

A.C. Grayling's *The Good Book: A Secular Bible*

**– Reviewed by Peter S. Williams (MA, MPhil),
Philosopher in Residence at the Damaris Trust,
Assistant Professor in Communication and Worldviews,
Gimlekollen School of Journalism and Communication, Norway.**

A.C. Grayling's opening 'Epistle to the Reader' declares an aspiration to guide us through 'the paths of the wise... master-thinkers whose mighty works are monuments to posterity' and to take from them 'resources to promote what is true and good.' But who counts as being wise in Grayling's book? Grayling exiles the likes of Moses, David, Solomon, Jesus, James, John and Paul from the category of 'the wise'. Few would agree with Grayling on this. Indeed, if Grayling were sincere about presenting 'distillations of the wisdom and experience of humankind' he would inevitably reflect the supernaturalistic and even specifically theistic understanding of reality held by the majority of humankind. Instead, this majority experience is dismissed from 'Genesis' one. In sum, Grayling doesn't appear to be a wise guide to wisdom. Whilst even Richard Dawkins has good things to say about Jesus' teaching, maintaining a 'Secular' tone appears to matter more to Grayling than being representative. Yet as it is written in Wisdom 1:8: 'the wise man is he who learns from all men.'

On the other hand, for a self-declared 'Secular Bible' that portrays human history as the struggle for Western secular enlightenment against the forces of ignorance, superstition and the Persian East, *The Good Book* contains a lot of material from thinkers who believe in some kind of deity! A glance at Grayling's list of sources (there's a greater degree of anonymity here than in the Bible) reveals he was content to re-work material from the likes of Aristotle, Bacon, Boyle, Chaucer, Kant, Locke, Milton, Newton and Plato. This is hardly a role call of naturalistic, secular humanists. Grayling omits to draw attention to this fact.

It's tempting to critique *The Good Book* as morally disturbing. For example, it appears to extol Spartan society with only a very partial moral critique (cf. Acts 2-14, where e.g. infanticide for the disabled doesn't so much as raise an eyebrow); and it presents a rather ambiguous analysis of war (note that the 'Histories' presented in *The Good Book* lack the benefits of independent attestation carried by the New Testament histories of Jesus, and that they are founded upon far shakier textual foundations). One might argue that 'The Good' excludes moral reformation by exclaiming 'let us always be true to ourselves...' (The Good 7:12). The book of Wisdom contains a philosophy of non-attachment that might be taken as an invitation to passivity in the face of evil. Indeed, rather than being commanded to love our enemies, we are told: 'To treat your adversary with respect is to give him an advantage he is not entitled to.' (Proverbs 9:5) But perhaps this is to read *The Good Book* without reference to context, a favourite 'new atheist' method of hermeneutics.

More fundamentally, *The Good Book* appears to think that goodness is a subjective matter of person-relative preference:

'But in humankind there is experience also,
which is what makes good and its opposite.' (Genesis 1:13)

‘It is our attitudes to things that give
them their value, whether good or
bad, or indifferent.’ (Wisdom 12:3)

As an attempt to ground the nature of moral goodness and duty this is a very bad show.

Grayling’s description of ontology in ‘Genesis’ is cleverly couched in a poetic form that brilliantly highlights its function as naturalistic creation myth, albeit a creation myth without a creation event. Grayling states both that a) ‘nothing comes from nothing’ (Genesis 2:8; 4:10; 6:1) and that b) ‘All things take their origin from earlier kinds’ (Genesis 3:1). Taken together, these affirmations entail the existence of an actually infinite regress of past events. This (ancient Greek) eternal view of the cosmos is reiterated when we are told that: ‘the components of our substance exist forever, coeval with the universe...’ (The Good 1:21.) Hence *The Good Book* contradicts contemporary scientific cosmology with its hot ‘Big Bang’ origin event for matter, space and time some 13.7 billion years ago. Indeed, Grayling’s own observation that thermodynamics has not yet reduced the universe to its primal elements forcefully contradicts the infinite past entailed by his earlier assertions: ‘if nature had given scope for things to be dissolved for ever... By now all bodies that once existed would be reduced to ultimate parts’ (Genesis 8:7-8). How ironic that Grayling’s ‘Secular Bible’ is *contradicted* by modern science while the Biblical concept of a cosmic ‘beginning’ (Genesis 1:1) is *vindicated* thereby!

