Book Reviews

Michael Martin (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), xix + 331 pp.

This timely volume appears in the midst of what many see as a resurgence of interest in and enthusiasm for atheism, a resurgence that may well result from a reaction to resurgent religious fundamentalism at home and abroad. In the words of its editor, this wide-ranging collection of eighteen original essays aims "to provide general readers and advanced students with an introduction to atheism: its history, present social context, legal implications, supporting arguments, implications for morality, and relation to other perspectives" (1). As one might infer from such an ambitious list of topics, the coverage is indeed usually at the introductory level. Nevertheless, the book does contain some resources that scholars will find valuable, and its introductory-level approach is appropriate given the book's aims.

The editor has included a brief General Introduction as well as a glossary of many of the less familiar or technical terms used in the various essays. Although generally helpful, the Introduction does contain here and there a passage whose less than careful use of language detracts from its value in making the crucial terminology precise at the start. For instance, the editor describes agnosticism as "the position of neither believing nor disbelieving that God exists" (2), thus implying that agnosticism is not a proposition so much as a *condition* in which one might find oneself. Fair enough as definitions go, but two sentences later the editor treats agnosticism as a proposition: "Agnosticism and positive atheism are indeed incompatible: if atheism is true, agnosticism is false and conversely" (2). If agnosticism and positive atheism are, as the editor most often suggests, not propositions but conditions in which one might find oneself, then they are neither true nor false. It makes our discourse more precise, then, if we instead define these various views as propositions that enjoy the usual logical relations of entailment, consistency, inconsistency, and so on. The Introduction also contains at least one misleading characterization of an atheistic argument that the editor notes isn't covered by any of the volume's contributors: J.L. Schellenberg's argument from the existence of a plurality of nontheistic religions in our world.

Schellenberg is described as having "attempted to demonstrate that the belief in the existence of nontheistic religions makes a theistic God's existence improbable" (4), when of course it is not our *belief* in the existence of nontheistic religions, but the existence of those religions themselves, that arguments of this sort see as disconfirming the existence of God.

The collection begins with two essays that provide overviews of atheism in the ancient Greco-Roman world and in post-Renaissance Europe. In an effort, perhaps, to keep the size of such a wide-ranging volume manageable, very strict word-limits seem to have been imposed on each of the contributors. In some cases these limits are welcome. Too often, however, they result in a rushed or truncated treatment of the issues, as in the case of these two historical essays, which attempt to cover enormous territory in just a few pages.

The third essay, Phil Zuckerman's "Atheism: Contemporary Numbers and Patterns," compiles survey results concerning the incidence and type of religious beliefs found in today's world. These results provide some evidence against the commonly held notion that being religious is generally good for people, since they show a strong negative correlation between the expressed religiosity of a country's residents and the country's societal health along various measures, including per capita income, infant mortality, life expectancy, and literacy. Some officially atheistic countries, such as North Korea, buck the trend by scoring quite low on those measures, but in this case Zuckerman urges us to distinguish "organic" atheism from the "coercive," state-sanctioned atheism characteristic of North Korea and the former republics of the USSR (57). For obvious reasons, only the former kind of atheism can be taken to reflect an attitude deeply held by ordinary citizens. One measure of societal health, the rate of suicide among males, also bucks the trend, with the highest such suicide rates tending to belong to the least religious countries. Zuckerman doesn't discuss the suicide rate among females, perhaps because of the difficulty in obtaining reliable data on it from some parts of the world, but I wouldn't be surprised if that rate told a different story in at least many countries.

The United States also stands out for having a prosperous, generally healthy population that, at least according to surveys, professes theistic belief at much higher rates than usual for such countries. One thing to consider in explaining this anomaly is the role played in American culture by what Daniel Dennett calls "the belief in belief": the widely held notion that professing *any* religious belief, no matter what kind, is better than professing none, since only religious believers can be counted on to be morally trustworthy.[1] In such a context, American respondents may be

[1]Daniel C. Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (New

inclined to overstate the degree to which they hold religious beliefs for fear of sacrificing the favorable associations that come with being regarded as religious. In any case, Zuckerman aims to portray the state of theistic belief and unbelief across the globe and so does not spend time discussing the American anomaly in particular.

