

Review of David Bentley Hart, *The Experience of God: Being, Consciousness, Bliss* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2013).

*Michelle Rebidoux*

## Preview

One thing, certainly, can be said about David Bentley Hart's book and it is this: that its author takes atheism very seriously—or rather, the “New Atheism,” as it is called, a recent ideologico-cultural “movement” whose proponents are mainly scientists who, through the publication over the past decade or so of a string of popular (and often best-selling) books, seek to debunk the “God theory” within the context of a strictly materialist / naturalist understanding of the world. But don't get me wrong: when I say that Hart takes the New Atheism seriously, I do not suggest that he himself sits within its camp. Rather, the whole point of Hart's book is, in a fairly lively and (admittedly often humorously) caustic polemical spirit, to, first of all, debunk the New Atheists' own debunking by demonstrating that their definition of “God” (or rather, lack of coherent definition) is not only distressingly unsophisticated, but also, in their clear lack of interest in even trying to learn anything at all about what the major religious traditions of the world actually say about “God,” appallingly infantile; and secondly, to offer instead a more sophisticated definition of “God” deeply rooted in the traditions and (which is most to the point) adequate in its address of the three experientially intractable phenomena that a strictly naturalistic explanation of the universe is finally simply incapable of accounting for: namely, being, consciousness, and bliss. Indeed, says Hart, a truly adequate appreciation of these three phenomena as the basis for a more philosophically refined definition of God ultimately renders naturalism (and with that atheism) itself incoherent as a position: “Faith in God is not something that can ever be wholly and coherently rejected, even if one refuses all adherence to creeds and devotions” (p. 287).

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The book is divided into three main parts, the first two of which are further divided into two and three chapters respectively, while Part Three has only one chapter. Part One (“God, Gods, and the World”) spends much of its time laying out the worldview of naturalism and attempting, through a brief overview of some of the New Atheist literature, to sort out just what kind of “God” it is that the New Atheists so

strongly object to. In fact, it is a fall-back, says Hart, to the deism of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries which largely defines the “God” so offending to the New Atheists’ sensibilities□ that is, a fall-back to the “Intelligent Designer God,” a sort of “God of the machine,” “God of the gaps,” or a crude demi-urgic God who is, ontologically speaking, a mere “brute being” among beings (albeit the greatest and causally-first among such beings) existing somewhere outside the natural (read: mechanical) universe. And, indeed, says Hart, such a God *should* be so offending□ but not only to the New Atheists; theists, too, should be offended. He even concedes to the New Atheists that it is no accident that such a demi-urgic God should become the straw man (or Straw God) of what he calls their “naturalist fundamentalism” in the same time frame (and especially post 9/11) in which one witnesses a steep cultural rise in theistic religious fundamentalisms which *themselves* promote a very unsophisticated (generally demi-urgic) understanding of God, largely because they themselves are (in some sense unwittingly) bound to the mechanistic understanding of nature which still dominates the modern world. Ultimately, says Hart, what on the surface appears to be a raging cultural debate between theism and atheism ends up being little more than a debate between two differing expressions of atheism: one that believes that there is an eternal and causally-first brute being among beings existing somewhere outside the natural (mechanical) universe, and one that believes that there is not such a being (see pp. 61 and 302).

Part Two, then (“Being, Consciousness, Bliss”), is Hart’s attempt to articulate a more philosophically sophisticated and coherent definition of God, and to demonstrate the rootedness of that definition in the profound philosophical / theological insights of the world’s major religious traditions. His justification for basing his definition of God on these three terms (which, actually, he already lays out in Part One) is that, first, their significance is upheld in a number of major religious traditions (albeit most recognizably in Vedantic Hinduism, whose *Satchidananda* concept is generally translated directly as “Being-Consciousness-Bliss”); second, that these three terms are crucial for any understanding of how God is experienced in the major traditions; and third, that these three terms denote regions of experience which are simply unaccountable for within the framework of naturalism (see pp. 42–44). Being, consciousness, and bliss, says Hart, constitute what in medieval terms would be called “transcendentals”: “The prior conditions that must be in place before anything called nature can be experienced at all, and as such they precede and exceed the mechanisms of natural causality” (p. 45).

