

# Atheism: A Philosophical Justification\*

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## Atheism Defined and Contrasted

### **Atheism Defined**

In the first part of this appendix I define atheism and in the second I contrast atheism with other ‘isms’ and movements that are sometimes associated with it.

#### ATHEISM POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE

If you look up “atheism” in a dictionary, you will probably find it defined as the belief that there is no God. Certainly many people understand atheism in this way. Yet many atheists do not, and 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.”<sup>1</sup> From this standpoint an atheist would simply be someone without a belief in God, not necessarily someone who believes that God does not exist. According to its Greek roots, then, atheism is a negative view, characterized by the absence of belief in God.<sup>2</sup>

Well-known atheists of the past such as Baron d’Holbach (1770), Richard Carlile (1826), Charles Southwell (1842), Charles Bradlaugh (1876), and Anne Besant (1877) have assumed or have explicitly characterized atheism in the negative sense of absence of belief in God.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, in the twentieth century George H. Smith, in *Atheism: The Case Against God* (1979), maintains, “An atheist is not primarily a person who *believes* that god does *not* exist; rather he does *not believe* in the existence of god.”<sup>4</sup> Antony Flew, in “The Presumption of Atheism”

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\* Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990.

<sup>1</sup> Gordon Stein, “The Meaning of Atheism and Agnosticism,” *An Anthology of Atheism and Rationalism*, ed. Gordon Stein (Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1980), p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> This negative sense of atheism should be distinguished from the sense 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 have other reasons. The negative sense of atheism used here is broader than the Edwards definition, since on the present definition someone could be an atheist who had no belief in God, although the lack of belief was not the result of rejection. See Paul Edwards, “Atheism,” *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Paul Edwards (New York and London: Macmillan and Free Press, 1967), vol. 1, p. 175.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>4</sup> George H. Smith, *Atheism: The Case Against God* (Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1979), p. 7.

(1972), understands an atheist as someone who is not a theist.<sup>5</sup> Gordon Stein, in *An Anthology of Atheism and Rationalism* (1980), says an atheist “is a person *without* a belief in God.”<sup>6</sup> A recent pamphlet entitled “American Atheists: An Introduction” says an atheist “has no belief system” concerning supernatural agencies.<sup>7</sup> Another recent pamphlet entitled “American Atheists: A History” defines American atheism as “the philosophy of persons who are free from theism.”<sup>8</sup>

Still there is a popular meaning of “atheism” according to which an atheist not simply holds no belief in the existence of a god or gods but believes that there is no god or gods. This use of the term should not be overlooked. To avoid confusion, let us call this *positive atheism*, and the type of atheism derived from the Greek root and held by the atheistic thinkers surveyed above let us call *negative atheism*. Clearly, positive atheism is a special case of negative atheism: Someone who is a positive atheist is by necessity a negative atheist, but not conversely.

In my usage, positive atheism is positive only in the sense that it refers to a positive belief—the belief that there is no god or gods. It is positive in contrast to negative atheism, which has no such positive belief. Of course, in another sense that is not relevant here, what I have called positive atheism is more negative than what I have called negative atheism. Positive atheism denies that one or more gods exist; negative atheism does not.

#### ATHEISM BROAD AND NARROW

If positive atheists disbelieve in god or gods and negative atheists have no belief in a god or gods, what is it that they either disbelieve or have no belief about? No general definition of god is attempted here,<sup>9</sup> but it is useful to distinguish different concepts of god that have played a role in the traditional controversies and debates. In modern times, theism has for the most part come to mean a belief in a personal god who takes an active interest in the world and has given a special revelation to humans. So understood, theism is contrasted with deism,

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<sup>5</sup> Antony Flew, “The Presumption of Atheism,” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 2, 1972, p. 30.

<sup>6</sup> Stein, “Meaning of Atheism and Agnosticism,” p. 3.

<sup>7</sup> “American Atheists: An Introduction,” distributed by American Atheists, Massachusetts chapter, P.O. Box 147, E. Walpole, MA 02032.

<sup>8</sup> “American Atheists: A History,” American Atheists, Massachusetts chapter.

<sup>9</sup> See Monroe Beardsley and Elizabeth Beardsley, *Philosophical Thinking: An Introduction* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1965), pp. 46-50. 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.

the belief in a god that is not based on revelation but on evidence from nature. Deism has also come to be associated with belief in a god that is remote from the world and not intimately involved with its concerns. Theism is also contrasted with polytheism, the belief in more than one god, and with pantheism, the belief that God is identical with nature.

