General Introduction

Michael Martin

The purpose of this volume is to provide general readers and advanced

students with an introduction to atheism: its history, present social context,

legal implications, supporting arguments, implications for morality,

and relation to other perspectives. This general introduction will set

the stage for the chapters that follow.

atheism, agnosticism, and theism

The concept of atheism was developed historically in the context of

Western monotheistic religions, and it still has its clearest application

in this area. Applied, for example, to premodern non-Western contexts,

the concept may be misleading. Moreover, even in the modern Western

context “atheism” has meant different things depending on changing

conceptions of God. Nevertheless, it will be assumed in this volume

that, if applied cautiously outside its clearest historical context, the concept

of atheism can be illuminating for contemporary Western readers.

If you look up “atheism” in a dictionary, you will find it defined

as the belief that there is no God. Certainly, many people understand

“atheism” in this way. Yet this is not what the term means if one considers

it from the point of view of its Greek roots. In Greek “a” means

“without” or “not,” and “theos” means “god.”1 From this standpoint,

an atheist is someone without a belief in God; he or she need not be

someone who believes that God does not exist.2 Still, there is a popular

dictionary meaning of “atheism” according to which an atheist is not

simply one who holds no belief in the existence of a God or gods but

is one who believes that there is no God or gods. This dictionary use

of the term should not be overlooked. To avoid confusion, let us call it

*positive atheism* and let us call the type of atheism derived from the

original Greek roots *negative atheism*.

No general definition of “God” will be attempted here,3 but it will

prove useful to distinguish a number of different concepts of God that

have figured in the traditional controversies and debates about religion.

In modern times “theism” has usually come to mean a belief in

General Introduction

A personal God who takes an active interest in the world and who has

given a special revelation to humans. So understood, theism stands in

contrast to deism, the belief in a God that is based not on revelation but

on evidence from nature. The God assumed by deists is usually considered

to be remote from the world and not intimately involved with its

concerns. Theism is also to be contrasted with polytheism, the belief in

more than one God, and with pantheism, the belief that God is identical

with nature.

Negative atheism in the broad sense4 is then the absence of belief in

any god or Gods, not just the absence of belief in a personal theistic God,

and negative atheism in the narrow sense is the absence of belief in a

theistic God. Positive atheism in the broad sense is, in turn, disbelief in

all gods, with positive atheism in the narrow sense being the disbelief

in a theistic God. For positive atheism in the narrow sense to be successfully

defended, two tasks must be accomplished. First, the reasons

for believing in a theistic God must be refuted; in other words, negative

atheism in the narrow sense must be established. Second, reasons for

disbelieving in the theistic God must be given.

These categories should not be allowed to mask the complexity and

variety of positions that atheists can hold, for a given individual can take

different atheistic positions with respect to different concepts of God.

Thus, a person might maintain that there is good reason to suppose

that anthropomorphic gods such as Zeus do not exist and therefore be

a positive atheist with respect to Zeus and similar gods. However, he

or she could, for example, be only a negative atheist with respect to

Paul Tillich’s God.5 In addition, people can and often do hold different

atheistic positions with respect to different conceptions of a theistic

God. For example, someone could be a positive atheist with respect to

Aquinas’ God and only a negative atheist with respect to St. Teresa’s

God.

Agnosticism, the position of neither believing nor disbelieving that

God exists, is often contrasted with atheism. However, this common

opposition of agnosticism to atheism is misleading. Agnosticism and

positive atheism are indeed incompatible: if atheism is true, agnosticism

is false and conversely. But agnosticism is compatible with negative

atheism in that agnosticism *entails* negative atheism. Since agnostics

do not believe in God, they are by definition negative atheists. This is

not to say that negative atheism entails agnosticism. A negative atheist

*might* disbelieve in God but need not.

Elsewhere I have evaluated the main arguments for agnosticism.6

Here I will explore what is at issue between positive atheism and agnosticism.

An agnostic, one might suppose, is skeptical that good grounds

exist, whereas an atheist is not. However, this is not the only way the

General Introduction 3

Difference between these positions can be construed. An agnostic might

think that there are good grounds for disbelieving that God exists but

*also* believe that there are equally good grounds for believing that God

exists. These opposing reasons would offset one another, leaving no overall

positive reason to believe or disbelieve.

Let us call the view that there are no good reasons for believing that

God exists and none for believing that God does not exist skeptical agnosticism

and the view that that are equally good reasons for believing both

theism and atheism that offset one another cancellation agnosticism.

