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Author(s): Kunz, Michael.

Source: *Direction*, vol. 41 (2011), pp. 17-27.

Published by: Direction.

Stable URL: <http://hdl.handle.net/11418/462>

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Answering an Intellectually Fulfilled Atheist

Michael Kunz

The study of nature has long encouraged scientists to ponder deeper realities. Some have come away with a heightened sense of faith in God; others, with the confident conviction that religious belief must melt under the bright light of scientific analysis. To this latter camp belongs Richard Dawkins, the evolutionary biologist among the cohort of writers that *Wired Magazine* considers the public face of the twenty-first century's "new atheism."

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questions about God are of fundamental importance.*

Since the 1970s, Dawkins has been a gifted and articulate spokesman for evolutionary biology. His early books, such as *The Selfish Gene*, used vivid imagery and apt metaphors to explain concepts like selection and biological change. As anti-evolutionary arguments gained prominence in American culture, Dawkins's popular works (e.g., *The Blind Watchmaker*) more directly confronted evolution's critics. While always transparent about his own atheistic worldview, his 2006 book, *The God Delusion*, went much further. Dawkins used his podium of scientific preeminence to discredit not only creationism, but the entire edifice of religion and belief in God. Dawkins' anti-religious crusade has found an audience: *The God Delusion* spent a year on the *New York Times* best-seller list. His arguments certainly deserve a response, especially if the church desires an apologetic appropriate to the scientifically-educated and those genuinely seeking a foundation for a life of meaning and compassion.¹

Michael Kunz teaches biology at Fresno Pacific University. He received a doctorate in Ecology from the University of California at Davis. He has been a member of Butler Mennonite Brethren Church in Fresno for twenty-two years.

Unlike his previous works, *The God Delusion* spends little time advancing arguments for evolutionary biology.² Instead, Dawkins argues for the improbability, irrationality, and moral bankruptcy of belief in God. Still, the issue of evolution cannot be avoided when responding to Dawkins because expertise in evolutionary biology is the basis of Dawkin's scientific credibility. It is also the genesis of his atheistic worldview. It was Dawkins who famously remarked that Darwin made it possible to be an intellectually fulfilled atheist.

THE CRUCIAL ISSUES

As a biologist and a Christian, I confess that I find many evangelical responses to evolution misguided and counterproductive. Arguments that Genesis is a scientifically accurate account of origins do not square with modern biological understandings, and I am deeply skeptical of apologetic arguments that try to buttress faith in God by looking for unexplainable gaps in natural history. This does not mean belief in God lacks scientific support, but the best scientific evidence for belief comes in a different form that does not require a rejection of mainstream science. More importantly, the crucial issues concerning atheism and theism have less to do with scientific arguments regarding the existence of an abstract and distant creator, and much more to do with the consequences of belief in God. Dawkins and other new atheists advocate the abolition of religion as the solution to the world's ills. The more convincing alternative (in my view) is taking seriously the call of Jesus to "follow me." True faith in God ultimately comes from the lived experience of walking in trust and love.

Catholic writer Thomas Merton observed, "One of the moral diseases we communicate to each other in society comes from huddling together in the pale light of an insufficient answer to a question we are afraid to ask."³ What if the universe and the life it supports have evolved? To the extent that many evangelical Christians consider this question, their answer is identical to that of Richard Dawkins: if natural explanations of origins are correct, then belief in God has been dealt a lethal blow. Ian Barbour describes this as the conflict-model approach to science and religion.⁴ The model assumes that if science gives a seamless explanation for a process, then God must not be a part of the story. It then becomes an absolute requirement for the faithful to attack the sufficiency of science to explain nature.

When confronted with the topic of evolution, Christian scientific responses generally fit into one of several categories. A majority of American evangelicals embrace an argument that "good" science does not support evolution, but fits with Genesis 1 and 2, read as a scientific account of creation. This is the approach advocated by both recent (young-earth) and

progressive (old-earth) creationists. A 2009 Pew Foundation survey found 55 percent of evangelicals agreed that “humans and other living things have existed in their present form since the beginning of time,” while only 2 percent of scientists agree with the statement.⁵

Interestingly, the same Pew study found that evangelicals are less likely than the general public to consider science and religion to be in conflict. Almost half who reject evolution acknowledge that scientists overwhelmingly accept evolution. This apparent contradiction only makes sense if many evangelicals believe that the best scientific evidence supports creationism. The corollary to this view is that scientists must be less able to reliably interpret the significance of the scientific data than are creationist evangelicals.