A negative atheist, if we understand theism in the way it has been understood in modern times, would simply be a person without a belief in a personal god. Atheism, so understood, would be compatible with deism, polytheism, and pantheism. However, this construction of atheism seems to conflict not only with the original Greek meaning, but also with what past and present professed atheists have meant. Consequently, I use “negative atheism” in its most fundamental sense to mean an absence of belief in any god or gods, not just the absence of belief in a personal god. Let us call this *the broad sense of negative atheism*.<sup>10</sup>

Although this broad sense is what most atheists have meant by atheism, many philosophical debates between atheists and nonatheists in Western society have been over the question of whether the Hebrew-Christian God exists. In particular, the debates have been over whether there is a personal being who is omniscient, omnipotent, and completely good and who created heaven and earth. Thus although the broad sense seems to capture what atheists have usually intended by atheism, it does not capture well what the traditional debate has been about. For this it is necessary to distinguish a *narrow sense of negative atheism*, according to which an atheist is without a belief in a personal being who is omniscient, omnipotent, and completely good and who created heaven and earth.

This distinction between a broad and narrow sense of atheism can be applied to positive as well as negative atheism. A *positive atheist in the broad sense* is a person who disbelieves that there is any god or gods and a *positive atheist in the narrow sense* is a person who disbelieves that there is a personal being who is omniscient, omnipotent, and completely good and who created heaven and earth.

In a way, the above characterization of atheism is misleading since it masks the complexity and variety of positions an atheist can hold. A person can hold different atheistic positions with respect to different concepts of God—for example, an anthropomorphic finite god and a nonanthropomorphic infinite god. Thus a person might maintain that there is good reason to suppose that anthropomorphic gods such as Zeus do not exist and thus be a positive atheist with respect to Zeus and similar gods. However, this person could maintain that

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<sup>10</sup> 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, pp. 335–341.

Paul Tillich's concept of God is meaningless and thus be a negative atheist only with respect to Tillich's God.<sup>11</sup>

In addition, people can and often do hold different atheistic positions with respect to different conceptions of a theistic God. For example, an atheist might disbelieve that the theistic God of Aquinas exists and yet maintain that with respect to the theistic God of some Christian mystics such as St. Teresa, the sentence "God exists" is meaningless. Such a person would be a positive atheist with respect to Aquinas's God and only a negative atheist with respect [sic] St. Teresa's God.

#### ATHEISM AND ALIENATED THEISM

Atheism, whether positive or negative, broad or narrow, should be clearly distinguished from another view that is sometimes confused with it. Some people have rejected the moral authority associated with a god or gods, or perhaps have rejected a god or gods as objects of worship, admiration, and the like. Consider Ivan Karamazov's conversation with his younger brother Alyosha in *The Brothers Karamazov*. In discussing the suffering of children being reconciled in a higher harmony, Ivan says:

I don't want harmony. From the love of humanity I don't want it. I would rather be left with the unavenged suffering. I would rather remain with my unavenged suffering and unsatisfied indignation, *even if I were wrong*. Besides, too high a price is asked for harmony; it's beyond our means to pay so much to enter on it. And so I hasten to give back my entrance ticket, and if I am an honest man I am bound to give it back as soon as possible. And that I am doing. It's not God that I don't accept, Alyosha, only I most respectfully return Him the ticket.<sup>12</sup>

Some existential philosophers have proposed views that come close to this rejection of a god's or gods' moral authority. For instance, Sartre, a professed atheist, suggested at times that even if God exists, the only thing that matters is for people to acknowledge their total freedom; humans are beings, according to Sartre, who in every circumstance will their total freedom. God is irrelevant to

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<sup>11</sup> This seems to be the position of Kai Nielsen. He rejects a nonanthropomorphic god as meaningless and an anthropomorphic god as false. See, for example, Kai Nielsen, "Introduction: How Is Atheism to Be Characterized?" *Philosophy and Atheism* (Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1985). See also his "Atheism," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, vol. 2, 1984.

<sup>12</sup> Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov* (New York: Random House Modern Library ed., n.d.), p. 254.

moral choice and its attendant anguish.<sup>13</sup> Thus in Sartre's play *The Flies*, Orestes says to Jupiter: "What have I to do with you or you with me? We shall glide past each other, like ships in a river without touching. You are God and I am free, each of us is alone, and our anguish is akin."<sup>14</sup>

Whether Orestes' position should be called atheism is doubtful. Perhaps a better name for his position and Ivan Karamazov's is *alienated theism*.<sup>15</sup> They both believe in God but reject part of the moral authority that usually goes with such a belief.<sup>16</sup>

### **Atheism Distinguished and Contrasted**

How is atheism related to isms often contrasted or associated with it? How is it related to agnosticism? humanism? communism? naturalism? rationalism? positivism? How is atheism related to movements such as ethical culture and free-thought? In any careful justification and defense of atheism it is necessary to answer these questions.

