

Course 5: Practical philosophy B – specialisation, 4p

Philosophy of Atheism

What am I doing here? What is the meaning of it all? What am I allowed to do? How did the universe start to exist? Often, when questions like these are put forward consecutively, as now, the next question is: “Is there a God?” In the great monotheistic religions – Islam, Judaism, and Christianity – God is the point on which a whole worldview rests. In this course, it will be discussed what happens with questions like the first ones if it is taken for granted that God does not exist and that “language games” with God in the centre have to be rejected. Friedrich Nietzsche, the philosopher who coined the expression “God is dead!”, was of the opinion that all ethics in the traditional sense have to be rejected. Existentialists such as Albert Camus thought that one is forced to regard the world as being “absurd”. However, these conclusions do not immediately follow. Instead, some classical theological questions come back in a new form. The classical question “Is God subordinated to the morally good, or can he decide what is good and evil?” transforms into “Is man subordinated to the morally good, or can s/he decide what is good and evil?” Depending on which answer the atheists opt for, a nihilistic atheism or an ethical atheism arises. Another question is whether there are reasons for atheists to bring into their own worldview any emotion or attitude of the sort often held to be a typically religious emotion or attitude. For instance, is there anything that an atheist can, or even should, regard as being holy? One might also discuss whether a philosophically informed atheism has to accept the existence of something upon which the whole atheistic worldview rests. Does perhaps Thomas Nagel’s famous “view from nowhere” presuppose the existence of a God-like point “Nowhere”? As many atheists have found philosophy of religion interesting because it does not treat religion as unproblematic, many believers might find the philosophy of atheism interesting because it does not treat atheism as unproblematic. Philosophy of atheism is, so to speak, philosophy of religion turned upside down. For a long time, we have been accustomed to distinguishing between different religions; similarly, we ought to become accustomed to distinguishing between various kinds of atheisms. There is, for instance, quite an important gap between fundamentalist atheisms that strive to prohibit religion and tolerant atheisms that really are in favour of freedom of religion-and-atheism.

Reading list:

Robin Le Poidevin, *Arguing for Atheism. An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, Routledge 1996 (5th printing 2001); (ca 150 pages).

Thomas Nagel, *Mortal Questions*, chapters 1 (“The Death”) and 2 (“The Absurd”), Cambridge University Press 1979 (9th printing 2004); (ca 25 pages).

Thomas Nagel, *The Last Word*, chapters 6 (“Ethics”) and 7 (“Evolutionary Naturalism and the Fear of Religion”), Oxford University Press 1997; (ca 40 pages).

Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphos* (1942), parts I (“Absurd Reasoning”) and IV (“The Myth of Sisyphos”), at least in the Swedish translation; (ca 50 pages).

Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (1882), First and Third book, at least in the Swedish translation; (ca 110 pages).

Teacher: Ingvar Johansson (IJ)

Lecture 1 Monday 051205

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Lecture 8 Tuesday 051220

The first two lectures will be concerned with “atheism, theism and infinite regresses”, number 3 and 4 with “atheism and ethics”, 5 and 6 with “atheism and the meaning of life”, and the last two lectures will be devoted to “atheism and adequate emotions”.

Examination:

Each student should write a paper called “Some essential arguments in favour of atheism of kind x” (with the value of x freely chosen) or “Some essential arguments against atheism”. The paper has to contain some references to the reading list.