

## Reviews

*36 ARGUMENTS FOR THE EXISTENCE OF GOD: A WORK OF FICTION.* By Rebecca Newberger Goldstein. Pantheon, 2010. 402 pp. \$27.95.

Readers of *William James Studies* may be familiar with Rebecca Goldstein, who holds a doctorate in philosophy from Princeton, because of her studies of Baruch Spinoza and Kurt Godel. Goldstein's philosophical interests often play out in her fiction, as well: including *The Dark Sister* (in which both William and Henry James appear as characters), *The Mind-Body Problem*, *Properties of Light: A Novel of Love, Betrayal, and Quantum Physics*, and most recently in *36 Arguments for the Existence of God*. Goldstein's latest book features Cass Seltzer, a professor of the psychology of religion, who has become an international celebrity with the publication of *The Varieties of Religious Illusion*—a title calling up James's famous book and Sigmund Freud's *The Future of an Illusion*. Deemed an “atheist with a soul” by his contemporaries, Seltzer wins acclaim for updating James's work, and both *Varieties of Religious Experience* and “The Will to Believe” are invoked throughout the novel. Goldstein's many characters – a messianic professor of faith, literature, and values; an orthodox rabbi; an adorable child prodigy mathematician; Seltzer's lover, a brilliant researcher in game theory; and an anthropologist intent on achieving immortality – bring up issues of belief, transcendence, and truth as the plot unravels. With chapters moving back and forth in Seltzer's life, unravels is as accurate a word as any for the progression of the narrative.

When the novel is not directly addressing questions of religion, it entertains as a spoof – like some novels by David Lodge and Richard Russo -- on the pretensions of academe. Central to the plot is the rivalry between Harvard and another university, here called Frankfurter, a few miles up the Charles in a dowdy town that Goldstein has dubbed Weedham. Harvard hopes to lure Seltzer away from Frankfurter to join its pantheon of intellectual stars, but the president of Frankfurter, a former Israeli paratrooper, aims to keep Seltzer “from going over to those shmendriks up the river.” Goldstein has a pitch-perfect ear for academic banter, and her renditions of faculty gatherings, including Seltzer's debate with the elegant Felix Fidelity, a Nobel Prize winner in economics, and a believer, are impressively deft.

Although Seltzer comes away from the debate thinking himself a winner, neither he nor the novel makes a persuasive argument for or against the proposition: God exists. The argument that does emerge, however, persuasively speaks against fundamentalism and, more importantly, the unexamined life. “There are expansive, life-affirming emotions that can find a natural expression in the context of religion,” Seltzer says. “But when religion encourages what I can only describe as moral childishness that blocks the development of true moral thinking, then I do condemn it. When religion tells us that there is nothing more we can say about morality than that we can’t see the reasons for it, but do it if you know what’s good for you, then I do condemn it.”

Goldstein saves her most focused examination of thirty-six arguments for the existence of God in an appendix, where she lists and refutes such ideas as 4. The Argument from the Big Bang, which holds that if the universe came from nothing, then something outside of physical laws must have caused it to exist; or 7. The Argument from Cosmic Coincidences, which holds that uncanny coincidences “must have been designed in order to enhance our awed appreciation for the beauty of the natural world” by a supernatural being. In 32: The Argument from Pragmatism (William James’s Leap of Faith), Goldstein understands James to say that “The belief in God is a belief that effects a change for the better in a person’s life,” and therefore, it is in a person’s interest to make “the leap of faith.” But Goldstein questions what “a change for the better” really means; asserts that the argument “implies an extreme relativism regarding the truth”; and asserts furthermore that James ignores consequences to others besides the believer, such as victims of inquisitions, fatwas, and suicide bombers. Moreover, she believes that “‘The will to believe’ is an oxymoron: beliefs are forced on a person (ideally, by logic and evidence); they are not chosen for their consequences.” Perhaps she would have given James more credence if he had titled his essay, as he once thought he should, “The Right to Believe.”

Despite her dismissal of James’s thesis, Goldstein, like James in *The Varieties*, comes to the generous conclusion that faith cannot be justified by any single argument, but fulfills needs that many of the thirty-six arguments address. “The Argument from the Abundance of Arguments,” she writes, “may be the most psychologically important of the thirty-six. . . Religions. . . do not justify themselves with a single logical argument, but minister to all of these spiritual needs and provide a space in our lives where the largest questions with which we grapple all come together, which is a space that can become among the most expansive and

loving of which we are capable, or the most constricted and hating of which we are capable—in other words, a space as contradictory as human nature itself.”

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