AFFIRMATIONS AFTER GOD: FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE AND RICHARD DAWKINS ON ATHEISM

by J. Thomas Howe

Abstract. In this essay, I compare the atheism of Friedrich Nietzsche with that of Richard Dawkins. My purpose is to describe certain differences in their respective atheisms with the intent of showing that Nietzsche's atheism contains a richer and fuller affirmation of human life. In Dawkins's presentation of the value of life without God, there is a naïve optimism that purports that human beings, educated in science and purged of religion, will find lives of easy peace and comfortable wonder. Part of my argument is that this optimism regarding the power of objective science is subject to Nietzsche's criticism of Socrates and what he calls the "theoretical man." As such, it fails in terms of providing a true affirmation of life in the godless world.

Keywords: aesthetics; argument from design; atheism; beauty; Darwinism; Richard Dawkins; materialism; naturalism; Nietzsche; science

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Atheism is old, just a bit younger than theism.[1] And certainly opposition to Christianity goes back at least to its founding event. Yet, old things often seem new from time to time, and given that the history of atheism is without obvious constants, periods of novelty occur (Buckley 1987, 13–14). In the last decade there has been a tremendous spur of intellectual activity, most notably in the United States and Great Britain, revolving around the advocacy of atheism and the call to banish God-talk and faith of all sorts from our understandings of reality and everyday practices. This activity has gathered attention enough such that it has earned the label of "New Atheism." This new atheism, concentrated in the writing of Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, and Daniel Dennett, has generated numerous responses, much of it critical and coming from the domain of Christian apologetics. Some of the criticism has rightly focused on the impoverished understandings of Christianity and numerous historical and philosophical errors found within the writings of the new atheists (Eagleton 2006; Hart 2010). Others defend Christianity against the charges that have been leveled against it, such as the presumed necessary connection between religion and violence or the idea that faith is simply

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believing without evidence (McGrath and McGrath 2007; Haught 2008; Hart 2009). Still others focus on the unexamined assumptions within atheistic materialism (Eagleton 2006; Taylor 2007; Haught 2008). In this essay, I too want to work toward a criticism of "new atheism," especially as it appears in the writings of Richard Dawkins. Instead of confronting Dawkins's atheism with theism, I compare his views with those of another atheist from a previous generation: Friedrich Nietzsche. Separated by more than a century, Dawkins and Nietzsche do have some common ground: both write with a brash confidence, unconcerned with backlash. They both qualify as "modern atheists" in that, according to the definition of Michael Buckley, atheism stands as a "signature and a boast," not a term of polemic (Buckley 1987, 27). Christianity, they insist, stands on a weak and ever-weakening foundation and, yet, it continues to yield considerable and negative consequences for the health and vitality of contemporary culture. Refuting Christianity is a major task of both Nietzsche and Dawkins as they each see bright prospects for life without God.

Yet, something has changed. From a critical perspective this change has inclined some critics of "new atheism" to refer back to the "old atheism" of the nineteenth century with respect as a time of better, more interesting, compelling, and challenging forms of atheism (Haught 2008; Hart 2010). The purpose of my essay is to attend to certain aspects of this change with the hope of lending persuasion to the views of those who see in the nineteenth century an atheism of greater depth, awareness, and understanding. There are many complex factors that contribute to this change and several ways of assessing the differences. The effort here to make some sense of this difference is tremendously provisional, but hopefully illuminating. I want to pursue one such assessment in terms of how Nietzsche and Dawkins, respectively, propose that we go about affirming our lives in a supposedly godless universe. In other words, I am less concerned with their arguments against Christianity and more with certain aspects of their ethical proposals for how to live after God. I want to argue that Nietzsche's atheism contains a richer and fuller affirmation of human life in the world than does that of Dawkins. One reason for this way of assessment is that there is no shortage of criticisms of both Dawkins's account of religion and the scientific materialism that grounds it. But little attention has been paid to his ethical proposals for how to live well in a godless universe. By taking a better look at what Dawkins has to say about the possibilities of life after God and comparing it with Nietzsche's proposals of the same, we might see novel aspects of this new atheism.

