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General Introduction

The purpose of this volume is to provide general readers and advanced students with an introduction to atheism: its history, present social context, legal implications, supporting arguments, implications for morality, and relation to other perspectives. This general introduction will set the stage for the chapters that follow.

ATHEISM, AGNOSTICISM, AND THEISM

The concept of atheism was developed historically in the context of Western monotheistic religions, and it still has its clearest application in this area. Applied, for example, to premodern non-Western contexts, the concept may be misleading. Moreover, even in the modern Western context “atheism” has meant different things depending on changing conceptions of God. Nevertheless, it will be assumed in this volume that, if applied cautiously outside its clearest historical context, the concept of atheism can be illuminating for contemporary Western readers.

If you look up “atheism” in a dictionary, you will find it defined as the belief that there is no God. Certainly, many people understand “atheism” in this way. Yet this is not what the term means if one considers it from the point of view of its Greek roots. In Greek “a” means “without” or “not,” and “theos” means “god.”¹ From this standpoint, an atheist is someone without a belief in God; he or she need not be someone who believes that God does not exist.² Still, there is a popular dictionary meaning of “atheism” according to which an atheist is not simply one who holds no belief in the existence of a God or gods but is one who believes that there is no God or gods. This dictionary use of the term should not be overlooked. To avoid confusion, let us call it *positive atheism* and let us call the type of atheism derived from the original Greek roots *negative atheism*.

No general definition of “God” will be attempted here,³ but it will prove useful to distinguish a number of different concepts of God that have figured in the traditional controversies and debates about religion. In modern times “theism” has usually come to mean a belief in

a personal God who takes an active interest in the world and who has given a special revelation to humans. So understood, theism stands in contrast to deism, the belief in a God that is based not on revelation but on evidence from nature. The God assumed by deists is usually considered to be remote from the world and not intimately involved with its concerns. Theism is also to be contrasted with polytheism, the belief in more than one God, and with pantheism, the belief that God is identical with nature.

Negative atheism in the broad sense⁴ is then the absence of belief in any god or Gods, not just the absence of belief in a personal theistic God, and negative atheism in the narrow sense is the absence of belief in a theistic God. Positive atheism in the broad sense is, in turn, disbelief in all gods, with positive atheism in the narrow sense being the disbelief in a theistic God. For positive atheism in the narrow sense to be successfully defended, two tasks must be accomplished. First, the reasons for believing in a theistic God must be refuted; in other words, negative atheism in the narrow sense must be established. Second, reasons for disbelieving in the theistic God must be given.

These categories should not be allowed to mask the complexity and variety of positions that atheists can hold, for a given individual can take different atheistic positions with respect to different concepts of God. Thus, a person might maintain that there is good reason to suppose that anthropomorphic gods such as Zeus do not exist and therefore be a positive atheist with respect to Zeus and similar gods. However, he or she could, for example, be only a negative atheist with respect to Paul Tillich's God.⁵ In addition, people can and often do hold different atheistic positions with respect to different conceptions of a theistic God. For example, someone could be a positive atheist with respect to Aquinas' God and only a negative atheist with respect to St. Teresa's God.

Agnosticism, the position of neither believing nor disbelieving that God exists, is often contrasted with atheism. However, this common opposition of agnosticism to atheism is misleading. Agnosticism and positive atheism are indeed incompatible: if atheism is true, agnosticism is false and conversely. But agnosticism is compatible with negative atheism in that agnosticism *entails* negative atheism. Since agnostics do not believe in God, they are by definition negative atheists. This is not to say that negative atheism entails agnosticism. A negative atheist *might* disbelieve in God but need not.

Elsewhere I have evaluated the main arguments for agnosticism.⁶ Here I will explore what is at issue between positive atheism and agnosticism. An agnostic, one might suppose, is skeptical that good grounds exist, whereas an atheist is not. However, this is not the only way the

difference between these positions can be construed. An agnostic might think that there are good grounds for disbelieving that God exists but *also* believe that there are equally good grounds for believing that God exists. These opposing reasons would offset one another, leaving no overall positive reason to believe or disbelieve.

Let us call the view that there are no good reasons for believing that God exists and none for believing that God does not exist skeptical agnosticism and the view that there are equally good reasons for believing both theism and atheism that offset one another cancellation agnosticism.

