

## Dawkins, Simplicity, and Complexity (Oct 1, 2023)

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Recently I watched part of Piers Morgan's 2023 discussion with Richard Dawkins on Piers Morgan Uncensored. There wasn't much that was new in Dawkins' presentation, but he did introduce an idea that I'd never heard him articulate before. At around the 6-minute mark, Dawkins says: "...it doesn't help to postulate something very complicated at the outset, because what we've got is primeval simplicity, and from that stems everything; and what science does is it starts with simplicity, which is relatively easy to understand, and from that it develops into the whole of the universe and the whole of life. It doesn't help to start with complexity, and a creator has to be complex."

This is very interesting, and it is probably the most philosophical claim I've ever heard Dawkins make. There is a sense in which he is entirely right about this, but the principle is not inconsistent with the notion of a divine creator, but entirely consistent with it. I believe the reason Dawkins cannot see it is that the conceptual framework in which he operates is fundamentally empirical or empirio-metric. He has a mind for science. The evidence we need to grasp this point is not empirical evidence, but rational data, that is, rational evidence that is gathered as we move the discussion to the level of the philosophy of being, which is the only level on which we can talk rationally and meaningfully about God, unaided by faith, that is.

Basically, God is entirely, completely, and utterly simple. Every being other than God has a degree of complexity. But understanding this depends on an understanding of the real distinction between essence and existence. A being is a *habens esse* (that which has an act of existing), and any being whose essence and existence are distinct is a contingent being (a being that may or may not be, that is, need not be). But a being whose essence is its existence, that is, identical to its act of existing, is completely and utterly simple, for such a being is Being Itself. It does not "have" being, but it is its own "act of being", and there is nothing simpler than "being".

The things around us have a degree of intelligibility, that is, they can be known to some degree or another. In fact, their intelligibility always seems to exceed what we currently know about them—there's always more to know about the phenomenon in question. But the scientific endeavor begins with the desire to know "what something is", that is, the nature of the thing. However, there is an intelligibility that is distinct from the intelligibility of a being's nature, and that is the intelligibility of its very "existence". I can know "what" something is, without knowing whether or not it is. Of course, in order to really grasp something of the nature of a thing, it must first exist; but the being before me—whatever it is—has a two-fold intelligibility. I grasp its "whatness" (what it is), at least to some degree, but I also apprehend that "it is". My apprehension involves two distinct acts of the intellect. The reason is that existence does not belong to the nature of any material thing; for what belongs to the nature of a thing belongs to it necessarily, and so if "existence" belongs to the nature of a being, then that being exists necessarily, not contingently—that being would be "the necessary being", which is a being that "cannot not be", and therefore always is.

After 30 years of teaching, I came to more fully appreciate the simplicity and soundness of Leibniz' modal argument for the existence of God: "If the Necessary being is possible, then the Necessary being exists" (If  $MLp$ , then  $Lp$ ). Those who attempt to refute the argument always seem to indirectly assert the distinction between essence and existence. It is typically pointed out that because the very idea of something (i.e., the necessary being) is possible, it does not follow that it actually exists. Of course, that is true in the case of contingent beings (one cannot establish the existence of a unicorn, or a flying horse, etc., on the basis of its

definition, which expresses or attempts to express what the thing is essentially). However, there is only one case in which one can posit the existence of a being on the basis of the idea, and that is the case of God, who is the Necessary being, who cannot not exist, but who exists necessarily. If such a being is possible, then such a being exists, and the reason is that such a being is necessary and cannot not exist.

Not everyone is convinced by the argument, and the reason seems to be traced back to an understanding that “essence and existence” are not the same, that one cannot go from an apprehension of “what” something is to the conclusion “that it is”.

There’s no need to defend Leibniz’s argument here. The point is that those who take issue with it typically end up distinguishing between “what a thing is” (essence) and “whether or not it is” (esse). Each contingent being is a composite, which is a degree of complexity, namely a composite of potentiality and actuality (essence and existence). An existing contingent being is a potential being that is actual—but it need not exist, that is, it can “not exist”. A human person, such as Abraham Lincoln, is a contingent being, a mosquito is a contingent being, a carbon atom is a contingent being or thing, etc.

The argument for the existence of God that starts with contingent beings—as opposed to beginning with the very idea of a Necessary being—will begin by pointing out that no contingent being contains within itself the sufficient reason for its own act of existing. A thing cannot give what it does not have, thus an existing nature cannot receive its act of being from its own nature, which is distinct from its existence, because contingent beings do not contain existence as part of their nature—otherwise that contingent being would be the Necessary being. Nor can a contingent being receive its own act of existence from another contingent being, because a contingent being can only act within the limits of its nature, and existence is outside the nature of a contingent being—that is why we cannot bring something into being from nothing, only from already existing things. Hence, the cause of the received act of existence of a contingent being is a non-contingent being, that is, the Necessary being. And this is what we mean by God, namely, that Being that is Being Itself, or pure Act of Existence—demonstrating that there is and can only be one Necessary being would take us too far afield at this point.

God, who is pure Act of Existence, is not complex. The reason is that outside of being is non-being, or nothing, therefore whatever is in God is identical to God’s act of existence. Whatever perfections we find within the realm of contingent beings exist in God, but differently. In God, they are identical to “his” act of existence. Hence, knowledge in God is not distinct from his being, but is his being. Thus, God is his knowledge, and his knowledge cannot not be, but is eternal and unchanging. Also, good is a property of being (whatever is, is good insofar as it is), and so God is Goodness Itself—he does not “have” goodness as one property among other properties. So too, beauty is a property of being, and so God is Beauty Itself, and truth is a property of being (a being is true insofar as it is), and thus God is Truth Itself.

And so, Richard Dawkins is correct: “...it doesn't help to postulate something very complicated at the outset, because what we've got is primeval simplicity, and from that stems everything”. God is that simplicity, and nothing in the universe can be that simple without being God. What Dawkins overlooks here is that science begins with a different kind of simplicity, a very impoverished kind of simplicity—for example, the electron is simpler than the atom, the atom is simpler than the molecule, the molecule is simpler than the organism, etc. The simpler something is from this angle, the poorer in property it is—a human being is richer in intelligibility than a molecule, and a molecule is richer in intelligibility than is an electron, etc., just as an automobile is richer in intelligibility than a gasket. The simplicity of God is not the simplicity of a material substance or its smallest

part; it is the simplicity of Being Itself. Such a simplicity is inexhaustibly rich in intelligibility—not complexity—, and the variety and diversity and complexity of contingent beings that make up the universe is a parable that speaks of the inexhaustible beauty, goodness, and intelligibility of God, who is absolutely simple, because he is pure Being Itself.

But,” said Moses to God, “if I go to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what do I tell them?”

God replied to Moses: I am who I am. Then he added: This is what you will tell the Israelites: I AM has sent me to you.

(Exodus 3, 13-14)