

**Oppy, Graham, *Atheism and Agnosticism*
(*Elements in the Philosophy of Religion*),
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018, 72p**

In recent years, the phenomena of atheism and agnosticism have become more common in the Western culture. While there has been a rise in the phenomenon itself, there has also been an outgrowth in the misunderstandings of what these terms really mean. In this specific sense, I believe Graham Oppy has done a splendid job in *Atheism and Agnosticism* suggesting clearly where to draw the line between atheism, agnosticism and theism. Thus, he states the meaning of all three positions very clearly.

The first position that Oppy defines is the atheist position. He states that atheists “believe that there are no gods. Hence, in suitable circumstances, atheists affirm that there are no gods and endorse the claim that there are no gods”.¹ One should notice that the way in which Oppy is employing the terms is the way in which many philosophers of religion have understood the term for many years, i.e., he provides a *positive* or *affirmative* definition of the word. Therefore, an atheist is not a person who does not believe that God exists (especially because that could be taken to mean that a person withholds belief in God); rather, an atheist is a person who explicitly affirms the non-existence of God (and for this matter, of gods in general).²

The second position that he defines is that of agnosticism. He states that agnostics “suspend judgement on the claim that there are no gods. Agnostics neither believe that there are gods, nor do they believe that there are no gods, despite having given consideration to the question whether there are gods”.³ Here, Oppy makes what I think to be a very pertinent distinction. He establishes a difference between those who have given real thought to the question

¹ OPPY, G., *Atheism and Agnosticism (Elements in the Philosophy of Religion)*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 4.

² While Oppy used the term “gods” for talking about atheism in general. I will be using the word “God” throughout this writing given that 1) according to Oppy an atheist affirms the non-existence of all gods, whether it is one or 10, 000 million, and 2) I will be analyzing Oppy’s work from the perspective of a Judeo-Christian worldview or big picture.

³ OPPY, G., *Atheism and Agnosticism...*, p. 4.

of God's existence and have decided to suspend judgment, and those who are "innocent". Innocents neither believe in the existence of God nor do they believe in the non-existence of God nor have they considered the issue carefully. In this sense, one would not call, for example, babies atheists, agnostics or theists. Finally, theists are those who believe that there is at least one god. Each of the positions sketched can be held in different degrees and with different attitudes. In this sense, he makes sure to generate some comprehensive enough definitions.

After having established these preliminary remarks on the topic, Oppy goes on to show that that there are other positions such as naturalism, skepticism, etc. that –while usually related– are not entailed by atheism or agnosticism. He states that "Merely being an atheist or an agnostic commits one to very little. There are many different substantive positions that entail commitment to atheism or agnosticism; it is these different substantive positions that are of primary interest in further discussion of the merits of atheism and agnosticism".⁴ In this sense, he leaves aside discussion on the merits of non-naturalist atheism and agnosticism, and seems to focus on the merits of naturalistic positions. For this reason, the following discussion will likewise focus on the scheme and methodology that have been postulated by him.

In the second section, he sketches the theoretical background knowledge as well as part of the methodology necessary to be presupposed in order to thoroughly analyze the main aspects of the issue surrounding atheism and agnosticism. Thus, he discusses what he calls "Big Pictures".⁵ A big picture or a worldview is essentially a way to view the most elemental aspects of the world. Oppy explains that a worldview is revisable and incomplete. There are constant changes that can take place within one's worldview. In this sense, he explains that big pictures or worldviews, which include atheism, agnosticism, and theism, need to account for the relevant evidence in the world in order to be regarded as plausible explanation. Therefore, for Oppy, the big picture that has more explanatory power with regards to the facts in the world should be considered to be the right one or, at least, the most plausible one, given that our knowledge will always be limited. He gives two criteria to evaluate big pictures; Oppy states, "So long as we are confident that (a) we have all of the relevant considerations in view, and (b) we have appraised those considerations correctly, we can be confident in our judgement about what best big pictures will say or entail concerning the matter at hand." Later on, he establishes a series of epistemic virtues that a worldview should possess. He says that scientific theories happen to resemble some of the virtues that one should look for when analyzing scientific data: "(1) internal

⁴ OPPY, G., *Atheism and Agnosticism...*, p. 21.

