

Ronald Dworkin, *Religion without God*, Harvard University Press, 2013, pp. 192, € 16.50, ISBN 9780674726826

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In 2009, Thomas Nagel, to whom Dworkin's book is dedicated, published a book entitled *Secular Philosophy and the Religious Temperament* where he underlined the importance of the *cosmic question*: "is there a way to live in harmony with the universe, and not just in it?". In that book, Nagel expressed a certain dissatisfaction with the alternative secular answers to religious theism that analytic philosophy had so far provided. Rather, he proposed an attitude toward life that he called *religious temperament*, which could serve as an answer to the *cosmic question* without appealing to the existence of God. Ronald Dworkin's very last book seems to take on the same exact challenge, further developing the position of *religious atheism*. At first this expression seems to be an oxymoron. However, the initial bewilderment can be overcome by considering religion as a broader concept than the mere belief in the existence of any form of deity. Dworkin, in the first chapter, outlines an understanding of religion as "[...] deeper than God. Religion is a deep, distinct, and comprehensive worldview: it holds that inherent, objective value permeates everything, that the universe and its creatures are awe-inspiring, that human life has purpose and the universe order. A belief in a god is only one possible manifestation or consequence of that deeper worldview." (p.1). The *religious attitude* then appeals to two fundamental judgments of value: a) that human life has an objective importance in each person's responsibility to try to live a good life; b) the universe as a whole, to which everyone takes part, has its intrinsic value in being sublime and awe-inspiring (p.10). This attitude, upholding that values are not only real, but fundamental, rejects a popular position among atheists called *naturalism*. This is the belief that nothing exists other than what can be studied by natural sciences (pp. 12-14). Contrary, on Dworkin's view, it is crucial that values are both real and fundamental. Given this position, it would be reasonable to wonder if Dworkin is appealing to some kind of super-natural existence (since values cannot be studied by natural sciences). If this is true, such values permeating through every single human life as well as the universe itself could turn out to play a role

similar to that of a supernatural deity. Again, the importance of value is underlined when he outlines the core argument of the book. Dworkin claims that theistic religions (e.g., Judaism, Christianity and Islam) are composed of two different parts: a science part and a value part. The former aims at answering the questions about the birth and the history of the universe, the latter offers a set of beliefs about how one should live and what one should value (including the universe as a whole). The main conclusion of Dworkin's argument is that a god is not needed to make sense of the value part (apart from what is directly connected with the existence of God, such as duties of prayer and worship). Thus endorsing the value part is still a valid option for an atheist. This is what Dworkin's *religious atheism* is all about: the endorsement (without the appeal to a god) of both the objective ethical responsibility to live a life as good as possible and the acceptance that the universe is not a mere matter of chance, being intrinsically beautiful and wonderful (pp.22-24).

The second chapter is thus dedicated to the second of the two value judgments, i.e. the understanding of what makes the universe so beautiful and wonderful in itself. The awe inspired by the Grand Canyon is not just a matter of being in front of something beautiful. Rather the wonder here depends also on the fact that nature, and not the human intellect, is the author of all this (p.46). If we deny the authorship of God, how do we explain this? Since God as a creator is the answer to be found in the science part of godly religions, godless religion should aim at something analogous: "*science must give a religious atheist at least a glimpse of a universe fit for beauty*" (p.48). Nevertheless, no matter how far the discoveries of physics have gone, the answer remains obscure. Quoting Einstein, Dworkin underlines how *the center of true religiousness* is the acknowledgement of the *radiant beauty* of the universe (p.49). This is, I believe, the *leap of faith* of religious atheism; this is where theism and atheism converge, revealing how any kind of religious attitude relies on an act of faith. This will lead to two further questions that drive the pages that follow from here: a) how could beauty guide scientific research (pp.53-65)? b) What kind of beauty could this be (pp.65-76)? The answer to the first question is that beauty is neither an expression of the truth that could lie in scientific theories of cosmology (beauty as *evidence*), nor is it a mere accident considered how the universe really is (beauty as

coincidence). Rather it is a *presumption* that the universe has some fundamental, sublime unity, that we are waiting (faithfully) for an explanation in the form of a *final*, comprehensive theory (pp.60-61). Every new little step that unveils the secrets of the universe generates awe because we are ultimately revealing the universe's beauty (pp. 64-65). The second question of the chapter tries to identify a conception of beauty that goes along with the presumption of a final theory. Beauty as the recognition of symmetry certainly plays a role in both terrestrial beauty and celestial beauty (as a result of the invariance of the laws of nature under the transformation of time and space). But is this enough to explain the religious attitude? Probably not (p.76). What makes meaningful the presumption of a final theory and the intrinsic cosmic beauty of the universe it inspires is the *strong integrity* of the theory granted by the *inevitability* of the universe. Dworkin, quoting Einstein again, defines *strong integrity* as what a theory expresses when it has *logical completeness*, namely that all the elements of the theory demand the others to be right (p.86). But this is not enough, since it could be said that this happens by chance. So a theory must be *shielded* by a further understanding of the universe as *inevitable*, that is “[...] *the laws that govern everything there is in the vastness of space and in the minutiae of existence are so delicately interwoven that each is explicable only through the others, so that nothing could be different without there being nothing*” (p. 98). We can explain the universe with just one, coherent, all-encompassing, final theory that explains how the universe has to inevitably be in order to exist. This is ultimately the reason why scientists, who endorse a religious attitude, aim at the *final* theory and this explains also what generates awe and wonder at their eyes.

