

A STUDY GUIDE FOR



HAS SCIENCE BURIED GOD?



OXFORD UNIVERSITY
MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY



FIXED POINT FOUNDATION

We take ideas seriously

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A STUDY GUIDE
compiled by Bill Wortman



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THE PARTICIPANTS



Richard Dawkins, FRS at the time of this debate held the position of Charles Simonyi Professor of the Public Understanding of Science at the University of Oxford. He did his doctorate at Oxford under Nobel Prize winning zoologist, Niko Tinbergen. He is the author of nine books, some of which are *The Selfish Gene* (1976, 2nd edition 1989), *The Blind Watchmaker* (1986), *The God Delusion* (2006), and most recently *The Greatest Show on Earth* (2009). Dawkins is an atheist.

John Lennox is a Reader in Mathematics at the University of Oxford and Fellow in Mathematics and Philosophy of Science at Green College, University of Oxford. He holds doctorates from Oxford (D. Phil.), Cambridge (Ph.D.), and the University of Wales (D.Sc.) and an MA in Bioethics from the University of Surrey. In addition to authoring over seventy peer reviewed papers in pure mathematics, and co-authoring two research monographs for Oxford University Press, Dr. Lennox is the author of *God's Undertaker: Has Science Buried God?* (2007). Lennox is a Christian.



Larry A. Taunton is founder and Executive Director of Fixed Point Foundation and Latimer House. Like Fixed Point itself, Larry specializes in addressing issues of faith and culture. A published author, he is the recipient of numerous awards and research grants. He is Executive Producer of the films “Science and the God Question” (2007), “The God Delusion Debate” (2007), “God on Trial” (2008), “Has Science Buried God?” (2008), “Can Atheism Save Europe?” (2009), and “Is God Great?” (2009). Larry formerly taught European and Russian history. He holds academic degrees from Samford University and the University of Alabama.

INTRODUCTION

Has science buried God? The answer has implications that reverberate throughout public and private life, from government policy and medical ethics to individual choices made every day. In 2006, Richard Dawkins wrote *The God Delusion* in which he argues that science has now shown that belief in God is delusional. In 2007, John Lennox wrote *God's Undertaker: Has Science Buried God?* in which he contends that science, to the contrary, points inexorably to belief in a purposeful and eternal Creator God.

These two eminent scientists previously debated on October 3, 2007 before a sold-out crowd at the University of Alabama-Birmingham's Alys Stephens Center. That event was broadcast to a global audience of over one million. This Oxford debate was the highly anticipated sequel to that robust conversation begun in Birmingham, Alabama.

Noteworthy among its many interesting moments was Dawkins' comment that "a serious case could be made for a deistic God". The well-known columnist Melanie Philips wrote an article two days after the debate entitled *Is Richard Dawkins Still Evolving?*. In it she expressed the baffling implications of Dawkins' opening statement, "Here was the arch-apostle of atheism, whose whole case is based on the assertion that believing in a creator of the universe is no different from believing in fairies at the bottom of the garden, saying that a serious case can be made for the idea that the universe was brought into being by some kind of purposeful force. A creator" (Spectator; Oct 23, 2008).

The Oxford Museum of Natural History was the famed site of the 1860 evolution debate between Thomas Huxley and Samuel Wilberforce. The debate occurred just one year after the publication of Charles Darwin's *Origin of the Species*. Almost one hundred and fifty years later, two Oxford scientists revisited that historic discussion. It is clear that God – as a debate topic at least – has not yet been buried.

ORGANIZATION OF THE DEBATE

The debate is unconventional in its format; unconventional in that it has almost no format. It is more likely to be viewed as an extended conversation. There are no stopping points and only towards the end of the conversation does Larry Taunton, the moderator, briefly engage the two men in order to make sure they have covered the topics they set to discuss. Nevertheless some very distinct topics are covered sequentially so that there are natural points to pause the debate. These distinct topics serve as the framework for this study guide.

The five major topic segments are as follows:

1. Rational Intelligibility: The Existence of Science Itself
2. Evolution and Fine-Tuning
3. The Origin of Life – Information Carrying DNA
4. The Resurrection of Christ – Is it Petty?
5. What is the Ultimate Meaning of Life?

Following these five topic segments, there are four questions from the audience; two for each scientist. Lennox and Dawkins then make closing statements.

