhaps it comes from within us instead. Even objective moral values can be natural. But regardless of these details, there are objective moral facts.

Beauty, like goodness, is objectively real. It might seem strange to think of beauty as a religious topic. Some religions don't bother much about beauty, and some don't even seem to like it. Of course, many other religions do appreciate beauty, and religious art pervades many faiths. Beauty is relevant to all religions because it is an important part of the meaning of existence - and because some of the more interesting poets and artists found spiritual insight in it. Beauty is a notoriously personal phenomenon ("in the eye of the beholder" as the saying goes), but that is only because you have to be in the right state of mind to behold it. The beauty is really there; it's not just an illusion. When poets sing the glories of the dawn, the beloved, or the starlight, they are not merely expressing illusory private feelings. They are not merely creating an enjoyable combination of words. Instead, they are actually revealing new knowledge - penetrating into reality in ways that only a poetically opened human mind can do. The knowledge they gain is, at very least, knowledge about the felt features of the world, and about other ways of seeing the world that may be just as "true" as the usual, everyday ways. Nothing in this special knowledge contradicts science or reason - but poetry and the other arts can reveal knowledge that science, with its objective methods, cannot reach.

Beauty, goodness and meaning are real spiritual features of things and of the world. The universe, though perhaps made only of physical substance, is not only physical; it also has these spiritual features. Behind these features is another, deeper stratum: something that could be called the supreme spiritual reality. This is not a being outside of nature, but an all-encompassing whole, containing natural things, relationships, and values, that is the summit of goodness and beauty. It is not just a poetical name for the physical universe. You might think of it as the best and finest aspect of the physical/spiritual cosmos in which we live. It is the kind of entity in which the poet's consciousness can find its long-sought ideal.

It is this entity that I, in my previous writings, have called "God." Some believers (and atheists also) might not be happy with my use of this term. This God is not much like the picture of a crudely humanoid God that some religions hold and that atheists love to deny. Some of the God-figures of religions are unkind and all too fallible. They don't even come close to being ideally good and beautiful. But setting aside those erroneous God-images, we find that the supreme spiritual reality has the most important features of the God

worshipped by good-hearted believers. The religions are right when they claim that an ideal, perfect being exists. They are only wrong about the details of that being - including their assumption that God can only be supernatural.

Human beings are more than just bodies. Existence has real meaning and contains real values. There is a supreme spiritual reality that exemplifies those values. These three ideas are among the most essential concepts of religion. As I have argued in my previous writings, these ideas have rational support. You can find them believable on rational grounds, without the use of faith. It is these ideas that I want to defend - along with anything else true and rationally defensible that can be found in the teachings of religion.

I am not the first to propose that some basic spiritual ideas are rational. In the history of thought there have been many spiritual-minded rationalists. Many noted philosophers, ranging from Leibniz and Spinoza of earlier times to the last century's Howison and Royce, knew that spiritual thought could be placed on a rational basis. One of the causes of the conflict between science and religion is the widespread ignorance of philosophy among today's scientists and believers. If religion would abandon blind faith and embrace rational exploration, and if scientists would realize that reason includes philosophy as well as science, then the degrading and unnecessary "war" between science and the human spirit might come to an end.

Religion today may consist largely of unjustified assumptions and guesswork, but essential truths still can be found among the doctrines. In its ideas of the soul, objective morality, and God, religion presents us with hints of these truths. The real ideas have been covered over by humanly invented dogmas, but the real ideas still remain true. And no matter what you've heard from ranting fundamentalists or angry atheists, the basic ideas of *real* religion are fully compatible with reason.

-----

## REFERENCES

For lengthier discussions of these topics, read the following documents of mine:

[Religion: the Next Version](#)

[God: the Next Version \[gtnv\]](#)

[Religion section of The Unfinishable Scroll](#)

---

05/02/10

## **Mind Is to Brain as Digestion Is to Digestive Tract. Oh, Really?**

There is an old philosophical chestnut that says that the mind is to the brain as digestion is to the digestive tract. The underlying thought is clear: why should we regard the mind as something "special," over and above the brain, when we wouldn't regard digestion as something over and above the digestive organs?

The best reply to this chestnut is simple but surprising: digestion *is* something over and above the digestive tract. Your digestion - what you refer to when you say things like "I have a slow digestion" or "my digestion is good today" - is not merely part of your digestive tract. Instead, it is a *feature* of your digestive tract. It is what philosophers call an abstract entity. A feature of a thing is not identical to the thing. Thus, your digestion is not identical to your digestive tract - for the same reason that the mass of an electron is not the same as an electron, or that the shape of a window is not the same item as the window.

The reason the digestion-digestive tract difference is unlike the mind-brain difference is that nothing interesting follows from the digestion-digestive tract difference. The fact that the digestion is different from the digestive tract doesn't tell us anything new about the nature of digestion or of ourselves. It tells us no more than we already know when we admit that the shape of a window is not identical to the window. It is a near-trivial logical fact.

However, in the case of the mind (which is a feature or set of features of the brain), the difference between mind and brain *does* imply something interesting. Unlike digestion, the mind is associated in a distinctive way with a large domain of other abstract entities. These other entities are the contents of consciousness, which make up what we think of as our inner world. The fact that we possess this inner, abstract "world" has a drastic bearing on who we are as individuals and as a species. It makes the difference between a conscious observer and a mere nonconscious thing. Once we face the fact that this inner world exists, we realize that minds and selves are not just lumps of matter, even if they are only features of the brain. What is more, we cannot understand the mind without taking the inner world into account. If we ignore the contents of consciousness, we miss what is most essential to the mind.

With digestion it is different. Once we know the physical mechanisms of digestion, there is essentially nothing left to understand about the nature of digestion. Even if we admit that digestion is something distinct from the digestive tract, this fact doesn't help us understand digestion. We learn no more that way than we already knew when we realized that the mass of an electron is not an electron, or the color of a stone is not the same as the stone. The distinctness of digestion from digestive tract is, as I have said, a near-trivial logical fact. However, if we don't pay attention to the complex abstract features of the brain (specifically mental contents), then we don't really have any idea of what a mind is. We miss the important aspects of the mind.

This, in brief, is why the old analogy between digestion and mind fails.

The same argument works against any analogy that says "Why should I think my mind is distinct from my brain, when my [fill in name of body function] isn't distinct from my [fill in name of organ]?" The analogy fails for the same reasons.

---

05/02/10

### **How Real Spiritual Experience Might Work**

There is such a thing as real spiritual experience. This has almost nothing to do with so-called "religious" experiences that involve seeing beings with physical forms (like angels or demons) or hearing voices or sounds from alleged heavenly beings. These so-called "religious" experiences are [best explained in terms of](#)

[psychology](#). We cannot trust these experiences. [Real spiritual experience](#) is something entirely different.

A real spiritual experience is not an experience of alleged beings or objects that normally are invisible. Instead, it is an experience of *properties and relationships* of objects. Here are a few examples.

- **A nature poet is gazing upon a mountain landscape, and suddenly perceives the woods, land, and rivers as divine.** This poet is not seeing any new objects besides the known objects in nature. Instead, the poet is perceiving a new *quality* of things - a quality of divineness or sacredness, perhaps best described as a supreme goodness and beauty that can be felt.
- **A religious mystic has an overwhelming impression that all things are one.** This mystic is not seeing or hearing any new things besides the objects she already knows about. Instead, she is simply seeing old objects in a new way - noticing the unity, inseparability, and sameness among them, instead of focusing on the differences.
- **A poet gazes upon his beloved, and sees in her the pinnacle of inner beauty and the very meaning of existence.** This poet is not seeing any new items besides the human being before him. Instead, he is noticing qualities in that person, and a relation between that person and the whole of existence, that are impossible to know without being in a poetically inspired state of mind.
- **An Eastern monk, deep in meditation, suddenly perceives the visible world as empty and void.** This meditator is not noticing any additional objects besides the ones in the visible world. Instead, he is noticing a set of qualities in those objects - qualities which, in everyday life, often get ignored. All objects in our familiar world are, in a way, flimsy. They are temporary and are dependent on other things; they are small compared to the whole of existence. Normally we notice the solidity and durability of objects - "positive" qualities. We tend to ignore the other, "negative" qualities. However, an observer in a certain frame of mind may be acutely aware of the negative qualities and unaware of their opposites - making familiar objects seem like insubstantial phantoms. Our normal, "positive" perspective is right - but *this other, "negative" perspective also is right*. The two perspectives just emphasize different aspects of things.

In each of these examples - those of the nature poet, the religious mystic, the romantic poet, and the meditator - a special experience occurs. In each of these experiences, what is important is the perception of *new qualities and relations*. All of these experiences can occur without the perception of any new particular objects. One doesn't have to see angels or devils or hear supernatural voices to have these experiences. Some people might not want to call these four examples "religious experiences." Yet there is no doubt that these experiences are "spiritual" in a broad, nonsectarian, and true sense of that word.

Do these real spiritual experiences prove the existence of the supernatural? Perhaps not - but they prove something far better.

We can't infer the existence of the supernatural from these experiences. Why? Because the qualities and relations disclosed in the experiences may, for all we know, fit into the framework of nature. Even if we don't currently know how to understand them as part of nature, we have no compelling reason to assume that this can't be done. (Labeling something "supernatural" is always a questionable move, because we can't know in advance that the "supernatural" thing won't someday be viewed as part of nature.) Therefore, these spiritual experiences don't settle the question of the reality of the supernatural. What these experiences *do* prove is that there are qualities and relations in the world that aren't part of our normal, everyday experience. To put it bluntly, the natural world has spiritual qualities as well as physical ones - and spiritual experience attests to the existence of these qualities, whether or not we believe in the supernatural or in religion.

In other words, spiritual experiences establish the reality of the spiritual features of the world. They do not tell us whether those features are natural or supernatural - so they don't rule out either naturalism or supernaturalism. (We might still be able to learn something from so-called experiences of the supernatural, even if we don't believe the experiences. I'll discuss that possibility in a footnote [1]).

