

Ziporyn, Brook. *Experiments in Mystical Atheism: Godless Epiphanies from Daoism to Spinoza and Beyond*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2024, 372 pp.

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Brook Ziporyn's goal in *Experiments in Mystical Atheism* (2024) is to defend an alternative form of mysticism, a mysticism that is atheistic and involves very different experiences than standard theistic mysticism. Furthermore, this atheistic mysticism is superior to theistic mysticism. Ziporyn's central claims are intriguing and fairly complex. Below I summarize Ziporyn's central argument, and present some critical remarks.

The atheism in Ziporyn's mystical atheism is rather different than the atheism commonly known in the West. Mystical atheism is not materialistic or physicalist (at least not necessarily so). It needs not even be naturalistic since it can allow for the existence of supernatural beings. Prime examples of mystical atheism are Chinese Daoism and Tiantai Buddhism. Especially adherents of the latter are known for worshipping a host of supernatural beings, like bodhisattvas. Nonetheless, according to Ziporyn, they count as atheistic. Mystical atheism also embraces infinity and an ultimate reality beyond space-time. This ultimate reality is, however, very different than a theistic ultimate reality.

According to Ziporyn, many common forms of atheism do not go far enough. They retain certain elements as central to their worldview which are "borrowed", or compensations from theistic worldviews. Especially the instance on an ultimate purpose of reality (e.g., an ultimate ethical purpose) signals that many atheists continue to be under the spell of remnants of theism. Ziporyn argues that a truer form of atheism rejects all this.

What is then this truer form of atheism? According to Ziporyn, atheism is the rejection of theism and thus the rejection of the existence of God. This goes beyond rejecting the existence of a supreme supernatural being, or even of a creator, since rejecting God means rejecting that reality is in the end purposeful. In theistic worldviews, all of reality is geared towards a purpose. That purpose may be the enactment of God's will, or a realization of God's intention for the universe. According to Ziporyn all theistic traditions share this commitment to an ultimate goal of everything. This goal subsequently shapes (or should shape) all human endeavors.

In the book, Ziporyn also traces the origins of the idea of ultimate purposefulness in the West to the thought of Anaxagoras. Where earlier presocratic philosophers suggest an ultimate reality that is much more indeterminate (e.g., Anaximander's

Apeiron), Anaxagoras posited the Nous, or an ultimate mind, at the origin of everything. The Nous is a thinking substance with goals and intentions. The ultimate source of everything is therefore filled with purposes, and all of reality which flows from it, is therefore by consequence purposeful.

Ziporyn continues by claiming that seeing all of reality as ultimately purposeful is conceptually flawed. A purpose implies a dichotomy since a purpose is always a strive for something else. In the end, God cannot be God's own purpose, nor have an outside purpose, wherefore purposefulness breaks down. Furthermore, to view all of reality as purposeful generates great difficulties when having to cope with apparently non-purposeful phenomena. Some examples are chaotic phenomena, evil phenomena, or simply phenomena that do not appear to be for anything. Ultimate purposefulness, therefore, has great difficulties in accounting for apparent purposelessness. The reverse is not the case. Therefore, according to Ziporyn, an alternative looms in the distance - a worldview where ultimate reality is devoid of purpose.

Thus, ultimate purposelessness offers a more coherent, superior account of an ultimate reality. A prime example of such ultimate purposelessness is found in Chinese Daoism. Here the ultimate reality is not God but the Dao. The term has many (sometimes contradictory) meanings. It is, however, clearly not an ultimate reality with a purpose. Rather, it is an unlimited source of enjoyment. The main goal in life, according to the main Daoist thinkers, is to align oneself with the Dao and to take delight in effortless, purposeless action for its own sake. Unlike theistic conceptions, ultimate purposelessness can account for its opposite, i.e. (temporary) purposes. For example, purposes can arise out of the will. A certain state can be determined, or willed, as desirable and subsequent actions can strive to meet that desire. The goal is, however, not ultimate but willed, or created. The purpose is therefore not ultimate but temporary and can be replaced by new purposes. Temporary purposes can also arise spontaneously as a function of structures intrinsic to a finite being (e.g., striving to stay alive).

Ziporyn then notes that the idea of ultimate purposelessness has gained much more traction in the East than in the West. Nonetheless, some Western thinkers came up with similar ideas, such as Spinoza, Nietzsche and Bataille. Most of the second part of the book is devoted to showing how these thinkers advocated a purposeless mystical atheism. All three thinkers add new elements, which Ziporyn pieces together in his account of atheistic mysticism. The most impressive is Ziporyn's discussion of Spinoza where he at great length explains Spinoza's metaphysical view. He notes how Spinoza defended the view that all of reality is part of a deterministic system where all possibilities are actualized. Important for Ziporyn's analysis of purpose is that on Spinoza's account, all possible things arise in a large system by *necessity*. The only goal that all things pursue, is to keep themselves in existence. The purpose of everything is thus very limited. Spinoza also highlights a different dimension to atheistic mysticism, where all is intrinsically connected, as all is a manifestation of the same ultimate determinate system.