In his chapter on “Being” in Part Two, Hart points out that the

naturalist framework, understanding as “brute beings” all things within the material universe, can adequately account (perhaps) for the *what* of those beings, but not ultimately for the *how*: that is, *how* are “brute beings” phenomenized, how are they *held* in being, and how are they related to one another ontologically, existentially? For that matter, neither can a religious fundamentalist demi-urgic picture of God account for the *how* of such beings, since not even God’s *omni* being (if God is a mere “brute being” among others) could be then adequately accounted for. What Hart seeks, rather, with regards to the *how* question of beings, is a philosophical articulation of deep ontological / existential ground: God as the *Being* of all “brute beings” (which, in fact, being so grounded in Being, makes them not quite such mere brutes after all, it seems); in other words, a panentheistic God in whom (as Hart frequently quotes) all things “live and move and have their being” (Acts 17:28).

In the next two chapters in Part Two, on “Consciousness” and “Bliss,” Hart emphasizes the irreducible character of subjective experience, pointing out that the naturalist framework, which seeks to reduce everything to mere synapses firing in the brain, simply cannot account for such phenomena as the qualitative dimension of experience, the capacity for abstract reasoning (which is more than merely computation), the phenomenon of intentionality, or the overall unity of consciousness. Rather, says Hart, in all these dimensions, consciousness should be understood as a “dynamic movement of reason and will toward reality” (p. 238)□ that is, toward Being, as the ground of all beings which, through consciousness (ever deepening itself in its knowledge), reveals itself to beings, and which, in the full revelation of itself (in the consciousness become one with Being in full knowledge), reveals or manifests itself also as “Bliss.” To that extent, consciousness is related to bliss *ecstatically*, as to a *final* and a *formal* causality, both of which causalities serve to guide and shape consciousness in its aspiration to transcend itself in the present limits of its knowledge toward its expansion and completion in the full knowledge of Being. Such expressions of causality (*final* and *formal*), says Hart, while crucial for the better and more coherent definition of God which Hart wants to promote, are unfortunately completely neglected by the naturalist framework, which recognizes only *efficient* and *material* causality which, Hart points out, are also the only kinds of causality imagined in the demi-urgic picture of God (and which are understood wrongly anyway if the first / efficient cause itself of the universe is a mere “brute being” among others). “We cannot encounter the world,” says Hart, “except through our consciousness and intentional orientation toward the absolute, in pursuit of a final bliss that

beckons to us from within those transcendental desires that constitute the very structure of rational thought, and that open all of reality to us precisely by bearing us on toward ends that lie beyond the totality of physical things” (p. 298).

Finally, Part Three (“The Reality of God”), comparatively much shorter than the first two parts, is more or less a summing up (and in places a rehashing) of the New Atheists’ “naturalist fundamentalism,” with a good dose of lyrical apologetical appeal to the “mystery” of Being and the deep affective experience of its beckoning us on towards its transcendental reality thrown in. One might even suppose that such an apologetic, in its emotional force here, is set up to counter the fact that, as Hart admits, “as an emotional commitment . . . atheism seems to me an entirely plausible attitude toward the predicaments of finite existence” (p. 294). Nevertheless, he says, it is “impossible to take atheism very seriously as an intellectual position” (p. 294). In fact, I’d like to connect this last quote back to the observation with which I began this review: that, in fact, Hart takes the New Atheism *very* seriously, in my opinion, to the extent that, of the two main purposes (as mentioned above) for which he wrote the book to begin with—namely, to debunk the New Atheists’ own debunking of the demi-urgic God, and to offer instead a more sophisticated definition of God grounded in the experience of the major religious traditions—he spends the *vast* majority of his time engaged with the *first* purpose. Page after page after page, and with an almost obsessive (and fairly repetitive) scrutiny, he dissects and exposes the banality and ultimately the incoherence of the arguments of the New Atheists and their “naturalist fundamentalism.” Actually, admittedly, it is in these dissections that Hart shows his complete mastery within the field of the philosophy of religion, especially in some of its more analytical articulations. But such exposition gets tedious and is, after all (as this reader felt), rather only preliminary to what I had (I admit) *hoped*, initially, to be the book’s *main* purpose (given its title) of articulating a better definition of God grounded in the experience of the major religious traditions (anyone remotely familiar with Vedantic Hinduism and its concept of *Satchidananda* would, I think, expect, at the mention of “Being, Consciousness, Bliss” in the title, more direct involvement with the religions’ philosophical / theological systems than is afforded here). But indeed, it is primarily only in the very few pages at the end of each chapter (or in a page or two sprinkled in the middle of each chapter) that Hart makes reference to the religious traditions themselves at all; and when he does so, it is generally in a frustratingly overly casual and reductive manner, quoting this or that concept or metaphor from each tradition immediately alongside those of

