Dawkins' Infinite Regress

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Abstract
In *The God Delusion*, Richard Dawkins gives, but runs together, two criticisms of the argument from design. One is evolutionary and scientific; the other is a philosophical infinite regress argument. Disentangling them makes Dawkins' views clearer. The regress relies on the premiss that a designer must be more complex than the thing designed. I offer two comments about theists who might accept the regress, citing God's infinity. These comments defend Dawkins: but only by making him, when using his regress argument, an atheist who knows (if his "complexity" premiss holds) that God cannot exist.

In his brilliant and bruising book *The God Delusion*,[1] Richard Dawkins attacks the argument from design. One of his main arguments is that evolution by natural selection adequately explains apparent design in nature. Another is an argument to an infinite regress. In this, he takes the creationist premiss that a wing or an eye, for example, is too complex to have emerged by chance from inorganic matter in one bound. (Of course, Dawkins does not believe this happens. He has written seven books which powerfully explain why it doesn't.) Creationists hold that the great complexity of an eye or a wing requires a supernatural intelligent designer.

To this creationist premiss about complexity needing a designer, Dawkins adds a premiss of his own: the designer must be more complex than the thing designed. If there were a supernatural intelligent designer – let's call him Sid – he would be very complex. For he has to plan for all the particles in the universe. But, being so complex, he would also need a designer. Then the Sid's designer, being even more complex, would need a Sid's designer's designer, and so on. The regress is under way, and can never be stopped. So the idea of the Sid seems to be in trouble.

Dawkins believes he is giving us argument which can show only that the Sid is extremely improbable. But this is a mistake, which flows from his belief that we cannot prove that something does not exist. His favourite example is Russell's celestial teapot. This orbits at too great a distance to be spotted by telescope or radar. We can't prove it doesn't exist, but it's very improbable. Now remember

[1] Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, (London 2006, Bantam Press).

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something Wittgenstein said: we nourish our thinking on a one-sided diet of examples. Maths and philosophy give us many examples of logical and conceptual proofs that something doesn't exist. There can be no construction, using only ruler and compasses, which produces a square equal in area to a given circle. And since there can be none, no such thing exists. Dawkins' own regress argument looks as if it would make the Sid impossible. So the Sid couldn't and therefore wouldn't exist, if Dawkins' argument holds.

If Dawkins were to disentangle the two arguments, he would strengthen his position. The argument from evolution does make the Sid extremely improbable. For evolution by natural selection is falsifiable, and not yet falsified. Dawkins' example of the possible falsification of evolution comes from J. B. S. Haldane (128): rabbit fossils in the pre-Cambrian strata. This isn't quite specific enough. A mining engineer could drill a tube down that far, and shoot in some rabbit bones. It's easy to patch this up. A possible falsification is: rabbit fossils in undisturbed pre-Cambrian strata, where the fossils have the right ratios of isotopes for that great age. Yet no such counter-example to evolution by natural selection has so far been found. There is a stack of evidence for it, from Darwin's finches to bacteria resistant to antibiotics.

The regress argument is not scientific but logico-philosophical. It turns on Dawkins' premiss, that a designer must be more complex than the thing designed. We have terrestrial cases of this. George designs dresses and Georgina designs nuclear fusion stations. The maximally compressed information specifying George is longer than that for one of his slinky dresses. But Dawkins is willing to extend his premiss from the terrestrial. If there were a supernatural realm, then any designer there must be more complex than the thing designed. This commits him to the idea that any conceivable designer is, and must be, more complex than the thing designed. The idea becomes true by definition.

The best way to defend this is to challenge the creationist or theist to produce a counter-example, a case of a designer simpler than the thing designed. Asserting that the Sid – or God, if enough attributes are added – must be simple is begging the question. (I say 'or God', thinking that creationists are not the only theists who hold that God is, among other things, a designer.) We would need a reasoned counter-example that the atheist is forced to admit. If one person could design, from scratch and with no reference to earlier work, a vast network of linked supercomputers and all their hardware, software and operating systems, this looks at first as if it might do. The information needed to specify the system could be more than that needed

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to specify the designer. But the catch is that all this must spring from the genius of one person with no previous contributions from elsewhere to the product. This seems enough to sink the counter-argument. Still, maybe there's an ingenious theist out there who can do better.

A typical infinite regress argument goes like this. Say Fred puzzles over what a mind is, and thinks (crudely) that it must be a little person pulling levers inside the head. Then that little person must have a mind too, otherwise Fred would be trying to put forward an inanimate puppet to explain what a mind is. But then the little person has a mind, which on this crude theory means that there is another even smaller person inside that one, pulling its levers; and so on for ever. This argument works against the crude theory because persons like us are finite beings and cannot contain any actual infinities.

But now the theist can offer an answer to the regress of designers. He says that his concept of deity is among other things a concept of an infinite being. And so, as far as the concept goes, the deity could contain actual infinities. Part of the theist's idea may be that his deity, if it existed, would have already lasted for an infinite time. He would want to say that his idea of deity is of something that does contain the idea of this actual temporal infinity and of other infinities too.

Dawkins can now ask the theist if he really wants to include the idea of this actual infinity of designers in his idea of a deity. It would make the deity a creator only via an infinitely long chain of subordinate designers of lesser complexity. This may seem to be an imperfection compared with the idea of a magnificently infinite creation springing unmediated from the divine will. And the idea of a deity is at least the idea of a being with no imperfections. The regress works against the traditional idea of creation, if Dawkins' own special premiss stands.

Instead, some theists might welcome a new perfection into their idea of a deity, a perfection in tune with glorifying twenty-first-century big business. This deity would be like the greatest CEO conceivable, one who controls an infinite hierarchy of delegation. New links arise in the great chain of being, in the form of infinitely stacked design departments. But this could be Dawkins' Trojan horse. These theists would be committed to the idea of a deity who is infinitely bureaucratic.

Dawkins says he is only an atheist who can show that the Sid, and God, are extremely improbable. But from his regress argument he ought to say he is also an atheist who conditionally knows that God can't exist – conditionally on establishing his premiss about designers being more complex than whatever they design. Let him follow where his argument leads him.

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