Zuckerman's essay closes with a brief discussion of how the demographic data bear on the claim that belief in God is innate in human beings, the result of either divine or natural hard-wiring of our brains rather than an artifact of some cultures and not others. Zuckerman cites theologians, neuroscientists, and evolutionary biologists who advocate claims of this sort, and he regards the demographic data as dealing such claims "a heavy blow" (61). These views, he says, fail to explain the sheer number of nonbelievers in any God or gods (something approaching 750 million) and even more clearly fail to explain the dramatic differences in rates of belief among various countries. In both cases Zuckerman prefers the explanations standardly offered by social scientists, ones that invoke "historical, cultural, economic, political, and sociological factors" (61). Indeed, the dramatic geographic difference in rates of theistic belief has already been used to bolster the case for naturalism over theism and to undermine the Calvinistic claim that human beings possess an innate *sensus* designed to produce belief in God.[2]

William Lane Craig's essay, "Theistic Critiques of Atheism," is an overly ambitious attempt to rebut major atheistic arguments and also provide four "cogent arguments for theism" in the space of fifteen pages. The author and the editor would have been well-advised to narrow this essay's range of topics or else increase its length. Unsurprisingly, Craig's breezy treatment of the issues leaves some gaping holes, a few of which I'll note here. He discusses arguments that defend a "presumption of atheism" (as opposed to merely a presumption of agnosticism), and he accuses such arguments of confusing "the absence of evidence" of God with "evidence of the absence" of God. He fails, however, to consider the answer to this accusation offered long ago by Bertrand Russell: absent any evidence for the existence of a china teapot orbiting the Sun between Earth and Mars—a teapot conveniently too small for our instruments to detect—we shouldn't merely remain agnostic with respect to

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York: Viking, 2006). This favorable attitude toward religious belief, regardless of content, is often attributed to President Eisenhower, who is reported to have remarked, "Our government makes no sense unless it is founded on a deeply felt religious faith—and I don't care what it is." For extended discussion of this remark, see Patrick Henry, "'And I Don't Care What It Is': The Tradition-History of a Civil Religion Proof-Text," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 49 (1981): 35-49.

[2]See Stephen Maitzen, "Divine Hiddenness and the Demographics of Theism," *Religious Studies* 42 (2006): 177-91.

the existence of such a thing; we should positively disbelieve in its existence. Concerning what we ought to believe or disbelieve, we *often* take the absence of evidence to be evidence of absence, and it looks like special pleading if one insists on making God's existence an exception to that rule.

Craig then argues that we shouldn't be surprised by the absence of evidence for God's existence, since "on the Christian view it is actually a matter of relative indifference to God whether people believe that he exists or not. For what God is interested in is building a love relationship with us, not *just* getting us to believe that he exists" (71). I have italicized the word "just" in Craig's sentence in order to reveal the non sequitur in his reasoning. Even if God's goal is not *only* to get us to believe he exists, it doesn't follow that it isn't among God's goals *that* we believe he exists, especially since believing that God exists is a necessary condition, particularly from Craig's Evangelical Christian perspective, for entering into a "love relationship" with God, or at least necessary for the best relationship of that kind. Craig goes on to speculate that the actual number of theistic believers might, providentially, exactly match the number of souls who *would* respond lovingly to God, but given his quick pace Craig can offer no more than speculation on this point.

