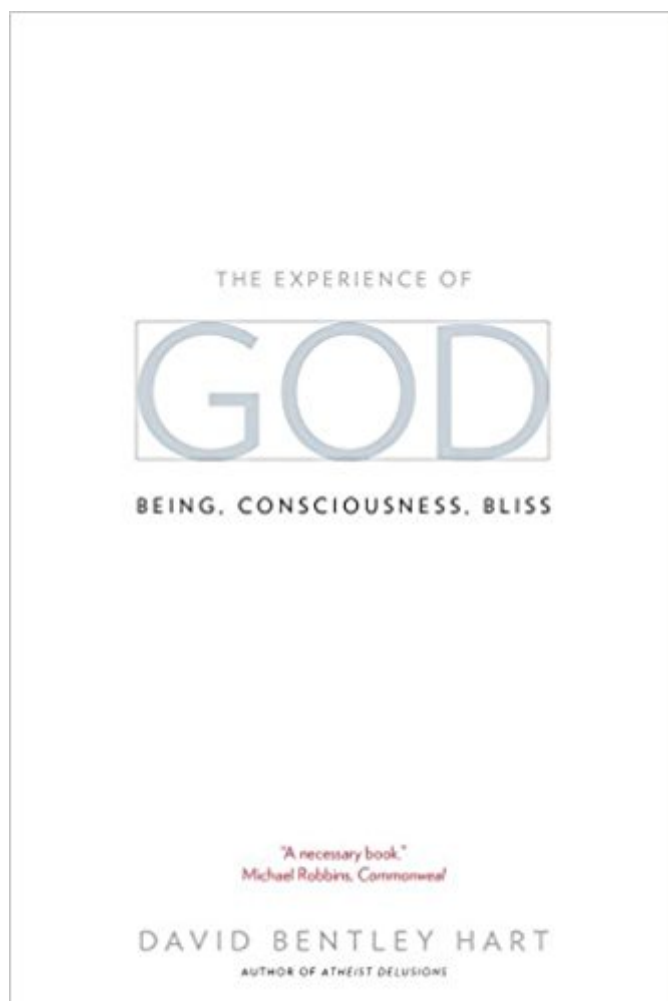


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The Experience Of God: Being, Consciousness, Bliss



Synopsis

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.

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Customer Reviews

"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. It's 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 Review "Bracing and eloquent . . . fans of Hart's winsome prose will not be disappointed . . . a fine work."

—Edward T. Oakes, S.J., National Review "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. . . . Hart's 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 Hart's 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 Hart's new book is a feast—stylish and substantial. Bringing together Sanskrit analyses of God's 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 Hart's 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

Praise for David Bentley Hart's *Atheist Delusions* • [A] major work by one of the most learned, forceful, and witty Christian theologians currently writing. • First Things • With impressive erudition and polemical panache, David Hart smites hip and thigh the peddlers of a "new atheism" that recycles hoary arguments from the past. His grim assessment of our cultural moment challenges the hope that the Christian revolution could happen again. • Richard John Neuhaus • Hart has the gifts of a good advocate. He writes with clarity and force, and he drives his points home again and again. He exposes his opponents' errors of fact or logic with ruthless precision. • Anthony Kenny, Times Literary Supplement • [This book] takes no prisoners in its response to fashionable criticisms of Christianity. • Dr. Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury, Church Times • *Atheist Delusions* will be remembered as Hart's breakout book. His contributions to such journals as *First Things* have long marked him as a rising public intellectual. . . . Hart's work is now likely to come to the attention of a wider audience. And not a moment too soon." • William J. Portier, *Commonweal* • --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

DBH has written nothing new here... and that is exactly the point. The whole premise of the book is not that we have some new evidence or philosophy that addresses the modern era, but that the modern era has been impoverished by the loss of ancient wisdom. DBH essentially pulls or stretches wisdom from the ancient past and explains not only how it is relevant, but how it is key to understanding the most fundamental question of history. DBH makes the case not that the popular atheists have the wrong answers, but that the answers they give aren't even relevant. The quote on the front of the book says "A necessary book." This is especially true for those of us (myself included) who are Protestant Christians. While I believe that Protestantism has been a beneficial thing, I also think that sometimes we do not give the ancients sufficient credit. The ideas presented in this book should be taught in every Sunday School. I think there might be fewer people leaving the faith in University if we did. One thing I might add, however, is that for those who do not have a background in Philosophy there are concepts in this book that might seem difficult, or odd. In particular how DBH uses causality in some of his discussions. If you do not understand those

concepts I would recommend reading Ed Feser's book "The Last Superstition" first. He gives a good primer on Plato, Aristotle, and Aquinas that can set your foundation as such that DBH makes more sense. There are only two issues I have with the book. The first is that he does to Intelligent Design what most people who are opposed to Intelligent Design do; misrepresent it or misunderstand it. I find that unfortunate because, while I believe DBH is correct in stating that Intelligent Design is insufficient compared to ancient philosophy to address the question of the Absolute, most ID proponents would have no problem integrating DBH's philosophy into their worldview. And it seems probable to me that many actually do. ID is not simply about probability and is much richer than it is often caricatured. The second issue is that there is no index entry for "Dolphin, coffee drinking"

My 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 pooriness 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, let's 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.

Good reading on what exactly is meant by "God" as traditionally viewed by monotheists across history and cultures. One really ought to have an idea of what one is talking about before taking a position either way, I think, because otherwise one ends up affirming or denying a caricature, and this is especially unfitting for the thinking man with the leisure and intellect to know better. Also, an excellent philosophical introduction to theology and some related topics. But even as someone with an undergraduate background of philosophy with good reading skills, his vocabulary was a bit daunting. I had to write down all the words I didn't understand and then look them up in a collegiate dictionary because of how advanced or obscure they were.

I definitely didn't understand everything, but this book blew me away. Hart claims it's not a theology book since it contains no confessional creeds by focusing on how major theistic traditions agree on divine simplicity. Hart explains how God is different from god, and goes into great detail explaining how many of the natural experiences we take for granted (our being and existence, consciousness, and bliss) can only be encountered through the supernatural, and how they all ultimately intersect at the one and infinitely simple God. Every Christian or atheist person should read this book, despite the admittedly unnecessary invective from Hart

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