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David Bentley Hart

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*"A necessary book."
Michael Robbins, Commonwealth*

DAVID BENTLEY HART
AUTHOR OF ATHEIST DELUSIONS



#25432 in Books Hart David Bentley 2014-09-30Original language:EnglishPDF # 1 8.53 x 1.02 x 5.54l,
#File Name: 0300209355376 pagesThe Experience of God Being Consciousness Bliss | File size: 62.Mb

David Bentley Hart : The Experience of God: Being, Consciousness, Bliss before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Experience of God: Being, Consciousness, Bliss:

212 of 225 people found the following review helpful. Rich, Readable, and Vintage HartBy Derrick A. PetersonMy general preamble to reviews these days starts the same way: I have fallen out of the habit of writing reviews because I think to do a review properly takes the time and energy at this moment in my education I would prefer be spent reading. Nonetheless both the excellence of this book and what in my humble opinion is the poorness of another

review, have momentarily called me back. It is of course anyone's right to give a one-star review to a book--even a book I love; in doing so however one would hope cogent reasons other than "I didn't understand it" or vague incriminations of association with a journal one apparently dislikes, would be more than forthcoming. Sadly, such was not the case. That said, I can assure you that my "five-star" rating is not merely serving as a countervalance to the one-star, it is my genuine opinion of the book that would have been given either way. But now that the throat-clearing is done, lets get down to business. Long story short: if you have read Hart and enjoyed his learnedness and witticism in the past, buy this book. If you haven't read Hart but are intrigued: this, or *Atheist Delusions*, are the places to start. In short: buy this book. Read it, Enjoy it. Pop some popcorn and wait for the fireworks. There really is no second guessing (especially at the affordable price). I was initially expecting something of a sequel to *Beauty of the Infinite* (which I still consider my favorite of Hart's books, despite its difficulty) but really for those interested I would consider this more akin to *Atheist Delusions* than anything. Much like Hart taking great pleasures dismantling many of our august myths regarding Christian history, here Hart takes aim at much of the tosh that passes for "talk about God," in the modern arena--particularly in the "God debates" between Fundamentalists and New-Atheists of all sorts. If you were like me, and were confused by the description of the book (Sanskrit? Hinduism? What is going on?) Hart attempts to dismantle--in classical Hart style--all these poor imitations of the Almighty by marshaling the resources of the "Classical theistic traditions" (note the plural, Hart includes Judaism, Islam, several forms of Hinduism, and others alongside Christianity). Here Hart thus takes an interesting--and perhaps controversial, for those of us still riding the avalanche of trinitarian scholarship of the last thirty years--approach by noting many of the conceptual similarities between these traditions and their theological and philosophical attempts to come to a "rational" picture of God. Thus Hart explicitly marshals the language of Thomas (which I'm sure many will recognize from Rahner's criticism of it): "There is an old Scholastic distinction between religious treatises written 'De Deo Uno' [on the one God] and 'de Deo Trino' [on the Triune God]..between, that is, those that are 'about the One God' known to persons of various faiths and philosophies, and those that are about the 'Trinitarian God' of Christian doctrine. I want to distinguish in a similar way between, on the one hand, metaphysical or philosophical descriptions of God and, on the other, dogmatic or confessional descriptions, and confine myself to the former." (4) In doing so, Hart opens with the wonderful line "this is either an extremely ambitious book, or an extremely unambitious book." Which is to say the goal of the book is such: "My intention," says Hart, "is simply to offer a definition of the word 'God' or of its equivalents in other tongues, and to do so in fairly slavish obedience to the classical definitions of the divine found in the theological and philosophical schools of most of the major religious traditions." As such, Hart wants to clarify just what this "God" is that we should, or should not believe in. He organizes this task around three themes familiar to anyone who has read the subheading to the book: Being, Consciousness, Bliss. Which is to say, how these "moments" or "concepts" implicate, and are implicated by, God: (taking some limited examples from the chapters) our Being as contingency implying an Ultimate non-Contingent, our conscious orientations to the world presupposing in every mundane thought, act, and supposition a reference to the infinite, and indeed a saturation by it--or that the mind and reality should be compatible with each other at all, and (to those familiar with Hart's work on Gregory of Nyssa this will sound familiar) our "bliss" or the ecstatic moments of rapture and joy, our "stretching out" or *epektasis* into infinity. Thus Hart provides three basic reasons for these terms: 1.) They more or less adequately summarize three concepts by which classical theism represented God (here those with Trinitarian hesitation to Hart's "separation of Treatises" will be relieved to note Hart's extensive talk of the Cappadocians, Augustine, Maximus the Confessor, and Bonaventure's concept of God as Love in Trinitarian form, a la *Beauty of the Infinite*. Hart has not strayed from his roots) 2.) Represent how humankind's relationship to God can be summarized by concepts and 3.) These three "moments" represent that which, it seems to Hart (quite rightly, I think) cannot be "metaphysically accounted for" by assuming metaphysical naturalism (42-45). Thus, following *Beauty of the Infinite's* discourse of the "beautiful rhetoric" of Theistic discourse's ability to "illuminate existence," there is here a limited apologetic purpose; Hart repeatedly affirms that he is not attempting to "prove" God, yet he also frequently repeats that authentic theology and apologetics have a fuzzy line, and that part of the task of unburdening us of idols and caricatures of God is also to bring forth the true power of the theistic tradition's actual "picture of God" (for lack of a better term) and how it represents a rationally, emotionally, and aesthetically robust "explanation" (again, for lack of a better term) of reality. This is, of course, not "God-of-the Gaps" here, where God appears in spaces allowed by the aporia of some natural mechanism: "All the classical theological arguments regarding the order of the world" in fact "assume just the opposite: that God's creative power can be seen in the rational coherence of nature as a perfect whole; that the universe was not simply a factitious product of a supreme intellect but the unfolding of the omnipresent divine wisdom or *logos*." (38) It would be difficult to summarize further without simply spoiling the book, but I will end with a few anecdotal observations of my own. The first is that one of the great surprises of the book is its readability. *Atheist Delusions* was of course quite readable, but this book represents Hart at his most "purified" and understandable (contra another reviewer, in my opinion); he is of course classic Hart (thus there are still flourishes that will make one reach for the dictionary), but classic Hart, I might say, doing his best Chesterton impression. His lucidness here is uncanny, as his ability to calmly explain and lay out themes one may already have familiarity with. There are--at least there was for me--many "wow" moments when

