

# New Atheism's Undead Arguments

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**Richard Dawkins argues that theism cannot explain anything because God would be more complex than anything he created. This argument has been rigorously critiqued by theists and atheists; yet Dawkins' faith is as blind and deaf as ever.**

Richard Dawkins' chief argument for atheism, the "Boeing 747 Gambit", is dead. It has been reviewed, analysed, critiqued and rejected by a range of analytic philosophers, theistic and atheistic, and he has issued no reply. These are not the theologians or continental intellectuals traduced by PZ Myer's "Courtier's Reply; they are the very scholars who specialise in reviewing the sort of argument Dawkins has advanced. No convincing response to these critiques is available; so Dawkins' argument for atheism has no compelling force. That's why I say it is dead.

Here's how Dawkins describes the argument in his 2002 TED talk, "[Militant Atheism](#)":

*Now, the difficult problem for any theory of biological design is to explain the massive statistical improbability of living things. Statistical improbability in the direction of good design — "complexity" is another word for this. The standard creationist argument — there is only one; they all reduce to this one — takes off from a statistical improbability. Living creatures are too complex to have come about by chance; therefore, they must have had a designer. This argument of course, shoots itself in the foot. Any designer capable of designing something really complex has to be even more complex himself, and that's before we even start on the other things he's expected to do, like forgive sins, bless marriages, listen to prayers favor our side in a war disapprove of our sex lives and so on."*

*Complexity is the problem that any theory of biology has to solve, and you can't solve it by postulating an agent that is even more complex, thereby simply compounding the problem. Darwinian natural selection is so stunningly elegant because it solves the problem of explaining complexity in terms of nothing but simplicity. Essentially, it does it by providing a smooth ramp of gradual step-by-step increment. But here, I only want to make the point that the elegance of Darwinism is corrosive to religion precisely because it is so elegant, so parsimonious, so powerful, so economically powerful. It has the sinewy economy of a beautiful suspension bridge."*

Obviously, this is just a variation of Hume's "who designed the designer?" objection. It is a piece of philosophy of religion, not science, and this is why philosophers seem well-placed to judge its merits. To fully grasp Dawkins' argument, we need to get our heads around the concept of "organised complexity". Roughly, an entity has organised complexity if it is

composed of a variety of parts arranged in a highly specific manner so that it is able to function. For example, cells exemplify organised complexity because they have numerous parts that must be arranged in a precise manner for the cell to function.

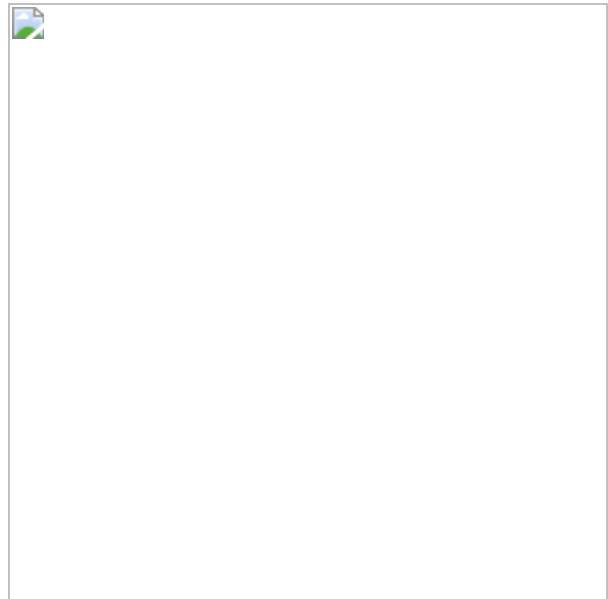
Statistically, it is extremely improbable that a cell would arise merely by chance, so the organised complexity of the cell demands an explanation. But Dawkins insists that God's mind must also be organised and complex<sup>[i]</sup>. Now, if the organised complexity of the cell stands in need of explanation because it is statistically improbable, how much more improbable is the organised complexity of God's mind? If God explains the eye, what explains God?

Thankfully, Darwin gives the atheist an alternative hypothesis to design. Evolution by natural selection, in contrast to design hypotheses, shows how organised complexity can develop from simpler things. The evolution of the eye, for example, did not occur all at once. It happened gradually, over thousands of generations. The accumulation of naturally selected mutations builds up more and more organised complexity over time.<sup>[ii]</sup>

So Dawkins' objection to theism is easily summarised: God cannot explain the universe because he must exemplify more organised complexity than the universe. And if God must exemplify more organised complexity than the universe, then he is more improbable than the universe<sup>[iii]</sup>. Finally, the theory of evolution by natural selection demonstrates that organised complexity can develop from simpler states. Therefore, the atheist has a satisfactory explanation for the organised complexity of our universe and the theist does not.