The big question about these experiences is whether the qualities and relations they disclose are real. I've already presented my detailed answer to this question elsewhere ([here](#) and [here \[gtnv\]](#)), so I'll just summarize it here. The question really is two questions:

1. Are these qualities and relations themselves real? (For example: is the quality of ultimate beauty, which the nature poet found in a natural landscape, a real quality? Is there really such a quality, or is this quality merely illusory?) [2]
2. If the qualities and relations themselves are real, do things really *have* these qualities and relations? (For example: does the natural landscape, in which the nature poet found ultimate beauty, really have the quality of ultimate beauty? Or does it only seem to have that quality?)

Here are the short answers:

1. Yes, these qualities and relations are real. At least they are as real as all familiar qualities and relations. Even if people experience these qualities and relations only in certain mental states, the qualities and relations themselves still are real.
2. Yes, things really have these qualities and relations. The fact that you have to be in a certain mental state to perceive the qualities and relations doesn't change this in the least. Qualities like beauty and meaning are *observer-dependent qualities*. There is nothing fishy about such qualities; scientists often use other qualities of this kind, [though not under that name](#). Observer-dependent qualities and relations can be important features of the world.

For the long answers, and the rational arguments supporting them, see [here](#) and [here \[gtnv\]](#).

(Someone might want to argue that there are real spiritual experiences of other kinds besides the ones I have described here. I haven't ruled this out; I'm not going to comment on this question one way or the other. The class of experiences I have described here seems to encompass the most important kinds of spiritual experience.)

The upshot of all this is that some spiritual experiences are trustworthy. These experiences can be used as a way of knowing spiritual realities. The spiritual realities we find in this way are not supernatural (or at least we have no compelling reason to think that they are). Instead, they are features of the natural world - every bit as real as more familiar features, like the mass of the electron or the liquidity of water.

This means that *many of the central insights of the nature mystics, religious mystics, and visionary poets are right*. Like all thinkers, these visionaries made mistakes - especially when they went beyond their data and assumed their experiences were supernatural. However, these mistakes do not shed any doubt on these thinkers' greatest contribution: the exploration of the spiritual features that the human mind can discover in the world.

-----

## NOTES

[1] It's possible that a person having a superficial "religious" vision, like seeing a physical angel with wings, might feel the presence of real spiritual qualities in that imagined being. In this case, the superficial experience is hallucinatory, but a real spiritual experience is occurring at the same time. The *idea* of an imaginary being - perhaps best understood as an abstraction similar to a character in a story - might serve as the basis for a real spiritual experience. This, I think, is what happens with those religious poets who have poetic insights but also have visions of beings with forms. The hallucinatory nature of the visions doesn't invalidate the spiritual experience - but we should be careful to separate the real experience from the untrustworthy part.

[2] In this post I am deliberately avoiding the old philosophical debate about the reality of qualities and relations. As I've said before in several places, I think we should consider qualities and relations real, though not in the same way that concrete objects are real. However, this debate doesn't make or break the present post. For now, the important issue is whether spiritual qualities and relations "exist" in the same sense that we have in mind when we say that familiar qualities and relations "exist."

---

09/30/10

### **Announcing Sharlow's Scratchpad**

My website has a new area where you can find some of my writings. I call this area "Sharlow's Scratchpad."

I plan to use the Scratchpad to post notes and drafts that are too tentative or rough to put on my blog, and ideas that are too speculative for other parts of my site. If you like this blog, you'll probably like the Scratchpad too. [Here's the link \[sp\]](#).

---

10/01/10

### **Let's Change the Subject and Talk About...Snails!**

Back in 2008 when I [started this blog](#), I said I planned to write about politics, religion, science, snails, and more. Well, I've covered all these topics but one - snails. So here's a post with the most interesting snail news

that I've run across recently on the web.

- The World Snail Racing Championship was held in July 2010. For information on the outcome, see [this story](#).
- A new, potent [anti-pain drug](#), based on snail venom, is in the works.
- An amateur scientist may have discovered a [homing instinct in snails](#).
- An artist in London did a project involving [painting on live snails](#). Wow! That project really explores the boundaries of art media. (This story was dated 2008, so it isn't *new* news, but it's news to me.)

I've always found mollusks, and especially snails, to be rather interesting animals. These stories didn't change my opinion!

---

10/03/10

### **The Trouble with the Supernatural**

In my earlier writings I've said that I am skeptical about the [existence of the supernatural](#). However, I've also said that I think there is a [supreme being](#) of some kind [gtnv], and that humans are not only bodies but also have [spiritual qualities](#) (see also [here](#)). These seemingly contradictory opinions may have confused some people. In this post I will spell out what I think about the supernatural.

"Supernatural" is a vague word. Its precise meaning is elusive. Philosophers might want to seek a precise definition of this word. However, when most people call something "supernatural," what they mean in practice is that the thing they are talking about will never be understood as part of nature.

To illustrate this point, I'm now going to do a thought experiment. (I don't think the scenario I'm about to describe ever will happen in real life. It's just a thought experiment.)

Think about leprechauns. [Leprechauns](#) are mythical beings described in Irish folklore. Leprechauns are widely regarded as supernatural beings, especially by those of us who don't believe in them. Today, scientifically inclined people don't think leprechauns are real.

Now here's the thought experiment. Imagine that some people believed in a type of supernatural being called a "meprechaun." Meprechauns are sort of like leprechauns; they allegedly wear green, guard pots of gold, and so forth. In our scenario, scientifically inclined people don't believe in meprechauns, but some less scientifically minded people do.

To continue our story, suppose that one day scientists discover that some meprechauns are real after all. If scientists were able to confirm that meprechauns are real, then what would the scientists do next? Presumably

they would begin to study meprechauns: their anatomy, their geographic distribution, and so forth.

When scientists began to understand meprechauns a little bit, it's a good bet that people would start to think of meprechauns as part of nature. We would start to think of meprechauns as natural creatures, previously thought to be only subjects of folklore and mythology but now known to be real. Like a mythical city later proven real by archeologists, meprechauns would enter the roll call of things that used to be scoffed at but that now are established parts of the world.

Even if we found that meprechauns could violate known natural laws, we still would think of them as "natural" if they were demonstrably real and could somehow be made to fit into the conceptual framework of nature. Even if meprechauns didn't obey the known laws of nature, we would still tend to think of them as "natural" if we could learn something about the laws they did obey. Even if meprechaun behavior turned out to be lawless in some respects, we could simply say their behavior is unpredictable and try to describe it using probability theory. Then we could regard the meprechauns as part of nature, but obeying previously unknown laws of a probabilistic character. (After all, randomness and *apparent* lawlessness don't make a phenomenon supernatural. The observed behavior of quantum mechanical particles is unpredictable in some ways, but that doesn't make those particles supernatural.) With or without predictability, we would begin to feel that meprechauns aren't supernatural after all.

This concludes the thought experiment. The point of the experiment is not (I repeat, NOT) that leprechauns or their close cousins might exist. I don't believe that they do. (Professional skeptics, read the previous two sentences before raising your poison pens against me.) My only point is this: **if we did** confirm that some supposedly supernatural beings were real, and if we began to understand how they work, **then** we would very likely start to think of them as parts of nature.

If we start to call things "natural" when we begin to understand them, then labeling something as "supernatural" amounts to claiming we never will come to understand it as part of nature. If we might, at some future time, understand a thing as part of nature, then we aren't justified in claiming the thing is really, truly supernatural. It might only be a natural phenomenon that we haven't yet recognized as such.

I am skeptical of any claim that says we will *never* understand something in a naturalistic way, or will never be able to view something as part of nature. Given some item that is real but seems supernatural, how can we rule out the possibility that in 500 or 1000 years somebody will discover a way to think of it as part of nature? (Consider how much our understanding of things has changed in the last thousand years.) However, if we label something as definitely supernatural, we are implicitly claiming that we never will understand that thing in a way that makes it fit into our picture of nature. The act of classifying something as supernatural says more about our current inability to understand that thing than it says about the thing itself.

For this reason, I don't think we ever have rational justification for claiming that anything is supernatural. The most we can do is claim that certain things *seem* supernatural, and that we don't yet have natural explanations for them.

Note that I am not arguing that there is nothing supernatural. I don't know of any way to rule out the possibility that there is something we really can't understand as part of nature. I just don't think we ever have good reason to assume there is such a thing. As we already know, what seems supernatural today may seem quite natural tomorrow.

Now here's the other part of my argument - the part that the professional skeptics won't like.

When I say that I don't believe in the supernatural, I am NOT claiming that any particular item thought to be supernatural does not exist. Traditionally, people have labeled various controversial items as supernatural.

Among these items are the supreme being and the human soul. My disbelief in the supernatural does not mean that I scoff at everything people call "supernatural." I just think that if these things turn out to be real, we eventually will begin to understand them in a naturalistic way. At least we shouldn't rule out this possibility by assuming that such things are truly supernatural.

This explains how I can argue for the reality of certain spiritual things while being a skeptic about the supernatural. My skepticism does not rule out the existence of a supreme being or of the spiritual qualities of human nature - though it does rule out certain crude conceptions of these things.

A final cautionary note: By saying that I don't believe in the supernatural, I am not - I repeat, **not** - suggesting that there is no knowledge besides scientific knowledge. When today's self-proclaimed "skeptics" say they don't believe in the supernatural, often they seem to mean that they only believe things that can be confirmed scientifically. Their position is not naturalism, but nonsense. There are other ways of finding knowledge besides science. Philosophy and art are a couple of obvious ones - and yes, philosophy is a rational subject and [the arts do yield new knowledge of reality](#), no matter what you've heard. These other ways of knowing can yield real knowledge that is not part of science. However, the possibility of extrascientific knowledge is a different issue from the reality of the supernatural. It's possible to recognize that there is extrascientific knowledge whether or not you believe in the supernatural. Many "skeptics" who claim to be naturalists are actually wide-eyed believers in a naive view of science - not adherents of a truly naturalistic picture of the world.