⁵ OPPY, G., *Atheism and Agnosticism...*, p. 22.

virtues: e.g. consistency of theory and consistency with data; (2) utility: e.g. fruitfulness, applicability, and predictive power; (3) minimisation of theoretical commitments: e.g. simplicity, beauty, and unity; and (4) maximisation of explanatory breadth and depth: e.g. width of cosmological role and fit with well-established science").⁶

At this point, I would like to make a few elementary remarks, regarding the place of big pictures as far as philosophical analysis is concerned. Oppy claims that "[a]theism is characterised by the claim that there are no gods; agnosticism is characterised by its commitment to **nothing more** than the claim that either it is the case that there are no gods or it is the case that there is at least one god". While it seems true, at least *prima facie*, that atheism (or agnosticism or theism) does not entail someone to anything other than the view that "there are no gods", in the long run this view, I think, turns out to be false for the reason I will state below. It is important to point out that many of the propositions that one holds to be true do not merely have repercussions on one's epistemic attitudes, but one's epistemic attitudes severely influence one's moral attitudes and one's metaphysical outlook. In this sense, definitely, I would not be willing to accept the assertion that belief in the non-existence of God does not have a huge impact in someone's life. There are definitely some theistic ideals of morality that are not compatible with an atheistic worldview. For instance, an atheist will be entitled to believe that certain religious rituals are meaningless or useless, and, therefore, the atheist will act accordingly. Furthermore, if the atheist does not believe that there is some sort of God, he or she will most likely not believe in the accountability of people before their Creator. Thus, this person will definitely not have the same reserves for sexual intercourse, drinking, and planning for the future of the world as a Christian, for example. Also, it seems very hard to see what kind of significance of life an atheist can have in an impersonal universe, where our actions seem ultimately purposeless. In this sense, the big picture that one adopts will have implication for how one views the universe, meaning, morality, the basic constitution of a person, the person's task in the universe, etc.

In the third section of his work, Oppy presents what he considers to be a case for atheism. Roughly, he seems to have an abductive approach to the question of the plausibility of atheism in contrast to that of theism. Thus, he seems to think that, in light of the evidence (brute facts) that we have in the world, atheism gives a better account of the phenomena observed. In this sense, I both agree and disagree with Oppy. On the one hand, I agree that the best way to approach the question of the plausibility of any Big Pictures is to take an abductive reasoning approach. This is how most scientists argue for the plausibility

⁶ OPPY, G., *Atheism and Agnosticism...*, pp. 26-27.

of their scientific theories. In philosophical terms, I would even be so bold as to claim that one could take an approach that somewhat resembles Kant's transcendental approach to philosophy. Therefore, we can ask the question of what Big Picture better explains the philosophical and empirical data that we experience. On the other hand, I disagree with Oppy in that I do not think that atheism provides a more cogent Big Picture than theism overall. For this reason, I will analyze some of the most important metaphysical problems that I encounter in Oppy's argumentation.

First of all, Oppy refers to causation as a phenomenon to be accounted for in terms of the plausibility of Big Pictures. He states that theists are mistaken in thinking that "theists can have an explanation of the existence of natural causal reality that appeals to the creative activities of gods".⁷ He states that causal reality needs to exist necessarily. He seems to think that if we are to account for causality, the account needs to be provided in terms of non-causal explanations, because, if causality were explained in causal terms it would amount to some sort of *petitio principii* (circularity). In this sense, "Ultimately, however you slice the pie, the existence of causal reality turns out to be a matter of primitive, unexplained necessity".⁸ Therefore, for Oppy, causality amounts to nothing advantageous for neither atheism nor theism.

However, I think that Oppy is somewhat mistaken in this respect. I want to suggest two lines of argumentation in order to prove this: 1) the nature of causation, and 2) a contextual understanding of induction, in terms of what has been called uniformity of nature. On the one hand, regarding the nature of causation, I suggest that it is far easier to justify the concept of causation in light of a theistic metaphysical framework than in light of an atheistic framework. When someone talks about causation, one needs to understand the nature of the phenomenon in question. Causation does not seem to be a physical entity, nor does it seem to be measurable as one could possibly measure natural phenomena, with normal scientific instruments. Such as Hume pointed out a long time ago, everything one can observe is *temporal succession* at most. How then is it possible to talk about an entity that transcends our sense (physical) experience? Furthermore, how can one *know* that events that precede other events are real causes and not imaginary or habit-based ones? Oppy could probably reply that atheists, just like the theists, would need to *assume* or *presuppose* that causation is real in order to make sense of phenomena; and, in this sense, theism's Big Picture would not have any theoretical advantage over atheism's Big Picture. Nevertheless, it seems to me that the traditional, metaphysical understanding of cause as a sufficient reason of the being of

⁷ OPPY, G., *Atheism and Agnosticism...*, p. 37.

⁸ OPPY, G., *Atheism and Agnosticism...*, p. 38.

something fits more naturally within the theistic Pig Picture, for it seems more reasonable to assume causality in a world that was designed by a personal being to “behave” a certain way than in atheism’s Big Picture.

