

Book Review

Peter Boghossian, *A Manual for Creating Atheists*, Pitchstone Publishing, 2013, 280pp., \$14.95, ISBN 978-1939578099 (paperback) Foreword by Michael Shermer.

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A Manual for Creating Atheists (hereafter, “the *Manual*”) is a training guidebook for curing those “contaminated” with what Boghossian calls “the faith virus.” It is replete with pithy aphorisms, guidelines, strategies, talking points, dialectical examples and analyses of real-life “interventions” designed to progressively tutor armies of atheist evangelists in the art of demolishing faith, which Boghossian claims is “pretending to know things one doesn’t know.”

Boghossian analyzes faith as a viral complex of pathogenic memes designed to inculcate “doxastic closure” – reason-insensitivity. The *Manual* reads like a bulletin from the Centers for Disease Control, a citizens’ how-to guide designed to enable millions-strong armies of ‘street’ epistemologists to eradicate faith, “ushering in a new Enlightenment and Age of Reason” (17-18). He views this as the next step in a movement initiated by the “Four Horsemen” of atheism: Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, and Christopher Hitchens.

The book is not a collection of metaphysical arguments about the non-existence of God. Boghossian includes many arguments about the irrationality of faith and counterarguments against theists’ typical defenses, but advises street epistemologists against lending credibility to the *metaphysical* issue of God’s existence, as if there are two sides to it. Boghossian takes it for granted that there are no good reasons for faith, and most who would purchase the *Manual* likely agree. Rather, those infected with the faith virus need to be engaged *epistemologically*: directed through Socratic inquiry to acknowledge their pretending to know what they don’t know, to accept *aporia*, uncertainty. Anyone con-

taminated by the faith virus presents the street epistemologist with an opportunity for a Socratic intervention – on planes, bank lines, at doctor’s office waiting areas, etc.

Boghossian provides a variety of useful insights, strategies, and clues about how to bring about doxastic openness, the opposite of doxastic closure, often illustrating them through actual intervention dialogues he has held with hosts of the faith virus. Although Boghossian avoids metaphysics, I found many useful things to take from the *Manual* into my philosophy of religion and related classes. And while he makes no attempt to make the book “balanced” (because that would be like debating with Creationists), the book (or parts of it) could play a useful role in an introductory philosophy, philosophy of religion, or epistemology class.

Boghossian’s emphasis on epistemology as the antidote to faith rings true in my own case. What drew me to philosophy as a teenager were personal mystical experiences I could not explain on the materialist view: out-of-body experiences, multiply-complex precognitive dreams, and deep altered states in meditation. I thought philosophy would provide the conceptual sophistication to explain the metaphysically unusual underpinnings of these powerfully noetic experiences. To my chagrin, my first epistemology class – which did not address these sorts of experiences at all – cast doubt on my gnostic sense of absolute certainty, the veracity of my memories, and the extent to which my experiences were as theoretically unbiased as I previously believed. Indirect epistemological inquiry led to

loss of faith, but it took years of self-inquiry before I could say I have shifted – fairly stably – from gnostic to agnostic.

Thus, I have doubts about how successful this methodology will be with the person on the street. The encounters Boghossian prescribes for his army of street epistemologists are relatively short-lived exchanges. I have a semester-long captive audience with my philosophy of religion students, I am in charge of the discussion, I support it with readings, quizzes, essays, PowerPoints, videos, exams, and social media tools and I reward students for detecting and responding to my expectations, often to no avail with the faithful. Boghossian suggests what many academics often tell ourselves, that we are planting seeds. He claims that the more vehemently our interlocutors resist the implications of our lines of inquiry, this is a diagnostic sign that the remedy is beginning to work; but this sounds, ironically, more like an article of faith than an empirically-supported diagnostic indicator.

Boghossian supports many of his claims with references to published materials in relevant domains, such as social science studies of cult deprogramming data and the like, but another irony is that he has a ready answer for the evidential gaps peppered throughout: the fact that social science research is conducted under the oversight of institutional review boards that frown on treating faith as a pathology, for a variety of cultural reasons he exposes and disentangles quite deftly, ranging from the widely accepted perception of faith and unshakeable conviction as virtues to the hands-off autonomy and dignity relativistically afforded to individuals' beliefs. This is ironically somewhat unfalsifiable, at least to date.

Boghossian outlines a variety of what he describes as “containment strategies” that go beyond the one-on-one chance-encounters to be expected of his street epistemologists, going so far as to insist that faith-based delusions be introduced into the Diagnostic Statistical Manual for mental illnesses, thereby enabling serious social science research into the causes and cures of the faith virus, and that our society eliminate the tax exemptions afforded to religious institutions that are not afforded to other non-profits. He even appeals to his readers to not purchase books by the faithful, so as to economically weaken the power of “vectors”, seemingly symptomless carriers of the faith virus, to spread it to others. To the

extent Boghossian uses the language of contamination, virus, disease, pathology, diagnosis, prescription, containment, intervention, vector, and the like, his perspective on faith as a doxastic pathogen is at least entertaining and at best enlightening. His stance is so strictly non-negotiable that it instinctively elicited my underdog-protecting proclivities, despite that I looked initially to the *Manual* for help dealing with doxastically closed theists, and despite his explicit advice to street epistemologists to remain light-hearted precisely so as to evade this reflex reaction.

