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## Eric Reitan, IS GOD A DELUSION? A REPLY TO RELIGION'S CULTURED DESPISERS

Jacqueline Mariña

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of you is to return his love, which means becoming a person with certain very particular (largely liturgical) habits. That is no doubt too extreme as a formulation. It may nevertheless serve to point out the difficulty here. Does Hedley's version of Christianity really mean that we should forget about the virtues? If not, why not?

And on the third and final difficulty, about kinds of image. Hold in your mind's eye a high-sublime image like almost any painting by Caspar David Friedrich (a painter of whom Hedley approves). Contemplate it for a while. You'll feel the shiver: the wild gorges, the setting suns, the small human figures in a vast natural background, the crags, the ruins (think of Wordsworth's "Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey," then as now a ruin, as you contemplate). Now contemplate your favorite icon, perhaps Rublev's Trinity, or even El Greco's early Byzantine work. These are static, ordered, beautiful. Contemplating them gives rise to no frisson, no prickling of the neck-hair. Their saturated beauty serves instead to assimilate those who contemplate them to the Lord in whom they participate. They are sacramental and therefore beautiful, not sublime. Now, the point of such a thought-experiment (an experiment in vision) is not to argue the superiority of one over another. It is rather to suggest that the Christian tradition contains a long, pre-Romantic tradition of thought and argument (not to mention violent and bloody disagreement, as between the iconoclasts and their opponents) about the image and the human possibility of response to it, a tradition very largely absent from Hedley's book. Its presence shows that use of and response to the image comes in many kinds, and that the kind so elegantly addressed and argued for by Hedley in this book is only one of them.

Hedley's is a brilliant and beautiful book. I think most of its conclusions wrong, but I have nothing but admiration for his achievement in writing it, and have been greatly instructed by reading it.

*Is God a Delusion? A Reply to Religion's Cultured Despisers*, by Eric Reitan. Walden, MA: Riley-Blackwell, 2009. Pp. 256. \$89.95 (hardcover); \$24.95 (paperback).

JACQUELINE MARINÁ, Purdue University

The main purpose of this book is to refute claims of New Atheists such as Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, and Sam Harris. While the book is successful in showing that the New Atheists have only the most superficial understanding of what religion is really about, this is not what is most valuable in it, or even its main point. Most relevant about this book is the vision of authentic religion it presents, as well as the discussion it provides of why morally committed rational agents might choose to believe in God. Reitan shows that the only argumentative force behind the claims of the New Atheists is based on a fundamental equivocation. They

claim *all* religious commitments are extremely dangerous, based on delusions having no rational foundation. Reitan convincingly shows that these authors focus only on what really amounts to corrupt varieties of religion, ignoring or explaining away all examples of religion's more benign forms.

The book is roughly divided into two parts, corresponding to its two principle aims. These are, first, a sketch of his vision of genuine religion (contrasted with its corrupt forms) and second, an account of the grounds for belief of morally committed rational agents. Chapters 1 through 4 provide an account of authentic religion and the significance it can have in a believer's life. Chapter 1, "On Religion and Equivocation," convincingly demonstrates that the view of religion put forward by the New Atheists is narrow and unsatisfactory: for them, only religion in its most degenerate and pernicious form counts as religion. Chapter 2, "The God Hypothesis," continues the project of the first chapter through an extended discussion of the concept of God. Reitan examines New Atheist conceptions of God and compares them with the idea of God developed in traditional theism. Two things stand out in this chapter: first, Reitan points out that the New Atheists leave goodness out of their account of God; second, Reitan briefly discusses non-substantive definitions of the word "God," which do not provide a list of attributes through which to define God. Important here is Reitan's invocation of Schleiermacher's understanding of God as the correlate of the feeling of absolute dependence, the "whence of our active and receptive existence." This is an *ostensive* definition tied to religious experience. Reitan does not, however, provide a satisfactory account of how this ostensive definition hooks up with his account of the attribute of God's goodness. How is this understanding of God's goodness supposed to work in tandem with his understanding of God as the correlate of the feeling of absolute dependence? He gestures towards Schleiermacher's fundamental understanding of God in terms of love and wisdom, but a strict account of *why* the correlate of the feeling of absolute dependence must be understood in these terms is missing.