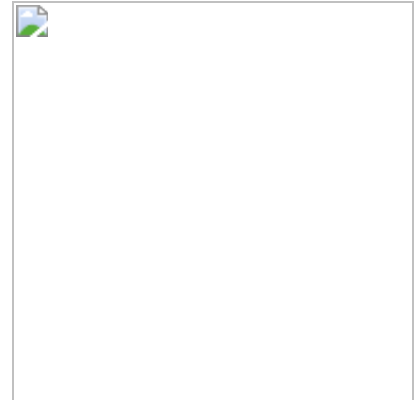
We will set aside the fact that the rationality of theism does not depend on the design argument. There remain at least five problems with Dawkins' version of the "who designed the designer" objection. First, it is unreasonable to describe evolution by natural selection as a simple state of affairs. Evolution depends on the existence of *replicators*: structures which cause copies of themselves to be made; each acts as its own template for copying.<sup>[iv]</sup> The copying system must allow for a *little* variation in each new generation; this allows a population of variants to come into existence. Yet the copying process must *also* be very reliable – otherwise beneficial variations would not be preserved.

Furthermore, natural selection requires more than variation and very reliable replication. The replicators must exist in an environment in which they compete for resources. Finally, to explain the taxonomic diversity and organised complexity of our world, these replicators must



be able to combine to form *vehicles* – that is, structures (for example, organisms) which work to propagate their replicators.<sup>[v]</sup>

It is remarkable that such a replication process is even *possible*. Evolution can only take place because the laws of physics and chemistry allow inorganic molecules to combine to form organic molecules which can become replicators of the correct kind. So evolution by natural selection depends upon specific laws of physics and chemistry, and extraordinarily precise cosmological constants. The point here is that natural selection is not a simple process; it depends on an extremely complex and improbable states of affairs.



Second, it is not at all clear that the existence of God would be highly improbable even if God exemplified organised complexity. For Dawkins, organised complexity is a statistically improbable state of affairs only because it is highly improbable that it would come about by chance. It is extremely unlikely that an organised complex object like a plane could be assembled by chance: “Thus, a spontaneously-formed God who is at least as complex as the physical universe itself is very improbable”.<sup>[vi]</sup>

Dawkins is correct that it is unlikely that an extremely complex entity could assemble from simple antecedents purely by chance. *But he simply assumes that every complex entity must have been assembled from simple parts.* And no-one believes that God “popped” into existence! God is uncreated, from eternity to eternity. That’s just what it means to be God! Douglas Groothius<sup>[vii]</sup> points out that Dawkins misrepresents or misunderstands the design argument. The design argument does not assume that *everything* which is complex requires an explanation. Rather, ***it points to examples of ordered complexity which also seem to require an external cause***, and infers a designer of those examples.

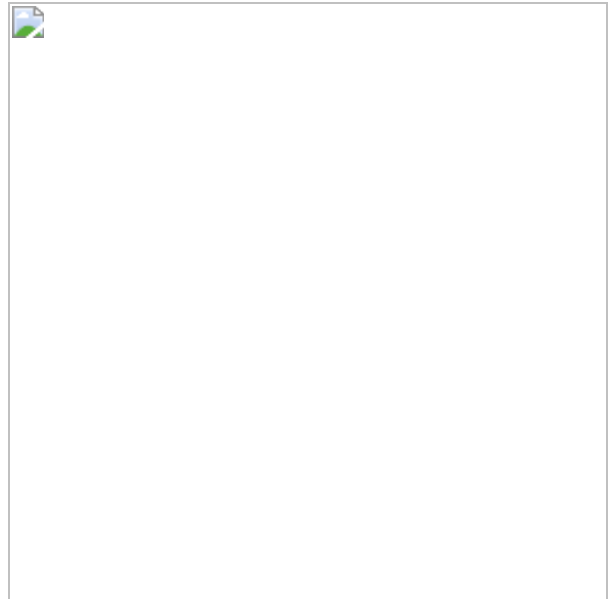
Third, it is clear that many good explanations depend on causes which are more complex than their effects. In the scientific revolution itself, an Aristotelian world-picture, in which natural bodies acted for a purpose, was rejected for a “mechanical” philosophy” which conceived the world as a machine, a “clock-work” universe governed by mathematically expressible laws. This mechanical philosophy hypothesised vastly more organised complexity in the universe.

Groothius points out that good scientific explanations have not always moved from the complex to the simple. Ludwig Boltzmann’s kinetic theory of heat required much more complexity than the older phenomenological approach to heat. It was not as simple, but it made better predictions. It is easy to enumerate other examples. Paleontologists regularly infer large, extremely complex animals from depressions in sedimentary rocks. In the

Search for Extra-terrestrial Intelligence project, scientists search for radio-signals which will provide evidence not only for alien life, but for sophisticated alien civilisations, far more complicated than the signals themselves.

