

# Introduction

In modern times, contemporary academia is acquiring an increasingly public character. Technological advancements over the last number of years have led to an unprecedented accessibility of knowledge. As such, we can no longer be content with conceptual partisans that keep academic disciplines separate. Similarly, the distance between ideologies and value systems is being contracted more and more as time passes, with steady advancements in global communications. This is the context in which this work rests. Consequently, this book will espouse the view that theology must open itself further to the prospects of dialogue with multifarious areas of academia and diverse ideologies. It will advance current efforts in this task not just by engaging in dialogue with worldviews that are easily amenable to theology, but to inherently antithetical perspectives. “Philosophy is dead”, proclaims Stephen Hawking on the first page of his 2010 international bestseller *The Grand Design* co-authored with Leonard Mlodinow.<sup>1</sup> The public character of such sentiments, it will be argued, must be engaged with if theology is to progress, and not fall into a perpetual regression of inward analysis. Theology needs to look outward and engage with the intellectual mosaic of diverse disciplines and philosophies that the modern world has made increasingly accessible.

This book will demonstrate how a dialogical approach to theology can be beneficial, even when dialogue partners advocate a strident hostility toward religious belief. To achieve this aim, we will explore the possibilities of a dialogue with British evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins. Dawkins [b. 1942] was trained and has taught at Oxford University, where he held the position of Charles Simonyi Professor for the Public Understanding of Science from 1995 to 2008. In 2007 *Time* magazine included Dawkins in its rankings of the top 100 most influential people in the world, while *Prospect* magazine voted him third in a list of the top 100 public intellectuals, behind novelist Umberto Eco and Noam Chomsky. He achieved such prominence principally for two reasons. Firstly, he has been an ardent defender of a gene-centered perspective of Darwinian evolution, and promotes the use of this perspective as an explanatory framework in which we can understand human behavior. Secondly, he has been a militant advocate of atheism and virulent critic of religion. Throughout his published work and lectures, he has always denounced religious belief peripherally, and he eventually devoted a full book to the

topic—his 2006 *The God Delusion*. It is for these two reasons that Dawkins should be taken as a dialogue partner. He represents a view from a distant outskirts of the academic realm, which can be identified as atheistic materialism/naturalism advocated from a scientific standpoint. It is exactly because Dawkins is so disagreeable to theology that he is a good choice as a dialogue partner. This will allow us to illustrate how engaging with a contrary worldview can be beneficial. For the purposes of this academic work, this dialogue has been delineated into chapters and subsections. However, it must be noted that these delineations are for practical purposes only; the true dialogue is more holistic and is less amenable to such compartmentalizing. Therefore, throughout this thesis, we will find overlaps between the themes explored in the various chapters and sections. This will unfortunately require that we reiterate/repeat particular aspects of the thesis as we progress.

The first chapter will outline the methodological premises for the dialogue. It will present the motives, method, and limitations of this work. This chapter will justify this dialogue with Dawkins by reference to theological method—the emphasis on interfaith and interdisciplinary dialogue as seen in the work of leading theologians such as Hans Küng, David Tracy, and Pope John Paul II. It will show how engaging in dialogue with Dawkins contributes to both the pressing need for pluralistic dialogue between ideologies and the need for dialogue with other disciplines such as science. This chapter will also explore the approaches we will adopt toward the relationship between science and religion and the philosophy of science. Moreover, we will seek a fresh approach to Dawkins himself, an earnest dialogical relationship as opposed to a confrontational model—which has predominantly been the case. However, given Dawkins' hostility toward theology and the thrust of his position, there are significant caveats in attempting to open a mutual conversation and therefore, these caveats will also be explored in this opening chapter.

As Dawkins seeks to ground his worldview in his interpretation of evolutionary science, Chapter Two will then establish an understanding of this science. This is a necessary task, as an appreciation of evolutionary theory will be indispensable if we are to open a dialogical relationship with his worldview. As Dawkins is chosen as the central dialogue partner for the thesis, we will predominantly explore his interpretation of evolution. However, we will indicate where Dawkins has significant support for his view. Conversely, we will also show that while there is a consensus view on evolution among the scientific community, there are also significant areas of disagreement between authoritative voices. As such, we will also outline a critique of Dawkins' perspective. Moreover, this chapter will show that these areas of dissonance

are particularly significant in the context of this thesis, as they point towards philosophical differences that may drastically influence how the science is interpreted. In addition, although we decided to develop a dialogue with an atheistic portrayal of science, there are significant interpretations of evolution that are more easily amenable to a theological position. Three examples of such views will thus be presented and critiqued to further strengthen our reasons for engaging with Dawkins' interpretation.

