

‘One Man and his Books’
Ian Morris interviews Peter S. Williams

In December 2020 Iain Morris interviewed Peter S. Williams for the ‘One Man and his Books’ video series on the ‘Grasping the Nettle’ website (www.graspingthenettle.org), which was published in January 2021:

www.graspingthenettle.org/watch/one_man_and_his_books_peter_williams

Here is a written interview based on Peter’s ‘notes to self’ prepared for that video recording session using the questions Iain sent Peter:

- 1) You write books, teach and broadcast, but in essence you are a philosopher . . . [That’s] quite different from being a train driver or a dentist. When growing up did you think: ‘A philosopher! That’s what I want to be!’ If not, how did you end up being a philosopher?

As a child, I did once say I wanted a job that involved lots of books and a swivel chair, so job done! I think there were several stimuli over time that influenced my choice to become a philosopher. My parents were science teachers who raised me to be concerned with truth and with Christianity. They taught me to play chess, which is very logical, and introduced me to a love of reading, including the writings of C.S. Lewis. I started with Narnia books, and went on to read his Christian apologetics. I was introduced to philosophy in college whilst studying classical civilization, and fell in love with philosophy as a subject at university.

- 2) Do we need philosophy and, if so, why?

We all have ‘a way of life’, a spirituality formed from our head, heart and hands. That is, we all have a set of assumptions and beliefs about reality that combine with the attitudes and commitments of our hearts to result in the activities we engage in. Our philosophical ‘worldview’ is foundational to our spirituality, and *it’s better to at least try to be wise about our worldview than otherwise!*

- 3) You have written *A Faithful Guide to Philosophy*. An interesting title. What does it tell us and why not just call it “A Guide to Philosophy”?

The book’s a guide to philosophy that’s faithful both in the sense that it’s a reliable guide, and in the sense that it’s imbued with a Christian worldview and spirituality. The second edition of this book came out in 2019 with Wipf and Stock publishers in the U.S.A, adding a new foreword by the American Christian philosopher Angus J. Menuge (a past president of the evangelical philosophy society) and a new Author’s Preface.

- 4) How have you deployed philosophy in your opposition to ‘New Atheism’?

When it comes to the New Atheists, I’ve primarily drawn on the philosophical field of logic to point out the fallacious nature of many neo-atheist arguments.

For example, Richard Dawkins’ key objection to the idea that God is the best explanation for the life-permitting structure of physical reality is to say that a God able to design the cosmos must be a complex being, but that it makes no sense to explain anything

by appealing to the existence of something else that's not simpler than the thing being explained. This objection is fallacious.

First, the principle that 'it makes no sense to explain anything by appealing to the existence of something else that's not simpler than the thing you are explaining' is obviously false, because it obviously makes sense to explain Dawkins' argument *by reference to Dawkins' existence* even though Dawkins is more complex than his argument! To be consistent with his own rule of explanation here, Dawkins would have to believe that his own argument wasn't something he had caused to exist – which is a self-contradiction!

Second, Dawkins' objection 'begs the question' against the traditional theological understanding of God's nature by assuming that God would have to be a complex arrangement of contingent parts rather than a metaphysically simple, necessary being.

5) You wrote *A Sceptic's Guide to Atheism*. Isn't it the atheists who are supposed to be the sceptics? Who is this book written for and what are you saying in it?

Being sceptical just means 'to apply rigorous critical judgement', and that's something that can and should be done with atheism just as it should be done with theism. *A Sceptic's Guide to Atheism* was an attempt to apply rigorous critical judgement to various popular atheistic claims and arguments at a readable, 'popular' level.

6) You are clearly very motivated to engage with atheism. Your latest (?) book is *Outgrowing God?* – which echoes a recent Dawkins publication. What is Dawkins saying in his *Outgrowing God*, and how do you reply? The style of this book is different from normal. In what way? Who is it written for?

Dawkins's *Outgrowing God* is a riff on his bestseller *The God Delusion*, aimed at a college or undergraduate audience. My book, *Outgrowing God?* (Cascade, 2020) – with a question mark – is a response to his book, aimed at the same audience. I decided to write it as a dialogue between characters who represent different perspectives on the God question as they read and respond to Dawkins' book in a student book club.

Dawkins says a lot of different things in his book, but I think it's fair to say that his central point is that young people need to question and think carefully about their religious beliefs and not just blindly accept what they've been taught.

That's a message I can endorse – as long as it's applied equally to nonreligious beliefs! Unfortunately, Dawkins undermined his own message by making lots of assertions in his book without giving readers any evidence for them, or equipping readers with the tools to help them assess his assertions.

Moreover, many of the assertions Dawkins makes are demonstrably false – his research is very bad (e.g. not knowing there's archeological evidence for the existence of King David, not knowing about the evidence for domesticated camels in the time of Abraham, not knowing that Josephus mentions Jesus in two separate passages, not knowing the latest research on how human eyes work, and so on).

7) Do you find the atheist worldview challenging, requiring strenuous mental effort to refute, or does it lack philosophical robustness?

There are certainly more serious, philosophically robust proponents of atheism than Richard Dawkins! But note that atheism, the belief that God doesn't exist, is only part of a worldview rather than a worldview in itself. In our culture, atheism tends to be part and parcel of a naturalistic or materialistic worldview, but that I think is very implausible.

Indeed, in general terms I think monotheism offers a far more plausible worldview than either a Western *naturalism* than denies the reality of the supernatural realm or an Eastern *pan-theism* than denies the reality of the natural world.

8) In your book *C.S. Lewis vs the New Atheists* you focus on one of the greatest Christian apologists of all time. But Lewis had no knowledge of Richard Dawkins et al, so how can we know how Lewis would respond?