In Ziporyn's description, Nietzsche's account is less metaphysical, and instead more practical since the latter stresses that each moment ought to be lived as if it reoccurs for all eternity. All should be lived not for some later, more ultimate purpose, but for

the enjoyment in itself. This leads to a very different way of life where the primary “goal” of all is its temporary enjoyment. Again, there is no other ultimate purpose.

Bataille’s account finally, is more practical as well. He stresses that phenomena which resist being coopted for any ulterior purpose, like chaos, sex for pleasure, destruction, et cetera, deserve more credit. Rather than trying to reject those phenomena or to frown upon them, they should be taken more center stage. Again, the focus points to purposelessness and the intrinsic value of everything, including things devoid of purpose.

The discussion of the three authors paves the way for Ziporyn’s own account of atheistic mysticism. This mysticism is not one where the subject contemplates, or is overcome by, something transcendent or divine. Instead, key examples of atheistic mysticism are more like states of flow. Such states occur when the subject enjoys something for its own sake, without contemplating what they are for, and with a sense of connectivity with all lies beyond the experience. Enjoyment of such states is not limited to events of “the right kind”, or events that contribute to some ulterior purpose.

The connectivity aspect of atheistic mysticism is perhaps the most striking in the book. Different accounts of atheistic experiences tend to point to experiences of emptiness, or isolating experiences, where life seems incomprehensible or brutish. The experiences that make up atheistic mysticism, by contrast, are rich, lucid and ecstatic. When one truly enjoys something without minding any ulterior purpose, one sees its connectivity with everything else. In other words, one sees its co-presence with all that is beyond. The best examples of such experiences are flow states, which are characteristic of Daoism and perhaps also Tantrism. The states then do not refer to any God, but reveal something about the ultimate nature of reality. Apart from the inherent connectivity, they reveal that all is in its rightful place and good as it is.

Ziporyn’s book successfully shows that atheism is multifaceted and cannot be equated to contemporary Western naturalism. He also successfully shows that not all Asian traditions are unambiguously theistic, and some adhere to very different metaphysical systems than Western theism. He thereby counters recent pluralist tendencies in theology and philosophy that tend to see convergence in most religious traditions. Pointing to the intricacies of Asian traditions alone is already a laudable achievement.

Ziporyn’s main goal, however, is not to display the differences between traditions. Instead, he aims to show that his deep, mystical atheism is superior to theism. First of all, believing that all of reality is purposeful poses limitations on enjoyment of life, and of apparent purposeless states. Apart from this practical claim, his arguments are both conceptual (i.e. showing that ultimate purposefulness is untenable) and experiential (i.e. ultimate purposelessness can be experienced). According to Ziporyn, purposefulness all the way through is untenable because purpose always implies a duality. While most contemporary theology and philosophy of religion give the inherent purposefulness of God what could be described as the silent treatment, older authors did indeed argue that God can be his own purpose. Some accounts link God’s inherent purposefulness to his trinitarian nature, where Father, Son and Holy Spirit find purpose in each other. Other accounts (mainly reformed accounts) see God’s ultimate purpose in glorifying himself.

Some mystical accounts (and also Hegel) maintain that God's inherent purpose lies in creation where God's latent purpose is revealed. While these accounts may have inherent problems (like does purposefulness always imply a lack of, and therefore an imperfection), they do show that purposefulness all the way through, need not be conceptually impossible. The theist may also concede that whereas all of creation has a purpose, God does not have a purpose in itself. This, however, might bring the account of God close to Ziporyn's account of an ultimate purposeless reality, although God would be more limited since God would not actualize realities devoid of any purpose.

In regards to the experiential section of the argument, questions arise on what the experiences indicate. Often, religious experiences of various forms are marshalled in support of theistic conceptions, where the ultimate reality is seen as purposeful. Instead Ziporyn argues that some mystical experiences support his deep atheistic conception of reality. However, defenders on both sides would need to show that their respective mystical experiences provide stronger justification than their rivals can. Ziporyn could argue that most religious experiences alluded to by theists do not support ultimate purposefulness, but support the existence of God or other supernatural beings. This is compatible with some forms of mystical atheism, like Daoism and Tiantai Buddhism. Additionally, on both sides, supernatural beings exist, but they are not the ultimate reality. Instead, supernatural beings arise from a more ultimate, purposeless reality (the Dao or emptiness). Thus, the deep atheist could argue that religious experiences merely support the existence of non-ultimate supernatural beings, or gods, and reveal nothing about a more ultimate reality. Similarly, the theist could argue that experiences of purposelessness do not point to an ultimate reality. There may be an (apparent) purposelessness but this fits within a broader purpose which is unknown to human subjects. To focus on the function of mystical experiences may thus end in a stalemate.

In summary, Ziporyn's book presents a profound, thoroughly argued case for a reality that is in the end not purposeful. To see reality in this way leads to a different way of life, which liberates people from concerns to do with purpose. The book is not an easy read and presupposes knowledge on Daoism and Chinese Buddhism. Nonetheless, the book should be of interest to theology and philosophy of religion, where inherent purposefulness is often taken for granted.

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