

# Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

---

Volume 26 | Issue 2

Article 9

---

4-1-2009

## Cottingham, ed., THE MEANING OF THEISM

T.J. Mawson

Follow this and additional works at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy>

---

### Recommended Citation

Mawson, T.J. (2009) "Cottingham, ed., THE MEANING OF THEISM," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 26 : Iss. 2 , Article 9.

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol26/iss2/9>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers by an authorized editor of ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange.

The clues to understanding Locke's Christianity are the hostility he shared with Shaftesbury to "priestcraft," or the burdening of faith with clerical impositions, and his understanding of Jesus as the authoritative revealer of moral truths that so often escape reason. Despite his connections to "freethinkers" and the suspicions of high-church Anglicans, Locke was no deist, although Woolhouse again shies away from precise judgment. His friendship, after the Glorious Revolution, with Archbishop John Tillotson points to his support for the archbishop's effort to shift Anglican emphasis from coercion and doctrinal dispute to the reformation of behavior in light of the gospel. Locke himself argued in 1689 that "No man can be a Christian without charity, and without that faith which works . . . by love" (*Letter*, 1690, p. 3). His non-creedal, "reasonable" Christianity and his adoption of toleration were answers to the excesses of sectarian "enthusiasm" as well as to those of intolerant churchmanship. In his preference for fundamental truths over theological squabbles, and in his emphasis upon a faith active in the practice of virtue, he was as much a herald of modern liberal Anglo-American Protestantism as he was the forerunner of modern political liberalism. All this can be gathered from Woolhouse's finely detailed biography; but as a biographer, Woolhouse too often advances detail over meaning.

*The Meaning of Theism*, edited by John Cottingham. Oxford: Blackwell, 2007. Pp. xi + 126. £17.99 (paper).

T. J. MAWSON, St Peter's College, University of Oxford

This is the book version of the latest *Ratio* special issue (*Ratio* Vol. XIX, no. 4., Dec. 2006). As such, it is the latest in a series which, since the first appeared some twelve years ago (*Truth in Ethics*, ed. Brad Hooker 1995), has ranged widely across Philosophy. With this volume the focus turns to the philosophy of religion. More specifically, the avowed hope of the editor was that his contributors would 'write with an eye to what belief in God, or its absence, *means* for the subject—what difference it makes to the flow and perceived significance of someone's life' (p. x). As is traditional with these special issues and their book versions, the papers that were delivered at a one-day conference in Reading the preceding Easter are bulked out with others from invited contributors. In this case, the result is a collection of papers written from a variety of perspectives—Christian, Buddhist, Jewish, Atheist, and Agnostic—most (but not all) of which keep one eye at least on what the editor hoped they would keep an eye on.

The full list of papers and their authors reads: "What's God Got To Do With It? Atheism and Religious Practice," by David Benatar; "What Difference Does It Make? The Nature and Significance of Theistic Belief," by John Cottingham; "Philosophy, the Restless Heart and the Meaning of Theism," by John Haldane; "Worshipping an Unknown God," by Anthony Kenny; "Seeke True Religion. Oh, Where?," by Michael McGhee; "The Varieties of

Non-Religious Experience," by Richard Norman; and "Divine Action in the World" (Synopsis), by Alvin Plantinga.

Although the editor tells us in his introduction that 'Each author has provided an abstract at the start of his paper' (p. x), sadly these abstracts did not survive the transition from the journal version to the book version. But, apart from that, in this incarnation, the papers constitute a handy little volume, one that is well set out and easily navigable with its good index.

In what follows, I shall focus on one theme, which is touched on by a number of those contributors to this volume who keep an eye on the question of the meaning of theism as the editor construes it: the extent to which assent to those propositions which characterize theism as it is usually discussed in the philosophy of religion can be disentangled from religious practice and the latter rationally present without the former.