---

10/12/10

### **Some Thoughts on the Ontological Argument**

The ontological argument is one of the traditional arguments for the existence of God. Actually it's a set of at least [two different arguments](#). The most widely quoted version, which uses the idea that a nonexistent God isn't as great as an existent one, is by far the worst form of the argument. There is another form that is far better. I've already written about the ontological argument [in an e-book \[gasoc\]](#) with the words "God" and "science" in the title. Also, I've written a little bit about the argument in an [earlier post](#). Here I want to share some thoughts about what this argument, in its good form, really tells us. I think a lot of the confusion about this argument comes from a misunderstanding about what it proves.

Scholars have long known that there is more than one form of the ontological argument. The argument's originator, Anselm of Canterbury, proposed at least two different forms (see [1] and [2] for details). The first form of the argument is (in my opinion and in the opinions of many other commentators) not much good. (Interestingly, this seems to be the form that [atheists prefer to attack](#). Coincidence?) The second form of the argument does succeed up to a point: it shows that if it's possible that there is a perfect being, then there is a perfect being. (Another way of putting this conclusion is: if there's no perfect being, then it's impossible for there to be a perfect being. The perfect being is either real or impossible - unlike many other things, which can *just happen* not to exist.) Thanks to the work of Charles Hartshorne [2], it seems that the argument establishes at least this much.

This leaves a big question open: What is a *perfect* being?

Philosophers of religion have tried to flesh out this notion of a perfect being (sometimes called a "greatest possible being") in various ways. They have tried to make this intuitive notion more precise - and as with some other intuitive concepts, there's more than one way to make it precise. I won't go into all of these ways here. The important thing is that a perfect being exemplifies, to the greatest possible degree, all the values that a being can exemplify. This means, for example, that if goodness is a value, then the perfect being is at least as *good* as any other being. There is no being greater in goodness. Similarly, if beauty is a value, then this being is, in some sense, at least as *beautiful* as any other being. And so forth.

Most religious people who like the ontological argument seem to think that this argument is proof of the existence of the God they believe in. Usually they believe that God is a supernatural creator of the universe. By "creator," they usually mean a being that literally caused the universe to come into existence - not an original cosmic principle of a more elusive kind.

Suppose, just for a moment and for the sake of discussion, that the ontological argument (in its better form) proved the existence of a perfect being. Does that mean the argument supports the existence of a supernatural creator?

It does not.

The ontological argument, if it succeeds, provides evidence for the existence of a perfect being or greatest possible being. It doesn't let us take the next step, to the existence of a supernatural creator - unless we make the additional assumption that a greatest possible being has to be a supernatural creator! Even a thinker who accepts the basic argument can avoid the leap to a supernatural creator by assuming that a perfect being might not have to be a supernatural creator. In other words, the argument doesn't support the traditional theistic God unless the property of being a supernatural creator somehow makes a being *more perfect* than that being otherwise would have been.

Is a supernatural being more perfect than a natural being, just by virtue of being supernatural? I don't think so. Why should it be more perfect? What's so glorious about being supernatural? Couldn't a natural being (a being that's within the framework of nature instead of outside that framework) be equally good and beautiful, and equally perfect in every other way?

Is a being that created the physical universe automatically better or more perfect than a being that did not? The answer isn't obvious - but the answer isn't obviously "yes." The physical universe, as we all know, is a bit of a mess in many ways. As the traditional "problem of evil" in the philosophy of religion reminds us, we can't automatically assume that a cosmic creator (if there is one) has to be a *perfect* being. There are difficult questions involved here.

So, is it obvious that the ontological argument (in its good form) supports the existence of the traditional God of theism? No, it is not obvious.

Earlier in my writings (see [here](#), [here](#) and [here \[gtnv\]](#)) I pointed out the importance of getting clear about what we mean by "God." The word "God" makes different people think of different ideas of God. Not everyone understands that word in the same way. If by "God" we mean a being that represents all that is good and that is worthy of our highest love, then the ontological argument supports the existence of such a being. (At least the argument shows that if such a being is even barely possible, then such a being exists.) However, if by "God" we mean a supernatural creator, or a supernatural being of any kind, then the ontological argument does not support the existence of "God." The argument doesn't rule out such a being; it just doesn't lend any support to the existence of such a being.

The idea of a perfect being that is not supernatural may seem odd. How can there be such a being when none of the things in nature is "perfect"? I've explored this question elsewhere (especially [at this link \[gtnv\]](#)), and I've proposed an answer. In brief: no single concrete object in nature is a perfect being, but a certain *abstract* object, combined with other objects, might very well qualify as a perfect being. I won't pursue this suggestion here because I've already gone into gory detail about it [elsewhere \[gtnv\]](#). I mention it only to point out that "perfect" doesn't necessarily imply "supernatural" - and that a perfect being wouldn't have to be an extra *thing* besides the things of nature.

Does the ontological argument, in its logically correct form, prove rigorously that there is a perfect being? Not quite. To make the argument prove that there is a perfect being, you need a separate argument showing that a perfect being is possible. (I said something about such arguments in the e-book I mentioned earlier.)

Does the ontological argument lend support to the existence of God? No - if you think God can only be a supernatural being that literally created the universe. Or yes - if you think of God as a supremely perfect being, and not necessarily as supernatural or as a literal "creator."

Take your pick.

-----

## REFERENCES

[1] Anselm. *Proslogium*. Trans. Sidney Norton Deane, ed. Paul Halsall. [<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/anselm-proslogium.html>], accessed 5/18/2009. In: Paul Halsall (ed.), *Internet Medieval Sourcebook* [<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/sbook.html>], accessed 5/18/2009. Anselm's first (weak) and second (strong) versions of the argument are in Chapters 2 and 3, respectively, of his *Proslogium*.

[2] See: Hartshorne, Charles. *Anselm's Discovery*. (LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 1965), especially pp. 12-18.

---

10/13/10

## **Why There Very Probably Is a God - but Not the Kind Some People Want**

Richard Dawkins' atheistic book [The God Delusion](#) contains a chapter titled "Why There Almost Certainly Is No God." The title of this post is a takeoff on that title, but my title ends with a curious phrase. This post won't be just another critique of *The God Delusion*. I've already written such a critique in [a set of earlier posts](#). In this post, I want to make a point about the concept of God - a topic that I've discussed a lot, but perhaps not enough.

Not every believer in a Supreme Being thinks of that being as a supernatural creator. In *The God Delusion*, Dawkins [defines God](#) in such a way that only a supernatural creator of the universe can qualify as God. Actually, some religious and spiritual teachings have [embraced belief in God](#) while also denying that God is

supernatural or that God literally is the creator. A Supreme Being doesn't automatically have to be a supernatural creator.

Dawkins' chapter "Why There Almost Certainly Is No God" gives an [argument \[improb\]](#) for the unlikelihood of a supernatural creator. Here is my own take on the likelihood of a Supreme Being.

To start, I'll mention some preliminaries. (I recommend reading all of these preliminaries. They might not be leading where you expect them to go.)

Most of us believe that there are real values in the world. These include, at very least, moral values. We think that some events are good, while others are bad, and still others are neutral (neither good nor bad). Many of us also believe that there are real aesthetic values in the world. We think, for example, that some sunsets are beautiful, or that the starry sky or the sea is beautiful. Scientists often feel that the underlying logical structure of the universe - its harmony and its system of mathematical laws - is fantastically beautiful. Some people may argue that beauty is all "in the eye of the beholder." However, as I've argued [elsewhere](#), the fact that the recognition of beauty depends on an observer does not imply that beauty is unreal.

People often disagree about what has value - about what is good or bad, or what is more beautiful or less beautiful. People also often disagree about the origin of values; there have long been debates about whether values have a purely natural origin, and about whether the mind plays a role in constructing values. However, most of us agree that there are real values of some kind. This central idea is more important than all the disagreements over details.

To believe that there are no real values is tantamount to believing that nothing truly matters and that no wrongdoing, however abhorrent, can rationally be condemned. I doubt that anyone fully accepts this, both in theory and in the practice of everyday life. I doubt that any thinker who claims to believe that there are no real values really does believe it, fully and in practical day-to-day terms. (How does this thinker behave? If he even tries to stay alive, he's denying his own position through his actions.) The assumption that something matters or is worth doing - which implies that there is a value of some kind or other - is as much a part of our basic knowledge as are our sense experiences. This knowledge is independent of any theory of how values work, whether values are mind-independent, or where values come from. Given that this knowledge exists, the assumption that there are real values of some sort is a *very* plausible assumption. We might not be able to make a probability estimate for this assumption, but speaking qualitatively we can regard the assumption as at least very probably true.

If there are real ethical or aesthetic values of any kind, or any other real values, then these values share a common property. This is the property of being a value, or of being a *good* quality in a very broad sense. (By "good" in this context, I don't mean just morally good. I mean "good" in the sense of having real value or true worth.)

In my [earlier writings \[gtnv\]](#) I showed that if this common property exists, then there is an entity that accurately can be described as the most perfect entity or as a supremely good being. I won't repeat the argument here; it's available at [this link \[gtnv\]](#). I want to emphasize right away that this argument has nothing to do with the idea of a God who enforces values on people. The argument does not even prove the existence of a supernatural creator, or of anything supernatural, or of a universal lawgiver of any sort. (Those are all separate issues.) The being in question would be a vast totality composed of known natural items and their abstract logical and mathematical features. This being would not include anything supernatural, unless something supernatural already happened to exist. (However, this being is not - I repeat, NOT - just [nature or the universe renamed as God](#). I am not proposing an atheistic pseudo-pantheism here. For the details, [read the original argument \[gtnv\]](#).)

This line of argument discloses a being that embodies and encompasses all that is good and beautiful - all that we can admire, idealize and love. Is this being a person? Perhaps not - but still it has features normally regarded as mental and spiritual. Though not a "person" in the conventional human sense, this being is more like a "someone" than a mere "something." It even encompasses personality in an indirect way, through its [logical relations with persons like us \[gtnv\]](#).

