

OLLI-PEKKA VAINIO

University of Helsinki

Kerry Walters. *Atheism: A Guide for the Perplexed*. Continuum, 2010. Michael Bergmann, Michael Murray and Michael Rea (eds.) *Divine Evil: The Moral Character of the God of Abraham*. Oxford University Press, 2011.

It is nowadays almost as common to hear ranting about the stupidity of belief in the existence of God or ridiculing of New Atheists for their lack of philosophical acumen as it is to hear someone complaining about the level of so-called God-debate. Kerry Walters belongs to the latter group, and he seeks in his book to rehabilitate the God-debate by giving philosophical arguments the attention they deserve. This, in his view, is lacking in many public debates. For him, the existence of God is a metaphysical question and it is not directly linked with how believers live their lives and how bogus their practices might be. Walter's position, and the variety of atheism presented here, is thus an instance of philosophical atheism. He admits that many people do embrace belief or disbelief for reasons that are not reasons at all. For example, disbelief is in many cases caused by an unhappy state of affairs, such as unanswered prayers, negative experiences of believers, etc. But being a real atheist should include a rigorously argued philosophical stance. Walters recognizes that arguing something rigorously cannot be undertaken in less than 200 pages. Therefore, the book is not presented as a systematic argument for atheism but rather as a guide to the existing discussions. This is an improvement on New Atheist writers who suppose that it is possible, or even preferable, for readers to abandon their basic beliefs after reading a handful of claims that seem to contradict them.

Atheism begins with a lucid and helpful introduction to worldviews and belief-formation which is unfortunately absent from much of the contemporary discussion. Walters's claims that worldviews are to a great extent axiomatic and it is extremely hard for us come up with sustained arguments for or against them. We argue *from* our worldviews, not *for* them.

In order to elucidate the difference between theism and naturalism/atheism, Walters introduces a distinction between "Spartan" (naturalist) and "Baroque" (Theist) worldviews. A Spartan worldview is metaphysically minimalist, and those trained in Spartan rigour consider it a virtue to

have as few metaphysical beliefs as possible in order to avoid possibly false beliefs. By contrast, Baroque people are flamboyant and less rigid about what they consider to be possible and worthy of consideration. This is to my view a helpful characterization up to a certain point. Walters' discussion about the general worldview differences seems to boil down to claim that theists are willing to entertain questions such as "why is there something rather than nothing" while atheists do not consider this to be a question worthy of consideration. The crux of the matter lies in the fact that we do not seem to have ways for settling the dispute concerning whether that question is worth pursuing or not. Thus theism is at least initially a possible option and cannot be ruled out *a priori*.

Walters then goes quickly through some theistic and anti-theistic arguments, in order to give a sense of what is currently under discussion at a serious philosophical level. However, none of the arguments receive thorough treatment. This is the case also with natural explanations of religion (Marx, Freud, and contemporary evolutionary by-product arguments). Walters then briefly discusses the possibility of morality and meaning in an atheistic universe. In the section on morality, Walters makes a set of interesting distinctions (131). According to him, atheistic morality can be "objective" but not "absolute". This means that values can be "rationally grounded" and "non-subjective", while still being "relative". If I think that *p* is an objective, rationally grounded and non-subjective moral statement, which claims that "it is wrong to torture innocent people", what does it mean that it is at the same time "relative rather than absolute"? Walters goes on to state that "[atheistic] values will also be flexible enough to take into consideration extenuating circumstances arising from context, agent, and situation." So does this mean that there can be extenuating circumstances where *p* is not true? But this might appear to be pushing the meaning of 'objective' basically to mean 'subjective'. Or he might take 'objective' to mean 'inter-subjectivity', which is a common move in the philosophy of science. In this case morality is a communal agreement, which is, of course, better than mere idiosyncratic subjectivity but it is not moral realism.

The book ends with a treatment of atheistic spirituality, which Walter's defines as a "sense of interconnectedness and unity with all of creation". Walters thinks that this spiritual sphere is the place where rapprochement between theism and atheism can take place. The book ends with a hopeful note that both sides of the debate could learn from each other and benefit from each other's criticisms.

Regarding the general subject matter and arguments, Walters seems to think that the evidence game ends in a stalemate, and this holds for both theistic and anti-theistic alternatives. Philosophical inquiry leaves us with multiple worldview choices: Atheists do not seem to have enough philosophical leverage to convert theists, and vice versa.

In the end atheism seems to be a lifestyle choice that involves some epistemic considerations but is not exhausted by them. Being an atheist boils down to aesthetic considerations: it is a way of keeping your belief system simple (a way that can be contested on at least relatively good grounds). One person likes vanilla, while the other prefers triple chocolate with macadamias, but it is better to stay with vanilla because it is simpler.

