
BOOK REVIEW

Review of *Atheism: What Everyone Needs to Know*

Atheism: What Everyone Needs to Know, by Michael Ruse

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Amid a number of introductions and companions to atheism that have emerged in recent years, Michael Ruse endeavors to synthesize them all in this compact and accessible overview, which straddles the line between mass-market appeal and serious scholarship. This is a difficult task. The book's emphasis on philosophical issues reflects its author's disciplinary perspective, and although very informative, whether it offers "what everyone needs to know" about atheism depends on what you take atheism, and the academic study thereof, to be. As a review of atheism as a philosophical position the book is thorough and engaging, but the lived experience of atheism and its place in modern culture and political life (in other words, atheism from the point of view of the social sciences) do not feature prominently here.

The book is structured in twelve chapters, and while not organized into distinct sections, they cluster into several themes. The first two chapters introduce the major thinkers and ideas that have shaped the development of atheism in the Western context (and therefore in relation to Christianity), focusing on ancient Greek philosophy, the Scientific Revolution, Enlightenment skepticism, Darwinism and debates about science and religion in Victorian England, and the New Atheism. Comments on the 20th century are mostly limited to a very brief discussion of the state atheism of China and Russia. Following this is a brief chapter offering statistics on rates of atheism worldwide and how they have been changing. Though important, it is a bit out of sync with the progression of the chapters that surround it and would have been a good element of a separate section dealing with atheism from the perspective of the social sciences. Ruse then shifts gears with two chapters that outline the contours of the Christian belief system and arguments for the existence of God. The heart of the book is in the following three chapters, which present the philosophical case for atheism. The first of these addresses whether Christianity is compatible with science, examining the religious views of scientists, and various positions on whether the "non-negotiable claims" (p. 110) of Christianity (i.e., its core fundamental beliefs) are proven false by science. The next two chapters tackle the morality of the Bible and the flaws in

theological arguments for God's existence. The remaining four chapters cover an assortment of topics and questions: atheism's relationship to Islam, Buddhism, and Judaism; naturalistic (i.e., Darwinian) explanations of the source and function of religious beliefs; whether religion is evil; and whether a philosophy of atheistic naturalism is compatible with a meaningful life.

Much of the book covers familiar territory, though Ruse peppers the discussion with enough details that one is sure to learn something new. The historical overview in the opening chapters is swift, as must be expected, but aptly identifies many of the intellectual and social developments that led to modern atheism. What could have been given more attention is the role of theology itself in bringing atheism to life. Ruse does briefly discuss the impact of the Reformation, though its importance is arguably understated, as he prefers to focus on the impact of developments in science. Ruse mentions Michael J. Buckley and Gavin Hyman, two major historians of atheism, but he does not grant sufficient attention to their most important insight: that the Church was not fundamentally opposed to the Scientific Revolution (as is commonly argued by militant atheists today), but in fact encouraged it, and theology was shaped to develop a conception of God as an immanent force within nature, with science a tool for discovering God's presence. Buckley and Hyman argue that it was therefore a revolution within theology as much as a revolution in science and philosophy that contributed to the development of atheism, since only an immanent God could possibly be called into question by scientific knowledge.

Most of the book is devoted to detailing philosophical and scientific critiques of Christian theology, which is well done. However, this also points to its weakness: the neglect of the social sciences. The early chapter on statistics could have been more thorough, and it is really only the tip of the iceberg of social-scientific research on atheism. Omitted topics include atheism as the basis of communities and associations, atheism as a political statement (in its strongest and most impactful expressions in the 18th and 19th centuries atheism was closely tied to radical political movements), and atheism as an identity, or a lived experience. The relationship between atheism and the secularization thesis, and social-scientific critiques of religion that focus on its role in social oppression rather than assessing the truth of its beliefs, also deserve more

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attention. In the chapter on naturalistic (i.e., biological/ evolutionary) explanations of the origins and purposes of religion, Ruse addresses some theories derived from the social sciences, focusing mostly on Durkheim. However, this lasts only a few pages because Ruse feels that getting further into these ideas would “sidetrack” the discussion. From my perspective as a sociologist, this sidetrack would have been quite welcome and could easily constitute its own chapter. Others who approach the topic from the perspectives of philosophy, theology, religious studies, and history may appreciate Ruse’s choice of focus.

Atheism: What Everyone Needs to Know is a very good guide for students and general readers who want to learn

about the history and philosophy of atheism. It is designed as an introduction to the topic that can reach interested non-academic readers, who will surely find it enlightening. It could also serve as a useful text for philosophy and religious studies courses. The book could have taken a different approach by focusing more on atheism as an object of social-scientific study, and indeed a similar book that takes this approach would be a welcome addition to the literature, both scholarly and popular. On its own terms, however, it is a success.

Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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