

Review of Ronald Dworkin's *Religion without God*

Mark Satta
Ph.D. student, Purdue University

Religion without God by Ronald Dworkin. Pages: 192. Harvard University Press, 2013. ISBN: 978-0674726826.

Abstract: In *Religion without God*, Ronald Dworkin argues that “religion is deeper than God” and examines the implications of such a position on a variety of levels. This review summarizes the main arguments for and implications of the view that “religion is deeper than God.” It also provides a critical assessment of the work focusing on the applications Dworkin makes from his religious framework to our understanding of the place of objective value in the natural sciences and of a political right to freedom of religion.

Keywords: Ronald Dworkin, religion, theism, atheism, objective value

The accessibly presented insight contained in *Religion without God* exemplifies what made the late Ronald Dworkin an exceptional philosopher and legal scholar. The volume is small (the hardcover is 4 x 6 and 192 pages), but it is packed with big, important ideas. The book is the result of provisional revisions made to the Einstein Lectures that Dworkin delivered at the University of Bern in December 2011. The publisher notes that Dworkin had originally intended to “greatly expand his treatment of the subject” but illness prevented him from doing so.¹ Still, the volume serves as a valuable contribution to a brilliant career.

¹ Ronald Dworkin, *Religion without God* (Harvard University Press, 2013), ix

Dworkin identifies the theme of the book as the claim that “religion is deeper than God.”² The positive correlate to this claim is that religion “is a deep, distinct, and comprehensive worldview” which “holds that inherent, objective value permeates everything, that the universe and its creatures are awe-inspiring,” and “that human life has purpose and the universe order.”³ Dworkin rightly points out that, on this account, “a belief in god is only one possible manifestation or consequence of that deeper worldview.”⁴ Thus, for Dworkin, religious theists comprise only a subset of those who are religious. This religious worldview gets expressed through a religious attitude which “accepts the objective truth of two central judgments about value”—namely the judgments that “human life has objective meaning or importance” and that “what we call ‘nature’—the universe as a whole and in all its parts—is not just a matter of fact but is itself sublime: something of intrinsic value and wonder.”⁵ The book is divided into four chapters. The first chapter unpacks Dworkin’s general conception of religion while the remaining chapters examine this conception—each from a different, more particular perspective. These subsequent chapters are unified in their appeal to this general conception of religion, yet each is independent of the others and is more or less capable of standing on its own.

Before discussing these subsequent chapters, it will be useful to highlight a few other points that Dworkin makes in chapter one. First, Dworkin identifies religion as an interpretive concept—i.e. “people who use the concept do not agree

² Ibid, 1

³ Ibid

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Ibid, 10

about precisely what it means: when they use it, they are taking a stand about what it should mean.”⁶ Thus, Dworkin counsels his reader to consider the question “[w]hat account of religion would it be most revealing to adopt?”⁷ Hence, it would be a mistake to challenge Dworkin on the grounds that people often do not mean quite what he means by religion. This is to miss the point. Rather, Dworkin is seeking to identify the core of why something should count as religious, both on a philosophical and political level. Second, Dworkin’s goal is not to argue against the existence of a personal god(s). Rather his goal is to argue that if objective value exists, then god(s) cannot be the source of this value. Dworkin shows a deep commitment to answering the Euthyphro dilemma with the claim that the gods love the good because it is good—not the other way around. This leads to a third important point. Dworkin also does not argue that we ought to adopt a religious worldview. Rather Dworkin is arguing that the divide between the religious and non-religious (what Dworkin calls the “naturalist”) worldview is a difference in opinion about the existence of objective value. For Dworkin, this difference in opinion about the existence of objective value is the deep difference between the religious and non-religious. And it is this difference that should guide both our philosophical and political understanding of what makes one religious.

By far the longest chapter in the book is chapter two, entitled “The Universe,” in which Dworkin examines the religious attitude of many physicists that there is inherent beauty in the universe. Dworkin identifies two questions as being of particular import for this discussion—namely, “what role does the faith in objective

⁶ Ibid, 7

⁷ Ibid

beauty play in any physicist's actual research and speculation?" and "what *kind* of beauty could [these] physicists be thinking of?"⁸ The line of reasoning in this chapter contains at least two kinds of tension. The first is an internal tension caused by a lack of clarity as to whether Dworkin is making a descriptive case about what it is that physicists with a religious understanding of the universe in fact believe about the nature of beauty and its role in theorizing or a prescriptive case about what these physicists are entitled or permitted to believe. Most likely, Dworkin intends to do a bit of both. The problem is that Dworkin's critical examination of the "religious physicist's" view that there is objective beauty in the universe is unnecessary for the descriptive case and, by my assessment, relatively unsuccessful in the prescriptive case. The second tension is a tension between the tone and line of reasoning in chapter two and the tone and line of reasoning occurring in the rest of the book. Dworkin's goal in this book is to delineate what counts as a religious worldview from a non-religious worldview along lines that do not match up with the line between theism and atheism. However, Dworkin spends relatively little time arguing that scientists who believe that the world is objectively beautiful or value-laden should count among the religious. Rather, he seems to assume this from the outset and then engages with other questions that fall out of that assumption. Thus, while it was a thought-provoking chapter, in many ways chapter two felt like a temporary departure from the line of thought present in the rest of the book.