other traditions, all too facilely and syncretistically (he makes sweeping references, for example, to “almost all the classical metaphysical schools, East and West” (p. 235), or to “contemplative and philosophical traditions, Eastern and Western (p. 228), or, in several places, to “the great theistic traditions”), to support his point. Nor does he make any distinction between emanationist (or monistic) and creationist (though not demi-urgic) religious cosmologies (both of which can nevertheless be understood as expressions of panentheism). Of course, Hart himself admits that “to say how the various traditions deal with [the key terms involved in the definition of God] in relation to their particular creedal commitments would carry me far beyond my purposes in this book” (p. 140); and he, furthermore, points out, immediately in the introduction, that “I want to distinguish . . . between, on the one hand, metaphysical or philosophical descriptions of God and, on the other, dogmatic or confessional descriptions, and then confine myself to the former. This may leave some readers disappointed, and some may wish that I had written a book marked either by more philosophical completeness or by more evangelical zeal” (p. 4).

Well, it is precisely here, I’m afraid, that I have to articulate my own disappointment. Certainly, Hart *does* deliver on his promise of a better (better than the demi-urgic) and more philosophically coherent definition of God, in terms of the three key concepts (being, consciousness, and bliss, as outlined above) in Part Two of the book. His definition is, moreover, as he says, more “philosophical” than it is a “confessional” one. But why draw such a dichotomy at all between philosophy and confessionality? Why not, for example, approach

confessional statements, creeds, even theological systems *phenomenologically*? Indeed, already in Part Two of Hart’s book, in his discussion of final and formal causality, one finds the suggestive beginnings of a phenomenological approach in the appreciative description of the affective, ecstatic experience of consciousness in being beckoned by a transcendental reality; he takes this up again in Part Three (although it is also in Part Three that much of Hart’s philosophical rigor gives way to a lyrical apologetics). My disappointment, therefore, lies *not* in the fact that I was looking for more evangelical zeal, rather in the fact that I *was* looking for more philosophical completeness, but precisely in the sense of a more in depth *phenomenological* (for is phenomenology not, after all, philosophy?) treatment of religious experience based in the beliefs (and writings) of the religious traditions themselves. But in the end, Hart’s book is not at all a phenomenological account of how the various religious traditions describe the experience of God in terms of being,

consciousness, and bliss. Fair enough. I'm not justified in criticizing a book because it is not the book that I myself would have written (had I the intention and the phenomenological vision to so write it). But I would at least point out that, on account of its lack of a greater philosophical completeness (as Hart himself admits), Hart's book is, in the end (if page allocation is any measure) *less* about the better and more coherent philosophical definition of God which it seeks to promote than it is about precisely *how* the unsophisticated arguments of the New Atheists (down to the last crude, excruciating, and oft-repeated detail) *miss* this definition because their "naturalist fundamentalism" cannot make room for the "transcendentals". This is why I say he takes the New Atheism very seriously□ perhaps all *too* seriously.

Hart opens his book with the following admission: "This is either an extremely ambitious or an extremely unambitious book. I tend to think it is the latter" (p. 1). Notwithstanding Hart's clear mastery within the field of the philosophy of religion (as pointed out above), and notwithstanding Hart's energetic (and usually quite enjoyable) writing style, I think I would have to agree with him in this matter.

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