In defense of the allegedly contaminated, then, to speak in my own idioms a bit, let me note some weaknesses in Boghossian's *Manual*. One thing I find difficult to accept is Boghossian's insistence that agnosticism is unjustifiable. His cavalier rejection of this position rests on the following analogy: He is not a Santa Claus agnostic, but a Santa Claus atheist. But this analogy is faulty, for whereas only children (and perhaps a few doxastically challenged adults) have ever believed in Santa Claus, Boghossian's claim that no argument for God's existence has stood the test of time is not on par with the case against Santa. The multitude of complex concepts of divinity and supernature throughout history and across cultures, including contemporary thought, renders the God case much more complex than it would be if all we meant by the God-concept was the Abrahamic concept. As Protagoras put it, life is too short and the subject is too complex to know one way or the other.

In a league with Boghossian's rejection of agnosticism is his somewhat cavalier description of the atheist as one who would believe in God if shown good evidence, for example, if Jesus were to come down from the sky, walk on water, and so forth. Sure, in principle an atheist is an atheist because she is an evidentialist and has found negative evidence for God's existence (such as the extent of evil and imperfection in what appears to be a stupidly designed world) and/or the absence of positive evidence for his existence (say, real miracles); as an evidentialist, she must say that the evidence could indicate that there is a God, and that if it did, she would become a theist. Of course, this much makes sense. But as William James implied, the atheist might be so doxastically closed to the very possibility of evidence that it is not a cognitively open or “live” option for her, such that she systematically ignores data that could count as evidence, for example, the sorts of experiences that led me to philosophy.

Ockham's Razor and error theories might be enough to presently dispel positive theistic conclusions based on such claims *per se*, but that is not the same thing as justifying the idea that such matters are not worthy of empirical investigation. Nor does it close options that render agnosticism an empirically viable position. Perhaps Boghossian is unconsciously taking the negotiator's strategy of starting off from the extreme atheist position so that after some negotiating what remains is still desirable, whereas starting from agnosticism leaves little wiggle room; perhaps not.

Another, related objection is to both of Boghossian's definitions of faith. Let's focus first on the definition of "faith" as "pretending to know what one doesn't know." I have mixed feelings about this. On the one hand, I found it interesting to take his challenge to simply substitute the phrase "pretend to know" in place of occurrences of the word "faith" wherever they occur. For example, followers of the 14th Dalai Lama pretend to know that he is the reincarnation of the 13th Dalai Lama, himself the reincarnation of the 12th, and so on. Catholics pretend to know that the communion wafer is metaphysically identical to the flesh of Jesus. As much as this was sort of fun, it strikes me as some sort of cross between the straw man fallacy and the fallacy of persuasive definition. It's a straw man because many who use the word "faith" would deny that they are pretending to know what it is they have faith in. For example, some intellectually honest believers readily admit that faith is belief in the absence of the sort of evidence or reasons for believing that work to constitute knowledge. They believe despite lacking sufficient evidence. Boghossian tries to account for this by saying that "faith" and "hope" are not synonyms. He poses a "thought challenge" to prove this: "*Give me a sentence where one must use the word 'faith,' and cannot replace that with 'hope,' yet at the same time isn't an example of pretending to know something one doesn't know*" (26).

I'm not sure about the methodological validity of this "thought challenge" because many do use the word "faith" to imply some possibly blended combination of doxastic and motivational elements; for example, "I don't know if there is life after death or if spirituality matters at all because I have insufficient evidence to think I know that it does, and I certainly do hope that it does, so I take a risk with a leap of faith and live my life as if it does." Whether hope is part of that or not can be separated from the thought challenge

simply by removing "and I certainly hope that it does," but inserting it doesn't violate my semantic intuitions, and nothing here seems to involve me pretending to know something I don't, so I don't see a real challenge here. Sophisticated theists don't need to think hope is an *evidential* reason for believing, although they *may* think it is a pragmatic reason for believing, and the more sophisticated among them would not claim that it counts as some form of knowledge; nor would they pretend that in hoping or having faith that they know something they pointedly don't. Thus, Boghossian's analysis and its substitution test fail. As for the fallacy of persuasive definition, it begs the question to define key terms in a debate in such a (persuasive) way that the disputed conclusion one seeks follows from one's stipulated definition by fiat, as it were. A sample case that exhibits the fallacious nature of persuasive definition would involve defining a "fetus" as an "unborn person" such that the pro-life conclusion that "abortion is murder" follows from the definition together with otherwise innocuous premises about abortion involving the killing of an innocent person, and so on. Thus, by defining "faith" as "pretending to know what one doesn't know," Boghossian guarantees that faith is, as he puts it, a faulty epistemology.