Chapter three addresses the question of how we should understand the political right to religious freedom. Dworkin claims, sensibly, that if we are to

⁸ Ibid, 51-52

sanction a special political right to religious freedom we “need to identify some particularly important interest people have, an interest so important that it deserves special protection against official or other injury.”⁹ This leads Dworkin to ask “[c]an we identify any special interest that people have because they believe in a god that they would not have if, like Einstein and millions of others, they subscribe to a religion without god?”¹⁰ Dworkin concludes that we cannot but that despite this we still have reasons not to do away with the idea of a right to religious freedom all together. This brings Dworkin to the point where he offers what might be viewed as the thesis of chapter three, that the right to religious freedom should be understood as a part of the general right to ethical independence—i.e. the right against the government’s restricting freedom because of an assumption that one way for people to live their lives is intrinsically better than another—as opposed to a special right like the freedom of speech.

This chapter is deeply rooted in practical considerations, and Dworkin is able to provide a number of legal cases in which our intuitions seem to support a view like his. However, his argument for the twofold conclusion that religion need not be limited to theism and that the right to religious freedom should be understood merely as part of ethical independence and not a special right of its own is less than air-tight in places. For example, Dworkin cites a Supreme Court ruling that the Native American Church should not be given an exemption that would allow the church’s members to use peyote for religious purposes and Congress’ passing of the popular Religious Freedom Restoration Act “which insisted that the Court’s decision

⁹ Ibid, 111

¹⁰ Ibid, 112

was wrong.”¹¹ Dworkin claims that the Supreme Court was right and Congress wrong because “[i]f the Native American Church is entitled to an exemption from drug control laws, then Huxley followers would also be entitled to an exemption, and skeptical hippies would be entitled to denounce the entire drug-control regime as a religious establishment.”¹² The problem with this rationale is that seeing the right to religious freedom as a special right only leads to these problematic outcomes if one adopts Dworkin’s view that “religion is deeper than God.” What this case seems to show is that Dworkin’s conception of religion does not go well with his opposition to religion being a special right. However, rather than keeping Dworkin’s conception of religion and embracing the view that the right to religious freedom falls under the more general right to ethical independence, one could just as easily retain the view that the right to religious freedom is a special right and cite the case of the Native American Church and the Religious Freedom Restoration Act as evidence against Dworkin’s conception of religion.

This leads naturally to a point about interpretation. In this review I have assumed that Dworkin’s main goal in *Religion without God* is to make a case for a particular conception of religion—one that is “deeper than God” and is rooted in beliefs about the objective value of human beings and nature. I have done so because this seems to be the most natural reading of the book. However, I think there is an alternative way to read this book—namely, as an exploration of what follows if we adopt Dworkin’s conception of religion. On this interpretation of the book, given that we are assuming Dworkin’s conception of religion is correct,

¹¹ Ibid, 134

¹² Ibid, 135

Dworkin would be right to conclude that the peyote case shows a problem with viewing the right to religious freedom as a special right. This would also help make sense of the dialectic of chapter two. However, this reading comes with problems of its own because the language, particularly in the first chapter, lends itself to the view that Dworkin's conception of religion is to be argued for and not assumed in *Religion without God*.

The final chapter of the book briefly addresses death and immortality. Given that this final chapter is but ten pages long, Dworkin could only say so much. This chapter lacks the direction of some of the earlier chapters, but if one were to identify a main point of the chapter it might be that the views of the religious theist and the "religious atheist" about death and immortality need not be as different as some take them to be. In this chapter, Dworkin also nicely states what I take to be the core message of the book:

What matters most fundamentally to the drive to live well is the conviction that there is, independently and objectively, a right way to live. That is the center of what I described, in Chapter I, as a religious attitude to life. It is not available to a naturalist who thinks that reality consists only of matter and mind: that values are either illusions or fictions constructed out of matter and mind. In this most fundamental respect religious theists and religious atheists are at one. The existence or nonexistence of a god does not figure in the instinct of value that unites them.¹³

Dworkin's message in this book is beautifully ecumenical and offers something of value to scientists, theologians, legal scholars, philosophers and any other reader interested in thinking about the relationship between religion and God.

¹³ *Religion without God*, 155-156