Is evolving Nature all there is – self-generated, self-propelled, self-sustaining, self-sufficient, self-contained? Are human beings, by implication, the topmost outgrowth of nature, thus the legitimate owners and masters of reality, the only ones that can give meaning to their lives and their life worlds, who are responsible to none other but themselves? That is the stance taken by Richard Dawkins, a celebrated biologist, convinced naturalist and committed atheist.

Or is evolving reality as a whole derived from, dependent on, empowered by, and, in the case of humans, accountable to a transcendent Source and Destiny of reality, including nature and the human being, whose benevolence reaches out to humans as a person because humans are persons? In this case humans are invited to participate in God’s creative power and redemptive love for reality as a whole. That is the conviction of the Christian faith and the stance taken by the author of this book.

The struggle for ultimate truth is not an academic pastime. The difference between these two approaches to experienced reality has far-reaching consequences for Western civilization, individual life, communal relations, society, the economy, politics, ecology and the future of the earth.
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In this chapter I argue that the core of the conflict between faith and naturalism is the issue of transcendence. For Dawkins’ naturalism, experienced reality is self-generated, self-sustaining and closed in upon itself. There is no transcendence, thus no Source and Destiny of reality, thus no God.

Is Dawkins’ the victim of a ‘God delusion’ of his own?

Science deals with immanent reality; faith intuits the transcendent. The aim of this section is to establish Dawkins’ attitude towards the transcendent dimension of human experience. Dawkins is a scientist. Science is about explanation and prediction. Its criterion is historical and empirical evidence. Its mandate and method are geared to immanent reality. Dawkins uses his scientific tools to assess the assumptions of faith and finds them wanting. That cannot be otherwise. The language of faith is not and cannot ever be a scientific language. It has a different rationale. Once you read the Bible through historicist-empiricist spectacles you are bound to misread it.

How pertinent then is Dawkins demolition of the “God Hypothesis” as he calls it? God is not a scientific hypothesis, theory or fact. In fighting a delusory God among Christians, Dawkins may believe that he is fighting the God intended by the biblical witness. He doesn’t.¹ His attack misses its target. Could it be that Dawkins is not the atheist he believes he is? With Einstein he confesses to be “a deeply religious non-believer”.² The glories of nature “deserve respect”.³ “I am calling only supernatural gods delusional”.⁴ “I have devoted a whole book (Unweaving the
Rainbow) to ultimate meaning, to the poetry of science, and to rebutting, specifically and at length, the charge of nihilistic negativity …”

So the concept of God as such does not seem to be the issue, as long as we understand that the concept of ‘God’ refers to the ultimate Source and Destiny of reality. In spite of many contradictions in his argument on this score, it is the kind of God that Dawkins is interested in. This is a highly provocative thesis, but I will show in which sense it is valid. Many of our secular contemporaries similarly do not dismiss the concept of God as such, but are uneasy with its supernatural and anthropomorphic connotations. Maybe their God consciousness is implicit and undeveloped, rather than absent?

**Not God but Nature**

Ultimate meaning perhaps, but of what kind? Dawkins rejects transcendence because he is a committed naturalist. The natural world is all there is. Reality is not open to a transcendent Source and Destiny. It is closed in upon itself. And Nature (spell that with a capital N) is not personal. Evolution is a self-propelled and self-sustaining mechanism of mutation, selection and adaptation. There is nothing underlying its process, no intention, no force, no purpose. For Dawkins, therefore, the concept of a transcendent and personal God as such can have no referent. It is as simple as that.

This is not always understood by Dawkins’ critics. He should have welcomed, Alister McGrath argues, the long overdue and incomplete acceptance of the theory of evolution by Pope John Paul II as a step in the right direction. Instead Dawkins blasts the pope for being superstitious and hypocritical. But why does he do that? Not really because Dawkins cannot stomach the idea that the pope has seen the light of atheism and is not honest enough to concede it. A much more probable reason is that the pope still believes in a transcendent God, while it is self-evident for Dawkins that an evolving Nature is automatic and self-contained process that excludes a transcendent God. Whatever the pope may
say, as long as he persists with the ludicrous concept of God, he cannot have embraced Nature as ultimate.

On the basis of his naturalist assumptions, Dawkins takes it for granted that, if God existed, God would have to exist as part of immanent reality. As such he would have to be experienced in the same way stones, insects or computers are experienced. At best God should qualify as a serious scientific hypothesis. As such God would have to be an object of scientific study. But there is, as he correctly says, no “shred of evidence” for such a God. That a part of the natural world cannot be supernatural is a non-brainer. So Dawkins’ ‘God Hypothesis’ has indeed no substance.

What Dawkins calls “supernatural gods” have to be imagined entities within immanent reality. God is believed to be a higher kind of intelligence, possessing a higher kind of intentionality, exercising a higher kind of agency that is not subject to the laws of nature, or in Dawkins’ terms, not part of the evolutionary process. ‘Nature’ for Dawkins is an ‘autonomous’ and all-encompassing network in becoming, beyond which there is nothing and there can be nothing. Where Nature is all there is, a “supernatural” entity does not, and cannot exist.

That nature is closed in upon itself; that it is absolute and ultimate is, quite obviously, not a scientific finding, but a metaphysical assumption. Hard core empiricism is incapable of thinking or imagining a transcendent Source and Destiny of reality. There may still be profound mysteries within reality; we may not yet be able to penetrate nature sufficiently to satisfy our curiosity; our mastery of reality may still be somewhat deficient – but that is not an argument for the existence of God. What we cannot observe, comprehend and manipulate, at least in principle, just does not exist. In sum, transcendence is not about gaps in our scientific knowledge that may one day be closed or that will never be closed due to human limitations. It is about the ultimate nature of reality. Naturalism cannot escape its own metaphysics.

