

## 1 | A New Approach to Atheism

### Arguing and Persuading

One night, I was watching a debate between American philosopher William Lane Craig and British biologist Lewis Wolpert in Central Hall Westminster. They debated with each other on the question “Is God an illusion?” Craig devoted his introductory speech to no fewer than five arguments for God’s existence, which he laid out carefully, premise by premise, showing how the conclusion should follow deductively from the premises. When Wolpert came to the stage, he did something completely different. Here are some crucial quotes from his 15-minute opening speech:

It’s quite a complex issue. And let me try to explain to you why.... I’m not against people being religious. I believe it helps you a great deal.... So, I’m not against people having a belief in God. I do believe that their belief is false.... Beliefs are like possessions, and I ask you: When did you really last give up a basic belief or your partner or your parent or your child? It’s very hard to do so.... Now, if you believe that [God deliberately designed and created the universe and human beings] (and many of you do believe that), you feel better. And that, I regret to tell you, is why you believe in it. And that really is the origin of religion.... Now, the problem about believing in God is looking for evidence. I regret to tell you ... there is zero evidence for the existence of God. I’m terribly sorry, there just isn’t.... Let me try to explain to you – you won’t like it one bit – as to why you actually believe in God. First of all, it makes you

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feel better; you have someone to pray to.... And so, I'm sorry to tell you – you won't like it, it's not attractive – the origin of religion comes from toolmaking.... And prayer is very comforting, even though it may not lead anywhere.... I'm sorry to tell you, you and all human beings have quite a strong set of mystical circuits in your brain, and it comes, I would want to argue, from the fact that those people who believed in religion and mysticism survived better in our ancestors than those who did not.<sup>1</sup>

I was stunned. How could one take a position in a debate and then not come up with any rigorous arguments for it? Just to be clear: I myself have debated several atheists who did come up with various serious arguments. However, why was Wolpert not doing that? And how come there was nonetheless something appealing, something persuasive, about what he said? How come the audience seemed to like and in fact cheered what he said?

I've rewatched that opening speech time and again. As I see it now, Wolpert presents a couple of somewhat sketchy arguments against God's existence and against belief in God. Any student who has taken an introductory course in elementary argumentation theory will easily dispel these arguments. The force of what Wolpert says is not in the arguments but in the implicit messages that can be heard between the lines. I think he conveys at least three such messages:

- The issue is complex and challenging, but I have a firm grip on it. I've been there, don't worry. I'll walk you through it; let's go!
- If you want to be happy, it helps to be religious. However, if, like me, you value truth more than your own happiness, then follow me. I'm a great scientist, and I know what science says about religion. Do you dare to face the truth?

<sup>1</sup> The full video is available at [www.ReasonableFaith.org](http://www.ReasonableFaith.org). It is also available on YouTube: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=n2wh179koso](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n2wh179koso).

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- I am a good-natured and sympathetic guy. After all, I'm very sorry to tell you the harsh truth. So, don't worry about rejecting the existence of God. You can be an atheist and still lead a valuable, moral, and fulfilling life.

Could it be that in the countless books, articles, blogs, public debates, and videos on atheism, we have been missing something? And when I say *we*, I mean *all* of us: atheists, agnostics, and religious believers alike. Much attention has been paid to whether or not the arguments for and against God's existence are convincing. Atheists have delved into the intuitions, experiences, psychological factors, and many other elements that supposedly explain why people believe in God. But what motivates atheism? What is life without God like? Are atheists really primarily motivated by arguments against belief in God, or is the attraction of life without God to be found in something else?

Atheism has received plenty of public attention, especially since the rise of *New Atheism*. This new branch of atheism is a twenty-first-century phenomenon and has become widely known by the bestsellers and public talks of four figures in particular: Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Christopher Hitchens, and Sam Harris. Critics of the movement have referred to them as the "four horsemen of atheism," an allusion to the apocalyptic appearance of four horses and their riders in Revelation 6, who symbolize such things as famine and death. Understandably, New Atheists themselves generally prefer slightly different labels, such as "the Brights." New Atheists have debated their opponents on the allegedly immoral doctrines and abject practices of several religions, the soundness of various arguments for God's existence, the presumed dangers of atheism, and the relation between science and religion. This New Atheism has been vigorously criticized not only by religious believers, like Alister McGrath and John Lennox, but equally by other contemporary atheists, like John Gray.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> See, respectively, Alister McGrath, *The Twilight of Atheism: The Rise and Fall of Disbelief in the Modern World* (London: Rider, 2004); John Lennox, *Gunning for*