In attempting to rebut the atheist's argument from the apparent existence of gratuitous evil, Craig warns that we "limited observers [ought not] to speculate on the probability that some evil we see is ultimately gratuitous" (74), a line increasingly offered by those calling themselves "skeptical theists."[3] But he fails to note how this skeptical position comes at a price ordinary theists may find too high: it makes believers equally unjustified in speculating on the probability that some apparent *good* is ultimately for the best and hence something for which they owe God praise or thanks. Moreover, this skepticism may also undermine the believer's ability to engage in ordinary kinds of moral reasoning.[4] Craig's treatment of four arguments for theism—cosmological, first-cause, teleological, and moral—is breathtakingly brief and certainly inadequate to show that these arguments are, as he claims, "cogent." His version of the moral argument, for instance, ends up resting on a divine-command theory of moral obligation: "the theist can make sense of moral obligation because God's commands can be viewed as constitutive of our moral duties" (83). Craig presents this closing line without so much as hinting at the serious problems that confront divine-command morality, problems known to philosophers since the time of Plato's *Euthyphro*. Craig's attempt to do too many things in this essay prevents him from doing any

[3]See, for example, Michael Bergmann, "Skeptical Theism and Rowe's New Evidential Argument from Evil," *Noûs* 35 (2001): 278-96.

[4]See Michael Almeida and Graham Oppy, "Sceptical Theism and Evidential Arguments from Evil," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 81 (2003): 496-516.

of them very well.

By contrast, Keith Parsons, in "Some Contemporary Theistic Arguments," recognizes the impossibility of covering much ground in a short article: "Clearly, even the attempt to sketch a taxonomy of theistic arguments would require more space than I have here" (102). Parsons then sensibly devotes that space to analyzing just two theistic arguments, Alvin Plantinga's argument that belief in God can be both rational and warranted and Richard Swinburne's version of the cosmological argument. Parsons has for years shown himself to be a careful student of Plantinga's and Swinburne's work, and his essay contains insightful critiques. For instance, he highlights the fact that Swinburne's argument from the allegedly greater simplicity of theism over naturalism in cosmology depends on the a priori assumption that the universe is more likely to be ontologically simple than to contain a plurality of irreducible entities or kinds. Parsons accuses Swinburne of trying to turn a pragmatic custom of science—namely, rejecting the more complex of two empirically equivalent hypotheses—into an a priori truth about the fundamental nature of reality.

Given Daniel Dennett's authoritative knowledge of evolutionary explanations and his experience in expounding them for general audiences, his essay "Atheism and Evolution" represents, I believe, a missed opportunity. It combines Dennett's characteristically smooth and vigorous writing style with his also unfortunately characteristic inability to stay on topic. Instead of an analysis we can easily follow, we get a string of sometimes obscure and wandering arguments whose chief virtue is their display of Dennett's impressively wide erudition. Still, readers will gain something from Dennett's collection of loosely connected observations about the neo-Darwinian response to the theistic argument from design, as well as his critique of the "intelligent design" argument and the argument from the apparent "fine-tuning" of the fundamental constants in physics.

David Brink's "The Autonomy of Ethics" examines the type of theistic grounding for ethics that Craig only briefly mentions in his essay: divine-command theory, or (as Brink prefers) "voluntarism," where the *voluntas* is God's. Brink's essay would be well matched against an equally careful defense of voluntarism, but nothing of the latter sort appears in the collection. Most of Brink's essay is devoted to criticizing voluntarism for sacrificing the autonomy of ethics, and in my view the criticisms hit home. He discusses several familiar worries about voluntarism, including its turning morality into a literally arbitrary (i.e., willful) business; its depriving adherents of the ability to assert the goodness of God in a meaningful and consistent way; and its disruption of the supervenience of moral facts on underlying natural facts. He also suggests that theists needn't see the autonomy of ethics as a threat to God's omnipotence because moral truths may enjoy the kind of necessity that attaches

to the truths of logic and mathematics, and not even an omnipotent being need (or, really, could) have control over such truths. Having revealed serious problems with voluntarism, Brink devotes a smaller chunk of his essay to showing what the alternative might look like: a nontheistic grounding for objective moral truths. Defenders of voluntarism will demand to see more on this topic than Brink provides.