The denial of the existence of God is often accompanied by some discussion about the meaning and value of human life in the godless world. For some the situation is one of simple despair. This is the case if a godless universe leads one to both cosmic nihilism (the cosmos is meaningless)

and existential nihilism (human life is meaningless) (see Crosby 1988, 26–36). In other cases, these discussions lead not to despair but to a tone of courageous acceptance. There is the admission that one can envision a better life more suitable to our needs and wants, but one accepts, with dignity, the futility of such hopes.[2] But oftentimes the denial of God's existence is thought to be a great boon for human life. In the atheism of Dawkins, this is certainly the case. When faced with the question of cosmic purpose, the universe, says Dawkins, reveals only pointlessness. Dawkins is a cosmic nihilist. But, as he writes, "the debunking of cosmic sentimentality must not be confused with a loss of personal hope" (Dawkins 1998, ix). In other words, do not confuse cosmic nihilism with existential nihilism. Nietzsche, too, has no such "cosmic sentimentality." And, like Dawkins, he finds it quite possible to affirm the value of human life in the world. But in his case, it comes only alongside a deep sense of the seriousness of atheism and the challenges for living well that it presents. Nietzsche, better than most, is well aware that the death of God is not simply an easy liberation from the tyranny of a cosmic despot. In a world where God does not exist, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche argues, certainly got the question right: "Has existence any meaning at all?" (Nietzsche 1974, 308). Life without God is an immensely difficult situation. Nietzsche's celebration of the death of God is infused with notes of tragedy. By this, I mean that the life we awaken to in the godless universe contains real and profound possibilities for significant joys and beauties. But they come only with great effort and unavoidable cost. Living well after God requires an honest awareness and affirmation of reality's costly and destructive ways. There are workable strategies for minimizing the risks of living in such a world. One can play it "safe" by means of renunciation, certain forms of asceticism, and resignation. But these devices, argues Nietzsche, are decadent and weaken one's capacities for joy, strength, abundance, and beauty. Nietzsche's way of affirmation is a life of willing and wanting, of full engagement, all the while knowing and affirming that one does so with unavoidable exposure to the risks of destruction and suffering. Throughout Dawkins's writings one finds little sense of these serious consequences of life without God.[3] Here we see that life without God is essentially unproblematic, with very little difficulties in terms of how to go on with things. In fact, life without God is presented as something airier, roomier, and altogether more wonderful. Dawkins partakes in what Charles Taylor calls a "subtraction story" (Taylor 2007, 22). This is not to suggest that Dawkins is entirely oblivious to the consequences of his views. Clearly, he attempts to make his atheism intellectually honest. But in Dawkins's presentation of the value of life without God, there is a naïve optimism that purports that human beings, educated in science and purged of religion, will find lives of peace and astonishing wonder. For Dawkins, reality, while immensely interesting to the curious mind, is a fairly benign spectacle. Nietzsche, in contrast,

recognized no easy comfort between reality and the human being who wants to live well. Whatever one is to do after God, if it is to reach levels agreeable to Nietzsche, it would require great effort, discipline, and courage. Human beings, he recognized, have serious tendencies toward boredom, complacency, sheepishness, and/or triviality (see Hart 2009, 229). One part of my argument is that Dawkins's optimism regarding the power of objective science is subject to Nietzsche's criticism of Socrates and what he calls the "theoretical man." As such, it fails in terms of providing a true affirmation of life in the godless world.

Dawkins and Atheism

As atheism requires some form of theism, Dawkins directs his arguments against what he deems "supernatural gods." This idea of God and the belief in the immortality of the soul he cites as the components of "real religion" (Dawkins 2003, 147). His intent is to refute the notion that there exists "a superhuman, supernatural intelligence who deliberately designed and created the universe and everything in it" (Dawkins 2006, 31).[4] His criticism follows from the premise that such a god is unsupported by empirical evidence and scientific reasoning (Dawkins 2003, 242). Religious beliefs, he says, rest on the weak foundations of authority, revelation, and tradition (Dawkins 2003, 243). Like fairies and pixies, supernatural gods do not warrant the status of truth (Dawkins 2003, 117).

The bulk of his philosophical argument for atheism comes in the form of a criticism against the well-known argument from design. Such critiques are not new. It is Hume, in the voice of Philo in the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, who puts forth the most compelling philosophical criticism. What Dawkins brings to the table is empirical evidence derived from Darwin's theory of natural selection that supports and fills out Philo's philosophical efforts (Dawkins 1986, 10). It is certainly true that Darwin, not Hume, does more to make public the dubious nature of the argument from design. While Hume shows the argument to be philosophically problematic, Darwin, says Dawkins, makes it possible to be an intellectually fulfilled atheist. With Darwin, we finally have a naturalistic explanation that accounts for the apparent order in the world (Dawkins 1986, 10).

