Prologue

"The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully." Thus read the opening lines of Richard Dawkins's runaway bestseller, *The God Delusion* (2006). A lot could be said – will be said – about this passage and the many pages that follow. Here, now, I want to point out that this is not really an epistemological statement – that is, a statement about the truth of things – but overwhelmingly an ethical statement – a statement about the morality of the situation. Whether or not God exists, He is a Very Bad Thing. The pressure is on us not to believe in Him. Rejection of God-belief for people like Dawkins – atheism – is never purely a matter of fact. It is always primarily a matter of right and wrong, of good and evil.

You might say that this cannot be so. Whether or not God exists cannot normally be a matter of morality, even though obviously it can be if He does exist and you wantonly reject Him and His being. Richard Dawkins exists, and that is a fact. Spiderman does not exist, and that is a fact. Either God exists, or He doesn't. End of argument. Things, however, are never quite this simple. Even the most confirmed believers admit that doubts are possible. Indeed, sometimes it is the most confirmed believers who are wracked by doubts. How so? Because God being God you can never be quite sure. Many Christians make something of this. For Søren Kierkegaard, faith had to involve a leap into the absurd in some sense. A God who could be proven once and for all precludes genuine faith, that sense of commitment, of trusting, of being led in the dark.

The famous British review *Beyond the Fringe* had one of the characters (played by Alan Bennett) as a vicar giving a farcical sermon about the nature of existence. "Life, you know, is rather like opening a tin of sardines. We are all of us looking for the key. And, I wonder, how many of you here tonight have wasted years of your lives looking behind the kitchen dressers of this life for that key." He continues: "Others think they've found the key, don't they? They roll back the lid of the sardine tin of life, they reveal the sardines, the riches of life, therein, and they get them out, they enjoy them. But, you know, there's always a little bit in the corner you can't get out. I wonder – I wonder, is there a little bit in the corner of your life? I know there is in mine." What makes this so hilarious is that it is not exactly false. Substitute "God" for "life" and there is always that little bit in the corner you can't get out. God's existence – or nonexistence – is

always tantalizingly at a distance, and that means commitment, and that means morality.

Belief in the existence of God. Right or wrong? Good or bad? This is the theme of this short Element. I set these questions against the fact that, in this century, we have seen a surprisingly large wave of God deniers – the so-called New Atheists. My aim is to look at these earnest thinkers – preachers or proselytizers are terms that come to mind – to put them in context and to see what they are saying. Then I seek to assess the strengths of their arguments – to see the good points, to see the bad points, and to draw conclusions. Some commentators on this controversy have objected that even to set about things in this way is implicitly to give the game to the critics (Crane 2017). Religion is about far more than belief – or not – in God, or even in the moral consequences that follow from such beliefs. Religion is about rituals and customs and identification with one group rather than another. In short, religion is about the whole lived life. To focus just on God is to distort the discussion from the first. I agree that religion is more than just beliefs or not in a deity, but I think the critics are right in assuming that such beliefs are at the heart of religion. For me, for instance, raised a Quaker, rituals have never been much a part of religion. So, without prejudging issues too strongly, I am with the critics in my focusing on the God and morality issues.

As it happens, though this Elements series is on "monotheism" generally, rather than on "Christian monotheism" specifically, simply because of the interests of the New Atheists – those whom they berate first and foremost – my chief (my default) focus is on Christian monotheism, only as appropriate broadening my discussion. I refer therefore to the God of both the Old and New Testaments, to God the Father, and His extensions through the Trinity – His son, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Ghost or Spirit. He is the creator and ruler of the universe, ever-present, loving all but especially those beings made in His own image, human beings.

In what I take to be entirely standard usage, since we are now referring (for all that He is three-in-one) to one and only one God, I speak of belief in this God as "theism" with the associated term "theistic" (Ruse 2015). A God who did not create but who ordered and designed the universe is the God of "deism" and such beliefs are "deistic." The main difference between the God of theism – the Creator God – and the God of deism – the Unmoved Mover – is that the former continues (or can continue) to interfere in the world's working through miracles. The latter cannot (or does not). Nonbelief starts with what Thomas Henry Huxley labeled "agnosticism." You simply don't know whether God exists or not. For some, agnosticism simply marks their total lack of interest in the topic. They don't care whether God exists. Others, like T. H. Huxley's grandson Julian

Huxley, care very much. They are in this sense deeply religious. Julian Huxley wrote a book: *Religion without Revelation* (1927). A better term for these religious nonbelievers might be "skeptic." At the end of the spectrum, you have those who assert the nonexistence of God as firmly as theists assert the existence of God. These are "atheists."

