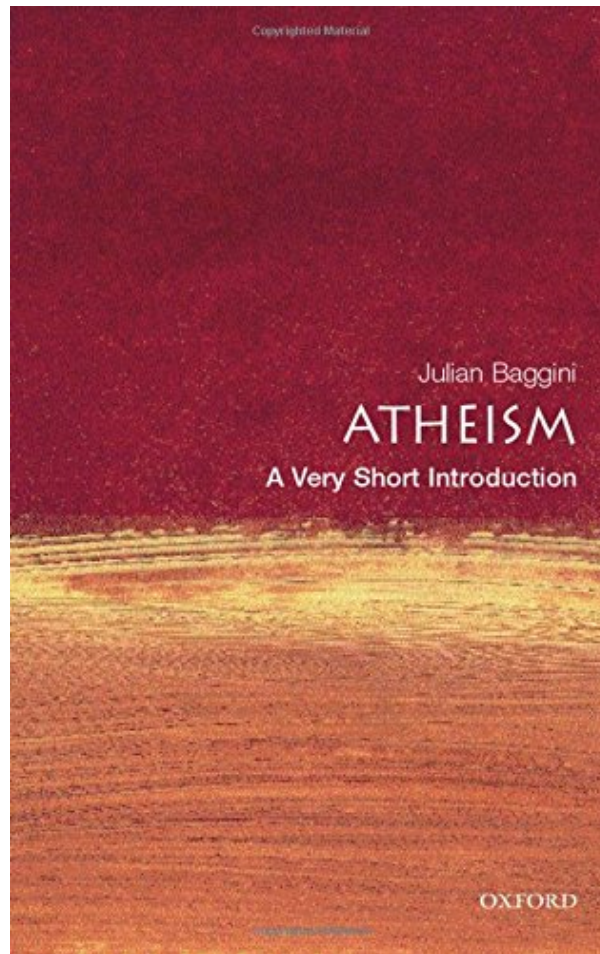


ATHEISM: A VERY SHORT INTRODUCTION BY JULIAN BAGGINI



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Review

'lively and readable...ideal for a popular audience...his very short introduction, which packs into a hundred pages a wealth of insight and argument, is itself a wonderful commitment to the rational thought which he defends'

Richard Norman, New Humanist

About the Author

Julian Baggini is editor and co-founder of The Philosophers' Magazine.

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ATHEISM: A VERY SHORT INTRODUCTION BY JULIAN BAGGINI PDF

Atheism is often considered to be a negative, dark, and pessimistic belief which is characterised by a rejection of values and purpose and a fierce opposition to religion. *Atheism: A Very Short Introduction* sets out to dispel the myths that surround atheism and show how a life without religious belief can be positive, meaningful, and moral. It also confronts the failure of officially atheist states in the Twentieth Century. The book presents an intellectual case for atheism that rests as much upon positive arguments for its truth as on negative arguments against religion.

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Richard Norman, *New Humanist*

About the Author

Julian Baggini is editor and co-founder of *The Philosophers' Magazine*.

Most helpful customer reviews

101 of 113 people found the following review helpful.

A wonderful introduction to naturalistic atheism

By jlowder@infidels.org

I had not heard of *_Atheism: A Very Short Introduction_* prior to receiving it as a gift from a friend. As I read the book, however, I quickly realized that Julian Baggini had written a masterful introduction to atheism, one that is sure to become a classic for years to come. Here is the table of contents:

Preface

List of Illustrations

1. What Is Atheism?
2. The Case for Atheism
3. Atheist Ethics
4. Meaning and Purpose
5. Atheism in History
6. Against Religion?