Setting aside the question of temporal origins, although we are told that ‘all things have their origins in nature’s laws’ (Genesis 4:10), we aren’t given any explanation of why nature’s laws exist in the first place. It is said that ‘nature does nothing in vain’ (Genesis 13:2), but the teleological implications of this observation go unexplored. Grayling acknowledges that our earthly habitat is fortunately conducive to the existence of complex and intelligent life: ‘The fruitful earth, without its seasons of rains and sun, could not bear the produce that makes us glad’ (Genesis 4:2), but the question of how to account for this fine tuning is ignored. Grayling goes on to make the false claim that ‘Earths from each sun burst’ (Genesis 9:2); and he offers the evidentially unsupported deduction that ‘in biochemical spontaneous birth rose the first specks of animated earth’ (Genesis 9:11). As Grayling cautions: ‘We are not to ignore the evidence of experiments for the sake of dreams and fictions of our own devising’ (Genesis 13:13).

The fundamental explanatory resource offered by Grayling in addition to matter and time is the teleologically tinged mythical figure of ‘evolution’:

‘In all species, nature works to renew
itself as it works to nourish itself,
and to protect itself from danger.
Each by its kind and for its kind, in
the great work of continuation that
is evolution.’ (Genesis 11:1-2)

Grayling asserts the sufficiency of evolution to explain integrated biological complexity by extrapolating into unquantified amounts of time: 'By evolution, in the aeons vast, since life first arose, to complex life at last.' (Genesis 10:12) However, if we followed Grayling's own injunction to 'Always assign the same effects to the same causes' (Genesis 12:4), then, presented with the nano-technological wonders of the simplest cell or the rapid information increase of the Cambrian Explosion, wouldn't we be compelled to conclude that some intelligence must have played its part?

Speaking of intelligence, Grayling sidesteps the awkward question of how subjective consciousness supposedly originated from nothing but material unconsciousness: 'nerves unite their long synaptic train, and new sensations wake the early brain' (Genesis 10:1). He doesn't enquire how thought might originate from nothing but unthinking dust: 'Last, multiple associations spring, thoughts join to thoughts' (Genesis 10:5). Moreover, if 'everything is corporeal' (Genesis 7:2) and 'nature's laws infallibly rule' (Genesis 5:4) then it is certain 'that men act by the necessity of their nature' and that 'anger and resentment' at people's actions is both misplaced and excluded by 'understanding the causes of other's actions' (Wisdom 6:8-9). In other words, the corollary of Grayling's naturalistic worldview is that free will and hence moral and rational responsibility are nothing but illusions. But as Wisdom 6:23 and 7:1 state: 'The mind has power over the emotions, and can be free... Some things lie under our control...' We have the 'ability to choose', says Wisdom 11:2. These two perspectives on human nature are mutually contradictory. One can have materialism and the illusion of freedom, or one can have freedom and the illusion of materialism, but one cannot have one's cake and hope to eat it. *The Good Book's* materialistic worldview is an inquiry stopper, a process of non-thinking requiring belief in the absence of evidence and even in the teeth of evidence.

The Good Book: A Secular Bible pays backhanded tribute to Scripture by patterning itself loosely upon the multi-genre structure of the Bible; but it makes no pretence to be anything but one man's collection of other men's words about life 'under the sun' (as the writer of Ecclesiastes would have put it). The substitution of Grayling for God as ultimate author means that any analogy between *The Good Book* and 'the good book' is extremely thin. Grayling may be the ultimate editor and redactor of the sources drawn together in *The Good Book*, but that's as far as a secular doctrine of inspiration can go. Grayling certainly doesn't suggest that his book is in any sense inerrant. In other words, since *The Good Book* doesn't claim to be the unique work of divine revelation, it isn't even *possible* to view it as a comparably significant book, although it is possible to view it as containing highly significant falsehood. Naturally, *The Good Book* contains a mixture truth and falsehood. Unfortunately, its falsehoods are more fundamental than its truths.

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