

# Book Review: Rebecca Newberger Goldstein's *36 Arguments for the Existence of God*

by Alex Kasman

Given the title of this book, you might be surprised to learn that I am recommending it to readers of the *Separationist*. Goldstein is a philosophy professor who has published some non-fiction (such as her recent biographies of Kurt Godel and Baruch Spinoza), but contrary to the impression one might get from the title, this is a novel, a work of fiction. Moreover, although it does contain arguments for the existence of God (in an appendix as well as embedded in the story), as a whole the book presents more of an atheistic viewpoint.

I should admit that I am already a fan of Goldstein's fiction. Not only do I see beauty in her prose, each paragraph being almost like a little poem, but the scenarios she imagines also appeal to me, portraying the world as a sad and complex but still beautiful place.

One thing which I particularly like about Goldstein's books, though it may not be to everyone's tastes, is how *academic* they are. The main character in "36 Arguments..." is Cass Seltzer, a professor at the fictional Frankfurter University whose new book "The Varieties of Religious Illusion" has the mainstream media declaring him one of the "New Atheists". In a charming scene, he sits at a conference next to Lucinda Mandelbaum, an extremely famous researcher in game theory, who mistakes him for someone else and so speaks to him as if they were old friends and confidants even though they have never met before. Just as different countries have unique cultures reflected in the way people communicate, so too does the academic world, and its unique culture is successfully parodied here.

Mathematics is a common theme in Goldstein's fiction. The subject of game theory, which Mandelbaum studies, is briefly but accurately described by Goldstein as "the attempt to use mathematics to capture the relative rationality of different strategies in various situations, where how well a person fares isn't just a matter of his own decisions but of the decisions of other players." An example, which appears later in the book, concerns the question of whether Cass should tell Mandelbaum that he loves her.

Judaism is also often a motif in her novels and short stories. Here, it is tied in through the mathematics by having Mandelbaum encounter a young

mathematical prodigy living in an isolated Hasidic community. The boy, the son of the community's rabbi, appears to have worked out for himself some interesting properties of whole numbers which, though examples of elementary number theory, are stunning discoveries for an untrained, six year old child. He re-enters the story later as a teenager, following Mandelbaum's advice to attend M.I.T., and discusses both his sense of obligation to his community and his own non-religious world view.

But, what about the "arguments" of the title of the book? The chapter titles have cute names like "The Argument from Dappled Things" and "The Argument from Strange Laughter" (or mathematical ones like "The Argument from Taking Differences"). A climactic moment in the novel occurs when Seltzer participates in a public debate on the existence of God. Unlike some similar debates I have attended, both participants in this fictional debate make some strong arguments, and each of the debaters justifiably can consider themselves to have won. However, the book really does conclude with an *appendix* describing exactly 36 arguments for the existence of God, and each of those arguments is then countered by an enumerated list of flaws.

The "New Atheists", a set which by some definitions includes Goldstein's husband, psychologist Steven Pinker, are often accused of being too aggressive. Perhaps this book is the author's attempt at another approach. It does actually contain the arguments promised in the title, as well as some discussion of the *emotional need* for religion even if it is based on falsehoods. However, some who buy the book after reading the title may be surprised by the alternative viewpoints presented as well. I would be very curious to know how such a reader would react. Would the non-religious viewpoint be more appealing or effective when tied to a character like Cass Seltzer that they could "get to know"? I am afraid I am unable to predict that, but do believe that many atheists, agnostics, Brights, and others will enjoy reading this book. Mixed in with some well thought out philosophical arguments one finds a little romance, a little humor, and a bit of math, all taking place in a fictional universe which, like the real one, is sad but beautiful.