

REVIEW: SEVEN TYPES OF ATHEISM BY JOHN GRAY

GRAY WRITES: I suggest that an atheist is anyone with no use for the idea of a divine mind that has fashioned the world. In this sense atheism does not amount to very much. It is simply the absence of the idea of a creator-god. There is precedent for thinking of atheism in these terms. In the ancient European world atheism meant the refusal to participate in traditional practices honouring the gods of the polytheistic pantheon. Christians were described as ‘atheists’ (in Greek *atheos*, meaning ‘without gods’) because they worshipped only one god. Then as now, atheism and monotheism were sides of the same coin. If you think of atheism in this way you will see that it is not the same as the rejection of religion. For most human beings religion has always consisted of practices more than beliefs.

COMMENT: Belief, in religions that tell you faith or belief are a choice, can be a practice itself or seem to be. Faith is intended as a practice. Belief and trust are acts.

A person then refusing to make the act of belief or faith is an atheist.

It is said that somebody simply not believing as opposed to rejecting belief in God is an agnostic not an atheist. But the person denies God the way it counts - in his or her heart. This is not about God as in mere theory - God is more than theory. It is personal. So it is implicit atheism.

GRAY WRITES: The rationalist philosophy according to which religion is an intellectual error is fundamentally at odds with scientific inquiry into religion as a natural human activity. Religion may involve the creation of illusions. But there is nothing in science that says illusion may not be useful, even indispensable, in life. The human mind is programmed for survival, not truth. Rather than producing minds that see the world ever more clearly, evolution could have the effect of breeding any clear view of things out of the mind. The upshot of scientific inquiry could be that a need for illusion goes with being human. The recurring appearance of religions of science suggests this may in fact be the case. Atheists who think of religions as erroneous theories mistake faith – trust in an unknown power – for belief. But if there is a problem with belief, it is not confined to religion. Much of what passes as scientific knowledge is as open to doubt as the miraculous events that feature in traditional faiths.

COMMENT: The human mind is programmed for survival and truth.

An illusion is only a crutch and survival demands that we know what dangers and realities are out there so that we can be ready to combat them.

Not everything that is claimed to be science or passes for it really is science.

GRAY WRITES: The project of a scientific ethics is an inheritance from Comte, who believed that once ethics had become a science liberal values would be obsolete. In a rational society, value-judgements would be left to scientific experts. Atheist illiberalism of this kind is one of the strongest currents in modern thought. The more hostile secular thinking is to Jewish and Christian religion, the less likely it is to be liberal. Though he may consider himself a liberal, Harris belongs in this illiberal tradition.

COMMENT: Liberal does not mean allowing just everything. It means allowing as much that lets society flourish and be free. It requires that you be illiberal to obstacles such as traditional religion.

GRAY WRITES: Instead of being left behind, old evils return under new names. No thread of progress in civilization is woven into the fabric of history. The cumulative increase of knowledge in science has no parallel in ethics or politics, philosophy or the arts. Knowledge increases at an accelerating rate, but human beings are no more reasonable than they have ever been.

COMMENT: Probably true.

GRAY WRITES: When he [Mill] affirmed that humankind was improving, he was relying on the belief that the human animal is a collective moral agent – an idea that also derives from Christianity. None of these assertions can be supported by empirical observation, supposedly the basis of Mill’s philosophy. Mill was aware that the religion of humanity could become an impediment to free thinking.

COMMENT: In general people do improve. Trying to improve is more important than improving. Trying to improve is a form of improving in itself. This quote is totally inaccurate.

GRAY WRITES: Adam was the father not of all humankind but only of the Jewish people, which had been chosen by God to receive the divine law, and, through Jesus, to bring redemption to all of humankind. Using pre-Adamism to argue for tolerance, La Peyrère did not rank different types of humans in any hierarchy. As an interpretation of Genesis this was highly provocative, and the book was burnt and its author arrested for heresy.

COMMENT: I just quoted that for I had never known that anybody thought that way about Adam! It might explain where Cain's wife came from - assuming he didn't marry his sister!

GRAY WRITES: At the time Sade had not revealed the furious enmity to religion that runs through all of his writings. So it may not be surprising to find him writing contritely from prison to the chief of police: Unhappy as I am here, I do not complain, I deserved the vengeance of God and feel it; to bemoan my sins and weep over my faults are my only employ. Alas, God could have annihilated me without giving me time to repent; what thanks must I give Him for allowing me to return to the fold. Sir, I pray you to allow me the means to accomplish this by permitting me to see a priest. Through his good offices and my own sincere repentance, I hope soon to be fit to approach the holy Sacraments, whose complete neglect was the first cause of my fall. A priest was sent to him, but if Sade returned to the fold it was not for long.

COMMENT: Ammunition for those who say that evil people like Sade are motivated by faith and God even if they do not say so. Sade has seen the results of his evil acts as punishment from God. But the likes of Sade could have been attracted by that very prospect. If you think God is boss and you resent that you may provoke him and take his punishments so that you feel you are in control.

GRAY WRITES: Sade's rebellion is essentially religious. It is also thoroughly confused. Sade's libertines have rebelled against the God of monotheism in order to serve the divinity of Nature. But if everything human beings do is natural, how can religion be singled out as being contrary to Nature? Prayer is no less natural than sex, virtue as much as vice. If everything humans do is ordained by Nature, they are following Nature when they obey morality and convention.

COMMENT: So if you are bad and think its natural that is just another form of religion.

However it is obvious that praying even if natural - magic making seems more natural - is by no means as natural or needed as sex is.

To make prayer matter as much as sex and virtue as good as vice takes an unimaginable supernatural miraculous feat. It is a hyper-miracle.