The argument from design is not complicated. It posits, simply, that the world, with its complexity, resembles a machine. As machines are created by intelligent and purposeful minds, the world has been, by analogy, created by something like an intelligent, purposeful mind. The argument assumes that complex entities can come into existence only by the intelligent intent of something more complex. Darwin, says Dawkins, successfully offers counterevidence to the premise that the complexity of living organisms and the order that they display require some supernatural creator with superior intelligence. Echoing Laplace, Dawkins has no need of the God

hypothesis. A solid understanding of Darwin's theory of natural selection is all that is needed to account for the complexity and order of biological life. It "explains the whole of life," thus requiring no need to bring in a supernatural agent as the key to explanation (Dawkins 2006, 116).

To anyone tempted to align supernatural theism with evolutionary theory by means of the claim that God simply works through natural selection, Dawkins raises the problem of evil. As old as theology itself, the problem can be quite devastating to the classical doctrine of God, and Dawkins is certainly correct in thinking that he is onto something that should give significant trouble to those who believe in this God. His own version of the problem is borrowed from an observation made popular by Darwin. A particular type of wasp lays its eggs in the body of a living caterpillar. The larvae feed on the body of the caterpillar, eating it alive. Surely, there are theological questions directed at the assumed goodness and wisdom of God, wondering how such a scene of suffering is intentionally and thoughtfully designed with the well-being of sentient entities in mind. Evolutionary biology reveals a universe that is indifferent to the problem of suffering. "The universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil, and no good, nothing but blind pitiless indifference" (Dawkins 1995, 133). For Dawkins, there is no supernatural god. And while this seems to be sorry news for some, Dawkins goes on to suggest otherwise.

Science, Beauty, and Wonder

The fact that God does not exist is, for Dawkins, no cause for dismay. Although the cosmos is without purpose, there are no reasons for conclusions of moral anarchy and empty lives with no value. Significant portions of Dawkins's essays are devoted to bringing out, as he says, the grandeur of the evolutionary view of life that Darwin speaks about at the end of the *Origin of Species* (Dawkins 2003, 12–13).[5] For Dawkins, then, where is the grandeur? And what values and possibilities exist for humanity in a godless world? The answers to these questions seem rather straightforward and unproblematic for Dawkins. We should, he says, place a high value on truth and the dignified acceptance of this truth, whatever it may be. "And there is true solace in the blessed gift of understanding, even if *what* we understand is the unwelcome message of the Devil's Chaplain" (Dawkins 2003, 11). As to where and how truth is to be found, the answer turns on science. Truth is revealed by science, for it is the scientist who specializes in "discovering what is true about the world and the universe" (Dawkins 2003, 242).

Dawkins firmly believes that the needs and problems of human life can only be met by science and its accompanying technologies. But what is interesting is that Dawkins seeks to justify the value of the scientific

life on grounds other than technology and pragmatic benefits. The life of science—with its pursuit and capture of truth—is said to be intrinsically valuable and the key to a profoundly meaningful life. In order to make this argument, he appeals to the aesthetic qualities of the scientific life. "The feeling of awed wonder that science can give us is one of the highest experiences of which the human psyche is capable. It is a deep aesthetic passion to rank with the finest that music and poetry can deliver. It is truly one of the things that makes life worth living" (Dawkins 1998, x). The romantic who dismisses science as revealing only a cold, sterile world incapable of meeting human demands for meaningfulness is, says Dawkins, entirely mistaken. Science can create poetry.

While the passage cited above places science alongside art, the greater drift of Dawkins's argument is that art is to be understood as under the authority of science. Science dictates what is good art. In fact, poetry is to be put to the task of celebrating the people and deeds of science (Dawkins 1998, 16). Dawkins goes so far as to say that poetry is far superior when the muse is science and not religion, nostalgia, or myth. Beautiful music, beautiful poetry, or simply beauty itself is truth; and truth is that which is revealed by a certain scientific empiricism. Astonishingly, while it might seem that he would greatly appreciate the similarly expressed sentiment of John Keats, Dawkins reduces Keats's "beauty is truth" to the status of superficial emotion (Dawkins 1998, 63–64). Keats, he says, finds science to be destructive of poetic beauty, unweaving our rainbows and dissolving beauty. The poet commits the unfortunate blunder, at least according to the etiquette of Dawkins, of proposing a toast to the "confusion of the memory of Newton" (Dawkins 1998, 38–39). Keats is upbraided for a perceived hostility to reason, a dismissal of clear thinking, and a preference for mystification. William Blake's "Auguries of Innocence," Dawkins claims, would be greatly improved if the inspiration and meaning were truly scientific and not mystical.[6] Where the poet-mystic is content to bask in cloudy mystery, the scientist, to her great credit, is restless and wants always to know the answers to legitimate questions (Dawkins 1998, 16–17). While Blake and the scientist are both lured by mystery and motivated by wonder, the scientist finds mystery to be more of a puzzle in need of a solution. Blake was not, to his great discredit, a lover of science and wallowed, therefore, in the irreducibility of mystery (Dawkins 1998, 17). With his mystical faculties, Blake is, says Dawkins, "a waste of poetic talent" (Dawkins 1998, 17). Dawkins's favorite poet is William Yeats, something he admits with reluctance. He speaks of Yeats in old age as a frustrated poet in search of inspiration. Yet, such frustrations, Dawkins says, could have been relieved if only Yeats had visited and made use of a large astronomic telescope close to his home (Dawkins 1998, 26). We might better be able to believe that Yeats's heart was no longer trembling and had truly stilled if the wisdom he drew upon in old age was science and not the Celtic counterparts

