



The Irrationality of Richard Dawkins

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Biography

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In his 2006 book, *The God Delusion*, Richard Dawkins laments the career path of Kurt Wise, who has, since 2006, held the positions of professor of science and theology and director of the Center for Theology and Science at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. Prior to that, Wise had taught for many years at Bryan College, a small evangelical college in Dayton, Tennessee, named after William Jennings Bryan, three-time Democratic presidential candidate and associate counsel in the 1925 Scopes "Monkey Trial."

According to Dawkins, Wise was at one time a promising young scholar who had earned a degree in geology (from the University of Chicago) and advanced degrees in geology and paleontology from Harvard University, where he studied under the highly acclaimed Stephen

Jay Gould. Wise is also a young-earth creationist, which means that he accepts a literal interpretation of the first chapters of Genesis and maintains that the earth is less than ten thousand years old. It is not a position I hold, and for that reason I am sympathetic to Dawkins' bewilderment at why Wise has embraced what appears to many Christians to be a false choice between one controversial interpretation of Scripture (young-earth creationism) and abandoning Christianity altogether.

At one point in his career, Wise began to understand that his reading of Scripture was inconsistent with the dominant scientific understanding of the age of the earth and the cosmos. Instead of abandoning what I believe is a false choice, he continued to embrace it, but this led to a crisis of faith. Wise writes: "Either the Scripture was true and evolution was wrong or evolution was true and I must toss out the Bible. . . . It was there that night that I accepted the Word of God and rejected all that would ever counter it, including evolution. With that, in great sorrow, I tossed into the fire all my dreams and hopes in science." So Wise abandoned the possibility of securing a professorship at a prestigious research university or institute.

Dawkins is disturbed by Wise's judgment and its repercussions on his obvious promise as a scholar, researcher, and teacher. Writes Dawkins: "I find that terribly sad . . . the Kurt Wise story is just plain pathetic—pathetic and contemptible. The wound, to his career and his life's happiness, was self-inflicted, so unnecessary, so easy to escape. . . . I am hostile to religion because of what it did to Kurt Wise. And if it did that to a Harvard educated geologist, just think what it can do to others less gifted and less well armed."

Of course, some Christians may be just as troubled as Dawkins. So one need not be an atheist to raise legitimate questions about Professor's Wise's intellectual and spiritual journey. But, given Dawkins' atheism, there is something odd about his lament, for it seems to require that Dawkins accept something about the nature of human beings and the natural moral law that his atheism seems to reject.

Let me explain what I mean. Dawkins harshly criticizes Wise for embracing a religious belief that results in Wise's not treating himself and his talents, intelligence, and abilities in a way appropriate for their full flourishing. That is, given the opportunity to hone and nurture certain gifts—for example, intellectual skill—no one, including Wise, should waste them as a result of accepting a false belief. The person who violates, or helps violate, this norm, according to Dawkins, should be condemned, and we should all bemoan this tragic moral neglect on the part of our fellow(s). But the issuing of that judgment on Wise by Dawkins makes sense only in light of Wise's particular talents and the *sort of being* Wise is by nature, a being who Dawkins seems to believe possesses certain intrinsic capacities and purposes, the premature disruption of which would be an injustice.

So the human being who wastes his talents is one who does not respect his natural gifts or the basic capacities whose maturation and proper employment make possible the flourishing of many goods. In other words, the notion of "proper function," as Alvin Plantinga puts it, coupled with the observation that certain perfections grounded in basic capacities have been impermissibly obstructed from maturing, is assumed in the very judgment Dawkins makes about Wise and the way by which Wise should treat himself.

But Dawkins, in fact, does not actually believe that living beings, including human beings, have intrinsic purposes or are designed so that one may conclude that violating one's proper function amounts to a violation of one's moral duty to oneself. Dawkins has maintained for decades that the natural world only appears to be designed. He writes in *The God Delusion*: "Darwin and his successors have shown how living creatures, with their spectacular statistical improbability and appearance of design, have evolved by slow, gradual degrees from simple beginnings. We can now safely say that the illusion of design in living creatures is just that—an illusion."

But this means that his lament for Wise is misguided, for Dawkins is lamenting what *only appears* to be Wise's dereliction of his duty to nurture and employ his gifts in ways that result in his happiness and an acquisition of knowledge that contributes to the common good. Yet because there are no designed natures and no intrinsic purposes, and thus no natural duties that we are obligated to obey, the intuitions that inform Dawkins' judgment of Wise are as illusory as the design he explicitly rejects. But that is precisely one of the grounds by which Dawkins suggests that theists are irrational and ought to abandon their belief in God.

So if the theist is irrational for believing in God based on what turns out to be pseudo-design, Dawkins is irrational in his judgment of Wise and other creationists whom he targets for reprimand and correction. For Dawkins' judgment rests on a premise that—although uncompromisingly maintained throughout his career—only appears to be true.

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