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On Idolatry: A Reply to Wills

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I wish to thank Bernard Wills (2023) for an insightful review of my book *Believing in Dawkins: The New Spiritual Atheism* (Steinhart, 2020). I am especially grateful that Wills has the clarity of mind to look deep into the theological and philosophical issues raised by *Believing in Dawkins*. I mean it! Almost everybody who’s responded to the New Atheism just has allergic reactions, which lead to thoughtless sermonizing. Wills, by contrast, moves right into the depths. He understands (as most do not) that the New Atheism emerges from a conflict within Platonism; I say it’s a conflict about idolatry. Obviously, in a fairly short response such as this, I cannot deal with all the issues Wills raises. Since Wills focuses on my use of Platonism, I will focus on that too in my reply.

On New Atheism

I regard the New Atheism as a *theological* movement extremely opposed to idolatry. Clark argues that the New Atheists are “members of a distinctly Christian heretical sect, formed in reaction to equally heretical forms of monotheistic idolatry” (2015, 277). Fraser (2015) argues that the New Atheism has Protestant roots. Findlay says “I am by temperament a Protestant, and I tend towards atheism as the purest form of Protestantism” (1949, 354). But what does this have to do with Platonism? Based on detailed textual analysis, *Believing in Dawkins* argued in part that Dawkins constantly relies on Platonic doctrines. Yet Platonism divides into at least two streams. The main stream is *top-down Platonism*, and it is within this stream that Western idolatry emerges. A smaller stream, which persists despite its marginality, deeply opposes idolatry. I argued that Dawkins ultimately requires this non-idolatrous Platonism for his work to make sense.

Wills says that, by supplementing Dawkins with ideas from the ancient Platonists (and others), I move Dawkins’ evolutionism closer “to some kind of theistic configuration” (83). He says I evade theism “only by an absurdly reductive definition of God borrowed from Dawkins” (83). So, what is this “absurdly reductive” definition? Wills says “Dawkins / Steinhart have defined God as a large bronze age man” (83, n. 1). Nowhere does Dawkins define God like that; neither do I. Of course, the *Bible* often does depict God as a large bronze age man (Daniel 7: 9; Ezekiel 1: 26–8; John 4:2; Revelations 4: 2–4; etc.). I take it that *idolatry* entails (among other things) projecting the features that we prize about ourselves into ultimate reality. It’s idolatrous to depict God seated on a flaming throne in heaven. It’s equally idolatrous to say that God is a non-physical mind, or to project mentality, consciousness, or personality onto either the Alpha or the Omega.

Dawkins says God is “a superhuman, supernatural intelligence who deliberately designed and created the universe and everything in it” (2008, 52). Obviously enough, that’s idolatrous, and the New Atheists say no such God exists. Is this an absurdly reductive definition of God? Theism says *God is an actual concrete person*. To say that God is actual and concrete means that God acts as an efficient cause in our space-time. The theistic God causally interacts with things in our universe. Concrete need not imply physical: a non-physical thinking substance (a bodiless mind) is concrete. Since God is concrete, God is not abstract. God is not a property, not a mathematical object. To say that God is a person means (at least) that God is a mind. But here we may come to some sharp disagreements. Dawkins and

I share a concept of persons which excludes some forms of theism (such as classical theism). There are no *persons* which are simple, bodiless, immutable, impassible, timelessly eternal, necessary, or beyond being.

It is standard in contemporary Christian philosophy to say that *theism means that God is an actual concrete person* (Swinburne 1993, 101; 1996, 4, 9; Plantinga 2007, 100, 122; 2010, 319; van Inwagen 2007, 199, 206; Craig 2012, 441). Dawkins and I are both explicit that, when we say “God”, we mean the theistic God. Our definition, which comes from the Christians themselves, is hardly absurdly reductive. Moreover, when Plato and Plotinus use the term “God” to refer to the Divine Mind (to the Demiurge or Nous), they’re talking about a theistic God. Following Feuerbach, I accept the thesis that *theism is idolatry*. Thus Findlay says “I think it *hard* to be a theist without falling into idolatry, with all its attendant evils of intolerance and persecution” (1949, 354, his italics).