Ultimate questions must be answered by science
If Nature is all there is, ‘ultimate questions’ must be answered by the natural sciences because in his view there just is no other meaningful discourse. Dawkins can conceptualise ‘ultimate questions’ only in terms of scientific explanations. The critically important dimension of relationships and perspectives does not enter into the equation. It makes a difference whether we can relate to nature in a personal way or consider it to be a thing at our disposal. Similarly a perspective from beyond reality is different from a perspective from within reality. This is of cardinal importance because it makes it possible for us to objectify reality, de-absolutise it and become responsible for it.

Dawkins does not believe that science is omniscient, but it is the only source of legitimate knowledge we have. “If science cannot answer some ultimate questions, what makes anybody think that religion can?” Only science can offer valid explanations. If there was a God, Dawkins argues, and if that God had indeed wanted to reveal himself, he could certainly have revealed himself for all of us to see and finish the argument once and for all. In fact, God did not, Nature did. It is this kind of argument that pulls the rug out from beneath the feet of many believers who have internalised modern empiricist assumptions. Too bad for these believers! They too have fallen into the trap of crude empiricism.

However, are “ultimate questions” about explanations and predictions in the first place? Are they not about the ‘grounding’ of experienced reality in its most comprehensive context? If the ultimate Source and Destiny of reality is ‘Nature’, then Nature is what Christians would call ‘God’. That should be pretty obvious. As mentioned above, Stuart Kauffman is not afraid to call Nature “God”, although he is fully aware of the misunderstanding this might cause. For him “God is the most powerful symbol we have”. If Nature is ultimate, Kauffman is entirely justified in appropriating this profound concept for Nature.

This observation also throws light on the question whether life and reality as such are not pointless after all. Although some
natural scientists arrive at that conclusion, naturalists do not have to be nihilists – an allegation that Dawkins explicitly rejects.\textsuperscript{12} It is significant though that for both Dawkins and Kauffman it is the human being who gives meaning to reality, or that ‘invents the sacred’, not God.\textsuperscript{13} It is equally significant that the impression that life is pointless is not as far removed from the biblical faith as one would have thought. The message of the book of Ecclesiastes that life is meaningless and futile and that we should enjoy it as long as it lasts comes perilously close to the hedonism of the modern consumer culture.\textsuperscript{14}

Once we concede that, however, the question is not whether God exists or not, but what kind of God we believe in. It is intriguing to see how close the biblical faith, in spite of its pre-scientific worldview, comes to Kauffman’s stance. We just have to look at Psalm 104 or Job 38ff to realise that. Here everything – trees for birds, water for antelopes, prey for lions, wine for humans – is attributed to God’s immediate creative activity. However, Kauffman’s concept of ‘God’ has a new content. In theological terms, ultimacy is transferred from the Creator to the creation. The biblical faith, in contrast, does not call nature God, but goes one step back beyond nature – to the transcendence of God in relation to nature. In biblical terms, a deified nature is an idol.

Dawkins ridicules this ‘going beyond’ Nature. He asks who the Creator of the Creator of the Creator of the Creator is – and thus \textit{ad infinitum}. He does not recognise that naturalism cannot escape this question either.\textsuperscript{15} Natural evolution certainly implies a sequence of events in time that has a beginning, say the big bang. What was ‘before’ that beginning? What is it that sustains the existence of fields and the quivering of waves? What happens inside a black hole? Nothing perhaps, but how can we possibly know?\textsuperscript{16}

Transcendence is not about tracing the chain reactions of causality backwards, but about the embeddedness of reality as a whole in something more encompassing and more profound than reality itself. It is this embeddedness, derivation, dependence, and
accountability of reality that Dawkins dismisses because there is nothing beyond the reality we actually experience.

Is Dawkins a Darwinian fundamentalist?

Dawkins dismisses with contempt the charge that he himself is a (Darwinian) fundamentalist: “what I, as a scientist, believe (for example evolution) I believe not because of reading a holy book but because I have studied the evidence.” Scientists are open to new insights, believers are not. Scientists seek the truth; believers erroneously think they already possess it.\(^{17}\) The point is taken.\(^{18}\) I do not deny that most believers are more conservative than most scientists, that they base their worldview on ‘biblical revelation’ and that they feel threatened by any problematization of their life supporting assumptions.

Yet it should be clear that scientific and theological flexibility to integrate new evidence is not the real issue. Dawkins’ “fundamentalism”, if that concept were at all appropriate for his stance, does not refer to his lack of readiness to integrate scientific evidence into his overall view of reality. It refers to his metaphysical assumptions. These just do not allow for the possibility of a personal relation to the transcendent Source and Destiny of reality. I have already addressed that issue above. For him there just is no such thing as transcendence, let alone a personal God. Reality as we know it is closed in upon itself. This is not a scientific finding but a decree.

Dawkins takes great pains to show that agnosticism is nothing but crypto-atheism and as such a dishonest stance. There is only black and white in his world. Full stop. Let agnostics be courageous enough to come out and confess that they are atheists! In fact, I would argue, a true scientist would have to leave an issue that cannot be settled by incontestable scientific evidence open. If you are not convinced of the merits of the assumption that experienced reality is embedded in and permeated by a
greater reality, agnosticism is the only honourable *scientific* stance.

Dawkins also wants ‘liberal theologians’ to be honest and confess that they have long abandoned their faith in God. They are just playing around with concepts to befuddle the issue and disguise the bankruptcy of their profession. No ways! The versatility displayed by theology is a reflection of the dynamic response to changing situations, needs and insights that is characteristic of the biblical faith in general and the Christian faith in particular.\(^\text{19}\) It may indeed have fallen behind in significant ways. But then Christian faith and theology do not have to be abolished, but reconceptualised in response to a new situation.