The other definition of "faith" Boghossian offers is "belief without evidence," which in itself is fine, but in explicating this he says things like "'faith' is the word one uses when one does not have enough evidence to justify holding a belief, but when one just goes ahead and believes anyway" or that it is "an irrational leap over the probabilities" (24). On a fairly minimal account of what a belief is, we can suppose it is something like "a thought one thinks is true." I often think things are true – that is, I have beliefs – in the absence of enough evidence to justify my holding of those thoughts that I take to be true. I think it is true that my file cabinet is still in my office, though I haven't been to the campus in over a week, I have no webcam aiming a live feed at it, I have not received verification from any colleagues, and so forth. I would not claim to know it is there because I know that I could be wrong. But I believe it's there. Boghossian can say I have sufficient evidence to believe it, and that the belief does not involve an irrational leap over the probabilities. It's probably true that the file cabinet is there, so my belief is justified. But many of my beliefs are not as justified as is my file cabinet belief. It seems to butcher my use of the word "faith" to say that I have faith in these things. Of course, if Boghossian puts the

weight on the “irrational” element in “irrational leap over the probabilities,” then that strikes me as another blend of fallacies -- straw man and circularity: straw man because that’s not what pragmatists mean when they use the term, and circularity because the conclusion that faith is irrational is built into the explication of the definition.

For one advocating epistemology for the multitudes on the streets, I’m surprised at these somewhat sloppy uses of key concepts in Boghossian’s atheism arsenal. Consider how *belief* has dropped out of his “belief without evidence” definition, to be replaced by *knowledge*: “If one claims knowledge either in the absence of evidence, or when a claim is contradicted by evidence, then this is when the word ‘faith’ is used. ‘Believing something anyway’ is an accurate definition of the term ‘faith’” (24). No doubt, *some* theists use the term “faith” in this way, and *many* are doxastically closed, but most of my encounters with theists do not support the view that they employ the term as a knowledge operator, but rather as an insufficiently-justified-belief operator.

Another objection is that Boghossian seems to equivocate when he claims, on one hand, that for street epistemologists performing interventions “*the core of the intervention is not changing beliefs, but changing the way people form beliefs*” (72), but, on the other hand, the whole point of the book – reflected in its title – is to convert theists into atheists: to get people to change from their belief that there is a God to the belief that there is no God. It is *strategic* to focus on changing from a faulty epistemology to a more coherent one, but if one intends the result to be *Creating Atheists*, it is misleading to claim that an improved epistemology is the core goal. If it is, however, then the title is misleading. One or the other must be adjusted.

Let us wind this review down with some positives. I mentioned earlier that this book contains few arguments against God’s existence, but many against faith. Here’s a paraphrase of one he considers most persuasive that I have found powerful specifically against theists convinced of the divine authority of only their tradition’s scriptures: Different traditions’ scriptures contradict each other and cannot all be true; therefore, some of them must be false (30-31). I typically add and emphasize that most people are indoctrinated into

their faith by accidents of birth, and that if they were born into different traditions, they would have faith that those were the only correct ones; I also add that most faith traditions make the same types of moves, such as discouraging doubt, appealing to the incomprehensibility of the divine, waffling between literal and metaphorical interpretations, etc., adding that to any member of religion A, religion B’s explanations seem silly, and vice versa. Again, the *Manual* does not engage with traditional arguments in philosophy of religion, but it is loaded with original arguments against the rationality of faith. Boghossian provides his army of atheist proselytizers with an ample cache of intellectual weapons, including astute summaries of the virus’s standard defense mechanisms and clever strategies for dealing with them.

Another instructive element of the *Manual* is the inclusion throughout several of its chapters of actual samples of what Boghossian calls “interventions,” dialogues in which he plays the Socratic role with folks afflicted with the faith contagion, displaying for his street epistemologists the ways in which certain moves work and how others can fail. If nothing else, Boghossian seems honest insofar as some of these dialogues are admitted failures that he analyzes in search of self-improvement, as a way of walking budding street epistemologists through the ongoing training. I found these records of his conversations with the faithful the most entertaining. If nothing else, Boghossian does a very good job of modeling Socratic inquiry in his dialogues, particularly well even with folks who, on a good day, make Euthyphro look wise.

The *Manual* begins with a Foreword from Michael Schermer followed by nine-chapters that make for a very easy, enjoyable, overall enlightening read, followed by useful appendices, glossary, references, and an index, and each chapter is followed by endnotes and a “Dig Deeper” section in which Boghossian provides the reader with references to external items relevant to that chapter, such as videos, books, articles, websites, organizations, camps, legal services, and the like, many of which are prefaced with explanatory remarks to guide the reader’s further explorations. Any minor objections notwithstanding, Boghossian’s *A Manual for Creating Atheists* is a worthwhile adventure into Boghossian’s sobering vision.