



Does challenging superstition or faith protect people?
 Is it mistaken to support organised religion in membership or donations?

If people do good because they are human, not because God prompts them,
 is it right to risk giving God any credit when they alone own their good?



REVIEW: ATHEIST OVERREACH, WHAT ATHEISM CAN'T DELIVER BY CHRISTIAN SMITH

This book sees the atheist principles namely

- you can be good without faith in God
 - you can believe in being universally good without God
 - science refutes God
- as false and tries to argue thus.

Many atheists agree with him. Some say that good is only a metaphor, the word should be grey. By grey, one is only admitting that everything is about taking a direction that has a helpful side and a horrible side.

If you change it to,

- you can be grey without faith in God
- you can believe in being universally grey without God
- science refutes God

Then it is obvious the book is nonsense.

By good, the book smuggles in a hidden meaning, sacred. If an atheist is good only because she or he can be that is good eviscerated of the sacred. Its about practicality not the sacredness. Yet the true good is in the person who is that spontaneous about it.

The point about being good to all creation makes people wonder why you should look after a stranger unless a God wants you to. The fact is the atheist who does something or nothing is being grey to everybody else. Action and inaction both have consequences for nobody is in a bubble by themselves - the bubble is the world. You may as well make people feel better. You may as well help. What is wrong with that?

Anyway author Christian Smith is Professor of Sociology at the University of Notre Dame and seems to be rehashing worn out Christian objections to atheism. He thinks atheists are not sticking to what they know but isn't that what he is doing himself? It depends on what a person reads and he clearly has not read well.

POINT - he says you look around you know atheists can be good for you can see it.

COMMENT: Trouble is Jesus himself said that you can look as good as the Pharisees and scribes and still be totally wrong and even vile. See Matthew 23. The Bible says God alone has the right to judge who is good as in what they are inside. It is not a good argument the book makes and manages to raise suspicion about atheists simply because it is too simple and too thin.

It may be true that you cannot see the motives in another to see if they are as really good as they seem, the notion that only God sees means that only God should see. So if we had a machine or detector it would be a sin to use it. It is religious extremism to ban people from seeing it if they can and should. It shows religion is not as opposed to evil as it wants you to think.

QUOTE: Just because someone can and does act "good" does not mean they necessarily have good reasons to do so.

COMMENT: He thinks atheists have no reason to be exceptionally good. He thinks an atheist is only moderately good. He is clear that one big problem is that the atheist cannot find a reason to care about the stranger on the other side of the world. This is the question of why we need to do good for all as far as possible.

Smith is actually being crafty here. You cannot be described as moderately good if you are selectively good. That is not morality but favouritism.

Goodness that does not care about or base itself on good reasons is superficial goodness - goodness is deeper than that.

QUOTE: I will say that we need to disaggregate monolithic and ill-defined notions of what “good” is—that is, what we mean when using the adjective “good”—by identifying and describing distinct versions of what “being good” might entail. Most arguments in this debate proceed by assuming an implicit good-bad binary, as if people’s lives are either simply “good” or “bad,” which is crude and obfuscating.

COMMENT: Not true - we simplify somebody as good or bad depending on how much harm they do though we know its more complicated than that. Its about why we condemn a person for murder disregarding the good that person did. Saving a thousand lives and murdering will get you the same condemnation as if you had never ever saved lives.

QUOTE WHERE HE: emphasizes the idea of having good reasons for moral behavior. I must clarify why I think that matters. I do not think that good reasons directly determine people’s moral actions. Humans are not simple rationalists who follow the best ideas. People’s behavior is influenced by many, often conflicting reasons, forces, and emotions. Other influences can override the genuinely good reasons people have to act a certain way. However, having good reasons for moral commitments still matters... even if having a good reason for it does not guarantee moral behavior, most people are more likely to behave in ways for which they believe they have good reasons than in ways for which they lack them.

COMMENT: It is important to inspire people with the reasons to be good even if some will not be inspired! It is better to put the truth out there anyway!

He thinks reasoning is an unfeeling head exercise. It does not have to be. Good sense means you let yourself be guided by feelings that it makes sense to have. If you head tells you to help the sick baby your head can tell you to do it because you feel you should among other reasons. There is nothing wrong with that. There need be no separation between having sensible rational reasons for doing something and letting your feelings attract you to doing so. In fact it is rational then to let your feelings have a say.

QUOTE: Rationality and intellectual honesty require that we evaluate important claims; and if we cannot find good reasons to justify them, then on philosophical grounds the claims must be judged lacking.

COMMENT: Good!