There is not the space here to give a point-by-point explanation for why evolutionary biologists (and 98 percent of scientists in general) are convinced that such creationist alternatives to evolution fail scientifically. There are many books besides those of atheists such as Dawkins that make this case; a number of books by Christian authors make this point well.⁶ There is an increasingly vast reservoir of research that fits comfortably with evolutionary theory, but of which creationist alternatives make little sense.

THE CONCEPTUAL POWER OF THE SCIENCES

Evangelicals not actively involved in research and academics in fields as diverse as geology, genetics, astronomy, and comparative biology have a difficult time conceptualizing the power of these sciences to provide a coherent system for understanding nature. Those who work within these fields recognize that not every observation fits easily with current evolutionary theory, but they give weight to the very great majority of observations that do.

Christians within these fields are likely to be influenced by something akin to Galileo’s dictum: “God has written two books: the book of Scripture and the book of nature.” When confronted with clear evidence from scientific observation that the earth was not the immobile center of the universe, Galileo reconsidered the doctrinal orthodoxy of his day. Most contemporary Christian scientists likewise conclude that reading God’s second book may be necessary in shaping our interpretation of the first.

This does not mean that one book loses authority, relevance, or reliability. Galileo argued that God accommodated his word to the understanding of the day. So, also, God accommodated his word to the literary genres of the day.⁷ To state that Genesis is not a scientific account does not compromise its relevance if its purpose was not scientific explanation. More important truth remains: one Creator is the author of all that exists;

the created order is the result of a purposeful act; material creation is not valueless or evil or illusory, but fundamentally good; the objects viewed by other cultures as gods are nothing more than objects created by the one true God; not just kings and rulers, but each individual human being is made in the image of God, and each has moral responsibility toward other humans and all of the created order.

INTELLIGENT DESIGN

The other significant attempt to discredit evolution makes no direct reference to Scripture at all in its arguments. It emphasizes specific aspects of biology that appear to have no adequate naturalistic evolutionary explanation. This is the approach of the current “Intelligent Design” (ID) movement. Where adequate evolutionary explanations are lacking, these can be used as evidence of the work of a purposeful Designer. ID serves an apologetic function: if science cannot give a completely comprehensive explanation, the gaps provide reasons for belief in God and rejection of evolution. The logical structure of the argument is the same as that used two hundred years ago in Darwin’s England.

ID advocates are correct in pointing out that mainstream science has an inherent bias in favor of naturalistic explanations. They argue that many implausible natural explanations are accepted only because mainstream science refuses to consider alternatives. There are good philosophical reasons why naturalistic explanations should be favored in science, but much of the reluctance to accept alternatives has historical roots. Scientists with stature as great as Isaac Newton have at times fallen back upon God’s supernatural hand to account for unexplained phenomena. In each case, subsequent advances provided perfectly acceptable natural explanations.⁸

No scientific paradigm is without its anomalies, and while productive scientific research programs generate answers, they simultaneously generate unanswered questions. If Christians are content with “God-of-the-gaps” apologetics, ID is a potential approach. However, its logic only concludes that God has intervened at points in natural history; it leaves untouched the larger framework of science related to an ancient universe and almost all arguments for evolution. ID supplies no evidence that Genesis should be accepted as a scientifically accurate account of origins.

ID has other inadequacies. It implies that processes with natural explanations have no relationship to God’s action, thus circumscribing God’s actions to smaller and smaller realms of natural history as yet unexplained by science. Calculations presented by ID authors regarding the unlikelihood of complex structures arising by natural means are often flawed because of the assumptions they make about initial conditions and the process of evolution. The specific examples of structures that proponents of ID consider

unexplainably complex have in many instances been adequately explained over the past decade.⁹ It is deeply unfortunate that each advance in scientific understanding which discredits ID arguments *ipso facto* becomes a reason for disbelief in God. If Christians wish to defend theistic belief against critics such as Dawkins, current ID is more of a liability than an asset.

GOD AND SCIENCE

Dawkins' first argument for atheism is that science has repeatedly failed to catch God in the act of doing anything supernatural, therefore his existence is extremely unlikely. But what science can catch is constrained by its conceptual and instrumental tools.

Indeed, God is not an explicit part of explanations in other branches of science. Meteorologists give a natural account of afternoon showers, nuclear physicists give a natural account of sunshine, and ecologists give a natural account of avian food chains, yet we accept Jesus' assurances in the Sermon on the Mount that these are God's acts. Even when linguists recount the evolution of the English language, they do not engender evangelical protests that this explanation contradicts Genesis 11.

