

**THE EXPERIENCE OF GOD: BEING,
CONSCIOUSNESS, BLISS**

(DAVID BENTLEY HART)

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Although this is a book written by one of today's most prominent Christian theologians, it is not a Christian book. David Bentley Hart's purpose is to demolish atheism, not to support Christian revelation. Hart's core point is that all theistic traditions, including the Abrahamic but also the Hindu and Buddhist, and even "various late antique paganisms," share sophisticated reasoning about God and have arrived at certain conclusions which, if not ironclad, are much more reasonable and much more convincing than atheist arguments, which are, mostly, some combination of simplistic and irrelevant. While I am not the target audience, it seems to me that an honest reader of this book is very unlikely to leave an atheist, even if he entered one, so if that is true, Hart's book is a success.

That said, *The Experience of God* demands a great deal of the reader. It is not a book to read while distracted—it is basically a book about the epistemology of religion, an inherently difficult topic. I have never been particularly interested in philosophy, mostly because I am bad at understanding and following it, as shown by that, every single time, I have to look up the definition of "epistemology." (On the other hand, often I suspect that when I can't understand some exemplar of modern philosophy, say John Rawls, the fault is not mine, but that what I am being fed is gibberish.) Instead, probably due to my own personality combined with the dubious age we live in, what is to be done and how to do it retains my focus. "Action in motion" is my watchword. It has been for a long time, and the world is turning my way, it appears. Still, that requires at least some philosophical justification, so I have focused a bit more on philosophy. I'm still bad at both understanding and following philosophy, but perhaps I can educate myself into being merely mediocre. Here's hoping.

Unlike the books of the so-called New Atheists (who, of course, are not new at all), this book is not a polemic. Hart repeatedly disclaims that he writes to show their errors, but he keeps returning to point them out, unable to resist, I suppose. His tone is mostly that of a parent

trying to show an undisciplined child that everyone would be better off if we just thought through what we were doing, because the truth then becomes obvious. He attributes no malice to the New Atheists, merely immaturity, total ignorance of what theists believe and why, and the intellectual rigor of a wet noodle. Not that he's particularly kind to them: "I am convinced that the case for belief in God is inductively so much stronger than the case for unbelief that true philosophical atheism must be regarded as a superstition, often nurtured by an infantile wish to live in a world proportionate to one's hopes or conceptual limitations." For example, in a semi-famous passage, he abuses Richard Dawkins for completely failing to understand Aquinas's arguments about the existence of God, and therefore beclowning himself in his book *The God Delusion*. Hart doesn't have much more sympathy with textual fundamentalists, Christian or otherwise, who are a purely modern phenomenon, resulting from the unfortunate spread of "culturally deracinated Christians, raised without the intellectual or imaginative resources of living religious civilization." It is just as absurd, Hart says, to view the Bible as a "digest of historical data" as it is to think that "science shows that God does not exist." All these people should instead return to the rich thinking of the theistic traditions, and Hart is here to show us what that is, with his own special spin.

It is nearly impossible to summarize this book, at least for me; the best that can be done, it seems to me, is to note the topics Hart covers, and to make a few comments along the way. He begins by introducing his basic point, that "naturalism—the doctrine that there is nothing apart from the physical order, and certainly nothing supernatural—is an incorrigibly incoherent concept, and one that is ultimately indistinguishable from pure magical thinking." In considerable detail, and from multiple angles, Hart patiently distinguishes between the conception of God as a demiurge, part of creation, and God as "the transcendent source and end of all contingent reality." It is as demiurge that atheists (and many Christians) address God, and this is a category error. Unfortunately, Hart says, various strands of thought, such as Deism, have contributed to this erroneous and simplistic conception, on which supporters of "intelligent design" also effectively, and foolishly, rely—making God an argument from probability, not from reason. So what is that argument, or arguments, from reason? That's the rest of the book.

Hart turns to the history of philosophy and its interplay with reason, as well as with the cultural backdrop of any given time. His major historical focus is the change in the early modern period to viewing the world as a machine, a byproduct of the new scientific and empirical methods. In passing, Hart also casually destroys tropes that are obviously false upon a moment's consideration, such as that "resistance to Copernicanism in the early modern period was inspired by some desperate attachment to geocentrism prompted by the self-aggrandizing conviction that humanity occupies the center of all reality." His central claim here is that merely because the "temporally prior physical causes of some object" can be discovered, it says nothing about the "nonexistence or conceptual emptiness of 'higher' forms of causality." Materialism, which claims the contrary, "is a metaphysics of the rejections of metaphysics, a transcendental certainty of the impossibility of transcendental truth, and so requires an act of pure credence logically immune to any verification. . . ." Nor is materialism the default position, both because logically it is not, and because we do not, in fact, have any actual direct experience of the material world, only "an immediate perception of phenomena—appearances, that is—which come to us not directly through our senses, but through sensations as interpreted by thought, under the aspect of organizing eidetic patterns." Hart is not trying to prove this higher causality directly; he is, he says, merely pointing out that rationality does not dictate any particular view of reality, including the materialist view.