Dawkins and many of his fellow New Atheists studied their terminal degrees at Oxford an intellectual generation on from Lewis, and far from being ‘New’ their thinking is heavily influenced by ideas that were promoted in the early twentieth century by Professors at Oxford who were Lewis’s contemporaries, ideas Lewis himself rejected.

For example, Lewis was a contemporary of A.J. Ayer, the Oxford philosopher who for a time promoted a now defunct, overly-narrow understanding of how we know things called ‘verificationism’. The New Atheists are heavily influenced by this kind of philosophy, but it’s something Lewis rejected and argued against at the time.

9) Latterly you have turned your attention to writing about Jesus. Is there really more to be said about Jesus than has been written over the centuries? Let’s take *Understanding Jesus* and *Getting at Jesus* and ask what *you* are ‘getting at’ and how these books differ from one another?

Understanding Jesus: Five Ways to Spiritual Enlightenment (Paternoster, 2011) puts the quest to understand Jesus in the context of the role Jesus thought he should play in our spirituality, and examines a cumulative case of five arguments Jesus and his immediate followers gave for thinking his claims about the role he should play in our spirituality were true.

Getting at Jesus: A Comprehensive Critique of Neo-Atheist Nonsense about the Jesus of History (Wipf and Stock, 2019) responds to what the New Atheists say about Jesus, both what they say to ‘get at’ Christian belief in him and how they go about ‘getting at’ Jesus historically speaking. That is, I make a philosophical critique of their historical methodology.

So, *Understanding Jesus* looks at a broader range of arguments for the Christian understanding of Jesus in the context of thinking about spirituality, while *Getting at Jesus* focuses in more detail and greater length on issues of methodology and on the resurrection of Jesus.

10) In one of your books, *Resurrection: Faith or Fact*, you focus on the central belief of Christianity. Since claims about Jesus’ resurrection arose 2000 years ago, isn’t it much more faith than fact?

Your question assumes we know that claims about Jesus’ resurrection arose roughly 2000 years ago. How do we know that? Because we have access to those claims through studying history, right?! And it’s the same for other data relevant to discussing the claim that Jesus rose from the dead.

I contributed two chapters to *Resurrection: Faith or Fact* (Pitchstone, 2019), which as far as I’m aware is the only debate book on the resurrection published by a secular publishing house. Like all the contributors, I have an autobiographically framed chapter, and I also wrote a chapter reviewing the debate between the late Carl Stecher and New Testament scholar Craig Blomberg that forms the bulk of the book. The other contributor is atheist Richard Carrier.

I've published a paper responding to Carl's closing remarks in response to my review chapter, which interested parties can find on my website.¹

11) When you write books that are essentially philosophy or history you have recourse to logic and evidence but you have also chosen to write a book entitled "The Case for Angels". How would you respond to the view that in this subject you have no basis for logic and certainly no evidence?

As the title indicates, the book presents a 'case' or cumulative *argument* for angels (and demons).

The notion that unembodied finite minds exist doesn't fit with a naturalistic worldview. But against that:

First: while naturalism is arguably an incoherent worldview, there's nothing incoherent about the idea of angels.

Second: If you think humans are finite embodied but immaterial minds created by the infinite unembodied mind God – two ideas for which there are good arguments – then angels start looking like a plausible idea.

Third: there are positive theological, philosophical and experiential arguments for the existence of angels. For example, I examine testimony from several contemporary academics with expertise in psychology or philosophy, convinced by personal experience against their own prior scepticism about the existence of demons.

12) One of the risks in publishing is the awkwardness of changing your mind afterwards. Have you ever wished you could recall one of your books?

If you find an academic who *hasn't* changed their mind about anything that's probably a cause for concern! So, yes, I have occasionally changed my mind about something I've written, though it's *usually* a matter of tweaking how I'd express an idea than thinking I was in totally the wrong ball-park. I mention this in the preface to the second edition of *A Faithful Guide to Philosophy*, to drive home the point that reader's need to critically engage with the material and not just approach it with a mind-set of learning by rote.

In *The Case for Angels* I did quote a story about an angelic encounter involving missionaries that later research led me to conclude was apocryphal. I noted this in a paper on angels I published some years later², but I also added other testimony I've come across that I think has some evidential weight.

13) Which of your works is your personal favourite? Which you think are the most poignant and relevant to readers today, what would they be?

I don't have a favourite, because they're all different and do different things, but: *C.S. Lewis vs the New Atheists* combined a lot of my interests in one book. *A Faithful Guide to Philosophy* (second edition) and *Getting at Jesus* are the most recent substantial works that represent my key interests in Philosophy and Jesus. And I enjoyed writing *Outgrowing God?* in the form of a dialogue, bringing some creative writing into the process of deconstructing Dawkins' arguments.

¹ See: Peter S. Williams, 'Resurrection: Faith or Fact? Miracle Not Required?' www.peterswilliams.com/2020/10/30/resurrection-faith-or-fact-miracle-not-required/.

² See: Peter S. Williams, 'Do Angels Really Exist?' www.bethinking.org/christian-beliefs/do-angels-really-exist.

Peter S. Williams

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www.youtube.com/user/peterswilliamsvid/playlists?view=1&flow=grid

Books mentioned in the interview:

Outgrowing God? A Beginner's Guide to Richard Dawkins and the God Debate. Cascade 2020.

Resurrection: Faith or Fact? Pitchstone, 2019.

Getting at Jesus: A Comprehensive Critique of Neo-Atheist Nonsense About the Jesus of History. Wipf and Stock, 2019.

A Faithful Guide to Philosophy: A Christian Introduction to the Love of Wisdom. Wipf & Stock, 2019.

C.S. Lewis vs. the New Atheists. Paternoster, 2013.

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