Walters's book is a call for respecting dialogue. And indeed, the second book considered in this review aims to further precisely that. *Divine Evil* is a collection of essays based on a conference held at the University of Notre Dame in 2009. The conference brought together leading Christian philosophers (Alvin Plantinga, Peter van Inwagen, Eleanor Stump, Nicholas Wolterstorff, Richard Swinburne, Mark C. Murphy, John Hare) and biblical scholars (Gary Anderson, Christopher Seitz) to debate atheist/agnostic philosophers (Evan Fales, Edwin Curley, Louise Antony, Paul Draper, Wes Morriston, James L. Crenshaw) about the moral character of God as it is presented to us in the pages of Hebrew Bible. With this kind of line-up you can expect a serious and interesting confrontation. The chosen theme incited heated responses during the conference itself (at which the author of this review was present), although the written contributions by contrast are (somewhat) more toned down. When the basic text is the Hebrew Bible, and especially its goriest narratives, tempers tend to rise. After all, people are discussing the meaning of the grounding documents of tradition they deeply love – or hate.

The approach in *Divine Evil* is quite distinct from Walters's more impersonal treatment. In many of the contributions by atheists moral anger towards God is clearly visible. Interestingly, recent studies in the psychology of religion (by e.g. Julie Exline & Alyce Martin) have demonstrated that atheists and agnostics, or those who are simply undecided, report more anger toward God than openly religious people. Many interpretations of these results are possible here. Are atheists simply saner and morally more robust than theists? Does faith involve some kind of naïveté or *sacrifium intellectus* and harmonization that denies the existence of divine evil that lurks in those pages? Are atheists angry because they are atheists, or atheists because they are angry? These

questions are not, of course, addressed in the book, but they give an extra angle how to read the contributions.

Obviously, one can form an argument based on moral outrage which might argue against theism from fact that the God of the Hebrew Bible is a “sadist bastard”, “abuser”, “sociopath”, “incompetent”, “uncaring”, and a “monster” (just to quote some of the non-standard divine attributes that appear in the volume). From this basis it could be said that the Bible and its subsequent traditions are simply reprehensible since the source code is corrupted to the core. As Evan Fales plainly puts it: “I have offered an argument from the moral knowledge we share to the conclusion that any sacred text that is morally depraved is either no genuine revelation at all, or reveals the character of a god unworthy of worship. Such a god is moreover not merely unworthy of worship, but deserving of moral censure. We have a duty to repudiate such a god.” (107) Edwin Curley takes this a bit further claiming, “[i]f it [the Bible] was written under divine inspiration, God must have wanted to mislead us, either about his moral nature, or about the difference between right and wrong. But that cannot be. So the Bible was not written under divine inspiration.” (62)

Several of the atheist contributions concentrate on identifying the most objectionable narratives in the book and employing them in the arguments described above. The theist’s responses basically follow three different forms. First, they can deny the factuality of the event, or literal interpretation of the text describing the event (e.g., Wolterstorff, Anderson). Second they may simply refer to the differing moral intuitions along the lines of skeptical theism (e.g., Stump, Plantinga). Third, they may offer some kind of reason why a certain atrocity was within the boundaries of God’s goodness to perform or allow (e.g., Murphy, Swinburne).

The sequence of essays consists of main paper, comments, and short reply to the comments. This enables useful and extended exchange of thoughts, while always falling short of reaching any kind of agreement.

A significant reason for disagreement on this topic seems to be the literary genre and the degree of factitiousness of the relevant Old Testament narratives. In his essay, Wolterstorff argues that Joshua should be read as intended fiction, not as a historical account of the history of ancient Israel. The accounts of killing the Canaanites should be understood as after-the-event utterances similar to “we crushed them” –style boasting after winning a football game. Anderson and Stump, among others, suggest that these stories should be read within

a larger canonical context, which makes them to some extent more understandable from a modern perspective. However, not even the Christians seem to agree about how the 'horrors' should be understood. Still, the exegetical remarks are important in this context. It is too easy simply to cite passages, or even consistent themes, and then express moral anger because they do not seem to stand up to one's ideals of justice. The problem, however, is that an atheist does not, and cannot, recognize any kind of canonical reading or sustained narrative that might give at least some kind of meaning to the events. Thus, the general pattern is that an atheist cites a passage where something horrible happens and argues that the Bible cannot be considered as a source for any kind of moral worldview. Theists then go on to respond that the Bible should be seen as a whole and as a narrative. But from the atheist perspective this is already too much to ask for.