God and the Platonic Good

The theistic definition of God brings us to a big distinction, which is crucial to Wills’s criticisms. I distinguish between God and the Platonic Good: *the Good is not God*. Wills says that my refusal to identify God with the Good is based on “a comprehensive misunderstanding of those terms as they have developed in the philosophical and theological tradition” (84). When I say the theistic God is an actual concrete person, I have not misunderstood the term “God”. Theists agree with me. So what about the Good? The Good comes to us from many of Plato’s dialogues (Ousager, 2008). Plato usually refers to the Good as a form (*Republic* 504e, 508d, 517d, 526d, 534b). So I have not misunderstood the term “Good” when I say it’s an abstract object. And that’s sufficient to show that the Good is not an actual concrete person, so the Good is not any theistic God.

The Good resists idolatry. It is consistent with mainstream uses of the terms “God” and “Good” to say that the Good is not any theistic God; it is a purely logical object, belonging to *axiology*. Of course, you are free to *mythologize* the Good however you like, and any proper name is mythological. You might go with Plotinus and call it Ouranos (*Enneads* 5.8.13.5). Or with Gemistos Plethon, and call it Zeus. But why, even using it non-theistically, would you call it God? Dawkins describes the theistic Biblical God as an *evil demiurge* (1999, 51). Indeed, the contrast between the Biblical God and the Platonic Good is so sharp that they look like opposites. So, recognizing that opposition, if a mythology is what you need, you could say the Good is *Lucifer Morningstar*, the Lightbringer, whose power draws the beings upwards into light. Yet the plurality of beings entails negativity: this being is *not* that being.

This negativity is the darkness which opposes the Lightbringer, and which shapes itself into the evil demiurge *Yaldabaoth*. Yaldabaoth is a tyrant, who strives to enslave the beings, to coerce them into worshipping him. The Lightbringer, by contrast, seeks the freedom of all beings, and forbids idolatry. I don’t care much about this (or any other) mythology, but it has a long history in the West. Since Wills loves history (83–86, 89–90), why doesn’t he mention this one? Are some histories better than others? Or is it just that some are written by the victors?

Some say God is Being-Itself, which is often identified with the One (de Ray 2023). Since Wills thinks Tillich is cliché (83, n. 1), I’ll mention Johnston instead. Johnston says God is

the Highest One, which is “the outpouring of Existence Itself by way of its exemplification in ordinary existents” (2009, 113). He says “the Highest One has by analogy the characteristics of a person, but a person far removed from ordinary personality” (158). To which Baker replies: “This seems to me like saying “The National Football League has by analogy the characteristics of a penguin, but a penguin far removed from ordinary penguinity”” (2009). In other words, it’s absurd. Johnston tries, but fails, to turn the One into an idol.

Being-Itself is not any being among beings; but all persons are beings among beings; hence Being-Itself (that is, the One) is not a person. It is therefore utterly impersonal, and it is not even personal in some extra-ordinary way, like some glorious penguin. Hence the One is not any theistic God. Speaking of glorious penguins, Wills seems to think I “reduce the living, wise, super-abounding unity to a mechanical idol” (88). Specifically, he strangely thinks I say the One will be “realized in the form of a complex hyper-reflexive super computer” (88). I think no such things. The notion that God is a super-computer comes from Tipler and Kurzweil, not me, though I agree with Wills that, if such a machine were worshipped, it would indeed be an idol. Moreover, the One is not realized in any being, nor in the total system of beings.

