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## Joshua Rasmussen and Kevin Vallier, eds., A NEW THEIST RESPONSE TO THE NEW ATHEISTS

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*A New Theist Response to the New Atheists*, edited by Joshua Rasmussen and Kevin Vallier. Routledge, 2020. Pp. xii + 216. \$155.00 (hardcover).

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In a recent conversation with a student about matters epistemological, I was surprised when, shortly into the conversation, Christopher Hitchens's name came up. The surprise was twofold: not only was I surprised to have Hitchens's work brought into a conversation about epistemology, I was surprised that the student thought Hitchens still relevant. For my part, I had gradually consigned Hitchens and the other "New Atheists" to the dustbin of history. Although Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris continue to be active, the New Atheists have long since ceased to be new, and society has since moved on to more pressing issues. Or so I thought.

The title of Rasmussen and Vallier's new edited volume suggests otherwise. Not only do the authors remain concerned about the influence of the New Atheists, their proposal aims to counter the New Atheists with a "New Theism." New Theism, as laid out in the introduction by Rasmussen and Vallier, is distinguished not so much by its content as by its approach. Rather than simply dismissing the New Atheists as mere polemicists or engaging in strident polemics themselves, the New Theists understand their task as one of collaborative inquiry, with the goal being to invite the New Atheists into a mutual dialogue that is both more nuanced and more productive. By engaging in a mutual exploration of truth, New Theists hope to promote a form of inquiry that is both more respectful and, ultimately, more productive.

The volume itself is divided into three parts. The first six chapters fall under the rubric of "God and Reason," covering territory that, in many respects, should be recognizable to those familiar with academic debates concerning the New Atheism and with philosophy of religion generally. The first article by Alexander Pruss provides a brief introduction to debates over the principle of sufficient reason (PSR) and the argument for causal finitism. Pruss examines three paradoxes—Thomson's Lamp, the paradox of Grim Reapers, and the paradox of Die Guessing—in light of prime intuitions concerning the implausibility of causal infinities. Pruss then presents two arguments for causal finitism, one inductive, the other deductive. Pruss invites the reader, including the New Atheist, to a mutual investigation into the merits of causal finitism and, Pruss suggests, its implications for the idea of an uncaused cause.



In "An Argument for a Supreme Foundation," Joshua Rasmussen argues from the principle of explanation (PE) that it is rational to believe that things have an explanation. If we accept this, Rasmussen argues, it further follows that there is some foundation that serves as the explanation of the totality of things, since by definition the totality of things would have nothing outside of itself, and yet it still be in need of explanation. Furthermore, the attributes of such a foundation would not be categorical and therefore not limited, and they would also be great-making ("supreme"). Once we recognize this, he argues, we are on the path to recognizing a foundation that looks much like the God of classical theism. In Chapter 3, Dustin Crummett and Philip Swenson address the question of whether theism provides a better justification for our moral knowledge than naturalism, noting that New Atheists such as Sam Harris and Richard Dawkins criticize theism on moral grounds. Crummett and Swenson argue that there is good reason to believe that we have moral knowledge and that such moral knowledge is widespread. They reject appeals to relativism and subjectivism, and they argue that naturalism provides a poor ground for believing that our moral beliefs are true. Theism, they argue, does provide such grounds, since God, unlike evolution, is a perfect moral being.

In Chapter 4, Chris Tweedt tackles the "data of suffering," addressing the way this can be interpreted from theological and atheological perspectives. Taking inspiration from the epistemological literature on permissivism—the view that equally legitimate but opposing beliefs can be inferred from the same evidence—Tweedt argues that atheological and theological perspectives differ in the way they interpret the data of suffering. While atheologians often focus on suffering, those adopting a theological perspective place greater weight on other elements of life that speak crucially and more optimistically to their framework. While some perspectives are illegitimate, neither atheological nor theological perspectives fall into this category. While change of perspective is challenging, it is not impossible, and the atheologian's encounter with the commitment of the theologian can be one factor in such change. In "Is the God Hypothesis Improbable?," Logan Paul Gage tackles Dawkins's influential "Ultimate 747 Gambit," in which Dawkins argues that God cannot serve as a satisfactory explanatory hypothesis because God is too complex an explanans. Gage challenges Dawkins's argument. To do this, Gage distinguishes between quantitative and qualitative accounts of parsimony, arguing that, in both cases, naturalism does not provide an obviously simpler explanation than theism. Further Gage argues that in terms of fundamental simplicity, theism comes out ahead, and so Dawkins's "Gambit" is defeated.