Here Reitan introduces one of the most significant and well-developed themes of the book: the importance of the idea of God's goodness to authentic religion. The fundamental issue at stake in the choice between a materialistic view of the world and a religious one is that of the good. If we choose to understand the world as mindless matter in motion, then the world is indifferent to the good itself: human consciousness is simply an insignificant epiphenomenon of atoms blindly colliding with one another, destined to the final annihilation awaiting all living things. Authentic religion provides a different vision, one providing a warrant for the ethico-religious hope that behind the indifference of what appears in the empirical world there is an Ultimate Reality that not only grounds and sustains everything that is, but that ultimately guarantees that the universe is on the side of the good. The third chapter, "Divine Tyranny and the Goodness of God," develops the idea of what it means to say that God is good, in part through a contrast with notions of God portraying God as a tyrant, to be worshipped out of

fear and the longing to put oneself on the side of ultimate power. Along with Schleiermacher and Plutarch, Reitan argues that such a god is no god at all, but the object of idolatry and superstition. If God is to be worthy of worship we must envision God as *good*. The goodness of God is the gold standard against which religious claims must be evaluated. This means that concepts of God found in various types of fundamentalisms, in which the wrath of God is ready to be rained on any one that does not believe in a certain way, are fundamentally deficient.

Chapter 4, "Science, Transcendence, and Meaning," tackles the evidentialist challenge initially put forward by Russell and echoed by Dawkins: the God-hypothesis is equivalent to the hypothesis that there is a teapot in the sky so infinitesimally small that it cannot, in principle, be detected by any instrument. But why believe in something that cannot make any empirical difference, and for which, in principle, there can be no evidence? According to Russell and Dawkins, such belief is irrational. Closely related to this issue is the question posed by Flew regarding the meaningfulness of assertions that are, in principle, neither verifiable nor falsifiable. If a claim is to be meaningful, its being true must make some difference. How then, do religious claims have meaning? Reitan points to the transcendence of God: because God is not a thing among things, we should not expect to find the sorts of evidential traces left by *things* in order to ground our belief in God. That would be a category mistake: God, as the ground of all things, cannot be discovered in such a fashion. This does not leave belief in the existence of God without meaning, however, for belief in God has moral and existential import for how we view and react to the world. Just as the world of the happy individual is different from that of the unhappy individual, the world of the person confident in the hope that the universe is ultimately *for* the good is different from that of the person who thinks that the universe is pitilessly indifferent to it. In some sense they see the same facts, but how they connect them and interpret them, and consequently how they react to them, will be different.

The next four chapters examine rational grounds for belief in God's existence. In laying out these grounds, Reitan's goal is not to provide arguments conclusively proving the existence of God. Rather, he agrees with John Hick that the evidence the world presents is ambiguous as to God's existence. This is not to say, however, that there is no rational basis for religious belief. In chapter 5, Reitan discusses different versions of the argument from design, including the fine-tuning argument, and makes the case that such arguments fail. He is much more optimistic about the cosmological argument, however, which he discusses in chapter 6. He concludes that if we accept the principle of sufficient reason, we must infer a transcendent cause. He then identifies this transcendent cause with God (138). This is by far the weakest part of the book. That he does not engage Kant's devastating critique of the cosmological argument is a major drawback: Kant argued that even if we were to concede that we must posit a necessary being, it is impossible to show that such a necessary being is not

finite and that it is convertible with the most perfect being. How then can such a ground be identified with the God of traditional theism?