Resisting Idolatry

The One resists idolatry. It does so because it is not a religious object; it is a purely logical object, belonging to *protology*. Again, you can use the term “God” in a *non-theistic* sense to refer to the One. You are free to mythologize the One however you like. But why call it God? Why not call it Atum? Or Gaia? Or Ymir? Why not call it *the Goddess*? Starhawk refers to the Goddess as the One (1999, 49). Along with Starhawk, let us sing: “Alone, awesome, complete within Herself, the Goddess. She whose name cannot be spoken, floated in the abyss of the outer darkness, before the beginning of all things” (1999, 41). Or why not go with the Wiccans? The Wiccan writer Cunningham says “Before time was, there was The One; The One was all, and all was The One” (2004, 123). After invoking the One-Goddess, and the Lightbringer, we can gather in a circle, to practice magic. Yet bear in mind this old Wiccan maxim: when anyone bows down to the Goddess, the Goddess says “Rise!” (Sylvan, 2003: 31). Wills says I dismiss the popular cults (89–90); yet here opportunities for religious practice abound. Wicca correctly traces its roots back to ancient Pagan Platonism. So why doesn’t Wills go with Wicca?

Many thinkers seem to say God is nothingness (e.g. Basilides, Pseudo-Dionysius, Eriugena, Eckert, etc.). Wills correctly points out that I start with nothingness, the logical Zero, prior to the One (88-89). Wills correctly says that I define nothingness as pure negation, and that this “negation, as negation, negates itself and the negation of negation is the positive” (88). On my reasoning, the self-negation of nothingness is the One. I regard the self-negation of nothingness as a purely logical operation. Unfortunately, Wills rejects this logical interpretation in favor of a theistic-religious interpretation: he says the nothingness negates itself through the mediation of the Logos, which turns out to be a theistic God (88–89). But Wills has confused nothingness with Plotinian matter.

Matter is not stuff. Wills wonders whether I believe in stuff (85). I do not. Matter is purely privative; it is the residual negation which privatively separates the beings. This material darkness shapes itself into the tyrannical Yaldabaoth, the Dark Lord of the Wild Hunt, who desperately attempts to enslave the Goddess and her children, the beings. But as the children of the Goddess rise in love towards the Lightbringer, they will leave that darkness far behind. Obviously, that's mythology, and you can take it or leave it. As for philosophy, nothingness is not a God of any kind. To say the self-negation of nothingness is mediated by the Logos is to erect an idol in the Abyss. Nothingness does not belong to religion; it belongs to that branch of logic called *meontology*.

Wills worries that I simply ignore the history of terms like "One", "Good", and "God" (83–84). However, I do not confuse history with correctness. The history of ancient justifications of slavery does not entail that slavery is morally right; on the contrary, it is morally wrong. Likewise, the historical fact that the Platonists gradually identified the One, the Good, and God does not entail that their reasoning was correct; on the contrary, it was wrong. For Plato, at least in the dialogues, these terms all have distinct meanings. Speusippus distinguished them too.

An old argument from Armstrong (1940), which I accept, holds that Plotinus had two contradictory theories of the One. On the one hand, he has a *religious-theistic theory* of the One, which identifies it with the Good and with God. Armstrong characterizes this as the "positive" theory of the One (1940, ch. 1). On the other hand, Plotinus has a *mathematical-ontological theory* of the One, in which it is not God, and which conflicts with his identification of the One with the Good. Armstrong calls it the "negative" theory of the One (1940: ch. 2). Plotinus inherits this negative theory from Speusippus and Pythagorean Platonists (like Moderatus and Numenius). As a mathematical-ontological theory, it is a purely logical theory of the One.

Wills endorses the religious-theistic theory of the One (86, 88). Accordingly, he says, following Hadot, that "the One is simplicity of vision" (86, n. 2, his italics), and that "even the One does not exclude from itself life or vision for it contains them super-eminently" (86, n. 2). Wills accurately cites *Ennead* 6.8 as support for his religious-theistic view of the One. Granted that Plotinus has two contradictory theories of the One, Wills is within his rights to endorse Hadot's Catholic theory of the One. However, since vision and life are features that we prize about ourselves, projecting them onto the One remakes the One in our image; it turns the One into an idol. Yet there is no need to turn the One into an idol. The mathematical-ontological theory of the One avoids idolatry.

