Dawkins's Gambit, Hume's Aroma, and God's Simplicity

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The editors of a recent anthology on natural theology observe that since the time of David Hume, "the vast majority of philosophical attacks against the rationality of theism have borne an unmistakable Humean aroma."[1] Hume's aroma became particularly pungent with the publication of Richard Dawkins's book *The God Delusion* in 2006. One of Dawkins's more well-known remarks is that "Darwin made it possible to be an intellectually fulfilled atheist."[2] In the same paragraph in which he makes that remark, Dawkins credits Hume with effectively criticizing the logic of the design argument, but suggests that Hume's writings nevertheless would likely leave the atheist feeling "unsatisfied" and that it was only the publication of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* some eighty-three years after Hume's death that put the atheist at ease.[3] It is somewhat ironic, therefore, that the central atheistic argument of *The God Delusion* is remarkably similar to an argument advanced by the character Philo in Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*.[4]

In this paper I analyze the central atheistic argument of *The God Delusion* and expose its Humean roots. It turns out that Dawkins's argument is a fragment of a more comprehensive critique of the rationality of theism that is

ABSTRACT: I examine the central atheistic argument of Richard Dawkins's book *The God Delusion* ("Dawkins's Gambit") and illustrate its failure. I further show that Dawkins's Gambit is a fragment of a more comprehensive critique of theism found in David Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. Among the failings of Dawkins's Gambit is that it is directed against a version of the God Hypothesis that few traditional monotheists hold. Hume's critique is more challenging in that it targets versions of the God Hypothesis that are central to traditional monotheism. Theists and atheists should put away *The God Delusion* and pick up Hume's Dialogues.

1. James F. Sennett and Douglas Groothius, eds., *In Defense of Natural Theology: A Post-Humean Assessment* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2005), 9.
2. Richard Dawkins, *The Blind Watchmaker* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996), 6.
3. Ibid.
4. As Daniel Dennett apparently observed; see Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), 157.

found in Hume's *Dialogues*. I will explain this more comprehensive critique and illustrate its superiority to Dawkins's argument. While I will not attempt to show that Hume's critique of theism is decisive, I will explain the nature of that critique and explain why it is much more challenging than Dawkins's argument. One moral of my story will be that theists and atheists alike ought to put away *The God Delusion* and open (or reopen) Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*.

Dawkins's Gambit

Early in *The God Delusion* Dawkins states what he calls "The God Hypothesis": "[T]here exists a superhuman, supernatural intelligence who deliberately designed and created the universe and everything in it, including us."[5] Although he does not explicitly say so in this passage, I think Dawkins also understands this supernatural intelligence as lacking an external explanation. Dawkins understands the God Hypothesis as positing an Uncreated Creator; his aim is to prove that such a being almost certainly does not exist. Thus, we may state the God Hypothesis as follows:

> (GH) There exists a superhuman, supernatural intelligence that created the universe and has no external explanation.

Dawkins's argument against this thesis begins with the idea that God is supposed to provide a certain kind of explanation for various features of the universe that are very unlikely to have come into existence all at once entirely by chance. More precisely, God is supposed to provide *an intelligent-design explanation* for complex natural phenomena, where x provides an intelligent-design explanation for y just in case y's existence can be understood in terms of intentional activity on the part of x. To take a simple example at hand: I provide an intelligent-design explanation for the existence of the article you are presently reading in that the words that make up the article were intentionally written by me. Unlike the features of the universe that God is supposed to explain, however, God is not explained by anything external to Himself. Thus, God is the ultimate explanation of all complex natural phenomena and has no explanation outside of Himself. Dawkins argues that it is extremely improbable that any being with both these features exists. A crucial premise of the argument is that "[h]owever statistically improbable the entity you seek to explain by invoking a designer, the designer himself has got to be at least as improbable."[6] This is so because God must contain at least as much complexity as the thing God is supposed to explain, yet God is not explained by anything external to Himself. This seems to imply that God came into existence all at once entirely by chance. But given God's required

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5. Ibid., 31.
6. Ibid., 114.

complexity, this is very unlikely, and hence it is very unlikely that God exists at all. Dawkins puts it this way: "God tries to have his free lunch and be it too."[7] The argument can be formulated as follows:

Dawkins's Ultimate Boeing 747 Gambit[8]
(1) If God exists, then God has these two properties: (i) He provides an intelligent-design explanation for all natural, complex phenomena in the universe and (ii) He has no explanation external to Himself.
(2) Anything that provides an intelligent-design explanation for the natural, complex phenomena in the universe is at least as complex as such phenomena.
(3) So, if God exists, then God has these two properties: (i) He is at least as complex as the natural, complex phenomena in the universe and (ii) He has no explanation external to Himself. (from 1 and 2)
(4) It is very improbable that there exists something that (i) is at least as complex as the natural, complex phenomena in the universe and (ii) has no explanation external to itself.
(5) Therefore, it is very improbable that God exists. (from 3 and 4)

The second premise is substantive and crucial, and Dawkins insists on it repeatedly:

> Seen clearly, intelligent design will turn out to be a redoubling of the problem. Once again, this is because the designer himself . . . immediately raises the problem of his own origin. Any entity capable of intelligently designing something as improbable as a Dutchman's Pipe (or a universe) would have to be even more improbable than a Dutchman's Pipe. Far from terminating the vicious regress, God aggravates it with a vengeance.[9]

It is here that the Humean roots of Dawkins's Gambit are most evident. In Part 4 of Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, the character Philo argues that "there is no ground to suppose a plan of the world to be formed in the Divine Mind, consisting of distinct ideas, differently arranged, in the same manner as an architect forms in his head the plan of a house which he intends to execute" because "a mental world or universe of ideas requires a cause as much as does a material world or universe of objects; and,

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7. Ibid.
8. Dawkins names the argument after an example associated with Fred Hoyle. Hoyle allegedly likened the probability of life originating on earth to the probability that a hurricane sweeping through a scrap yard would assemble a Boeing 747. See *The God Delusion*, 113. Some critics construe Dawkins's Gambit as the "who designed the designer?" objection. Although there are some passages that suggest such an interpretation, I think Dawkins's Gambit is more happily understood as I have formulated it here, not least because this argument is more interesting than the "who designed the designer?" objection.
9. Ibid., 120.

if similar in its arrangement, must require a similar cause."[10] Compare those remarks with this rhetorical question posed by Dawkins: "How do [theists] cope with the argument that any God capable of designing a universe . . . must be a supremely complex and improbable entity who needs an even bigger explanation than the one he is supposed to provide?"[11] Like Philo, Dawkins maintains that an intelligent designer of the universe stands in need of explanation at least as much as the universe itself because the designer must be at least as complex as the universe itself. Because of the complexity the intelligent designer must possess, it is unlikely that the designer came into existence through chance. But since theists deny that God has an external explanation, they presumably (by Dawkins's lights) are committed to saying that God did in fact come into existence through chance. Thus, theists are committed to the existence of a very improbable entity—one that is remarkably complex and yet is a product of chance. While the existence of such a being is not absolutely impossible, it is highly improbable. This is why Dawkins states the conclusion of his gambit as the claim that "God *almost* certainly does not exist."[12]

The Failure of the Gambit

There are various versions of what Dawkins calls "the God Hypothesis" and, as many of Dawkins's critics have pointed out, Dawkins's argument seems to be directed against a version of the God Hypothesis that is at odds with much traditional western theology. For instance, Thomas Nagel says this in his review of *The God Delusion*:

> If the [design] argument is supposed to show that a supremely adept and intelligent natural being, with a super-body and a super-brain, is responsible for the design and the creation of life on earth, then of course this "explanation" is no advance on the phenomenon to be explained. . . . [However,] [t]he explanation of his existence as a chance concatenation of atoms is not a possibility for which we must find an alternative, because that is not what anybody means by God.[13]

Nagel's comments indicate that in order to evaluate Dawkins's Gambit properly, we need to consider what Dawkins means when he says that God must be at least as *complex* as the natural phenomena God is supposed to explain. Nagel seems to construe Dawkins as claiming that God must have at least as much *physical* complexity as the natural phenomena God is sup-

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10. David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998), 30.

11. Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 147.

12. Ibid., 137, 189 (emphasis added).

13. Thomas Nagel, "The Fear of Religion," *The New Republic*, October 23, 2006, 26.

posed to explain. On this interpretation, premise (2) of Dawkins's Gambit could be restated this way:

> (2a) Anything that provides an intelligent-design explanation for the natural, complex phenomena in the universe has at least as much *physical* complexity as such phenomena.