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To study atheism itself rather than assess the soundness of various atheistic arguments is merely to catch up with what atheists have been doing regarding religion. It is quite common among atheists to psychologically explain religion away. Says A. C. Grayling:

The major reason for the continuance of religious belief in a world which might otherwise have long moved beyond it, is indoctrination of children before they reach the age of reason, together with all or some combination of social pressure to conform, social reinforcement of religious institutions and traditions, emotion, and (it has to be said) ignorance – of science, of psychology, of history in general, and of the history and actual doctrines of religions themselves.<sup>3</sup>

This is, of course, not only polemical and offensive but also particularly ill-informed. Anyone working in the field of the cognitive science of religion – the scientific discipline that provides naturalistic explanations for belief in God and religious experience – will tell you that indoctrination can't do the job, not even in combination with other social phenomena like pressure and reinforcement. But the more important point is this: atheists have paid plenty of attention to what motivates religious believers. Rather than being obsessed with theistic arguments, they have rightly addressed every aspect of a religious worldview. Time has come for atheism to be explored in a similar way.

In this book, the aim is to better understand but also fairly evaluate atheism. Why is it so attractive to many nowadays – what motivates the atheist? Apart from the affective appeal, are there particular cognitive frameworks or ways of thinking that are conducive to atheism? Can atheism perhaps be the default position? And putting the issue of the soundness of atheistic arguments aside, what can

*God: A Critique of the New Atheism* (Oxford: Lion, 2011); and John Gray, *Seven Types of Atheism* (London: Penguin Books, 2018).

<sup>3</sup> A. C. Grayling, *The God Argument: The Case against Religion and for Humanism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 13.

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we learn from them? Do these arguments perhaps contain insights for everyone, atheists and religious believers included? I believe the debate so far has been somewhat obsessed with whether arguments for and against God’s existence are convincing. We’ve overlooked important and fascinating issues. Here, we’ll see whether we can set things straight.

### What Is Atheism?

There are two crucially different ways to define *atheism*. First, atheism can be the lack of belief in any kind of god.<sup>4</sup> Some call this *negative theism*. An example of this is how John Gray characterizes what it is to be an atheist: “An atheist is anyone with no use for the idea of a divine mind that has fashioned the world.”<sup>5</sup> If one has no use for the idea of a divine mind, one might simply suspend judgment on whether there is such a divine mind. A stronger position is atheism as the belief or conviction that there are no gods.<sup>6</sup> Some call this *positive atheism*.<sup>7</sup>

When I talk about atheism, I have the stronger version in mind. This is because most vocal atheists nowadays are actually positive atheists. Moreover, there is already another word for the weaker position, namely, *agnosticism*. An agnostic doesn’t know whether there is a God; there may well be and there may well not be. Some agnostics even claim that we cannot possibly know whether or not

<sup>4</sup> E.g., Stephen Bullivant, “Defining ‘Atheism,’” in *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism*, ed. Stephen Bullivant and Michael Ruse (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 11–21; Michael Martin, *Atheism: A Philosophical Justification* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990).

<sup>5</sup> See Gray, *Seven Types of Atheism*, 2. See also Bullivant, “Defining ‘Atheism,’” 14.

<sup>6</sup> Julian Baggini, *Atheism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 3; Paul Cliteur, “The Definition of Atheism,” *Journal of Religion and Society* 11 (2009): 1–23; McGrath, *The Twilight of Atheism*, 175.

<sup>7</sup> E.g., Bullivant, “Defining ‘Atheism,’” 14.