In Chapter 6, Liz Jackson tackles the question of the rationality of faith, challenging the New Atheist claim that faith is by definition unjustified belief and so therefore never rational. Focusing on epistemic rationality, Jackson surveys several possible meanings of the charge that faith is irrational, including defining faith as an "epistemically unjustified attitude." In each case, Jackson argues that either the definition in question misses

important elements of faith in practice or that the criterion captures other sorts of belief which are justifiable. Jackson concludes by arguing that faith can be understood in two ways, as a form of Jamesian self-justifying belief in the case of non-religious faith or, in the case of religious faith, as a form of belief that is not formed merely on strictly empirical evidence but which is important for flourishing.

Part 2 of the book turns explicitly to God and morality. In "Deiform Morality," Thomas Ward takes on "Dawkins's Dilemma": if you believe that without the existence of God you would murder, steal, etc., then you are not really a moral person, but if you believe you would not do these things even if God didn't exist, you show that belief in God is not necessary for morality. Ward divides the dilemma into two forms, a factual form and a motivational form. The factual form Ward conceives to be easily dealt with, arguing that since a gap often exists between belief and action, it is quite possible that a person believes one thing and does another. The true challenge, Ward argues, is the motivational version of the dilemma. The worry here is that a motivation of divine reward and punishment is egoistic in character rather than genuinely moral. Ward briefly lays out a possible response to this challenge, one grounded partly in an Aristotelian conception of human nature and in an understanding of Christian friendship with God.

In "Are We Better Off Without Religion?," Christian Miller takes up the New Atheist argument that religious belief leads to bad moral behavior and that secular (i.e., non-religious) ways of thinking motivate moral behavior better than religious ones. Miller succinctly marshals empirical data on crime, education, health, charity, and subjective well-being to show that, in all these domains, religious individuals (often defined in terms of attendance at religious services) outperform non-religious individuals. Miller admits that this data is largely correlational in character, and as such it cannot clearly demonstrate causation. But, he argues, the causal arrow from religious commitment to moral behavior is plausible, and so the New Atheist argument fails. In Chapter 9, Jennifer Zamzow asks the important question of whether engaging in spiritual practices entails moral licensing in the same way that, for many people, exercising vigorously may create the feeling that one "deserves" the extra slice of chocolate cake afterwards. Zamzow acknowledges that there is very little direct literature on this issue, but related studies on prayer and licensing behavior generally lead her to conclude that while engaging in some spiritual practices may sometimes lead to licensing behavior, this is no reason to discontinue them. Rather, we should revise how we do them and how we frame them.

In Chapter 10, Paul Copan and Thom Wolf argue for the beneficial moral impacts of Christian and, especially, Protestant civilization. Casting a very wide net, Copan and Wolf argue that Christianity has been the source of much of what is good in the world, including the spread of democracy and education, and they highlight in particular empirical and anecdotal

evidence in support of the positive impact of missionaries globally. In this, Copan and Wolf see a corrective to Christopher Hitchens's charge that religion poisons everything, and they argue that the secular morality of the West is itself based on its Protestant roots. In "Moral Strangers as Co-Laborers in the Fields of Justice," Rico Vitz takes a decidedly different approach. Acknowledging the apparent intractability of moral debate in contemporary philosophy, Vitz argues that we should instead focus on our commonalities. While Christians and atheists may disagree even over the implications of such basic valuational concepts as beneficence and nonmaleficence, they can nevertheless agree on many substantive issues concerning duties to aid those in need. Vitz argues that the practice of co-laboring in turn will provide a stronger experiential basis for achieving moral consensus than the forensic wizardry of abstract argumentation. In Chapter 12, Hunter Baker makes the case for why atheists should support the First Amendment free exercise clause. Baker briefly reviews the history of religious liberty as well as providing a brief account of the constitutional provisions regarding religion. Baker argues that as beneficiaries of the free exercise clause, atheists should also respect the free exercise of religion despite their denial of religious claims. Baker then devotes much of the article to the contentious argument that such respect of free exercise extends to two recent cases: the Affordable Care Act provision requiring insurance coverage of abortion and the case of Christian vendors refusal to service homosexual wedding services. In both cases, Baker argues that religious liberty should win out.