In the previous section I noted that the second premise of Dawkins's Gambit is essential to his overall argument and that he asserts it repeatedly. A weakness of his argument is that he doesn't provide much support for this crucial premise. This problem is exacerbated if (2a) is the proper understanding of (2) since (2a) implies that anything that can provide an intelligent-design explanation for physical phenomena must itself be physical. It is hard to see why we should accept (2a) in the absence of an argument for its truth.

In a recent critical discussion of Dawkins's argument in this journal, Gregory Ganssle suggests another way of understanding Dawkins's claim:

> It is not clear what Dawkins means by claiming that God would be complex. Certainly he does not mean that God is a complex physical thing made of different parts. He must mean that God's life requires a complex mental structure—albeit a nonphysical one.[14]

There is some weak textual evidence in *The God Delusion* in support of this interpretation. At one point, Dawkins says this: "God may not have a brain made of neurons, or a CPU made of silicon, but if he has the powers attributed to him he must have something far more elaborately and non-randomly constructed than the largest brain or the largest computer we know."[15] Here Dawkins seems at least to hint at the possibility of a nonphysical God while simultaneously insisting on God's complexity.

With Ganssle's interpretation in mind, let us direct our attention to the fourth premise of the Gambit:

> (4) It is very improbable that there exists something that (i) is at least as complex as the natural, complex phenomena in the universe and (ii) has no explanation external to itself.

Much of the support for this premise rests on the idea that the more complex a being is, the less likely it is that such a being would spontaneously come into existence by chance alone. Dawkins sees a kind of tension between conditions (i) and (ii) specified in (4) above. If something has no explanation external to itself, then presumably it somehow came into existence on its own. The more complex the entity in question is, the less likely it is that this would occur. Thus, a spontaneously-formed God who is at least as complex as the physical universe itself is very improbable.

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14. Gregory Ganssle, "Dawkins's Best Argument: The Case against God in *The God Delusion*," *Philosophia Christi* 10 (2008), 41.

15. Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 154.

One reply a theist might make here is that Dawkins has overlooked an important difference between God and natural complex phenomena: Natural phenomena are contingent things (they exist but could fail to exist) whereas God exists necessarily (He exists and it is impossible for Him not to exist). Ganssle puts the point this way:

> God set up the laws of nature. They are contingent on the way God set them up. God himself is not subject to them. What is it, then, that God's existence could be dependent on? It does not seem that there is anything outside God on which he could depend. Whether or not he existed would not depend upon how the universe turned out. So God's existence, if he exists, is best thought of as necessary.[16]

If God is a necessary being, then He did not come into existence all at once entirely by chance because He did not *come into existence* at all.[17] Thus, *contra* premise (4) of Dawkins's Gambit, the fact that a given thing is complex and lacks an explanation external to itself does not imply that the existence of the thing in question is improbable. Premise (4) does not hold in the case of things that exist necessarily; hence, it does not hold in the case of God.

The central weakness of Dawkins's Gambit, then, is that it is aimed primarily at proving the nonexistence of a being that is unlike the God of traditional monotheism in some important ways. There are various versions of what Dawkins calls "the God Hypothesis," and his argument is ineffective against some of them. To see this point more clearly, we may distinguish these two versions of the God Hypothesis:

(GH1) There exists a *contingent, physical, complex*, superhuman, supernatural intelligence that created the universe and has no external explanation.

(GH2) There exists a *necessary, nonphysical, complex*, superhuman, supernatural intelligence that created the universe and has no external explanation.

Dawkins's argument may be effective against (GH1), but no clear-thinking Jew, Christian, or Muslim accepts that thesis. (GH2) is much closer to traditional monotheism than is (GH1), but Dawkins's Gambit is ineffective against (GH2). In light of this, I must side with those critics of *The God Delusion* who have judged Dawkins's Gambit to be a failure. However, I think a more comprehensive and challenging critique of the God Hypothesis (or,

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16. Ganssle, "Dawkins's Best Argument," 41. Also see Peter Williams, "The Big Bad Wolf, Theism and the Foundations of Intelligent Design," http://www.epsociety.org/library/articles.asp?pid=53&ap=1.

17. A similar objection is based on the claim that God is eternal. Richard Swinburne makes this claim in *Is There a God?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 45.

more accurately, Hypotheses) is to be found in Hume's *Dialogues*. I turn now to making this case.