These terms help our discussion. They are essential. But be warned, there are always queries and qualifications. Buddhists are neither theists nor deists – they do not believe in a Creator or Designer God. In respects, though, they are as far from agnosticism and atheism as it is possible to imagine (Ruse 2019). They believe in orders of lesser gods and their whole world is as infused with meaning as one finds in any Abrahamic religion, especially the Christian religion. It would be as misleading to refer without qualification to the Dalai Lama as an atheist as it would be to refer to Pope Francis as an atheist. Quakers reject the God of an evangelical like Franklin Graham as firmly as would Richard Dawkins. Does that therefore mean that Quakers are atheists? Or that, as did the followers of Baal, Franklin Graham is following a false God? Questions like these, and the difficulty of answering them, show that the God debate moves on from simple epistemological questions to ethical questions, and these ethical questions take us right into issues to do with meaning. A major reason why most of us would feel uncomfortable simply dismissing Buddhists as atheists, in the same category as Richard Dawkins, and equally uncomfortable with sneering at Quakers for their nigh-mystical approach to the Godhead, is that, unlike Dawkins, these people find an external – an objective – meaning to their lives. Differing from French novelist and essayist Albert Camus ([1942]1955), they do not think their lives "absurd," something William Shakespeare captured in *Macbeth* centuries ago.

> Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player,
> That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
> And then is heard no more. It is a tale
> Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
> Signifying nothing.

For those who reject atheism (and probably most forms of agnosticism), human life makes sense, a sense that is given to us and not created by us in the fashion promoted by the existentialists. So here is another reason – perhaps the most important reason – for careful use of the categories of religious belief.

In hallowed philosophical fashion, cautioning about our use of words, I have stirred the language pot. Mischief over, I am ready to begin. First, some historical background and context. Then the New Atheists. We can take things from there.

1 Why Atheism?

Athens and Jerusalem

Famously, the early Christian thinker Tertullian (AD 155–240) asked: "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?" He was arguing that the Christian faith should avoid the snares of the false pagan philosophy of the Greeks – Plato and Aristotle, particularly. Later Christian thinkers, above all Augustine and Aquinas, were to disagree strongly with this position, but they (as do we) agreed with Tertullian that it is to Greek and to Jewish thought – seen in harmony or seen in opposition – that we turn to discover the nature of Christian monotheism, and even more to discover the nature of (let us use the oxymoron) Christian atheism. In respects, it does seem that Tertullian has a point. Nonbelief simply does not come as an option in either the Jewish contribution to the Bible, the Old Testament, or the Christian Bible, the New Testament. "The fool hath said in his heart there is no God." Although Anselm quoted this passage from the Psalms (14:1), stating his case for the ontological argument, general agreement is that this was not truly an avowal of nonbelief. Rather, it was a denial of the God of the Jews. There were lots of people like that – the already mentioned followers of Baal, for example. And there was certainly much hostility to the devotees of alien deities. But there was no atheism, or even agnosticism, in the senses we are using the words.

Why was this? To get at God, as it were, there seem to be two paths. On one hand is the path introduced in the Prologue – that of faith, meaning that, in some sense, psychologically you are overwhelmed by the conviction of God's existence like Saul on the road to Damascus. On the other hand is the path Anselm is about to pursue, where you try to use reason and evidence to prove the existence of God. Using the conventional terms of "revealed theology" (meaning belief on faith) and "natural theology" (meaning belief on reason and evidence), there is very little of the latter in any part of the Bible. Exceptionally, in the Psalms we learn: "The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handywork" (19:1). Passages elsewhere, notably Paul speaking in the Areopagus (Acts 17), reveal hints of natural theological reasoning. Generally, the very attempt to prove (or deny) the existence of God gets short shrift. The Jews were not into that sort of thing. It was faith or nothing, and nothing was not an option. Jesus made that clear. "Then saith he to Thomas, reach hither thy finger, and behold my hands; and reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into my side: and be not faithless, but believing. And Thomas answered and said unto him, My Lord and my God. Jesus saith unto him, Thomas, because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed: blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed" (John 20:27–29).

