

BOOK REVIEW

Review: *Atheists: The Origin of The Species*

Atheists: The Origin of The Species, Nick Spencer, Bloomsbury, 2014, ISBN: 1472902963

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In his *Atheists: The Origin of the Species*, Nick Spencer, the current Research Director of the 'theology think tank,' Theos, takes up an incredibly difficult undertaking: on one hand attempting to synthesize the 'meaning' of Atheism amid the noise and haste emanating from the contemporary 'New Atheism,' while on the other, offering an evolutionary perspective that traces the historical origins of 'Atheism-in-general.' With the latter, he addresses the 'myth' that Atheism emerged in Europe within the 'teeth' of brutal religious—Christian—opposition, through the "services of reason, science and evolution" (xiv). This, he says, overlooks the more rational idea that modern Atheism's emergence was primarily a "political and social cause," its Western development the product of reactions toward Theological authority, rather than as counter developments in science or philosophy (xv-xv). He summarizes this theory into three contentions: the history of Atheism is best understood in political and social terms, which engender the notion that rather than a singular 'Atheism' there exists instead a 'family of Atheisms,' which is evinced by the 'huge range' of terminology adopted, modified, and used over the last four centuries (xvii-xviii).

As such, his text is divided into four chapters—'Possibilities,' 'Pioneers,' 'Promises,' and 'Problems'—a chronological and geographical 'who's who' that maps the relative lives and careers of characters across various stages both national and inter-national, contextualized by epochs like the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Enlightenment, modernity, and post-modernity. This ancestry speaks a language of immeasurable ideologies, a dialogical gradient of '-isms' that range from standard identifiers like skepticism, humanism, agnosticism, or Atheism, to more broad descriptors such as communism, determinism, existentialism, fatalism, materialism, positivism, naturalism, rationalism, or secularism. In an equally deft and hurried manner, Spencer weaves together these biographical snippets into a four-century tapestry, highlighting the Atheism—or similar, often imputed philosophies—of such figures like Lucretius, Machiavelli, Montaigne, Descartes, Hobbes, D'Holbach, Newton, Locke,

Meslier, Hume, Jefferson, Hegel, Marx, Chernyshevsky, Diderot, Voltaire, Shelley, Paine, Darwin, Freud, Holyoake, Bradlaugh, Nietzsche, Stalin, Darrow, O'Hair, Khrushchev, Mao, Lenin, Dawkins, Harris, and Hitchens.

This survey of key players, which at times feels almost superficial, like pragmatic name-dropping, creates a curtain call that, for his intentions, Spencer uses to support his argument that 'modern Atheism' is, indeed, an evolved concept. Across his four chapters these individuals represent a maturation of sorts, a step-by-step progression leading toward a wider profile of Atheism-in-general. The concept seems to then become a signifier imbued with like notions, wherein the 'Atheist trait' develops into something genetically passed on, a mimetic peculiarity and product of cultural adaptability that evolves according to its environment. This equally accounts for the subtle similarities between different Atheisms: as the concept evolves, its meaning grows from each previous derivation so that between the Atheisms of, say Hobbes and Dawkins, we are able to perceive both similarity and difference. In this way, we might say that his text is a successful analysis in that it provides the characters, settings, and plot of an entity that represents a political or cultural migratory construction.

On the other hand, Spencer's text reveals a number of entirely problematic issues. For example, we might ask whether it offers anything new at all, considering the existence of a *Cambridge Companion* (Martin 2007) and *Oxford Handbook* (Bullivant and Ruse, 2013), not to mention the available texts by a myriad of others that equally provide both an historical examination of the term's usage, as well as a number of theoretical attempts at defining its broader meaning. Which leads us to another issue. Because the study of Atheism is an emerging field, and is thus fraught with the growing pains one might expect of adolescence, such as its relationship to the larger study of religion, and the disparity between how individuals describe themselves and how they are described by scholars, any in-depth study of Atheism itself is, at present, a precarious endeavor. Which also means, because it is not—necessarily—adding anything new, rather than resolving these issues Spencer's text seems to merely join in. In this way, it comes across as less a clarification about the 'vastness' of Atheism, and more a simple contribution, albeit wrapped within an account bulging at the seams with nuanced details pragmatically left out.

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More specifically, perhaps the most troubling revelation is that it seems written for—or at least was inspired by—one man: Richard Dawkins. Yes, it might be a truth universally acknowledged that there has been a ‘rise’ in Atheism since Dawkins’ contribution to the four books that wholly encompass the canon of New Atheism, but to shackle together a history of the concept just to point out that Dawkins’ hatred of religion is merely an evolved version of something already established, is troublingly—and perhaps too theologically—myopic. Maybe this explains the sense one gets of the text’s generality, the way it feels short, like a ‘Wikipedia’ style gloss of centuries of theoretical, philosophical, and theological thought, quickly combined in order to remind Dawkins and his ‘allies’ that they are merely a product of a conceptual evolution. Or, perhaps it also justifies his possible oversight in not recognizing his thesis as a disguised form of Dawkins’ own meme theory—which he does not reference.

His focus on Dawkins, then, seems to be one of his text’s major downfalls, exemplified perhaps most clearly by his bold statement: “New Atheism died with a whimper rather than a bang” (253). This proclamation, when accompanied by his conclusive statement, “Atheism

is here to stay because God is back” (258), seems to betray his true intentions, and thus diminish his text’s objectivity. That is, and according to his own thesis, New Atheism should be categorized as an equal product of the evolutionary progress he himself has traced across the body of his text. It, just as the others, should be likewise perceived as a product of discourse, so that rather than ‘dying’ it is seen as existing and thriving at a certain point along a particular chronology, so as to provide an insight into how the key players—such those cited above—contextually contribute to the larger meaning of the species ‘Atheist.’ Yet, this seems not the case. Which causes us to further consider: if Spencer had felt less required to counteract Dawkins’ ‘war on religious belief,’ and focused his obvious talents on revealing New Atheism as yet another discursive source with which we might better understand the construction, development, and promotion of what it might mean, to particular individuals, within particular contexts, to ‘be Atheist,’ then perhaps his text would seem less like an ironic addition to the list he himself describes as reacting within a revived ‘religious book market,’ and more like something ‘new.’

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