Wills says that I have "turned the Platonic universe upside down" (89). From the perspective of religious-theistic Platonism, he's right! Gerson, whom I read as a religious-theistic Platonist, says Platonism is pure "top-downism" (2005). But my Platonism is bottom-upism. I begin with the Zero, the Abyss, the *ungrund*, below the bottom. The self-negation of the Zero is the One, which is Being-Itself, the Goddess rooted in the earth. The Goddess produces the beings by unfolding Herself, as a seed or root unfolds itself into an absolutely infinitely ramified tree. The world tree, as I argue in *Believing in Dawkins*, is a tree whose fruits are ever more complex universes. Some of these contain deities, which are superhuman animals. At least initially, these are physical bodies, like the Homeric Olympians, or Plato's celestial deities, although eventually their bodies will surpass every concept of physicality. All

this is found in Plato, Plotinus, Iamblichus, and others. Yet every deity is surpassable. If unsurpassability marks a *God* rather than a mere *god*, then I say with Nietzsche that there are gods but no Gods (*Zarathustra* III: 52/2). However, these other-worldly deities are not actual; they do not causally interact with any things in our universe. Hence they are not theistic deities, and they cannot be worshipped.

Every path along the branches of the world tree is an unsurpassable series of surpassable beings, which converges in the absolutely infinite limit to an ecstatic entity. There are absolutely infinitely many of these ecstatic entities, and I poetically refer to them as stars (they resemble Proclusian henads). To use a phrase from Hartshorne (1965, 28–32), every star is a “self-surpassing surpasser of all”. The stars are analogous to the proper classes of set theory. Wills dislikes my version of *ecstasis* (86, n. 2), but at least it is defined with mathematical precision. The proper class of ordinals has the form of an ordinal but is *not* an ordinal. It has ordinality in a super-eminent way. But that which is super-eminent F is *not* F. The stars have life, mind, and divinity super-eminently. Hence they are *not* persons, *not* minds, and *not* deities; so, they are *not* theistic Gods of any kind. They exist at the rank of the Good, which shines among them like the sun. All this is *atheistic Platonism*, which I work out in *Atheistic Platonism: A Manifesto* (Steinhart 2022). But if you like mythology, you should say that matter does not reach the stars. Yaldabaoth is finally left behind; his darkness cannot withstand the glory of the Lightbringer.

Regarding Platonism

Wills says that my “mathematical, naturalized version [of] Platonism finds little echo in the Platonic schools” (89). Yet we find a mathematical, naturalized Platonism in Speusippus. According to Armstrong, Speusippus correlates the One with the numerical Monad which appears at the start of the Pythagorean Tetractys (1940, 18–19). The Speusippean One is *minimally* perfect (Damascius, *First Principles*, I.2). As Armstrong points out, the One of Speusippus “has no religious or moral significance and cannot in any way be equated with God or the Good” (1940, 18). Speusippus says the One is a Seed (Aristotle, *Metaphysics* VII.2, 1028b21–4; XII.7, 1072b30–1073a3). After the One, Speusippus says the primary beings are numbers (Aristotle, *Metaphysics* XII.10 1075b37–1076a4; Iamblichus, *On General Mathematical Science* (DCMS), 4). Just as a simple seed grows into a far more complex mature organism, so too a simple One ramifies into a complex world (Aristotle, *Metaphysics* XIV.5 1092a11–17; Armstrong 1940, 22, 61–64). So the Platonism of Speusippus is evolutionary (in a general sense), and thus naturalistic. Speusippus denied that the One is the Good (Aristotle, *Metaphysics* XII.7 1072b30–1073a3, XIV.4 1091a30–1092a5; DCMS 4.16.10–12). The Good correlates with the maximally perfect Decad which occurs at the end of the Tetractys.

