

Book Review

Atheism, Ayn Rand, and Other Heresies. By George H. Smith. Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus, 1991. 324 pp.

George Smith's remarkable new book is easy to read but difficult to review. From the time I first met George Smith (if memory serves, near the end of 1978), I have been impressed by his extraordinary intellectual range and erudition. The book displays these qualities to a high degree. It is a collection of essays, and includes historical work, philosophical argument, and an assessment of contemporary issues. What is a reviewer to do, faced with such an abundance? Rather than comment on each essay, a task that far exceeds my powers, I will concentrate on the philosophical pieces. This in itself is not easy, since the book includes arguments on religion, ethics, and political philosophy.

The book opens with a section on atheism, the subject of the author's earlier book, *The Case Against God*.¹ After an engaging biographical account of his adoption of atheism, he proceeds to its defense. Just as in his first work, Smith places great stress on the proper definition of atheism. An atheist, in his usage, need not deny that God exists: The absence of belief is sufficient. "An atheist is a person who does not believe in the existence of a god" (p. 35). The issue to Smith is much more than semantic; he thinks a crucial philosophical issue is at stake. Since an atheist need make no claims about God, it is up to the believer to prove his case. "The theist, or god-believer, asserts the existence of a god and must prove the claim. If the theist fails in this task, reasonable people will reject the belief as groundless" (p. 63).

Yet this will not do, for the following reason. Suppose one defines an "antitheist" as someone who denies that God exists. A theist is then someone who lacks this belief. He need not believe that God exist: He need only fail to have the antitheistic belief that it is not the case that God exists. The burden of proof here is on the antitheist—the theist is within his intellectual rights in refusing to become an antitheist. If Smith's argument works, so does this one.

What has happened? I suggest that the statement "S does not believe in God" is ambiguous. It may mean that on the list of all S's beliefs—his "belief set"—"God exists" is not included. Taken this way, "S does not believe in God" makes no substantive claim about God; it instead reveals something about S.

The proposition may, however, be construed differently. In this interpretation, *S* does have some belief about the existence of God; for example, "God does not exist," or "It is unlikely that God exists." If the proposition is taken this way, then the atheist, just as the theist, has made a claim about the world. To the extent someone who makes an assertion has a burden of proof, he bears it as much as someone who asserts that God exists. Smith's claim of a difference between theist and atheist, as regards the burden of proof, is plausible only if an atheist makes no claim whatever about God. Since he has said nothing about God, he of course has no obligation to prove anything about Him.

Furthermore, as usual in philosophy, there is a complication. A belief that mentions God need not be about Him. Suppose that *S* has this belief: "I do not know whether God exists." This seems best taken as a claim that *S* makes about himself. Aside from this and similar examples, however, the point made earlier holds. If an atheist makes a claim about God, he is under no less a burden of proof than the theist. Nothing that has been said so far implies that there is an obligation of proof on either the theist or atheist: The claim made above is that there is no *difference* in burden of proof.

Smith's definition of atheism will not gain for him the epistemological advantage he wants. But how does it stand strictly as a definition? Here the verdict is mixed. Smith is quite rightly alert to the objection that he has advanced a "stipulative" definition. A stipulative definition deviates from standard usage in order to characterize a concept in a question-begging manner. Many socialists, for example, refuse to count oppressive regimes as truly socialist. By definition, a centrally planned economy will promote liberty; counterexamples have been ruled out by a stroke of the pen.

Smith relies on his vast knowledge of the free-thought movement to show that his definition of atheism is not aberrant. Though this is good evidence that his definition is not stipulative, a more important question remains: Is his definition of atheism worthy of adoption? I do not think it is, at least in unmodified form. If someone has never thought at all about God, it seems to me odd to characterize such a person as an atheist. Further, think of someone with this view: "I am not sure whether God exists, but I certainly hope so." It strikes me as quite unusual to term this person an atheist. But both are atheists on Smith's definition.

