

1. Definitions of “Atheism”

The word “atheism” is polysemous—it has multiple related meanings. In the psychological sense of the word, atheism is a psychological state, specifically the state of being an atheist, where an atheist is defined as someone who is not a theist and a theist is defined as someone who believes that God exists (or that there are gods). This generates the following definition: atheism is the psychological state of lacking the belief that God exists. In philosophy, however, and more specifically in the philosophy of religion, the term “atheism” is standardly used to refer to the proposition that God does not exist (or, more broadly, to the proposition that there are no gods). Thus, to be an atheist on this definition, it does not suffice to suspend judgment on whether there is a God, even though that implies a lack of theistic belief. Instead, one must deny that God exists. This metaphysical sense of the word is preferred over other senses, including the psychological sense, not just by theistic philosophers, but by many (though not all) atheists in philosophy as well. For example, Robin Le Poidevin writes, “An *atheist* is one who denies the existence of a personal, transcendent creator of the universe, rather than one who simply lives his life without reference to such a being” (1996: xvii). J. L. Schellenberg says that “in philosophy, the atheist is not just someone who doesn’t accept theism, but more strongly someone who opposes it.” In other words, it is “the denial of theism, the claim that there is no God” (2019: 5).

This definition is also found in multiple encyclopedias and dictionaries of philosophy. For example, in the *Concise Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, William L. Rowe (also an atheist) writes, “Atheism is the position that affirms the nonexistence of God. It proposes positive disbelief rather than mere suspension of belief” (2000: 62). The *Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* recognizes multiple senses of the word “atheism”, but is clear about which is standard in philosophy:

[Atheism is] the view that there are no gods. A widely used sense denotes merely not believing in god and is consistent with agnosticism [in the psychological sense]. A stricter sense denotes a belief that there is no god; this use has become *standard*. (Pojman 2015, emphasis added)

Interestingly, the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* recommends a slight broadening of the standard definition of “atheist”. It still requires rejection of belief in God as opposed to merely lacking that belief, but the basis for the rejection need not be that theism is false. For example, it might instead be that it is meaningless.

According to the most usual definition, an *atheist* is a person who maintains that there is no God, that is, that the sentence “God exists” expresses a false proposition. In contrast, an agnostic [in the epistemological sense] maintains that it is not known or cannot be known whether there is a God, that is, whether the sentence “God exists” expresses a true proposition. On our definition, an *atheist* is a person who rejects belief in God, regardless of

whether or not the reason for the rejection is the claim that “God exists” expresses a false proposition. People frequently adopt an attitude of rejection toward a position for reasons other than that it is a false proposition. It is common among contemporary philosophers, and indeed it was not uncommon in earlier centuries, to reject positions on the ground that they are meaningless. (Edwards 2006: 358)

At least until recently, the standard metaphysical understanding of the meaning of “atheism” was so ingrained in philosophy that philosophers could safely use the word “atheism” in that sense without worrying that they might be misunderstood and without feeling any need to defend it. For example, in his book, *Arguing About Gods*, Graham Oppy (another atheist) repeatedly treats “agnostic” (in the psychological sense of someone who suspends judgment about God’s existence) and “atheist” as mutually exclusive categories (2006, 1, 15, and 34) without offering any justification for doing so. The only plausible explanation for his failure to provide justification is that he expects his readers to construe the term “atheism” in its metaphysical sense and thus to exclude from the class of atheists anyone who suspends judgment about whether gods exist. Another sign of how dominant the standard definition is within the field of philosophy is the frequent use of the term “non-theist” to refer to the broader class of people who lack the belief that God exists.

Of course, from the fact that “atheism” is standardly defined in philosophy as the proposition that God does not exist, it does not follow that it *ought* to be defined that way. And the standard definition is not without its philosophical opponents. For example, some writers at least implicitly identify atheism with a positive metaphysical theory like naturalism or even materialism. Given this sense of the word, the meaning of “atheism” is not straightforwardly derived from the meaning of “theism”. While this might seem etymologically bizarre, perhaps a case can be made for the claim that something like (metaphysical) naturalism was originally labeled “atheism” only because of the cultural dominance of non-naturalist forms of theism, not because the view being labeled was nothing more than the denial of theism. On this view, there would have been atheists even if no theists ever existed—they just wouldn’t have been called “atheists”. Baggin [2003, 3–10] suggests this line of thought, although his “official” definition is the standard metaphysical one. While this definition of “atheism” is a legitimate one, it is often accompanied by fallacious inferences from the (alleged) falsity or probable falsity of atheism (= naturalism) to the truth or probable truth of theism.