A word about the moral outrage: In the Hebrew Bible, Jahve seems to play according to the standard evolutionary fitness rules: protect the in-group and engage in out-group hostilities if the in-group is threatened. The garden-variety atheist can object here that the theist somehow invents a deity that claims to be perfectly loving but this deity is not the God of the Bible who is, if not perfectly, at least to a great extent morally suspicious and Janus-faced. The theists' crime is to be *more* moral than their founding documents allow them to be, and/or blind to the corruption in their own tradition. Yet, as van Inwagen points out, this moral outrage of atheists owes a great deal to the Judeo-Christian tradition. Despite the 'horrors' of the Hebrew Bible, somehow the altruistic morality we now cherish so dearly (at least outwardly, if not always in deed) grew out from this tradition. In his contribution, van Inwagen suggests that instead of as a moral sourcebook the Bible should be read as a sort of coming-of-age-story. Curley greets this as a very welcome critical attitude towards the scriptures (calling van Inwagen "an unexpected ally") but remains in doubt whether van Inwagen's co-religionists will accept his moderate views.

Generally the book serves a number of good purposes. It is one of the very few manuscripts that record extended exchange between theists and atheists on central matters of Judeo-Christian religion. This way it witnesses both to the need for this kind of exchange and the difficulties that people coming with different worldview assumptions have when they try to understand each other. In particular, seeing the (suppressed) anger and emotion, which is usually absent from purely academic exercises,

can be an eye-opener. Secondly, the book offers good treatments of the several problematic passages in the Old Testament, and, although no certain answers are given, the different examinations should give us all a lot of think about. Thirdly, several essays illustrate that the angle or narrative from which we read the text does have a great effect on how we perceive those texts. This is especially apparent in Stump's contributions, and these themes are further developed in her new monumental book on the problem of suffering (*Wandering in Darkness*, OUP 2010).

The book ends with a remarkable essay by Howard Wettstein who tries to summarize the previous exchanges. He agrees with the atheists that making apologies for Jahve might not be good idea. Still, he resists the idea that we should somehow erase those passages in the Bible that shock us. This would, in his view, be a great loss for all. For example, thinking about the story of Abraham, Wettstein's comments are worth citing in length:

Abraham, I want to propose, does not decide to obey God; not that he decides against it. Nor is this indecision. Abraham holds in his hands two incompatible non-negotiable loves, two non-negotiable commitments—commitments do not go any deeper than these—towards God and towards his son. Nor does Abraham, I'm imagining, have any conception of what it would mean to prioritize such commitments. The idea of making such a choice boggles the mind. There is almost something obscene about it. The text, strikingly spare, invites us to imagine Abraham's reaction. How could he not have been feeling alone in the universe? It must have been a long and lonely night. As I imagine his response the next morning—all one can do is dwell in the language, letting it seep in—what he does is to proceed, to march resolutely ahead, his eyes fixed, together (the Hebrew *yachdav*, repeated several times, suggests intimate togetherness) with his beloved son. Abraham's transcendent faith is exhibited in his ability to so march forward, not knowing where the path will lead, but ready to follow it, with confidence that he will know what to do when he has to. To withstand any such an experience must be transformative. And sometimes, as the text perhaps suggests, one comes out of the other end having survived that ordeal, loves intact, having grown in ways otherwise unavailable. (329)

After reading the interpretations of the Old Testament 'horrors' from both sides, and having witnessed the failures to communicate one's

perspectives, it might seem imprudent to say that it may paradoxically be these kinds of passages where the possibility of agreement lies. I am thinking especially Wettstein's accounts of the Old Testament, and how he succeeds in seeing the existential element in those stories, which is common, if not for all, at least for many of us. (For example, I think that the story of Abraham and Isaac speaks very differently to a mother who has to send her son to war compared to a person who does not have experiences of personal loss). Here it is easy for one to find resonances with what Walters writes in his book about atheist spirituality. Yet, in the end, there can be no ultimate agreement, but hoping for understanding might not be that far-fetched, and that is something that we can experience in purely philosophical encounters between theists and atheists, where distancing oneself from the subject matter is possible. Nevertheless, there is something that haunts us, beyond the level of mere arguments. And here some atheists might agree with the note on which Wettstein ends the book: "Better to suffer in confusion about God, an appropriate state for us if not a pleasurable one, than to forgo these stories." (333)

FEDOR STANZHEVSKIY

Saint Petersburg State University

Vladimir K. Shokhin. *Philosophy of Religion and Its Historical Forms (From Antiquity to the End of the Eighteenth Century)*. Moscow: Alpha-M, 2010 (В.К. Шохин, *Философия религии и ее исторические формы [античность – конец XVIII в.]*, Москва, АЛЬФА-М, 2010).

What exactly is philosophy of religion? Can we answer this question without considering the history of thought on the issue? These are some of the main questions that Vladimir Shokhin (the Chair of Philosophy of Religion at the Institute of Philosophy of the Russian Academy of Sciences and Professor of Philosophy at the Moscow State University) addresses in his book. He argues that in virtue of the self-reflective character of philosophy in general, philosophy of religion, in particular, should reflect on the history of its formation.

However, historical reflection may pursue two different tasks: the archeological reconstruction of the thought of the past and the selection of philosophically relevant aspects of historical heritage. It is the second