**In sum**

If the concept of God refers to ultimate reality, the difference between Dawkins’ naturalism and the theism of faith is not whether God exists but what kind of ultimate reality is envisaged. For Dawkins there is only one reality, the reality that we experience and that the sciences investigate. This reality is ultimate and absolute. There is only one valid way of dealing with ultimate questions and that is scientific research. His ‘fundamentalism’, if that term were at all appropriate in his case, lies in his metaphysics, not in his scientific theory. It is here that the Christian faith follows a different kind of intuition.
In this chapter I argue that, in contrast to Dawkins’ naturalism, the Christian faith assumes that reality, as we experience it and as the sciences explore it, is not closed in upon itself, but open to its transcendent Source and Destiny. This stance is based not on empirical evidence, but on a profound awareness of derivation, dependence, accountability and mortality. I also try to respond to the main difficulties that Dawkins has with the concept of God – its supernaturalism and its personal connotations.

**Once again, the issue of transcendence**

My response to Dawkins’ naturalism is that the issue of transcendence is of critical importance for human existence in general and for the Christian faith in particular. I will now offer a few cardinal points in this regard.

To begin with, the transcendent dimension ‘irrupts’ or ‘breaks in’ upon our lives. Truth, of whatever nature, is not invented, but found. It impresses its validity on our consciousness. This holds for specific insights as much as for a system of meaning falling into place. The biblical faith entails a system of meaning. Yet the shape of this system of meaning is a consequence, not the root of faith. It is highly dynamic, malleable, and adjustable. It is capable of integrating ever new insights and experiences.

What then is the root? It is a message about the character of the ultimate Source and Destiny of reality as a whole and our own existence in relation to this ultimate. It is an invitation to accept the gift of our own existence and our own authenticity from beyond
ourselves, an invitation to become part of a creative and redemptive project that involves our own lives and our entire life worlds. The gospel message is not part of our normal experience, or an exciting theory, or part of a worldview that we construct. It is a claim on our lives that reaches us from beyond our daily lives and life worlds, that defines our identity and that we cannot avoid without forfeiting our integrity.xx

Expressed in theological terms, the ‘Word of God’ reaches us through the words of somebody else speaking in the name of God. It is based on the outcome of the evolution of the biblical tradition over more than a millennium of biblical history and powered by a series of redemptive responses to human needs.xxx It ‘settles in’, as it were, in our existence. It is internalised, becomes present and effective when accepted in faith. It liberates, transforms and empowers us. It is the divine Spirit manifesting itself in the structure and orientation of our individual and communal spirit.

This process has a number of critically important consequences. Transcendence means ‘reaching beyond’ experienced reality towards ‘God’. God is our name for the ultimate Source and Destiny of reality. The horizons of a believer are taken beyond the triviality and self-centred nitty-gritty of daily life as well as the seeming meaningless of society and nature. A believer becomes aware of the stunning beauty, vastness and complexity of reality as a whole as far as it is accessible to human perception and imagination.

One sees reality from above, as it were, “with the eyes of God” and one’s own location, status and role within one’s concentric contexts: the self within the body, the community, the society, nature, the earth, the cosmos. This ‘eccentric’ perspective prevents us from absolutising the human ego, the community, or the whole of humanity as the centre, master and owner of reality.

When introducing the “gene’s eye view” that led him to the concept of the “selfish gene”, Dawkins has this to say about ‘perspective’: “But a change of vision can, at its best, achieve something loftier than a theory. It can usher in a whole climate of thinking, in which many exciting and testable theories are born, and imagined facts laid bare … you can end up with a new way of seeing. And a new way of seeing … can in its own right make an original contribution to science.” xxii Indeed it can. This is precisely what
happens when one gains a perspective from beyond experienced reality, a perspective as ‘seen with the eyes of God’.

Transcendence also de-absolutises experienced reality as such. The immanent is not ultimate. Its authority and power over our lives is limited. While we are inextricably embedded in experienced reality, reality has no ultimate claim on us and no ultimate right to determine our existence. There is a higher source of power and authority. There is a higher court of appeal. In short, awareness of the transcendent dimension of reality leads to a sense of freedom from reality. Freedom from reality is the prerequisite for responsibility for reality. Human beings have a unique capacity to objectify reality and thus to take charge of reality as far as it is in their power to do so.

Transcendence allows us to face the fact of our own derivation and the derivation of our life worlds, not only from countless previous constellations of reality going right back to the big bang, not only from countless factors that make our existence possible every second of our lives, but beyond all that to the ultimate Source of reality. Derivation implies dependence. This is fundamental. We are not autonomous and cannot be.

Awareness of the gratuity of existence leads to gratitude for an existence that can ever only be a gift. Similarly the evolutionary trajectory, embedded as it is in the entropic process, loses its mechanical inevitability. The future is open, at least in principle, and that is decisive for appreciation, hope and responsibility to materialise. A reality without a future has no meaning, no purpose and no ultimate value.

Responsibility for reality – including our own reality – implies that we become accountable for the consequences of our attitudes and actions and the impact of our lives on reality. We realise how much reality – community, society, nature – has to sacrifice to make our lives possible. We are confronted with the need for ecological constraint, social justice, and caring love. We become aware of our selfishness and callousness, our lack of authenticity, our failures.

This creates in us the need for remorse, forgiveness and reconciliation – not only in relation to our immediate human environment but in relation to our entire life worlds. But we cannot relate to our life worlds in this personal way. It is the transcendent Source and Destiny of reality that offers the sacrifices necessary for
our survival and well-being, through whom we can regain peace with 
our world, who brings about our reintegration into reality as a whole.

One of the most profound needs of the human being is acceptance 
and belonging. Life becomes truly miserable without it. Think of 
unwanted children, unemployed workers, abandoned lovers, 
disenfranchised citizens, failures in business, discredited politicians, 
losers in sport, delinquent youths, criminals, primary group misfits, 
examination failures and so on.