On the other hand, the atheistic Big Pictures need to take the problem of induction very seriously. One of the reasons that Oppy seems to postulate for defending atheism over theism is that the success of science –understood merely in naturalistic terms– provides enough evidence to explain the phenomena we observe in the world, and, therefore, it is unnecessary to posit God’s being in order to explain the world, for one would be multiplying entities beyond what is needed.⁹ Nonetheless, it seems obvious that there are more things to “be explained” than merely physical entities. I do not consider it to be an illegitimate question to ask why one can have confidence that the phenomena we observe today will have the same properties and will be subject to the same kinds of measurements in the future. I do not believe the atheist can provide a sufficient reason to justify this belief, whereas the theist has a reliable guide to the future, in virtue of the belief that God has created and ordered and purposeful universe.

Second, Oppy seems to think that when mental phenomena needs to be explained, Naturalism has a greater advantage over theism, due to the minimal resources that it needs to explain the emergence of mental properties. He says the following:

Naturalists also suppose that we need appeal to nothing more than biological processes in organisms, the local environments of those organisms, and the local social and biological evolutionary histories of those organisms, in order to explain the various aspects of their mindedness.¹⁰

To be fair, since his treatment of the subject is brief, I will not use too much space of this review on this subject myself. Now, it seems to me that he thinks that minimal a framework that has fewer elements tends to be better. In that sense, if one has a theory in which only three entities need to be postulated that makes it better than the theory which has four entities. Nevertheless, Oppy would probably say also that that is not the case. In his view, the framework that postulates fewer entities *and* explains all of the phenomena more adequately will be the best theory. This is exactly where I want to make a point, namely, that while naturalism does postulate fewer entities (minimality)¹¹ it not explain all of the phenomena that theism would. When one thinks of the structure of the brain, one can certainly think of neurons, electrical impulses, synapses, size of the brain, etc. However, when one really thinks about

⁹ OPPY, G., *Atheism and Agnosticism...*, pp. 34-35

¹⁰ OPPY, G., *Atheism and Agnosticism...*, p. 40.

¹¹ OPPY, G., *Atheism and Agnosticism...*, p. 34-36.

this issue, it seems to be that no amount of empirical descriptions of the brain will ever be enough to describe introspective experience or qualia.

My experience of colors is not the same as a consciousness of wavelengths of light. Also, my thoughts are not the same as the succession of electrical impulses in my brain. First person-perspective experience does not have the same properties as physical descriptions of reality, nor does it seem possible to predicate intentionality of the brain in the way we do so with states of conscience, while it seems indeed necessary to postulate intentionality for the mind. In this sense, I do not think that the epiphenomenalism that is entailed by Naturalism will suffice. Like Oppy, I could say much more about the subject. Yet, I think the remarks I have made seem enough to make us at least start thinking about the issue from a different perspective.

Third, Oppy writes a few paragraphs about religious and mystical-like experiences.¹² Nonetheless, I would like to approach the topic from a slightly different perspective from the one taken by him. Essentially, I maintain that Naturalism does not seem to be able to give a satisfactory answer to the most fundamental questions of human experience. While Naturalism has a tremendous confidence in the natural sciences, naturalists make the mistake of reducing all knowledge to the empirical measurements (and experience) of the phenomena (scientism). And, that would probably be fine if there were no other phenomena to account for. When it comes to the meaning of life and our moral experience, atheism in general and Naturalism in particular do not seem to have an adequate answer whatsoever. God provides purpose and meaning in life, things which seem to be endemic to human experience, along with a sense of morality. The Naturalist would discard these as nothing more than chance and matter in motion; they would probably reduce these experiences as the products of evolutionary processes that have helped the human race to survive and have no correspondence to reality (i.e., there is no objective meaning, morality or purpose). However, when Naturalists do this, they take away what is most important to human beings. In theory, they deny that these are objective phenomena to be explained, but, in practice, they cannot deny moral principles. They might continue to affirm the knowledge of these principles, while they deny the ontological objectivity of them. In this sense, it seems more plausible to fit these experiences with a theistic Big Picture, rather than with an atheistic one.

The last part of his analysis focuses on agnosticism and his theoretical advantage over both theism and atheism. In the end, I believe that the points made above can work also for the agnostic's Big Picture. While the agnostic will remain without any commitment to any worldview in theory, it seems

¹² Oppy, G., *Atheism and Agnosticism...*, pp. 44-45.

to be that, in practice, many of them seem to live somewhat of a practical atheism. I think that agnosticism is an interesting theoretical position. Nevertheless, when agnostics need to live their lives, they will commit to many of the atheistic positions. In that sense, I think a review of the claims of theism should be considered, especially in terms of the third point analyzed above. Finally, I would like to point out that while these questions do have a very rational component in terms of the plausibility of a particular framework to account for reality, there will always be a step of faith that will need to be taken into account for either position. In this sense, while I believe Oppy masterfully approaches the question of God in an elegant manner, I think theism in general, and Christianity in particular, are far more capable to make sense of our experience of the world and the world itself than both atheism and agnosticism.

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