If confusion leads evil religious people to act as they do what if religion leads to such confusion? Is that why the religious are just as "sinful" and malignant as the non-religious? Religion if it means leading to such confusion then is intrinsically bad.

GRAY WRITES: Today a nihilist is commonly understood as someone who believes in nothing. The Russian Nihilists of the 1860s were very different. They were fervent believers in science, who wanted to destroy religion so that a better world than any that had hitherto existed could come into being. Nihilism of this kind was the creed of most of those who rejected religion throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Whether they realize it or not, it remains the creed of most secular thinkers today. Dostoevsky rejected this rationalist faith. Human beings are nothing like the rational animals imagined by philosophers. They are not guided in their lives chiefly by motives either of self-interest or of concern for the general welfare. Their actions express their impulses, which include not only a desire for cruelty for its own sake but also a desire for freedom.

COMMENT: Self-interest is seen as an individualist me me me attitude. But it usually is more like group selfishness. Group-self-interest is as much about me me me as is the individualist one. The group can be your nation, religion, village, family and even the whole human race. The only ingredient is that you need to class something as being other - not in the group so that you have a protagonist. Selfishness needs enmity.

GRAY WRITES: One has to do with the nature of atheism, which Dostoevsky believed was a project of self-deification. Having renounced the idea of any divine power outside the human world, human beings could not avoid claiming divine powers for themselves. If they could not abolish death, they could prove themselves superior to it. That is what Kirillov imagined he was doing by killing himself. Very few were capable of such defiance. But by sacrificing themselves, they – like Christ – redeemed all of humankind.

COMMENT: It is true that you become supreme in your life if you reject or ignore God. Ignoring God is more rejecting God than rejecting God is. Outright rejection is compatible with caring about God - you can turn against a person because you see the value in them.

The believer may be self-deifying by saying and holding that there is a God. Is that a paradox? No. If you use your belief faculty and your needs and feelings to be embodied in the concept of a God you are in fact making a personal perception of God that you worship. You must be better than God when you can determine what he is going to be and what you are going to worship.

GRAY WRITES: While Dostoevsky may have believed in goodness, he writes as if he did not believe that he believed.

COMMENT: Believers in God may wrongly believe that they believe. The Bible senses this for it insists on piety and love of God's word and continual and ever increasing sacrifice to be good in the sight of God. It refuses to just call somebody a child of God or a Christian - it says the evidence of their being a new creation is what must label them. It technically is not about a label but about the label being the truth.

GRAY WRITES: Empson's position in ethics was not so much indefinite as incoherent. He wrote: 'I am still inclined to the theory of Bentham that was in favour when I was a student at Cambridge; that the satisfaction of an impulse is in itself an elementary good, and that the practical question is merely how to satisfy the greatest number.' But he acknowledged that there is 'a basic objection to the theory': 'The satisfaction of an impulse to inflict pain on another person must have its equal democratic right.' This makes it sound as if wanting to inflict pain on another person is wrong only if that other person lacks the ability to inflict a similar pain. But Empson goes on at once to say that 'this satisfaction is an elementary evil ... a remarkable object, carrying the only inherent or metaphysical evil in the world.' Here Empson departed from Jeremy Bentham, who believed the satisfaction derived from causing pain was in principle no less valuable than any other. The impulse to cruelty was not a 'metaphysical evil'. If it had to be curbed - as Bentham recognized it did - it was not because it was bad in itself but because it tended to reduce the total sum of satisfaction ...

COMMENT:

GRAY WRITES: No conception of evil as an active force can be found in the Hebrew Bible, where Satan appears as a messenger of God rather than an embodiment of malevolence. The serpent in the Genesis myth is identified as satanic only in the New Testament. A problem of evil is posed in the Book of Job, but it has to do with why good people suffer and does not involve any actively malign force.

COMMENT: If Christianity is slandering Satan by making him evil then that makes Christianity evil for it is a central and core Christian idea that with Jesus we are at war with Satan the prince of evil.

GRAY WRITES: Within Christianity, the problem of evil is insoluble. Evangelical atheism faces a similar difficulty. If religion is evil, why is humankind so attached to it? Or is it humankind that is evil?

COMMENT: Usually when such atheists say religion is evil they mean Islam and Christianity and see the other religions as being evil but not significantly so. Humankind is attached mostly to tolerable religions such as Buddhism, Hinduism or Shinto. Most people are attached not to an organised religion but what might be termed unorganised religion - a spiritual outlook with a vague god and which stresses comfort in faith and helping others for spiritual reasons.

GRAY WRITES: If the Christian universe is a vast torture-chamber, it is also a universe in which human suffering has moral significance. In the ancient world of the Greeks and Romans, suffering might be the work of the gods; but the gods were arbitrary and capricious. Christianity answered a need ancient polytheism could not satisfy: it gave misery meaning and value. By taking suffering out of the realm of blind chance, Christianity imposed a responsibility on those who inflicted it.

COMMENT: If suffering is made by chance, we cannot have any right or duty or responsibility to do something about it? Not a sensible stance to take! If chance knocks over my lego house then that means I may not rebuild it.

Suffering being created by chance or involving a lot of chance means we have all the more reason to battle it. Bombs falling at random need more direct action than bombs deliberately set on us. In the latter case the emphasis has to be on getting the enemy to stop doing it or maybe reconsider. The problem is the enemy not the bombs.

If anything the Christian is guilty of treating evil and suffering as a project to pass the time and look good in God's eyes about. This is not facing and dealing with evil at all at least not properly. It is not about fixing something bad for the sake of fixing something bad.