

Review: JAR1363

THE PHILOSOPHICAL PACKAGE DEAL OF ATHEISM

a book review of

*The Atheist's Guide to Reality:
Enjoying Life Without Illusions*

by Alex Rosenberg

(W. W. Norton and Company, 2011)

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It's not often one comes across a convinced atheist making a powerful philosophical case for the existence of God. Yet that's precisely what we find—quite contrary to the author's intent—in Alex Rosenberg's book *The Atheist's Guide to Reality*.

Rosenberg is the R. Taylor Cole Professor of Philosophy at Duke University. He specializes in the philosophy of science, with a particular focus on the philosophy of biology. He's also an atheist—and an impressively hard-nosed one, too. Although he shares the evolutionary naturalist worldview of Richard Dawkins, the important difference between these two atheists is that Rosenberg is philosophically trained and far better equipped to recognize and spell out the full implications of his worldview. And that's precisely what the *Atheist's Guide* sets out to do. Rosenberg's book is directed primarily at his fellow atheists and seeks to persuade them that they haven't done enough intellectual housecleaning. If they're to take their worldview seriously, they must purge it of every last remnant of theism. Rosenberg thus valiantly sets out to dispel the lingering superstitions of his unbelieving comrades.

Absolute Atheism. One can only admire the clarity, wit, and intellectual honesty of Rosenberg's book. He represents a robust and muscular anti-theism, not the limp-wristed pseudo-atheism one so often encounters today. For example, it has become common to redefine "atheism" as merely *the absence of belief in God* rather than *belief in the absence of God*. Similarly, many atheists will insist that atheism isn't a *worldview*: it's merely the repudiation of one. But Rosenberg knows how superficial and evasive such claims are. In his view atheism involves not only a positive affirmation of God's nonexistence, but also compelling arguments for that affirmation. And while atheism *as such* may not constitute a worldview, it has wide-ranging implications for one's worldview, especially when coupled with the scientific theories cherished by modern atheists. As he writes, "There is much more to atheism than its knockdown arguments that there is no God. There is the whole rest of the worldview that comes along with atheism. It's a demanding, rigorous, breathtaking grip on reality, one that has been vindicated beyond reasonable doubt. It's called science" (p. viii).

Readers who look forward to learning more about these "knockdown arguments" for atheism will be disappointed. But to be fair, refuting theism would be tangential to the purpose of Rosenberg's book—which, let us recall, isn't meant to convince anyone of atheism, but to get convinced atheists to follow through consistently with their atheism.

Nothing Really Matters. So the worldview that goes with atheism is "science." Yet as the book progresses, it becomes abundantly clear that when Rosenberg refers to *science*, he frequently means *scientism*. Scientism isn't merely a commitment to the scientific method and to what science is supposed to have proven. Scientism is the *absolutization* of science: the conviction that science alone gives us an accurate understanding of reality. Scientism, in other words, is the view that the *only* reality is *scientific* reality. As Rosenberg puts it, "Science provides all the significant truths about reality, and knowing such truths is what real understanding is all about....Being scientific just means treating science as our exclusive guide to reality, to nature—both our own nature and everything else's" (7–8).

A well-informed atheist, then, will endorse scientism. What's more, this "scientific worldview"—like any other worldview—offers answers to our Big Questions about life, the universe, and everything. We may not *like* those answers—we may find them discomfiting, counterintuitive, even downright absurd—but scientism does offer very clear answers to such questions. In an entertaining first chapter, Rosenberg lists some of these Big Questions and summarizes the "correct" answers:

Is there a God? No.

What is the nature of reality? What physics says it is.

What is the purpose of the universe? There is none.

What is the meaning of life? Ditto.

Why am I here? Just dumb luck.

Does prayer work? Of course not.

Is there a soul? Is it immortal? Are you kidding?

Is there free will? Not a chance!

What happens when we die? Everything pretty much goes on as before, except us.

What is the difference between right and wrong, good and bad? There is no moral difference between them.

Why should I be moral? Because it makes you feel better than being immoral.