Benatar suggests that 'there is nothing incoherent about a heretic, even of atheistic proportions, practising traditional Judaism' (p. 1). The explanation is that:

an atheist might view the origin of a religious practice as unimportant. It simply might not matter to a particular atheist whether the practice is of divine origin or a human invention. To appreciate this point about the origin of a religion's practices, we might consider an analogy with a (non-religious) legal system. Imagine, for example, that it were discovered that some country's ancient Constitution had not been adopted under the circumstances previously thought . . . Would that commit citizens to cease obeying the laws? . . . A negative answer . . . is not implausible. It just may not matter whether the mythology of the Constitution's origin is true or not. (p. 7)

Of course, it may matter; some people *do* stop going to synagogue, church, or mosque, or start eating pork, shopping on a Sunday, or drinking alcoholic beverages once they have decided that there is no God. But Benatar is surely right to suggest that some do not; some continue to conform themselves, at least outwardly, to the rules that the variant of theism to which they once subscribed enjoins upon its adherents even after they have stopped believing that it is true. If then there were nothing to religious practices other than their outer manifestations, these 'nostalgic former believers' (as McGhee refers to them, p. 81) could be said to continue on in the same religious practices as they had participated in when they were believers. But matters cannot be left there; some religious practices are constituted by more than their outer manifestations.

In my experience, it would not be unprecedented to find in an Oxford College Chapel on a Sunday evening someone who would self-identify as an atheist or an agnostic; perhaps one might find oneself sitting beside Anthony Kenny, who tells us in his contribution to this volume, 'I read the Bible frequently; I attend church more than once a month. . . . But in fact I am not a believer, I am an agnostic. Perhaps . . . I am a devout agnostic' (p. 59). The mere presence of such people in chapels or churches though does not settle the issue of whether or not all the practices that they engage in whilst sitting in their pews are the same as those that the not-yet-former believers who we may imagine sitting beside them are engaging

in, even if outwardly there is nothing to differentiate them. A question here is whether a particular practice can count as a *religious* practice if it is done with no religious motivation. It strikes me that for some practices it can, but for some it cannot. Let us first consider examples of the sorts of practices which most obviously need a religious motivation if they are to be correctly counted as religious.

If one refrains from eating pork because one thinks it has been demanded by God as a sign of obedience to him, then one's refraining from eating pork is a religious practice. But if one refrains from eating pork due to the warnings of a this-worldly dietician concerning the effect of its salt content on one's blood pressure, it is not a religious practice. Neither is it if one refrains from it just from habit. Similarly, not shopping on a Sunday may be something one does for religious reasons, thinking oneself commanded by God to keep the Sabbath day holy and thinking that shopping is incompatible with this. Alternatively, it may be something one does merely out of habit. The shops were never open on Sunday in one's youth, so one does not even think of going shopping on a Sunday now when such would be a possibility. In the former case, the act of not shopping is a religious one; in the latter, it is not. Thus losing religious beliefs and their associated motivations prevents one from continuing on in certain religious practices *qua* religious practices, even if it does not prevent one continuing on with practices which, were it not for one's altered worldview and motivations, would have been religious and which even now, to the outside point of view, may be mistaken for being religious. This, I suggest, applies to dietary and certain other practices, the objects involved in which may be specified in non-religious terms; such practices constitute some of Benatar's examples. The same is not so obviously true of Kenny's examples—attending church and reading the Bible. Let us consider those next.

One might suggest that some practices get to be religious by their involving certain objects the identity of which cannot be specified save in religious terms and they may be practiced by someone with no religious beliefs or motivations at all, remaining religious when so practiced in virtue of the religious nature of these objects. One might suggest that attending chapel or church and reading the Bible are such practices; they involve paradigmatically religious objects: a building built and maintained with certain religious intentions and a book that is widely regarded as being a communication from the divine. Now of course someone such as Kenny might be attending church 'just for the music,' but normally people who so justify their presence there nevertheless mouth the words of the communal prayers that 'fill in the time' between choral pieces; stand up and sit down in parallel with others in the congregation; and so forth. The religiosity of a former believer's own practice when he or she goes to church in this fashion; reads the Bible in this context (plausibly the same would not be true if he or she were reading the Bible outside the context of a church service, merely to enable him or her to pass a Theology exam the next day); listens to choral music; receives communion; and so forth can thus be vouchsafed by the religious intentions and beliefs of others with respect to the building, book in this context, art and ceremony which his or her practice involves. Consider the following situation as a plausible analogy.