It is important to put these issues into a larger historical context. Ancient and medieval sciences were teleological in nature; that is, explanations were given with respect to purposes. The scientific revolution removed teleological explanations from physics and astronomy, and provided only mechanistic explanations for phenomena. Explanations involving atoms and gravity were considered atheistic by some when they were introduced, yet no one would argue that now. Subsequent advances removed teleology from other disciplines until purpose was only employed by the biological sciences. Because contemporary evolutionary explanations do not provide a "purposeful" explanation, it is sometimes assumed that the explanation must be atheistic. One of the most common religious criticisms of evolutionary biology is that it is a process devoid of purpose. Such a judgment is no longer applied to physics, astronomy, geology, or chemistry.

Arthur Eddington was the twentieth-century Quaker physicist who provided the first experimental confirmation of Einstein's theory of relativity, and he was the scientist most effective in interpreting the revolutionary new ideas generated by quantum physics. He tells a parable of an ichthyologist who repeatedly cast his net into the deep ocean, concluding from his long career that no sea creatures existed that were smaller than two inches. His tools prevented him from catching anything smaller, but he scornfully dismissed other ways of collecting observations as exercises in metaphysics.¹⁰

Christians have failed to capture and demonstrate to science evidence that God created all life ten thousand years ago. They have yet to

prove complex objects like bacterial flagella have no natural explanation. Dawkins emphasizes that controlled experiments have not provided scientific evidence that God answers prayers. The absence of such fish is an argument for atheism only to the extent that we insist their presence is the best possible evidence for theism. All analogies are flawed, but it may be more helpful to imagine God as the ocean in which all existence swims, rather than the leviathan that can be conveniently caught in our observational nets.

THE LIMITS OF SCIENCE

Science by its very nature is limited in its ability to detect meaning and ultimate purpose. Physicist Steven Weinberg observed, “The more the universe seems comprehensible, the more it also seems pointless.”¹¹ Weinberg won the Nobel Prize for his work on the fundamental forces of nature, work that has contributed to the scientific consensus regarding the “Big Bang” origin of the universe billions of years ago. These basic fundamental “laws of nature” are the regularities that have shaped the course of the universe through time and space. For atheists like Weinberg, they simply exist without an observable goal.

Yet when considering these same fundamental laws concerning gravity and nuclear forces, many other prominent physicists, both religious and agnostic, have been profoundly moved by some remarkable findings. It is as if very laws of physics are an ocean precisely fine-tuned to allow the existence of life. Most laws of physics include constants that have been precisely determined by careful measurement. There is no logical reason why the strength of gravity could not be slightly stronger or weaker than it is, but a universe with even the slightest such deviation would either have quickly collapsed upon itself or never coalesced into structures like galaxies and stars and planets. The slightest change in any of a half-dozen other physical constants yields similar results: make a universe in any other fashion and life would not be possible. This approach does not prove the existence of God, but its proponents, such as Harvard emeritus professor Owen Gingerich, a Mennonite, argue that it is entirely consistent with a theistic understanding of nature.¹² Given this evidence, theism is at least as philosophically coherent as atheism, and perhaps more so.

This type of argument can be considered a form of the “intelligent design,” but there is a crucial difference: it does not rely on occasional miracles to fill the gaps of scientific explanation, but looks instead to the apparent design underlying nature itself. Theism here does not require a conflict with science; it only conflicts with atheistic interpretations of science.

And there are atheistic alternatives to such theistic arguments. Dawkins devotes a chapter in *The God Delusion* to their elucidation. In one

fashion or another, all these arguments hinge on some form of the proposition that ours is one of an almost infinite number of universes. If so, it is not remarkable that we find ourselves in the one best-of-all-possible universes because no one exists in the alternative universes to ponder the question. Play the lottery often enough, and eventually you must hit the jackpot. The most significant problem with this argument is that alternative universes are almost by definition untestable hypotheses. There is no evidence for or against their existence.

At an even deeper level, there are fundamental questions about why any universe is structured around such regular laws. If, as Dawkins and others assert, our universe is merely one chance outcome of quantum fluctuations in which the dice were rolled and a random assortment of physical constants emerged, who or what determined the basic rules of this quantum physics game? Dawkins rejects God as an explanation because, as an evolutionary biologist, he always sees complexity arising from simpler precursors, and any universe-designer would have to be more, not less, complex than the system he designed. But as with Eddington's ichthyological story, disallowing by fiat any alternatives to your own methodology is a poor way to investigate the truth of God.