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there is a God. A famous example of an agnostic is Charles Darwin's bulldog – his advocate and defender in public discussions – Thomas Huxley:

When I reached intellectual maturity and began to ask myself whether I was an atheist, a theist, or a pantheist; a materialist or an idealist; a Christian or a freethinker; I found that the more I learned and reflected, the less ready was the answer; until, at last, I came to the conclusion that I had neither art nor part with any of these denominations, except the last. The one thing in which most of these good people were agreed was the one thing in which I differed from them. They were quite sure they had attained a certain “gnosis,” – had, more or less successfully, solved the problem of existence; while I was quite sure I had not, and had a pretty strong conviction that the problem was insoluble.<sup>8</sup>

Most atheists, though, claim that we *can* know that God does not exist: various arguments, often from science, give us convincing evidence to think there is no God. Atheists believe that there is no God and that we can know this. This means I won't be talking about agnosticism. Nor will we consider what German theologian Karl Rahner calls *practical atheism*, “a lifestyle in which no (discernible) conclusions are drawn from the (theoretical) recognition of the existence of God.”<sup>9</sup> The life of an atheist is not one in which God happens to be theoretically or practically absent, but one in which God is intentionally ruled out because he is thought not to exist.

Atheism in this sense is also simply more interesting. Just not believing in God may well reflect a more general skeptical attitude in life. If one moves from belief in God to agnosticism, God may not really be replaced with something else – his place may

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Huxley, “Agnosticism,” in his *Collected Essays*, vol. 5, *Science and Christian Tradition* (London: Macmillan, 1893–1894), 239–240.

<sup>9</sup> Karl Rahner, “Atheismus II. Philosophisch–III. Theologisch,” in *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche*, vol. 1, *A–Baronius*, ed. Michael Buchberger, Josef Höfer, and Karl Rahner (Freiburg: Herder, 1957), 983.

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be vacant, so to say. A sincere belief that there is no God is much bolder. As psychologists have convincingly shown if belief in God is actively rejected, it is usually replaced with something else; for instance, belief in progress may replace belief in divine providence, and belief in science may replace belief in revelation. Psychologists have argued that these things may provide the comfort and security that religion used to give.<sup>10</sup> Some atheists even go so far as to suggest that science can answer our moral questions, that is, that it can tell us what the good life is. Sam Harris's influential 2010 book *The Moral Landscape* aims to do exactly that. Positive atheists are more interesting than negative atheists because they have felt compelled to come up with alternative worldviews, such as existentialism, New Atheism, humanism, Marxism, and scientism.

What, though, are we talking about when we talk about god or God or gods? I take it that a god or a deity is a supernatural person who is thought to be worthy of worship. Of course, according to many religions, there is a multitude of supernatural persons: not only gods but also demons and angels. Gods are distinguished from demons and angels in that only gods are thought to be worthy of worship. Angels are to be revered and maybe prayed to, whereas demons are to be feared or exorcised. Only the gods are to be worshiped. The Greek god Zeus, the Scandinavian god Woden, the Sumerian god Enlil, the god of Islam, Allah, the Judaic god, Yahweh, and the Christian god, often referred to simply as "God" – that's what we are talking about. In this book, I will refer to several gods, but mostly to the god worshiped in the Abrahamic religions of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism.<sup>11</sup> Religious believers think God is perfect in every regard – omniscient, omnipotent, infallibly good, eternal, and omnipresent – and that he is the creator of the universe.

<sup>10</sup> See Miguel Farias, "The Psychology of Atheism," in *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism*, ed. Stephen Bullivant and Michael Ruse (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 472.

<sup>11</sup> I will refer to God with the words *he*, *him*, and *his* even though, of course, God is neither male nor female.

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Atheists usually target belief in this particular god. I suppose that is because it is most widespread in Western democracy and theologically the most sophisticated: if belief in God has to go, then so does belief in all the other gods. If God, the eternal, perfectly good, and immaterial creator of the universe, doesn't exist, then surely Zeus, Woden, and Ganesha don't exist either.

### **Why Does Atheism Matter?**

One may wonder why we should try to understand atheism. After all, many countries have relatively few atheists; in the case of the United States, they comprise even as little as 5 percent of the population. The vast majority of the world's population, some 80–85 percent, is religious. Admittedly, not all religious people believe in gods. Some Theravada Buddhists and Jains don't. Yet, most religious people believe in one god or another. Does it follow that atheism isn't that important? No, it doesn't – I think it's crucial to get more insight into atheism, its motivations, and its arguments.