of Greek panpipes and nymphs (Dawkins 1998, 26–27). The argument that we might infer from all of this is that science is the antidote to all of life's hurdles and anxieties, even those of old age, unfulfilled desires, and nostalgia for the remembered but no longer present past. These are problems that will evaporate in front of a telescope.

Repeatedly Dawkins makes the point that the universe revealed by science is one of astonishing wonder and beauty and capable of evoking the highest aesthetic sensibilities. His aesthetic seems to be largely that of the sublime, which, for him, produces an interesting combination of humility and pride. For example, the study of astronomy shows a vast cosmos with only scattered blips of matter; and, as far as we know, only one particularly minute blip of this matter contains a world of organisms with great complexity and the cognitive capacities to know just how small and insignificant they are.[7] A keen and unflinching awareness of finitude and contingency, he says, makes life all the more beautiful and precious (Dawkins 1998, 118). But with this humility is a feeling of pride at knowing that we can know. "It is the power—the fact that we can learn so much by precise analysis of what seems so little information—that gives these unweavings their beauty" (Dawkins 1998, 82).

For Dawkins, it is all rather simple: the world revealed by science is entirely capable of filling our lives with meaning. It does so by showing beauty and leading us to lives of wonder and contemplation. "Isn't it a noble, an enlightened way of spending our brief time in the sun, to work at understanding the universe and how we have come to wake up in it?" (Dawkins 1998, 6). Science reveals a strange array of creatures and features that have the arresting capacity of arousing our curiosity, and with it no real human existential challenge should arise. We are to seek scientific clarity, dispel ignorance, and be content. We are to be captivated by a sense of contingency and in awe of the fact that we exist at all. It is, simply put, good to be. But if contingency and the sense of vulnerability that it can produce causes anxiety of any sort, we are, it seems, incapable of appreciating the nourishment offered by truthful scientific inquiry. "There is deep refreshment to be had from standing up and facing straight into the strong keen wind of understanding" (Dawkins 2006, 355). If we shiver with anxiety or squint at a perceived irony, it is only out of ignorance. That one should be and have been is cause for simple gratitude. "Whichever way you look at it, only an extremely small proportion of creatures has the good fortune to be fossilized. As I have said before, I should consider it an honour" (Dawkins 1998, 14).[8] The scientific truth-seekers, unfettered by the bondages of religious faith, can widen their visions of reality so much as to expose their senses "to airy and exhilarating freedom" (Dawkins 2006, 362). The assumption here is that this is a freedom from ignorance and, as such, a freedom that brings a trouble-free, frictionless existence. One can, with it, find all of the consolations needed.

Thus, in some important ways, Dawkins echoes those who claim that we can find nobility and dignity through contemplation of the vast and deep wonders of nature, even if nature is cosmically pointless. We find dignity in being a finite and contingent, but thinking and knowing, thing in this entirely purposeless, contingent, and material universe. Full of awe and respectful of the vast machinery of luck that allows us to be at all, we find an aesthetically meaningful life. It is all quite simple and, we can add, comfortably safe. Missing is what has usually accompanied reverence for the sublime: a feeling of uncanniness, danger, and some fear. Dawkins promises us a safe engagement with the sublime. In fact, it seems that the nature of the sublime has been reduced simply to an object of our curiosity. It is not that Dawkins sees the universe as a peaceful place. He is immensely sensitive to the amoral violence of the natural world, but none of it should give us much trouble. Absent as well is the fact that although one is struck by the disjunction of being a thinking and knowing thing in an indifferent universe, this situation, for Dawkins, produces neither a sense of absurdity nor irony.