Is this being God? That's a matter of how you define the word "God." Let me just point out that the notion of God as supremely perfect being is much more important to the real Western religious tradition than is the better known idea of God as supernatural creator! As I've pointed out elsewhere ([here](#), [here](#) and [here \[gtnv\]](#)), there is more than one idea of God. Most ordinary good-hearted believers seem to have [two different concepts of God](#) without realizing it. Despite this ambiguity in the notion of God, the idea of a supremely perfect being is the most important idea of God. Many Western religious thinkers have defined "God" in just this way - as a perfect being, or a greatest logically possible being, or some similar definition that adds up to supremely good being. Many (probably most) of these thinkers also believed that God is a supernatural creator, but this was not their *definition* of God. Most religions today involve supernatural belief, but the concept of God can exist without supernaturalism. Some theists might not be comfortable with that fact, but it remains a fact.

The existence of real values in the world - even of values with purely natural origins - implies the existence of an entity that answers to a classic definition of "God." (Once again, the argument is [at this link \[gtnv\]](#).) However, there is absolutely no guarantee that this being is supernatural. Further, this being does not "create" the universe in a literalistic, humanlike manner - though the being can be regarded as the source of all things in a more abstract way.

As far as I am concerned, this being is God. It embodies all good, is worthy of our highest love, and (though not literally a person) is partly mental and spiritual - making it more of a "someone" than a mere "something." This is the kind of God that very probably exists. By "very probably" I don't mean to imply a quantitative estimate of probability. I just mean that the existence of this being follows from very plausible assumptions. These assumptions are the existence of objective values and of the common feature that I mentioned earlier in this post.

What does all this tell us? Just that there very probably is a Supreme Being - but not the kind that people might want. Theists might be unhappy with this concept of God because it's different from their usual personal and supernatural concept. They might find this idea of God blasphemous. Atheists might be unhappy with this concept of God because their arguments against a supernatural creator are powerless against it. They might find this idea of God frustrating.

Maybe no one will be happy with this idea of God. Except, of course, the poet who feels the presence of God in the vast meadows, the mighty ocean, and the infinitely mysterious sky. And the lover who is so awed by the presence of the beloved that only the language of the divine and the perfect can describe the experience. And the mystic who discovers in the depths of the mind a God so vast that the ideas of "person" and "supernatural" are simply too small to fit it. All of these visionaries might find this new/old concept of God more congenial than the conventional theistic one. And from the standpoint of reason, they very probably would be right.

03/02/11

## Some Closing Remarks on "The Anti-Dawkins Papers"

This post is a follow-up to "[The Anti-Dawkins Papers](#)," my critique of Richard Dawkins' atheistic book *The God Delusion*.

"The Anti-Dawkins Papers" are now complete, but I still have more to say about Dawkins' ideas. There are more flaws in Dawkins' line of argument than the few points I covered in the "Papers." I have continued my critique of Dawkins in the [atheism](#) category. (The "Papers" form a subcategory of that category.) Also, I've updated the "Papers" a bit in response to some readers' objections to them. (See [Paper 11](#).) The objections I have seen so far have been easy to rebut.

The atheism category has gotten quite long, so some of the older posts have dropped off the bottom of the main atheism page. The dated links in the left sidebar will take you to the earlier posts.

If you are interested in my views on religion in general, you might want to read the [religion](#) category of this blog, which includes the atheism category as a part. Also, you might want to read [my other blog](#), which deals with my own view of religion. Those who think I am a theist or an atheist (and I've been called both) might be surprised to find out where I really stand.

You might be wondering what I think of other New Atheist authors besides Dawkins. With one exception, I haven't addressed those authors specifically (though I might say more in the future - no definite plans yet). Instead, I have concentrated on Dawkins because he seems to have done the most thorough job of pushing the New Atheist agenda. If you know how to debunk Dawkins' arguments, you will know how to debunk many other New Atheists' arguments too.

Some people claim that because I don't like Dawkins' book, I must be a theist pushing a religious agenda. Am I a theist? To find out, follow [this link](#) - and then explore my two blogs. To find out whether "The Anti-Dawkins Papers" have a religious agenda, consider this quote from [the last of the "Papers"](#):

"Belief in God remains a reasonable option for thinking people; so do atheism and agnosticism."

When I wrote "[The Anti-Dawkins Papers](#)," I was not trying to prove a particular religious viewpoint. Instead, I was trying to show that *The God Delusion* fails to settle the question of the existence of God. That much I have shown.

## Index to critique of Dawkins' book *The God Delusion*

This is an index to "The Anti-Dawkins Papers" (a frequently discussed part of *The Unfinishable Scroll*) and related posts.

<u>Date</u>	<u>Link to Article</u>	<u>Category</u>
03/02/11	<a href="#"><u>Some Closing Remarks on "The Anti-Dawkins Papers"</u></a>	religion/atheism/god_delusion
04/08/10	<a href="#"><u>A Final Word on Leprechology and the Courtier's Reply</u></a>	religion/atheism
04/02/10	<a href="#"><u>The Courtier's Reply Exposed: Why Dawkins Still Needs Theology</u></a>	religion/atheism
03/17/10	<a href="#"><u>Why Dawkins Needs to Study Theology - Especially if There Is No God</u></a>	religion/atheism
07/14/09	<a href="#"><u>Anti-Dawkins Paper No. 11: A Summary of the Papers, and What It All Means</u></a>	religion/atheism/god_delusion
07/13/09	<a href="#"><u>Anti-Dawkins Paper No. 10: Hate by Any Other Name?</u></a>	religion/atheism/god_delusion
07/09/09	<a href="#"><u>Anti-Dawkins Paper No. 9: Of Science and Miracles</u></a>	religion/atheism/god_delusion
07/06/09	<a href="#"><u>Anti-Dawkins Paper No. 8: Are Scientists and Other Smart People Atheists?</u></a>	religion/atheism/god_delusion
06/25/09	<a href="#"><u>Anti-Dawkins Paper No. 7: Dawkins Misrepresents Some Opposing Ideas and Thinkers</u></a>	religion/atheism/god_delusion
06/24/09	<a href="#"><u>Anti-Dawkins Paper No. 6: Does All Religion Cause Evil?</u></a>	religion/atheism/god_delusion
06/22/09	<a href="#"><u>Anti-Dawkins Paper No. 5: The Causes of Religion Cannot Prove Religion False</u></a>	religion/atheism/god_delusion

06/20/09	<a href="#"><u>Anti-Dawkins Paper No. 4: Evolution and the So-Called Illusion of Design</u></a>	religion/atheism/god_delusion
06/19/09	<a href="#"><u>Anti-Dawkins Paper No. 3: Dodging the Issue of Personal Religious Experience</u></a>	religion/atheism/god_delusion
05/26/09	<a href="#"><u>Anti-Dawkins Paper No. 2: Why Dawkins' Main Argument Against God Is Wrong</u></a>	religion/atheism/god_delusion
05/18/09	<a href="#"><u>Anti-Dawkins Paper No. 1: Overlooking the Idea of God</u></a>	religion/atheism/god_delusion

---

## Part II. *Religion: the Next Version*

---

### Index for *Religion: the Next Version*

<b><u>Date</u></b>	<b><u>Link to Article</u></b>	<b><u>Category</u></b>
11/06/09	<a href="#"><u>The Crossroads of Logic and Poetry: Toward a Rational Version of Religion</u></a>	general
11/05/09	<a href="#"><u>The Meaning and Beauty of the Universe</u></a>	meaning
04/27/09	<a href="#"><u>Introducing a New Version of God</u></a>	God
03/19/09	<a href="#"><u>The New Face of Spirit: Part Two</u></a>	soul
03/05/09	<a href="#"><u>The New Face of Spirit: Part One</u></a>	soul
03/02/09	<a href="#"><u>The Guts of Religion</u></a>	general

---

---

## ***Religion: the Next Version* Starts Here**

---

03/02/09

### **The Guts of Religion**

There has been a lot of discussion over the years about whether science and religion are compatible. Atheists often claim that science and religion are incompatible, and that everyone should give up religion. Fundamentalist religious believers typically are much like the atheists - they think science and religion don't mix. However, they want to give up part or all of science (especially evolution) instead of religion. Liberal religious thinkers often think science and religion are compatible - that you can hold some religious beliefs and still believe everything that science has discovered.

I am going to argue that the most important ideas of religion are fully compatible with science. You can believe in the most important ideas of religion, and also believe in science. There is no conflict at all between the basic ideas of religion and our scientific knowledge of the world. What is more, it's possible to build a system of spiritual belief based on reason instead of dogmatic faith.

Before getting started, I should clarify what I mean by "religion." I won't try to define "religion" precisely. I'll just say that religion is not the same as dogmatic belief or as membership in a religious sect. These are not religion, but are only particular forms of religion. There can be other forms.

Three ideas are basic to a truly religious attitude.

The first idea is that the universe is meaningful. There are things that really matter and that really have value. By "value" I don't just mean moral values, like goodness. I also mean the value of beauty in all its forms - like the beauty of nature. These values are real. They are not just illusions of the mind. They are not just reactions and preferences of ours. At least some values are objectively real. Some happenings really are good. Some things really are beautiful. Some things really matter. It's not just that we *think* they matter - it's that they *really do* matter.

The second basic idea of religion is that there is a supreme being or supreme reality of some sort. There are many different ideas about this supreme reality. The idea of God taught in Christian churches is not the only possible idea of a supreme being or reality. Different religions and philosophies teach different ideas about this topic. Some Eastern religions have ideas of an ultimate root of things quite different from the usual Western ideas of God. But the important point is that there is a supreme being or reality of some kind. This is not just the source of all things (as matter might be for an atheist), but a being, entity, or reality that is of supreme significance for our spiritual and ethical lives.

The third basic idea of religion is that we are not just our bodies. A human being is not just matter, but is something more than that. A human being is something capable of having rights, dignity and worth. This implies that a human being must be the *kind* of thing that can have rights, dignity and worth - which means not just a simple blob of matter, but something more. Different religions and philosophies have different

ideas about what this "something more" is. Many religions teach that there is a soul inhabiting the body. The soul is supposed to be sort of an invisible, ghostly thing that lives in the body. Other religions have a more subtle idea of the soul. Buddhism, for example, traditionally teaches that there is no permanent soul, but that personal identity or consciousness can pass from an earlier body to a later one. According to this belief, the "something more" is not a supernatural soul, but an ongoing process that extends beyond our present bodies. No matter how we think of the "something more," the important point is that there is something more to us than the matter of our bodies. A human being is more than just a lump of matter - and because of that, a human being can have spiritual qualities that no mere heap of chemicals can possess. (By mentioning human beings here, I am not ruling out similar beliefs about other organisms.)

