\* Forthcoming in *Reading Religion* (<http://readingreligion.org/books/atheism-and-agnosticism>)

Review of: Graham Oppy. 2018. *Atheism and Agnosticism*. Cambridge University Press.

Graham Oppy’s *Atheism and Agnosticism* is part of the Cambridge Elements series. That means that it is shorter than a standard book, in this case the printed version includes only 63 pages excluding references, and it introduces a specific topic by a specialist on that topic, in this case, atheism and agnosticism. There are no footnotes, and each section helpfully ends with a list of recommendations for further reading. The element has four sections. In the first, the terms atheism, theism and agnosticism are clearly defined. The second section sets up a framework for assessing the views. The third section sketches an argument for atheism and the fourth section sketches an argument for agnosticism.

The element is clear and brief and provides a useful introduction to the topic. Oppy’s style is analytic, meaning that there’s an emphasis on precision and logical coherence. At times I found the writing dense, and some concepts are insufficiently explained. (Examples of concepts that aren’t explained are *robustness* of beliefs (§1.4), *natural*, *physical* and *material* causal entities and properties (§1.9 and §3.1), and *fruitfulness*, *beauty* and *explanatory breadth and depth* of explanations (§2.4)). I would definitely recommend this element to readers with some background in and attraction to analytic philosophy. I predict that some beginners might have trouble understanding some of the details, but most of the book should be accessible and useful to them as well.

I will restrict myself to four short remarks on the content, two positive remarks and then two negative remarks. (1) The first section clearly pulls apart the strict meanings of atheism, theism and agnosticism, from unnecessary baggage that is often associated with them in popular discourse. For instance, atheism does not imply moral nihilism, nor is it a religion. Similarly, agnostics are not atheists who are afraid to endorse their atheism, nor does agnosticism imply skepticism about anything unrelated to gods. At the end of this section there is a list of quotes illustrating a number of common confusions. I found this is especially helpful.

(2) In assessing the views, an interesting feature of Oppy’s arguments is that theism and atheism are assessed as parts of big pictures. By big pictures Oppy means detailed views about all that exists, not just about gods. Often it is thought that we can just assess theism and atheism independently. For example, if we just consider the question of whether gods exist, the view that no god exists is obviously more parsimonious, that is, it assumes less about the world, and that’s an advantage. Oppy, however, believes that theism and atheism must be assessed as parts of big pictures. Once we consider the big pictures, it may be that atheists end up having to compensate for the lack of gods by positing even more beings than some theists. For example, some atheists believe that in order to explain the fine-tuning of our universe, we should believe that ours is only one out of multiple universes that exist. If we compare the view that there is a single universe with a single god with the view that there is no god but many universes, it is actually the latter that posits more things than the former.

(3) Oppy defines agnostics as those who have given thought to the matter and suspend judgment on whether any god exists (§1.1). This seems plausible. However, how should agnosticism be analyzed in terms of credences (= degrees of belief that can be modeled on a scale of 0=certainly false to 1=certainly true)? Oppy claims that if we have credences, then *agnostics* are “those who assign a credence of precisely 50% to the claim that there are no gods”, *theists* are anybody even slightly more confident that a god exists than not, and *atheists* are anybody even slightly more confident that no god exists than that at least one god exists (§1.4). There are problems with this analysis. One implication is that if people were scattered randomly in their credences towards theism then we shouldn’t expect anybody to be agnostic. That is because agnostics only occupy a single point (50%) while atheists and theists divide between them the whole region excluding that point. Furthermore, someone who is ever so slightly more convinced of atheism than theism, say one whose level of confidence that a god exists is 49.9999999%, counts as an atheist. Moreover, as many doubts about gods as Oppy might raise in section 4, it is implausible to think of those as reasons to occupy only the very specific point of 50%. For these reasons, it would have been better to either stick with the less formal definition of agnostics as those who have given thought to the matter and suspend judgment, or define agnostics vaguely as those who are *near* 0.5, but need not occupy that precise point.

(4) Oppy argues that the view that talk about gods is meaningless, is self-defeating. His argument relies on the premise: “It must be that in order for ‘it is meaningless to say that there are gods’ to be meaningful, ‘there are gods’ is meaningful” (§1.11). This is implausible. Take any expression that you think is genuinely meaningless, such as “there are stringtons hammocked”. It isn’t meaningless to say “it is meaningless to say that there are stringtons hammocked”. (Perhaps quotation marks should be added to single out the meaningless phrase, but that can be said for the claim about god talk as well).

In sum, this element is a concise presentation of atheism and agnosticism from one of the leading authors on these topics, recommended for anybody who is interested in these topics and appreciates clear definitions and precise arguments.

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