Dawkins' Logico-Philosophical Blunder:

A Reply to a Dawkins Apologist

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Introduction

In "Dawkins' Infinite Regress," an article published in *Philosophy*, the journal of Britain's prestigious Royal Institute of Philosophy, philosopher Roger Montague describes Richard Dawkins' book, *The God Delusion*,[1] as "brilliant and bruising," and Montague attempts to strengthen the book's crucial argument against God's existence.[2] The argument in question is Dawkins' infinite-regress argument, also known as Dawkins' who-designed-the-designer objection, an argument that is, as Montague correctly points out, not scientific but logico-philosophical.[3] In view of the immense popularity of Dawkins' book and now the philosophical legitimacy the book has been given in a high-ranking academic journal, it is appropriate that Dawkins' argument and especially Montague's attempt to strengthen it be given a serious apologetic reply.

In this paper I do the following. I review Dawkins' argument and Montague's attempt to strengthen it. Then I argue that Dawkins commits a multi-facetted logico-philosophical blunder, a blunder that renders Montague's work beside the point.

Dawkins' Argument

According to Dawkins' infinite-regress/who-designed-the-designer argument, appealing to an intelligent designer to explain

nature's complexity (apparent design) is an explanatory failure. Why? Because it merely passes the explanatory buck. The intelligent designer hypothesis merely transfers the mystery of nature's complexity, which is the puzzle to be explained, to the mystery of the designer's complexity, which is a *new puzzle* to be explained, but this in turn generates *another puzzle*, that is, the mystery of the complexity of the designer's designer. And so on.[4]

More specifically, Dawkins argues that because the complexity of the natural world is highly improbable, and because the intelligent designer must be more complex than the complexity of the natural world that is being explained by the intelligent design hypothesis, it follows that the intelligent design hypothesis must be more improbable than the natural world.[5] But, Dawkins continues, this is to explain one improbability by another improbability greater than the first improbability.[6] What is worse (for the intelligent designer proponent), this also raises the question of the origin of the designer, thereby adding yet another layer of improbability to explain the additional complexity of the designer's designer.[7] But then this also raises the question of the complexity of the designer of the designer's designer, thereby adding *yet another layer of improbability*. And so on, *ad infinitum*.[8]

Because of this unending regress of additional improbabilities, Dawkins thinks that the God hypothesis is not a rational explanation for the apparent design found in nature. Indeed, Dawkins thinks that his argument renders God's existence extremely improbable: "God almost certainly does not exist."[9]

Montague's Attempt to Strengthen Dawkins' Argument

Montague comes to Dawkins' aid and argues that Dawkins' regress argument is stronger than Dawkins thinks. Montague reminds us that Dawkins' crucial premise is the claim that a designer must be more complex than the thing designed. And Montague adds that if this premise is true (that is, if it "holds"[10]), then Dawkins can go further than merely concluding that God is extremely improbable: indeed, Dawkins can say that he (Dawkins) "conditionally knows that God

can't exist—conditionally on establishing his premise about designers being more complex than whatever they design."[11] So, if the truth of the crucial premise can be established, then Dawkins has provided us with an infinite regress argument that shows us not merely that God almost certainly does not exist, but that God "couldn't and therefore wouldn't exist."[12]

To establish the premise that any conceivable designer must be more complex than the thing designed, Montague argues that we have good evidence of terrestrial cases of designers always being more complex than the things they design and, significantly, that no counterexamples are forthcoming. After all, it very much seems that more information is always needed to specify an object's designer than to specify the design of the object itself. Moreover, Montague argues, even if, as an answer to the infinite regress of designers, some "ingenious theist" were to conceive of a deity containing an "actual infinity of designers," then our theist "would be committed to the idea of a deity who is infinitely bureaucratic."[13] In other words (uttered undoubtedly with a chuckle), "[t]his deity would be like the greatest CEO conceivable, one who controls an infinite hierarchy of delegation."[14] But this, Montague asserts, is Dawkins' "Trojan Horse" (invited by the so-called "ingenious theist" into the camp of the intelligent designer proponents).[15] It surely renders the idea of God absurd.