From here, Hart focuses on "being, consciousness, and bliss." "[T]hese three words are not only a metaphysical explanation of God, but also a phenomenological explanation of the human encounter with God." I really can't do any of this justice in a short writeup, but I'll say a few things. As to being, Hart's basic point is that the universe is "absolutely contingent." "Nothing within the cosmos contains the ground of its own being." To our minds, this a mystery, graspable only in an occasional unbidden sense of wonder, but still something about which we can reason. (And have reasoned—Hart is the first to admit that none of his thoughts here are in any way original, and in fact all are very old, though his presentation is compelling.) Naturalism/materialism, though, can say nothing at all about the contingent nature of reality. Theories of how the universe could arise from nothing are not to the contrary, for

“nothing” is not the same thing as “not existing.” “The distance between being and nonbeing is qualitatively infinite.” Hart develops this at length, citing various theistic traditions for illustration. God is not a being, he is “beyond being” (and univocity is false). Hart discusses Saint Anselm and Alvin Platinga. He discusses time, and eternity as the transcending of time (a particular fascination of mine), noting that “temporal things are [not] really ‘simultaneous’ with God at all—he has no time to be simultaneous with—but rather they are present to him in a radically different way.” He talks about the infinite simplicity of God, in whom “there is not even any distinction between essence and existence.” All this is very dense, and very compelling.

Hart says of Stephen Hawking, for example, “It never crosses his mind that the question of creation might concern the very possibility of existence as such, not only of this universe but of all the laws and physical conditions that produced it. . . .” As it happens, just before I read this book I was paging through Hawking’s *The Universe in a Nutshell*, sitting on my library table (the kids were reading it) and was struck by the desperation with which he talked around this problem, nattering on that “the universe need have no beginning or end in imaginary time.” (By imaginary time he does not mean “unreal,” but time somehow multiplied by imaginary numbers, such as the square root of -1 , though that’s unreal enough.) Hawking triumphantly announces that if he, Hawking, is right about this, “The universe would be entirely self-contained; it wouldn’t need anything outside itself to wind up the clockwork and set it going. Instead, everything in the universe would be determined by the laws of science. . . .” As to where those laws come from, and why their pre-existence is not “outside the universe,” Hawking is completely silent, which pretty much proves Hart’s point.

On this book’s sections on consciousness and bliss, I’ll be honest—I found both chapters difficult to comprehend. Parts, yes, but the whole was difficult for me. That is more likely my fault than Hart’s. Certainly, consciousness fascinates me, and the idea that consciousness may exist outside the brain is compelling. We know very little about consciousness, but that itself is not Hart’s point, or something he relies on. He talks about qualitative experience at length, the relationship of abstract concepts to consciousness, and much else, all to the point of making “inductive approaches to a nonmaterialist conception of the mind.” This

is essentially a parallel to his point about higher orders of causality. He rejects various attempts to show consciousness does not exist—"the illusion of consciousness would have to be the consciousness of an illusion"—although he sees why men like Daniel Dennett feel obliged to deny the reality of consciousness, since its existence tends to undermine their materialist claims.

Bliss is viewed as part of the package—the point is, I think, that “in God, the fullness of being is also a perfect act of infinite consciousness that, wholly possessing the truth of being itself, forever finds its consummation in boundless delight. . . . God is the one act of being, consciousness, and bliss in whom everything lives and moves and has its being; and so the only way to know the truth of things is, necessarily, the way of bliss.” Variations on this perspective appear intertwined with thoughts on why this is so, combined with analogies and examples of relevant thought from everyone from Sufi philosophers to Plotinus.

All this is internally coherent and highly rational, though not, and not meant as, airtight logical proof of the existence of God, as conceptualized here. It does compel the conclusion that materialism must be rejected. The effect is to prepare the educated mind to engage in further thought on the specifics of revelation that may be combined with theism, which Hart has as conclusively demonstrated as it is likely to be to a mass audience. From here, for those interested in the further derivation of Christianity, specifically, I'd turn to something like Robert Louis Wilken's *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought*, which explicates the rational bases for core Christian beliefs, and the relationship of that to faith (as well as what faith is). But *The Experience of God* is invaluable to anyone who has never been exposed to anything but the malevolent pablum that is usually encountered when talking about theism as the opponent of materialism.