#### ATHEISM AND AGNOSTICISM

In common understanding, agnosticism is contrasted with atheism. In the popular sense an agnostic neither believes nor disbelieves that God exists, while an atheist disbelieves that God exists. However, this common contrast of agnosticism with atheism will hold only if one assumes that atheism means positive atheism. In the popular sense, agnosticism is compatible with negative atheism. Since negative atheism by definition simply means not holding any concept of God, it is compatible with neither believing nor disbelieving in God.

Putting aside the current popular sense of the term, "agnosticism" was coined by T. H. Huxley in 1869. According to Huxley, "Agnosticism is not a creed but a method, the essence of which lies in the vigorous application of a single principle. Positively the principle may be expressed as, in matters of the

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<sup>13</sup> Patrick Masterson, *Atheism and Alienation* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1971), p. 133.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted *ibid.*, p. 182, n. 6.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Kai Nielsen, "How Is Atheism to Be Characterized?" p. 12.

<sup>16</sup> This statement does not, of course, do complete justice to the subtlety of the position of Ivan Karamazov. For a sensitive analysis of this position, see Stewart R. Sutherland, *Atheism and the Rejection of God* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1977), chap. 2. The only problem with Sutherland's analysis is that he insists on calling Ivan Karamazov an atheist. I believe it would be much clearer to use some other term. The position of alienated theism should be distinguished from a position that maintains that one or more gods exist but have nothing to do with salvation. This position, held by Jainists and some Buddhists, has been called soteriological atheism. See Arvind Sharma, "Buddhism and Atheism," *Sophia*, 16, 1977, p. 29. Again, I think it misleading to use the term "atheism" in this way.

intellect, follow your reason as far as it can carry you without other considerations. And negatively, in matters of the intellect, do not pretend the conclusions are certain that are not demonstrated or demonstrable. It is wrong for a man to say he is certain of the objective truth of a proposition unless he can produce evidence which logically justifies that certainty.”<sup>17</sup>

It should be clear that agnosticism understood in this way does not entail atheism even of a negative sort, although it is compatible with it. Indeed, it could be compatible with theism, since some theists have argued that one can demonstrate the existence of God. Huxley’s agnosticism would entail negative atheism only if the existence or nonexistence of God was not capable of proof and it was assumed that one should not believe or disbelieve something unless it was capable of proof or disproof.

Certainly some agnostics have intended more by agnosticism than simply a methodology. On this view an agnostic is someone who neither believes nor disbelieves that a god or gods exist since their existence or nonexistence cannot be proved by reason. Agnosticism so understood is identical with one type of rationalism considered below<sup>18</sup> and is compatible with a negative atheism in which belief or disbelief in God should be based on reason.

According to some dictionary definitions, an agnostic is a person who claims one cannot know whether god exists or not. This view is compatible with theism, since a theist need not base this belief on knowledge. Belief may be based on a leap of faith. So unless one assumes that one ought not to believe something unless one can have knowledge of it, agnosticism in this sense is compatible with either theism or positive atheism.

#### ATHEISM AND SKEPTICISM

In one sense of the term a skeptic is someone who questions whether one can have knowledge of anything. A religious skeptic, in particular, questions whether one can have knowledge about religious claims such as that God exists.<sup>19</sup> Understood in this way, skepticism is compatible with theism and does not entail negative atheism. For theists might not claim to have knowledge that God exists; they might say only that they have faith that God exists.

However, sometimes “religious skepticism” is used in a narrower sense to mean not only that knowledge of the existence of God is impossible but also that one ought to suspend one’s belief concerning the existence of God because of this lack of knowledge. Skepticism so understood entails negative atheism and is identical with one type of agnosticism considered above.

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<sup>17</sup> Quoted in Stein, *Anthology of Atheism and Rationalism*, p. 5.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Gordon Stein, “Agnosticism,” *Encyclopedia of Unbelief*, vol. 1, pp. 3-4.

<sup>19</sup> See Richard Popkin, “Skepticism,” *Encyclopedia of Unbelief*, vol. 2, pp. 625-633.