Arguments that are intended to establish both negative and positive

atheism refute both skeptical and cancellation agnosticism. Showing

that negative atheism is justified undermines cancellation agnosticism,

for it assumes that both atheism and theism have good grounds that cancel

each other out, and negative atheism entails that there are no good

grounds for theistic belief. Moreover, arguments showing that there are

good grounds for the nonexistence of God undermine skeptical agnosticism

since skeptical agnosticism assumes that there are no good grounds

for either atheism or theism.

background, the case against theism,

and implications

Atheism has a long and distinguished history as several of the background

chapters in this volume attest. Jan Bremmer in “Atheism in

Antiquity” argues, on the one hand, that the Greeks discovered theoretical

atheism, which some scholars maintain is one of the most important

events in the history of religion. On the other hand, Bremmer maintains,

“Greeks and Romans, pagans and Christians, soon discovered the utility

of the term ‘atheist’ as a means to label opponents. The invention of

atheism would open a new road to intellectual freedom, but also enabled

people to label opponents in a new way. Progress rarely comes without

a cost.” Gavin Hyman in “Atheism in Modern History” outlines the

development of atheistic thought in the Western world, arguing that

atheism and modernity are so linked that modernity seems almost necessarily

to culminate in atheism. He concluded that we can be sure of

one thing: “the fate of atheism would seem to be inescapably bound up

with the fate of modernity.” And Paul Zuckerman in “Atheism: Contemporary

Numbers and Patterns” brings together a vast amount of data

on the number and distribution of atheists throughout the world. Among

other things, he shows that atheists make up a signification portion of

the world’s population, that nonbelief tends to be associated with social

health, and that the pattern and distribution of atheists in the world calls

into question the now fashionable theory that belief in God is innate.

4 general introduction

Needless to say, many contemporary philosophers have defended theism

against the criticisms of atheists.7 In this volume William Lane

Craig in “Theistic Critiques of Atheism” presents the theistic position.

Readers must decide for themselves whether his defense of theism succeeds

or whether atheism has been successfully defended by the arguments

put forward in other chapters in this volume.8

Several chapters in this book contribute to the task of defending negative

atheism. Richard Gale in “The Failure of Classical Theistic Arguments”

brings up objections to such classical arguments for the existence

of God as the ontological argument. Keith Parsons in “Some Contemporary

Theistic Arguments” criticizes the arguments for God defended by

two leading contemporary Christian philosophers, Alvin Plantinga and

Richard Swinburne. Daniel Dennett offers criticisms of creationism and

intelligent design theories, both of which are often associated with theism.

Evan Fales in “Naturalism and Physicalism” raises objections to

supernaturalism, of which theism is a special case, and David Brink in

“The Autonomy of Ethics” argues that ethics is independent of belief in

God, although theists often claim that ethics is dependent on God.9

Other chapters contribute to the task of defending positive atheism.

In “The Argument from Evil,” Andrea Weisberger defends the traditional

argument from evil – the attempt to show that the large amount

of evil in the world makes the existence of the theistic God either false

or improbable. Quentin Smith in “Kalam Cosmological Argument for

Atheism” maintains that cosmology has atheistic implications. Patrick

Grim in “Impossibility Arguments” attempts to show that the concept

of God is inconsistent.10 It should be noted, however, that many other

arguments also contribute to the second task that are not considered in

this volume.11 Elsewhere, for example, Ted Drange has defended positive

atheism by attempting to show that the large amount of nonbelief

in the world makes the existence of a theistic God improbable.12

John Schellenberg13 has attempted to demonstrate that the belief in

the existence of nontheistic religions makes a theistic God’s existence

improbable. In addition, Schellenberg has argued that the existence of

reasonable nonbelief is itself grounds for supposing that God does not

exist.14

Several chapters in this volume draw out some of atheism’s important

and exciting implications. Atheism has been accused of being antireligious,

but Michael Martin in “Atheism and Religion” shows that

although atheism is not a religion, there are atheistic religions. Christine

Overall in “Feminism and Atheism” concludes, “Being a feminist also

requires that one be an atheist.” According to Steve Gey in “Atheism

and the Freedom of Religion,” “the religious liberty of atheists has come

a long way since the days in which serious political theorists could argue

General Introduction 5

that atheists should be put to death, denied the ability to give evidence

in court, or prohibited from becoming a Member of Parliament. . . . [But]

atheists will not enjoy the same religious liberty as religious adherents

unless the government under which they live is comprehensively secularized.”

John Caputo in “Atheism, A/theology, and the Postmodern

Condition” reviews some of the important challenges postmodernism

poses for theism and atheism and maintains that “postmodernism turns

out to be not a particularly friendly environment for atheism, either, not

if atheism is a metaphysical or an otherwise fixed and decisive denial of

God.”