HOW TO USE THIS STUDY GUIDE

This study guide will introduce each topic segment and explain as simply as possible the meaning of that segment's thesis and the nature of the conversation that ensues. It is probably best to read each topic's introduction first and then watch the debate segment that corresponds to it. Following the introduction is a series of questions for further discussion. These are intended for group discussion. At the conclusion of all the segments (including the question period and closing statements), there is a recommended reading section on the topics discussed.

THREE PRACTICAL HINTS

- A common way to watch such a highly charged debate like this is to look for a rhetorical knockout punch or silver bullet. But a debate about serious ideas and their consequences should not be viewed as merely another form of film entertainment. Instead, the goal is to better understand the nature of the debate by listening to two highly accomplished scholars present their respective arguments.
- It is natural for people to identify more closely with one side of the debate. Therefore, it is all too easy to listen carelessly to what the opponent of one's own views is arguing. So as a practical strategy, it is recommended that you try as a priority to understand the arguments of the person you *don't* tend to agree with.
- Unfortunately, much of public debate these days is nothing more than an emotional shouting match of talking points. This debate represents a contrast to this. Two educated and well-informed men have a robust and civil disagreement, where they respectfully allow their opponent to finish his thoughts without rude interruptions. In your own discussions on this debate, you should consider the debate itself as a model of how people can respectfully, yet forcefully, dialogue.

PART I: RATIONAL INTELLIGIBILITY (5:35 - 16:02)

THE EXISTENCE OF SCIENCE ITSELF

INTRODUCTION

Dawkins opens the debate with a rather surprising statement that “a reasonably respectable case” (from science) could be made for a deistic God. It is surprising because he represents the position that science has definitively “buried” the question of God. Yet he appears to concede that a reasonable scientist may in fact see evidence in nature for a deistic God. But since Lennox believes in the Christian God, Dawkins directs his attention to what he perceives to be some “petty” elements of the Christian faith. Science has buried the Christian God. Lennox suggests that the two can discuss the Christian faith later in the debate and proposes that they start at the more basic level of what science itself says about Ultimate Reality and whether some kind of God (deistic or otherwise) best explains the nature of this Ultimate Reality. He contests that the entire enterprise of science (a created system of material governed by mathematically predictable laws) gives clear evidence that some kind of divine intelligence or mind best explains the rational intelligibility of the universe. Dawkins argues that the rational intelligibility of science should not compel a person to postulate a divine Mind behind the universe, not even a deistic one.

QUESTIONS

1. Dawkins insists that the notion that the God of the universe was tortured and executed (in the person of Jesus Christ) is “profoundly unscientific”. Do you agree with him that there is something “unscientific” about this core Christian belief? Are these elements even in the category of science? Why or why not?
2. Dawkins says that the Christian God “couldn’t think of a better way to rid the world of sin than... to have himself tortured and executed so that he could forgive himself.” Do you think this statement accurately represents Christian belief? (Cf. Acts 3:18-19)
3. Dawkins says that cosmologists have not had “their Darwin” yet. So, rather than postulating God, we should be patient and wait for a cosmologist “Darwin” to enter history and explain how the universe and its laws came to be. Do you think that the problem Darwin sought to answer (explaining variation among living organisms) is comparable to the problem cosmologists face (explaining the origin of the universe)? How do these problems differ?
4. Dawkins expresses that it is difficult to conceive of “the Christian God” who “actually cares about things like sin”. Do you agree that it is difficult to conceive? If not, why do you suppose that Dawkins thinks it is difficult to conceive? In other words, what leads him to this opinion?
5. Lennox cites some atheist scientists who contend that the mechanism of natural selection results in features that best serve reproduction rather than truth. That is, the acquired traits which transform an organism are the ones that help it survive, not necessarily ones that direct the organism toward what is true; e.g. lying, rather than truth-telling, may better help someone survive. If in fact survival does not always depend on truth, what does it imply about the reliability of a mind that has been “created” by a mindless evolutionary process?

INTRODUCTION

The discussion turns to the question of Evolution by natural selection. Natural selection is the mechanism whereby living organisms transform over successive generations. All organisms have genes and these genes are able to mutate and form new traits. Nature “selects” the traits which best outfit that organism for reproductive survival. Dawkins argues that evolution by natural selection produced humans with phenomenally sophisticated and reliably reasoning brains. Lennox points out that the immense sophistication of a process that produced human brains from mere material is itself evidence for a Designer.

