

**Peter Karl KORITANSKY, *Engaging the Skeptic: Essays Addressing the Modern Secularist's Objections to a Catholic Worldview*. Ottawa, Justin Press, 2018, 13.5 × 21 cm, 181 p., ISBN 978-1-988165-11-0**

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Peter Karl KORITANSKY, **Engaging the Skeptic: Essays Addressing the Modern Secularist's Objections to a Catholic Worldview**. Ottawa, Justin Press, 2018, 13.5 × 21 cm, 181 p., ISBN 978-1-988165-11-0

One might go into Peter Karl Koritansky's *Engaging the Skeptic* expecting it to be a late addition to the apologetics movement that began in response to New Atheism. However, the book's subtitle, *Essays Addressing the Modern Secularist's Objections to a Catholic Worldview*, gives one a more accurate indication of Koritansky's intended audience: it is modern secularists and their objections to a Catholic worldview that Koritansky aims at addressing. *Engaging the Skeptic* is written for upper-high-school and university students (and others of similar capabilities) who are concerned with the common prevailing doctrines of scientism, materialism, atheism, and secularism (pp. 11-12); by "concerned" I mean both those who are convinced of these doctrines to one degree or another, as well as those who reject them, but who are, nonetheless, confronted by them through their peers and who find themselves struggling to answer them. Thus, in *Engaging the Skeptic*, one will not find a tight, rigorous, academic treatment of the issues at hand, but rather an easier and lighter exposition of the issues and some replies. What is evident from the book itself is that Koritansky is treating themes and lines of thought that he himself has wrestled with (p. 11). And while some of these themes and objections are in reality quite new (here I am thinking especially of Chapter Seven), those readers who have even only a passing acquaintance with philosophy will recognize very old and very weathered objections to the theistic worldview.

The *Catholic* label in the book's subtitle might strike some as something of a misnomer, as at first blush it would appear that the arguments Koritansky tackles are decidedly against *theism*, in general. While this is true, it is Koritansky's treatment of these anti-theistic arguments that gives the book its Catholic character; throughout *Engaging the Skeptic* Koritansky relies upon Church Fathers and Doctors for support, most notably St. Thomas Aquinas, as well as various Church documents.

Each chapter in *Engaging the Skeptic* can be characterized as being *against* some doctrine or philosophical position that undermines the theistic worldview. For example, the first chapter considers the challenge of scientism, which Koritansky treats in the form of the fact/value distinction. This is a distinction which, when drawn, purports that "Facts can be known. Values cannot" (p. 19), and is often used to reduce ethical and religious claims to nothing more than subjective opinion which cannot, even in principle, be facts in any meaningful sense. What counts as "facts", so says the proponent of scientism, are *scientific* facts that can be verified or falsified, measured, tested, and so forth – thus, facts alone can be *known*. Koritansky summarizes this view as follows:

If all we can do when faced with the great questions about God, morality, and human existence is offer conjecture and blind opinion, there is little point in doing so. Why discuss, read about, or even think about questions concerning which there is no knowledge to be had? Rather than wasting our time with "values," why not just stick to provable and testable *facts*? (pp. 16-17)

Yet, as Koritansky points out, the fact/value distinction is itself notoriously self-undermining. One must ask: Is the fact/value distinction itself a fact or a value? If it

is simply just a value, then, according to its own proponents, it may safely be ignored. But surely the fact/value distinction is not a fact, as it would be absurd to claim that it can itself be tested, measured, or found in things. Speaking more broadly of scientism as a whole, Koritansky writes: "in order to persuade us that empirical or scientific knowledge is the only kind of knowledge there is, the proponent of the fact/value distinction must provide empirical or scientific evidence that scientific knowledge is the only kind of knowledge there is" (p. 21). This does not appear plausible – indeed, it is not even clear what such evidence would look like; on the contrary, it would seem patently *impossible* to provide such evidence, given the natures of scientific investigation, the fact/value distinction, and evidential reasoning. Thus does Koritansky confront *scientism*, and in so doing, allow for the possibility of philosophy.