Suppose that, having lost all interest in football whilst a youth, you are now contacted by an old school friend with whom you lost touch many years ago. He reveals that he retains his keen interest in the sport and invites you to accompany him to a football match where Oxford United, the team you both supported as youngsters, will be playing. You fail to mention that you have strayed from the path of 'football righteousness,' accept his invitation, and join him in the terraces the next Saturday, having dug your old Oxford United scarf out of the attic and reminded yourself of the words of United's chants. Despite having no interest in the game, you join in the scarf waving and chanting so as not to upset your friend. All the time you have your mind fixed on some other object. Have you spent your Saturday afternoon supporting Oxford United? It seems to me that you have. In waving the United scarf and singing the United chants, you have been a United supporter, regardless of your mental state or motivations; you would have been so even had you in fact been secretly willing the opposing team to win. The Oxford-United-supporting nature of your practice is generated by the Oxford-United-themed nature of the scarf and the socially-constituted supportive nature of the activity of waving scarves and singing chants.

Similarly, it seems to me, a devout atheist might engage in certain religious practices without these religious practices' religiosity being eviscerated by his or her personal atheism as long as the religiosity is derived from such living traditions. I say 'living traditions' as it seems to me that the religiosity of one's practice in such cases is parasitic upon the religious beliefs of those who set up *and maintain* the practice. If some ancient rite of the Egyptian religion were re-enacted by a troop of actors, each person involved being motivated solely by historical curiosity, the result would not be the revival of the ancient Egyptian religion. If everyone's a free-rider, there's nothing left to ride on. This is not of course (not yet at least) the case with theism. So it is that a celebration of communion being presided over by a devout atheist could still be a religious ceremony despite the president's atheism if enough of the congregation were theists. A devout atheist could still have performed the religious practice of receiving communion, rather than simply eating a wafer and sipping some wine, if he or she attended the service in the company of theists (and of course made the right movements at the right time).

So some practices (e.g., not eating pork) seem to require no particular beliefs or motivations for their identity, but then again precisely because of this they cannot be counted as *religious* practices unless they have a religious motivation (there is nothing inherently religious about not eating pork). Thus they may be persisted in, but not as religious practices, after one has abandoned one's religious beliefs. Other practices require no religious motivation from the person partaking in them to retain their religiosity as practices, because their religiosity is imbued by the religious objects that form their focus (e.g., attending church). One can retain these practices, and retain them as religious practices, after having abandoned one's religion. Yet a third class of religious practices might seem to be closed off from non-believers in a more radical way than those we have so far discussed.

Once one has come to the belief that the person that one had believed oneself to have been talking to on the telephone is in fact a looped auto-

mated message from the telephone company telling one that the number one has dialled is unobtainable, one may continue speaking down the telephone line, but one cannot continue in a conversation. One cannot be in conversation with someone without believing or at least hoping oneself to be. Similarly, for the act of articulating certain words to be the act of participating in private prayer, one must suppose that it is at least possible that there is someone supernatural to whom one is speaking. The same considerations apply *mutatis mutandis* to acts of worship; one has to view one's act of worship as directed towards something worshipful if one is to conceive of it as an act of worship and one has to conceive of it as an act of worship if it is to be an act of worship. If one does not think that there is anything to be worshiped, then one can sing 'Worship' songs all one likes but one cannot worship with them. However, perhaps nothing stronger than the supposed possibility of someone hearing one's prayer or being the object of one's worship is required.