These are the three most important ideas of religion: that existence is meaningful, that there is a supreme reality, and that we are more than our bodies.

---

03/05/09

### **The New Face of Spirit: Part One**

One of the most basic ideas of religion is that we are not just our bodies. According to most religious teachings, a human being is not just a physical body, but also has a soul or spirit. The soul or spirit is supposed to be an intangible part of us - a nonphysical "something or other" that makes us more than just hunks of matter or bags of chemicals.

Religions have many different ideas about the soul. Many religions teach that the soul is immortal. According to most Western denominations, the soul is a spiritual entity that inhabits the body. Buddhism offers a different view: that there is no permanent soul, but a person's mental processes (or some aspects of them) can start up again in a new body. Some liberal forms of religious thought hold that the soul is not immortal, but that we still are more than our bodies during this life.

All of these beliefs have a common denominator: we are more than our bodies. The soul, whether immortal or not, is what makes us different from the complex chemical and physical system that is the human body.

Are we really more than our bodies? Science would seem to say no. Scientific findings suggest that the mind and personality depend completely on the brain. Scientists have not found any need for a supernatural soul in their picture of the mind. Science seems to say that we are only hunks of matter.

But has science *really* debunked the soul? A little thought will show that the answer is no! Science has **not** proven that we are just our bodies. Instead, science has rejected one particular idea about the soul: that the soul is a supernatural, ghostlike entity that controls the brain and the body. This is not the same as disproving the soul. There are other ideas of the soul that are even better than the ghostly idea. Science cannot disprove these other ideas!

We are more than our bodies in at least two ways. I will discuss one of these ways in this post. I'll leave the other way for a future post.

Here is the first way in which we differ from the matter of our bodies: **Human beings contain abstract objects as well as matter.**

What are abstract objects? Are they supernatural or ghostly? No! Abstract objects are perfectly natural - but they can be spiritual also.

The following quote from my article "[God: the Next Version](#)" explains what abstract objects are.

---

[From "*God: the Next Version*"]

Our daily experience shows that there are other kinds of "items" besides concrete material objects. We live in a material world, yet not everything around us is a material thing. Material things are not just vague, featureless things. Instead, all material things have *properties*, or (as I will call them here) *qualities*.

What are some examples of qualities? All red objects have the quality of redness. All triangular objects have the quality of being triangular (which we also could call the quality of triangularity). All hard things have the quality of hardness. All liquids have the quality of liquidity.

Redness, triangularity, hardness, and liquidity are examples of qualities. They are not things - they are the qualities of things. There are red things in the world - but there also is a quality, redness, that these things have in common.

Qualities are examples of *abstract objects*. They are not things, but are found in things. Usually they are features of things. The mind can pick them out by examining many similar things and recognizing something in common. [...]

Other examples of abstract objects are *relations*. These are features that connect together more than one thing. For example, one mountain may be taller than another. The relation of *being taller than* connects together two physical things. *Being taller than* is not just a quality that one thing can have. It is a relation that can connect two things. A more familiar example of a relation is friendship. This is a relation that holds between any two people who are friends of each other.

For still other examples of abstract objects, we can look at *patterns*. The posts in a wooden fence form a definite, repeating pattern. Once your mind has recognized this pattern, you can notice it in fences anywhere. If you do digital photography, you probably know about the "Moiré patterns" that appear in some photos. These are patterns made of straight or curved bars of dark and light. A computer program also is a pattern - a pattern of bits of information, which can be found in any processor that is running the program.

Patterns, qualities, and relations are important to our reasoning and our experience. We find patterns, qualities, and relationships in the world around us. We did not invent them; they really are there. Yet these items do not "exist" in the same way that a physical object exists. They are not things at all. They are *abstract objects*.

---

At this point, you may be asking an important question: Do abstract objects really exist? Philosophers have been asking this question for thousands of years. They have developed several possible answers: that abstract objects really exist, that they don't really exist, that only some kinds of them exist, and so forth. Despite its popularity, I think this question is a fooler! The answer depends on whether "exist" means "exist in the same way that material things exist." Abstract objects are not things - they do not exist the same way that things

exist. However, they are true components of reality. Things really do have properties. People really do form relationships. Patterns really do show up - sometimes in the most surprising places. The problem isn't that these items don't exist, but that they don't exist *as things*. A property, relation or pattern is not a thing. It's just a property, a relation, or a pattern - nothing more. But that can be a lot!

Here are two quotes, from my earlier work, about the reality of abstract objects. (One of these is from a blog post named "[Spirit without the Supernatural](#)" that first appeared on my other blog, [The Unfinishable Scroll](#).)

---

[From "*God: the Next Version*"]

Philosophers have long debated whether abstract objects are truly real. I think this question is somewhat confused. Instead of worrying about this question, we should just accept that our world contains physical objects, patterns, qualities, and relations, and stop fretting about which of these objects "really" exists. Patterns, qualities and relations do not "exist" in the same way in which sticks and stones "exist" - yet clearly a Moiré pattern in a photograph *really is there*. We should not try to deny that this pattern is real, even though it is "only" a pattern and not a physical object. The photographer who denies that a conspicuous Moiré pattern is there may end up losing a customer! And it seems rather silly to claim that a computer program is unreal.

[From "*Spirit without the Supernatural*"]

I think this question depends on confusion about the meaning of the word "exist." If someone asks whether properties exist, I'll answer the question with another question: What do you mean by "exist"?

If you think "exist" means "be a physical object," then the answer is no - properties don't exist, because they are not physical objects.

But if you think "exist" means "be something" (be any kind of item at all), then properties do exist.

I've written a [philosophical paper on this subject \[realism\]](#), where I went into more detail and covered some points that I've skipped over here. The main lesson of that paper: We can safely assume that properties exist. [...]

To insist that properties don't exist is to cut off the idea of existence arbitrarily - to limit existence artificially to concrete, individual objects like physical objects. If existence includes everything found in the universe, instead of just concrete physical objects, then properties exist. They exist *as properties* instead of *as physical objects* - but that's just another way to be real.

---

So we find that there are abstract objects in the world - properties, relations, patterns, and more. So much for the belief that only material objects are real! Even if every *thing* is made of matter, the universe still contains abstract objects as well as *things*. We live in a natural universe - but not in a universe made only of lumps of matter. There is nothing supernatural about all this. (A Moiré pattern is not supernatural, and neither is the hardness of a diamond!)

Now, where does spirit come in? Here is a further quote from "[Spirit without the Supernatural](#)":

---

[From "Spirit without the Supernatural"]

What does all this have to do with spirit?

If properties are real, then spirit doesn't have to be a substance or stuff. Instead, it can be a property!

Instead of being an invisible substance, spirit might be a property of physical objects. As a property, it would be every bit as real as the redness of a sunset, or the hexagonal shape of a snowflake, or the brilliance and transparency of a diamond.

If spirit is a property, then the human brain could indeed have a soul. Science suggests that your personality or self is a property of your brain. If so, then that property might be your soul. [...]

Skeptics try to debunk the soul by claiming that the self is "only" a property of the brain. The skeptics had better watch out! They are making a serious mistake!

The skeptics begin with the idea (suggested by science) that the self or personality is a property of the brain. From this, they argue that the soul is nothing - that there is no soul.

But wait a minute!

The skeptics say the self is a property of the brain. However, we have found that a property is not just nothing. In its own way, a property is quite real!

If the self is a property, then the self has a real existence of its own - just as real as if it had been a real ghostly substance. By saying that the self is only a property of the brain, the skeptics are admitting that the self is real. Worse yet for them, they are admitting that the self has a type of existence that goes beyond the existence of physical objects!

The skeptics might not realize they are admitting all this. However, if properties are real in any way at all, then this is where their "skepticism" leads.

Without realizing it, the skeptics have painted themselves into a corner, and admitted that people have souls of a sort!

Granted, these souls are a little different from what most religions teach. They are properties, not ghostly supernatural objects. But the important point is that *they are real*.

Once we admit that properties are real, then the skeptical view that the self is a property of the brain becomes almost the same as the religious belief that people have souls distinct from their bodies. The property of the brain that we call the self is an entity different from the matter of the brain - just as the yellowness of the sun is different from the sun itself.

So it appears that the skeptics and the believers are not as far apart as they seem.

---

This is the first way in which we differ from the matter of our bodies. (I'll deal with the second way in a

future post.) We differ from the matter of our bodies because we contain abstract selves - properties of our brains - as well as matter.

This idea that the soul or spirit is an abstract object is not new. It's been around for quite a while. (For references to some previous versions of this idea, see the references in "[Spirit without the Supernatural](#)" and also [this paper \[abstself\]](#).) The idea that the self or soul is nothing but a property of the brain, or perhaps a pattern of information (or both), will be nothing new for those who have done some reading about the brain. The important point, which most so-called skeptics overlook, is that these features of the brain *have an existence of their own*. They are real in their own way. To claim that they do not exist is to confuse different kinds of existence. If the soul or spirit is a feature of the brain, then people really do have souls or spirits - because the feature is an abstract object, and is not to be confused with the brain that has it.

The soul is not just the brain. We are not just our bodies. And you don't have to believe in anything supernatural to recognize this fact.

Can an abstract soul of this kind be immortal? I'll deal with that question in a later post, if I dare...

*(Links in post slightly updated 10/18/2010.)*

---

03/19/09

## **The New Face of Spirit: Part Two**

In [Part One](#) of this post I explored a basic idea of religion: that we are more than just our bodies. This idea is true because we have abstract selves that are not the same as our material brains. However, we also differ from the matter of our bodies in another way. We differ from the matter of our bodies because all physical objects differ from their parts.

To explain what I mean by this mysterious statement, I'll explore some facts about diamonds. (What do diamonds have to do with the human spirit? Read on.)

Think about a diamond. According to science, a diamond is composed of carbon atoms arranged in a certain orderly way. A diamond is made of carbon atoms; it has no substance besides the substance of its carbon atoms.