## ATHEISM AND RATIONALISM

The term “rationalism” has been used over the years to refer to several outlooks and systems of ideas.<sup>20</sup> In philosophy it is often contrasted with empiricism. In this usage it refers to a philosophical outlook that stresses the power of *a priori* reason to arrive at truth about the world.<sup>21</sup> This sense of rationalism has little historical connection to atheism, if only because the famous philosophical rationalists—Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz—believed in God and thought they could prove the existence of God by reason. To be sure, Spinoza can be classified as an atheist in the narrow sense defined above, but Descartes and Leibniz cannot.

Rationalism in theology, in contrast to philosophy, is used to refer to rational criticism directed against the allegedly revealed truth of the Bible. In particular the term refers to the doctrine of a 1740-1840 school of German theologians that had an important influence on biblical criticism.<sup>22</sup> The connection is certainly closer between this sort of rationalism and atheism than between philosophical rationalism and atheism, but it is by no means a necessary one. Criticism of the Bible as the revealed word of God can lead to at least the negative variety of atheism, but it need not, for theologians can criticize and reject Scripture and yet continue to believe in God on nonscriptural grounds.

Perhaps the best known use of “rationalism” is as a popular rather than a technical term. In this sense it stands for an anti-religious and anti-clerical movement that stressed historical and scientific arguments against theism.<sup>23</sup> It is in this sense that various atheist societies and presses use the term. For example, the Rationalist Press Association defines “rationalism” as “the mental attitude which unreservedly accepts the supremacy of reason and aims at establishing a system of philosophy and ethics verifiable by experience and independent of all arbitrary assumptions or authority.”<sup>24</sup> It is noteworthy that the Rationalist Press Association does not mean by “reason” what philosophical rationalists do: It is contrasting reason and revelation or reason and appeal to authority, not reason and experience.

Still, this use of “rationalism” leaves open the question as to whether a rationalist is an atheist, for a deist is a rationalist in this sense of the term. To be sure, the societies and presses that have used “rationalist” in their titles have in general been atheist at least in the negative sense of the term specified above. They have not only believed that reason should be used (in contrast to revelation

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<sup>20</sup> Lauchlan Chipman, “Rationalism,” *Encyclopedia of Unbelief*, vol. 2, pp. 531-533.

<sup>21</sup> A. R. Lacey, *A Dictionary of Philosophy* (New York: Scribner's, 1976), p. 180.

<sup>22</sup> Bernard Williams, “Rationalism,” *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. 7, p. 69.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Stein, *Anthology of Atheism and Rationalism*, p. 315.

and authority) in religious contexts but they have also thought that if reason was used, it would not establish that any gods exist.

This is made clear, for example, in the writings of Charles Watts, former publisher of the Rationalist Press Association. In a chapter of his *Collected Works* entitled “The Meaning of Rationalism,” Watts says, “The Rationalist does not deny the existence of God or a future life. Upon such hope it is not thought rational to dogmatise. Where knowledge is absent, to either affirm or deny is sheer presumption.”<sup>25</sup> Thus Watts maintains that by the use of reason one cannot conclude that God either does or does not exist. On this interpretation a rationalist is a person who believes that only reason (in contrast to revelation) should be used to establish belief about a god or gods but that reason cannot determine whether a god or gods do exist. In short, Watts believes that the use of reason leads to negative atheism in the broad sense. Thus rationalism in this usage has a methodological and a substantive component.

#### ATHEISM AND NATURALISM

According to Arthur Danto, naturalism is a “species of philosophical monism, according to which, whatever exists or happens is *natural* in the sense of being susceptible to explanation through methods which, although paradigmatically exemplified in the natural sciences, are continuous from domain to domain of objects and events. Hence, naturalism is polemically defined as repudiating the view that there exists or could exist any entities or events which lie, in principle, beyond the scope of scientific explanation.”<sup>26</sup>

Naturalism is compatible with materialism but should not be confused with it. According to Danto, naturalism is compatible with a variety of rival ontologies, and a heterogeneous group of thinkers identify themselves as naturalists: dualists, idealists, materialists, atheists, and non-atheists.

Now, in order not to be at least a negative atheist and yet to be a naturalist, a person would have to believe in the existence of a god or gods that can be explained by the methods of science. Such a god or gods would be a part or the whole of the natural order. Certainly this view is not common today. Most religious thinkers suppose that God is a supernatural being transcending the natural order.

Yet such a naturalistic view of a god or gods has been advocated. John Dewey, for example, defines God as “the unity of all ideal ends arousing us to desire and action.”<sup>27</sup> Such a unity is surely explainable by scientific method and is part of the natural order. Auguste Comte developed an organized religion,

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>26</sup> Arthur Danto, “Naturalism,” *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. 5, p. 448.