Part III, titled "God and Theology," addresses two distinct issues. In Chapter 13, Jordan Wessling responds to Dawkins's criticism of the doctrine of atonement, arguing that God could have forgiven humanity without the suffering involved in the crucifixion. Instead of defending the propitiation model, Wessling argues for a deification/theosis approach which understands the life and death of Jesus in terms of enabling God to effectively model a virtuous human life and thus enable closer participation in the divine life. Wessling uses the interesting analogy of Alcoholics Anonymous, where former alcoholics serve as models and mentors for those in the process of recovering. In the crucifixion, Jesus exemplifies "oppositional" virtues requisite for human life that cannot be modeled in any other way.

In the final chapter, Kevin Kinghorn takes on the question of the fate of the good person, Christian or otherwise. Kinghorn rejects the view that faith is a matter of belief, and that it is the explicitly held beliefs of a Christian that therefore count towards eternal salvation. Rather, faith involves commitment to a kind of life, and this commitment can be made in the absence of explicit belief in creedal Christianity. To support this, Kinghorn appeals to the traditional belief that the Old Testament patriarchs were saved through their faith despite the fact that they lived before Jesus was born. The Holy Spirit, Kinghorn argues, can work in Christian

and non-Christian alike, and entry into heaven is influenced by this character of commitment as well.

Who is this book for? The book's Preface suggests that the text is aimed at the New Atheists themselves or, at least, their followers who might be persuaded to engage the mutual dialogue many of the authors envision. Some essays succeed in this tone of mutual dialogue more than others, and the articles by Jackson, Miller, Zamzow, and Vitz stand out among those that do so well, sometimes by selecting topics that serve to open engagement. The emphasis on moral categories is also a strength, since they have not received the same level of attention in the New Atheist debate. It also reveals some issues, not least being the highly problematic assumption in a few essays that the concrete moral commitments of Christians just are the moral commitments espoused by conservative evangelicals. Several essays are conventionally apologetic in tone, primarily aiming to defend the truth or superiority of Christianity without fully engaging either the arguments put forward by New Atheists and their allies or the motivations for their arguments. In an effort aimed at mutual engagement, the latter is especially important, since, if the arguments of an opponent are poor, motivated reasoning is a likely cause, and understanding motivations is thus crucial to understand why the arguments are made in the first place. Some of the essays succeed in this endeavor, and most but not all achieve at least a balanced tone.

Likely the main audience will be undergraduate students enrolled in philosophy of religion or related classes, especially but not exclusively in Christian-affiliated universities. The essays are short and readable, often serving as a jumping off point to important themes in the philosophy of religion, both old and new. In this sense the essays usefully serve as an invitation, and this is true even for those essays that are more clearly apologetic in their orientation. Despite their brevity, many of the essays are thoughtful and nuanced, and essays such as those by Tweedt, Wessling, and Kinghorn are able to demonstrate richness in thinking in a limited amount of space. Taken together, the essays also suggest a different kind of invitation, not simply to a "New Theism" but to philosophy itself. As the volume makes plain, the cardinal sin of the New Atheists is, in important respects, the abandonment of careful, nuanced reasoning in favor of the delicious but self-serving *bon mot*. An engagement by both sides that is genuinely more humane, more empathetic, more careful both in its reasonings and in its characterizations of the partisans of the opposing side would be a welcome development. Philosophy is distinctive in its capacity to encourage this kind of more thoughtful and more reflective engagement that is, arguably, more needed now than ever. In this, the volume's language of invitation and mutual exploration of truth is a welcome development, one that I hope has significant impact.