Now ask yourself: Is a diamond really just carbon atoms?

The obvious answer to this question is "yes." After all, a diamond is made of carbon atoms. Take away the carbon atoms and - poof! - there's no diamond left. It seems as if there's nothing to the diamond but carbon atoms.

*It seems that way - but is it true?*

It isn't easy to find a good answer to this question. To find the answer, we have to think carefully about the relationship between the diamond and the atoms that make it up.

Is the diamond the same thing as any one of its atoms? Obviously not - because the diamond isn't just a single atom.

Is the diamond the same thing as all of its atoms together? This option seems much more reasonable, but still it isn't quite right. If the diamond were somehow identical to all of its atoms, then *one* thing would be the same thing as *many* things. If you take this idea literally, it doesn't make much sense: how can one single diamond really be the same as many different atoms? (This is one aspect of the traditional philosophical problem of "the one and the many.") Of course, the diamond will be the same as all of its atoms together if we take this to mean that the diamond is the same as the whole composed of all the atoms. But that isn't an answer. It's just a different way of saying what we already know: that the diamond is made of the atoms.

So can the diamond really be its carbon atoms? The best answer is: Not exactly. The diamond is not identical to the atoms that make it up. The diamond is an object that comes into being when the atoms are placed in the proper arrangement. It's perfectly true that the diamond is composed of these atoms and of nothing else. It's also true that the diamond is the whole made up of the atoms, and that the diamond has no substance besides that of the atoms. However, if we want to say that the diamond *is* the atoms, we must stop ourselves - for we are saying something that isn't quite true. The diamond is made up of its atoms, but it is not just its atoms. It is a whole of which the atoms are parts - but still, it is something a bit different from the atoms.

If you start with a zillion carbon atoms and then build a diamond, you are starting with a zillion things and ending up with a zillion and one things.[1] You are creating a new thing, even though no new matter is created!

There is nothing mysterious about what I just said. I'm not claiming that the diamond has some mysterious, ghostly thing in it besides its atoms. The diamond is just a whole composed of atoms, with no added parts - natural or supernatural! But in spite of this, the diamond is not just its atoms. There are the atoms. There is the diamond. There is the relationship between diamond and atoms (the diamond is a whole composed of the atoms). But the diamond is not *identically the same* as the atoms. If you took some loose carbon atoms and built a diamond, you would be creating a new thing - an extra thing that wasn't one of the things you started with. The extra thing is just the diamond itself. The amount of matter would remain exactly the same - but a new object would come to exist.

So what's the point of all this talk about diamonds? What do diamonds have to do with the human spirit?

The point is not just about diamonds. The point is that *all material objects work the same way as the diamond*. Material objects are not identical to the matter that makes them up. They are made of matter, but it would be a mistake to say that they *are* just matter. There is something to them besides the matter that makes them up. This "something" is not ghostly or mysterious. The "extra something" is just the fact of the existence of the complete material object - an existence that is *not* the same as the mere existence of the matter that makes up the object!

Like the diamond, your body is more than the matter that makes it up. Your body - including your brain - has an existence that goes beyond the mere existence of atoms and subatomic particles. This difference of existence is not magic, but is a subtle difference rooted in the logic of whole and part. It is not a property of humans alone, or even of living things alone. All physical objects have this difference. However, for humans the differences between the atoms and the whole system are much more dramatic than for diamonds. The human body has properties that would be unthinkable in the atoms - properties such as self-movement and thinking. Philosophers call these features "emergent properties." Their presence is a sign that your brain is

more than the chemical elements that make it up.

There is a school of thought called "holism" that says the whole is more than the sum of the parts. The idea I am presenting here may sound like holism, but it isn't the same. You can believe what I am saying here whether or not you are a holist. Holism, in its common forms, says that the properties of the whole can't be explained in terms of the parts. I'm only claiming that the whole is *not the same as* the parts. Holists and non-holists alike are welcome to consider this view.

You are not just matter. Even your body - a material object - is not just matter. We live in a world in which wholes are a bit different from their parts. Your brain is no exception!

In [Part One](#) of this post I said that you have an abstract self that is not the same as your brain or your body. Now it turns out that your brain and body are not just the matter that make them up. This is a second way in which you are not just matter. Not only are you more than matter, but even your body is more than matter. Once again, there is nothing supernatural about this.

The human mind is more than just matter. Even the human body is more than just matter. You are more than just matter - and you don't have to believe in the supernatural to be that way!

If you want to read more about the ideas in this post, read my ebook [God, Son of Quark](#). There I present detailed arguments about the differences between objects and their parts. (I've presented the ideas informally in this post; the book gives the rigorous arguments and the philosophical details.) The book also contains references to the work of many philosophers who did things related to this idea. If you're curious about all this, [read the book](#) [gsoq]. It has an interesting cover too.

-----  
*Notes*

[1] The view of whole and part that I suggested here is essentially the same as what Donald L. M. Baxter called "the Non-Identity view" of whole and part. See Baxter's article "Identity in the Loose and Popular Sense" (*Mind*, vol. 97 (1988), pp. 575-582).

---

04/27/09

## **Introducing a New Version of God**

One of the most basic teachings of religion is the idea that there is a supreme spiritual reality of some sort. Some religions depict this supreme reality as a person and call it God. Others think of it in impersonal ways, using concepts like Tao, Brahman or the Void. Either way, religions usually portray the supreme reality as spiritual instead of as merely physical. This can mean that the supreme reality is purely spiritual, or that it is physical but also spiritual, or that it is the common ground of matter and spirit.

These religious ideas of the supreme reality are different from the nonreligious view of matter as the ultimate reality. Even a committed atheist can believe there is an ultimate reality if this reality is just matter itself. The

supreme being or reality known to religious thought is not like this. It is not merely matter, but has mental or spiritual aspects. Some religions depict it as impersonal, but even if it is not a person it is more like a "someone" than a mere "something." What is more, the supreme being is thought to play an important role in our spiritual and moral lives. In most religions with a personal God, the supreme being creates the laws that govern human morality. In most religions without a personal God, the quest to understand the supreme reality brings enlightenment and wisdom. According to some religious teachings, the effort to create a better world brings us closer, in some sense, to the supreme being.

Is there a supreme being? The question is not simple. Despite what some atheists have claimed, the existence of a supreme being is not a question that science alone can settle. Some ideas of the supreme being may be scientifically testable, but others are not. Two random examples that come to mind are the God concepts of the philosophers G. H. Howison and Charles Hartshorne. Both views of God are scientifically untestable, but both depict a real God who is not just matter. Philosophy, and not science, is the right subject for studying these other ideas of God.

Do you have to abandon reason to think there is a supreme being? No. Philosophers have developed several alternative ideas of God based on reason instead of faith. (Again, Howison and Hartshorne come to mind as examples, but there are many others: Hegel, Aristotle, Leibniz, and so forth.) These ideas of God may be right or wrong, but at least they are attempts to think rationally about God. You *can* think rationally about God - and if you do, you don't have to stop believing in God, though your ideas about what God is like may change.

As a starting point for studying God rationally, I'm going to introduce you to an idea of God that is both rational and poetic. According to this idea, God is more than just matter, and God lies at the root of all goodness and beauty in the universe. However, this idea of God contains absolutely nothing that disagrees with science! This idea can be true even if everything in the universe came about through purely natural causes. This idea of the supreme being cannot disagree with evolution, with scientific theories of the origin of the universe, or with anything else that science may discover.

To find out about this alternative idea of God, [click here](#) to read a PDF ebook titled [God: the Next Version](#) [gtnv].

---

11/05/09

## **The Meaning and Beauty of the Universe**

In my [first post to this blog](#) I pointed out three ideas basic to a religious outlook. In later posts ([here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)) I discussed and evaluated two of these ideas. In this post I will turn to the third idea: the view that existence is meaningful.

People often find that their lives, and the events happening in their lives, have meaning. I'm not talking about the kind of "meaning" that words or pictures have when they refer to something or convey a message. I'm talking about a completely different kind of "meaning" - the kind that people might have in mind when they say "a meaningful experience" or "a meaningful relationship." With this kind of meaning, to be meaningful is to matter - to be significant. We feel that some events, deeds and situations matter, for better or for worse. What is more, people normally feel that this meaning is real and not just imaginary. We feel that there are things that don't just *matter in our opinion*; instead, some things *really do matter*. People often disagree over

the details of meaning; different individuals can have different insights about what is meaningful and to what degree. However, these differences of detail do not change the fact that people perceive meaning - just as the differences in what people see and hear in the physical world do not change the fact that people perceive a physical world. Despite all the differences of detail, the awareness of meaning is a universal human experience. Meaning is a property, or at least an apparent property, of things and events in the world.

The universal human insight that some features of life are meaningful disagrees with the so-called "scientific" view that people, and other things in the universe, are meaningless hunks of matter. This so-called scientific view isn't the least bit scientific. Science can't disprove the reality of meaning, because science can't make any judgments of meaning at all. When skeptics call the denial of meaning scientific, they are practicing pseudoscience. However, the very existence of this skeptical view leads us to an important set of questions. Is the meaning we find in our world real? Is this important property of the world merely an illusion of our minds, or is it at least sometimes a real feature of the world?

To begin answering this question I will quote from my ebook [\*Poetry's Secret Truth\*](#) [pst]. The following two excerpts from the book are about subjective feelings and beauty as recorded in poetry. However, we can apply these same ideas to the perception of meaning in life - another supposedly "subjective" experience.

**An advance warning about these quotes:** When I mention modern physics in these excerpts, I am not claiming that physics says anything about beauty or the value of poetry. I am only mentioning physics to set up a useful analogy about beauty and subjective experience. I give this warning because self-appointed skeptics are likely to pounce on these excerpts and write something like "Sharlow thinks poetry is based on the theory of relativity ha ha ha ha ha." I do not think this. Any skeptic who claims that I do is being careless, dishonest, or both.

Now for the two excerpts. (Note: The term "subjective fact" here refers to a fact that is purely about how things seem. I deal with subjective facts in detail in [one of my other books](#) [fbtc].)