7. Conclusion

References and further reading

Index

In chapter 1, Baggini explains his primary purpose in *Atheism* is to "provide a positive case for atheism," which he defines as "the belief that there is no God or gods" (p. 3). As Baggini correctly explains, atheism is not materialism, and Baggini makes it clear that he rejects materialism. Instead, most atheism is rooted in "the broader claims of naturalism" (p. 7). Since naturalism *entails* atheism, any evidence for naturalism is automatically evidence for atheism. (The converse is not necessarily true, however.) In Baggini's words, "atheism is essentially a form of naturalism and so its main evidential base is the evidence for naturalism" (p. 16). Why is this significant? Because the evidential case for naturalism is much broader than the evidential case for atheism. Thus, Baggini's case for atheism has a far greater explanatory scope than the cases found in recent defenses of atheism by such scholars as Martin, Rowe, Le Poidevin, Smith, and Mackie, who do not defend atheism by appealing to the case for naturalism.

In chapter 2, Baggini sets forth his case for atheism. It includes (i) the absence of evidence of the supernatural; (ii) the physical dependence of the mind upon the brain; (iii) the simplicity of naturalism compared to supernatural alternatives, including theism; (iv) religious diversity; and (v) the problem of evil. Baggini concludes that atheism is the best explanation for these facts.

In chapter 3, Baggini discusses the relationship between atheism and ethics. His refutation of the idea that moral laws require a moral lawgiver is excellent. As he puts it, morality "is the basis upon which just laws are enacted and enforced; it is not constituted by the laws themselves" (p. 38). Thus, if we think of God as a moral lawgiver, God's laws will be moral only if "they conform to moral principles which are independent of God" (p. 38). Baggini also argues that an atheist ethics can combine features of Aristotelian, Kantian, and Utilitarian ethics.

In chapter 4, he explains a related issue, the relationship between atheism, meaning, and purpose. He refutes the idea that God is a necessary or sufficient condition for a meaningful life. As Baggini points out, just because a creator gives a purpose to its creature hardly makes the purpose significant *for the creature* (p. 59). Ultimately, life's ultimate purpose must be something which is intrinsically valuable. That something, he argues, is life itself. Moreover, immortality isn't required for a meaningful life, either. On the contrary, the inevitability of death is "what makes life so valuable in the first place" (p. 71).

In chapter 5, Baggini discusses atheism in history. Specifically, he discusses the emergence of atheism in Western civilization, as well as the claim that atheism was responsible for 20th century totalitarian atrocities. On the latter, he discusses the relationship between, atheism, Nazi Germany, and Soviet communism. Regarding Nazi Germany, Baggini correctly mentions Nazi Germany was not an atheist state. Moreover, "Nazi doctrines themselves were also at odds with the kind of rational naturalism of traditional atheism" (p. 84). As for Soviet communism, Baggini points out that the history of the Soviet Union was not somehow the consequence of atheist beliefs; what happened in Russia was partially the result of *militant* atheism. Atheism as such does not entail militant atheism, and Baggini argues against militant atheism throughout his book.

In chapter 6, Baggini addresses the claim that atheism is against religion. Atheism as such is only opposed to the truth of religion; it does not entail hostility towards religious believers. Baggini then briefly considers some arguments for God's existence, including the cosmological, teleological, and ontological arguments. Finally, he criticizes militant atheism.

In chapter 7, Baggini acknowledges some of the omissions of his book. He also talks about humanism as a type of positive atheism.

Perhaps the main fault that I find with Baggini's discussion of the case for naturalism, as well as his rebuttal to the case against it, lies in its incompleteness. Given Baggini's emphasis on atheism as a form of naturalism, it is surprising he did not also include evolution or the biological role of pain and pleasure. Moreover, his failure to mention divine hiddenness as evidence for atheism is odd. On the theistic side, I was struck by how Baggini neglected the so-called 'fine-tuning' argument and instead discussed merely the

watchmaker argument, which even most theists reject.

The other important fault which I find with Baggini's book are his references to the idea of 'atheist ethics' or 'atheist morality,' as if there were clearly one atheistic approach to ethics. Since the only ethical implication of atheism is the falsity of the divine command theory, it seems to me this is a non sequitur. Baggini's discussion of an Aristotelian-Kantian-Utilitarian hybrid approach is fine as far as it goes, but he says nothing about the obvious objection that atheists have no basis for selecting that ethical theory over any other secular ethical theory.

