# WILLIAMS ON DAWKINS – RESPONSE

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Peter Williams ('The Emperor's Incoherent New Clothes: Pointing the Finger at Dawkins' Atheism', *THINK* 24) complains that Richard Dawkins wraps his naturalism in 'a fake finery of counterfeit meaning and purpose'. For his part, Williams has wrapped his complaint in an unoriginal and inapt analogy. The weavers in Hans Christian Andersen's fable announce that the Emperor's clothes are invisible to stupid people; almost the whole population pretends to see them *for fear of being thought stupid*. Fear of being thought stupid does not seem to trouble Richard Dawkins. Moreover, Williams offers no reason to think that such fear motivates any of Dawkins' readers. Perhaps all we are supposed to take from the fable is that Dawkins' naturalism is *obviously* lacking in meaning and purpose. If that is the intended reading, then by using this analogy, Williams has given himself an unnecessarily difficult task. Surely, it would be achievement enough for him to show that Dawkins' naturalism lacks meaning and purpose. There is no reason for Williams to make the extra claim that it *obviously* lacks meaning and purpose. After all, there is an obvious difficulty with arguing over several pages that something is obviously the case.

Setting aside the analogy of imperial nakedness, let us turn to the logic of Williams' critique. According to Williams, Dawkins accuses religious believers of failing to meet their cognitive obligations because they believe without evidence and what is worse, they regard such ungrounded belief as a good thing. Dawkins certainly does say something of the sort: 'Non-fundamentalist, "sensible" religion… is making the world safe for fundamentalism by teaching children, from their earliest years, that unquestioning faith is a

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virtue.'(*The God Delusion*, Black Swan paperback edition, 2007, p. 323). Williams counters that 1) Dawkins does not understand that 'faith' means 'trust' and 'is compatible with evidence', and p. 2) Dawkins' naturalist worldview has no place for normativity in it, so he (Dawkins) cannot appeal to normative standards in his criticism of religious belief.

On the meaning of 'faith', Williams does have a point, but not one that helps his case in the end. Dawkins does seem to take it that the word 'faith' means holding a proposition to be true in the absence of evidence (or even in the presence of counter-evidence), and that this is always a foolish thing to do. Such a straightforward view of the meaning of the word 'faith' is certainly open to challenge. Some religious apologists point out that you can have faith *in* a person as well as faith *that* some proposition is true. For the sake of argument, let us grant that having faith in someone does not reduce analytically to assenting to a proposition about that person. Having faith in a person may indeed be more like having a disposition towards that individual, and perhaps such dispositions cannot be analysed as assent to some set of propositions. Having faith in someone may have nothing to do with propositions at all. Moreover, it is not always foolish to have faith in a person in the absence of evidence. As William James argued in his lecture 'The Will to Believe' (1898), human relationships, from brief acquaintances to the most intimate lifelong commitments, require us to trust others. Someone who did not believe what anyone else says without sufficient independent evidence would live a lonely, dysfunctional life. We take it that other people are decent and trustworthy, without waiting for proof – we have to. We could not function otherwise. In committed relationships, we hold to our trust in close friends, partners and spouses even in the face of (some) counter-evidence.

With this thought about trust in mind, some religious believers describe their faith as a trust *in* God rather than a conviction *that* God exists. Presumably, for such believers, no doubts arise about the existence of God. However, this

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analogy between religious faith and trust between people does not alter the principal point. William James notwithstanding, judgments of human trustworthiness are sensitive to evidence. Years of reliable behaviour deepen trust; on the other hand, frequent unexplained items on the credit card statement and an unfamiliar number on the phone bill will raise suspicions in even the most trusting spouse, as they should. In relationships between humans, trust does not mean utter gullibility. If contrary evidence keeps piling up then, eventually, even the most entrenched trust has to give. Our trust or faith in other people should be sensitive to evidence, even though (following James) we rationally assume that others are trustworthy and faithful unless there is some good reason to think otherwise. The (sound) distinction between faith-that and faith-in does not dispose of our cognitive obligations. Dawkins can still claim that religious believers are culpably insensitive to evidence, even if he allows that religious faith is trust *in* rather than unsupported assertion *that*. He can claim, plausibly, that religions mostly discourage believers from subjecting their trust in God to any kind of evidential check.

Naturally, one wonders what sort of evidence would be relevant to God's trustworthiness, but this question is really asking what talk of trust in God means. We know what kind of evidence would undermine trust in a spouse, or a business partner, or a casual acquaintance, because we know what trusting such people involves. We know how we would suffer if such trust were betrayed. A worried spouse looks specifically for signs of sexual infidelity; a suspicious business partner looks for hidden costs and accounting anomalies. A stranger might arouse our mistrust if he is too eager to please or seems inexplicably nervous. Individual relationships involve specific kinds of trust, and these in turn fix the kind of evidence that would undermine that trust. The relationships that believers say they have with God do not seem to have the same evidence-fixing specificity. In his article about Dawkins, Williams says that faith is compatible with evidence, but he does not say what



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evidence he has in mind. However, there is a general principle that has a bearing on all trust-relations among people. It is a bad sign when someone you trust seems anxious about your trust and keeps looking for assurances about it, either by asking 'You do trust me, don't you?' or insisting 'Just trust me'. Such anxiety may arise from a fear that you will discover an abuse of your trust. Those theistic religious organisations that urge believers to trust God and His representatives might take care not to press the matter too far.

