

BOOK REVIEW

THE FOUR HORSEMEN: The Conversation that Sparked an Atheist Revolution. New York: Random House, 2019 (134 pp. + xix)

A helpful material for an exposition of some of the basic ideas of the four new atheists also known as the four horsemen of atheism: Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris, and the late Christopher Hitchens. It is divided into four main parts. The first three parts are the essays of Dawkins, Dennett, and Harris. The fourth part is the transcript of their 2007 discussion (Hitchens was still alive) which, among others, focused on the role of atheism in contemporary and how it, in the words of Stephen Fry, “empowers humanism and secularism for a new generation.”

The book provides no additional essential information to those who have read the primary works of the authors. For those who have not read any of the primary and longer works of the four horsemen, this relatively short work is a good entry point that may lead to the depths of their minds.

Dawkins in his essay argues in favor of the humility of science contra the accusation that it is arrogant. “Scientists love not knowing the answer because it gives us [scientists] something to do, something to think about” (p. 8) says our biologist. In contra-distinction, theologians (and their theology) are presumptuous despite ignorance. In his words: “[i]t’s fascinating to see how the theological mind works: in particular, the lack of interest in – indeed, the contempt for – factual evidence” (p. 11). But isn’t it the case, one would ask, that science has its own pride? For this question, Dawkins answers: yes, science has its own pride, but it is justified (p. 16). When it postures its pride, science does so with its actual accomplishments and achievements that allow people to know their world much better. “Who does not feel a swelling of human pride when they hear about the LIGO instruments which, synchronously in Louisiana and Washington State, detected gravitation waves whose amplitude would be dwarfed by a single proton” (p. 16). By an “embarrassing contrast” religion has contributed “literally zero to what we know” – and this is, according to Dawkins, a huge “hubristic confidence” on its part (p. 19). So, science, for Dawkins, is more virtuous than religion because it allows itself to evolve through self-criticism. Its propositions change and some of its earlier findings may even be ruled out as erroneous or at the very least inaccurate. It also does not claim to solve all the deep problems of humankind. As Dawkins puts it science, including the “science of evolved superhuman aliens” may not answer the problems of the universe in the next century (p. 21). And this is where atheistic worldview comes into the picture. By this Dawkins means a worldview that relies on science and not religion. It is one that has the “moral courage” and the ability “to abandon your imaginary friend” (God) (p. 24).

Dennett’s essay focuses on the phenomenal rise of new atheism. It is a response to the opinion that the four horsemen of atheism are the catalysts of the “emptying

[the] churches around the world” (p. 27). This opinion, according to Dennett, fails to see the reality that contributed to the rise of new atheism: “the expansion of mutual knowledge” (pp. 28-29). This is brought about by the Internet Explosion that allows to see and be seen further, faster, and more cheaply than even before (p. 28). Social relations in the current context are one where people interact in a “recursive hall mirrors of mutual knowledge that both enables and hobbles” (p. 28). This is what, according to Dennett, enables in large measure – the rise of the New Atheism. Unlike Dawkins, Dennett argues for atheism with greater consideration for the deeply engrained realities that must be contended with. While the former is almost always willing to launch his direct attacks at religion, the latter admits that up until recently there is something good that can be preserved in organized religions (p. 31). This is so not because of an admission of an epistemological validity underlying religion but rather it is practical to do so. Thus, while Dennett regrets “the residual irrationalism valorized by almost all religion” but he does not see the state “playing the succoring, comforting role well” (p. 32). Adding to this: “so until we find secular successor organizations to take up that human task” the churches cannot just be ushered “off the scene” (p. 32). So, atheism’s contribution, for Dennett, is the transformation of organizations (specifically religion) into forms that are “not caught in the trap of irrational – and necessarily insincere – allegiance to patent nonsense” (p. 32).

Writing about their company (as the Four Horsemen), Sam Harris admits that their interests as well as their atheistic perspectives are not homogenous. However, despite differences in views they are, according to Harris, united by the awareness that “religious dogmatism hinders the growth of honest knowledge and divides humanity to no necessary purpose” (p. 36). It may be true that religion unifies people but does so by “amplifying tribalism and spawning moralistic fears” (p. 36).

The short essays of Dawkins, Dennett, and Harris are good textual materials for a preliminary exploration on what I would call the varieties of atheism. At the very least the essays provide immediate descriptions of the kind of objection each thinker has against theism. Eventually, one would understand that Dawkins’ militant atheism is not necessarily and entirely the position of Daniel Dennett, or that Hitchens believes that “religion poisons everything” but Dennett does not.

I am not going to discuss in length the details of the fourth part which is, as said at the onset, the transcript of their discussion in 2007. But perhaps a few brief remarks would help the reader as a matter of exposition. The intellectual exchange is divided into two parts: first, the issue on offence against religion (by atheists). This would cover related issues on respect for religious sensitivities and the freedom of believers, among others. The second half of the discussion has two sub-themes: one, on what the new atheism aims to accomplish, and second, the contention that one cannot argue against someone out of their beliefs (p. 85). I can only invite the reader to take effort in paying close attention to the details of their arguments and discussions. They are a combination of valid and objectionable points and expectedly with the blend of wit and humor specifically Dawkins’ lines.

It is tempting, especially on the part of someone who grew up in a community of faith, to take offense against the writers especially on their objectionable points that are found in their 2007 encounter. For example, Dawkins' criticism of theology shows his little knowledge of the discipline. Theology is not a monolithic and homogenous field and there are many debates and propositional contestations among theologians as there are among scientists. It would be interesting, for example, what Dawkins would say about the work of Marie-Dominique Chenu: "Is Theology a Science?" – though I can only presume that his understanding and definition of science is limited to the natural sciences, which is philosophically problematic.

However, and as has been said, it would be better and thus fairer to read the major representative works of each. This means that a more intellectually guided path to take in critiquing each of them is to conduct a serious reading and review of the chief arguments found in their books and not merely through this short work that is nothing but a small window into their thoughts.

I do not see the need to present arguments in defense or in favor of religion or theology. Many other brilliant minds have done so either in their debate/s with the new atheists (e.g. John Lennox versus Richard Dawkins, William Lane Craig versus Sam Harris, etc.) or in book reviews. Truth to tell, the debates between theism and atheism seem not to add anything new to what has been said comprehensively by philosophers across ages. If one would pay attention to the details of what Kant said, indeed there can be no reasonable ground to deny that the reason that can prove the existence of God is the same reason that can disprove his existence. In the end God is an idea that is beyond pure reason.

For those who have lived their lives and have found meaning in their faith or religious conviction, the book can be read as an enriching literature and not necessarily an offensive assault. Neither do I believe that the book (and not even the more scholarly or the more footnoted works) would be enough to change the mind of he who "encounters" God as a living reality. Mircea Eliade has said enough on the difference between the God of the believer and the God of the philosophers. For the believer, God is not an idea or "an abstract notion" and more so is he not a "moral allegory." For him who believes, God is "a terrible power" and an "inspiring mystery."

Instead of critiquing the four horsemen and their atheism, it would be more philosophically honest to ask why atheism continues to exist and what kind of atheism are we getting these days? What new arguments have atheists like Dawkins, Dennett, Harris, and the late Hitchens – put forward? Or perhaps this question is wrong or at least subject to rethinking. Maybe because the kind of atheism that there is today, is only as interesting (or silly?) as the kind of religion/s it has been criticizing.