QUESTIONS

1. Dawkins says that he is “on the extreme end of Darwinians in that [he] emphasize[s] the power of natural selection to home in on particular ends.” That is to say, he believes evolution is teleological (leading toward a determined end); that the laws of physics and the nature of organic material being what they are, the process of natural selection leads to particular ends so that there is not as much variation among living organisms as one might expect if the process were unguided. Does this undermine his argument that there is no evidence in evolution for a Designer?
2. Why does Lennox insist that Dawkins’ conviction that evolution is unguided is an “assumption?” Is this merely an assumption?
3. If the process of evolution is “blind and automatic”, does that imply there is no Designer? What does Lennox’s watch analogy have to do with this point?
4. What is the distinction between agent and mechanism? Does the discovery of scientific mechanisms imply that there is no agent?
5. Dawkins says that Isaac Newton was a theist because “he lived in the seventeenth century, and everybody was [a theist].” Do you think this a sufficient explanation for why the great physicist Isaac Newton was a theist?

PART III: THE ORIGIN OF LIFE (22:37 - 32:40)

INTRODUCTION

The unique problem of the origin of life now becomes central to the debate. It is true that living organisms undergo evolution. But the “origin of life” question addresses how in the first place inorganic (dead) material came to be organic (living). Since it is well-established by observation that inorganic material does not under any known circumstances transform into organic material, a special explanation must account for the first life.

Furthermore, all living organisms have DNA, the genetic code. This code, which is analogous to a language, is a set of instructions that define the development and functioning of an organism. Lennox cites this as positive evidence that Mind precedes matter. Dawkins counters that evolution developed human intelligence (mind) from matter (brain), so there is no problem believing that inorganic material improbably became organic material and started replicating.

In the middle of this topic the two men debate whether a phenomenon, any phenomenon, can ever be legitimately explained in terms that are more complex than the phenomenon itself. Normally in science a phenomenon is explained in terms simpler than the phenomenon being explained. For example, the simple law of gravity accounts for the complex orbits of the planets. Gravity, a simple principle, explains complex phenomena. This is relevant because Mind/God is more complex than the thing (life) that God is intended to explain, the universe. Dawkins claims that a scientific explanation must always be in simpler terms, Lennox disagrees.

QUESTIONS

1. Both men accuse the other of simply refusing to believe what the evidence points to. The “argument from personal incredulity/credulity” is what they wittily label it. Do you agree that one of them is simply refusing to believe what is objectively obvious?
2. Dawkins asks Lennox where the Logos (a Greek word for “word”, used in John 1:1 to describe God in the flesh) came from if it created the universe. Does it make sense to ask where a God, defined as eternal, came from? Why or why not?
3. Lennox counters that Dawkins needs to account for where the universe came from if he is going to expect Lennox to account for where God came from. Is this a reasonable challenge to Dawkins? Why or why not?
4. What evidence does Lennox give that simple things can be explained by more complex things? Can you think of other examples?
5. Dawkins says, “both of us are faced with the problem of saying how did things start.” Dawkins argues that Nature gives the *appearance* of design. Lennox insists that it reveals actual design. How can we be sure who is right? Is our sense of assurance drawn from science? If not, from where does it come?

PART IV: THE RESURRECTION OF CHRIST (32:40 - 50:32)

IS IT PETTY?

INTRODUCTION

The discussion now returns to the point Dawkins raised in his opening statement: that the death and resurrection of Christ is “petty and small-minded”. He dismisses the entire story as “myth and fantasy” and laments that this God could have just “simply forgiven” without being tortured. Lennox responds by explaining that the significance of the death and resurrection is inextricably tied to ultimate justice, which is clearly no “petty and small-minded” matter. Lennox insists that there are different types of evidence for God, one sort that comes from science and a second sort that comes from revelation in history. The resurrection falls under the second type of evidence. In this context they debate the historical evidence for the resurrection and whether the possibility of miracles would adversely affect the work of a scientist.

