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A review of Scott F. Aikin & Robert B. Talisse, *Reasonable Atheism: A Moral Case for Respectful Disbelief*, Prometheus Books, 2011

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Readers and critics often object to the confrontational style of Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins, and the other New Atheists, a style which sometimes descends into rudeness and name-calling. The authors of *Reasonable Atheism*, though, do not hold the New Atheists' style against them: "there are times," they write, "when rudeness is most effective and appropriate" (p. 75). Religion and religious belief are important matters both for individuals and society. If being confrontational and rude works to bring them to people's attention and stimulate discussion, then good for being confrontational and rude.

What bothers Scott F. Aikin and Robert B. Talisse about the New Atheists is their refusal to get on with the hard work of changing minds now that they have shaken the religious out of their complacency. "They fail to engage with the best versions of the views they criticize, electing instead to respond to the especially weak arguments commonly offered in support of religious belief" (p. 79).

Reasonable Atheism advertises itself as a pro-atheism, anti-religion book outside the camp of the New Atheists. The authors say that, unlike Hitchens and the others, they are temperate conversationalists who respect believers and don't think them benighted or stupid. They say their book is addressed to the faithful, and meant to engage them in dialogue, and to demonstrate to them that atheism can be well defended intellectually, morally, and from the point of view of living a life worth living. Though they present arguments against the existence of God and against the soundness of living religiously, Aikin and Talisse claim not to care whether they have disabused the faithful of their faith. They want only, they say, to disabuse them of their narrow and false beliefs about atheism.

Despite the authors' criticisms of the New Atheists, *Reasonable Atheism* is not an alternative to the current line of New Atheist polemic. It's simply a gentler, often better-argued addition to it. If you are looking for a deeply critical account of New Atheism by a non-believer, this isn't it: Terry Eagleton's *Reflections on the God Debate* is still the book for you. *Reasonable Atheism* distinguishes itself merely in the generally high quality of its arguments and their lucid presentation.

Aikin and Talisse mean to combat the low opinion many Americans have of atheists. Religious believers in the States, they say, typically suppose that atheists "must be dishonest, irrational, amoral, untrustworthy, mean, deceitful, delusional, and unintelligent" (p. 10). Since most Americans are believers, these ideas about atheists have serious consequences. For instance, as the authors point out, the state constitutions of Tennessee and Arkansas bar atheists

from holding public office (pp. 68-69).

What lies at the heart of this mistrust of atheists? The authors propose that since the faithful in America believe that moral rules bind us only because they are given by God, they must think atheists are without morality. Religious believers “typically contend that atheism is equivalent to immoralism or nihilism” (p. 95). After all, atheists don’t believe in God, so they cannot believe in anything that has its foundation in God. As individual people, then, atheists must be false, untrustworthy, and unkind. They are good, when they are good, only because they believe being good to be in their personal interest. That is why atheists cannot be trusted with one’s friendship, let alone with public office.

Aikin and Talisse agree with the faithful, and with most of the New Atheists, that morality requires that we conceive of values as existing objectively, independently of our preferences, and that we are capable of being moved to action simply by our beliefs about what is objectively right and wrong. Believers charge that without God, values can be only preferences, and that no imperative could move us to action except that it connects with our preferences. Cruelty, that is, could be wrong only for those disturbed by it; moreover, for those inclined toward it, only another preference (for staying out of jail, for instance) could serve as a reason to refrain.

Aikin and Talisse respond to this charge by arguing that God is both a decidedly poor ground for morality and not the only possible ground. It’s “possible to explain moral goodness without recourse to God”; indeed, “there are *many* objective, binding, and nontheistic accounts of morality” (p.124). Aikin and Talisse sketch three different such accounts: that right and wrong are rooted in pleasure and pain, in the internal coherence of our intentions, and in human flourishing.

Yet the fact that there are many possible non-theistic explanations of morality goes no distance at all toward showing that morality in fact has a non-theistic explanation. The theories Aikin and Talisse describe are “possible” only in the sense that we don’t know which one, if any, is correct. It’s possible that my sock is in the drawer and it’s also possible that it is in the dryer, but only until I discover that it is in the drawer. Then it is not possible it is in the dryer. So, yes: hedonism, deontology, and virtue theory are each possible theories of the ground of morality, but only until I know that God is the true theory.

A religious believer, that is, can admit that atheists think that moral goodness has a non-theistic foundation, and yet hold that since atheists are wrong about what that foundation is, atheists cannot have sound commitments to ethics. Of course, a cynic might respond that really it doesn’t matter what a person believes is the foundation of moral goodness; all that matters to having a strong commitment to ethics is believing that moral goodness has a foundation. That response is no more open to Aikin and Talisse, though, than it is to religious believers or most of the New Atheists, for they all reject the view that morality is an illusion, even if a useful or necessary one.

Aikin and Talisse are much better on the question why God cannot be the ground of morality. They rehearse Plato’s Euthyphro problem, the upshot of which is that if God’s fiat creates good and bad and right and wrong, then morality is a matter of arbitrary preference after all. That it’s a matter of *God’s* arbitrary preference doesn’t make it objective. “If morality depends on God, then all morality is subjective” (p. 110). This result, moreover, has consequences for God’s status as the unique being worthy of worship: if God’s preferences underlie good and bad, then God Himself isn’t good in any sense that would make Him worthy of worship. God would have to be *objectively* good to merit worship.