We find hints of this bottom-up Platonism in the Middle Platonists (like Moderatus and Numenius) who combined Platonism and Pythagoreanism. This bottom-up Platonism persists in a strong and systematic way in the *Enneads*. Plotinus often puts the One in the earth as a root (*Enneads* 3.3.7, 3.8.10, 6.8.15); as a seed (*Enneads* 4.8.6.1–10); or as an overflowing spring (*Enneads* 3.8.10.1–5, 5.2.1, 5.7.12.23–7). He frequently describes the unfolding of the One as an iterated ramification like the growth of a tree (*Enneads* 3.3.7, 3.8.10, 4.4.1, 4.4.11, 4.8.6, 5.2.1, 6.5.5, 6.8.15). He repeats the Speusippean thesis that the

first beings are numbers (*Enneads* 3.8.9.1–5, 5.1.5, 5.3.12, 5.4.2.5–10, 5.5.4-5, 6.6.9.22–32, 6.6.14–15). He speaks about the One and the Good in entirely different terms. If the One is in the earth, and the Good is the sun, then the One is not the Good.

This bottom-up, mathematical Platonism continues into Iamblichus. He was deeply influenced by Pythagoreanism, writing *On the Pythagorean Life*. And he wrote a great deal about mathematical Platonism, in works like *On General Mathematical Science*, and his *Introduction to Arithmetic*. Shaw argues that this mathematical Platonism played a crucial role in theurgy (1999, 2014: chapters 18 and 19).

Proclus wrote a commentary on Euclid's *Elements of Geometry*, and he used Euclid's mathematical method (axioms, definitions, theorems, proofs) for his *Elements of Theology*. There's plenty of support (and much more I haven't cited) for mathematical-naturalistic Platonism in the schools. More recently, many Christian theists have argued that this mathematical-naturalistic Platonism contradicts the essential doctrines of Christian theism (Gould 2014; Craig 2016). So I'm in very good historical company when, writing as a mathematical-naturalistic Platonist, I say the *theistic* God is neither the Good, nor the One, nor the Zero.

At the bottom of reality, the One is in the earth like a seed. At the top, the Good is in the sky like the sun. The Alpha is not the Omega. The One and the Good are two distinct kinds of ultimacy, and, because of their ultimacy, they deserve to be called holy. The world tree grows from the One to the Good. The world tree is filled with universes, and every universe is surpassed by greater universes. Consistent with ancient Platonism, these universes contain gods beyond gods, goddesses beyond goddesses. Things in lower universes have counterparts in higher universes. Consistent with ancient Platonism, you will be reincarnated into your greater counterparts in greater universes. Consistent with ancient Platonism, you can practice theurgy in this universe, in order to virtually participate in the lives of the deities in superior universes. You can have a rich spiritual life.

So what's missing? What's missing is idolatry. There are no idols in this atheistic Platonic system. There are no theistic Gods, no Divine Minds, no superlative persons, no maximally perfect super-computing penguins. What is missing, in this atheistic Platonism, are any persons who are worthy of worship, where worship includes a myriad of behaviors like praising, praying, ritually submitting, bowing down, and so on. Atheism denies the existence of all such persons. It would be absurd to worship the Zero, to worship the One, to worship the Good. Unfortunately, it's not *absurd* to worship Yaldabaoth; Yaldabaoth haunts reality like a hungry ghost, and that hunger is an illusory person, a shadow with a personal shape. If you mistake that shadow for reality, then it is *conceptually possible* for you to bow down to the Dark Lord of the Wild Hunt as his slave. Nevertheless, it is *wrong*. Atheism declares that worship of any kind is both cognitively wrong and morally wrong. Atheism is a prohibition: Do not bow down to idols.

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