Nietzsche and the Death of God

We saw that for Dawkins, atheism is the result of a form of naturalism that finds no need for God. In particular, Darwin's theory of natural selection provides a fatal blow to the argument from design. Thus, the idea of a young earth and a supernatural God who makes something from nothing is entirely out of place.

In Nietzsche's thought, the death of God occurs by similar means. For Nietzsche, the intellectual history of the West amounts to the history of the idea of the True World of Being, a supposed world characterized by stability, clarity, and eternal Being and unmarked by history, suffering, and finitude. While the world in which we live lacks these qualities, thinkers from Plato to Augustine through Kant have claimed that the world of change and finitude is grounded in this True World of Being. For Nietzsche, this history is the history of an error. Reality is radically historical and there is no True World of Being. Nietzsche certainly agrees with Dawkins that Darwin's theory of evolution plays a significant role in exposing this error. Revealed, he says, is the truth of "sovereign becoming, of the fluidity of all concepts, types, and species, of the lack of any cardinal difference between human and animal" (Nietzsche 1995a, 153). These truths crystallize in the awareness of the death of God, and with them comes the growing awareness of the problem of nihilism. Because of the death of God, we must, Nietzsche states, "reject the Christian interpretation and condemn its 'meaning' like counterfeit" (Nietzsche 1974, 308).

What is interesting is that Nietzsche's criticism of Christianity and his ensuing atheism have less to do with scientific and logical challenges to

theism. The Christian God is rejected not so much because it does not exist, but because the values purported by the worldview it creates are those of decadence and nihilism. Thus, although the death of God makes nihilism explicit, nihilism—here meaning the lack of reverence for human life in the world—is present, though latently so, all along. "That we find no God—either in history or in nature or behind nature—is not what differentiates *us*, but that we experience what has been revered as God, not as 'godlike' but as miserable, as absurd, as harmful, not merely as an error but as a *crime against life*" (Nietzsche 1976a, 627). Although this is not my main point, it can be argued that this difference gives Nietzsche's atheism an advantage over that of Dawkins. Dawkins takes theism to be intellectually dubious largely because it is empirically unprovable. Along with the faulty nature of the argument from design, experience grants little credibility to claims that God answers prayers or that one is rewarded, by God, for living a pious life (see Hart 2010). But when all is said and done, it is difficult to see just who is bothered by these findings—perhaps the friends of Job. Much has been made of the fact that the new atheists often deal only with a gross caricature of Christian belief and life (Eagleton 2006 and Haught 2008). On the other hand, when Nietzsche shows a good understanding of the workings of Christian life and attacks its core values as decadent and nihilistic, it's hard to see just who *is not* required to take serious note.

Nietzsche and Affirmation

Running throughout Dawkins's proposals for a meaningful life in a godless universe is the gleeful optimism that the truth will, indeed, set us free. Stripped of myth and saccharine illusions and with eyes wide open, the delightful curiosities of scientifically ruled poetic wonder await us. Nietzsche, though, knows better. Pilate's "What is truth?" is Nietzsche's most esteemed biblical principal. The sentiment that scientific truth liberates us is, for Nietzsche, a sophomoric pose. It lacks the power, which Dawkins thinks it holds, to provide the basis for a full affirmation of human life in the godless world. In this regard, Dawkins bears a similarity to Nietzsche's conception of Socrates, put forward in *The Birth of Tragedy* and some of the later writings. At the heart of Nietzsche's criticism of Socrates is the shift in values that Socrates represents from a tragic culture to one of optimism with a high regard for the power of reason. "There is . . . a profound *illusion* that first saw the light of the world in the person of Socrates: the unshakable faith that thought, using the thread of causality, can penetrate the deepest abysses of being, and that thought is capable not only of knowing being but even of *correcting* it" (Nietzsche 1967a, 95). This faith in reason involves the claim that reason can clear a path through the muddle of superstition and mythology and come to find the truth that will

dispel our ignorance and lead to a state of peace and well-being. Although Dawkins is unlike Socrates in that he would certainly reject the notion that reason finds a true world beneath the empirical world of particulars, much of Nietzsche's criticism still applies. Nietzsche's description of the "theoretical man," who carries the torch of Socratism, describes much of what Dawkins upholds. Taking an "infinite delight in whatever exists," the theoretical man, like Dawkins's person of science, finds a cheery satisfaction with life and is protected from pessimism (Nietzsche 1967a, 94). And again like Dawkins, the theoretical man "finds the highest object of his pleasure in the process of an ever happy uncovering that succeeds through his own efforts" (Nietzsche 1967a, 94).