Acceptance and belonging granted by our social and natural 
contexts are fickle and unreliable. Inexplicable fate, disease, suffering 
and death question our ‘right of existence’ very profoundly. 
Acceptance and belonging granted by our social contexts are withheld 
when we fail to fulfil the norms and expectations imposed by them. 
One can become an outcast, even a martyr, very quickly if one does 
not toe the line.

Under all these circumstances human dignity and self-estimation 
is restored through an acceptance that transcends the unreliable and 
conditional acceptance of natural and social reality. The Christian 
message proclaims God’s suffering, liberating, transforming 
acceptance of the unacceptable into his fellowship. Acceptance of the 
unacceptable implies suffering for the one who accepts. This message 
is epitomised in the interpretation of the cross of Christ as God’s self-
sacrifice for us in his messianic representative. The culpable and 
the failing can breathe again. Their worth is reaffirmed; they are given 
a new beginning; the future again opens up for them.

How deeply this need is rooted in human existence can be 
gleaned, among many other examples, from the sensitivity displayed 
by the mathematician, biologist and naturalist Stuart Kauffman. His 
research culminates in the finding that we humans are not an 
evolutionary accident, unexpected, unwanted children, as it were, but 
an ‘expected’ outcome of the evolutionary process itself, ‘legitimate 
children’, as it were, thus “at home in the universe”.

The need for acceptance and belonging cannot be expressed in 
more profound terms. But who is it that guarantees or offers us this 
acceptance and belonging – an impersonal evolutionary mechanism,
or a loving God who is willing to accept what is unacceptable to transform it into what it ought to be? That is the question at issue between the Christian faith and naturalism.

The supernatural God

Dawkins emphatically rejects a ‘supernatural God’. In which sense is the God of the Bible meant to be a ‘supernatural’ entity? One only has to read Psalm 104 or Job 38ff to see that in biblical times God was deemed the transcendent Source and Destiny of experienced reality as such and as a whole as it unfolds in cosmic history. God is not a giant child wilfully tossing around his toys on the playground of inner-worldly reality. Dawkins justifiably ridicules such a God.

But this kind of God is not the God of the Bible. Obviously Dawkins’ comparison of faith in God with faith in Santa Claus and the Tooth Fairy either betrays a complete lack of comprehension or it is nothing but cheap rhetoric. To honour Dawkins one should not take such derailments seriously. There is much more at stake in Dawkins’ attack on faith than that.

Stuart Kauffman, an equally ardent naturalist, suggests that the ‘Abrahamic’ form of the concept of God is not too distant from the ‘God’ of naturalism. Looking at the texts quoted above, he certainly has a point. But none of the Abrahamitic faiths can do without transcending nature as such towards a higher, ultimate Source and Destiny of reality. Transcendence precludes the idea that God is part of experienced reality rather than its transcendent ‘ground’ or ‘basis’ or ‘whence’.

Once that is the point of departure, an important characteristic of the biblical faith becomes clear. For the biblical faith God’s ‘activity’ does not obviate or thwart human activity and inner-worldly processes and regularities, but generates and empowers them. God is not an addition to reality but its Source. God’s activity works in and through the processes of reality, not alongside them, in cooperation with them or in competition with them.

God is not a factor within the network of causality but its transcendent Source and Destiny. God is the ‘depth dimension’, as Paul Tillich put it, of precisely the inner-worldly processes and regularities that Dawkins and his fellow scientists investigate and
describe. That is why the ancient Christological doctrine is not a paradox: the true God works through the true human being and the two ‘natures’ are not to be separated or mixed up. xxviii

Let us take, as an example, the thesis of Ludwig Feuerbach that our God concept is a projection of unrealistic wishes (such as eternal life or omnipotence) and idealised abstractions from experienced reality (such as love or power) into a heaven of make-believe. Apart from flaws and qualifications in the detail, the truth of Feuerbach’s thesis can hardly be disputed. There is similar truth in Sigmund Freud’s idea of God as a “super-ego”, Marx’s idea of religion as “opium for the poor and oppressed” and Dawkins’ idea of a ‘meme’.

All these theses presuppose that our concepts of the transcendent are part of immanent reality situated in our individual and collective consciousnesses. As such they can be described, critiqued, transformed, or abandoned. The biblical tradition has indeed emerged and evolved as a series of redemptive responses to the most profound spiritual needs that emanate from ‘the human condition’. Our concept of God indeed depends on metaphors taken from human reality.

But all these facts do not render faith illegitimate. Faith is a protestation of what ought to be in response to the experience of what ought not to be and that in the name of ultimate authority. And there is no theological reason that forces us to deny that God uses our psychological apparatus to disclose God’s redemptive intentions.

The demonstrably human nature of faith does not mean that the concept of God as such is invalid. On the contrary, it confirms what the biblical faith has always confessed, namely that reality as such and as a whole is derived. That includes the human awareness of God’s intentionality. The ‘Word of God’ has entered human reality. That is the meaning of the ‘incarnation’ (‘enfleshment’) of the divine Logos. God can very well manifest God’s creative and redemptive intentions through inner-worldly processes and in response to human need – including physical, biological, social and psychological phenomena. xxix

Naturalists similarly assume that Nature itself brings about whatever exists and happens. Faith does not have to deny that there are self-generating and self-catalysing processes within reality. If faith
takes God to be the transcendent Source and Destiny of the reality we experience and of which we are a part, such findings do not militate against faith. God is not a causative factor within reality. What these findings do mean for faith is that we have to subject our concept of God to critique and to struggle for its most appropriate rendition.

One could argue, therefore, that Charles Darwin derived his atheistic conclusions from his empirical observations because he entertained a wrong concept of God. But for Dawkins and Kauffman that is not an option. Nature is all there is. Dawkins defines the “God Hypothesis” as the idea that “there exists a superhuman, supernatural intelligence who deliberately designed and created the universe and everything in it, including us.”