So, given Dawkins' premise that a designer must be more complex than the thing designed—a premise (allegedly) made more reasonable to believe because of Montague's assistance—it is not the case that God is merely extremely improbable; rather, according to Montague, Dawkins should now know that God *cannot* exist. Because of Montague's help, then, Dawkins' infinite-regress/who-designed-the-designer argument continues to block the inference to a designer, but now more effectively than before.

Dawkins' Blunder—and Montague's Continuation of the Blunder

Let us return to Dawkins' infinite-regress/who-designed-the-designer argument. And let us concede Dawkins' premise (that

a designer must be more complex that any object it/he/she designs), and let us even concede Montague's defense of this premise. Does Dawkins' infinite-regress-of-designers argument block the inference to an intelligent designer (natural or otherwise) from the apparent design in objects?

We should think not.

Simply put, Dawkins' infinite-regress-of-designers objection is *not relevant* to the making of the design inference. That is to say, the question of the complexity and origin of a designer simply has *no bearing* on the issue of whether something is designed. Consider the science known as SETI (Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence). In SETI the intelligent design hypothesis is available and legitimate as an explanation of ET's communications (if they were to occur). Interestingly, even Dawkins would agree—but only because of what Dawkins calls ET's "provenance" (origin).[16] According to Dawkins, "Entities that are complex enough to be intelligent are products of an evolutionary process. No matter how god-like they may seem when we encounter them [e.g., via their messages], they didn't start that way."[17] But, we should notice, these claims are sheer assumption on Dawkins' part. Moreover, and more importantly, we should also notice that whether an alleged message is truly a message from ET depends not at all on our knowledge of ET's complexity or origin or provenance, but solely on whether the message displays a design that we can discern.

How do we discern design? Think about some long words in a *Scrabble* game, or consider some sophisticated computer software. Or think about some cave paintings and arrowheads found by an archaeologist. Or imagine, say, the discovery of strange complex machinery on Mars. Or recall the message from outer space in the movie *Contact*. The way to discern empirically that something is designed (or not) is to determine whether the thing satisfies two criteria: (1) that its existence or configuration is highly improbable via non-intelligent causes alone, given what we know from empirical experience of the capacities of non-intelligent causes; and (2) that it is strongly analogous to things we know (also) from empirical experience to be designed by intelligent causes. (Of course, we could be mistaken in our discernment, but this is the nature of empirical reasoning; mistaken or not, we should surely go in the direction that the evidence points us.[18])

Who designed the designer? Perhaps the designer just is (and always has been). Or not. Perhaps the designer is complex (more complex than what it has designed). Or not. The point here is this: we are not required to understand the nature of a designer (that is, whether it is complex or not) or even the origin of a designer (whether it has a designer or not) to determine, rationally and empirically, that something has been designed and, consequently, that a designer exists.

Therefore, as an alleged block or objection to discerning a designer from its designed effects, the infinite-regress/who-designed-the-designer argument is beside the point. *It is not relevant.*[19]

What is worse (for Dawkins), the infinite-regress/who-designed-the-designer argument is also based on a false implicit premise. The explicit premise (defended by Montague) that a designer must be more complex than the thing designed seems to be true (at least of terrestrial designers[20]). However, what is not true is the unspoken but assumed premise that the complexity of a designer makes a designer hypothesis improbable. What is neglected is the fact that the complexity and improbability of the apparently designed object in question *makes the designer hypothesis probable.* Surely, *that* is why the designer hypothesis is appealed to in the first place! Indeed, intelligent designer explanations are accepted in science even if the designer is complex— for example, in archeology (to explain cave paintings and arrowheads), in cryptography (to explain codes), and in forensic science (to explain "who dunnit"). In fact, in these sciences the designer is even *more complex* than the objects or phenomena explained, yet the designer hypothesis is scientifically legitimate. If we were to accept Dawkins' implicit premise, then—to be logically consistent—the aforementioned explanations would not be legitimate. But they *are* legitimate. Thus, it is false that the complexity of a designer makes a design hypothesis improbable.

At this juncture, Dawkins (and Montague) might point out that, yes, it is legitimate to explain various individual instances of organized complexity/apparent design by appeals to other organized complex things, such as terrestrial designers, if the inference is temporary; but it is *not* legitimate to make such an inference in a more general or ultimate way to a supernatural designer such as God. Why not? Because, Dawkins' assumption seems to be, ultimate causes must be

simple and non-intelligent, just as elementary particles are simple and non-intelligent.