An important, although not primary, part of the case for atheism is

to show that religion can be explained as a natural phenomenon. Stewart

Guthrie in “Anthropological Theories of Religion ” reviews different

types of naturalistic explanations of religion and advocates a cognitive

explanation of religion in which animism and anthropomorphism are

central notions. Finally, Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi in “Atheists: A Psychological

Profile” reviews the psychological data and concludes that

atheists tend to be more intelligent and better educated than believers;

less authoritarian, less suggestible, less dogmatic, and less prejudiced

than believers; and more tolerant of others, law-abiding, compassionate,

and conscientious. “In short, they are good to have as neighbors.”

bibliographic note

For introductions to atheism, see Douglas Krueger, *What Is Atheism?*

(Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1998), and Julian Baggini, *Atheism:*

*A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

Excellent references to atheistic literature can be found in the bibliographies

and end notes of the chapters in this volume. In addition,

extensive bibliographies can be found in Nicholas Everett, *The Non*

*Existence of God* (London: Routledge, 2004); Finngeir Hiorth, *Atheism*

*in the World* (Oslo, Norway: Human-Etisk Forbund, 2003), *Ethics for*

*Atheists* (Mumbia, India: Indian Secular Society, 1998), and Hiorth,

*Introduction to Atheism* (Oslo, Norway: Human-Etisk Forbund, 2002);

S. T. Joshi (ed.), *Atheism* (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 2000); and

Gordon Stein (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Unbelief*, vols. 1 and 2 (Buffalo,

N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1985). For more on feminism and atheism, see

Annie Laurie Gaylord (ed.), *Women without Superstition: No God – No*

*Masters* (Madison, Wis.: Freedom from Religion Foundation, 1997), and

*Woe to theWomen: The Bible Tells Me So* (Madison,Wis.: Freedom from

Religion Foundation, 1981). Moreover, a Google search of the Secular

Web (http://www.infidel.org) turns up over 700 items on atheism and

related topics.

6 general introduction

Notes

1. Gordon Stein, “The Meaning of Atheism and Agnosticism,” in Gordon Stein

(ed.), *An Anthology of Atheism and Rationalism* (Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus,

1980), p. 3.

2. This negative sense of “atheism” should be distinguished from the sense

of “atheism” introduced by Paul Edwards. According to Edwards, an atheist

is a person who rejects a belief in God. This rejection may be because

the person believes that the statement “God exists” is false, but it may be

for other reasons. The negative sense of “atheism” used here is broader than

Edwards’s definition since on the present definition someone can be an atheist

if he or she has no belief in God, although the lack of belief is not the

result of rejection. See Paul Edwards, “Atheism,” in Paul Edwards (ed.), *The*

*Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (New York: Macmillan and Free Press, 1967),

vol. 1, p. 175.

3. However, the definition of “God” proposed by Beardsley and Beardsley has

considerable merit. On their view, for a being to be a god it must meet

four criteria: it must have supernatural powers; be free from so many of the

natural limitations of inanimate objects, subhuman organisms, and humans

that it cannot be classified as belonging to any of these groups; have some

kind of mental life; and be regarded as superior to human beings. See Monroe

Beardsley and Elizabeth Beardsley, *Philosophical Thinking: An Introduction*

(New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1965), pp. 46–50.

4. I owe the distinction between the broad and narrow senses of “atheism” to

William L. Rowe, “The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism,”

*American Philosophical Quarterly* 16 (1979): 335–41.

5. This seems to be the position of Kai Nielsen. He rejects a nonanthropomorphic

God as meaningless and an anthropomorphic God as false. See,

e.g., Kai Nielsen, “Introduction: How Is Atheism to Be Characterized?” in

Karl Nielsen, ed., *Philosophy and Atheism* (Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus Press,

1985).

6. Michael Martin, “Atheism v. Agnosticism,” *Philosophers’ Magazine* 19

(Summer 2002): 17–19; see also Michael Martin, “On an Argument

for Agnosticism,” Aug. 27, 2001, http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/

michael martin/martinag.html.

7. For example, see Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford:

Oxford University Press, 2000) and *God, Freedom and Evil* (Grand Rapids,

Mich.: Eerdmans, 1977), and Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism*

(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977) and *The Existence of God* (Oxford:

Oxford University Press, 1979).

8. For further critiques of Craig, see Stan Wallace (ed.), *Does God Exist?*

(Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate Publishing, 2003); William Lane Craig and

Quentin Smith (eds.), *Theism, Atheism, and Big Bang Cosmology* (Oxford:

Clarendon, 1993); Erik J. Wielenberg, *Values and Virtue in a Godless*

*Universe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); and Jeffrey Jay

Lowder, “Historical Evidence and the Empty Tomb: A Reply to William

Lane Craig,” in Robert Price and Jeffrey Jay Lowder (eds.), *The Empty*

*Tomb* (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 2005). Also see the critical papers

General Introduction 7

on Craig at http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/theism/christianity/

craig.html.

9. For arguments against theism that are not included in this volume see

Michael Martin, *Atheism: A Philosophical Justification* (Philadelphia:

Temple University Press, 1990); Nicholas Everett, *The Non Existence of*

*God* (London: Routledge, 2004); and Richard Gale, *On the Nature and Existence*

*of God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

10. See Michael Martin and Ricki Monnier (eds.), *The Impossibility of God*

(Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 2004).

11. See Martin, *Atheism*; Everett, *The Non Existence of God*.

12. Theodore Drange, *Nonbelief and Evil* (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books,

1998).

13. J. L. Schellenberg, “Pluralism and Probability,” *Religious Studies* 33 (1997):

143–59.

14. J. L. Schellenberg, *Hiddenness and Human Reason* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell

University Press, 1993).