Suppose, however, that I am mistaken, that Smith's definition of atheism is plausible, and that he is also correct that the theist bears a burden of proof the atheist does not. It is unclear how helpful this is to him, as against his more circumspect atheist colleagues. Smith does deny that God exists: The burden of proof argument will not help him. I wonder why he has made such a fuss about the definition of atheism.

Before bidding this matter a fond farewell, I pause for a moment over an exercise in philology Smith offers in support of his definition. The prefix "a" in Greek

is a privative particle: How exactly should it be taken in “atheism?” If it means “without,” then Smith’s view receives confirmation: If it means “not,” then the view that atheism means the denial of God’s existence is supported. Not so, Smith explains: “But consider; even the negative sense of ‘a’ doesn’t by itself give us the definition [the denial that God exists] . . . ‘a-theism,’ with the negative ‘a’ translates into ‘no-belief in a god or gods.’ Here again, we have an essentially privative definition—atheism as the *absence* of theistic belief” (p. 58). Does he really think that the Greek prefix attaches to the English word “theism” rather than to *theos* (god)?

I have so far maintained that no special “burden of proof” devolves upon a believer in God. A much more important question now arises: What exactly must either a theist or atheist attempt to prove in order to be within his epistemological rights? In Smith’s view, one cannot reasonably believe on faith that God exists. “Faith conflicts with reason” (p. 63). As already mentioned, he believes that if the theist fails to prove his claim that God exists, “reasonable people will reject the belief as groundless” (p. 63). He does not extensively discuss the irrationality of belief on faith. Judging by his earlier book, however, one can safely say that his contention is this: In order to be justified in believing something, one needs argument or evidence supporting one’s belief. But faith, by definition, does not rest on grounds. Therefore, it is unjustified to believe something on faith, and people who do so are to that extent irrational.

This argument has problems at its initial premise. For convenience, let us term the position that one needs argument or evidence to be justified in one’s belief the “Clifford principle,” after the great nineteenth-century mathematician W. K. Clifford, who advocated it. If the Clifford principle itself is correct, then by its own terms some argument or evidence is required in its support: None is offered.

Maybe the Clifford principle is supposed to be self-evident. I can only say that its evidence escapes me. If a particular view of religion strikes someone as plausible, why is it unreasonable for him to accept it? If he refuses to entertain arguments against his beliefs, that is another matter; but to condemn someone as irrational just because he violates an unsupported principle is itself hardly reasonable. Perhaps, though, Smith does have in mind an argument against faith. He is philosophically a follower of Ayn Rand, if not of the strictest observance, and she argued roughly along these lines: Reason is the key tool of man’s survival. If one uses some other means than reason to arrive at one’s beliefs, one is acting against reason. Such conduct is anti-human, since it impedes human survival.

This time it is the second premise that is questionable. Why is one acting irrationally if he arrives at a belief without evidence or argument? It is of course a poor response to say that one is believing on the basis of an irrational method: Just the point at issue is whether whatever is not arrived at by argument or evidence is

irrational. Smith uses the distinction between *denial* and *lack of affirmation* as the key to his definition of atheism. An analogous distinction seems to apply here.

Although I cannot accept the main points of Smith's approach to atheism, then, many of the essays in Part I of the book do nonetheless contain valuable insights. His article on the deists is particularly well done, using his immense learning to full advantage. He sees many of the deists as covert atheists. His interpretation of Lord Herbert of Cherbury (p. 133) can usefully be contrasted with Eric Voegelin's, which stressed Herbert's mysticism. Also not to be missed is a bibliographical essay on free thought. Smith includes a section on "Jesus revisionism," the denial that Jesus of Nazareth existed. It is unclear whether Smith himself holds this position, which nearly all Biblical scholars reject.

Even in the historical essays, however, the author runs into problems when he touches on philosophy. In an interesting account of religious persecution, he states: "Calvin believed in predestination so he recognized that persecution is powerless to win converts" (p. 109). It does not at all follow that if one believes in predestination, one will think efforts at conversion, forcible or not, to be useless. Unless someone claims to know which people God has predestined to salvation, nothing excludes the possibility that those to whom one preaches are among the elect. If so, then the preaching may be the occasion for their conversion. It does not follow from "X is predestined to be saved" that "Even if X had not been converted at time *t*, he would have been saved." Furthermore, this point has more than theoretical importance, for the position Smith attributes to Calvin ignores Calvin's discussion in Book 3 of the *Institutes*.