Departing even more radically from the norm in philosophy, a few philosophers (e.g., Michael Martin 1990: 463–464) join many non-philosophers in defining “atheist” as someone who lacks the belief that God exists. This commits them to adopting the psychological sense of “atheism” discussed above, according to which “atheism” should not be defined as a proposition at all, even if theism is a proposition. Instead, “atheism”, according to these philosophers, should be defined as a psychological state: the state of not believing in the existence of God (or gods). This view was famously proposed by the

philosopher Antony Flew and arguably played a role in his (1972) defense of an alleged presumption of “atheism”. The editors of the *Oxford Handbook of Atheism* (Bullivant & Ruse 2013) also favor this definition and one of them, Stephen Bullivant (2013), defends it on grounds of scholarly utility. His argument is that this definition can best serve as an umbrella term for a wide variety of positions that have been identified with atheism. Scholars can then use adjectives like “strong” and “weak” (or “positive” and “negative”) to develop a taxonomy that differentiates various specific atheisms. Unfortunately, this argument overlooks the fact that, if atheism is defined as a psychological state, then no proposition can count as a form of atheism because a proposition is not a psychological state. This undermines Bullivant’s argument in defense of Flew’s definition; for it implies that what he calls “strong atheism”—the proposition (or belief in the sense of “something believed”) that there is no God—is not really a variety of atheism at all. In short, his proposed “umbrella” term leaves so-called strong atheism (or what some call positive atheism) out in the rain.

Although Flew’s definition of “atheism” fails as an umbrella term, it is certainly a legitimate definition in the sense that it reports how a significant number of people use the term. Again, the term “atheism” has more than one legitimate meaning, and nothing said in this entry should be interpreted as an attempt to proscribe how people label themselves or what meanings they attach to those labels. The issue for philosophy and thus for this entry is which definition is the most useful for scholarly or, more narrowly, philosophical purposes. In other contexts, of course, the issue of how best to define “atheism” or “atheist” may look very different. For example, in some contexts the crucial question may be which definition of “atheist” (as opposed to “atheism”) is the most useful politically, especially in light of the bigotry that those who identify as atheists face. The fact that there is strength in numbers may recommend a very inclusive definition of “atheist” that brings anyone who is not a theist into the fold. Having said that, one would think that it would further no good cause, political or otherwise, to attack fellow non-theists who do not identify as atheists simply because they choose to use the term “atheist” in some other, equally legitimate sense.

The next question, then, is why the standard metaphysical definition of “atheism” is especially useful for doing philosophy. One obvious reason is that it has the virtue of making atheism a direct answer to one of the most important metaphysical questions in philosophy of religion, namely, “Does God exist?” There are only two possible direct answers to this question: “yes”, which is theism, and “no”, which is atheism in the metaphysical sense. Answers like “I don’t know”, “no one knows”, “I don’t care”, “an affirmative answer has never been established”, and “the question is meaningless” are not direct answers to this question (cf. Le Poidevin 2010: 8). It is useful for philosophers to have a good name for this important metaphysical position, and “atheism” works beautifully for that purpose. Of course, it may also be useful on occasion to have a term to

refer to all people who lack theistic belief, but as noted above philosophers already have such a term, namely, “nontheist”, so the term “atheist” is not needed for that purpose.

A second reason for preferring the metaphysical definition is that the two main alternatives to it have undesirable implications. Defining “atheism” as naturalism has the awkward implication that some philosophers are both theists and atheists. This is because some philosophers (e.g., Ellis 2014) deny that God is supernatural and affirm both naturalism and theism. Defining “atheism” as the state of lacking belief in God faces similar problems. First, while this definition seems short and simple, which is virtuous, it needs to be expanded to avoid the issue of babies, cats, and rocks counting as atheists by virtue of lacking belief in God. While this problem is relatively easy to solve, another is more challenging. This additional problem arises because one can lack belief in God while at the same time having other pro-attitudes towards theism. For example, some people who lack the belief that God exists may nevertheless feel some inclination to believe that God exists. They may even believe that the truth of theism is more probable than its falsity. While such people should not be labeled theists, it is counterintuitive in the extreme to call them atheists. The psychological definition also makes atheists out of some people who are devoted members (at least in terms of practice) of theistic religious communities. This is because, as is well-known, some devoted members of such communities have only a vague middling level of confidence that God exists and no belief that God exists or even that God probably exists. It would seem misguided for philosophers to classify such people as atheists.

A third reason to prefer the standard definition in philosophy is that it makes the definitions of “atheism” and “theism” symmetrical. One problem with defining “atheism” as a psychological state is that philosophers do not define “theism” as a psychological state, nor should they. “Theism,” like most other philosophical “-isms”, is understood in philosophy to be a proposition. This is crucial because philosophers want to say that theism is true or false and, most importantly, to construct or evaluate arguments for theism. Psychological states cannot be true or false, nor can they be the conclusions of arguments. Granted, philosophers sometimes define “theism” as “the *belief* that God exists” and it makes sense to argue for a belief and to say that a belief is true or false, but here “belief” means “something believed”. It refers to the propositional content of belief, not to the attitude or psychological state of believing. If, however, “theism” is defined as the proposition that God exists and “theist” as someone who believes that proposition, then it makes sense to define “atheism” and “atheist” in an analogous way. This means, first, defining “atheism” as a proposition or position so that it can be true or false and can be the conclusion of an argument and, second, defining “atheist” as someone who believes that proposition. Since it is also natural to define “atheism” in terms of theism, it follows that, in the absence of good reasons to do otherwise, it is best for philosophers to

understand the “a-” in “atheism” as negation instead of absence, as “not” instead of “without”—in other words, to take atheism to be the contradictory of theism.

Therefore, for all three of these reasons, philosophers ought to construe atheism as the proposition that God does not exist (or, more broadly, as the proposition that there are no divine realities of any sort).