Here's why. Atheism as I have defined it may be a minority position. Yet, many people nowadays live as atheists do. If atheism in the stronger sense is correct, then that would actually justify the kind of life that many people live – a life without God. In fact, many people nowadays tacitly rely on the stronger atheists. I think the idea is that these can do the challenging intellectual work for others, pretty much in the same way as many religious believers leave things like the details of doctrine and the relation between science and faith to a few specialists, such as religious scientists and clergy.

Atheism may be a minority position, but it is also the fastest-growing worldview since the beginning of the twentieth century, held by some 10 percent of the worldwide population now. Although the percentage of atheists may be low in the general population, it is much higher among students and faculty in colleges and universities, and these institutions shape the culture of the future.



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In my own country, the Netherlands, for instance, the percentage of atheists in academia is as high as 35 percent.<sup>12</sup>

Religious people have additional reasons to take atheists seriously. For one thing, they share with them the idea that it matters whether or not God exists. Quite a few agnostics simply don't care whether God exists and don't think it particularly matters. In fact, some can rightly be called *apatheists*: they don't feel any affection or emotion (*pathos*) toward the whole issue. The fact that you've picked up this book suggests that you're probably not an apatheist. And in case you are, let's see whether that still holds once you've read this book.

Within the group of religious believers, Christians have even further reasons to try to better understand atheism. There are various passages in the Bible that seem to say that those who seek God sincerely will actually find him (e.g., Luke 11:9). To claim that all atheists are insincere seems implausible – in any case, that's a kind of suspicion and dehumanization that I don't feel comfortable with at all. So why is it that some atheists don't find God, even though they honestly seek him? In order to provide a satisfactory solution to this challenging problem, we need to better understand atheism.

There is something elusive about atheism. After all, unlike Christianity, Hinduism, or Islam, atheism as such does not have an explicit view of the world. It is merely the denial that there are any gods. It rules out something without thereby saying what reality is like. It is one thing to declare that God is dead; it's quite another thing to come up with an alternative story of why we are here, what makes something good or evil, and what provides

<sup>12</sup> For more numbers on atheists internationally, especially among academics, see Elaine Howard Ecklund, David R. Johnson, Brandon Vaidyanathan, Kirstin R. W. Matthews, Steven W. Lewis, Robert A. Thomson Jr., and Di Di, *Secularity and Science: What Scientists around the World Really Think about Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019); Elaine Howard Ecklund and David R. Johnson, *Varieties of Atheism in Science* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).

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meaning in life.<sup>13</sup> As Nietzsche sharply noticed in a captivating aphorism, the death of God leaves a yawning void:

God is dead! God remains dead! And we have killed him! Yet his shadow still looms. How can we console ourselves, the murderers of all murderers! The holiest and mightiest thing the world has ever possessed has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood from us? With what water could we clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what holy games will we have to invent for ourselves? Is the magnitude of this deed not too great for us? Do we not ourselves have to become gods merely to appear worthy of it?<sup>14</sup>

How should one understand and assess a view that is primarily negative in its orientation? And what alternatives can it come up with? These are challenging questions that we need to address.

### The Future of Atheism

Some people may object that understanding atheism is not all that relevant since atheism is on the decline. In a recent piece, blogger Scott Alexander argued that from 2005 or so onwards, public attention for atheism grew steadily and reached a peak around 2012.<sup>15</sup> Since then, attention has been withdrawn. He backs up this idea with large quantities of online data, such as the number of Google searches for “atheism,” the use of the word *atheism* in the *New York Times*, and the number of visits to influential atheist websites, such

<sup>13</sup> Mikael Stenmark rightly draws attention to this feature of atheism in his “Secular Worldviews: Scientific Naturalism and Secular Humanism,” *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 14, no. 4 (2022): 237–264.

<sup>14</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, ed. Bernard Williams, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff and Adrian Del Caro (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 120.

<sup>15</sup> See Scott Alexander, “New Atheism: The Godlessness That Failed,” *Slate Star Codex* (blog), October 30, 2019, <https://slatestarcodex.com/2019/10/30/new-atheism-the-godlessness-that-failed/>.