Koritansky characterizes the second chapter of *Engaging the Skeptic* as being against *fideism* (pp. 27 and 72). Where the first chapter considers arguments against philosophy on the side of scientism, the second considers an argument against philosophy that claims that, in the light of faith and theology, philosophy is either useless or dangerous. To Koritansky's credit, he is foresighted enough to consider the opposing view as well, that, in the light of natural reason and philosophy, it is faith and theology that is useless. Both of these views are handled admirably by Koritansky.

The third and fourth chapters constitute *Engaging the Skeptic's* remarks against materialism. Here, Koritansky considers the Greek conception of *archè*, as well as Democritus and atomism. The thrust of these considerations is that any attempt to reduce all of reality to a single materialistic principle renders it "impossible to explain intelligibly the world" around us (p. 47). For this reason, Koritansky introduces the thought of Aristotle, specifically his distinction between matter and form (as well as his attending view of change), as an antidote to the materialistic misconceptions of the world. Yet Koritansky considers an even more decisive refutation of materialism in the fourth chapter: "materialism's most glaring failure is its inability to account for the mental or intellectual functioning of the human person" (p. 60). Koritansky is aware that this claim is nothing new to the materialist, and that rebuttals to this objection are many and varied. However, rather than reiterating much of the mainline scientific research, or proposing incredulity at how mental states could possibly be reduced to brain states, Koritansky offers a rather interesting metaphysical argument that, to my mind, is one of the highlights of *Engaging the Skeptic*. Koritansky writes:

if materialism is true, it's not just that all our mental functions (...) are represented by the physical and chemical reactions taking place in our brains or the arrangements of neurons in our brains. It must be that [our] opinions and beliefs *simply are* those physical reactions and arrangements. (...) But here is the problem: *Conceiving of ideas and beliefs in this way completely eliminates the possibility of truth and falsity in our beliefs*. What could it possibly mean to say that one arrangement of neurons is "true" and another is "false"? (pp. 66-67)

Koritansky's question is not one of incredulity, but of implied positive statement: if *everything* in the brain is reduced to physical reactions (or what-have-you), then truth or falsity don't apply, just as we cannot apply truth or falsity to any other physical reaction considered as such. Neither, of course, can we say that certain physical states

in the brain *represent* certain ideas which could be true or false, as everything (ideas, representations, etc.) boils down to the physical reactions of the brain, according to the materialist.

Chapters Five, Six, and Seven are against atheism, and purport to show that God's existence can in principle be demonstrated (Chapter Five), offer a demonstration of God's existence (Chapter Six), and consider various objections to the demonstration offered (Chapter Seven). Chapter five includes a discussion of the burden of proof – which will be welcome especially for those who are interacting with New Atheist literature – as well as Anselm's ontological argument. Those familiar with the Thomistic proofs will recognize the Second and Third Ways in chapter six, which Koritansky attempts to combine into a single proof and which he believes to make "the strongest case for God's existence to a modern audience" (p. 87). The seventh chapter considers fourteen common objections of varying levels of sophistication (these range from "Who created God?" (p. 107), to "Hasn't quantum mechanics shown that things can come into existence without any explanation at all? And doesn't this disprove the need for a supernatural cause?" (p. 128)).

Chapter Eight is mostly concerned with the Euthyphro dilemma and issues surrounding God and the nature of morality. Here, Koritansky's Aristotelian/Thomistic commitment to the notion of *eudaimonia* is on display. Moral norms, claims Koritansky, are derived from human nature, so that what constitutes human flourishing is the basis for right and wrong actions. This concept is ultimately rooted in God and the happiness of the next life, so that in the end Koritansky can conclude that part of what makes murder, for example, morally evil "is that it violates and degrades the nature of the murderer himself (...). It makes him, not just a criminal, but a *worse person* all the more separated from the happiness for which he was created." (pp. 144-145) Thus, Koritansky's reply to the Euthyphro dilemma consists in the interplay between (i) *created* human nature, and (ii) the end or goal of that nature.