<sup>27</sup> John Dewey, *A Common Faith* (New Haven, Ct.: Yale University Press, 1934), p. 42.

completely within a naturalistic framework, in which the object of worship was humanity. Comte sometimes referred to humanity as the supreme being.<sup>28</sup> Again, such a notion of God or a supreme being is compatible with naturalism. Other philosophers, among them Spinoza, identified God with nature itself. Such pantheistic views may well be compatible with naturalism insofar as nature itself is explainable by scientific method. Thus the acceptance of naturalism does not exclude belief in a god or gods, interpreted in a nonsupernatural way.

However, belief in a god or gods is usually given a supernatural interpretation. Most of the famous atheists of history could well believe that God exists if God only meant what Dewey meant by this term. This suggests that great confusion would result by defining God along Deweyian or other naturalistic lines. So it may be maintained that Danto's claim that naturalism is compatible with nonatheism is true only if "god" is understood in a most peculiar and misleading way.

In any case, atheism does not entail naturalism. Certain Eastern religions such as Jainism are atheistic in the sense that they do not assume the existence of an all-knowing, all-powerful, all-good God, and yet the world view presented in these religions is not clearly naturalistic. In Jainism the law of Karma plays an important role. It is far from clear that such a law can be considered to be explainable by scientific method.

#### ATHEISM AND POSITIVISM

Positivism, a doctrine associated with Auguste Comte (1798-1857), maintains that the highest form of knowledge is the mere description of observable phenomena. Comte based this doctrine on the evolutionary "law of three stages." In this scheme the history of each science goes through three inevitable and irreversible stages. In the theological stage everything is explained in terms of a will and a purpose similar to human will and purpose. At first, humans believed that each object has a will of its own (animism). Later they believed that gods imposed their wills on objects (polytheism). In the most advanced phase of theological thinking they believed that one God imposed His will on objects (monotheism). In the metaphysical stage, things were explained by things-in-themselves and by impersonal forces that operated behind appearances. Explanations in terms of will and purpose play no role. However, in the positivistic stage science forsakes all explanatory schemes that appeal to unobservable entities. The object of scientific inquiry is simply the study of the laws of succession and resemblance.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> See William Alston, "Natural Reconstructions of Religion," *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. 7, pp. 145-146; Christopher Kent, "Positivism," *Encyclopedia of Unbelief*, vol. 2, pp. 512-518.

<sup>29</sup> Bruce Mazlish, "Auguste Comte [sic]," *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. 2, pp. 173-177; Christopher Kent, "Auguste Comte," *Encyclopedia of Unbelief*, vol. 1, pp. 119-120.

The view of science developed in Comte's positivistic stage of science was elaborated and defended by Ernst Mach (1838-1916), an Austrian physicist and philosopher of science. Mach argued that science aims at the most economical descriptions of appearance; no hidden entities or causes are postulated. Atoms and other seemingly unobservable entities are treated as mere *façons de parler*.<sup>30</sup>

Clearly such views would entail at least negative atheism unless God was treated as Mach treated atoms, as a mere *façon de parler*. However, atheism certainly does not entail positivism. Of the atheists who have rejected positivistic restrictions on scientific explanations, one contemporary example is Michael Scriven, who has vigorously defended atheism as well as the explanatory value of unobservable entities.<sup>31</sup> Further, some atheistic religions are not positivistic. For example, metaphysical entities such as souls are postulated in Jainism.

Logical positivism is a philosophical movement primarily associated with the Vienna Circle of the 1920s, whose most famous members were Moritz Schlick, Rudolf Carnap, Otto Neurath, and Friedrich Waismann. Carl G. Hempel and Hans Reichenbach in Berlin and later A. J. Ayer in England also came to be identified with the movement.<sup>32</sup> The basic tenet of logical positivism was that a statement was meaningful if and only if it was one of logic or mathematics or was verifiable by the empirical methods of science. Given this criterion of meaningfulness, all statements of metaphysics and theology were declared to be meaningless. In particular, both the statements "God exists" and "God does not exist" were deemed meaningless. Consequently, it follows that logical positivists were negative but not positive atheists.

Logical positivists tended to give a noncognitive account of ethical statements. They argued that statements such as "One ought to be kind to people" were neither true nor false and were not used to state facts; ethical language had another function or use. On one account, for example, ethical sentences were used to express emotions and influence others to adopt one's point of view. Some philosophers sympathetic to the tenets of logical positivism attempted to give an account of religious discourse along similar lines; that is, they have argued that statements about God do not assert any fact but have another function. Richard Braithwaite, for example, has maintained that religious statements

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<sup>30</sup> Peter Alexander, "Ernst Mach," *Encyclopedia [sic] of Philosophy*, vol. 5, pp. 115-119.