In reply, it is reasonable to point out that this seems very much to grant a privileged philosophical status to an *assumed* metaphysics, namely, materialism. But, it should be emphasized, this metaphysical assumption is *at issue* if we are trying to discern whether evidence points to a supernatural intelligence or not. In other words, to privilege this assumption when it is at issue is to incur the fallacy of question-begging, the error in argument of assuming as proven that which is at issue.

Therefore, Dawkins' infinite regress/who-designed-the-designer argument is (to put it mildly) a multi-facetted logico-philosophical blunder. But this means that Montague's attempt to buttress Dawkins' crucial premise (that a designer must be more complex than any object it designs) amounts to an *exacerbation* of a logico-philosophical blunder. Montague's work, then, is basically beside the point, too. It's as if one were to tune-up an engine of an already sunken ship, unaware that the ship has sunk, yet think that doing the tune-up will keep the ship from sinking. In other words, Montague perpetuates the fallacy of irrelevance committed by Dawkins.

Conclusion

To recap, Dawkins' infinite-regress/who-designed-the-designer argument is seriously flawed: it involves question-begging, it relies on a false implicit premise, and, more importantly, it is simply irrelevant as an objection to the design inference. Moreover, Montague's attempt to strengthen Dawkins' argument is basically to perpetuate the irrelevancy. In other words, the argument that constitutes the philosophical foundation of *The God Delusion* is a multi-facetted logico-philosophical blunder and, even with Montague's help, continues to be so.

Contrary to what Dawkins and Montague think, there is no passing of the explanatory buck. Nature's apparent design remains, and continues to suggest an Intelligent Designer.[21]

Notes

1. Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston & New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006).
2. Roger Montague, "Dawkins' Infinite Regress," *Philosophy* 83:323 (January 2008): 113-115.
3. Montague, "Dawkins' Infinite Regress," 114.
4. Chapter 4 of *The God Delusion* contains this crucial argument.
5. Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 113-114.
6. Ibid., 114.
7. Ibid., 120.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid., 113.
10. Montague, 'Dawkins' Infinite Regress,' 113.
11. Ibid., 115.
12. Ibid., 114.
13. Ibid., 115.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
16. Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 73.
17. Ibid.
18. It should be noted that the satisfaction of the above criteria for determining design would constitute neither an argument from ignorance nor Dawkins' "Argument from Personal Incredulity" (Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 128). Rather, the argument would be an argument based on what we know.
19. In other words, Dawkins has committed a fallacy in informal logic, i.e., a violation of the relevancy criterion of a cogent argument. Two other necessary criteria of a cogent argument are the acceptability of the premises and the adequacy or sufficiency of the grounds of the relevant premises, if otherwise rationally acceptable. For more on the criteria of a good argument, see Trudy Govier's, *A Practical Study of Argument*, 6th edition (Belmont, California: Thomson/Wadsworth, 2005).
20. Though some might argue that the complexity is true only of material beings, but not immaterial beings. On this, see Alvin Plantinga, "The Dawkins Confusion," http://www.christianitytoday.com/bc/2007/002/1.21.html [accessed February 29, 2008].
21. For further discussion of the concept of intelligent design and its discernment, see Hendrik van der Breggen, "Miracle Reports, Moral Philosophy, and Contemporary Science" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Waterloo, 2004), pp. 214-226. See too Del Ratzsch, *Nature, Design, and Science: The Status of Design in Natural Science* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2001) and William A. Dembski, *The Design Revolution: Answering the Toughest Questions about Intelligent Design* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2004). Also, see Robert B. Stewart, ed., *Intelligent Design: William A. Dembski &*

Michael Ruse in Dialogue (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2007) and William A. Dembski & Sean McDowell, *Understanding Intelligent Design: Everything You Need to Know in Plain Language* (Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House, 2008). For helpful online discussions of Dawkins' arguments, see: William Lane Craig, "What do you think of Richard Dawkins' argument for atheism in *The God Delusion?*" http://www.reasonablefaith.org/site/News2?page=NewsArticle&id =5493 [accessed February 29, 2008] and (again) Alvin Plantinga, "The Dawkins Confusion," http://www.christianitytoday.com/bc/2007/002/1.21.html [accessed February 29, 2008].