Despite these two faults, I think that this book does an excellent job in introducing atheism. In particular, I am especially pleased with its emphasis on the case for naturalism. I highly recommend this book to anyone interested in atheism.

29 of 35 people found the following review helpful.

Good Pocketsize Introduction - Informed Go Elsewhere

By Daniel R. Sanderman

I have to admit it: I am a fan of these little books. It's my dirty little secret. These short introductions provide one with a pocketsize, portable introduction to a wide variety of topics. With a light tone and a surface skim of the issues, these little guides provide one with the general overview one might expect in a small survey course. Naturally, there are downsides. Are these guides comprehensive? Heavens no! Do they take time to dig deeply into the issues? Not generally. But are they a good resource to use if you want to get your feet wet before you dive in? Yes. When used properly, these little guidebooks can allow what might start out as a casual curiosity to develop into a more in-depth research project. In fact, all of these introductions provide references and suggestions for further reading.

Julian Baggini's *_A Very Short Introduction to Atheism_* is told from the viewpoint of one who attended Roman Catholic primary schooling and went on to become an atheist. He spends the first couple of chapters matching up atheism with naturalism and realism, while sketching out some basic positive arguments for atheism. Baggini also deals with the lack of evidence for theism and claims that the motivations and methods of science are clearly in favor of non-belief in the supernatural (a general claim that the atheist generally holds). Chapter three responds to various theistic challenges that morality and ethics rely upon religion and a belief in the supernatural. Chapter four handles one other common objection to atheism: that it leads to a life devoid of meaning and purpose. The last couple of chapters deal with the history of atheism and the various schools of thought concerning the militancy of atheism.

Baggini's *_Introduction_* is short...very short. But hey, that's what the title says. In order to keep the page limit down and to keep the reader entertained, Baggini has drastically oversimplified many of the arguments in this book. Many of his statements hinge upon implicit premises that are unstated and quite interesting in their own right. My only complaint is that there was not enough room to rehearse these implicit premises. I would recommend reading this book if you have a casual interest in atheism, want to learn more, or are a believer yourself and you want to understand an opposing viewpoint better. There are more developed, more comprehensive, and better introductions to atheism out there, but clocking in at 111 pages, you can't beat this read.

21 of 25 people found the following review helpful.

Short and to the point.

By A Customer

This is definitely a jewel of a little book. Clear rational thinking and to the point. It presents the arguments for the non-existence of a supernatural being in simple language. It shows why there is abundant evidence that everything exists within the natural world and why the arguments for a supernatural domain are utterly flawed.

As for the one negative review below, just take it at face value. It's most likely written by Rev. Cheung

himself. I took his advice and checked out some of his books. Well, his total lack of rational thinking is frightening. His writing clearly show how possessed by the supernatural one can become, basically losing all sense of reality. His book (and all his writings) is based on the assumption that the Bible is the infallible word of God. Why? Just because he says so! He writes page after page based on this alone, and thus every argument he makes is utterly flawed. He claims that -- "the power of the dogmatically argument is such that it conclusively establishes the entire Christian faith as true, and simultaneously serves as a conclusive refutation to all non-Christian ideas and worldviews, whether known or unknown" -- He uses this type argument to prove such points as -- "since evolution contradicts Scripture, then evolution is automatically false" -- ! Need I go on . I have never had such a good laugh reading fundamentalist "philosophy". Reading his books leads one to clearly understand why supernaturalistic systems of belief can not be taken seriously as a world view or philosophy for society today. As their foundation, Cheung and others like him, have rejected reason and find no problem with rejecting 2000 years of accumulated scientific knowledge. The philosophy that Cheung propounds is one that would promote the idea that we are simply passing through this sin stained world on our way to God's kingdom. This is the same philosophy responsible for the 9/11 terrorism.

See all 64 customer reviews...

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