Cleanthes' Gambit

In Part 9 of Hume's *Dialogues*, the character Cleanthes poses this question: "[W]hy may not the material universe be the necessarily existent Being"?[18] The relevance of this rhetorical question to the present discussion is as follows: If the idea of necessarily existing complex entities makes sense, why not suppose that the natural complex phenomena themselves exist necessarily and have no external explanation? Dawkins's Gambit seeks to establish that the God Hypothesis is *improbable*; a different strategy involves making the case that the God Hypothesis is *unnecessary.* Ganssle's appeal to God's necessary existence short-circuits Dawkins's Gambit, but it seems to open the door to what we might call "Cleanthes' Gambit":

Cleanthes' Gambit
(1) Either (*a*) the natural universe exists contingently and was created by a necessarily existing complex God or (*b*) the natural universe itself exists necessarily.
(2) (*a*) and (*b*) account for the existence of the natural universe equally well, and (*b*) is simpler than (*a*).
(3) If (2), then it is more reasonable to believe (*b*) than it is to believe (*a*).
(4) If (1) and (3), then it is reasonable to believe that (*b*) is true.
(5) Therefore, it is reasonable to believe that (*b*) is true (from 1–4).[19]

One obvious objection to (*b*) is that we observe natural complex phenomena being created and destroyed all the time, which apparently indicates that their existence is contingent. But Cleanthes' proposal can avoid this difficulty if we think of the universe as a four-dimensional structure and suppose that it is this entire structure that exists necessarily.[20] So, while it is true that complex natural phenomena come into existence and go out of

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18. Hume, *Dialogues*, 56.

19. It should be noted that Cleanthes's Gambit is not, strictly speaking, an argument for atheism. Its conclusion is entirely compatible with the existence of God. But this Gambit could function as part of a larger atheistic argument in that if cogent, it undermines one reason for believing that God exists, namely, that God is necessary to account for the existence of the natural universe.

20. It turns out that there may be more than four dimensions. One contemporary physicist suggests that string theory indicates that there are in fact ten dimensions—nine spatial dimensions and one time dimension. See Brian Greene, *The Elegant Universe* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999), 203. But I do not think that this complication affects the basic argument of this section.

existence, it is also true that all of this happens necessarily.[21] Of course, we can conceive of the four-dimensional structure being different than it is, or not existing at all. However, we can also conceive of there being no God, so the theist who believes in a necessarily existing God can hardly maintain that conceivability is a reliable guide to possibility.[22] If God can exist necessarily despite the fact that His nonexistence is conceivable, why may not the same be true of the natural universe?

Some contemporary theists recognize that if it is necessarily true that God exists, that God exists is a *nonobvious* necessary truth, one that cannot be seen to be true simply by considering it. For example, Alvin Plantinga asserts that "it is indeed necessarily true [that God exists], but it isn't self-evident to us."[23] Cleanthes suggests that the same may be true of the natural universe, declaring that "[w]e dare not affirm that we know all the qualities of matter; and, for aught we can determine, it may contain some qualities which, were they known, would make its non-existence appears as great a contradiction as that twice two is five."[24] If God can exist necessarily despite His existence not being self-evident to us, why may not the same be true of the natural universe?

Therefore, although (i) it is conceivable that the natural universe does not exist (or is different from the way it actually is), and (ii) that the natural universe exists and has the nature it does is not self-evident to us, it may nevertheless be the case that it is necessarily true that the natural universe exists and has the nature it has. Given that both *God exists* and *the natural universe exists* are not self-evident to us and can be conceived to be false, it is hard to see a reasonable basis for admitting the possibility of a necessarily existing complex God while denying the possibility of a necessarily existing complex four-dimensional universe.[25] As Cleanthes puts it: "It must be some unknown . . . qualities which can make [God's] non-existence appear impossible or his attributes unalterable: And no reason can be assigned why these qualities may not belong to matter."[26]

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21. Matters are complicated by the possibility that humans possess (indeterministic) free will; the existence of this sort of free will would introduce a certain amount of contingency into the universe. However, even if this sort of free will exists, it does not threaten the necessity of what we might call *foundational* complex natural phenomena—those complex natural phenomena whose existence temporally precedes the existence of humans, and consequently are not rendered contingent by the existence of human free will.

22. Ibid.

23. Alvin Plantinga, "Reply to Tooley's Opening Statement," in Alvin Plantinga and Michael Tooley, *Knowledge of God* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008), 154.