Arguments that are intended to establish both negative and positive atheism refute both skeptical and cancellation agnosticism. Showing that negative atheism is justified undermines cancellation agnosticism, for it assumes that both atheism and theism have good grounds that cancel each other out, and negative atheism entails that there are no good grounds for theistic belief. Moreover, arguments showing that there are good grounds for the nonexistence of God undermine skeptical agnosticism since skeptical agnosticism assumes that there are no good grounds for either atheism or theism.

BACKGROUND, THE CASE AGAINST THEISM, AND IMPLICATIONS

Atheism has a long and distinguished history as several of the background chapters in this volume attest. Jan Bremmer in "Atheism in Antiquity" argues, on the one hand, that the Greeks discovered theoretical atheism, which some scholars maintain is one of the most important events in the history of religion. On the other hand, Bremmer maintains, "Greeks and Romans, pagans and Christians, soon discovered the utility of the term 'atheist' as a means to label opponents. The invention of atheism would open a new road to intellectual freedom, but also enabled people to label opponents in a new way. Progress rarely comes without a cost." Gavin Hyman in "Atheism in Modern History" outlines the development of atheistic thought in the Western world, arguing that atheism and modernity are so linked that modernity seems almost necessarily to culminate in atheism. He concluded that we can be sure of one thing: "the fate of atheism would seem to be inescapably bound up with the fate of modernity." And Paul Zuckerman in "Atheism: Contemporary Numbers and Patterns" brings together a vast amount of data on the number and distribution of atheists throughout the world. Among other things, he shows that atheists make up a significant portion of the world's population, that nonbelief tends to be associated with social health, and that the pattern and distribution of atheists in the world calls into question the now fashionable theory that belief in God is innate.

Needless to say, many contemporary philosophers have defended theism against the criticisms of atheists.⁷ In this volume William Lane Craig in "Theistic Critiques of Atheism" presents the theistic position. Readers must decide for themselves whether his defense of theism succeeds or whether atheism has been successfully defended by the arguments put forward in other chapters in this volume.⁸

Several chapters in this book contribute to the task of defending negative atheism. Richard Gale in "The Failure of Classical Theistic Arguments" brings up objections to such classical arguments for the existence of God as the ontological argument. Keith Parsons in "Some Contemporary Theistic Arguments" criticizes the arguments for God defended by two leading contemporary Christian philosophers, Alvin Plantinga and Richard Swinburne. Daniel Dennett offers criticisms of creationism and intelligent design theories, both of which are often associated with theism. Evan Fales in "Naturalism and Physicalism" raises objections to supernaturalism, of which theism is a special case, and David Brink in "The Autonomy of Ethics" argues that ethics is independent of belief in God, although theists often claim that ethics is dependent on God.⁹

Other chapters contribute to the task of defending positive atheism. In "The Argument from Evil," Andrea Weisberger defends the traditional argument from evil – the attempt to show that the large amount of evil in the world makes the existence of the theistic God either false or improbable. Quentin Smith in "Kalam Cosmological Argument for Atheism" maintains that cosmology has atheistic implications. Patrick Grim in "Impossibility Arguments" attempts to show that the concept of God is inconsistent.¹⁰ It should be noted, however, that many other arguments also contribute to the second task that are not considered in this volume.¹¹ Elsewhere, for example, Ted Drange has defended positive atheism by attempting to show that the large amount of non-belief in the world makes the existence of a theistic God improbable.¹² John Schellenberg¹³ has attempted to demonstrate that the belief in the existence of nontheistic religions makes a theistic God's existence improbable. In addition, Schellenberg has argued that the existence of reasonable nonbelief is itself grounds for supposing that God does not exist.¹⁴

Several chapters in this volume draw out some of atheism's important and exciting implications. Atheism has been accused of being anti-religious, but Michael Martin in "Atheism and Religion" shows that although atheism is not a religion, there are atheistic religions. Christine Overall in "Feminism and Atheism" concludes, "Being a feminist also requires that one be an atheist." According to Steve Gey in "Atheism and the Freedom of Religion," "the religious liberty of atheists has come a long way since the days in which serious political theorists could argue

that atheists should be put to death, denied the ability to give evidence in court, or prohibited from becoming a Member of Parliament. . . . [But] atheists will not enjoy the same religious liberty as religious adherents unless the government under which they live is comprehensively secularized." John Caputo in "Atheism, A/theology, and the Postmodern Condition" reviews some of the important challenges postmodernism poses for theism and atheism and maintains that "postmodernism turns out to be not a particularly friendly environment for atheism, either, not if atheism is a metaphysical or an otherwise fixed and decisive denial of God."

