

Believing in Dawkins: The New Spiritual Atheism. By Eric Steinhart. Springer/Palgrave, 2020.
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For philosophers, reading Richard Dawkins is often a frustrating experience. Many of Dawkins' writings treat important philosophical topics, such as the existence of God, the meaning of life, the relationship of randomness to order. Dawkins has original ideas, but he lacks the philosophical training and vocabulary to articulate these ideas properly and to develop them coherently. In *Believing in Dawkins*, Eric Steinhart sets himself an ambitious task: to use the writings of Dawkins to present a coherent, naturalistic alternative to religious metaphysics, specifically to Christian theism. Using an architectural metaphor, he summarizes the project of *Believing in Dawkins* as follows

It is helpful to think of the Dawkinsian texts in architectural terms. His fragmentary sketches for spiritual naturalism are like architectural drawings. Sometimes they depict little windows, while other times they portray enormous spires reaching towards the stars. The edifice is vast. But these architectural diagrams are often unclear, incomplete, and inconsistent. I want to clarify them, fill in their missing parts, and resolve their conflicts. So I'm using his writings to construct a novel building. ... To fit his fragmentary plans into a

coherent and self-supporting structure, I will add some large-scale frameworks (10).

Steinhart's wide-ranging book covers many topics: complexity, ontology, possibility, humanity, spirituality, among many others. He does not sneak theism into Dawkins' writings. In fact, Steinhart argues that many practices and ideas that he uses to construct the edifice of Dawkins' spiritual naturalism have been hijacked by theism, such as the notion of an afterlife, sacredness, holiness, and even the notion of gratitude.

As Steinhart correctly and often points out, to be able to formulate a coherent metaphysical picture of naturalism that allows for atheist spirituality, one needs to go *beyond* Dawkins or, as he puts it, one has to build on Dawkins: "Given the Dawkinsian fragments and foundations, I prefer to think of myself as building a *sanctuary*. It is a sacred place, filled with joy and light. It is a spiritual refuge, a gleaming city" (10). Theists are welcome at this sanctuary for spiritual naturalism, as long as they leave their theism behind at the door. He likens himself to an architect trying to finish Gaudi's Sagrada Familia, using sketchy directions of the original designer.

Steinhart delivers on this vision of a gleaming city for spiritual atheists. He outlines a vision of spiritual naturalism that is based on key Dawkinsian ideas, such as the importance of replicators, the way complexity increases in a universe without designers, the role of an objective ethics, how to conceive of the good without God. To be able to build this gleaming city, though, Steinhart has to draw on some sophisticated ancient metaphysical assumptions. From Stoicism, he takes many ideas including the concept of *arete* or excellence. Dawkins shares with the Stoics the idea that nature is rational, undergirded with rational principles. Steinhart builds on Dawkins by updating the idea of the *Logos*, an ordering principle of nature, by adding some Dawkinsian

ideas. These include universal selection, which not only creates biological, but also cultural entities. The second metaphysical framework Steinhart employs is (Neo)Platonism. Like the Platonists, Dawkins affirms that abstract mathematical structures exist, and he frequently talks about the space of possible organisms as real things. Thirdly, Steinhart harkens back to the Nietzschean notion of *amor fati*, the notion of loving your fate, for good or for ill.

Throughout Steinhart's discussions of Dawkinsian spiritual naturalism, we can find notions ordinarily associated (or at least associated currently) with theism, such as holiness, goodness, sacredness, and ecstasy updated and reframed in an atheistic context. For example, *ekstasis* means literally (in Greek) to "stand outside." In Steinhart's conceptualization, ecstasy occurs when part of the universe mirrors the whole. Self-modeling is the ecstasy of the universe, and so, when we model the universe, as creatures who perceive, and as scientists who try to model the universe, the universe is in ecstasy (54). This is an attractive spiritual vision.

Steinhart also updates several theistic arguments in naturalistic context. There is a naturalized organic design argument, cosmological arguments, an ontological argument, and there is an atheistic equivalent to theodicy, a response to Yujin Nagasawa's question of how an atheist can be optimistic or hopeful in the bleak world she inhabits.

