

Atheists' Theism?

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There is a fascinating quote of the famous German composer, Johannes Brahms (1833–1899), which shows how a man may have no religious faith at all, yet still recognize that there is an objective order. Such a recognition is a handle on reality, and it gave to Brahms access to a great deal of beauty, shown forth in his music. The crisis of countless modern souls is that they are convinced that there is nothing objective at all. They are imprisoned within their own subjectivity, which makes for a very bare prison, and for suicidal music!

In 1878 Brahms wrote for an outstanding violinist, his friend Joseph Joachim (1831–1907), one of his loveliest and most beloved works, the Violin Concerto in D. When he heard Joachim play it, he said, “Hmm – yes . . . it could be played that way.” In other words while Brahms was composing the Concerto, he had been hearing it in his mind's ear being played in such and such a way, but he recognized that the somewhat different use that somebody else might make of his composition was also legitimate.

Now undoubtedly there are ways of performing the Concerto which Brahms would not have accepted, but so long as a performer made use of his composition to approach by a different way the goal he had himself approached in composing, then Brahms felt no need to insist on his own approach. The objective goal mattered more than the subjective approach, so that if by composing he had provided all kinds of performers with an access to that goal, then – within certain limits – they were all of them welcome to play the Concerto how they liked. Object above subject.

Ultimately that means God above man, yet Brahms was no believer. The Catholic Czech composer, Antonin Dvorak (1841–1904), friend and admirer of Brahms, once said of him,

“What a great man! Such a great soul! And he believes in nothing! He believes in nothing!” Brahms was no Christian – he deliberately left out of his *German Requiem* any mention of Jesus Christ. Nor did he admit to being any kind of believer – he said that the Bible texts he had used in the *Requiem* were there for their expression of feeling rather than for any profession of religion. Subject above object. And to this professed disbelief on the part of Brahms corresponds, one may hold, the lack of a certain spontaneity and joy in much of his music.

But how much autumnal beauty it contains, and carefully crafted order! This craftsmanship and reflection of the beauties of Nature, for instance in the Violin Concerto, call to mind Our Lord saying how there are souls that deny him in word but honour him in deed (Mt.XXI, 28–29). Today when almost all souls deny him in word, how many there are that still in some way or other, for instance in music or in Nature, honour at least the order that Our Lord has planted throughout his universe. Such faithfulness is by no means yet that Catholic Faith which alone can save, but it is at least that smouldering wick which should not be extinguished (Mt.XII, 20).

Let all Catholics gifted with the fullness of the Faith have discernment for such souls around them, and let us have compassion on the multitudes being led away from God by his enemies, in music and in all domains (Mk.VIII, 2).

Kyrie eleison.