Is abortion, euthanasia, suicide, paying taxes, foreign aid, or anything else you don't like forbidden, permissible, or sometimes obligatory? Anything goes.

What is love, and how can I find it? Love is the solution to a strategic interaction problem. Don't look for it; it will find you when you need it.

Does history have any meaning or purpose? It's full of sound and fury, but signifies nothing.

Does the human past have any lessons for our future? Fewer and fewer, if it had any to begin with.

If nothing else, Rosenberg does us a great service by making plain that modern atheism is a philosophical package deal. No one could take this book seriously and remain indifferent about whether or not God exists.

After setting out the purpose and basic orientation of the book, Rosenberg proceeds in the remaining eleven chapters to explain, as clearly and compellingly as he can, precisely why the answers above *must* be the correct ones. A review of this length cannot interact with every chapter, but suffice it to say that I found his central arguments to be lucidly expressed and largely cogent. An atheist committed to scientism should indeed answer those Big Questions much as Rosenberg does. The snag, however, is that some of those answers are downright self-defeating. In the end, what Rosenberg serves up is a *reductio ad absurdum*¹ of modern atheism.

In the early chapters, Rosenberg makes clear what he thinks science tells us about the fundamental nature of reality. In short, everything that exists reduces to physical particles: “The basic things everything is made up of are fermions and bosons. That’s it” (21). Scientism thus commits one to *physicalism*: everything that takes place in the universe, including every aspect of human life, can be explained in terms of purely physical facts. From this it follows that there is no real purpose or design anywhere. Reality is nonteleological² from the bottom up. Scientism means that “we have to be nihilists about the purpose of things in general, about the purpose of biological life in particular, and the purpose of life in general” (92).

The relentless logic continues in Chapter 5, where Rosenberg argues that *teleological* nihilism leads to *moral* nihilism.³ There are simply no correct answers to any moral questions. His case for moral nihilism is intriguing because it involves a new spin on an old conundrum known as “Euthyphro’s dilemma,” usually posed as a problem for God-based morality. Rosenberg argues that a parallel dilemma faces any evolutionary account of morality according to which our core moral beliefs are the product of unguided natural selection. We take for granted that our moral beliefs are basically *correct*. But were these beliefs selected because they’re correct, or are they correct because they were selected? Rosenberg argues that neither option makes sense. The only way out is to reject the assumption that our moral beliefs *are* basically correct.

Some of Rosenberg’s readers may be unsettled by his argument that none of our moral beliefs are really true. Yet this conclusion is tame in comparison to what follows. Rosenberg had earlier remarked (while arguing for moral nihilism) that “natural selection is not very good at picking out true beliefs” and “there is strong evidence that natural selection produces lots of false but useful beliefs” (110–11). But it turns out that his views are even more radical than these candid statements would suggest. He actually thinks that, strictly speaking, *we don’t have beliefs at all*—not even false ones.

The Illusion of Introspection. Chapter 7 softens up the reader by arguing that human introspection (“watching or listening to ourselves think”) is radically misleading. Apparently most of what we think about how we think is wildly mistaken, at least if we take science (i.e., scientism) seriously. In fact, our greatest mistake is thinking that we actually think about anything: “Ultimately, science and scientism are going to make us give up as illusory the very thing conscious experience screams out at us loudest and longest: the notion that when we think, our thoughts are about *anything at all*, inside or outside of our minds” (162).

Rosenberg admits that this sounds absurd, but reckons he has a knockdown argument for it. Introspection tells us that our thoughts are *about* things. For example, your thought that Paris is the capital of France is *about* something, namely, Paris. We might say that the thought is *directed toward* Paris. The technical term for this “aboutness” or “directedness” of our thoughts is *intentionality*. However, as Rosenberg explains, intentionality can’t be an intrinsic property of physical objects. As he puts it, “One clump of matter can’t be *about* another clump of matter” (186). Yet scientism says that there is no mind distinct from the brain: thinking is something your *brain* does.

