

**BEFORE GOD, EXERCISES IN SUBJECTIVITY** by Steven DeLay, *Rowman & Littlefield International*, London and New York, 2020, pp. xi + 187, £80.00, hbk

In her BBC Radio 4 *Desert Island Discs* interview, the English writer, Frances Partridge, then in her nineties, was asked about her religious belief. Partridge replied by recounting that when she was a girl of eleven years she shocked an older sister by declaring casually as she jumped into bed that she did not believe in God. When asked by the interviewer if she was ever tempted to believe in God, she answered: ‘Not at all’. ‘Not even much later in your life when you suffered the deaths of your husband and son in pretty swift succession?’ ‘I know one would think I might, but I think that if anything replaced God for me... I find it in nature’.

Even if one suspects that the force of the question of God’s existence might have impinged on her consciousness more than she recognised or was prepared to admit, Partridge’s testimony nonetheless suggests that she did not experience anguish at her lack of religious belief, even if she was also denied its consolations. Furthermore, she was not a superficial or frivolous person: she sustained enduring friendships, was able to stand up for her moral beliefs (both she and her husband were pacifists in World War II), and had a love of great literature and music (not least her appreciation of the musicianship of Pablo Casals).

Compare this with Steven’s DeLay’s characterisation of the religious skeptic:

‘...it is worth noting that, very often, the skeptic’s own face belies his claims of inexperience. Though he pleads ignorance, we might not be so convinced. Eventually, even if only very late in life, those who neglect the claim of God’s call in their lives only end up witnessing against themselves; when they say that they have not experienced such things and know nothing of the Spirit, it is clear that they have worn themselves out by trying to live without it’ (p. 30).

DeLay then proceeds to focus on those who vehemently deny God’s existence:

‘To strengthen the suspicion that a suppression of the truth lies at the root of why those who claim no familiarity with the experience of God’s call say so, we have only to look into the eyes of those who disagree most vehemently that there is such a call... What, we ask, does this unbelieving face show? Setting to the side whatever else it shows, notably, it shows this: the glassy sheen of shark’s eyes, an icy stare whose vacancy reveals a cold heart that feels itself not at peace’ (p. 30).

Even allowing that I was unable to see Partridge’s face during her radio interview; and even granting that DeLay is plausibly getting at something important; these characterisations of the unbeliever are, I strongly suspect, liable to strike at least some as unnuanced and hyperbolic. For a start, the natural order can have its own consolations. Furthermore, people like

Partridge might have had more openness to the divine than they or possibly DeLay would realise: Partridge's comment on nature arguably suggests this possibility. DeLay, it seems to me, does not pay adequate attention to those who (perhaps even vehemently) deny God's existence but who might nonetheless be receptive to the stirrings of the Spirit unbeknownst to themselves.

At such points, some readers might be tempted to give up on this book; but that would, I think, be a pity. *Before God* is a richly insightful, frequently opinionated, and sometimes idiosyncratic book well worth the effort. Indeed, the above quotations are from a chapter that is on the whole both perceptive and moving.

But what kind of book is *Before God*? I do not ask how the author would like it to be viewed. My question concerns, rather, how to categorise the book in order to do most justice to its virtues: for different genres come with different criteria of success/failure, and thus categorisation can affect how a work is engaged with and judged.

If taken straightforwardly as a work of philosophy, and despite the author's often masterly deployment of philosophical ideas, *Before God* would be problematic for the sort of reasons to which I have already alluded. The example of Frances Partridge, or one's own (seemingly) relatively untroubledly atheist acquaintances, might, for example, by conventional philosophical standards, simply falsify some of DeLay's claims. Even if this comment betrays my own analytical tendencies, and even if greater allowance might conceivably be made for 'continental', non-analytical, approaches, the point I think still stands given the sweeping boldness of some of what DeLay has to say.

If, however, *Before God* is read as a work of spirituality (for want of a better term), albeit one of value as a work of philosophy, then a positive evaluation can emerge. To describe the book as a work of spirituality is not meant in a backhanded fashion, as 'second best'. It is to flag up that the book's method and stance are at variance with a great deal of the contemporary philosophical scene. Indeed, the book begins with a short prayer (p.xi). In this spirit, DeLay's characterisation of the unbeliever, for example, could thus be read less along the lines of an exceptionless universal statement and more as an invitation to recognise the not uncommon reality of an often unacknowledged heavy burden due to religious unbelief.

In keeping with this, DeLay's approach is not to focus on standard textbook philosophical arguments of rational demonstration for theism following his analysis of the unbeliever. Instead, he presents a series of detailed reflections, 'exercises in subjectivity', in the phenomenological sense of how human life, its fundamental existential challenges and responsibilities, manifest themselves for those who stand 'before God': those who actively bring into their engagement with the world both faith in God's redemptive work and commitment to the immeasurable value of the human being as made in the image and likeness of God.

This involves reflecting on particular domains of human life and showing how the dynamics within these domains force us to address the question of the divine; and that incorporating an acknowledgement of the divine in a way that seeks to do justice to the implications of this, does greater justice to the nature of the domains in question than a methodologically atheist approach. In this DeLay's target is not only the atheist, but also the complacent theist who manifests their underestimation of the existential significance of theist commitment by being so willing to bracket out the existence of God in their philosophical analyses.

DeLay's method allows for a wealth of insight in very fine discussions on, for example, 'The Interlacement of Self and God' (Chapter 2), 'What is the Problem of Intersubjectivity?' (Chapter 3), 'Forgiveness' (Chapter 4), 'Making Peace' (Chapter 5), and 'Suffering and Salvation: A Note on Art' (Chapter 7). To give a flavour of the subtlety and perceptiveness of DeLay's writing, consider the opening passage of Chapter 4:

'To be true, forgiveness is an act that must be sustained. It takes our resolve. And when it is resolved honestly, which is to say firmly, then in a way, eventually, it begins almost to sustain itself. But at first it is not so, requiring a serious effort, one repeated, and thus affirmed, time and again... It therefore does not occur once and for all, but rather continues on, always only insofar as it unfolds through the ideal that incessantly solicits its resolve. When we forgive... we do not make a decision that is therefore accomplished forever. Even when we pronounce it, whether explicitly to the other or simply to ourselves silently in our own hearts, any such declaration of forgiveness, though illocutionary, is not immediately and automatically successful. In reality, in every salient respect it is more like a commitment' (p.73).

The rest of the chapter (twenty pages) continues at this highly illuminating level. That said, I found the chapters, 'A Sketch of Silence and Evil' (Chapter 6) and 'The Light That Lights Every Man' (Chapter 8) less convincing in places, even if the discussion was always thought-provoking.

A short review cannot do justice to the richness of the discussion. I have indicated ways in which some readers might understandably lose faith in the book; but I have also made a case for its numerous merits. This is philosophically-inspired discussion at the service of spiritual growth, enrichment, and conversion. It is a book I recommend and will very happily return to.

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