<sup>31</sup> See Michael Scriven, *Primary Philosophy* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), chap. 4; Michael Scriven, "A Study of Radical Behaviorism," *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science*, vol. 1, ed. Herbert Feigl and Michael Scriven (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1965), pp. 88-130. Thus Ignace Lepp is mistaken when he says that "the 'perfect' atheist would be one who believes in no being or forces that transcend the empirical order." See Ignace Lepp, *Atheism in Our Time* (New York: Macmillan, 1963), p. 5.

<sup>32</sup> John Passmore, "Logical Positivism," *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. 5, pp. 52-57; Paul Edwards, "Logical Positivism and Unbelief," *Encyclopedia of Unbelief*, vol. 2, pp. 422-435.

should be interpreted as expressing a commitment to a certain moral way of life that is associated with certain parables and stories.<sup>33</sup> This attempt to make religious discourse acceptable to the tenets of logical positivism closely parallels Dewey's attempt to make religion compatible with naturalism, and it has similar problems: The interpretation distorts religion [*sic*] discourse and may be more confusing than helpful. However, there is a crucial difference between Dewey's naturalistic reinterpretation of religion and Braithwaite's noncognitive interpretation of religious discourse. A Deweyian naturalist could believe that God exists if God were understood along the lines Dewey suggests. Braithwaite's reinterpretation does not allow logical positivists to have a belief about God, however. It simply allows logical positivists to use religious language.

#### ATHEISM AND HUMANISM

The term "humanism" refers to a number of different movements of thought. In general it refers to any view in which interest in human welfare is central. It is thus opposed to views that emphasize otherworldly concerns and deemphasize secular problems. Certainly, in this general sense one could be a humanist and yet not be an atheist. Deists, for example, may well stress human welfare over otherworldly considerations.

More narrowly, humanism refers to the revival of classical learning in the Renaissance as opposed to merely ecclesiastical studies.<sup>34</sup> Representing a break with an authoritarian, sterile intellectual method and a turning to Greek and Latin writers as a source of inspiration and guidance, humanism has sometimes been considered just a chapter in the history of literature, but it was an attempt to find a more important place for humanity in the secular world. Since many of the most famous humanists in this movement were Christians, humanism in this sense cannot be considered atheistic.

Humanism also refers to a modern literary movement, led in America by Irving Babbitt, Paul Elmer More, and Norman Foerster, which opposed the extreme emphasis on vocational education and recommended a return to classical liberal education in the humanities.<sup>35</sup> Clearly, a humanist in this sense may or may not be an atheist.

Religious humanism is a modern movement that maintains that the religious way of life should be understood purely in terms of human purposes and goals. Otherworldly considerations are completely excluded. This movement of

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<sup>33</sup> R. B. Braithwaite, *An Empiricist's View of the Nature of Religious Beliefs* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1955).

<sup>34</sup> Nicola Abbagnano, "Humanism," *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. 4, pp. 69-72; Max Otto, "Humanism," *Colliers Encyclopedia*, vol. 12, 1980, pp. 349-350.

<sup>35</sup> Otto, "Humanism," p. 350.

thought has been associated with naturalism and with the importance of scientific method in human affairs. Indeed, some scholars have argued that one cannot be a humanist without being a naturalist. However, other writers have maintained that being a humanist only excludes being a theist.<sup>36</sup>

In their attempt to found a religion on human purposes and goals, humanists such as Comte have suggested elaborate humanistic ceremonies and rituals. Others, such as Dewey, have stressed the importance of reinterpreting the religious dimension of life in naturalistic terms. Some of these latter have redefined God in naturalistic terms, while other humanists have avoided this sort of redefinition.<sup>37</sup>

In a 1983 announcement, the Academy of Humanism said “humanism” refers to “a point of view that rejects supernatural and occult explanations of the Universe and focuses on the use of reason and science in life and seeks to encourage the moral growth and ethical development of the individual, based on experience.”<sup>38</sup> On this recent account, being a humanist seems to entail being an atheist unless a naturalistic interpretation of “God” *à la* Dewey is given. However, leading members of the academy have denied that humanism so construed is a religion.<sup>39</sup>

Other humanists have viewed humanism as a religion, but they have not been atheistic, at least in the broad sense. These thinkers have argued that belief in a god is not vital to religion. Thus the 1933 Humanist Manifesto, representing the views of a group of left-wing Unitarian ministers and university professors, maintained that religion “consists of those actions, purposes, and experiences which are humanly significant.”<sup>40</sup> One could be a nonatheist, at least in the broad sense of the term, and uphold the 15 tenets of humanism specified in this manifesto.