There is one point on which all concerned agree: questions about God are of fundamental importance. But the questioning cannot stop with the mere existence of God. A remote "God of the Big Bang" seems to have less immediate relevance to those of us embroiled in the crises of this tiny planet. Apologetic arguments for their own sake may be engaged at high theological centers or late-night college dorm bull sessions. The more crucial question is not the theoretical existence of God, but what kind of God is he? Inextricably linked to this question is its corollary: What kind of people does he call us to be? Even demons believe in God and tremble—little good does their mere assent to his existence do.

GOD AND EVIL

The God Delusion lays out the proposition that belief in God is the world's most significant source of evil; this is why Dawkins is so adamant about confronting the entirety of religion. Everywhere he turns, Dawkins finds irrational and unquestionable religious beliefs used as self-serving justification for mistreating others. Dawkins is convinced that where religion teaches us to do good toward others, it limits that command to those within our own group: "'Love thy neighbor' didn't mean what we now think it means. It meant only 'Love another Jew.'"¹³ Dawkins states that Jesus, like all other biblical characters, advocated this in-group mentality rather than a universal ethic of compassion. The consequences of this cir-

cumscribed ethic are justifications for warfare, genocide, and nearly every other evil we can now so easily imagine.

It is hard to disagree with Dawkins in condemning the use of religion for generating hate and persecution. However, it is difficult to find anything but unreflective polemic in Dawkins' proposition that Jesus taught a version of in-group morality. Circumscribed morality is precisely what Jesus condemns in the very passage of scripture Dawkins quotes. When Jesus is confronted with the question, "And who is my neighbor?", his response is to extol an out-group Samaritan caring for the beaten traveler, while condemning in-group religiosity. This story is not peripheral to Christian ethics but is what Jesus refers to as the summation of all the law.

This ethic is lived out by Jesus in practice, with compassion and admiration for Gentiles and forgiveness for those who crucify him. In similar vein, there are strains of Christianity, including Anabaptism, that emphasize the primacy of the Sermon on the Mount with its command to love the out-group enemy. When religious faith is understood as a set of beliefs about the existence of God, it can be corrupted to all the evil ends Dawkins describes. When religious faith is understood as an experience of the living God by following Jesus, its corruption is less likely.

Steven Weinberg has said: "With or without [religion], you'd have good people doing good things and evil people doing bad things, but for good people to do bad things, it takes religion."¹⁴ Jesus agrees with both Dawkins and Weinberg: religion *per se* does not necessarily transform us into good people, and may even make us worse. Jesus condemns the Pharisees by decrying that their converts are twice as fit for hell as they were before conversion.

There is no denying that the history of Christianity as well as other religions make Dawkins' points much too vividly and depressingly. Religion is not unique in this way, though. Nationalism is used to incite hatred just as much as religion is; wars are fought and foreign enemies persecuted even if they confess the same religious belief. Flags are viewed as sacred and those who question Caesar are consigned to prison or worse. Tribalism sets Hutus in genocidal conflict with Tutsis. Economic and political philosophies are given sacred status, with gulags awaiting those who deviate in the slightest from these types of orthodoxies. But the answer is not to abolish all economic systems, to destroy all culture, and to abolish all political entities any more than it is to abolish all religion or belief in God. All good and necessary powers that can inspire us to good can equally inspire us to evil.

UNASKED QUESTIONS

The questions that remain unasked by Weinberg and Dawkins are: "What can transform a bad person into a good person?" and "What can

sustain a good person in doing good?" I suspect that the new atheists may themselves be huddling together in their own pale light. It is a profoundly insufficient answer to simply state that religious belief in God is the source of all human evil. And it fails to account for the source of humanity's greatest good.

Anti-religious crusaders like Dawkins not actively involved in the spiritual quest to know God have a difficult time conceptualizing the power of God to transform and sustain lives for good. Jesus did not establish a school of philosophy, though the Greek philosophical roots of modern science still shape our world today. Observing the book of nature provides only limited insight into much of reality. The reality of such positive transformation can only be understood from within. Instead, Jesus called disciples to see a reality that can only be known through participation. This is the basis for true evangelical faith: it began with the call of Jesus to "follow me." It is the task of the disciple to both follow Jesus and invite others to "come and see."

The religiously inspired evils Dawkins deplores disappear whenever belief in God takes as central Jesus' command to love neighbor as self. In one very interesting essay, Dawkins appears to recant his conviction that Jesus practiced a circumscribed in-group ethic. Like many others through history, he expresses admiration for Jesus, even going so far as to humorously title his essay "Atheists for Jesus."¹⁵ He expresses the conviction that if Jesus were alive today, he too would be an atheist. But would an atheistic Jesus still be the same person Dawkins admires? Still unasked is the question of the source of Jesus' deep power to love friend and foe alike, and to walk the path of suffering love consistently and fully.