24. Hume, *Dialogues*, 56.

25. It should be noted that Cleanthes does not actually endorse option (*b*). Instead, Cleanthes is making the point that *if* the concept of a being that exists necessarily in virtue of having certain unknown properties makes sense at all, *then* it is entirely plausible to suppose that the natural universe itself is such a being. On this point, see Donald E. Stahl, "Hume's Dialogue IX Defended," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 34 (1984), 506–7.

26. Hume, *Dialogues*, 56.

God's Simplicity

So far we have considered two main versions of the God Hypothesis:

(GH1) There exists a *contingent, physical, complex*, superhuman, supernatural intelligence that created the universe and has no external explanation.

(GH2) There exists a *necessary, nonphysical, complex*, superhuman, supernatural intelligence that created the universe and has no external explanation.

(GH1) is susceptible to Dawkins's Gambit whereas (GH2) opens the door to Cleanthes' Gambit. However, there is a third version of the God Hypothesis that may allow the theist to avoid both Gambits:

(GH3) There exists a *necessary, nonphysical, simple*, superhuman, supernatural intelligence that created the universe and has no external explanation.

According to Richard Swinburne, theism is a "very simple hypothesis" because it "postulates the simplest kind of person that there could be."[27] As Swinburne understands theism, it purports to provide a complete explanation of the natural universe in terms of a single essentially omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly free being.[28] Omnipotence and omniscience are simple in that they are infinite and "[t]here is a simplicity about . . . infinity that particular finite numbers lack."[29] A perfectly free being is one "whose actions are determined only by his uncaused choice at the moment of choice" and such a being is simpler than one "with an inbuilt detailed specification of how to act."[30]

Granting Swinburne's contention that the hypothesis of a single person with three simple properties is a simple one, the Christian tradition nevertheless includes a line of thought that posits an even simpler God. Thomas Aquinas claims that complexity in God is incompatible with God having no explanation external to Himself on the grounds that "every composite has a cause, for things in themselves different cannot unite unless something causes them to unite."[31] God cannot consist of multiple parts, physical or otherwise, because if He did, some external explanation would be required to account for the fact that God's various parts are united in a single being. Indeed, Aquinas denies the presence of various kinds of complexity in God:

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27. Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 96–7.
28. Ibid., 98.
29. Ibid., 334.
30. Ibid., 98.
31. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1947), I, q.3, a.7, p.19.

> [T]here is neither composition of quantitative parts in God, since He is not a body; nor composition of form and matter; nor does His nature differ from His *suppositum*; nor His essence from His existence; neither is there in Him composition of genus and difference, nor of subject and accident. Therefore, it is clear that God is nowise composite, but is altogether simple.[32]

Aquinas is hardly alone in his endorsement of the doctrine of divine simplicity. Nicholas Wolterstorff writes: "Once upon a time, back in the so-called middle ages, theologians, Jewish, Christian, and Muslim alike, in developing their doctrine of God, gave extraordinary prominence to the attribute of simplicity."[33] Among the implications of the doctrine of divine simplicity as it is traditionally understood are that God is identical to His essence, His existence, and each of His properties (and consequently that all of these things are identical with each other).[34] Wolterstorff suggests that even to understand this doctrine "we [contemporary philosophers] must enter imaginatively into a style of ontology different from that which is dominant among us."[35] Although Wolterstorff himself does not ultimately endorse this understanding of divine simplicity, his remarks indicate the doctrine's importance in monotheistic thought.

Those who endorse (GH3) will reject the second premise of Dawkins's Gambit:

(2) Anything that provides an intelligent-design explanation for the natural, complex phenomena in the universe is at least as complex as such phenomena.

Dawkins considers the possibility of a simple God. Unfortunately, his criticism of this possibility amounts to little more than repeated assertion of (2), with emphasis: "A God capable of continuously monitoring and controlling the individual status of every particle in the universe *cannot* be simple."[36] And: "God may not have a brain made of neurons, or a CPU made of silicon, but if he has the powers attributed to him he must have something far more elaborately and non-randomly constructed than the largest brain or the largest computer we know."[37] Dawkins quotes with approval Keith Ward's rejection of the Thomistic doctrine that God is simple "in the sense that what

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32. Ibid.

33. Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Divine Simplicity," in *Philosophy of Religion*, Philosophical Perspectives 5 (Atascadero, CA: Ridgeview, 1991), 531. Also see Brian Leftow, "Is God an Abstract Object?" *Noûs* 24 (1990): 581.

34. Wolterstorff, "Divine Simplicity," 532.

35. Ibid., 535. Wolterstorff labels this other style of ontology "constituent ontology" (541). Also see William Vallicella, "Divine Simplicity," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/divine-simplicity/, and Jeffrey Brower, "Making Sense of Divine Simplicity," *Faith and Philosophy* 25 (2008): 3–30.

36. Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 149.

37. Ibid., 154.

is true of any part of God is true of the whole."[38] Dawkins agrees with Ward's alternative proposal that if God existed, He might be "indivisible" but would also be "internally complex."[39] But Dawkins provides no argument for his view that Ward's understanding of divine simplicity is plausible whereas Aquinas's is not.

Earlier I noted that one weakness of Dawkins's Gambit is the lack of support for the crucial second premise of his argument. An implication of this weakness is that the appeal to divine simplicity may offer another way of defusing Dawkins's Gambit.

What about Cleanthes' Gambit? Recall that Cleanthes' Gambit depends on the plausibility of: (*b*) the natural universe itself exists necessarily. It is hard to see how a theist (like Ganssle) who posits a complex necessarily existing God could consistently deny a certain degree of plausibility to (*b*). Thus, Ganssle's favored rejoinder to Dawkins's Gambit seems to strengthen the force of Cleanthes' Gambit. On the other hand, a theist (like Aquinas) who posits a simple God does not thereby play into Cleanthes' hands. Furthermore, to the extent that Aquinas's claim that every composite entity must have an external cause is plausible, it provides a reason to reject (*b*).[40]

Here again is the first premise of Cleanthes' Gambit:

(1) Either (*a*) the natural universe exists contingently and was created by a necessarily existing complex God or (*b*) the natural universe itself exists necessarily.

The defender of divine simplicity rejects this premise on the grounds that there is a third plausible alternative: That the natural universe exists contingently and was created by a necessarily existing *simple* God. The defender of divine simplicity endorses the third version of the God Hypothesis:

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38. Ibid., 150.

39. Ibid.

40. It might be suggested that a version of the doctrine of divine simplicity less extreme than the Thomistic version sketched here could evade both Dawkins's Gambit and Cleanthes's Gambit. Consider, for instance, the view that while God's mind may contain many ideas, and God's ideas will often be quite complex, God is simple *as a disembodied mind.* There may be complexity in God's *ideas*, but the divine *mind* itself is simple (thanks to an anonymous referee for this suggestion). However, I think this view is no less susceptible to Cleanthes's gambit than is (GH2). Here is why: God is omniscient and hence has complete knowledge of all the real numbers. Thus, the view under consideration entails that either (*a*) God has a single, infinitely complex idea corresponding to (on some views, identical with) the real numbers or (*b*) God has infinitely many ideas, each one corresponding to (or identical with) each real number. If God is essentially omniscient and exists necessarily, then the infinitely complex idea (option *a*) exists necessarily or infinitely many ideas (option *b*) exist necessarily. Either way, the view in question implies the necessary existence of *some* sort of complexity—and it is precisely this implication that makes plausible Cleanthes's proposal that the natural universe itself exists necessarily. The fundamental point here is that it is hard to see a rational basis for admitting the plausibility of one kind of necessarily existing complex entity while denying that the natural universe itself could be such an entity.

(GH3) There exists a *necessary, nonphysical, simple*, superhuman, supernatural intelligence that created the universe and has no external explanation.

While Dawkins offers little in the way of serious criticism of this option, Hume's *Dialogues* suggests an interesting line of attack against (GH3). Wolterstorff observes that the doctrine of divine simplicity entails a number of important conclusions about God's nature. Indeed, this is why thinkers like Aquinas saw the doctrine of divine simplicity as central: "If one grants God's simplicity, then one also has to grant a large number of other divine attributes: immateriality, eternity, immutability, having no unrealized potentialities, etc."[41] In Hume's *Dialogues*, the character Cleanthes draws on these implications to argue that a simple God cannot also be a personal God by arguing that a simple (in the Thomistic sense) mind is impossible:

> [T]hough it be allowed that the Deity possesses attributes of which we have no comprehension, yet ought we never to ascribe to him any attributes which are absolutely incompatible with that intelligent nature essential to him. A mind whose acts and sentiments and ideas are not distinct and successive, one that is wholly simple and totally immutable, is a mind which has no thought, no reason, no will, no sentiment, no love, no hatred; or, in a word, *is no mind at all*.[42]

Whether or not Cleanthes' remarks establish the *impossibility* of a perfectly simple mind, they drive home the *otherness* of such a mind. The doctrine of divine simplicity suggests that God's mind is an alien mind, radically different from any human mind, and far beyond the understanding of human beings. As Jeffrey Brower remarks, "[f]ew tenets of classical theism strike contemporary philosophers as more perplexing or difficult to comprehend than the doctrine of divine simplicity."[43]

Richard Crean has recently appealed to divine simplicity to respond to Dawkins's Gambit. Crean himself emphasizes the difficulty human beings face in understanding God's simple mind:

> [I]n the realm of thought, greater simplicity is a mark of greater perfection. The better the knower, the simpler his manner of knowing. Far from supposing, then, that a being perfect enough to know and design the entire universe must be extremely complex, we ought to suppose that he would be extremely simple. Nor should it bother us if we cannot imagine what his knowledge would be 'like'. A dog, whose knowledge is limited to what his senses can perceive, could not imagine how any being could have 'a million oak trees' as a *single* object of knowledge. . . . [I]f we desired by means of our own experience to

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41. Wolterstorff, "Divine Simplicity," 531.

42. Hume, *Dialogues*, 29 (emphasis added). For a contemporary attempt to address at least some of these concerns, see Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann, "Eternity," *The Journal of Philosophy* 78 (1981): 429–58.

43. Brower, "Divine Simplicity," 3.

grasp the nature of the divine knowledge, we should be in the position
of a dog trying by its own experience of the world to understand its
master's thoughts.[44]

Crean remarks that our inability to understand God "should not bother
us." But this claim is ambiguous. Perhaps God's incomprehensibility should
not bother us in that it should not lead us to infer that God does not exist.
As Crean's dog analogy aptly illustrates, there is little reason to suppose that
reality is limited to what can be understood by the human mind. On the other
hand, that theism provides an explanation for the existence of the natural
universe is often put forward as a reason to believe that theism is true. In this
context, our inability to understand God should bother us. More precisely,
our inability to grasp the nature of the primary entity posited by the theistic
explanans should make us doubt whether much of an explanation has been
given at all. Thus, there appears to be tension between the God Who Explains
and the God Who is Simple. On the one hand, God is supposed to render in-
telligible the nature and existence of the universe. On the other hand, God is
said to be transcendent, mysterious, Other. But the more mysterious God is,
the less He constitutes an intelligible explanation for anything. Explanations
shed light; mysteries are shrouded in darkness.

Hume emphasizes this tension in the *Dialogues* through his inclusion
of two quite different theistic characters, Cleanthes and Demea. Cleanthes
(characterized as an "anthropomorphite") understands God primarily as
the intelligent designer of the physical universe whereas Demea (labeled a
"mystic") emphasizes God's transcendent, mysterious nature. It is no ac-
cident that the two characters, though they are both theists, are on opposite
sides of essentially every substantial issue that arises in the *Dialogues*. For
example, Demea is critical of Cleanthes' attempt to establish God's existence
by way of an argument from design. One of the worries Demea has about
Cleanthes' approach is that it may "render us presumptuous, by making us
imagine we comprehend the Deity and have some adequate idea of his nature
and attributes"[45] Cleanthes, for his part, at one point rhetorically asks Demea:
"[H]ow do you mystics, who maintain the absolute incomprehensibility of
the Deity, differ from skeptics or atheists, who assert that the first cause of all
is unknown and unintelligible?"[46] Through the characters of Cleanthes and
Demea, Hume seeks to highlight the tension between the God Who Explains
and the God Who is Simple. The greater this tension, the more obscure is
(GH3). One worry lurking here is that (GH3) turns out to be equivalent to
this hypothesis:

44. Richard Crean, *God Is No Delusion: A Refutation of Richard Dawkins* (Fort Collins, CO:
Ignatius, 2007), 31–2.

45. Hume, *Dialogues*, 26.

46. Ibid., 28.

(GH3a) There exists a *necessary, nonphysical, simple, largely incom-prehensible something-or-other* that created the universe and has no external explanation.