I suspect that this definition picks up the stance of Christian creationists who insist on the literal, thus historical-empirical interpretation of the creation narratives in Genesis 1 and 2. In some form or other millions of believers share this interpretation. But the one is as inappropriate as the other. God is not a ‘supernatural’ entity within experienced reality – which would be a contradiction in terms – but its transcendent Source and Destiny.

The personal God

The second obstacle presented by faith to naturalists is that Abrahamitic religions relate to God in a personal way. Even if naturalists were willing to concede the possibility of a transcendent Source and Destiny of reality, the idea of a personal God would not make sense to them because nature as such is impersonal. They are entitled to demand that faith and theology account for their personal concept of God.

My analysis of the personal level of reality falls solidly within the overall approach of experiential realism. Evolution has produced a creature that cannot live without meaning (orientation, validity, criteria of authenticity), legitimacy (acceptability) and authority to act (status and role). This is fact, not fantasy. The Christian faith presents a particular response of the Christian faith to this need. For faith, God is the transcendent Source and Destiny of reality, including all levels of emergence. It is the focal point of a system of meaning that covers experienced reality as a whole.
Because reality is in flux, highly differentiated, and accessible to human observation and comprehension only to a very limited extend, this system of meaning is dynamic, versatile, malleable, adjustable to changing insights and perspectives. But is must be inclusive of the personal level of emergence, otherwise it is truncated. Christians (among many others) relate to the Source and Destiny of reality in personal terms because they are persons and there is no other way to relate to reality as a whole in a personal way.

Dawkins is right when he says that intelligence and intentionality have only materialised towards the end of the evolutionary process. But that refers to the human, rather than the divine level. As Kauffman has shown, the roots of agency can be traced backward to earlier forms of life and even beyond life as such. Agency, taken in this broad sense, does not imply intentionality. But even intentionality can be traced backward to some extent, at least to some species proximate to the human being. The point is that intentionality and agency cannot be foreign to the Source and Destiny of the reality we experience if it occurs in such a prominent line of development.

Dawkins is also right when he claims that religious experiences involve the ‘simulation software’ of the human psyche and that we can easily be fooled by it. He may also be right when he says that our psyche is “biologically programmed to impute intentions to entities whose behaviour matters to us.” But what does that prove? Obviously there can be nothing in our consciousness that does not involve the neurological infrastructure underlying our consciousness. A believer can argue that the spill-over of the need for personal relationships into non-personal layers of reality show the overwhelming importance of personal relationships for dignity and responsibility engraved into the human psyche by the Creator through the evolutionary process.

Dawkins is not right, therefore, when he concludes from such immanent phenomena that the concept of a transcendent God characterised by creativity and intentionality is spurious. If God is indeed the Source of reality, as believers assume, the concept of God’s creativity must cover the emergent and evolving personal dimension of reality as much as any other. Expressed in theological terms, God is likely to utilise the capacities God installed in the created world, whether chance, causality or intentionality, just as much as I use the
programmes installed on my computer to write this manuscript. A God who does not cover intentionality cannot be the Source and Destiny of a reality that includes intentionality. Dawkins’ logic only works if one denies any form of transcendence.

As any educated theologian knows or should know, the creation narratives are expressed in ancient anthropomorphic metaphors. Dawkins calls them ‘myths’ and he is right in doing so. But a myth is not a fairy tale. A myth is a metaphorical narrative that expresses pervasive and enduring ‘truths’ located in the existential sphere of human life. The narrative is projected to the beginning of time to indicate that it is valid for all times. Ancient cultures do not work with abstractions to make generic or essential statements, but express the depths of reality, its apparent regularities, its being-thus-and-no-different, its ‘essence’, in the form of a story. Such stories typically use personified animals or plants with specific attributes and powers. I will later come back to the significance of that for biblical hermeneutics.

Believers relate to divine intentionality in personal terms because they have encountered it in personal terms. Jesus of Nazareth proclaimed and lived out the God of Israel as a God of creative and redemptive love. Convinced of the ultimate validity of this proclamation and manifestation of God’s love, they gathered that God is a person for humans because humans are persons. This conviction has found a classical formulation in John 1:1ff: “the Logos became flesh”, that is, concrete human reality. That is what the ‘incarnation’ of the redemptive intentionality of God in human reality means.xxxv

At present the question is merely whether the depiction of God as a person is justified or not. In fact it is indispensable – not because there is evidence that such a personal being ‘exists’, but because humans are persons and their deepest relationships with reality are personal relationships. Martin Buber’s well-known distinction between ‘thou’ and ‘it’ applies in this case. When humans relate to an impersonal reality, they are in charge. At least they want to get on top of it. The relationship is vertical. Authentic personal relationships are horizontal. That means the partners operate at the same level of dignity. In a horizontal relationship ‘the other’, the community and even the natural environment co-define the identity of the ego. That is
of immense importance for our relation to other people, to society and
to nature.

The absolutised human being and the absolutised world

One cannot have a personal relationship with nature because
nature as such does not seem to be personal. One can only have a
personal relationship with reality via the personal Source and Destiny
of this reality. Without an existential relationship with a personal God,
the ego, the community or humanity as such become the peak of the
hierarchy of emergence, the only kind of personhood around, the only
meaning-giving, purposed creature and thus the highest, only and
solitary authority. By the same token, reality becomes an impersonal,
mechanical, meaningless and automatically functioning mechanism
that needs to be understood, subdued and utilised.

It is this absolutisation of the human person that modernity has
been striving for and that now leads it in the direction of a massive
social and ecological disaster. It makes a difference whether you take
reality for granted, as your own backyard as it were, or whether you
accept it as a gift of grace with awe and gratitude. Believers can thank
God for reality as such, the earth, life, humanity, the miracle of their
own existence, the blessings they enjoy. Reality assumes a dignity that
it does not have when viewed on its own or as a human possession.