QUOTE: By my account, then, a good reason for being “good without God” must entail both an explanation and a motivation for why people should be so. On this point I part ways with rationalist Kantian ethics, which insists that warranting explanations always contain their own justifying motivations, so that all any person needs is a reasoned account for why an action is right or wrong, and that ought automatically to motivate any rational person to conform to her duty of obeying the moral law. I believe Kantians are misguided, and I maintain that a truly good reason for moral actions requires both a warranting explanation and a motivational justification.

COMMENT: But enough Kantians do find the philosophy helpful. Are we talking preferences here?

By the way the religionists may not be Kantian but Kantian in some things. For example, Jesus made it an absolute moral law that everybody must follow that everybody is to serve God just because God deserves it and to do it with only God in your heart. You serve God in others but not for their own sake but his so that is how you can do this and still help people. If Kantianism is incoherent or dangerous then Jesus was dangerous as is anybody who is Kantian with God. God is the biggest issue of all. So if Kantianism is immoral or harmful then even if you are not Kantian, being Kantian with God, makes you as bad or worse than a Kantian.

Religious people say that if you are forced through having no choice to do something terrible it remains wrong. You are not to be praised or rewarded for doing it. Rather you are to be supported and understood. So what if you had to pick loving God supremely and alone or valuing your neighbour?

QUOTE SAYING THAT NO ATHEIST MORALIST IS CLEAR ON WHAT GOOD MEANS: A few are muddled and unclear. Sometimes they describe moral goodness with vague phrases like “behaving ethically,” our “deepest values,” and

helping others to “be more of a person.”

COMMENT: Some say, "We don't need definitional clarity. We know good when we see it. We know that good is a default for even if there were nothing at all it is good at least that we don't exist to suffer. Its bad in other ways but that is not the point. Good is there still."

I'd put light grey where the word good is. Anything else is just sophistry.

QUOTE ABOUT WHY IF WE RECOGNISE A MORAL RULE WE WILL THINK ALL PEOPLE MUST RESPECT THAT RULE: Rebecca Goldstein's reference to the philosopher Thomas Nagel, who argues in his book *The Possibility of Altruism* that “logic commits us to universalize . . . certain natural attitudes that already commit us to valuing our own lives.” That is, we can reason that “we all know for ourselves that there is a right or wrong . . . so from there only radical selfishness could prevent us from understanding that these concepts are universal.” (Here we appear to return to the Kantian view of having a “good reason” for acting morally...) And, Epstein says, since selfishness leads to unhappiness (which shifts back to a consequentialist ethics), that is not an option. Hence universalism. “Ethics really isn't that complicated,” Epstein concludes. Neither Kitcher's nor Epstein's arguments for universalism is remotely persuasive. They may “convince” people who, for other (good or bad) reasons, already want to believe in inclusive moral universalism without thinking too hard about it. But convincing people who are already or mostly convinced is not the challenge. The challenge is to convince reasonable skeptics.

COMMENT: The most important argument in the book is that atheists cannot come up with a reason why moral rules apply to everybody regardless of what they believe and think. The book accuses Kitcher and Epstein of trying to make out we should simply assume on the basis of trust in their philosophy and what they say that ethics applies to everybody. Epstein tries to force you to agree with him by saying you are radically selfish if you do not. So our author says that atheist moralities just have to resort to bullying to get you to agree that morality applies to all people. In fact we could say most moralists bully for even if say most Christians should have reasons for you they never do.

QUOTE - ATHEISTS HAVE TO HIDE HOW ACTUALLY HUMAN AND GUESSED THEIR MORAL RULES ARE: Yet if atheism is correct, human practices of ethics will function more effectively if the general public remains in obfuscated darkness about morality's mere human origins and sheer functional purposes. People who believe that their moral norms reflect objective standards of moral truth—what philosophers call “moral facts”—will be more likely to uphold them than people who see that they are mere human constructions that evolved to reduce social conflicts and enhance general human well-being. The Great and Terrible Oz of morality, so to speak, was only revered and obeyed.

COMMENT: True but ignores the fact that we are forced to have an objective morality anyway. It is not the atheists who are forcing. Even if you say no moral rule is valid you are saying these rules are immoral. See the point? Conscience and objective morality force you to hear them. Even God has to live with that! You cannot dump objective morality without replacing it with another one. This is what matters. Not God. God cannot help the problem and its just unfair to say he can.