Part II provides a sympathetic account of Ayn Rand's views. Smith shows how Rand took over theories of earlier philosophers, combining them in a way that resulted in a significant viewpoint of her own. He also makes penetrating observations about the "moralism" of certain Randians.

I am afraid, though, that this section suffers from the same deficiency as the first: The author's excursions into philosophy simply fail to come off. For example, he endorses one of Rand's question-begging arguments against skepticism. Correctly noting that a thought must have an object, Rand hastily concluded that this demonstrates that the external world exists. The argument, in brief, is this: I am conscious of X. My consciousness is not identical with X: The latter is the object of my thought. Thus, while my consciousness is mental, X is not.

This argument fails at its last step. All that one is justified in concluding is that X *need* not be mental: Whether it is or not is left open. One can certainly think of things that do not actually exist, such as centaurs, unicorns, John Galt, and so on. The Randian reply to this, I assume, is that one obtains the concepts of imaginary or fictional entities through abstraction from actually existing things. Hence a thought about Sherlock Holmes, for example, presupposes earlier acquaintance with novels in which he appears or conversations in which he is described. Thus

even thought about fictional beings requires perception of the actual world. Perhaps so; but this is a new argument. The point remains that one cannot refute skepticism just from the intentionality of thought, Rand and Smith notwithstanding.

In Smith's defense, he merely cites this argument briefly; I may be making too much over a passing remark in his account of Rand's thought. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said about his treatment of ethics. My principal objection here lies not with the ethical egoist theory that Smith defends. It instead concerns the way in which he conceives the task of providing a foundation for ethics. A parallel with the theory of knowledge will clarify what is at issue. When philosophers discuss skeptical arguments, their purpose is theoretical. They do not in their ordinary lives doubt that the external world exists, nor does anyone seriously entertain the possibility that he alone has a mind. The problem of constructing a justification for common-sense beliefs raises questions of extraordinary interest; but, once more, little in "real life" turns on the outcome of these inquiries.

Moral philosophy exemplifies a similar situation. If one asks why people obey the rules of morality, one can take this as a causal question. Here psychology and sociology are relevant factors, and matters such as the way people have been raised play a key part in the answer. But the philosophical issue is of course quite different. The question "Why be moral?" asks, "What rationally justifies morality?" The separation between theory and practice here lacks the completeness of that between epistemology and belief in an external world. One's view of moral theory can change one's practice, and philosophers often try to ground theoretically views compatible with their own moral inclinations. But, just as with epistemology, our behavior does not wait on philosophy. Philosophers do not give up morality, pending their solution to the problems of moral theory.

George Smith rejects this antithesis. Unless one can ground moral practice on an ethical egoist basis, he claims, morality flies out the window. "[T]here can be no breach between that which is moral and that which will enhance one's happiness" (p. 226), where happiness refers to "an expected emotional response" (p. 225). Again, what seems to me significant here is *not* the ethical egoist theory he advances, which is one of the standard options in the literature. It is his attempt to make the actual observance of morality dependent on showing a concrete link between moral imperatives and personal happiness. I can only say that if you meet someone who fully lives by this view (and I do not believe for a moment that Smith does), you had better watch the silverware.

Ethical egoism can of course be viewed as a moral theory as well as a guide to practice. In an illuminating discussion of this Smith locates a tension in Rand's views. On one account, she claimed that the basis of morality is man's nature as a rational being: From this essence, binding precepts follow. At other times, she suggested that moral principles guide those who wish to achieve happiness. As one might expect, Smith favors the latter position; the former is "moralistic."