I have been challenged by Richard Dawkins. He may indeed be an intellectually fulfilled atheist, but intellectual filling is for me a positive but insufficient life goal. The religious dimension of my person whispers quietly but forcefully that being is more than intellectually knowing. Of that mix of evil and good within us all, I, like many, can attest that what good there is in me comes through finding God in Jesus.

So I respond: "Theists and atheists for Jesus!" I would welcome the company of all on that journey. We all may discover something new. ☀

NOTES

1. A number of Christians have already done so. Readers seeking a short book that cogently responds to Dawkins should consider *The Dawkins Delusion? Atheist Fundamentalism and Denial of the Divine* by Alister McGrath and Joanna Collicutt McGrath (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2007).

2. Dawkins' returns to his field of expertise in his most recent book, *The Greatest Show on Earth: The Evidence for Evolution* (New York: Free Press, 2009).
3. *No Man is an Island* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968), xiii.
4. *Religion and Science: Historical and Contemporary Issues* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997).
5. The Pew Research Foundation survey on Religion and Science can be found at <http://pewforum.org/Science-and-Bioethics/Public-Opinion-on-Religion-and-Science-in-the-United-States.aspx#2>. This statement is consistent with only the most conservative literal interpretation of Genesis 1; even old-earth creationist interpretations in which days of creation equate to long ages of time do not fit with the view that all species have existed on earth since the beginning of time.
6. For example, Darrel R. Falk, *Coming to Peace with Science: Bridging the Worlds Between Faith and Biology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004) and Francis Collins, *The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief* (New York: Free Press, 2006). Kenneth R. Miller has authored several general biology texts. *Finding Darwin's God: A Scientist's Search for Common Ground Between God and Evolution* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2007) also presents a general argument for evolutionary biology and its consonance with Christian faith.
7. There is not space here to lay out a detailed theological justification for interpretations that do not consider the early chapters of Genesis to be scientific descriptions. I do not believe that the similarities between the early chapters of Genesis and other neighboring creation accounts means that the surrounding oppressive Middle Eastern cultures "almost" got the scientific account of creation correct. What is most significant are the differences between Genesis and the neighboring accounts. These differences highlight the theological and moral lessons that God's people needed for encouragement and guidance.
8. Patrick McDonald and Nivaldo Tro, faculty at Seattle Pacific University and Westmont College, describe the historical problems associated with non-natural explanations in science and provide a philosophical defense of preferring naturalistic explanations in their article "In Defense of Methodological Naturalism" in *Christian Scholar's Review* 38 (Winter 2009): 201–29. Karl Giberson gives an account of why he, as an evangelical scientist, cannot take the easier path of accepting intelligent design arguments in his book

- Saving Darwin: How to be a Christian and Believe in Evolution* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008).
9. For example, Michael Behe's book, *Darwin's Black Box* (New York: Free Press, 1996), uses the bacterial flagellum, the immune system, and human blood clotting as his premier examples of irreducibly complex systems that cannot be explained by natural means. A second book by Kenneth Miller, *Only a Theory: Evolution and the Battle for America's Soul* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2008), explains how each of these systems can be derived from simpler precursors. Many of these new insights have come about in the past decade through our recently-acquired ability to sequence the genomes of diverse species. While these explanations do not provide proof of evolutionary pathways, they fully discredit the basic premise of ID supporters that such systems are irreducibly complex.
 10. Arthur Eddington, *The Philosophy of Physical Science* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1967), 16.
 11. *The First Three Minutes: A Modern View of the Origin of the Universe* (New York: Basic, 1993), 144.
 12. A concise and accessible presentation of Gingerich's approach can be found in his book *God's Universe* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap/Harvard University Press, 2006).
 13. *The God Delusion* (Boston; New York: Mariner Books, 2008), 287–88.
 14. Steven Weinberg, "A Designer Universe?" (Based on a talk given in April 1999 at the Conference on Cosmic Design of the American Association for the Advancement of Science in Washington, D.C.). Posted on the Physics & Astronomy Online website at http://www.physlink.com/Education/essay_weinberg.cfm.
 15. An essay on Dawkins' article, "Atheists for Jesus," can be found on his official website at <http://richarddawkins.net/articles/20-atheists-for-jesus>.