-----

[from *Poetry's Secret Truth*, pp. 2-3:]

The subjective facts that poetry can evoke are inner facts of sensation, feeling, and perception. These facts can encompass a wide spectrum of contents, ranging from familiar emotions (happiness, longing, concern) and sensations (colors, sounds, scents), to content of a far subtler and more enigmatic sort. These subtler contents include such things as the elusive, almost indescribable sensations that fill one's awareness when one encounters a flowering apple tree in spring.

Anyone who has fully and deeply experienced an apple tree in full flower in a rolling, rustling spring meadow will know what I mean by this.

Anyone who has become fully aware of the mysterious looming of the clouds in the hours before rain, or of the charged, green freshness after the rain, or of the almost audible silence of some warm summer afternoons, will know whereof I speak.

-----  
[from *Poetry's Secret Truth*, pp. 6-7:]

Another, related, philosophical problem is the question of whether the subjective facts can be said to be facts about the external world at all. Think about the flowering apple tree again. Don't the subjective facts evoked by the tree come from processes in the observer's mind or brain, instead of from anything in the apple tree? My answer to this question is twofold. First, the existence of subjective facts does indeed depend upon the state and presence of the observer. Second, the subjective facts are not just features of the observer's mind or brain. They are real features of *the observer plus the object being observed*. The whole system, observer plus object (in other words, you plus apple tree), is the source or seat of the subjective fact. The experience is an experience *of* the object, not only an experience *in* the observer.

Subjective facts are not "only in the mind." They are characteristics of the observer-object couple. They are relative, but only in the same way that certain measurable features of the physical world are relative. According to modern physics, the size and mass of an object depend upon the state of the observer (specifically, the observer's state of motion) as well as upon properties of the object in itself. But this relativity of size and mass does not mean that an object's size and mass are unreal or are "all in the mind." Subjective facts, like facts of size and mass, are simply relative to the state of the observer. However, in the case of subjective facts, it is the observer's state of mind, not state of motion, which matters. In spite of their dependence on the observer's mental state, the subjective facts about the apple tree are every bit as real - or as unreal - as the tree's size or mass.

This relativity of subjective facts also encompasses what happens when people experience very different things during encounters with the same object. A particular scene may seem happy to one person, sad to another - perhaps due to the observers' past experiences, mental associations, and the like. This only means that the subjective facts depend on the state of the observer as well as upon the state of the object. It does not mean that the subjective facts are unreal.

One can think of the many possible subjective appearances of an object as *possibilities* inherent in the object\* - all of them equally real features of the object, or perhaps of the world. Some possibilities may be more crucial, or more important to our understanding, than others. Yet all of the possibilities are there, and all of them are parts of reality. (Philosophers belonging to the school of thought called *phenomenology* have argued that we should take into account the multiple possible ways of perceiving things. What I am proposing is different, with a different range of possibilities, and involves something more - an additional element or factor.)

[end of excerpts from *Poetry's Secret Truth*]  
-----

What does all this amount to? It suggests that our subjective experiences of the world, such as experiences of beauty and of the felt qualities of nature, reveal genuine objective facts. Which objective facts? Facts about the whole, or couple, made up of the experiencing observer and the object of the experience.

Think of it this way. The beauty of an apple tree on a spring day might seem to be merely "in the eye of the beholder." Not everyone who observes the tree will experience this beauty; those who do experience it will not all experience it in the same way. However, when you observe the tree at a particular moment, the fact that *you* find the tree beautiful *in that particular moment* is an objective fact. It is a fact that science cannot dismiss.

When other observers encounter the tree, they might experience the beauty of the tree in other ways. Some might not even experience the beauty at all. However, the fact that the tree seems *just this way* to a particular observer at a particular moment is an objective fact.

The beauty of the tree, and other "subjective" properties of the tree, can just as well be called *objective* properties of the tree. These properties depend on the state of the observer, but this does not mean that these properties are imaginary or are only "in the eye of the beholder." To explain this distinction, I have used an analogy from the special theory of relativity in physics. Now I am going to expand on this analogy. Needless to say, relativity theory is not a theory about beauty or aesthetic properties. However, relativity theory provides some excellent examples of properties that are real but that still depend on the state of the observer.

According to the special theory of relativity, certain measured properties of an object, like length and mass, have different values for different observers. These properties depend on the way the observer is moving relative to the object. An object's measured length and mass are observer-dependent properties of the object. They depend on the observer's state. However, these properties are objectively real; they are not illusions and are not only in the mind. Clearly, an object's mass and size are not only "in the eye of the beholder"! These are real physical properties - but unlike some other properties, they depend on the state of the observer. Relativity theory makes it clear that objects can have properties that are real, yet observer-dependent. There is nothing illogical about this. The length and mass of an object depend on the state of motion of the observer; that state of motion is only one part of the overall physical state of the observer.

Stepping outside theoretical physics for a moment and into the world of art, we find that the *beauty* of an object is a property that depends on the state of the observer's brain. This dependence on the observer's state is what leads people to claim that beauty is only subjective or "in the eye of the beholder." However, the state of an observer's brain is objectively real. The neural state of an observer, like the observer's state of motion, is part of the observer's overall physical state. An observer's brain state is a real part of the state of that observer. So why do we say that beauty is only subjective while we call mass and length objective? All of these properties depend on the physical state of the observer. Why do we call mass and length "objective" even though they depend on the observer's physical state, while we call beauty "subjective" or even "unreal" just because it depends on the observer's physical state? There is no good reason for this difference in treatment. Of course, someone might try to escape this conclusion by assuming that the observer's brain state is not really part of the state of the observer. However, this assumption doesn't make much sense, no matter what views one holds on the nature of mind.

If we think of the beauty of an object as a function of the observer-object *couple* (the whole composed of object plus observer), we find that beauty is an *objective* property of this couple. If Harry finds the Mona Lisa beautiful at a particular time, then it is a *fact* that Harry finds the Mona Lisa beautiful at that particular time. Someone might want to argue about whether the Mona Lisa really is beautiful, but it still is a fact that the Mona Lisa seemed beautiful to Harry at that moment. The fact that the painting seemed that way to Harry is simply true. It is a fact that depends on the state of Harry's brain, but still it is true - regardless of whether we want to consider Harry's judgment right, wrong, or purely subjective.

Perceptions of beauty cannot be mere illusions of the mind. Even if our minds create these perceptions, the perceptions still reflect facts about the real world. Thus, experiences of beauty reveal real truths about the world. The first truth we discover this way is the fact that there really is some beauty in the world. This is a

fact even though beauty is an observer-dependent property.

If two observers have incompatible feelings about what is beautiful, both observers can be right. The difference is simply a matter of state dependence.

For those who are interested, I explored this line of argument in an ebook (now freely available) called [\*The Unfinishable Book\*](#) [unfin]. Download this ebook and read Talk 12, titled "Art, Imagination and Truth."

The argument I have presented here is about beauty, not meaning. However, it is easy to make the same argument about meaning instead of beauty. If you modify the argument this way, you end up with a rational argument for the objective reality of meaning. Meaning, like beauty, is an observer-dependent property. (Indeed, meaning is intimately related to beauty; experiences of great beauty are prime examples of meaningful experiences.) If you perceive meaning in the world, then that meaning really exists in the world - even if an observer in a different mental state would perceive the meaning differently. Meaning can be understood as an observer-dependent property of physical objects, events and situations, and as a function of the observer-object couple. Despite these dependencies, meaning is objectively real.

The meaning in life really exists. It is real, but it is perceived differently by observers in different mental states. If two observers disagree about whether something is meaningful, this doesn't imply that the meaning is unreal. It simply illustrates the fact that meaning is observer-dependent. Just as with beauty, it is possible to have partial and incomplete perceptions of meaning - but meaning itself is real.

Now we have rational support for the third basic idea of religion: the existence of real meaning in the world. If we find meaning in the universe, then there really is meaning in the universe. Even if meaning is "in the eye of the beholder," it still is part of objective reality. The universe is a truly meaningful place.

-----  
Notes

\* The asterisk in the second [\*Poetry's Secret Truth\*](#) excerpt pointed to an endnote in the ebook. The note said: "The possibilities I have in mind here may include, but are not restricted to, the imaginative possibilities noted by Kilby (pp. 57-59)." The reference is to Clyde S. Kilby, *Poetry and Life* (reprint ed.; Plainview, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1975).

---

11/06/09

### **The Crossroads of Logic and Poetry: Toward a Rational Version of Religion**

At the beginning of this blog, in a post called "[The Guts of Religion](#)," I pointed out three ideas that are basic to a religious outlook:

- The universe is meaningful.
- There is a supreme spiritual reality or supreme being of some sort.
- We are not just our bodies.

In later posts I examined each of these ideas.

In the post called "[Introducing a New Version of God](#)," I showed that the existence of a supreme spiritual reality, or supreme being if you prefer those words, is consistent with science and with rational thought. I gave a link to a document titled [God: the Next Version](#) [gtnv], in which I proposed a rational model of such a being. A supreme being or reality of this kind can exist even if there is nothing supernatural. You don't need to have any faith to conclude that this being exists. All you need is a certain understanding of existence and of values.

This supreme spiritual reality is different from the humanlike God concept taught by many religions. However, this "new" version of God is more than a pantheistic name for the physical universe. The supreme being proposed here is not a humanoid god, but it also is not just the sum of all physical objects. This supreme being has mindlike features that make it more like a "someone" than a mere "something." This being also lies at the root of all real values. We can learn about this being by contemplating values like goodness and beauty.

In the posts titled "[The New Face of Spirit: Part One](#)" and "[The New Face of Spirit: Part Two](#)," I pointed out two ways in which a person transcends the matter of the body. In the first of these posts I showed that the mind and self are more than just the brain, even if these are features of the brain as science suggests they are. In the second post I argued that the human organism is more than just the matter that makes it up - not because of any supernatural add-ons, but because of a general logical fact about material objects and their parts. (I did not address the question of the afterlife in those posts. I did that later [on my other blog](#).)