Hart shows you something you have been looking at but did not quite recognize you saw. This is also, in my opinion, Hart's funniest book, with Hart's typically penetrating observation producing (at least for me) some actual laugh-out-loud moments. There is for example (I won't ruin it) a particularly great moment where Hart is tearing into analytic theology by telling a brief story of a coffee-loving dolphin; or there are great one-liners like "I am enough of a romantic to believe that if something is worth being rude about, it is worth understanding as well." Other surprises abound. For example, Hart takes on analytic theology repeatedly (though he is quite respectful of those like Alvin Plantinga, he is almost palpably frustrated by others), and I for one was quite surprised with Hart's extensive engagement with evolutionary and cognitive science literature (some of Hart's book reads very similar to his friend Conor Cunningham's book *Darwin's Pious Idea*). These are fun new territories to watch Hart turn his immense talents and intellect toward. Further, if I had a complaint about *Atheist Delusions* it was that Hart, despite his obviously immense learning, is often coy about his sources. I do not doubt the veracity of his claims, but for those like myself who like to hunt down new avenues of reading, the sparse annotations and bibliography were irritating. Here, Hart does follow much the same formula, with very few endnotes trailing his oceans of prose. However he adds a wonderful (and surprisingly fun to read) "Bibliographic Postscript" which is a sort of annotated bibliography (343-350), but reads more like one is having coffee with Hart and he is giving his opinion on sources used, and others which should be read by those interested. But enough of my review, go start reading. Get lost in Hart's beautiful prose and wonderful mind. Even if you end up disagreeing with everything he wrote, I think you will have at least left the encounter having learned quite a bit.

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Dazzling By WLS This is a wonderful essay on how a traditional conception of God--not just a Christian one but global--holds up well in a secular/materialist/naturalist milieu. (There are also well-deserved pokes at the so-called "New Atheists.") Hart is an eloquent and entertaining writer, perhaps relying a bit more on rhetoric and less on argument than he should. But even if you disagree with his positions, and I do to some extent, there is much to learn from this erudite scholar. One of the better efforts at theology in the 21st Century.

