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# Andrew Fiala and Peter Admirand. "Seeking Common Ground: A Theist/Atheist Dialogue"

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**Andrew Fiala and Peter Admirand.** *Seeking Common Ground: A Theist/Atheist Dialogue*. WIPF and Stock Publishers 2021. 294 pp. \$50.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9781725275300); \$35.00 USD (Paperback ISBN 9781725275294).

Beginning with an acknowledgement of how fraught with tension and historical baggage any direct discussion of the boundaries between theism and atheism can be, Andrew Fiala and Peter Admirand's recent joint effort, *Seeking Common Ground: A Theist/Atheist Dialogue*, seeks a deeper understanding of the other's perspective, not simply to win a debate that realistically might never be resolved.

The wonderful choice to begin the book with autobiographical sketches allows the reader to see the humanity behind each point of view while demonstrating that the authors see each other as complex human beings. This is done not simply to remain civil in conversation, but to acknowledge the foundational goodwill that every dialogue modeled on their own must consent to. This step is a crucial one for those who enter into discussion from opposing sides that often gets sidelined. It is to their credit that Fiala and Admirand take great pains to illuminate why such a first step is essential to the process.

The authors develop a series of virtues that any dialogue between an atheist and theist should strive to achieve. It is a remarkable list that is enumerated after some elaboration of other comparative models. Their conclusion is that harmony, courage, humility, curiosity, honesty, compassion, and honor are those traits that should guide them. Attention is given to the nature of dialogue and to the working out of the virtues that structure the conversation, to the advantage of the reader who becomes privy to insights on why dialogue between the religious and the nonreligious has struggled thus far.

Fiala and Admirand's dialogue presents us with a novel approach, one that de-centers debate and confrontation. Important concerns and differences are brought up and discussed, though they remain somewhat secondary to the overall aim of seeking common ground through the virtues they outline. By doing so, the book records the unfolding of a bold wager between these two authors: that it would be better to address how they each regard these virtues in order that authentic dialogue develop from within and beyond their varied points of view.

To highlight this unique facet of their book is not to suggest that major dividing issues between theism and atheism are not taken up, as this volume brings them up in droves, from the globalized pluralistic landscape that humanity faces to discussions of the existence of God. Rather, they take this approach, and I dwell on it here, so as to cement the importance of dialogue itself, especially how a method of conversation can shape the conversation's content. In their words, 'dialogue should bring people together despite their differences, rather than creating further difference and division. But the lingering presence of difference means that metaphysical and epistemological issues will remain unresolved. Indeed, one of the things that remains unresolved is the basic distinction between faith and reason' (35).

Though such concessions might be somewhat off-putting to those who wish to follow the dialogue between a theist and an atheist in order to see which position might seem the 'better' one



in the end—though, better based on what criteria exactly? More reasonable? More faithful? —there is a tremendous benefit to their taking this alternative approach. What develops in the course of what follows is a deeply meditative series of reflections on religious and nonreligious responses to each of the virtues under consideration.

Though I will not give a descriptive account of each chapter, as I don't think it is necessary to convey what focusing on each virtue adds to the conversation, the first chapter on harmony provides ample evidence of how productive and engaging such an approach can be. Here, Admirand takes us on a tour of what it means to avoid rigid certitude in favor of striving for harmony in one's belief systems. Fiala responds with an approach that, though acknowledging that a belief system is not the only way to achieve harmony, finds in Admirand's thoughts common ground in their shared willingness to take up failure and responsibility as central themes (77). There is a willingness to embrace shared viewpoints while also a compassionate insistence on where their differences lie. This back-and-forth, as each chapter is likewise structured, allows us to see how one perspective can challenge another, gently and cordially, so that the virtues continue to displace the potential for invective.

In a later chapter, for example, Fiala's rich description of the necessity for curiosity prods Admirand to consider how curiosity has been problematic for religious believers, but also how it is an essential part of being human and much in need of consideration. This is underscored by an anecdotal story regarding his wife's insistence that curiosity is what makes us human. In exchanges such as this, the book's strengths become more apparent: we see a multi-layered and considerate dialogue unfolding, wherein both sides are challenged to remain faithful to the virtues of the dialogue itself, forcing any debate to adhere to standards that actively reshape the content itself. Asking theologians to value curiosity regarding things taken as absolute, as well as asking atheists to respect the role of honoring the sacred, as another chapter eventually does—even if we debate what exactly is absolute, what is sacred—is essential to the process of remaining in dialogue with one another.

One of the more powerful chapters for me was the one centered on the virtue of honesty, where Fiala introduced a respectful but honest appraisal of theism, offering a number of solid critiques of theistic beliefs. Admirand's response, though not directly responding to the rational assessments made by Fiala, actually takes up the perspective of 'surrender' through an acknowledgement of both the value of atheist critiques for religious worldviews and the confession of how broken human religion can be (182). If such dialogues are to continue, if they are to have a life of their own, the humility displayed by Admirand by 'self-reckoning' in order to be open and honest is worth emulating. Reading his response, I could only imagine how much more beneficial, even wonderful, conversations between theists and atheists could be should religious individuals and communities respond by taking an atheist's ever-reasonable words of critique as priceless gems that need to be cherished for religion to have a better future, allowing them to reshape their perspectives on themselves and their beliefs.

There were two main considerations within this dialogue that need to be held up as models worthy of emulation: Admirand's contrition before critique and his respect for the wisdom that an

atheist outlook brings to bear on the conversation, and Fiala's willingness not only to refuse any hesitations in listing challenges to religious ways of being, but to consider how reaching an agreement with theists on a more responsible image of God, can be a way of advancing humanity as a whole. Though many atheists might find this last gesture somewhat repugnant, it actually strikes me as one of the best ways the dialogue can continue.

I began to imagine the atheist playing the role of the 'devil's advocate' to the theologian: offering counterpoints to each doctrine or belief, forcing the theologian to produce a more 'reasonable' version of divine being, while also being challenged to account for the idealizations and projections that comprise not just religious being in this world, but our all-too-human desires at the same time, atheists very much included.

There are moments when I wished that more substantive debate did permeate the conversation, allowing Admirand an opportunity to respond more fully to Fiala's extensive discussions of God's (in)existence or his account of the holy in relation to honor, as well as to see how both might further envision Fiala's suggestion that common ground can be found by acknowledging the ideal of a compassionate deity who suffers with those who suffer—a point that very much resonates with Admirand's theological views. But such desires for more are often what one feels when they are confronted by a beautiful tapestry of insights. This book is such an experience and I wholeheartedly commend it to the reader seeking to invest themselves more in the ever-expanding dialogue between theism and atheism that we need so much more of in our world today.

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