QUOTE REGARDING ATHEIST SAM HARRIS THAT BEING GOOD IS MORE NATURAL THAN WE REALISE: Harris writes: “our selfish and selfless interest do not always conflict.” True, but sometimes they do, and that is the problem at stake. Bayer and Figdor claim that “pursuing [one's own] happiness . . . can and do[es] lead to ‘typical’ moral behavior” in part because “enlightened self-interest [means that] prioritizing your own concerns can lead you to behave in a way that is moral and beneficial for society.” True again. But just because it can lead to that does not mean that it always will or should. They also write: “we choose to act morally because our personal preferences are to act in that way.”

COMMENT: If we are very selfish but still unselfish most of the time then the morality that governs us may be imperfect rather than non-functional! Or we are what is imperfect or non-functional. What then of the argument: "We can be selfish or unselfish which is why we cannot say we will not worry too much about morality for nature advances it anyway"? It has a point but does not prove nature and morality are not friends.

QUOTE - A GOOD ANSWER TO HYPOCRITES WHO SAY RELIGIOUS TERRORISTS DO NOT REALLY BELONG TO THEIR RELIGION: Why exactly—having both dismissed all religions as false and relegated all judgments of objective truth to mere personal opinions—Bayer and Figdor believe they are in a position to declare which forms of Islam are authentic and misguided is beyond my comprehension, but that is another matter.

COMMENT: A religiously motivated terror incident happens. Politicians and social commentators and journalists who say, "It's not a real Muslim" or whatever are just usurping the role of theology or the founder of the religion or its authorised representatives to decide that! Its an attempt to use religious labels as weapons against those who do harm in the name of their religion. But it cuts the other way. If you can mess with words like that then the person who simply self-identifies as Muslim is Muslim which means any terrorist can identify as Muslim to smear Islam.

QUOTE: Officially, science is only methodologically naturalistic, not metaphysically so, meaning that scientific methods and explanations only appeal to natural causes but science makes no judgments about the nature of ultimate reality.

COMMENT: It does if the natural IS ultimate reality. The quote assumes there could be a spirit God or force that is outside of nature and that can exist independently of it. Science does treat the natural as ultimate reality - period! If you say you have something transcendent that agrees that some tests be done science will run from your door. You will not be entertained.

QUOTE: Evolution provides no moral orientation whatsoever. For many years evolutionists believed that they could squeeze the doctrine of Progress out of evolution. But it did not take long to realize that evolution is simply an account of change, not progress or advance. Organisms do tend to “want” to survive. But on evolutionary grounds per se we cannot say that it was morally good or bad that the dinosaurs lived or died, for instance. It simply happened.

COMMENT: Evolution has no direct moral orientation. It is not about morality. But morality is about changing yourself so evolution being about change is accidently moral.

QUOTE: I can imagine some saying “yes, but the time has come to extend our cooperative capacities to the entire human race. We must learn global cooperation if we as humans are to survive.” As an empirical fact, that may be so (or it may not be—it is an empirical question). But even if it is empirically true, still left unexplained in the claim are the reasons justifying the words “entire” in the first sentence and “must” in the second sentence. Once again, this claim presupposes what we actually need to explain and vindicate, namely, the warranted moral force of a universalistic obligation.

COMMENT: There is no evidence that anybody who preaches we must make a better world for all really means it. In reality everybody is selective. Actions speak loudest.

Some might say you cannot call presupposing bad for we have to presuppose anyway so we can just assume all people should be helped as far as possible.

And what kind of goodness are we going to give to all those people? The modest goodness which the book says the atheist has or a stronger more intense goodness?

Modest goodness is a relative term. Doing good for strangers impresses people but only you know if you are cutting corners. You can always do better and do more. Thus the argument that Christians can do more than modest good and atheists would not be expected to is superficial.

QUOTE: If and when people come to see these “morals” as mere social conventions, the main thing that will then compel their conformity in action is the threat of greater harm for not conforming. And that is not a prescription for sustaining a robust culture of universal benevolence and human rights.

COMMENT: True. But this happens under Christian and Atheist cultures.

QUOTE: If reproductive fitness is enhanced by engaging in cooperative social life, then that is good; if reproductive fitness is enhanced by antisocial selfishness, than that is good too.

COMMENT: That is exactly what evolution and natural selection would say if they could speak. But notice that if we cannot help it that we have to be social or anti-social to reproduce then reproducing is good.

QUOTE: Utilitarianism is incapable on its own terms of explaining why anyone should actually be committed to the happiness of the greatest number. Why not—given utilitarianism’s assumption of hedonic individualism—simply be concerned with one’s own pleasure and happiness and perhaps those of the other people we care about?

