
(appears in *The Philosopher’s Magazine*, Vol. 55, 4th quarter 2011)

Michael Antony
University of Haifa

*Reasonable Atheism* is aimed primarily at religious believers who think that “atheists must be dishonest, irrational, amoral, untrustworthy, mean, deceitful, delusional, and unintelligent.” Although there’s little doubt that millions of believers do view atheists in this way, it’s safe to say that this is a philosophically unsophisticated bunch. Authors Scott Aikin and Robert Talisse wish to show that such believers have “false beliefs about atheists”, and should view atheists “in roughly the same way they regard those who subscribe to religious faiths different from their own” – namely, as reasonable and moral people with false beliefs about reality. This is how the authors view thoughtful religious believers.

Believers who think that atheists, no less than theists, can be moral, trustworthy, intelligent, and so on – and there are many such believers as well – are thus unlikely to feel that their views are being directly addressed throughout much of the book. The same will hold for most atheists and agnostics. But there’s enough in *Reasonable Atheism* to make it a worthwhile read for all three groups.

One of the book’s central themes is that a proper concern for our beliefs – caring that they be true – requires that we intellectually engage in a respectful manner with people with whom we disagree. Pursuing truth demands that we subject our views to criticism, and attempt to understand where our opponents (or we) have erred when we fail to persuade. This presupposes that we treat our critics as generally reasonable people (otherwise what value would their criticisms hold?), and accord them the respect that such reasonableness warrants. This important discussion is aimed at persuading the book’s primary intended readership – believers unsympathetic to atheists, essentially – to view atheists more charitably. But it’s also directed at the New Atheists and their followers (given their oft-adopted confrontational, schoolyardish stance), and indeed at anyone concerned with the debates on religion.

Aikin’s and Talisse’s book is chock full of arguments. There are two against unsophisticated versions of the cosmological and teleological arguments, which is excusable if the authors are right that these versions are popular with their target theist audience. There’s a useful critique of the New Atheists’ appalling treatments of the ontological argument, and a less-than-impressive attempt to construct an ontological argument against theism. The authors’ discussion of evil, while admittedly inconclusive, illustrates well the enormous challenge this problem presents for the theist. Their discussion of the Euthyphro dilemma, however, wholly ignores a standard way of navigating through the horns of the dilemma by locating goodness in God’s nature rather than outside of God. The book contains many other discussions, several interesting, centred on the concepts of worship, hell, religion and politics, among others. Even if
these fail to convince, they will challenge the book’s intended readership, and help show that atheists can be reasonable, intelligent, moral, respectable individuals.

But there’s an odd tension running through *Reasonable Atheism*. The authors repeatedly claim that their aim is not to present a case either against religious belief or for atheism. Rather, they “aspire to demonstrate that atheism is a reasonable position, a view that religious believers must recognize as one option that sincere, intelligent, and honest people could adopt after a competent and thorough examination of the evidence and arguments.” Given the numerous arguments in their book, however, this will come across, even to those untrained in philosophy, a bit like an artist who insists that her aim isn’t to make a painting but rather to demonstrate her artistic talent, which she proceeds to do by making a painting. *Of course* the authors are making a case in their book against theism and for atheism, even if it is not, as they say, their “full case”. After all, it is only by presenting a case for a view that one can hope to make such a view appear reasonable to someone who doesn’t hold it.

It may be that the authors get themselves into this minor muddle because they insufficiently appreciate how difficult it is to make sense of mutually recognised reasonable disagreement. The authors appear to believe – and with this I sympathise – that it must be possible somehow for participants in a debate to view each other, not only as reasonable people, but as reasonably holding their opposing views. In recent years, however, epistemologists have found it exceedingly difficult to show how this can be possible. I won’t suggest anything here, other than to say that the answer can’t involve participants in disputes claiming that they aren’t trying to argue for their views.

Philosophically unsophisticated believers who see atheists as irrational and amoral are unlikely to be disturbed by this issue, even if they have some vague awareness of it. Mainly, the book’s arguments will challenge their worldview, and illustrate the manner of respectful debate the authors are urging us to engage in.