REVIEWS

Varieties of Atheism

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In clear prose and thoughtful argument, Professor Thomas Molnar probes into the attitude of non-belief or atheism. It is not a new phenomenon but has been with us as long as history can record. If religion is as old as mankind, so is atheism. We need not surrender to it as the wave of the future, since its ups and downs can be set out in a historical graph. But that graph also shows atheism to be engaged in dialogue with religion. This shows that religion is not a purely private affair but a participant in reasoned discourse, even when it also expresses personal feeling and commitment. Molnar's approach, therefore, is the double one of dealing with religious issues by reasonable public argumentation and also of moving our affective nature through its discussion.

This book undertakes three tasks: to set forth the kinds of atheism in a general typology; to show that each variety has a continuing history and counterpart in theism; and to advance arguments against each main type of atheism, along with showing how theism similarly modulates its responses of head and heart. It is the typology itself that makes this project manageable within a rather short compass. Molnar distinguishes four primary kinds of atheism: pantheism, materialism, humanism, and ultra-supernaturalism. Around these fundamental varieties are organized the historical representatives and main arguments, along with theistic responsories.

It is instructive that much less space is assigned to the two former positions than to the two latter. There is something rather flat about the pantheistic declaration that the universe is spirit, as well as about the materialistic thesis that the universe is matter. Each view is lacking in nuance and tends to engulf us in its favorite generality, such that "spirit" and "matter" lose sight of reality's articulations. To recover articulate reality, Molnar distinguishes God-as-Creator from even the most exquisitely spiritual caused being and the most complex structure of physical particles.

Two chapters are devoted to humanism, corresponding to its chief subclasses of primitive and radical. The guiding idea of primitive humanism is that man is his own master. This is "primitive," not in any chronological sense (since its representatives reach from Greece to the Renaissance and Enlightenment), but in the sense that self-measuring man is granted too easy a sway over nature and society. Radical humanism avoids this pitfall but gets entangled in the consequences of Hegel's submergence of God and man in Absolute Spirit. Molnar views contemporary atheism as a complex attitude containing three forms of radical humanism, as appropriately thematized.

The first theme is "the need for God." This would seem to be the taproot of theism, but Jung interprets God to be but one image expressive of a human aspiration that takes many religious shapes. The second theme is "the death of God." Nietzsche proclaims that the very need for God is extinguished by modern secular drives and their satisfaction in our thisworldly values. Finally, there is the "anguished humanism"
of Heidegger. He makes man the shepherd of Being, but remains inconclusive about whether God can relate to and manifest himself in our reflections and language. Perhaps Molnar’s most provocative thesis is that the ultra-supernaturalist search for God beyond God is a type of atheism. There has always been an urge of mystics to look beyond the creator God who is the personal revealing God. Deeper in the abyss of divinity is the primal ground or super-essential godhead. Berdyaev speaks of a thesis, a process whereby the godhead fulfills itself in the human soul and the human collectivity. The practical outcome is the divinization of man, a result not so distant from radical humanism.

In his concluding chapter Molnar outlines the sort of dialogue that theists can have with atheists. He correctly identifies the mainspring of atheism as being the problem of evil. It cannot be “resolved” in the sense of dissolving evil in some dream of robot smoothness. “God’s mystery is, thus, not that he allows evil but that he created the world as it is,” with imperfections and opportunities of freedom to overreach others or help their burdens.

This is a book to ponder, both for its thoughtful typological analyses of the varieties of atheism and for its quiet, yet effective, reflections on personal theism in its reasonable and affective dimensions.

The Rupture Between Jaspers and Heidegger


Again the philosophical world is indebted to Professor Paul Arthur Schilpp for this augmented edition of the original work. The format of the whole excellent series, The Library of Living Philosophers, has remained fairly constant and is well known to professional philosophers as well as the general reader: the philosopher to whom the book is dedicated writes a philosophical autobiography, and most are more philosophical than autobiographical, but even that tells us something. Following is a series of articles by well-known scholars, critical, expository, and occasionally even laudatory. These essays are then replied to by the philosopher himself; the purpose, as Schilpp explains it, is to encourage philosophers and their critics to air their agreements and differences before the parties are all dead. All this is most admirable and, more often than not, highly successful, none perhaps more so than the volume under review. The original volume was published in 1957. When Schilpp originally was shown Jaspers’ Philosophical Autobiography it contained a large segment on his personal relationship with Martin Heidegger; but upon reflection Jaspers deleted this segment, asking only that it be published after Heidegger’s death. Jaspers died in 1969, Heidegger in 1976. The way then was now open to restore this passage of some sixteen pages, and a most interesting passage it is.

As it originally occurred in Jaspers’ autobiography, it is highly personal and personal in a way in which Jaspers excels: candid, honest, without a trace of self-justification or recrimination, and it ends remaining “open” to Heidegger, even though Jaspers had no reason to believe Heidegger was open to him.

Jaspers was seven years Heidegger’s senior, and when they first met had already come to public notice with his General Psychopathology and his Psychology of World Views; Heidegger was known only to a small group around Edmund Husserl. This was just after World War I. Both men immediately spotted something in the other which led to lively intellectual interchange; both wanted a radical alteration in philosophy and the way it envisaged itself.

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