As well, of course, to be the ground of morality, God would have actually to exist. Aikin and Talisse go quickly but effectively through criticisms of some standard proofs of God's existence, concluding that "a proper assessment of the evidence and arguments favors atheism" (p. 56).

Having criticized arguments both that God exists and that God is necessary for objective morality and our commitment to ethics, and having defended both atheism and the contention that "atheists can adopt the view that there are objective rights and wrongs, and goods and evils" (p. 96), Aikin and Talisse make their most striking claim, that atheists are morally superior to believers.

One argument they give for this claim draws on W.K. Clifford's "The Ethics of Belief." Since religious believers believe something without sufficient reason for believing it (specifically, that God exists), and believing something without sufficient reason is morally wrong, religious believers live immorally. Believing without sufficient reason is morally wrong for beliefs guide actions, beliefs held without sufficient reason are apt to be false, and actions guided by false beliefs put people at risk of harm. This is because actions guided by false beliefs are not only unlikely to realize their aim but likely to have unforeseen consequences—including harmful ones.

In this argument, Aikin and Talisse repeat Clifford's mistake of assuming that any belief at all might be called upon to guide an action. But there are many beliefs a person could have that won't ever change how she pursues her ends. The belief that God understands and loves me is certainly not a belief that will not guide me in anything I attempt to do. Thus, its falsity will not prevent me from succeeding in what I do; therefore, my having that belief puts no one at risk of harm.

Aikin and Talisse contend in a second argument for the claim that atheism is morally superior to theism that "religious belief tends to dampen one's moral response" (p. 127). Since they believe that God is omnipotent and omniscient as well as perfectly good, the faithful must believe that everything that happens, happens for a good reason. This must make them accepting of or indifferent to the world's evils. As Aikin and Talisse put it, "According to the theodicies we examined, the world is just fine as it is; everything is as it should be, morally speaking. Hence, there's no need for anyone to strive for change. The result of theodicy, therefore, is *moral quietism*..." (p. 142).

This argument implies something empirically false. Plenty of religious believers take the world's ills very seriously, and religious organizations are often at the forefront of relief and charitable efforts. If religious believers do take the world's ills seriously, something must be wrong with Aikin and Talisse's argument.

The third and final argument Aikin and Talisse present for the moral superiority of atheism is that religious belief requires worship but worship is an ignoble attitude for any person to take toward anything. I find this to be the most interesting argument of the book.

Aikin and Talisse first tell us that worship is ignoble for "None of the properties that theism attributes to God amount to reasons to worship him" (p. 154). None of omnipotence, omniscience, and perfect goodness merits worship, as distinct from love or gratitude or admiration.

The reason no attribute of God makes worshiping God appropriate is that worship requires submission, absolute submission, which in turn requires denying the importance of one's own flourishing, and coming to flourish through one's own actions. To worship is at least to be slavish, for "once we submit to God, we must abdicate our capacity for independent moral

judgement” (p. 151). Worship might also be debilitating, for if we are psychologically unable to deny to ourselves the importance of our flourishing, we will experience a riven consciousness of our nature and our values, a mind split between God and ourselves.

Unfortunately, despite the importance of this argument, Aikin and Talisse leave too many objections unconsidered for their presentation of it to be successful. Central among these objections is that God’s meriting our worship, contrary to Aikin and Talisse, does not imply His entitlement to it. While we may give Him our worship in love, He may not claim it as His right; in giving Him our worship freely, we are not acting slavishly or debasing ourselves. They also miss the objection that the suggestion that believers will experience worship as debilitating flies in the face of evidence that believers are often happy and accomplished.

Reasonable Atheism set itself the task of demonstrating to theists that atheists can be morally serious and committed to ethics. Most of the New Atheists, as Aikin and Talisse acknowledge, accept that seriousness and commitment require both that values be objective and that we believe that they are. The New Atheists, though, Aikin and Talisse maintain, reduce morality to something else, to naturally-selected urges toward kindness or to solving co-operation problems. And so “the New Atheists have thrown the baby out with the bathwater. They have affirmed [despite themselves] that once belief in God is rejected, the world must become morally strange” (p. 90).

Aikin and Talisse do a fine job explaining the incompatibility of objective morality with religious belief. They do no better than the New Atheists, though, in explaining and defending the objectivity of ethics and value. Theist, New Atheist, or reasonable atheist—none, it seems, has a good account of objective moral goodness.

Given this predicament, perhaps it’s time to revisit the “old atheists” of the 19th and 20th centuries, many of whom held a disdain for both God and objective morality.

Sure, one can be an atheist and also believe that values exist objectively and, moreover, that it’s objectively important that we get them right and hold ourselves to them. By why should an atheist believe this? If a person is going to give up God, why shouldn’t she also give up objective morality?

Lots of atheists have had use for neither. Nietzsche was keen to laugh at anyone who sought to put anything else in the place of God, anything else to worship and to abase herself before. Bertrand Russell likewise saw that objective morality was just another idol people have created so that they might have something to submit to. He spoke against both religion and the idea that values are objective in such popular articles as “Has Religion Made Useful Contributions to Civilization?” and “Can Religion Cure Our Troubles?”

“I will love my neighbour because my creator requires it.” “I will love my neighbour because objective morality requires it.” What’s the difference?