That in turn leads to accountability. What do I do with this
precious gift? That alone is a reason for believing in a ‘Creator God’.
It has been said that if there was no God we would have to invent one.
Humans whose existence is geared to a personal God are people who
demn themselves accountable. They are free from reality but
responsible for reality and accountable to the Source and Destiny of
reality.

If we are accountable only to ourselves, whether individually or
collectively, we are not accountable to any ultimate authority at all. As
modernity has shown, this dominating, utilitarian and hedonistic
pragmatism can easily commodify all and everything, including
humans and their gifts. Reality becomes a quarry to be mined for the
satisfaction of human needs and desires. In the end, the human being
itself is depersonalised, commercialised and thus dehumanised.
The gift of freedom from reality and responsibility for reality are further potentiated by the offer of participation in God’s creative and redemptive project in reality, which is part of the Christian message. And this is not only true for the natural world, but also for art, culture, politics, economics and society. None of these are meant to be absolute, all of them should be subject to critique, relativisation and transformation. \( ^{xxxvii} \)

The eccentricity of the human being is an aspect that more sensitive naturalists may be able to appreciate, except that their eccentricity will be directed at the natural world as a whole and not at its transcendent Source and Destiny. It should be pretty obvious that to make the human being the centre of the universe is an unwarranted self-aggrandisement. The biblical faith has been guilty of this for millennia and the sooner it abandons it the better. But at least faith has always recognised an authority higher than the human being.

Once you deem nature the only reality that goes beyond humanity, Nature becomes absolute. The typically human capacity to think, envision and hope beyond experienced reality is confined to the borders of human observation, comprehension and control. You cannot go beyond, even by way of imagination or intuition, because there is no beyond. You are quite literally boxed in. Again the existential consequences are disastrous. Humans gain spiritual freedom not by absolutising but by objectifying reality. The assumption of a transcendent Source and Destiny of reality is a radical way of objectifying reality.

**The existential challenge**

Relating to reality in personal terms is costly. Dawkins’ problem with the ‘God Hypothesis’ should go deeper than its supernaturalism and the anthropomorphic metaphor in which it is presented, namely to the existential challenge it entails. Believers have a personal relationship with an entity that determines their everyday lives. This entity is not part of reality, thus in competition with other forces and agents in reality including the ego, but their transcendent Source.

Therefore the relationship does not emasculate them, but empowers and emboldens them. They do not draw only on their own spiritual resources, but trust in the wisdom and benevolence of the
assumed ultimate Owner and Master of reality. They are invited to
become participants in God’s creative and redemptive project. This
entails letting go ultimate self-interest and ultimate control over their
lives and to follow a lead that aims at the comprehensive well-being of
the whole.

The challenge this entails is to derive one’s identity and
authenticity from an entity beyond one’s own self. This is the place
where faith must become truly problematic for Dawkins. Call it a
collective superego if you will. Could Dawkins entrust himself
to God, any God? No ways. Dawkins offers a seemingly compelling reason:
“any creative intelligence, of sufficient complexity to design anything,
comes into existence only as the end product of an extended process
of gradual evolution. Creative intelligences, being evolved,
necessarily arrive late in the universe, and therefore cannot be
responsible for designing it. God, in the sense defined, is a delusion;
and, as later chapters will show, a pernicious delusion.”

But that is a formal truism, not a response to the existential
challenge that faith in God presents. Dawkins’ existential commitment
lies in the fact that he excludes transcendence per definition. He
conflates the transcendent ‘entity’ intended by faith (God) with
immanent reality – a reality over which humans have control. As
mentioned above, the intelligence he refers to is human intelligence,
human intentionality, human creativity. This has indeed arrived very
late on the scene. By implication the anthropomorphic notions of God
have also arrived late on the scene. To assume that human intelligence
could be held responsible for designing reality as a whole is ludicrous.

But that is not what faith is all about. Faith is not geared to a
“supernatural intelligence” but to the transcendent Source and Destiny
of reality as a whole, including the process that led to human creative
intelligence and redemptive intentionality. More especially it includes
one’s own existence – its derivation and its potential authenticity.
Once one assumes that reality as a whole is open towards its ultimate
Source and Destiny, it would be entirely unwarranted and arbitrary to
omit creative intelligence and redemptive intentionality from one’s
concept of God. God is, among many other things, the transcendent
‘depth dimension’ of human intelligence and intentionality.

Faith as trust
However, this objectifying discourse – whether in Dawkins’ terms or in terms of faith – does not provide a valid answer to the existential question. When you entrust yourself you consciously relinquish ultimate control. This happens constantly in daily life. I entrust myself to the pilot of an airliner or to a surgeon who cuts my body open. These two cases show that trust does not have to be _blind_ trust; it can be well motivated trust.\(^{xix}\)

Obviously trust can be misguided, naïve and irresponsible. I can entrust myself to a con-man or charlatan. A young lady can entrust herself to a dubious lover. Many Germans entrusted themselves to Hitler, which they should not have done. Genuine trust is neither uncritical, nor irrational, nor irresponsible. It weighs the consequences, considers the alternatives and takes the risk. Genuine trust is not infantile. On the contrary, it demands a considerable degree of realism, maturity and courage.

Self-entrustment to a God of creative power and redemptive love ennobles and emboldens the human being because it is sacrificial in nature. People who cannot entrust themselves betray a deeply rooted existential anxiety. They feel threatened. They want to retain control. They cannot invest themselves. They are not willing to bear the suffering that trust entails.