Nietzsche states that this quest for scientific truth is a major turning point in Western history and comes to be understood as a panacea for all human issues and challenges. "To fathom the depths and to separate true knowledge from appearance and error seemed to Socratic man the noblest, even the only truly human vocation" (Nietzsche 1967a, 97). Error leads to ignorance and ignorance is the presumed source of all difficulties and problems. Here reason and the acquisition of scientific truth have the power, just as they do for Dawkins, to liberate one from all sorts of existential crises. Socrates "appears to us as the first who could not only live, guided by this instinct of science, but also—and this is far more—dies that way. Hence the image of the *dying Socrates*, as the human being whom knowledge and reason have liberated from the fear of death" (Nietzsche 1967a, 96). The relief from ignorance and all that plagues human life, promised by Socrates, becomes the emblem and mission of science, and we are promised that existence will be made unproblematic.

Nietzsche sees this valorization of reason as the impulse behind a transformation of art and drama that bears an interesting point of similarity to Dawkins's discussion of science, poetry, and wonder. Socrates, Nietzsche says, condemns the poetry and art of his time on the grounds that they are not rooted in reason, but only "instinct." As such, art cannot be understood as a source of philosophical truth. Euripides, says Nietzsche, sought a transformation of art and drama on Socratic principles, thus elevating, he hoped, the status and usefulness of art. Aesthetic Socratism asserts that in order for something to be beautiful it must be intelligible. Art must extol the virtues of clarity and rationality, just as it does for Dawkins. In Nietzsche's terms, Aesthetic Socratism is the condemnation of Dionysus. With this new principle, Euripides judged the dramas of Aeschylus and Sophocles to be nonrational and the embodiment of a spirit of ambiguity and uncertainty. The meaning of their plays was anything but clear, for in Euripides's judgment, the problems of their tragic heroes were never resolved and they seemed to portray a universe with no moral structure whereby there could be a fair distribution of fortune and misfortune, of just deserts (Nietzsche 1967a, 80). Art, on the basis of Aesthetic Socratism,

becomes, as it does for Dawkins, a medium solely for a certain kind of truth telling. The only poetic works that Socrates is capable of comprehending are, Nietzsche snickers, the fables of Aesop (Nietzsche 1967a, 89).

Socrates and the theoretical man succeed in accomplishing, just as Dawkins does, a sense of cheerfulness and an affirmation of human life in the world. They both believe that the powers of reason can "guide life by science, and actually confine the individual within a limited sphere of solvable problems" (Nietzsche 1967a, 109). But for Nietzsche, this affirmation, as worldly as it is, ultimately fails. That the "eternal wound of existence" is capable of being cured by reason is a delusion (Nietzsche 1967a, 109).

Within Socrates's exaltation of reason, Nietzsche detects a form of decadence. Socrates's project is to replace the Dionysian world and its tragic culture with one that is rational and not subject to insolvable difficulties and real losses; he wants a world where tragedy is not possible. But within this optimism, Nietzsche sees an inability to cope with the world as it really is. "Is the resolve to be so scientific about everything perhaps a kind of fear of, an escape from pessimism? A subtle last resort against—truth?" (Nietzsche 1967a, 18).

Socrates and those in the scientific community who are influenced by him are guilty, Nietzsche claims, of attempting to evade the difficult and challenging aspects of life. They do so by rising above into a detached life of the mind. Dawkins, too, finds little that troubles him in the godless world. He would insist that to see reality as it really is, which is to see it as a scientist, is a benign event. It does, of course, excite our curiosity, but it should not trouble us in any significant way. In contrast, Nietzsche boldly suggests that there is something awesomely terrible about reality when viewed without filters. One sees "terrible destruction" and great cruelty in nature, so much so that one runs the risk of a debilitating Hamlet-like paralysis (Nietzsche 1967a, 60). Nietzsche will later go on to speak that we must learn not to be paralyzed by such visions and that we can come to see the "innocence of becoming," but unlike Dawkins, Nietzsche claims that these are hard-won achievements.

Clearly, there are a number of important differences between the scientific projects of Dawkins and Socrates. But the point that should capture our attention is the manner in which Dawkins emphasizes the entirely unproblematic nature of the affirmation of human life afforded by a contemplative science. Life presents simple problems that can be solved; and the wonder induced by science is the key solution to a good number of them. The decadence of Socrates stems from his own assessment of life in the world as unproblematic and untragic. Socrates seeks a truly manageable world in which everything is corrigible (see Babich 1994, 190). Dawkins, too, suggests that the suffering caused by being a finite person in a world of contingency is easily managed. Life is for the lucky, and any sense of

general malaise or yearning for something else is simply impolite. "However brief our time in the sun," Dawkins writes, "if we waste a second of it, or complain that it is dull or barren or (like a child) boring, couldn't this be seen as a callous insult to those unborn trillions who will never even be offered life in the first place?" (Dawkins 2006, 361).