Indeed, Dawkins would not, and does not, reject evolution by natural selection as an explanation because that process depends upon many improbable states of affairs (specific physical laws) and improbable events (the origin of the first cells) which are left unexplained in Darwinian theory. While the theory of evolution by natural selection can be described very simply, it postulates an incredibly complex state of affairs which the theory cannot account for. It is not consistent, then, for Dawkins to insist on an explanation for a designer's nature and existence before design can be used as an explanation.

Fourth, David has pointed out that we need to distinguish between the probability *before* all the evidence has been taken into account and the probability *afterwards*. If Dawkins' argument worked, it would only establish that God's existence is improbable *before* the evidence has been considered. Yet a belief can be very improbable before relevant evidence has been considered and highly probable afterwards.



*Suppose my friend Tom enters the lottery every week and that the winning numbers have just been announced in a particular week. What is the probability that Tom has hit the jackpot? Well, either he has or he hasn't, but not knowing what numbers he selected it is very reasonable for me to assign an extremely low probability, 1 in 10,000,000 perhaps. However, the next day Tom arrives at my house, driving a new BMW, and he tells me that he hit the jackpot in the lottery the previous night. Initially, I am suspicious because Tom is a bit of a practical joker, but then he shows me a newspaper which has a picture of him receiving the cheque and later I see him on the local news on television which again confirms his story. What is the probability now? Now that all the evidence has been taken into account it is extremely high; in fact, I can be virtually certain that he hit the jackpot.*

Suppose God is even more complex and so more improbable than any one piece of evidence he is supposed to explain. However, also suppose various pieces of evidence in the universe are very unlikely if there is no God: say, the laws of nature, the fine-tuning of

various constants, life, consciousness, and rational, personal beings. If God's existence makes all this evidence much more likely, then we might end up with the conclusion that God's existence is more likely than not.

So, Dawkins demand for a certain type of simple explanation is misplaced. But, fifth, there are good reasons to believe that it would not be possible for God to have organised complexity. Anything which has organised complexity is composed of parts. But *by definition God cannot be assembled out of parts*. If God were made of parts then those parts would be more fundamental than God; God would not be the creator. God would not be composed of physical or quasi-physical parts because he would not be a material agent.

Theism argues that *an immaterial agent* explains large scale features of the universe, like its order and structure. The idea of an immaterial agent is coherent and intuitively clear; to be an immaterial mind is simply to be the subject of beliefs, intentions and purposes; and that is *all that it is*. Now perhaps the atheist does not believe that *humans* are immaterial agents. But that does not mean that immaterial agents could not exist, and that we could not have evidence of their existence.

The theist is can argue that such evidence is abundantly available: the universe is crying out for a purposive explanation. When the theist argues that an immaterial mind planned the universe, he is arguing that something simpler than the physical universe is responsible for its intricate structure and organised complexity. Once more, Dawkins' critique of the design argument collapses.

Now, most of these points have been made by secular scholars in academic journals in more rigour and detail than this brief summary. Some of these scholars are atheists – they just think that Dawkins' argument is not very convincing. What does Dawkins' say in reply? So far as I can tell, nothing. He simply ignores these critiques as if they never passed peer review. In doing so he turns a refuted, dead argument into something sinister: what we could call an undead argument.

Every time Dawkins is asked to justify his atheism, he trots out the Boeing 747 gambit as if it had never been questioned. Wide-eyed audiences assume that a prestigious academic would never present a heavily critiqued argument as if it was a decisive proof; zombie like, they repeat the memes on blogs and in tweets. The contagion spreads; critical thought dies. By closing minds in the name of scepticism, Dawkins has created an argument which remains easy to answer, but impossible to kill.

[i] A more detailed piece reviewing more academic literature on Dawkin's Gambit will be available on the site in July 2015.

[ii] Patrick Richmond "Richard Dawkins' Darwinian Objection to Unexplained Complexity in God" *Science and Christian Belief*, 19:2, (October 2007) , 99-116

[iii] 'The argument from improbability states that complex things could not have come about by chance" Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, (London:Bantam, 2006),114.

[iv] Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, (New York: Oxford University Press 1989),15-20.

[v] Dawkins, *Selfish Gene*

[vi] Erik Wielenberg "Dawkins' Gambit, Hume's Aroma and God's Simplicity", *Philosophia Christi*, 11 (2009), 117

[vii] Douglas Groothuis "Who Designed the Designer" *Think* Volume 8: Issue 21 p. 77