Self-entrustment to God is _defiant_ trust in the face of contrary experience. It faces the obstructions in the way of the envisaged outcome. Without faith there is no reality-transcending hope. The future is restricted to options that the parameters of the past have laid down. The alternative to self-entrustment is either an overestimation of the resources of the ego, or timidity, resignation and fatalism. I shall come back to that when dealing with suffering in chapter 6.

The point to be made here is that self-entrustment to a transcendent Source and Destiny of reality is emphatically rejected and resisted by the emancipatory thrust of modernity. The aim is total personal autonomy. You do not relinquish control over your life if you can help it, not even in the sense of entrusting yourself to the power of love emanating from the ultimate Source and Destiny of reality. This is where Dawkins’ stance is located.

_Faith involves a change of perspective_
But trust as such is still a formal concept. What matters existentially, morally and socially is to whom or to what you entrust yourself. The biblical God to whom Christians entrust themselves is characterised by unconditional benevolence in relation to reality as a whole. In view of their importance, let me repeat some things I have said above.

The assumption that the transcendent Source and Destiny of reality is unconditionally benevolent changes your perspective on reality. Suddenly you are no longer ultimately in charge. You are also no longer ultimately important. You are embedded in God’s creative and redemptive project. You are no longer the star of the show, but you can also never get lost to meaninglessness and irrelevance. That is what makes your anxiety about yourself and your world subside.

This again has consequences for our attitude and behaviour. It makes an enormous difference whether you believe that you, your community, or even humanity as such, constitutes the solitary peak or centre of your life world, perhaps even the cosmos as a whole, or whether you look at reality from above, as it were, ‘with the eyes of God’. Once you do that you will see yourself within its concentric contexts – your body, community, society, the earth, and the cosmos as a whole. You are free from reality and responsible for reality. It is a fundamental change of perspective. The centre of reality becomes eccentric in relation to yourself and your social context.

Nobody should assume that a change in perspective is irrelevant, arguing that in the end it is objective fact that counts, not our view of it. What is ‘objective fact’ in this connection? Does it matter whether an infant is cared for or left to its own devices? Does it make a difference for the future of the infant whether the caregiver is a mother or a paid nurse in an orphanage who resents the unpleasant chores of changing nappies, or getting up countless times at night when the child cries?

Similarly Jesus compares the attitude of the owner of the sheep, who cares and tends, with that of the hireling, who has no existential interest in the sheep, and the thief, who steals, murders and devours. There is a difference between loving care, calculating indifference and plain rapaciousness.
It is this qualitative difference in perspective that defines the quality of being human. We can look at the world from the vantage point of our own unredeemed desires and the collective interests of our social groups, or we can look at the world with the eyes of a loving God. The world changes for us with that change of perspective – the very world that science investigates, that technology manipulates, that commerce exploits and that consumerism uses and abuses – and it changes radically.

Things and living beings gain a quality, a dignity, a significance that they do not have in themselves – at least not in the way the sciences investigate and describe them. For faith even pain, suffering and death are no longer just nasty inevitabilities that we have to contend with. When they are recognised as the pain of a loving God, who intends to reach the optimisation of life, and in which we are privileged to participate, they gain a profundity they cannot possibly have in terms of the mechanisms that evolutionary theory (correctly) describes.

**In sum**

The biblical message confronts us with the demand for, and the gift of, an authentic life within the dynamically evolving prospects of an authentic life world. It questions the ultimacy of the human subject as well as the ultimacy of the world in which it is embedded, thus obviating the lure of fatalism and despondency.

It assumes that the human being is a derived, dependent, accountable and mortal creature, rather than the autonomous owner and master of reality. Similarly the world as a whole is not closed in upon itself, self-generated, self-sustaining, self-sufficient, thus absolute, but open to God, its transcendent Source and Destiny. Proclaiming God to be benevolent, it invites us to entrust our lives and our world to God in the face of experiences to the contrary.

Because it assumes a personal Source and Destiny of reality, the biblical faith makes it possible for humans to have a personal relationship with the impersonal reality of the universe. It invites us to abandon our desire for self-aggrandisement and self-gratification and participate in God’s creative and redemptive project. This is the root
of the meaningfulness and dignity of the human being and all aspects of the reality in which the human being is embedded.

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1 Dawkins would reject this suggestion. He says of Einstein that he “understood very well exactly what he was rejecting” (Dawkins 2006:16).
A “philosophical naturalist” is “somebody who believes there is nothing beyond the natural, physical world, no supernatural creative intelligence, lurking behind the observable universe, no soul that outlasts the body and no miracles – except in the sense of natural phenomena that we don’t yet understand” (Dawkins 2005:14).

See McGrath 2007:26f for the underlying argument.

“The God Hypothesis is a scientific hypothesis about the universe, which should be analysed as sceptically as any other” (Dawkins 2006:2). “Contrary to Huxley, I shall suggest that the existence of God is a scientific hypothesis like any other … God’s existence or non-existence is a scientific fact about the universe, discoverable in principle if not in practice. If he existed and chose to reveal it, God himself could clinch the argument, noisily and unequivocally, in his favour.” If we argued in terms of probability the estimate would have to be “far from 50 per cent” (Dawkins 2006:50).

“Even if a cosmological theory were to make headway on this question (why there is a universe at all), we could ask what that particular theory – its assumptions, ingredients, and equations – was relevant, thus merely pushing the question of origins one step further back” (Greene 2005:310).

Stephen Hawking offers some remarkable reflections on ultimate reality. “To try to answer these questions, we adopt some picture of the world …” but such pictures have proved to be prove inadequate and continue to do so (2005:138ff). “The unpredictable, random element comes in only when we try to interpret the wave in terms of the positions and velocities of particles. But maybe that is our mistake: maybe there are no particle positions and velocities, but only waves.” (2005:140). “Scientists have been too occupied with the development of new theories that describe what the universe is to ask why. On the other hand, the people whose business it is to ask why, the
philosophers, have not been able to keep up with the advance of scientific theories.” (2005:142). This is true to an even greater extent for theologians. But the awareness of ‘cultural lag’ should generate a powerful motivation to catch up, not to abandon the quest.