In the spirit of this kind of thinking, as noted in the Prologue, belief in the existence of God is always somewhat at a distance, that little bit in the corner that you can't get out. It is obviously true that many people of faith don't have this worry – "I know that my redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth" (Job 19:25) – but it is equally obviously true that many people do have doubts and sincere believers can wrestle with these throughout their lives. Indeed, paradoxically, it can be that which makes faith so vital. Followers of natural theology would tend to disagree. They would argue that reason and evidence can prove definitively the existence of God. You can empty all the corners. "God exists" is true or not true. Forget all the worries about morality and meaning.

Faith and Reason

To answer this sturdy argument, three points are pertinent.

First, in the Christian tradition, faith has always trumped reason and evidence. With reason, Thomas Aquinas is taken to be the greatest natural theologian of all time. Yet he makes no bones about where he stands on the faith/reason divide. "The truth of the intelligible things of God is twofold, one to which the inquiry of reason can attain, the other which surpasses the whole range of human reason" (Aquinas 1975, 7). Aquinas asserts definitively that faith is the more important – else the ignorant and stupid and lazy would never get knowledge of God. The recent pope Saint John Paul II stood right in this tradition: "The results of reasoning may in fact be true, but these results acquire their true meaning only if they are set within the larger horizon of faith: 'All man's steps are ordered by the Lord: how then can man understand his own ways?' [Proverbs 20:24]" (John Paul II 1998, 16).

Second, the natural-theological proofs may be found wanting. This is a major item discussed in this Element. Full knowledge of God may not be so easily available as you first thought. Note that, here, revealed theology is in a somewhat stronger position. The critic can go after revealed theology, for instance arguing that it is all a matter of psychology, wishful thinking, and belief in God has no stronger basis than belief in winning the lottery. This is true, but that is hardly going to stop the believer from believing. After all, he or she has already foresworn reason and evidence, so reason and evidence are not going to be definitively effective now. In any case, by next week you may know that you did not win the lottery. God-belief will only be authenticated after death, when there is going to be no one around to laugh at you for your naivety.

Third, if you do go the route of natural theology, then you open the path to atheism. The person of belief might turn from God because of the horrors of the

Holocaust. But you certainly cannot make them turn from God because of the Holocaust, and it is as likely that they will reaffirm their belief in the Christian God because of the Holocaust. Only in the overall Christian eschatological scheme of things can one make sense of the Holocaust. Don't mistake me. I am not trying to slide in at the beginning of this Element that that makes Christians horrible people. I don't see that as necessarily or universally true at all. What I am saying is that the Holocaust for a person of faith is not the knockdown argument that a black swan is to the biologist who believes that all swans are white. I am also saying that if you go the route of natural theology – reason and evidence – then you do open yourself to refutations for the existence of God. Nothing in the corners of the tin to shield you. So atheism is now firmly on the table.

The Greeks

As it was for the Greeks in a way not true for the Jews. Neither Plato nor Aristotle was an atheist. They certainly knew of atheists and Plato for one disapproved of them. He wanted them locked up, fed only by slaves, and buried outside the city walls. Talk about a moral issue! This is about on a par with being a child abuser. Although neither Plato nor Aristotle was given to dancing around stark naked ("skyclad") or cutting the sacred mistletoe or calling down the moon, in the sense of pagan as someone outside the Abrahamic religions, that is obviously where they fall. Neither was into the polytheism we associate with ancient Greece – gods on Mount Olympus fighting and copulating and feasting and so forth. Both thought that sort of thing not just wrong but rather common and vulgar. Plato had his Theory of Forms, supposing that there is a rational world of universals or archetypes that our material world copies in some sense – "participates in." Just as our world is ordered, with the sun being the prime force illuminating and giving sustaining existence to all else, so in the world of the Forms the Good is the prime force illuminating and giving sustaining existence to all else. Aristotle likewise had his Unmoved Mover, the totally perfect being toward which all else strives.