Now, given this idea of religion, we can try to understand what religious freedom means and that is what Dworkin discusses in chapter three. Religious freedom has been included in most constitutional documents as one of the basic rights of human beings ever since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Nevertheless, most of the people understand it as the freedom to adhere to a practice that involves the worshipping of a god (p.107). But is this how constitutions have to be understood? No, because religion, like other politically relevant concepts, is an *interpretative concept* and thus it does not rely on dictionary definitions or common understandings. Moreover there is no

justification for making that right exclusively valid for theistic religion, leaving aside both godless religions and atheism (p.117). At the same time it is not straightforward that extending this right to every possible conviction about how to conceive one's life is enough to have a coherent account of freedom that will not generate conflicts (pp.124-125). Furthermore, Dworkin highlights that *political liberty*, granted by governments, is based upon two concepts (as he defines it more extensively in his *Justice for Hedgehogs*, chp.17): *ethical independence*, namely that government must never foster a particular way of living life as being better than others and it should leave the choice up to the single citizens; and *special rights*, namely particular well defined liberties such as the freedom of speech (pp.129-131). The former expects governments to constrain people's freedom only if it harms others, the latter does so only if that special right allows some citizens to cause a clear extraordinary danger for others. Dworkin then proposes to abandon a concept of religious freedom as based upon a *special right*, since this would allow a series of religious practices that could be harmful for others (such as the use of particular drugs) and thus requires a constraint by the government. Rather, we should ground religious freedom only on *ethical independence*, which allows free choice of how to live one's life as long as it does not harm others. In this way *ethical independence* "[...] *limits the reasons government may offer for any constraint on a citizen's freedom at all*" (pp.132-133).

The fourth chapter, the final and shortest one, deals with the issue of immortality of the soul and life after death. What could the religious atheist alternative to the atheists' vanishing into thin air and to the godly religions' promises of an afterlife be? At first, science could suggest a conception of a *natural soul* as a fluctuation of independent countless quanta which survives the death of the brain. This fluctuation of *mental stuff* could represent the immortality of the *natural soul* and possibly even allow for reincarnation as the reunification of it into a new nascent brain (pp.150-151). Dworkin himself, though, recognizes that such a possibility, other than not being very desirable, will lack one of the main features of other religions' entrance of the afterworld: the final moral judgment. But why this final evaluation is necessary? We could say that it will make everyone willing to lead a good mortal life. This, says Dworkin, is something that even a religious atheist could hold since, being

aware of human mortality and considering human life as valuable, he wants his life be a good one (p.153). Living in accordance with a valuable conception of life is like producing a work of art (he says referring to romantic poets) and this, somehow, will make one's life immortal (p.158).

The primary aim of this book is that of making sense of a life lived in harmony with a universe perceived as valuable, beautiful and meaningful (i.e. answering to the *cosmic question*) in a way that does not require the belief in God. Dworkin's position, and *religious atheism* in general, aims at mapping out the logical space between believers and non-believers and showing the possibility of a new class that many have already been endorsing for years. Nevertheless, there is a secondary aim that lies on the background of many passages of this book. Dworkin is trying to underline what conflicting religious and non-religious positions jointly share, or better as he refers to them, between godly religions, godless religions and *hard-headed atheism* (as Nagel defines it). His view, in fact, appears to be a middle position between theism and *hard-headed atheism*, since it shares with the former the so-called *value part* and with the latter the so-called *science part*. Accordingly we should be able to see how the apparently unbridgeable gaps that generates conflicts among them could be mitigated ("*What divides godly and god-less religion – the science of godly religion – is not as important as the faith in value that unites them*" p.29). I believe that this could probably be said of the conflicts between theists and religious atheists and those between religious atheists and *hard-headed atheists* (if such a thing ever existed). But this is true only on the ground of what the different positions respectively share. It is difficult to see how appealing to *religious atheism* as a middle ground could soothe the conflicts between positions that share neither *religious science* nor *religious value*, and thus lie at extreme opposites. It is reasonable then to ask "*Is that much too much to hope? Probably.*" (p.147).

Bibliography

Thomas Nagel, *Secular Philosophy and the Religious Temperament: Essays 2002-2008*, Oxford University Press, 2010.

Ronald Dworkin, *Justice for Hedgehogs*, Belknap Press, 2011.

Further reviews of this volume

<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/nov/28/religion-without-god-ronald-dworkin-review>