One competing theory to ethical egoism contends that moral principles stand in no need of prudential justification. Either through direct inspection, or by deduction from self-evident truths, moral rules can be shown to be binding. Smith chooses to caricature this position: "A rule is a sanctioned principle of action. A sanction is a physical or psychological means of coercion or intimidation used for the purpose of motivating obedience to a principle of action" (p. 217). This is certainly not the way advocates of moral rules portray their doctrine. To be justified in offering this reductionist characterization, Smith needs to show that the arguments of those who advance these views do not work. He does nothing of the sort. I suspect (but cannot prove) that the position he thus describes seem incomprehensible to him: He is "tone deaf" to the appeal of the position. His breezy dismissal has, in Russell's famous phrase, all the advantages of theft over honest toil.

In the last section of the book, Smith turns to issues that directly bear on libertarianism. He presents a superb discussion of Herbert Spencer, on whom he is an authority. He refutes many common misconceptions; for example, Spencer did not claim that winning the struggle for existence was a criterion of ethical superiority.

The key essay in this section is "Justice Entrepreneurship in a Free Market," a revision of a much-discussed article that appeared in this journal in 1979.² The starting point of the essay is a challenge to a chief contention of Robert Nozick's *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*. Nozick's argument for a dominant protection agency depends on differences of opinion in the state of nature over reliable decision procedures. As Smith correctly notes: "Essential to Nozick's argument is the assumption that legal procedures are *not* a matter of knowledge" (p. 297). (He wrongly thinks that Nozick endorses procedural rights. In fact Nozick does not commit himself on the issue; but fortunately this mistake does not affect Smith's main argument.) Smith's article is not a direct analysis of Nozick, however. He intends rather to counter Nozick by establishing a rational solution for a vital problem of libertarian legal theory, namely liability in third-party intervention. Smith endeavors to show that "justice entrepreneurs" will deal with the risks attendant on coping with third parties. The protection agencies that emerge through the activities of the justice entrepreneurs need not coalesce into a dominant agency.

The situation that concerns Smith arises when someone attempts to deal by force with a rights violator. The miscreant need not have violated the enforcer's own rights: Smith holds that anyone has the right to enforce the law of nature. Let us suppose that *A* attempts to recover his stolen wallet from *B*. A struggle ensues: *B*, who fails to see how surrender of the billfold would promote his happiness, feels under no obligation to comply with *A*'s preemptory demand for its return. Justice prevails, and *A* overpowers *B*. But just as *A* prepares to administer the *coup de grâce*, *C* arrives. Not having viewed the earlier events, *C* thinks that *A* has aggressed

against *B*. He proceeds to put the kibosh on *A*, sending him to the hospital. After *A* is removed from traction, can he sue *C* and collect?

No, he cannot. Smith contends that even though *A* was in fact not aggressing against *B*, but attempting legitimately to recover his property, *C*'s action was reasonable. "[T]he person who is observed to initiate violence, or the threat of violence, is presumed to be the Invader unless there is evidence to the contrary" (p. 310). Smith further contends that the fact that *C*'s action was reasonable eliminates his liability to *A*. He rejects the contention that even if *C* acted reasonably, he ought to pay for *A*'s crushed hips and pelvis because he in fact erred. "If an error is made responsibly for error rests with the *Victim* who failed to identify publicly his violent act as one of restitution." (p. 301).

In support of his view, Smith distinguishes between behavior and action. One cannot tell just by examining physical movements whether aggression is occurring. To do so, one must resort to conventional meaning. Just as extending one's hand in a certain way is a conventional gesture of greeting, so is certain other physical behavior a sign of aggression. The distinction Smith draws between physical motion and action is a vital one, but I do not think it will quite do the job he wishes. *C* is surely justified in concluding that *A* is inflicting violence on *B*, even though all he strictly sees is certain movements of two bodies; here Smith's invocation of convention fits. But it does not follow from this that *C* is justified in taking *A* to be the aggressor. As Smith himself notes: "Libertarianism does not prohibit the use of force, or even the initiation of force" (p. 322). Why then assume the existence of a convention in which *A* appears to be an aggressor because he has struck *B*? One certainly cannot derive the alleged convention from a point about how words get their meaning.