In a recent statement put out by the American Humanist Association entitled “What Is Humanism?” nothing is said explicitly about not believing in God, but humanists are said to make no claims about transcendent knowledge, to reject arbitrary faith, revelation, and altered states of consciousness, and to recognize that there is no compelling evidence for a separable soul. This view may or may not be compatible with belief in God. On the other hand, in “The Humanist Philosophy in Perspective,” published in *The Humanist*, the official

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<sup>36</sup> Cf. Paul Kurtz, “Humanism,” *Encyclopedia of Unbelief*, vol. 1, pp. 328-333; E. Royston Pike, *Encyclopedia of Religion* (New York: Meridian Books, 1958), p. 185.

<sup>37</sup> Alston, “Natural Reconstructions of Religion,” p. 146.

<sup>38</sup> “The Academy of Humanism,” *Free Inquiry*, 3, Fall 1983, p. 6. See also Marvin Zimmerman, “Aren’t Humanists Really Atheists?” *The Humanist Alternative*, ed. Paul Kurtz (Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1973), pp. 83-85.

<sup>39</sup> See, for example, Paul Kurtz, “On Definition-Mongering,” *Free Inquiry*, 6, Fall 1986, p. 54.

<sup>40</sup> Reprinted in Corliss Lamont, *The Philosophy of Humanism*, 6th ed. (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1982), p. 287.

publication of the American Humanist Association, Frederick Edwards, the organization's national administrator, maintains that in the light of the findings of astronomy, "we find it curious that, in the absence of direct evidence, religious thinkers can conclude that the universe or some creative power beyond the universe is concerned with our well-being or future. From all appearances, it seems more logical to conclude that it is only we who are concerned for our well-being and future."<sup>41</sup>

Just as one can be a religious humanist without being an atheist, one can be an atheist without being a religious humanist. As I have mentioned, there are atheistic religions. Some of these religions could hardly be called humanistic in the sense that they stress secular problems and social reforms. For example, the supreme object in Jainism is to escape from the fetters of Karma, which means, in effect, for the soul to escape from the body and the cycle of birth and rebirth, and to reach salvation or Nirvana. Nothing could be farther, it would seem, from the spirit of the Humanist Manifesto or other modern statements of humanists.

#### ATHEISM AND COMMUNISM

In its most general sense, communism is a system in which land, buildings, implements, and goods are held in common. There is no private property; property is owned by the community.<sup>42</sup> Given this understanding of communism, there is no necessary connection between atheism and communism. Indeed, many proposed communist societies have been based on theistic views of the world. For example, the Apostolic Brethren of the fourteenth century were communists. Further, there have been atheists who were vigorously anti-communist. For example, in contemporary times the libertarian thinker Ayn Rand has expounded atheism as well as militant capitalism.<sup>43</sup>

Perhaps the close connection between atheism and communism in popular thought is based on a confusion between the Marx-Engels brand of communism and communism in general. Marx and Engels were indeed atheists—positive atheists—and their anti-religious views were an important part of their revolutionary program. Religion, according to Marx, distorted people's self-awareness, because their self-awareness was based on a view of society that was itself distorted. Religion was the opium—the painkiller—of the suffering masses. The cure was for people to free themselves from the life that made them crave this opium. The way to free themselves was to uproot the organization of

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<sup>41</sup> Frederick Edwards [*sic*], "The Humanist Philosophy in Perspective," *Humanist*, January/February 1984, pp. 17-20, 42.

<sup>42</sup> Neil McInnes, "Communism," *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. 2, p. 160.

<sup>43</sup> See, for example, Ayn Rand, *For the New Intellectual* (New York: Random House, 1961); Ayn Rand, *The Virtues* [*sic*; should be "Virtue"] of *Selfishness* (New York: New American Library, 1964).

society by social revolution.<sup>44</sup>

Millions of people today claim to be Marxists and yet believe in God. Whether they are, strictly speaking, correct is not clear. Much depends on what one means by “being a Marxist.” If being a Marxist entails embracing all of Marx and Engels’s views, one cannot be a Marxist without being an atheist. But there are many schools of Marxist thought, and it might well be possible to accept a large part of Marx and Engels’s doctrine without accepting their analysis of religion. If accepting a large part of their doctrine makes one a Marxist, one could indeed be a Marxist and yet not be an atheist.