One of the most appealing and interesting ideas in the book is the formulation of an atheistic optimism. Optimism becomes possible if one abandons a utilitarian notion of equating the good with pleasure or even happiness. Steinhart draws on the Stoics, who were not utilitarians. They did not think you could equate happiness with good and misery with evil, though they personally preferred happiness to misery. Rather, the Stoics saw excellence (*arete*) as revealed most in struggle—a virtuous life is one characterized by striving for virtue in the face of struggle, and a virtuous life is a beautiful life. Updated in Dawkinsian terms, the Logos is the

rational self-ordering of nature. Through universal Darwinian principles, the Logos maximizes the “dramatic intensity of biological competition” (97). In the struggle (*agon*) for existence, arete is maximized.

Steinhart demonstrates that Stoicism and Platonism, paired with pagan rituals and spirituality (as discussed in the final chapter) offer a marvelous vision for the naturalist, a vision that affords beauty, meaning, objective morality, excellence, teleology. But it also reveals sharply how much extra work needs to be done to build on Dawkins. To give just one example, Dawkins mocks the ontological argument (as well as other theistic arguments) in his book *The God Delusion*. But, as Steinhart writes “the correct atheistic response [to this argument] is analysis and counterargument, not mockery and ad hominem attacks” (p. 192). To counter the ontological argument, Steinhart invokes the Platonic One, and he notes that he is building on Dawkins and extending far beyond Dawkins’ original writings, “I do not say that Dawkins is a Platonist” (p. 204).

These remarks reveal both the main strength and what I take to be the main weakness of the book. The strength of this book is that it offers a serious, thoughtful, atheistic spiritual naturalism. But the book purports to build on Dawkins, and even to “believe in Dawkins” (e.g., “Believing in Dawkins means providing some independent evidence that abstract objects exist” [204]). But, as Steinhart frequently points out, Dawkins frequently contradicts himself, and he does not provide sufficient grounding for his claims. He uses mockery rather than argument to rebut theists. Steinhart realizes this. Moreover, in some places in the book, for instance where Steinhart talks about the Platonic good, he writes, “You may object that we are very far from Dawkins now” (p. 217). Indeed!

In chapter 8 (“Humanity”), Steinhart works like a patient theologian who tries to assemble and make sense of disparate parts of scripture into a coherent whole. He tries to make sense of Dawkins’ disparate writings to present a coherent vision of humanity in line with spiritual naturalism. The introduction of free will compatibilism, ethical naturalism, and natural duties lead us far beyond Dawkins. I wonder why Dawkins is needed at all to unify this vision, which can stand on its own. To take an analogy, it is possible to write a political philosophy that is coherent with the deeds of Charlemagne, but such a project is probably not worthwhile. So, we need a sense of when it is worthwhile to try to cash out and philosophically develop the ideas by a non-philosopher. While we have many writings by Dawkins, and there is something evocative there to be sure, I am not entirely convinced that Steinhart would not have been better off outlining his own theory, perhaps supported by a wider range of naturalistic authors.

Chapter 9 outlines, in a tentative manner, some ways in which a Dawkins-inspired spiritual naturalism can enrich religious practices too. Steinhart here goes far beyond Dawkins, who is a cultural Christian and enjoys Christian (Church of England) rituals. By contrast, Steinhart is not content with singing Christian hymns and so he offers serious alternatives for the non-theist to achieve mystical experience, including ecstasy in rave dances, communion and fellowship in Burning Man, and self-knowledge and equanimity with Stoic mental exercises.

In spite of my reservations with using Dawkins as a starting point for the naturalistic edifice that Steinhart constructed, my overall assessment is that this is an excellent, thought-provoking book. It is my hope that this book can contribute to a conversation in philosophy of religion that goes beyond rehearsing arguments about the rationality of theism. While such discussions are valuable, we can enrich philosophy of religion by looking at a wider range of religious metaphysical views, and I think Steinhart does an excellent job of outlining a coherent

vision of spiritual naturalism. This is a vision that is emphatically not nihilistic or hopeless, that sees beauty in the struggle of natural selection, and meaning in the fact that we are organisms try to make sense of the universe we inhabit. There is a lot of material here for discussion on the metaphysics and ethics of spiritual naturalism.

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