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Philosophical, a delight to read By Cindy So far I'm loving this book. It's philosophical but not so deep I can't follow it. If you're not into that sort of thing you probably won't like it, but it's great for me. Very enlightening. I love Hart's use of language. Such beautiful word pictures. Really, even if you couldn't follow the train of thought, it's lovely to read if only for the poetic visuals.

Despite the recent ferocious public debate about belief, the concept most central to the discussion God frequently remains vaguely and obscurely described. Are those engaged in these arguments even talking about the same thing? In a wide-ranging response to this confusion, esteemed scholar David Bentley Hart pursues a clarification of how the word God functions in the world's great theistic faiths. Ranging broadly across Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Vedantic and Bhaktic Hinduism, Sikhism, and Buddhism, Hart explores how these great intellectual traditions treat humanity's knowledge of the divine mysteries. Constructing his argument around three principal metaphysical moments being, consciousness, and bliss the author demonstrates an essential continuity between our fundamental experience of reality and the ultimate reality to which that experience inevitably points. Thoroughly dismissing such blatant misconceptions as the deists' concept of God, as well as the fundamentalist view of the Bible as an objective historical record, Hart provides a welcome antidote to simplistic manifestoes. In doing so, he plumbs the depths of humanity's experience of the world as powerful evidence for the reality of God and captures the beauty and poetry of traditional reflection upon the divine.

"Hart marshals powerful historical evidence and philosophical argument to suggest that atheists if they want to attack the opposition's strongest case badly need to up their game." Oliver Burkeman, *The Guardian* "Hart . . . recalls believers of all faiths to the best of their traditions, challenges unbelievers to examine their own metaphysical presuppositions, and does these with tremendous gusto. . . . A necessary book." Michael Robbins, *Commonweal* "Stunning . . . bracing and bold. . . . For provoking deep thought about the profoundest human questions, and for taking an intelligent stand in defense of faith. . . . Hart deserves the gratitude of a large and appreciative audience." Damon Linker, *The Week* "A thoroughly entertaining and engaging read. Its difficult to convey to those who are unacquainted with Hart's writing the sheer exuberance of his prose and the bite to his wit." Ryan Marr, *Catholic Books* "Bracing and eloquent . . . fans of Hart's winsome prose will not be disappointed . . . a fine work." Edward T. Oakes, S.J., *National* "Impressive." David Gibson, *Religion News Service* "Hart is a phenomenally gifted thinker who recalls believers of all faiths to the best of their traditions, challenges unbelievers to examine their own metaphysical presuppositions, and does these with tremendous gusto. . . . A necessary book." Michael Robbins, *Commonweal* "Magnificent. . . . Massively learned and gorgeously written, *The Experience of God* should entirely transform contemporary debates concerning the validity of belief in the divine." Mark Anthony Signorelli, *University Bookman* "Creative and engaging . . . a stunning and provocative achievement." Kenneth Oakes, *Reformation 21* "Hart is as skilled a rhetorician as he is a theologian, and is able to deliver a punchy verbal image of the God who transcends all images." Francesca Aran Murphy, *First Things* "[Hart] retrieves and celebrates the classic Christian understanding of God . . . [with] rigorous logic and a caustic style.

. . . His elegant prose and witty invective bring Evelyn Waugh to mind. . . Harts exuberant writing unmasks the false pretensions of secularism."Sidney Callahan, Commonweal "David Hart can always be relied on to offer a perspective on Christian faith that is both profound and unexpected. In this masterpiece of quiet intellectual and spiritual passion, he magnificently sets the record straight as to what sort of God Christians believe in and why."Rowan Williams, University of Cambridge "David Harts new book is nothing less than astounding. He is liberal, conservative, radical, theological, philosophical, and historical all at the same time that is his genius. There is no American writing on religion as intelligently, bravely, and originally as Hart."Conor Cunningham, University of Nottingham "David Bentley Harts new book is a feast- stylish and substantial. Bringing together Sanskritic analyses of Gods being with Latin and Greek and Arabic ones, this is a considerable achievement by one of the most distinctive voices in contemporary theology."Paul J. Griffiths, Duke Divinity School "Writing at a high philosophical level with a sharp sense of humor, Hart argues for an ecumenical Theism. Devastatingly accurate, imaginative, and immensely readable, this is David Bentley Harts best book."Francesca Murphy, University of Notre Dame "Magnificent . . . a book unlike anything done in recent times and one that only Hart could write."Robert Louis Wilken