To those who suggest that science presents a true alternative to the ascetic ideal and succeeds at putting forth an affirmation of worldly life without God and the beyond, Nietzsche writes, "Such noisy . . . chatter, however, does not impress me: these trumpeters of reality are bad musicians, their voices obviously do not come from the depths" (Nietzsche 1967c, 146–47). To speak from the depths is to understand and acknowledge the tragic nature of human existence. As tragic, life in the world does not present us simply with problems that can be solved by overcoming ignorance.

None of this is to say that Nietzsche's affirmation of the godless world does not turn on the issue of truthfulness. Nietzsche greatly admired the pursuit of truth, stating that one's integrity is measured by the amount of truth that one can dare to apprehend and endure (Nietzsche 1967b, 218). To be sure, there are delights and wonders awaiting those who know the truth of the death of God. We can find, Nietzsche says, an open sea whereby we will have the opportunity for creating our own values (Nietzsche 1974, 280). But the open sea that awaits is not pacific. Rather, with an onslaught of analogous images, such truth seekers are destined for labyrinths (Nietzsche 1976a, 568), lonely mountaintops, and icy glaciers (Nietzsche 1967b, 218); they build houses on the slopes of Vesuvius (Nietzsche 1974, 228); and they have "left the land" with burnt bridges behind them (Nietzsche 1974, 180). And while it is certainly possible to apply the notions of beauty, wonder, and *fröhliche Wissenschaft* to Nietzsche's understanding of how best to affirm life in the godless universe, these concepts incorporate aspects unacknowledged in Dawkins's sense of affirmation. Nietzsche's concept of affirmation is built around his understanding of Dionysus. It stands free of the spirit of resignation found in Schopenhauer while also avoiding both the superficial optimism of Socrates and the omni-satisfaction of the yes-saying ass lampooned by Zarathustra (see Reginster, 2006, 242–47).

In a tragic world, those who wish to live well will be embroiled in a world where commitment to the highest values requires the acknowledgment that one's destiny will be a life of suffering and loss, which necessarily accompany joy and love. "That the creator may be, suffering is needed and much change. Indeed there must be much bitter dying in your life, you creators" (Nietzsche 1995b, 87). The life that awaits one who is willing to accept the truth of the death of God is a losing proposition in terms of happy endings and the contentful peace of untroubled success. Nietzsche accepts much of Schopenhauer's analysis of the relationship between desire and suffering. Suffering comes to all who will and want. But he adamantly refuses Schopenhauer's conclusion that the best strategy is resignation.

Instead of the defensive stance of Schopenhauer, Zarathustra says he loves the soul that is willing to squander itself, to spend freely, with no wish of preserving itself. But this involves tragedy and commits one to a life of loss. "Loving and perishing: that has rhymed for eternities" (Nietzsche 1995b, 123).

For Nietzsche, the healthy and affirmative individuals, those with Dionysian tendencies, have souls that "want to want" and therefore "dive into becoming" (Nietzsche 1995b, 208–9). Wanting to want is tragic because it means that one pursues hopes and loves with a strong relish and that these efforts, by a particular measure, inevitably fail. There is no success or solution in terms of creating something of value that will provide a satisfaction of lasting duration.[9] There are, instead, opportunities for experiences of great profundity and joy—and yet they come tragically at the cost of wasteful expenditure. "He flows out, he overflows, he uses himself up, he does not spare himself—and this is a calamitous, involuntary fatality, no less than a river flooding the land" (Nietzsche 1976b, 548).

This marks the key point of difference between Dawkins and Nietzsche. For Dawkins, when God is pushed out of the way, there is simply a lovely and gentle freedom. When vacated, the space in our minds originally overwhelmed by concern for God can be filled with a love of life in the world with no worries of guilt, forgiveness, and the felt need for redemption (Dawkins 2006, 347). Nietzsche, too, readily acknowledges the great possibilities that emerge after the death of God. But the world that is revealed is far from one that provides ease and contentful well-being. Rather we find an as yet undiscovered country "so overrich in what is beautiful, strange, questionable, and terrible" (Nietzsche 1974, 346). And for those willing to venture there, they will find, Nietzsche writes, "that the real question mark is posed for the first time, that the destiny of the soul changes, the hand moves forward, the tragedy *begins*" (Nietzsche 1974, 347). Changed now is that without God, life is no longer the search for comfort or the game of self-preservation. The tragedy begins as Zarathustra decides to descend the depths, to expend and give himself away, for he is the cup that wants to overflow and become empty again (Nietzsche 1974, 275).