Furthermore, even if one accepts all of Marx and Engels’ [*sic*] views, it would be possible to interpret religion and the concept of God along naturalistic lines, making belief in God compatible with Marx and Engels’ [*sic*] analysis. After all, Marx and Engels understood belief in God in a traditional supernatural way. If one followed the naturalistic lines suggested by Comte and Dewey, and identified God with the final stage of communism, the classless society, belief in God might be a stimulus to social revolution instead of an opium. As far as I know, no Marxist has attempted to reinterpret religion along these Deweyian or Comtian lines. The problem with this sort of naturalistic reinterpretation of God has already been mentioned: the use of the term “God” may be more misleading than helpful.

#### ATHEISM AND THE FREETHOUGHT MOVEMENT

A freethinker is generally understood to be a person who arrives at conclusions, especially in religious matters, by reason and not by authority. Although it had been used before,<sup>45</sup> the term “freethinker” came into general use after the publication in 1713 of Anthony Collins’s *Discourse of Freethinking Occasioned by the Rise and Growth of a Sect Called Freethinkers*. Associations of freethinkers took different forms in different countries. In England the association was closely linked to deism but did not break completely with Christianity. In other countries the break was more extreme. Voltaire, a freethinker, broke all connections with Christianity; the encyclopedists, also considered freethinkers, broke with all religion. In the United States the term “freethinkers” came to be associated with organizations such as the American Association for the Advancement of Atheism, American Atheists, Freedom from Religion Foundation, and United Secularists of America.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> See V. G. Kierman, “Religion,” *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought*, ed. Tom Bottomore (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983), pp. 413-416; George J. Stack, “Karl Marx,” *Encyclopedia of Unbelief*, vol. 2, pp. 441-444.

<sup>45</sup> See Gordon Stein, “Freethought,” *Encyclopedia of Unbelief*, vol. 1, pp. 247-248.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.* See also “Freethinkers,” *The New Columbia Encyclopedia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1975), p. 1008.

In general the term “freethinker” is very close, if not identical, in meaning to one of the senses of “rationalist” defined above. Thus being a freethinker does not entail being an atheist even in the negative sense. In [*sic*] can be and historically has been compatible with deism.

#### ATHEISM AND THE ETHICAL CULTURE MOVEMENT

The Society for Ethical Culture was started in 1876 by Felix Adler. Based on the conviction that morality need not rest on religious dogma, the new movement adopted the motto “deed rather than creed” and at once undertook practical and philanthropic work such as free kindergartens and tenement house reforms. Maintaining that Judaism and Christianity were wrong to make ethics dependent on religious dogma, Adler based the organization on Immanuel Kant’s ethical principle that human beings are ends-in-themselves. He proposed three goals for the society: (1) sexual purity, (2) devoting surplus income to the improvement of the working class, and (3) continued intellectual development. Although the movement spread from New York to other major cities in the United States and to other parts of the world, in terms of the number of members it was never a large movement. Even at the peak of its popularity the society never had more than about 6,000 members in the United States.<sup>47</sup>

Adler intended to found a religion based on fervent devotion to the highest moral ideals. The society conducted Sunday services as well as marriage and funeral ceremonies. However, it remained neutral toward the existence of a god or gods. Thus membership in the society was not contingent on being an atheist even in the negative sense. Although undoubtedly there were many in the ranks of the Society for Ethical Culture, there were nonatheists as well. There is, then, no necessary relation between atheism and the ethical culture movement.

#### Conclusion

I have distinguished several varieties of atheism and have distinguished atheism in its various forms from other isms that have tended to be associated with it. Since this is a book on atheism, I have not been concerned with these other isms. But what senses of atheism were most important for our purpose? In view of the fact that the controversy between atheists and nonatheists in Western society has usually been about the question of whether an all-good, all-knowing,

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<sup>47</sup> Howard B. Radest, “Ethical Culture,” *Encyclopedia of Unbelief*, vol. 1, pp. 169-174; Percival Chubb, “Societies for Ethical Culture,” *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, ed. Samuel Macauley Jackson (New York and London: Funk & Wagnalls, 1909), vol. 4, pp. 183-184.

all-powerful being exists, there was good reason to limit the discussion to atheism in the narrow sense. In addition, it is impossible to criticize in one volume all the views of God that people have held. There are so many different senses of “god” that a detailed appraisal of the disbelief or nonbelief in God in all these senses would fill volumes.