Elsewhere Kenny has said that:

There is no reason why someone who is in doubt about the existence of God should not pray for help and guidance on this topic as in other matters. Some find something comic in the idea of an agnostic praying to a God whose existence he doubts. It is surely no more unreasonable than the act of a man adrift in the ocean, trapped in a cave, or stranded on a mountainside, who cries for help though he may never be heard or fires a signal which may never be seen. (A. Kenny, *The God of the Philosophers* [Clarendon, 1979], p. 129)

And Cottingham suggests in his contribution to this volume that focusing on 'metaphysical freight,' as he puts it, is misguided, for it:

invites us to suppose that preparedness to assent to a metaphysical proposition about the existence of this divine supernatural entity is a *prerequisite* for embarking on the path of spiritual praxis. Yet it may turn out instead that intimations of the divine are available only to those who are prepared and trained, through such praxis, to approach God in humility and awe, to risk the vulnerability of trust and hope where there is no 'external' epistemic warrant or prior demonstrative certification. (p. 37)

There seems to me to be something in this. One need not be as willing as Cottingham to accept that it may turn out that nobody may receive 'intimations of the divine' or 'approach God' if ever there is external epistemic warrant or demonstrative certification for their belief in Him, but it does seem plausible to say that for most who believe, the relationship between their belief and their praxis is at least somewhat as Kenny and Cottingham suggest, and thus theists and devout agnostics such as Kenny are closer than one would have been led to think by focusing on the different 'metaphysical freight' that they carry.

Wittgenstein famously remarked that if we were to consider one man who said that there was a German plane in the sky and another who said that he was not sure, we would say that they were close together, but if we

were to consider instead one man who said he believed in the Last Judgment and another who said that he was not sure, we would say that there was a great gulf between them. Now consider entering a church on three successive days and overhearing on each occasion three different solitary men articulating the words of the Lord's Prayer. When questioned, the first says he is doing so in the firm conviction that there is a God who hears him; the second says he is doing so in the hope that there is a God who hears him; the third says that he is doing so out of habit, with no thought as to the meanings of the words he uses and no beliefs one way or the other about whether or not there is a God to hear them. Would we not say that, whatever the gulf between the first two, the first two were a lot closer together than either was to the third? And would not most theists say that their own religious lives find them vacillating between the positions held by the first two, slipping into the third only when at their least reflective? Is this condition not, as Cottingham suggests, a part of what it must almost universally *mean*—in his sense of 'mean'—to be a theist this side of the grave?

To these and related questions most of the contributors to this volume have something to say; some pursue their own lines, which do not take them past these issues but are not without interest in their own right. The volume as a whole is accessible, both in style and length; it could easily be read in an afternoon, leaving the evening free to contemplate the questions it raises and answers it proffers, or alternatively to attend chapel.

*The British Moralists on Human Nature and the Birth of Secular Ethics*, by Michael B. Gill. Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 2006. Pp. 359. \$85.00

NEIL G. ROBERTSON, University of King's College, Halifax, NS, Canada

Michael Gill's new book tells the story of a crucial development, indeed transformation, of moral philosophy in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries: namely, with David Hume, the rise of a consistent and well-grounded secular ethics—an ethics that need make no reference to God or even an extra-human order to explain and justify morality. Gill's story is by no means comprehensive of the ethical theories available at this time; rather, Gill has focused his attention on a particular line of development from the Cambridge Platonists through Shaftesbury and Hutcheson to David Hume. The analysis is framed by what Gill calls "the question of human nature." The book has a wonderful shape to it because it follows this line of development as defined by this question. Gill frames the story as one of a continually developing inheritance where each figure takes up the moral theory of his predecessor and develops it by resolving an internal tension in that previous account.

Gill evidently has a full grasp of his material and the surrounding secondary literature and yet, because of the narrative drive of the volume and the clarity of analysis in the interpretations offered, the book is both eminently readable and full of material to provoke the thought of scholar