An important, although not primary, part of the case for atheism is to show that religion can be explained as a natural phenomenon. Stewart Guthrie in "Anthropological Theories of Religion" reviews different types of naturalistic explanations of religion and advocates a cognitive explanation of religion in which animism and anthropomorphism are central notions. Finally, Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi in "Atheists: A Psychological Profile" reviews the psychological data and concludes that atheists tend to be more intelligent and better educated than believers; less authoritarian, less suggestible, less dogmatic, and less prejudiced than believers; and more tolerant of others, law-abiding, compassionate, and conscientious. "In short, they are good to have as neighbors."

BIBLIOGRAPHIC NOTE

For introductions to atheism, see Douglas Krueger, *What Is Atheism?* (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1998), and Julian Baggini, *Atheism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). Excellent references to atheistic literature can be found in the bibliographies and end notes of the chapters in this volume. In addition, extensive bibliographies can be found in Nicholas Everett, *The Non Existence of God* (London: Routledge, 2004); Finngeir Hiorth, *Atheism in the World* (Oslo, Norway: Human-Etisk Forbund, 2003), *Ethics for Atheists* (Mumbai, India: Indian Secular Society, 1998), and Hiorth, *Introduction to Atheism* (Oslo, Norway: Human-Etisk Forbund, 2002); S. T. Joshi (ed.), *Atheism* (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 2000); and Gordon Stein (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Unbelief*, vols. 1 and 2 (Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1985). For more on feminism and atheism, see Annie Laurie Gaylor (ed.), *Women without Superstition: No God – No Masters* (Madison, Wis.: Freedom from Religion Foundation, 1997), and *Woe to the Women: The Bible Tells Me So* (Madison, Wis.: Freedom from Religion Foundation, 1981). Moreover, a Google search of the Secular Web (<http://www.infidel.org>) turns up over 700 items on atheism and related topics.

6 GENERAL INTRODUCTION

NOTES

1. Gordon Stein, "The Meaning of Atheism and Agnosticism," in Gordon Stein (ed.), *An Anthology of Atheism and Rationalism* (Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus, 1980), p. 3.
2. This negative sense of "atheism" should be distinguished from the sense of "atheism" introduced by Paul Edwards. According to Edwards, an atheist is a person who rejects a belief in God. This rejection may be because the person believes that the statement "God exists" is false, but it may be for other reasons. The negative sense of "atheism" used here is broader than Edwards's definition since on the present definition someone can be an atheist if he or she has no belief in God, although the lack of belief is not the result of rejection. See Paul Edwards, "Atheism," in Paul Edwards (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (New York: Macmillan and Free Press, 1967), vol. 1, p. 175.
3. However, the definition of "God" proposed by Beardsley and Beardsley has considerable merit. On their view, for a being to be a god it must meet four criteria: it must have supernatural powers; be free from so many of the natural limitations of inanimate objects, subhuman organisms, and humans that it cannot be classified as belonging to any of these groups; have some kind of mental life; and be regarded as superior to human beings. See Monroe Beardsley and Elizabeth Beardsley, *Philosophical Thinking: An Introduction* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1965), pp. 46–50.
4. I owe the distinction between the broad and narrow senses of "atheism" to William L. Rowe, "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16 (1979): 335–41.
5. This seems to be the position of Kai Nielsen. He rejects a nonanthropomorphic God as meaningless and an anthropomorphic God as false. See, e.g., Kai Nielsen, "Introduction: How Is Atheism to Be Characterized?" in Karl Nielsen, ed., *Philosophy and Atheism* (Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus Press, 1985).
6. Michael Martin, "Atheism v. Agnosticism," *Philosophers' Magazine* 19 (Summer 2002): 17–19; see also Michael Martin, "On an Argument for Agnosticism," Aug. 27, 2001, <http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/michael.martin/martinag.html>.
7. For example, see Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) and *God, Freedom and Evil* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1977), and Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977) and *The Existence of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979).
8. For further critiques of Craig, see Stan Wallace (ed.), *Does God Exist?* (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate Publishing, 2003); William Lane Craig and Quentin Smith (eds.), *Theism, Atheism, and Big Bang Cosmology* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993); Erik J. Wielenberg, *Values and Virtue in a Godless Universe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); and Jeffrey Jay Lowder, "Historical Evidence and the Empty Tomb: A Reply to William Lane Craig," in Robert Price and Jeffrey Jay Lowder (eds.), *The Empty Tomb* (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 2005). Also see the critical papers

on Craig at <http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/theism/christianity/craig.html>.