Chapter 7, "Religious Consciousness," answers the New Atheist charge that religious experiences are either as reliable as hallucinations (Dawkins) or merely an experience of the dissolution of the illusory self (Harris). Reitan uses William James's characterization of mystical experience, especially its ineffable character, to argue that this ineffability is just what one would expect if one were to experience a *transcendent* and *fundamental* ground of reality. He then presents a brief discussion of Schleiermacher's account of the feeling of absolute dependence, implying that it can help us to understand the mystical experience of someone like Simone Weil. The chapter covers a great deal of material, but it moves too quickly, skirting over too many important issues. For instance, Reitan simply sides with Walter Stace, affirming that the mystical experience is the same across cultures, and that only the interpretive lens through which it is understood is different (a controversial issue). Assuming for the sake of argument that he is correct, if the experience can be interpreted in myriad ways, it *need not* be understood theistically. It may very well be the case that pantheistic or monistic interpretations of mysticism are correct; under such an understanding the self *as distinct* is an illusion. Reitan knows this, but he later argues that although direct experience of a unitary self is impossible, we must posit such a self as that which unifies experience. But there are important arguments against the validity of concluding that there is a substantial self on the basis of the unity of experience, a notable one being Kant's paralogisms. Reitan seems to be unaware of these, and too quickly uses his argument to justify his claim that theistic mysticism, with its positing of a distinct self, is the highest stage of mysticism (158–159). His discussion of Schleiermacher is plagued by some of the same issues. For instance, he does not touch upon whether, and in what sense, Schleiermacher was a theist, especially given the metaphysical picture presented by him in *On Religion*. Schleiermacher's early work offers a pantheistic metaphysics.

Some of the most persuasive points in the book are developed in chapter 8, "The Substance of Things Hoped for." Here belief in God is presented as providing a warrant for the ethical hope that behind the seeming pitiless indifference of the empirical world, there is a transcendent ground guaranteeing not only that all will, finally, be well, but that even the most horrible suffering endured in this life ultimately has some meaning and will be redeemed by God (this is the upshot of chapter 9, "Evil and the Meaning of Life"). Genuine faith is a choice to live *as if* there is a God, in trust and hope. It should not make claims to absolute knowledge. However, contra the New Atheists, Reitan shows that genuine faith is not blind, but is firmly rooted in, and guided by, ethical commitments. As such, it can ground moral judgments critical of human proclivities to claim absolute status for what is only finite and historically conditioned. In the last chapter, "The Root of all Evil?," Reitan argues that evil does not spring from religion, but that religion *can* be poisoned by the human tendency to

want to divide the world into in groups and out groups. He suggests that such tendencies can only be overcome through the spiritual sustenance that genuine religion can provide.

At times Reitan claims that theism is the best guarantor of the ethico-religious hope (51); at others he affirms that "more than one world view" can satisfy it (185). Throughout the book he does not always stick to his more modest claim, and sometimes argues as if his arguments for theism are more decisive than they are. Moreover, connections between the three principle reasons for belief he provides, the cosmological argument, the argument from religious experience, and the argument from ethical hope, are not explored in depth. The author does succeed in showing that attacks on faith by the New Atheists are based on both a very superficial understanding of religion and a failure to recognize that there are, indeed, rational grounds for faith. Moreover, Reitan does a refreshing job sketching what such a rational faith, based on a moral commitment to the good, looks like.

*A Metaphysics for the Mob: The Philosophy of George Berkeley*, by John Russell Roberts. Oxford University Press, 2007. Pp. xxii + 172. \$55.00 (hardcover).

DALE JACQUETTE, University of Bern, Switzerland

A book, not as I had hoped, about ontology and organized crime; rather, John Russell Roberts's study of George Berkeley's eliminative immaterialism, takes its title from Berkeley's *Philosophical Commentaries*, I §405: "All things in the Scripture which side with the Vulgar against the Learned side with me also. I side in all things with the Mob."

It is a puzzling statement. One, indeed, that has perplexed even those critics sympathetic to Berkeley's empiricism, if not to his project as a whole, expressing his rejection of a non-thinking substratum of *sensibilia* and mind-independent things existing "without the mind." Roberts proposes to explain the commonsense nature of Berkeley's philosophy, and in the process tackles many other related topics in the background of Berkeley's thought and in contemporary discussions of Berkeley and the problems with which he was engaged.

In the first half of the book, Roberts offers historical background to Berkeley's immaterialism. In the second half, he applies the exposition of Berkeley's ideas presented in the first part to an interesting choice of historical and contemporary philosophical problems, including links to an extended form of Daniel C. Dennett's concept of the intentional stance, the thorny issue of Berkeley's relation to Malebranche's occasionalism as a solution to the causal interaction problem for Cartesian substance dualism, and Wilfrid Sellars's distinction between the manifest and scientific images. Woven through this development of interrelated topics is Roberts's motivation to extrapolate Berkeley's positive doctrine of spirit, an important