Conclusion

Up front, I offered the claim that when comparing Dawkins and Nietzsche on the question of how one is to affirm human life in the godless world, one finds the proposals of Dawkins to be lacking in the fullness, richness, and depth that one finds in Nietzsche's. Along the way, I have tried to highlight the differences that make this the case. In conclusion, it is helpful to be more explicit about this, if only in a suggestive way. After the acceptance of God's nonexistence, we can find, says Dawkins, an open and

airy space, uncluttered by religious faith. Here we can live lives of scientific contemplation, fulfilled with the joys of wonder and curiosity. Existential worries and concerns are out of place, says Dawkins. Such things show a lack of appreciation for the wildly improbable fact that one exists at all. In Dawkins's proposals for life without God, there is the assumption that it will all come easily and with little expense (see Haught 2008, 20).

In contrast, Nietzsche argues that life without God is a grand affair that requires great strenuous efforts of the will if one is to affirm life. Nietzsche's grand philosophical project, evident from beginning to end, is devoted to teaching human beings how to overcome the nihilism that becomes obvious after the death of God (see Reginster, 2006). Although Nietzsche writes with conviction and confidence in regards to his claims, they are made, always, with the keen awareness that life without God is no easy task and that the temptations to decadence, despair, or resignation always loom close by (see Nietzsche 1967b, 223). Whatever values one is to live by, they come only by being willed and sustained by constant effort of the individual. Overall, Nietzsche's greater depth on these matters resides in this awareness. The shallowness of Dawkins's proposals can be seen when they are aligned with Nietzsche's critical understanding of Socrates and the theoretical man. Putting Dawkins's thinking in this context brings about a number of suspicions: does one really find an easy and cheery freedom after God? Is there really an obvious harmony and comfortable fit between a human being's honest desires and the ways of the pointless universe? Is a life of wonder within a cosmically pointless and materialist universe so sustaining?

A life of gratitude and affirmation may certainly be possible within the universe that Dawkins describes. But there are grounds to doubt that it comes so simply or even as purely has he presents. Nietzsche's depth, again, is achieved in the recognition of the fact that whatever one finds after God, ease and pure peaceful contentment are not included. Nietzsche wanted more than a life of contemplation and, in the end, rejected such strategies as evasive and decadent. The cost for this desire is a life of tragic engagement.

Notes

My thanks to Karen Adkins, Ron Disanto, Kari Kloos, and Hannah Breece for reading and offering helpful suggestions on an earlier draft of this essay.

1. In this essay I am concerned with atheism only as it relates to Christianity.
2. For a contemporary example, consider the philosophical conclusions of Nobel Prize–winning physicist Steven Weinberg: "It would be wonderful to find in the laws of nature a plan prepared by a concerned creator in which human beings played some special role. I find sadness in doubting that we will" (Weinberg 1992, 256).
3. Alasdair MacIntyre claims that this lack of seriousness is a characteristic of the atheism that came about in the 1960s (MacIntyre 1969, 13–17).

4. In the beginning of *The God Delusion*, Dawkins explicitly conditions his argument by claiming that he is dealing only with supernatural theism and he acknowledges that there are other forms of theism. But despite these limitations, Dawkins proceeds as if these are differences that make no difference and treats religion as if it were a single entity.

5. Darwin writes, "There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved" (Darwin 2006, 760).

6. Dawkins is referring to the following passage: "To see a world in a grain of sand/And a heaven in a wild flower/Hold infinity in the palm of your hand/And eternity in an hour."

7. The fact that a similar point was made by Pascal centuries ago seems to go either unnoticed by Dawkins or fails to interest him (see Taylor 2007, 347).

8. One might counter with the suggestion that Dawkins is a scientist, not a philosopher, and that elaboration of such matters is not his primary responsibility. But remember, Dawkins is a scientist and access to truth is through science. Dawkins rejects any division of labor on these questions. In *The God Delusion*, Dawkins tells us that he has, throughout his writings, dealt extensively with the question of science and meaning in human life.

9. Although the concept of *amor fati* seems to suggest that we should be unfazed by such losses, we need also to keep in mind that Nietzsche's view is tempered by the fact that these creations that are lost and/or left behind are indeed loved and that one feels, as Zarathustra says, a certain *bitterness* in regards to these conditions.

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