There are similarities between Plato's Form of the Good and Aristotle's Unmoved Mover – and incidentally, not contingently, with the Christian God (Ruse 2017). All are outside time and space, perfect, unchanging, and the cause of all else. However, Aristotle's Unmoved Mover does the only thing such a perfect being can do, contemplate perfection, meaning think only of itself (!). It has therefore no knowledge or interest in anything else, certainly not the things of this world. Plato's Good is very different, for it does have concern for the rest of existence – not the rest of creation, for Plato like Aristotle (and very

much unlike the Christian) did not think the world was created. It existed always – eternal. However, Plato's Form of the Good was a designer – it was this that made the world (universe) as it is, and it was this that strove to make everything within the world as good as possible. There is debate about whether the Good-as-Designer – what Plato called the "Demiurge" – did an actual act of designing in space and time, or if (as most think) It was more a principle of ordering. Either way, Plato (probably drawing on earlier thinkers, especially Socrates) started the Western tradition of natural theology, for he argued that the design-like nature of our world points to an external intelligence that planned the way that things are and function. The eye, for seeing, did not come about by chance. It was intended to be that way, thanks to the benevolent forethought of the Demiurge. For Plato, all physical existence shows design – inanimate objects as well as organisms – and this was true also of Aristotle. However, given the indifference of the Unmoved Mover – no designer It – the principle of ordering had to be a "vital" force within, rather than an external intelligence. Also, because earlier in life he was a practicing biologist, Aristotle always thought more of functioning – what he spoke of as being guided by "final causes" as opposed to regular "efficient causes" – in the world of organisms than in the whole physical world. Whatever the differences, however, there is not much atheism about Plato and Aristotle.

The Christians

Which makes it hardly unexpected that the great Christian philosophers-theologians, notably Augustine, Anselm, and Aquinas, picked up on essential elements of Greek philosophy and incorporated them right into their world systems (Ruse 2015). Augustine's God bears remarkable similarities to the Platonic Form of the Good, no surprise since he was much influenced by the Neoplatonist Plotinus. In the *Confessions*, Augustine homes right in on the key points. Necessary: "For God's will is not a creature but is prior to the created order, since nothing would be created unless the Creator's will preceded it. Therefore God's will belongs to his very substance." Outside space: "no physical entity existed before heaven and earth." Outside time: "Your 'years' neither come nor go. Our years come and go so that all may come in succession. All your 'years' exist in simultaneity, because they do not change; those going away are not thrust out by those coming in … Your Today is eternity" (Augustine 396, Book XI). In some sense, as with the Good, the Christian God does not exist contingently – like the objects of this world – but necessarily. Hard as it is to imagine, there might indeed have been a world without Michael Ruse. It is impossible that there be a world without God.

This point leads to the most notorious of the proofs of God – the ontological argument of Anselm (1903), which asserts His being straight from His definition. God is defined as "that than which none greater can be conceived." Suppose, with the fool, we say that God does not exist. We run into a reductio ad absurdum. "God cannot be conceived not to exist. – God is that than which nothing greater can be conceived. – That which can be conceived not to exist is not God." In the *Summa*, Aquinas offers a neo-Aristotelian, teleology-drenched picture of all of nature, although he is not at all adverse to using Neoplatonic notions in his thinking too. These emerge particularly in his famous fivefold proofs for the existence of God. First, a series of variations on the causal or cosmological argument for God's existence: everything has a cause, ultimately we are led back to a first cause, namely God. The second version is perhaps the easiest version to grasp:

> In the world of sense we find there is an order of efficient causes. There is no case known (neither is it, indeed, possible) in which a thing is found to be the efficient cause of itself; for so it would be prior to itself, which is impossible. Now in efficient causes it is not possible to go on to infinity, because in all efficient causes following in order, the first is the cause of the intermediate cause, and the intermediate is the cause of the ultimate cause, whether the intermediate cause be several, or only one. Now to take away the cause is to take away the effect. Therefore, if there be no first cause among efficient causes, there will be no ultimate, nor any intermediate cause. But if in efficient causes it is possible to go on to infinity, there will be no first efficient cause, neither will there be an ultimate effect, nor any intermediate efficient causes; all of which is plainly false. Therefore it is necessary to admit a first efficient cause, to which everyone gives the name of God. (Aquinas 1952, 1a, 2, 3)

The fifth argument is a version of Plato's teleological argument, the argument from design.

> We see that things which lack intelligence, such as natural bodies, act for an end, and this is evident from their acting always, or nearly always, in the same way, so as to obtain the best result. Hence it is plain that not fortuitously, but designedly, do they achieve their end. Now whatever lacks intelligence cannot move towards an end, unless it be directed by some being endowed with knowledge and intelligence; as the arrow is shot to its mark by the archer. Therefore some intelligent being exists by whom all natural things are directed to their end; and this being we call God. (Aquinas 1952, 1a, 2, 3)

Notice that, like Augustine and Anselm, Aquinas is assuming that God exists necessarily. He must or we run into the obvious objection: "What caused God?" God for these great thinkers has no cause and has no need of a cause. Obviously,

we need to do some more unpacking of this claim. We turn to this task later in this Element. For now, it is enough to state that through a combination of faith and reason – remember, the first was always prior – right through the medieval period the basic, Christian monotheist position made good sense.