COMMENT: Does it need to explain why? The idea is attractive and is that not enough? Can we not say, "We should do it for we like it?" It would be strange to say we should do it for we don't like it. My happiness is threatened if others think Utilitarianism is wrong. Nobody can even consider happiness important at all without considering the possibility of making most happy is practical. It explains itself. It does explain on its own terms.

QUOTE: Let us suppose that a version of Shafer-Landau’s case is correct in which in reality only two (and no more) kinds of properties and facts exist: (1) scientifically discoverable natural facts, and (2) self-evident ethical facts having no religious basis. That is, no divine, transcendent, or (quasi-)religious property like karma exists, even though moral facts exist. We would then have a version of Shafer-Landau’s self-evident moral realism that a nonnaturalist atheist could embrace, by accepting the reality of immaterial, nonnatural moral facts while still rejecting the existence of God or other

religious entity related to those moral facts. Does that secure us universal benevolence and human rights? The answer is: not now and probably not ever. Shafer-Landau has not listed universal benevolence and human rights among the moral facts he believes are self-evident, and I doubt he would ever attempt it. Let us be clear: a vast distance separates “do not inflict pain on others for your own pleasure” from “actively practice benevolence toward and champion the human rights of all people everywhere, as you are able.” The first is prohibitive and narrow, the second is proscriptive and globally expansive ...

COMMENT: That is back to the discredited argument that there seems to be no reason to think we should do what we can with an eye to improving the whole world for everybody. It is like arguing that if you chose lemon cake for your tea there was no reason to refuse the alternative, the pancake.

QUOTE REGARDING DEFINITION OF RELIGION SAYING IT IS A: matter of ongoing and vexing dispute among scholars. I define “religion” as “a complex of culturally prescribed practices that are based on premises about the existence and nature of superhuman powers.” These powers may be personal or impersonal, but they are always superhuman, in the dual sense that they can do things humans cannot do and that they do not depend for their existence on human activities. Religious people engage in practices intended to gain access to and communicate or align themselves with these superhuman powers. Their primary hope in doing so, I believe, is to avert misfortune, obtain blessings, and receive deliverance from crises in this life and perhaps after death. People are religious, on this view, in order to tap those superhuman powers to help them avert and solve problems they confront—from getting hurt or sick to suffering a bad existence after death. This substantive definition of religion provides traction for identifying when religion is present or absent, stronger or weaker, in human life. It does not focus on religious beliefs but on religious practices.

COMMENT: So a Catholic that does not do the required core Catholic things is not a Catholic. A less strong claim is that Catholic is not a religious label but a description of what religious commitments you made. So you are Catholic but not a believing one. As being loyal and believing matters most, making a deal then about being Catholic would be trying to abuse the term like some kind of label. It would be wrong.

It is interesting that he speaks of religion as a crutch and there is no mention of using religious faith to overcome sin and be part of forming a wholesome spiritual community.

Culture is such a cover for being bad and for political advantage that religion if a form of culture or too married to it is a bad thing. If it is culturally acceptable to burn widows then that will be changed faster than it would be if religion was there justifying it as well.

A religion should not be pointing to its good deeds when accused of being immoral or something that would better disband.

That is using the good deeds. Catholicism tends to argue that what we should be asking about with religion is "Is it true?" If it is true then we can criticise its badness and hope that people will let the principles sink in. The religion can remain valid even if every member is a terrorist violating its doctrine.

The Christian definition of religion could be, "a complex of genuinely supernaturally prescribed practices that are based on truths about the existence and nature of superhuman powers."

CONCLUSION

We cannot avoid being grey as in harming and helping. All harm helps. All help harms. In that light there is nothing odd if an atheist says we should think of helping the whole world. Good is a misleading term and riddled with notions of pure goodness and so on which are rubbish. This book is thinking of good as in something that is like a part of a perfectly loving God. It is guilty of trying to prove that atheists cannot be very good based on its definition of good when it should be justifying that view of good in the first place. This is not done. No reasoning in circles please.

The last point is that saying the whole world should be helped has no practical value. Its only words. Look at what people do. Let action speak. Everybody is selective period. For some, the best way to improve the world is not to permeate their loving action all over the globe but to choose carefully who they will help. The world is improved if you help your bubble of five people even though they are not the whole world. See the point? Things are still better even if it is only in one bit.

How useful is our morality of love and justice anyway? The worst choices in life are nobodys to make but mine. For example, even if abortion is immoral, its still only the person carrying the pregnancy who can choose. Its not for their god, their government, doctor or partner to choose. Who says that doing the right thing means doing the nice or attractive thing? That is not how it works Mr Smith.

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