The philosophical view implicit in the work of Dawkins will then be explored in Chapter Three. We will encounter four specific aspects of Dawkins' materialist worldview that have decidedly theological implications: the evolution of consciousness, memetics (cultural evolution), a purposeless world and the evolution of altruism. These aspects of Dawkins' philosophy will provide direct opportunities for dialogue with theology, given their theological connotations. The American philosopher Daniel C. Dennett, whom Dawkins once labeled as his "intellectual older brother", will feature prominently in this chapter for several reasons, but most significantly, because Dawkins explicitly points to Dennett's thinking on the issue of the evolution of consciousness. Dawkins does not delve into this area himself, but he does note its significance. Moreover, Dennett supports Dawkins on the issues of cultural evolution, purposelessness, and the evolution of altruism. In this sense, Dennett can be seen as an important figure in a dialogue with Dawkins. We will also present arguments against the materialism of Dawkins with regard to these philosophical issues.

Chapter Four will then analyze the concept of religious belief in the context of a dialogue with an evolutionary worldview. Although it is debatable whether religious belief is definable, we will examine the cross-cultural elements of theism, providing a panoramic approach to religion in general. This approach can be problematic, and as such, we will outline limitations to viewing religion in this way. However, within the context of a dialogue with Dawkins, an evolutionary perspective on religion must be considered. Dawkins attempts to use evolution to explain human societal behavior, and religious practices are a prevalent feature across human civilizations. Therefore, if Dawkins' view is maintained, then religious belief must be explicable by referral to evolutionary theory. Moreover, theology itself can be understood as the analysis of religious beliefs. Therefore, an evolutionary analysis of religion such as the one Dawkins promotes could be considered consistent with the aims of the theologian. In this sense, Dawkins' evolutionary view on religion may provide new material for theological consideration, thus contributing to the overall aim: to demonstrate how a dialogue with Dawkins may be beneficial for theology.

In Chapter Five, we reach the culmination of the book, which will open a direct dialogue between Dawkins and theology. This chapter will largely be based upon two of Dawkins' cardinal critiques of theism: namely, what we can call his theodicy challenge, and how God can be relevant in a world that science understands as governed by strict laws (though the strict cause-and-effect interpretation of the world has been significantly challenged, as we will note, particularly in Chapter Two). This chapter will first contextualize Dawkins' version of the problem of evil by looking at its previous incarnations and the rich history of theological responses. It will then ask how dialoguing with Dawkins' interpretation of the problem of evil (which stems from the scientific understanding of evolution) may provide a new dimension to theological discourse in this area. We will also examine how dialogue with Dawkins' materialist worldview may offer new considerations in ongoing theological discourse regarding God's relationship with creation. We will ask how God can be considered relevant when the phenomena of the world can largely be explained naturalistically: Where does God fit into the causal world?

It is ultimately the contention of this project that perpetuating theological discourse by focusing on scholarly material that is inherently agreeable to theology will not suffice in the current context of modern academia. Therefore, theology needs to test its boundaries and venture into dialogue with those from antithetical positions. We have chosen Dawkins as the embodiment of such a position to illustrate how such dialogue may offer new perspectives on classical theological problems. Therefore, we will show how this dialogical paradigm may take shape, as opposed to merely discussing it as a theoretical framework. Moreover, such a dialogue will send a message to the intellectual marketplace that theology has the confidence to earnestly consider even its most vehement critics, and attempt to learn from them. Of course, the dialogue with Dawkins proposed in this thesis has significant caveats, particularly given that the two dialogue partners may disagree on a fundamental question regarding the existence of God. However, a dialogue between such opposing hermeneutics may provide a method for a new paradigm of theological scholarship—one that is up to the task of facing its critics in the unprecedentedly public and pluralistic context of modern academia.

## Notes

1. Stephen Hawking and Leonard Mlodinow, *The Grand Design: New Answers to the Ultimate Questions of Life* (London: Bantam, 2010), 8.