Williams' second and main claim against Dawkins is that Dawkins' 'naturalism' has no place for normativity, so it is incoherent for Dawkins to speak of obligations of any sort. In particular, it is incoherent (says Williams) to complain that religious believers do not do their cognitive duty. In Dawkins' universe, no-one has any duties. Here too, Williams has a point, but not one that does him any good.

Dawkins does seem to be a naturalist (even though the word 'naturalism' does not seem to be in his lexicon). For a naturalist (in this sense), the universe is as natural science describes it. There is no deeper reality into which merely empirical enquiry cannot penetrate. Nor is there any reality to the objects of moral enquiry, such as values, virtues, good, evil and so on. These, for the naturalist, are fictions. Naturalism of this sort is common in philosophy at the moment. It has some technical difficulties with objects like numbers (which are not part of the physical universe, but without which it is very hard to do physics) and money (which is also not part of the physical universe, but which does seem to have a rather firm sort of reality), but these need not detain us now. Dawkins does not write about metaphysics, but what he does say about truth and ethics suggests that he does hold something like this kind of naturalism. Such naturalist perspectives are sometimes called the 'view from nowhere', because natural science does not look at the universe from any privileged point of view. In particular, the fact that scientists are human beings

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belonging to particular cultures and historical moments should not affect the science in the long run. We might say that naturalism looks at the universe from without, except that naturalists do not think that the physical universe has an outside. From this as-if-from-without or view-from-nowhere perspective, values, meanings and purposes do not appear.

So Williams has a point. However, it is a pyrrhic point, because in order to make it, Williams has to take up the same as-if-from-without perspective as natural science. An older and more theological vocabulary calls this perspective 'looking at the world *sub specie aeternitatis*' (under the aspect of eternity, or from the point of view of the eternal). Williams effectively accuses Dawkins of nihilism. How (he asks) can there be meaning, value and purpose if there is no God? This question reveals nihilism in the person asking it. For, it presupposes that without God, the good things in life, the love and laughter, the insight, compassion, beauty and virtue are not good in themselves. The premise of the question is that the things that we know to be good are good only because they have had goodness pumped into them from some outside source. However, human life seems bereft of goodness only if we view it from without, that is, *sub specie aeternitatis*, in other words, in the view-from-nowhere of natural science. Naturalism and theism share that perspective, which is why they both see human life as lacking all intrinsic worth, purpose and meaning. The only difference is that theists try to remedy the lack by positing an external supplier of goodness – God. In doing so, they seem to visualise goodness as a kind of liquid that can be pumped from where it originates to where it is needed. This oddly mechanical image of goodness suggests that the scientific revolution may have affected the minds of theists more deeply than they realise. It doesn't work; goodness is not a sort of stuff that you can pump from here to there. Theists who think that a godless universe would be bereft of meaning, purpose and value are nihilists, whether they know it or not.



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There is no need to share the nihilism of naturalists and theists, because the as-if-from-without view is not the only perspective available, and other viewpoints reveal other kinds of fact. For example, Mozart's father also wrote music, but, as a matter of fact, it is not as good as that of his son. This fact is as factual as any fact you care to name. It can be demonstrated and explained, but not from the point of view of natural science. Music is invisible to physics. Physics can record the changes in air pressure and describe the wave forms, but it cannot distinguish between the orchestra tuning up and the actual performance, let alone identify better and worse music. The differences between music and other sorts of noise, and between better and worse music, are discernible only within the practice of musical performance and appreciation. Within that practice, we can discern facts and norms. Similarly, money is invisible to natural science. Notes and coins are, for physics, just material objects and their equivalence with electronic recordings in the computerised data of banks does not appear in the view from nowhere. Those of us who participate in the money economy have another, closer view of the matter, and we can detect financial facts. If you are in debt, this fact is as factual as your weight (try explaining to your creditor that money is 'just a social construct'). Moreover, because we use money, we can see the reasonableness of money-related virtues and norms. Scientific arguments are also invisible to physics. Nevertheless, from within the practice of science, we can see that some arguments are (in fact) valid while others (in fact) commit logical errors. None of these facts are visible *sub specie aeternitatis.*

Richard Dawkins may be the most famous living atheist, but his is not the only atheism. In revealing the shortcomings of naturalism, Williams makes points that tell equally well against those theisms that look at human life *sub specie aeternitatis*. Such theisms fall to the same objections as the scientific naturalism that they try to oppose. There are other theologies that eschew the view from

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nowhere, theologies that seek to develop a point of view lying within the practices that jointly make up human life. These theologies face a corresponding problem: they struggle to distinguish themselves from Humanism.

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