And your brain is just one more clump of matter in the universe. Ergo, if your thoughts are nothing more than physical brain states, then your thoughts can't really be *about* anything. So your thought that Paris is the capital of France isn't really *about* Paris. It can't be, if Rosenberg's "scientific worldview" is correct.

Needless to say, this is a very hard pill to swallow. It isn't just counterintuitive; it seems utterly incoherent. If scientism means that we can't really have thoughts about anything, then we can't have thoughts about *scientism*; in which case, one has to wonder what Rosenberg has been doing all this time. Heroically, Rosenberg sees the bullet and bites it hard. By his own confession, his book isn't really *about* anything: "This book isn't conveying statements. It's rearranging neural circuits, removing inaccurate disinformation and replacing it with accurate information. Treat it as correcting maps instead of erasing sentences" (193).

But this radical revisionism about human cognition won't fly, for not even Rosenberg can purge all "aboutness" from his discourse. Consider all those false beliefs *about* morality discussed in earlier chapters. In fact, consider the very claim that intentionality is an illusion. If we're misled by introspection, we must be misled *about* something. We can't have false beliefs about our brains if we don't really have beliefs about anything. Intentionality is like that stubborn wrinkle in your carpet: stamp it down in one place, and it just pops up somewhere else.

The upshot is that Rosenberg's uncompromising scientism can only be believed and intelligibly communicated if it is in fact *false*. One could scarcely find a more self-defeating position than that! It's not as though Rosenberg is unaware of these problems; he's all too familiar with the obvious objections. Yet he does little more than give a smug philosophical shrug in response.

Scientism for Scientism's Sake. The sum of the book is that scientifically knowledgeable atheists should disbelieve in cosmic purpose and direction, historical progress, meaningful human existence, life after death, moral truths, free will, the directedness of our thoughts, our ability to formulate and execute plans, and the reality of a first-person point-of-view. (Surprisingly, although Rosenberg denies *self*-consciousness, he won't go so far as to deny consciousness altogether: a conspicuous holdback for such a hard-nosed physicalist.)

This is hardly an inspiring message, although Rosenberg has a fix for any readers who find this "reality" depressing: take Prozac. (Remember, your feelings are really nothing more than brain chemistry.) Of course, the fact that a worldview is depressing doesn't mean that it's wrong. But if scientism conflicts with so many common-sense beliefs, don't we therefore have excellent reason *to reject scientism*? Or does Rosenberg have a compelling argument for scientism that trumps all these commonsense beliefs? Hardly. In fact, Rosenberg's positive argument for scientism is astonishingly feeble. The compelling evidence for his worldview turns out to be (drum roll, please) "500 years of scientific progress" (227). In other words, the amazing success of *science* demands that we accept *scientism*. But how could this be? How does the fact that we can now cure tuberculosis and create televisions support the sweeping universal claim that science is

“our exclusive guide to reality”? As the philosopher Edward Feser has witheringly observed, one might as well argue that since metal detectors have proven extremely successful at finding metallic objects, *everything* must be made of metal.

In the final analysis, Rosenberg offers no good reason to accept scientism but many compelling reasons to reject it. Let us recall, however, that Rosenberg stated at the outset—and not without justification—that scientism is “the worldview that comes along with atheism.” Insofar as the *Atheist’s Guide* gives us good reasons to reject scientism, by Rosenberg’s lights it also gives us good reasons to reject atheism. The book is an unintended gift to believers; indeed, it does a more effective job of refuting the modern atheist worldview than many books written by Christians. The next time you come across a copy of the *Atheist’s Guide* in a bookstore, consider relocating it to the “Christian Apologetics” section. —*James Anderson*

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NOTES

- 1 *A reductio ad absurdum* (“reduction to absurdity”) is a form of argument that refutes an opposing position by demonstrating that it has absurd implications.
- 2 *Nonteleological* (from the Greek *telos*: ‘end’ or ‘goal’) means lacking any goal or purpose.
- 3 *Nihilism* (from the Latin *nihil*: ‘nothing’) is a viewpoint that denies objective truth and meaning.