In "The Argument from Evil," Andrea Weisberger examines both "logical" and "evidential" versions of the atheistic argument from suffering. Too many recent philosophers all but ignore the logical version of the argument, mistakenly supposing it to have been refuted by Plantinga's "Free Will Defense." Not so Weisberger, who discusses plausible post-Defense versions of the logical argument given by Richard La Croix and Quentin Smith. Her analysis of the evidential argument covers both the "moral evil" committed by free agents and the "natural evil" that all sentient beings experience, along with a representative sample of the theodicies that theists have offered to explain such evil. She also highlights some of the costs of the "skeptical theist" reply that I criticized earlier.

Craig is perhaps best known among philosophers for advocating the Kalam cosmological argument, and Quentin Smith takes him on in Smith's contribution to the collection. Smith critiques Craig's cosmological reasoning and offers, in its place, a theory on which the universe is "internally caused" to exist: the history of the universe is a continuous, finite temporal interval that is open at its earlier end—it lacks a first member without, however, stretching back forever in time (188). So, on Smith's theory, the universe began to exist (i.e., it isn't infinitely old), yet each state of the universe is caused by an earlier state, there being no earliest state. He describes the theory as "an atheistic version of the Kalam cosmological argument" (191) because it invokes only contingent states at every stage and yet allegedly explains the origin of the cosmos. Why, the cosmological theist will respond, do *any* of those states exist rather than none at all? Smith sees no question here that isn't adequately answered by what he has already said, namely, that every state of the universe has a cause of its existence. He rejects the widely held notion that explaining each part might fail to explain the whole.

In "Impossibility Arguments," Patrick Grim canvasses reasons to regard such divine attributes as omnipotence and omniscience as impossible for anything to possess. Over the centuries, analyses of the claim "God is omnipotent" have retreated from the naïve and problematic formulation "God can do anything" to formulations so complex and hedged that I won't take space here to reproduce them. Grim shows, however, that even some of these restricted formulations face counterexamples, and of course the more we hedge our formulations to avoid those counterexamples the easier we make it for almost anything to count as om-

nipotent. Grim's previous work on the logic of omniscience is justly well-regarded, and his treatment here includes two objections to omniscience that he himself has championed. The first is the objection from "essential indexicals": for example, no one else (not even God) can know all that I know when I know that I am making a mess. The second is the objection from the incompleteness of truth: one can give a Cantor-style diagonal argument for the claim that it is in principle impossible to comprehend (i.e., gather together) *all* the truths there are and thus impossible to know them all. Grim then addresses replies to these objections that have emerged in recent years. He closes by briefly considering the idea that various divine attributes logically conflict with one another—divine freedom and moral perfection, for instance, or omnipotence and moral perfection—but this discussion consists mostly of references to other published works.

The collection ends with a group of essays that relate atheism to other topics, such as feminism (Christine Overall) and postmodernism (John D. Caputo). Caputo's discussion reveals, among other things, just how esoteric postmodern conceptions of God are when compared to the conceptions of God held by the believer on the street. According to Emmanuel Levinas, as Caputo renders him, "God is neither being itself nor some sort of higher being or person" but instead "an imperative issued from the depths of the face of the neighbor" (273). Far from giving commands, Levinas's God is apparently *himself* a command, and one that issues from an odd place. According to Mark C. Taylor, says Caputo, "religion is present where it is not," a familiar-enough postmodern aphorism but one that even Caputo dismisses: "Taylor has gone on to ... be read less and less by people who are interested in religion where it actually is present" (277). The last essay in the collection, "Atheists: A Psychological Profile," complements the large-scale geographic data from Zuckerman's essay by correcting some of the negative misconceptions about atheists at the level of their individual psychology and behavior.

Rather than try to comment on each of the eighteen essays in the collection, I have focused on those I think will be of greatest interest to the readers of an academic philosophy journal. I recognize that a review of this length can't do justice to the entire volume, any more than the volume itself, valuable as it is, can do justice to the wide range of topics it tries to cover.

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