QUESTIONS

1. Why does Dawkins think that the death and resurrection of Christ is “petty and small-minded?”
2. Lennox says that “atheism doesn’t give” any “real hope that there will be a rational evaluation and fair justice at the end of the world?” Dawkins responds, “suppose there is no hope. Suppose there is no justice. Suppose there is nothing but misery and darkness and bleakness...Suppose that there is nothing that we would hope for. Too bad.” Do you think the matter of hope and ultimate justice is irrelevant? Why or why not?
3. Lennox emphasizes that God is a person and a human being is “not just a scientific object”. Why is that important in discussing the evidence for God’s existence? What does the resurrection point to that science does not?
4. Do you agree with the following statement by Dawkins, “Surely you can see that a God who is grand enough to make the universe is not going to [care] about what you’re thinking about and your sins and things like that?” Why or why not?
5. While discussing the evidence for the resurrection, Lennox argues that Dawkins is not “taking history really seriously.” What evidence has Dawkins dismissed that leads Lennox to this accusation or is this accusation unfairly leveled?
6. Dawkins and Lennox disagree about whether the possibility of miracles adversely affects the way a scientist does his work. Does the possibility of miracles, as conceived in the biblical narratives, adversely affect the work of science? Why or Why not?

PART V: THE ULTIMATE MEANING OF LIFE (50:32 - 57:37)

INTRODUCTION

The last topic segment of the debate is devoted to the ultimate meaning of life. Dawkins believes that “each one of us can make an ultimate meaning.” Lennox argues that ultimate meaning is tethered inextricably to Ultimate Reality. If the ultimate reality is God, then meaning is not “bounded” by our limited time on earth or even “by the universe” itself.

QUESTIONS

1. Does materialism or theism best concord with our desire for ultimate meaning and purpose in life? Explain your answer.
2. Dawkins tells Lennox that “there would be many things that would be nice about” belief in God. Does this surprise you? Which things has Dawkins said would be “nice about” it?
3. Dawkins asks Lennox at what point in evolution did an organism become a “person”, made in God’s image. Lennox responds by saying that fossils can’t tell us whether we have discovered a “person”, who had consciousness, or not. What evidence might indicate whether a fossil is a “person”, a *Homo sapiens*?
4. Does Lennox believe in evolution? Be sure to be specific in your answer.

CLOSING STATEMENTS (1:06:26 - 1:15:50)

QUESTIONS:

1. In Lennox's closing remarks he cites three different kinds of evidence for the Christian God's existence: scientific, historical, and moral. Yet the central debate question was, "Has science buried God?" Does science provide the only legitimate evidence in pursuing the question of God's existence? Should such an investigation be limited to science? Why or why not?
2. Lennox's says that "atheism doesn't begin to rise to account for the rationality which lies behind science." Explain what he means by this comment.
3. In Lennox's final point he refers to atheist Peter Singer (Professor of Bioethics from Princeton University) who says that a "newborn baby is of no more value than a pig or a dog or a chimpanzee." What is Dawkins' defense of Singer's moral position and is it reasonable?
4. Dawkins argues that science must keep working to understand nature. Has Lennox argued that science should in some way stop working?
5. Dawkins's final point is to equate belief in God with magic and belief in a multiverse (millions of universes) with rationality. Is this a fair distinction to make? Why or why not?

RECOMMENDED READING

The following recommendations for further reading are deliberately few. They are intended for those who want to acquaint themselves with the details of the recent debates about God's existence. A debate of this kind ventures into science, history, philosophy, and biblical scholarship. For that reason, it is helpful to get the perspectives of authorities in different areas and so the recommendations are organized according to this criterion. Books marked with an asterisk (*) are written by Christian authors.

BOOKS BY SCIENTISTS:

Berlinski, David (2009). *The Devil's Delusion: Atheism and Its Scientific Pretensions*. New York: Basic Books.

*Lennox, John (2009). *God's Undertaker: Has Science Buried God?* London: Lion UK.

Dawkins, Richard (2006). *The God Delusion*. New York: Houghton Mifflin.

BOOKS BY HISTORIANS:

Hitchens, Christopher (2007). *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*. New York: Twelve.

*Hart, David Bentley (2009). *Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies*. New Haven: Yale UP.

BOOKS BY PHILOSOPHERS:

Singer, Peter (1993). *Practical Ethics*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.

Dennett, Daniel (2006). *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*. New York: Peguin.

*Craig, William Lane (1984, 2008). *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*. Wheaton: Crossway Books.

*Plantinga, Alvin (2000). *Warranted Christian Belief*. New York: Oxford UP.

BOOKS BY BIBLICAL SCHOLARS:

Ehrman, Bart (2009). *Jesus Interrupted*. New York: Harper Collins.

*Roberts, Mark (2007). *Can We Trust the Gospels?* Wheaton: Crossway Books.

*Blomberg, Craig (1987). *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels*. Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press.



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