As Demea's comments quoted above suggest, it is far from clear that (GH3a) is even a distinctively *theistic* hypothesis. It is something that at least some agnostics and atheists would find little reason to reject.[47]

Conclusion

We have now considered three versions of the God Hypothesis:

(GH1) There exists a *contingent, physical, complex*, superhuman, super-natural intelligence that created the universe and has no external explanation.

(GH2) There exists a *necessary, nonphysical, complex*, superhuman, su-pernatural intelligence that created the universe and has no exter-nal explanation.

(GH3) There exists a *necessary, nonphysical, simple*, superhuman, su-pernatural intelligence that created the universe and has no exter-nal explanation.

Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* includes critical ex-aminations of all of these hypotheses. Taken together, these arguments sug-gest that (GH1) is *improbable*, (GH2) is *unnecessary*, and (GH3) is at best *obscure* and at worst *incoherent*. In *The God Delusion* what we find is es-sentially a fragment of Hume's overall attack on the rationality of theism. Because Dawkins offers only the fragment of Hume's critique that focuses on (GH1), theists can easily defuse Dawkins's Gambit simply by pointing out that traditional monotheists have typically endorsed (GH2) or (GH3) rather than (GH1). Therefore, Dawkins's Gambit is not a convincing argu-ment against the existence of God.

At this point, it is worth considering a defense of *The God Delusion* that is known as "the Courtier's Reply." The reply was initially presented not by Dawkins but rather by P. Z. Myers; however, Dawkins endorses the reply in the preface to the paperback version of *The God Delusion*.[48] Myers imagines a courtier responding on behalf of the emperor from the famous Hans Chris-tian Andersen fairy tale "The Emperor's New Clothes." Likening Dawkins to the child who points out that the Emperor has no clothes, Myers imagines the courtier responding, in part, as follows:

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47. See, e.g., Quentin Smith, "Time Was Created by a Timeless Point: An Atheist Explana-tion of Spacetime," in *God and Time: Essays on the Divine Nature*, ed. Gregory Ganssle and David Woodruff (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 95–128.

48. For Myers's original presentation of the courtier's reply, see http://scienceblogs.com/pharyngula/2006/12/the_courtiers_reply.php.

> I have considered the impudent accusations of Mr. Dawkins with ex-
> asperation at his lack of serious scholarship. He has apparently not
> read the detailed discourses of Count Roderigo of Seville on the ex-
> quisite and exotic leathers of the Emperor's boots, nor does he give
> a moment's consideration to Bellini's masterwork, *On the Lumines-
> cence of the Emperor's Feathered Hat*. . . . Until Dawkins has trained
> in the shops of Paris and Milan, until he has learned to tell the differ-
> ence between a ruffled flounce and a puffy pantaloon, we should all
> pretend he has not spoken out against the Emperor's taste.[49]

As this excerpt should make clear, the courtier's reply is intended as a response to those who criticize *The God Delusion* on the grounds that it fails to engage with sophisticated work in theology. The essence of the reply is that since theology deals primarily with a nonexistent entity (God), there is no need for Dawkins to engage with such material.

The reply does nothing to blunt the criticisms offered in this paper. A central element of my critique is that Dawkins's Gambit provides no reason at all to doubt some of the most widely-held versions of the target of his attack, the God Hypothesis. I do not know exactly how much theology one needs to know to disprove the existence of God, but one needs to know at least enough theology to understand the various widely-held conceptions of God. In general, in order to argue effectively against a given hypothesis, one needs to know enough to characterize that hypothesis accurately. Further-more, if one intends to *disprove* God's existence, it is hardly reasonable to dismiss criticisms of one's putative disproof on the grounds that God doesn't exist anyway.

Thus, the central atheistic argument of *The God Delusion* is unconvinc-ing, and the courtier's reply cannot save it. However, Hume's critique of monotheism is not so easily blunted in that the *Dialogues Concerning Natu-ral Religion* contains challenges to all three versions of the God Hypothesis identified in this paper. Therefore, atheists who wish to press the case against the God Hypothesis ought to look to Hume rather than Dawkins, and theists who wish to defend the God Hypothesis ought not to rest content with cri-tiquing Dawkins's Gambit. Parties on both sides of the debate should engage with the best the other side has to offer, and Hume is the more worthy model for atheists and the more challenging opponent for theists. He may be gone, but his aroma lingers on.[50]

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49. Ibid.
50. [Acknowledgements]