

Richard Dawkins' "Main Argument" from a Philosophy of Science Standpoint

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- Anglberger, Albert J.J., Feldbacher-Escamilla, Christian J., and Gugerell, Stefan H. (2011-01-26/2011-01-26). *Richard Dawkins Hauptargument wissenschaftstheoretisch betrachtet*. Research Seminar. Presentation (invited). Winter term 2010. University of Salzburg: Philosophical Society Salzburg.

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- Feldbacher-Escamilla, Christian J. (2011-09-08/2011-09-08). *Analytic Philosophy of Religion I*. Workshop. Organization. Facts: est. 25 participants; 3 invited: Norbert Hoerster, Reinhard Kleinknecht, and Clemens Sedmak. University of Salzburg.
- Anglberger, Albert J.J., Feldbacher-Escamilla, Christian J., Gugerell, Stefan H., and Weingartner, Paul (2008-11-13/2008-11-14). *Moderner Atheismus (New Atheism)*. Conference. Organization. Facts: est. 30 participants; 8 invited: Wolfgang Achtner, Hans Czermak, Ernst Peter Fischer, Armin Kreiner, Winfried Löffler, Edward Nieznanski, Paul Weingartner, and Wolfgang Wickler (Programme- and Local Organizing Committee). University of Salzburg.

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The God Delusion

- Chapter 4: “Why there almost certainly is no god”
- Dawkins on the conclusion:
“If the argument of this chapter is accepted, the [...] God Hypothesis is untenable. God almost certainly does not exist. This is the main conclusion of the book so far.” (cf. Dawkins 2006, p.189)
- Dawkins on the argument:
“This chapter has contained the central argument of my book.” (Dawkins 2006, p. 187)

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Different Readings

Reading 1

- ① If there is an irreducible complex being, then evolutionary theory is wrong. (cf. Dawkins 2006, p.151)
- ② Evolutionary theory is not wrong; it is rather well confirmed.
- ③ God is an irreducible complex being (he did not come into being and hence he also did not come into being in an evolutionary way). (cf. Dawkins 2006, p.151)
- ④ Hence: It is quite probable that God does not exist. (cf. Dawkins 2006, p.137)

1st strategy of Dawkins: *Attack on the God hypothesis*

Reading 2

- ① Every theistic theory is less probable than the fact which is described by the proposition 'There is a complex being.'
- ② If a theory \mathcal{T} is less probable than the fact which is described by a proposition \mathcal{S} , then \mathcal{T} should not be used for explaining \mathcal{S} .
- ③ Hence: The fact which is described by 'There is a complex being.' should not be explained by help of a theistic theory.
(cf. Dawkins 2006, p. 145f)

2nd strategy of Dawkins: Attack on theistic explanations

Reading 3

- 1 Evolutionary theory explains the fact described by 'There is a complex being.', also theistic theories explain this fact, and evolutionary theory is more probable than any theistic theory.
- 2 If a theory \mathcal{T}_1 explains a fact described by \mathcal{S} , and if also theory \mathcal{T}_2 explains this fact, and if \mathcal{T}_1 is more probable than \mathcal{T}_2 , then one should explain the fact described by \mathcal{S} with \mathcal{T}_1 and not with \mathcal{T}_2 .
- 3 Hence: The fact described by 'There is a complex being.' should be explained with evolutionary theory and not with a theistic theory. (Dawkins 2006, p. 188)

Again the 2nd strategy of Dawkins

Background Assumptions and Evaluation

'Probability' by Dawkins

How does Dawkins use the term 'probability'?

- 1 Domain: entities (e.g. God), events, and states of affairs (e.g. God's existence).
- 2 Dawkins' usage varies: entities \Rightarrow states of affairs
"What matters is not whether God is disprovable (he isn't) but whether his existence is probable." (Dawkins 2006, p. 77)
- 3 He speaks of a measure for probability:
"Suppose it [(the origin of life)] was so improbable as to occur on only one in a billion planets." (cf. Dawkins 2006, p. 165)
- 4 He makes calculations (negation theorem): $p(\phi) = 1.0 - p(\neg\phi)$
- 5 Hence: It is adequate to presuppose the minimal theory of Kolmogorov.

Evaluation of some Readings

Reading 2 and 3 have methodological norms in the premiss set. For this reason we focus on reading 2 and 3. They aim at the 2nd strategy. However, reading 2 is due to the following reasons implausible:

- 1 Not practical, hence inadequate:

“A few small marks on a flint are enough to tell an archaeologist that he is dealing with an artefact, and not just a piece of weathered stone. Inferences to intelligent agency are made as a matter of routine in disciplines such as archaeology, cryptography, computer science and forensic medicine.” (cf. Lennox 2009, p.175)

Evaluation of some Readings

② Not theoretical fruitful, hence inadequate:

- In Kolmogorov's probability theory holds the so-called *consequence theorem*:

$$\Gamma \vDash \phi \Rightarrow p(\phi) \leq p(\Gamma) \quad (p\text{-theory})$$
- To explain the fact described by ϕ by help of Γ means to provide a deductively valid argument with Γ (*explanans*) as premiss, and ϕ (*explanandum*) as conclusion. (DN-explanations)
- Hence: In every explanation the *explanans* is at least as improbable as the *explanandum*.
- According to Dawkins' norm the *explanans* has to be more probable than the *explanandum*.
- Hence, Dawkins' suggestion (2) is inadequate.

Evaluation of some Readings

Also reading 3 is due to at least two reasons implausible:

① Not practical, hence inadequate:

There are typical cases where one opts for the less probable of two competing theories for explaining a phenomenon (e.g. when the less probable theory allows for the explanation of further phenomena which are not covered by the more probable one).

Evaluation of some Readings

- ② Not theoretically fruitful, hence inadequate:
 - It is generally accepted in philosophy of science that theories rich in content are *prima facie* to be preferred in comparison to theories which are not rich in content.
 - The conjunction of axioms of theories which are rich in content is typically less probable than the conjunction of axioms of theories which are not rich in content.
 - Hence: It is commonly accepted in philosophy of science to opt for the less probable theory of two competing theories in order to explain a phenomenon.
 - According to Dawkins one should always opt for the more probable theory.
 - Hence, Dawkins' suggestion (3) is inadequate.

Summary

Summary

- We have described three readings of Dawkins' main argument.
(benevolent interpretation)
- We have tried to make background assumptions of the text explicit.
(exactness)
- And we have tried to evaluate these background assumptions.
(discussion)
- With the result: The background assumptions of Dawkins' main argument are inadequate from a philosophy of science standpoint. (result)

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