Atheism

What then of the atheists who so disturbed Plato? Most notably there were the atomists who argued that the universe is empty space filled with little balls of matter – atoms – that buzzed around aimlessly. Every now and then they collided and stuck together. Gradually over time these chunks of matter got bigger and bigger, and since there was infinite time and space – just like monkeys typing Shakespeare – every now and then something functioning appeared. "Friends, Romans, countrymen." Working ears and eyes. So it all came together, without rhyme or reason, without purpose or intention. Leucippus and his student Democritus (around the fifth century BC) were the early atomists, followed by Plato's contemporary Epicurus (341–270 BC) – who much influenced the Roman poet Lucretius (94–55 BC). His poem *On the Nature of Things* lays out things starkly.

> At that time the earth tried to create many monsters
> with weird appearance and anatomy –
> androgynous, of neither one sex nor the other but
> somewhere in between; some footless, or handless;
> many even without mouths, or without eyes and blind;
> some with their limbs stuck together all along their body,
> and thus disabled from doing harm or obtaining anything
> they needed.
> These and other monsters the earth created.
> But to no avail, since nature prohibited their development.
> They were unable to reach the goal of their maturity,
> to find sustenance or to copulate.

Nothing works. It is a mess. Then, time cures all.

> First, the fierce and savage lion species
> has been protected by its courage, foxes by cunning, deer by
> speed of flight. But as for the light-sleeping
> minds of dogs, with their faithful heart,
> and every kind born of the seed of beasts of burden,
> and along with them the wool-bearing flocks and the
> horned tribes,
> they have all been entrusted to the care of the human race.
>
> (Lucretius 1950, 5.862–867)

Even in offering an alternative, meaningless scenario, Plato and later thinkers saw this kind of thinking as a threat to societal stability. What price ethics and the rule of law when all is simply a matter of chance, without rhyme or reason? Overall, though, the main objection – as Plato makes very clear in the *Phaedo* – is that it is all so implausible. It is all very well to talk about infinite time and space – who can grasp those concepts? In the real world, Murphy's Law prevails – if it can go wrong, it will go wrong. Piles of junk simply don't jump up and start functioning. They just don't.

The Modern Age

What changed things? There were no New Atheists in the Middle Ages. Why do we have them now? Essentially, we have them because of the Three Rs: the Renaissance, the Reformation, and the (Scientific) Revolution (Ruse 2019). The Renaissance brought a renewal of interest in the writings of the ancients. Works like *On the Nature of Things* had a whole new life and an eager audience. This did not mean that people at once became atheists, but the option was being presented anew. Similarly, the Reformation, the break with the Catholic Church by Luther and Calvin and others, hardly signaled a turn to nonbelief. If anything, the Reformers were more ardently Christian than the Catholic establishment. But the differences in beliefs and practices showed the way to thinking outside the loop, and this pointed the way to the possibilities of little or no belief at all. Finally, the Scientific Revolution was no clarion call to atheism. Copernicus, at the beginning, was a minor cleric who died in good standing. Newton, at the end, was deeply religious, in later life spending far more time on biblical interpretation than on physics. It did, however, put the sun at the center of things, rather downgrading the special status of things on Earth, and, more important, it challenged Aristotelian final causes. Rather than thinking of the universe in organic terms, the new breed of scientists thought in mechanical terms, of the world as a machine.

Of course, machines have purposes, but that part of the metaphor (in the physical sciences, at least) was downgraded and dropped. The new science simply thought of the world as in endless motion, governed by blind laws. God could still exist, but He was pushed out of scientific explanation. In the words of one of the greatest historians of the Scientific Revolution, He became "a retired engineer" (Dijksterhuis 1961, 491). It is significant that, for all his religiosity, Newton moved toward a form of deism, denying the Trinity, and thinking in terms of a world where God no longer interferes. This was the pattern set through the eighteenth century. Benjamin Franklin, for instance, was open about all of this. "Some Books against Deism fell into my Hands; they were said to be the Substance of Sermons