9. For arguments against theism that are not included in this volume see Michael Martin, *Atheism: A Philosophical Justification* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990); Nicholas Everett, *The Non Existence of God* (London: Routledge, 2004); and Richard Gale, *On the Nature and Existence of God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).
10. See Michael Martin and Ricki Monnier (eds.), *The Impossibility of God* (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 2004).
11. See Martin, *Atheism*; Everett, *The Non Existence of God*.
12. Theodore Drange, *Nonbelief and Evil* (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1998).
13. J. L. Schellenberg, "Pluralism and Probability," *Religious Studies* 33 (1997): 143–59.
14. J. L. Schellenberg, *Hiddenness and Human Reason* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1993).

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I. Background

JAN N. BREMMER

1 Atheism in Antiquity

In 1942 the French historian Louis Febvre published his epoch-making study of Rabelais, in which he noted the absence of atheism in the Middle Ages.¹ Febvre explained this absence as a kind of *blocage mental*. In the life of society and the individual, Christianity was of overriding importance. Its festivals constituted the rhythm of the year; important transitions in the life of the individual – birth, marriage, and death – were completely integrated into religious life, as were everyday activities. Churches, whose bells would always remind the forgetful believer of their existence, often dominated the landscape. It was simply impossible to think Christianity away from medieval society.²

Subsequent research has modified Febvre's findings to some extent,³ but his main findings still stand. Antiquity was not that different from the Middle Ages in this respect. The ancient Greeks and Romans also moved in a landscape where temples were everywhere, where gods adorned their coins, where the calendar went from religious festival to festival, and where religious rites accompanied all major transitions in life. Consequently, atheism never developed into a popular ideology with a recognizable following. All we have in antiquity is the exceptional individual who dared to voice his disbelief or bold philosophers who proposed intellectual theories about the coming into existence of the gods without, normally, putting their theories into practice or rejecting religious practice altogether. If we find atheism at all, it is usually a "soft" atheism or the imputation of atheism to others as a means to discredit them.

Even if we may assume that mankind always has known its sceptics and unbelievers, the expression of that scepticism and unbelief is subject to historical circumstances. Some periods were more favorable to dissenters than other times, and later times may interpret as atheism what earlier times permitted as perhaps only just acceptable theories about the gods or the origin of religion. This means that we must be attentive to the different periods in which atheism more or less flourished, to the interpretations by later Greeks and Romans of their predecessors, and

to the reasons why contemporaries impute atheism to people who differ from them in religious opinion.

The Epicurean Philodemus (ca. 110–35 B.C.) classified the various kinds of atheists in antiquity as follows:

- (1) Those who say that it is unknown whether there are any gods or what they are like;
- (2) Those who say openly that the gods do not exist;
- (3) Those who clearly imply it.⁴

Although this classification is a fairly acceptable one, it stays at the level of ideas and neglects practicing atheists. More seriously, it does not mention atheism as a labeling device to slander your opponents, be they religious or philosophical ones. That is why we do not follow Philodemus but divide our evidence into three periods: (1) the classical period, (2) the Hellenistic period, which started to label earlier thinkers as atheists and developed a “soft” atheism that tried to save the existence of the gods, and (3) the Roman period when the Christians were called *atheoi* by the pagans and vice versa. Given its interest for the history of atheism, we will concentrate on the classical period. In all cases, we will use the term “atheism” rather loosely for those thinkers and people who denied the existence of the gods or put forward theories to explain the existence of the gods.⁵

It is not our intention to give an exhaustive listing of all people that have been called atheists in antiquity. This has already been done in a very competent manner and needs not to be redone.⁶ Atheism itself has also been studied repeatedly.⁷ Yet recent publications of new papyri and new editions of already published texts enable us to take a fresh look at the older Greek evidence and thus to sketch a better picture than was possible in most of the twentieth century.

I. THE CLASSICAL PERIOD

Atheism in Greece became visible especially in Athens in the second half of the fifth century, although the first “atheist” was not from Athens. The first prominent philosopher that was later categorized as such was Protagoras (ca. 490–420 B.C.) from Abdera, a city in the northeast of Greece, where Democritus (ca. 460–400? B.C.), who could have developed into an atheist but apparently did not, was born. He was famous for what probably was the opening sentence of his work called “Concerning the Gods,” as in antiquity the titles of prose works often consisted of the opening words: “Concerning the gods I am unable to discover whether they exist or not, or what they are like in form; for there are many hindrances to knowledge, the obscurity of the subject and the brevity of