

BOOK REVIEW

Review of *The Atheist's Primer* and *Atheism for Beginners*

The Atheist's Primer, Michael Palmer, Cambridge, UK: Lutterworth Press, 2012, ISBN: 9780718892975. *Atheism for Beginners*, Michael Palmer, Cambridge, UK: Lutterworth Press, 2013, ISBN: 9780718892913

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The New Atheists are occasionally accused of lacking nuance and sophistication, or of existing in an intellectual vacuum. To some it may seem that Dawkins *et al.* are naïve logical positivists; this perspective may be reinforced by recent authors' explicit rejection of the value of philosophy and other non-scientific approaches to knowledge (cf. Lawrence Krauss, Stephen Hawking). Into the fray steps Michael Palmer, offering his attempt to popularise a version of atheism that is underpinned by a long tradition of philosophical inquiry. *The Atheist's Primer*, a condensed version of Palmer's previous work, is aptly named: it is a crash course on the history and major arguments of atheism from a firmly philosophical angle. Its companion text, *Atheism For Beginners*, is a coursebook aimed at tutors seeking to teach this material. In both cases, Palmer's writing is engaging and pleasingly concise. He assumes very little prior knowledge of the topic or of philosophy generally, and clearly introduces relevant concepts when necessary. This might well be off-putting to readers who are more familiar with philosophical writing; however, as the book is aimed at novices, this is not a problem.

The subject matter of these books has been appropriately selected and covers, amongst other things, the meaning and variations of atheism; miracles; theodicy; and teleological, cosmological, and moral arguments for God, and their weaknesses. The historical and biographical material scattered throughout the text is particularly enjoyable. Arguments are put into context, and this narrative approach allows one to ease into each subject with a sense of where it fits into the broader picture. As one might expect, ideas from Hume and Nietzsche are prominent, but Palmer also presents a more rounded cast of characters that includes those less widely appreciated by atheists, Freud, Marx, and Feuerbach amongst them.

The Atheist's Primer is clearly not striving for neutrality. Palmer lays his cards on the table in the introduction: he openly aims not only to give an introduction to

atheism, but to arm the reader for debate with theists. In this sense, the book sits alongside the better work of the New Atheists as a sort of atheistic apologetics, and is certainly a more rigorous and level-headed example of the genre. While Palmer lacks Christopher Hitchens' rhetorical flare or Daniel Dennett's affable charm, he provides a thorough and rounded grounding in the critical arguments for and about atheism. A reader fresh from *The God Delusion* would be well-served by *The Atheist's Primer*. Readers who are not atheists but who seek an efficient introduction to the philosophy of religion, and arguments about the existence of God in particular, also have much to gain from this book. While Palmer comes at the topic as an atheist, he has not written a polemic in the vein of Hitchens. No doubt he will succeed in offending some, as seems to happen any time a writer argues for atheism, but readers who are not looking to take offence should find little cause for complaint.

The main difference between *The Atheist's Primer* and *Atheism for Beginners* is the order and style in which the material is presented. *The Atheist's Primer* does what it says on the tin: it's a concise and accessible introduction to the philosophy of atheism. *Atheism For Beginners* is written as a modern textbook, complete with annotated margins and end-of-chapter exercises. The short list of suggested readings that concludes each chapter is generally well-chosen. The presentation of *Atheism For Beginners* as a textbook may raise a problem. While *The Atheist's Primer* makes no pretence of neutrality, one might expect a textbook to offer a more balanced discussion. From the first page it is evident that this is not the case: opposite the table of contents is Palmer's "atheist's creed". Intended to serve as a summary of the core claims of atheism, in this context it rather comes off as a little contrived. It certainly does not aid the tired and tiring claim that the New Atheists are as dogmatic as their religious targets. As *Atheism For Beginners* aims to cover the same material as its companion, the lack of balance is to an extent unavoidable. There seems to be little effort to avoid it, however. The case for atheism consistently emerges stronger, perhaps, than it actually is. For example, Palmer tentatively concedes the logical problem of evil to Plantinga, and naturally moves

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to the evidential problem of evil. The argument from soul-making and its flaws are discussed at length, and then Palmer concludes by asserting that the evidential problem of evil stands. I readily agree with him, but I feel he could have made a stronger case for theism in this chapter. If, as Palmer says, the evidential problem of evil is “the decisive objection to the existence of God”, perhaps other theodicies ought to have been addressed in the same detail as the argument from soul-making.

In Palmer's defence, the further readings offer balance and do not shy away from heavyweights such as Richard Swinburne and Brian Davies. An enthusiastic student would be able to use *Atheism For Beginners* as a springboard to deep reading on these subjects. That said, it is not clear to me that the same benefit would not be gained

from *The Atheist's Primer* or, indeed, a more neutral (albeit less readable) introduction to the philosophy of religion.

Overall I am very pleased by *The Atheist's Primer*. It is wonderfully accessible and engagingly written, and offers much-needed historical perspective and philosophical grounding to the modern atheist. I cannot recommend it enough to anyone, of any religious persuasion, who is looking for a well-rounded introduction to the major strands of atheistic argument or a starting point for reading primary material. *Atheism For Beginners* may well be of interest to tutors in search of a high-quality course-book covering atheism in detail, but is not recommended for (nor aimed at) the general reader. Neither book will likely appeal to those with a background in philosophy or theology.

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