The ninth chapter returns to the issue of God's existence, this time answering arguments that arise from the problem of evil. Koritansky mostly limits the scope of his discussion to John Leslie Mackie's treatment of the problem of evil in its deductive form, although Koritansky acknowledges that this version of the argument has been largely abandoned in contemporary philosophy (p. 152); thus, an inductive version of the argument is considered as well.

The final chapter is against secularism, which Koritansky treats in the form of John Rawls's theory of justice, more specifically Rawls's notion of the veil of ignorance, which would in practice remove any comprehensive notion of the good (religious or otherwise) from "public reason".

The result of all of this is that Koritansky has confronted scientism (Chapter One), materialism (Chapters Three and Four), atheism (Chapters Five to Nine), and secularism (Chapter Ten). One also finds a defense and limiter, of sorts, of philosophy itself (Chapters One and Two), which is a particularly welcome inclusion.

My negative remarks of *Engaging the Skeptic* are mostly confined to the formatting and structure of the book. For example, *Engaging the Skeptic* lacks an index, which would have proven very helpful (I sorely missed one just in the course of writing this review). Some references are inconsistent (compare p. 24, n. 4 and p. 26, n. 5) or simply incorrect (see p. 35, n. 12). Structurally, it would have made more

sense to switch the positions of Chapters Eight and Nine, as the ninth chapter (“The Problem of Evil and Suffering”) seems to me to be a logical extension of the seventh chapter (which answers objections against the argument for God’s existence in Chapter Six), as the ninth chapter is concerned to combat arguments *against* God’s existence, while Chapter Eight (“God and Morality”) is, at root, concerned with the relationship between God and moral norms (perhaps even aligning it with the tenth chapter, on secularism).

Despite these few and minor negative remarks, for the goal of engaging the skeptic at the level of a high-school or university student, Koritansky has knocked it out of the park. Throughout *Engaging the Skeptic* Koritansky remains clear and concise, reducing complex issues to simple and digestible ideas in a manner that is, frankly, enviable. And yet, for all of their relative simplicity, Koritansky’s treatments of scientism, materialism, atheism, and secularism remain, in the words of one reviewer on the back of the book, “devastating”. I concur. Of particular note too is the fact that, instead of unloading numerous philosophical thinkers and systems onto the reader, Koritansky prefers in *Engaging the Skeptic* to keep his rival sources to a minimum; this is especially evident in the final three chapters, which are primarily engaged with the Euthyphro dilemma (Chapter Eight), John Leslie Mackie (Chapter Nine), and John Rawls (Chapter Ten).

Koritansky’s *Engaging the Skeptic* is a wonderful little book in that it accomplishes admirably its goal for its intended audience. At the time of this writing it is available from publisher Justin Press for the very reasonable price of \$14.95 CAD, which, surely, by far undervalues the worth of the content inside.

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Iva APOSTOLOVA – Monique LANOIX (eds.), **Aging in an Aging Society. Critical Reflections**. Sheffield UK – Bristol CT, Equinox, 2019, 15,5 × 23,2 cm, viii-213 p., ISBN 978-1-781179-690-0.

When Iva Apostolova and Monique Lanoix organized the conference, *Building Hospitable Communities for Aging* in 2016, they could hardly have anticipated the events which would underscore the significance of this work to the public dialogue. In 2020, COVID-19 became that event. Those who were the first and hardest hit by COVID-19 were the aging and elderly. The reasons for this go beyond medical frailty but rather are reflective of the systemic and on-going under appreciation for the conditions within long-term care facilities. In the first 8 months of the pandemic, 80% of all fatalities were from long-term-care facilities. In some facilities, 80% of their residents succumbed to the disease. In an astounding admission of defeat, the Governments of Ontario and Quebec called upon the Canadian Armed Forces to assist them in a dealing with this man-made disaster. The report by 4th Division Commander, BGen Conrad Maikowski was scathing in its condemnation of the