McGrath is not the only one who charges Dawkins with atheist fundamentalism (e.g. 2007:25ff). In my view this charge confuses the issue. Biblical and doctrinal fundamentalists are bound to existing formulations of sacred texts, while Dawkins is open, in principle, to newly emerging insight. His fundamentalism is of a metaphysical nature, namely the denial or non-awareness of transcendence. These are two different phenomena.

For detail see Nürnberger 2002 or 2004.

I find it difficult to believe that McGrath became a Christian just because he “found himself persuaded that Christianity was a much more interesting and intellectually exciting world view than atheism” (McGrath 2007:viii). One does not give up a promising career and start to study an entirely different discipline right from scratch just because a particular world view is interesting and exciting. At least this is not typical for a serious faith commitment.

The classical text in this connection is Rom 10:14-17. Against the so-called ‘enthusiasts’ who believed that God spoke directly into our hearts without the mediation of the biblical tradition, Luther emphasized that the gospel is an ‘external word’ (Verbum externum), coming from outside ourselves, mediated by a preacher on the basis of the biblical tradition. This is quite important in a number of ways. The tradition is the outcome of an evolutionary process that took more than a millennium to reach its present shape – a process in which the biblical message responded redemptively to a long series of changing constellations of human need. It prevents us from mistaking our personal whims and desires as well as our collective self-interest for the will of God. It provides at least some kind of criterion for what is in line with the biblical tradition. It links us to an overall Christian identity. It makes inter-subjective correction and enrichment possible.

Dawkins 1989:xi.

Dawkins misunderstands the sacrificial death of Christ on the cross as a fulfilment of the demand of a merciless God who cannot freely forgive those who turn back to him, a misunderstanding shared by countless Christians. In fact the paradigm of humans sacrificing their firstborn sons to God turned into its precise opposite during the cause of the evolving biblical tradition: God sacrifices his only-born son (= his messianic representative on earth) to humankind. For the detail see Nürnberger 2002 or 2004 chapters 10 respectively.

Indeed “if the word God is not to become completely useless, it should be used in the way that people have generally used it: to denote a supernatural creator that is ‘appropriate for us to worship’” (Dawkins 2005:13). But what exactly do the metaphors ‘supernatural’ and ‘creator’ refer to? For a naturalist ‘supernatural’ means fictitious because there is nothing beyond nature, while ‘creation’ is an illegitimate description of the evolutionary process.

See McGrath 2007:2ff.

For a modern interpretation of Christology see Brümmer 2005:81ff.

“For a start, wanting something is no demonstration that it does not exist … This argument also suggests that all worldviews are a response to human needs and desires – including, of course, atheism, which can be seen as a response to the human desire for moral autonomy” (McGrath 2007:28f). As I want to argue in this book, this desire constitutes the major thrust of modernity.

Dawkins’ definition of the “God Hypothesis” is “there exists a superhuman, supernatural intelligence who deliberately designed and created the universe and everything in it, including us.” His own alternative view is “any creative intelligence, of sufficient complexity to design anything, comes into existence only as the end product of an extended process of gradual evolution. Creative intelligences, being evolved, necessarily arrive late in the universe, and therefore cannot be responsible for designing it” (Dawkins 2006:31). But no believers in their right mind would claim that human intelligence has designed creative intelligence! Nor will Dawkins want to claim that evolution happened in a totally haphazard way, quite independent of a ‘rationality’ that physicists express in mathematical formulae. Cf Kaufman’s non-theistic concept of “serendipitous creativity” (2004:53ff).


Dawkins 2006:89ff.


Logos is a Greek word that means ‘word’, but also ‘rationale’, or ‘systematic treatise’. The concept picks up two aspects of the tradition: God creates through a decree in Gen 1 and God creates through his wisdom in the apocryphical Jewish books of Sirach and Wisdom of Solomon. It is entirely feasible, in this context, to translate it as God’s intentionality. ‘The word became flesh’ then means: God’s intentionality manifested itself in the life, ministry and death of Jesus of Nazareth.

It is interesting to note that Kauffman traces ‘purpose’ and ‘meaning’ (not consciousness) as far down the evolutionary ladder as bacteria (2008:72ff).
This is, of course, highly significant, but it does not yet justify relating to nature in personal terms.

“… when a society rejects the idea of God, it tends to transcendentalize alternatives – such as the ideals of liberty or equality” (McGrath 2007:50)


McGrath rejects the idea that faith is *blind trust* with considerable contempt, repeating again and again that this is a ludicrous invention of Dawkins and that he knows no believer who has such a crazy idea (2005:85ff). I think he goes way too far in this regard. Most certainly Dawkins is right when he claims that there is a difference between real or potential evidence unearthed by the sciences on the one hand and the unproven assumptions of faith on the other. Of course, faith is trust, what else? Among the classical theologians at least Martin Luther (in his Large Catechism) defines it as such. And at least to the extent that you have no evidence for the existence and trustworthiness of the entity you trust it is indeed ‘blind’ trust. Yet trust does not have to be arbitrary, infantile or irrational. It can be well founded, critical, responsible and sacrificial trust. Dawkins rejects faith as assent to a set of propositions that cannot be shown to be true. The definition of faith offered by Griffith-Thomas that McGrath recommends (2005:86) will not alleviate Dawkins’ concern. It includes “conviction of the mind based on adequate evidence” (which kind of ‘evidence’ and what evidence is ‘adequate’?), “confidence of the heart or emotions based on conviction” (on what is the ‘conviction’ based?) and “consent of the will … expressed in conduct” (why should anyone consent to unproven propositions and act upon such a consent?)