In the post titled "[The Meaning and Beauty of the Universe](#)," I argued that it is more rational to think of the meaning in life as objectively real instead of as merely imaginary or illusory. The universe is a truly meaningful place, regardless of any differences in people's personal feelings about meaning. Also, the universe is a place in which real beauty exists. Beauty is not just in our imaginations; it is an objectively real feature of the world. Among other consequences, the objective reality of beauty implies that the arts can reveal genuine truths about the world.

All three of the religious ideas described in the first post have rational support. We got this result without ever relying on faith. The basic truths of religion are rationally credible. You can accept these basic truths without accepting anything on faith and without believing in anything supernatural. These basic spiritual truths are philosophical rather than scientific, but all of them are compatible with scientific fact and theory. These three spiritual truths can be true in a purely natural universe because they refer, not just to physical objects, but to certain properties and relationships that exist within the natural world.

The ideas I have presented here form a philosophical viewpoint that is both rational and spiritual. Is this viewpoint really religious? Some atheists and theologians might claim that this view is not religious because it does not involve faith or the supernatural. We could just as well label this view "spiritual but not religious." Those who are sensitive to the evils done in the name of religion might prefer to avoid the term "religious" altogether. However, we should remember that religion, no matter how idiotic people sometimes make it, contains a core of sensible spiritual ideas. Thoughtful believers can (and usually do) separate these sensible ideas from all the nonsense that fanatics proclaim in the name of religion. In addition to these true ideas, there are other religious beliefs that are false or questionable if understood simplistically, but true if given a

more liberal interpretation. (For examples, see [God: the Next Version](#).) To acknowledge the basic underlying truth of religion, I will continue using the term "religious" for the spiritual viewpoint developed here - though simply calling it "spiritual" might be less controversial.

Compared to familiar forms of religion, this rational approach might seem too dry and intellectual. Does our new viewpoint strip religion of its emotional value? It does not. The new version of religion is not only rational, but also keenly poetical. In [God: the Next Version](#) I pointed out that we can know the supreme reality through experiences of transcendent beauty. These incandescent experiences, often inspired by nature or by human love, can lead to awareness of the supreme spiritual reality. Such experiences can reveal the supreme reality to us whether or not we realize that they do. Indeed, the poetically inspired observer who experiences nature or a beloved person as somehow divine may be noticing an authentic fact. Despite the visionary character of these experiences, there is nothing supernatural or antirational about them. (If you find the last two sentences hard to believe, read [God: the Next Version](#) carefully.) This type of religion is not short on emotional value! It is a philosophy for poets and scientists alike.

When I started this blog, I planned to present an alternative approach to religion - an approach based on reason instead of faith. Now I have finished that task. The fact that such an approach is possible shows that religion, in and by itself, is not the enemy of reason. Religious sects can be quite antirational; some of them have made a mess of human history. However, this does not change the fact that some of the fundamental ideas of religion are rational.

The specific approach to rational religion presented here might not be the last word or the only possible approach. However, the fact that we can formulate such an approach at all shows that we should not discard all religion as irrational. The dogmatic religions of today contain many errors, but the essence of religion is compatible with reason.

Given the bloody history of many religions, it is clear that the human race needs to be more thoughtful in its attempts to answer the ultimate questions. However, if we abandoned religion entirely (as many noisy atheist authors tell us to do), we would be throwing out the baby with the bathwater. The human race cannot afford to lose the essential truths behind religion. These truths are important because they support the view that the human individual matters. They point out that human nature has a spiritual side, and that this spiritual side is related to a supreme spiritual reality. The essential truths of religion remind us that a person is more than just a disposable lump of chemicals or an insignificant speck of matter in the universe. That is an important fact to remember in these times of genocide and oppression, when persons often are treated as mere material things. "Scientific" materialism (which actually is not scientific) is much like religious fanaticism; both of these ideologies deny the significance of the person. A truly religious outlook supports the importance and dignity of the person. The modern authors who attack all religion are undermining human dignity. Even if those authors consider themselves humanists, their message is profoundly antihuman.

The right answer to religion's mistakes is not the rejection of religion, but the quest for a rational religious philosophy. We need to cleanse religion of its errors instead of giving up on the human spirit.

This post completes what I wanted to say in this blog. Although I can't absolutely rule out the possibility that I will write more here, I plan to do my future religious blogging on my main blog, [The Unfinishable Scroll](#). I've already written a lot about [religion on that blog](#). If you want more detail on the topics discussed here, [The Unfinishable Scroll](#) would be a good place to start your search.

---

## REFERENCES

### for *The Unfinishable Scroll and Religion: the Next Version*

These references are in addition to the ones already cited within some of the posts.

**Important Note:** Many of the URLs listed here are for the documents on the author's website. Most of these documents also can be found in the PhilPapers archive (<http://philpapers.org>) or in PhilSci-Archive (<http://philsci-archive.pitt.edu>). If you cannot get these writings from the author's site, please visit these archives. (A search for Sharlow's name should bring up the relevant material in these archives. Searching by title may help too.)

**Further Note:** If you can't find one of these documents in PhilPapers, search there for a document named *Patchworks*. *Patchworks* is a compilation containing many of Sharlow's writings. The document you want might be in it.

[abstraction] "I Am an Abstraction, Therefore I Am." <http://www.eskimo.com/~msharlow/abstraction.pdf>

[abstself] "Platonizing the Abstract Self." <http://www.eskimo.com/~msharlow/abstself.pdf>

[consewill] Mark F. Sharlow, "Yes, We Have Conscious Will."  
[http://www.eskimo.com/~msharlow/papers/conscious\\_will.pdf](http://www.eskimo.com/~msharlow/papers/conscious_will.pdf)

[design] "What's Really Wrong with the Argument from Design?"  
[http://www.eskimo.com/~msharlow/philos/argument\\_from\\_design.pdf](http://www.eskimo.com/~msharlow/philos/argument_from_design.pdf)

[ebooks] To find Sharlow's ebooks, see <http://www.eskimo.com/~msharlow/ebooks.htm> or see the references [gsoq], [gadbd], [gasoc], [gtnv], [pst] and [unfin] in this list.

[fbtc] *From Brain to Cosmos*. Parkland, FL: Universal Publishers, 2001.  
<http://www.eskimo.com/~msharlow/book.htm>

(Note: Most of the chapters of this book can be found in PhilPapers, <http://philpapers.org>.)

[forward] "Tomorrow Is for Freedom." (formerly titled "Forward to Freedom")  
[http://www.eskimo.com/~msharlow/politics/documents/tomorrow\\_is\\_for\\_freedom.pdf](http://www.eskimo.com/~msharlow/politics/documents/tomorrow_is_for_freedom.pdf)

[gadbd] *God and Darwin - Buddies!* Available through Ebookomatic (<http://www.ebookomatic.com>)

[gasoc] *God and Science? Of Course!* Available through Ebookomatic (<http://www.ebookomatic.com>)

- [gsoq] *God, Son of Quark*. Available through Ebookomatic (<http://www.ebookomatic.com>)
- [gtnv] *God: the Next Version*. [http://www.eskimo.com/~msharlow/philos/god\\_the\\_next\\_version.pdf](http://www.eskimo.com/~msharlow/philos/god_the_next_version.pdf)
- [improb] "Playing Fast and Loose with Complexity."  
[http://www.eskimo.com/~msharlow/philos/argument\\_from\\_improbability.pdf](http://www.eskimo.com/~msharlow/philos/argument_from_improbability.pdf)
- [main] "Brain, Time and Cosmos." (home page) <http://www.eskimo.com/~msharlow>
- [manifesto] "Manifesto of the Good Society."  
<http://www.eskimo.com/~msharlow/politics/documents/manifesto.pdf>
- [meadow] "The Meadow, the Sky, and the Vision."  
[http://www.eskimo.com/~msharlow/culture/documents/meadow\\_sky\\_vision.pdf](http://www.eskimo.com/~msharlow/culture/documents/meadow_sky_vision.pdf)
- [politics] "Liftoff to Freedom." (home page) <http://www.eskimo.com/~msharlow/politics>
- [principles] "Statement of Principles."  
<http://www.eskimo.com/~msharlow/politics/documents/principles.htm>  
PDF version:  
[http://www.eskimo.com/~msharlow/politics/documents/statement\\_of\\_principles.pdf](http://www.eskimo.com/~msharlow/politics/documents/statement_of_principles.pdf)
- [progress] "Progress: the Boundless Quest."  
[http://www.eskimo.com/~msharlow/culture/documents/progress\\_the\\_boundless\\_quest.pdf](http://www.eskimo.com/~msharlow/culture/documents/progress_the_boundless_quest.pdf)
- [pst] *Poetry's Secret Truth*. [http://www.eskimo.com/~msharlow/philos/poetrys\\_secret\\_truth.pdf](http://www.eskimo.com/~msharlow/philos/poetrys_secret_truth.pdf)
- [qualia] "Qualia and the Problem of Universals." <http://www.eskimo.com/~msharlow/qualia.pdf>
- [realism] "Getting Realistic about Nominalism." <http://www.eskimo.com/~msharlow/realism.pdf>
- [rebuttals] "Dawkins Examined Again: Rebutting Objections to 'The Anti-Dawkins Papers'."  
<http://www.eskimo.com/~msharlow/philos/rebuttals.htm>
- [relbeyond] "Religion and Beyond." [http://www.eskimo.com/~msharlow/philos/religion\\_and\\_beyond.pdf](http://www.eskimo.com/~msharlow/philos/religion_and_beyond.pdf)
- [seemsthat] "Seemsthat" ("Anti-Postmodernist Paper #1").  
<http://www.eskimo.com/~msharlow/philos/seemsthat.pdf>
- [sp] "Sharlow's Scratchpad" (home page). <http://www.eskimo.com/~msharlow/scratchpad>
- [unfin] "The Unfinishable Book." [http://www.eskimo.com/~msharlow/philos/unfinishable\\_book.pdf](http://www.eskimo.com/~msharlow/philos/unfinishable_book.pdf)
-

Document updated June 24, 2011.

### **Legal notices**

Copyright © 2011 Mark F. Sharlow. The author is not responsible for the content of external sites (besides the author's own site) linked from this document. Any medical or psychological statements herein are for information only and should not be relied upon in place of professional advice.