Perhaps one should instead take the argument as an appeal to probability. In most cases, the initiator of force is the aggressor: Therefore a Third Party is justified in taking *A* to be the aggressor. But this contention also fails. To say that given certain information a judgment is probable reveals little by itself. If all one knows about two people is that one is a citizen of the U. S. and other a resident of the Middle East, one might conclude that the former is probably wealthier. If one learns that the U.S. citizen is a beggar and the other person the Emir of Kuwait, the case alters drastically.

To obtain a useful probability judgment, then, one must take into account the chances relative to all relevant data that are available. If a Third Party follows this course, the judgment he makes will depend on the circumstances of the incident. He will have no quick and easy pretext for jumping into the fray. And even if the Third Party does rightly conclude that it is probable *A* is the aggressor, the move to intervention still goes too fast. Why is the Third Party restricted to only two judgments: *A* is the aggressor or *B* is? He can also withhold judgment. It seems odd to hold that even a slight probability that *A* is the aggressor justifies interven-

tion: Should one not require a threshold of sureness, even on Smith's own principles? Withholding judgment, after all, stands behind Smith's definition of atheism. Should he not use it here as well?

There is another incongruity in Smith's argument. On the one hand, the Third Party may interfere even if it is slightly more probable than not that he has correctly identified the aggressor. "Even partial evidence is overwhelming when weighed against no evidence at all" (p. 312). On the other hand, the Victim who wishes to defeat the presumption of aggression for initiating force must present the strongest case possible. It is precisely to avoid the risks of intervention, given this stringent requirement, that Smith surmises a Victim will employ a protection agency. Why the double standard? Further, the principle of evidence Smith suggests does not withstand examination. Suppose that someone is found murdered. The police discover no clues on the scene. Later, it is discovered that another person strongly disliked the murdered man. Do the police now have overwhelming evidence that this person is the murderer?

Suppose, however, that Smith is entirely correct about circumstances in which Third Parties may justifiably intervene. Will people then resort to protection agencies because they fear to assume the risks of Third Party intervention? I am not at all sure. If *C* may justifiably intervene when he sees *A* attack *B*, why will not *D*, a person who arrives still later, be justified on the same principle in taking action against *C*? Third Parties must face the risk of Fourth Parties, Fifth Parties, and so on. The problem that then arises for Smith is that if *A* is supposed to be deterred from direct action because of risk from intervention by *C*, why will *C* not be deterred from acting because of risk from *D*? If *C* is deterred, and *A* knows this, is there in fact much risk to *A* of Third Party intervention? The question soon becomes quite complicated. What about interferers with *D*'s action? I do not wish to risk advancing a solution to how the various parties are likely to act. But unless the complications leave *A* at substantial risk, Smith's argument for protection agencies fails.

A much simpler problem is also threatening. It does not follow that if Third Parties *may* intervene, then they are likely to do so. Perhaps *C* fears getting injured by *A*. Unless *A* has reason to think that he faces a good chance of intervention from *C*, it is not clear that he will be deterred from direct action. People are now at liberty to make a citizen's arrest of an armed bank robber, but few avail themselves of this opportunity.

Finally—though this is only a quibble—Smith defines "coercion" so that "It refers to a *state of affairs* that obtains among two or more persons when there is a violation of property title" (p. 323). This sentence is not a slip: he says elsewhere that if *B* takes *A*'s property, *A* and *B* are in a state of coercion. No doubt libertarian law differs from current law, but must proper English be changed as well?

This review has turned out substantially more critical than I anticipated when first taking up the volume. By concentrating on the philosophical articles, I have perhaps

given a misleading picture of the book's quality. The historical articles, I should emphasize, are very good indeed; and even the theoretical pieces always center on important issues. But I have a sense in reading them that although George Smith has considerable intelligence and talent, he does not fully grasp the depth and difficulty of philosophy.

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Notes

1. George H. Smith, *The Case Against God* (Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1971).
2. George H. Smith, "Justice Entrepreneurship in a Free Market," *JOURNAL OF LIBERTARIAN STUDIES* 3, no. 4 (Winter 1979): 405-26; and "Justice Entrepreneurship Revisited," *ibid.*, pp. 453-69.

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