

Defining 'atheism': a modest proposal

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Lois Lee's draft glossary provides us with much – and valuable – food for thought.

However with one definition, at least, I find myself in disagreement:

Atheism – a conscious or unconscious lack of commitment to God(s) (2011: 2)

Commitment strikes me as a problematic and ambiguous category. Is this a lack of intellectual commitment – e.g., 'a... lack of commitment to (the idea that there exists [a] God(s))'? Or a lack of what one might term an existential commitment – e.g., 'a... lack of (personal, devoted, trusting?) commitment to God(s)'? The former might imply the latter, but the same is not true vice versa. It can be argued that while a great many Britons have at least some kind of intellectual commitment to the idea of God existing (even if this commitment extends only to ticking the requisite box on sociologists' surveys), comparatively few have the kind of existential commitment to God(s), traditionally expressed through regular prayer, attendance at religious services, etc. This ambiguity could, of course, be clarified fairly satisfactorily. However, I believe a far better and usable definition of 'atheism' – one already in scholarly use – can be located in the category not of 'commitment', but of 'belief'. What I want to do in this short paper, then, is simply to outline what I believe to be a fairly uncontroversial definition of *atheism* already in scholarly use: 'a lack of belief in the existence of a God or gods'.¹ While I will be presenting a case for the utility of this definition, I do not intend to do so in any exhaustive, defeat-all-comers

¹ This definition is of course a *contingent* one, not least concerning the meanings of 'existence' and 'God/gods' (as well as, probably, 'belief'). That cannot, however, be helped. I should also point out – since the possibility of misunderstanding has been pointed out to me – that 'lack' is intended here in a neutral sense. It is certainly not meant to imply that the atheist is 'missing something, which he or she ought not to be missing'.

way. All I am wanting to do is to put one (I think good) definition on the table, as a stimulus to discussion and debate.

In classical Greek, *atheos* ('atheist') sometimes signifies i) one who *denies* the gods (as with Socrates in Plato's *Apology*), but is also used of ii) one *abandoned* by the gods or 'godforsaken', as well as in the negative moral sense of iii) 'godless' or 'ungodly' (Liddell and Scott 1869: 27). It is in the second sense, although possibly with overtones of the third, that the word makes its only appearance in the New Testament. The gentile converts of Ephesus are reminded of when they were 'without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenant of promise, having no hope and without God (*atheoi*) in the world' (Eph 2.12). In modern English, however, it is the first sense which has most securely attached itself to the word, albeit until quite recently retaining the pejorative overtones of the second and third (cf. Hyman 2007: 30). In common speech, then, an atheist is typically understood to be one who actively, and perhaps even stridently, *disbelieves* in the existence of God. This is similar to Alister McGrath's usage in *The Twilight of Atheism*: 'By "atheist," I mean precisely [...] a principled and informed decision to *reject* belief in God' (2004: 175).

However, there is another – slightly but significantly different – definition in use in the scholarly literature on atheism. This defines an atheist as '*a person who is without a belief in the existence of a God (or gods)*', and thus atheism, obviously, as '*a lack of belief in the existence of a God (or gods)*'.² This encompasses both those who believe that God does

² This definition is sometimes given in a shorthand manner (including by myself) as 'a lack of belief in a God or gods'. Stated like this, however, the definition is open to a similar objection of ambiguity to the one I have leveled at Lee's definition. In English, as in several other languages, the question 'do you believe in God?' can be understood in either of two, distinct senses: 'do you believe that God exists?' or 'do you believe *in* [i.e., trust in] God' (Lash [1992] 2002: 18-21). This distinction – roughly speaking, the distinction between mere propositional belief (belief-that) and genuine faith (belief-in) – is, of course, an important one in Christian

not exist, and those who, while not necessarily disbelieving, do not possess a belief in God's existence either. Among others who follow this definition of 'atheist', these two categories are often designated 'positive atheism' and 'negative atheism' respectively (Robertson 1970: 238; Flew 1976: 14; Martin 2007: 1). (On this schema, agnosticism is a species of negative atheism. Agnostics are, therefore, in this sense 'atheists'. Also included under 'negative atheism' are those who, like the logical positivist A. J. Ayer, deny any meaning to the word 'God', and thus to all positions regarding his existence or lack of it: 'if the assertion that there is no God is nonsensical, then the atheist's assertion that there is no God is equally nonsensical' [(1936) 1990: 121]. His protests notwithstanding, Ayer is still an atheist according to this definition.)

This deviation from the arguably more common meaning requires justification. In the first place, it is broader than the common-language, McGrathian definition, and permits exploration of a range of closely related (and sometimes-overlapping) positions vis-a-vis the existence of a God or gods. However, it is not so broad as to become either meaningless or indiscriminate. Rather, it recognizes atheism to be a useful 'umbrella concept', but one which permits various sharper sub-definitions (positive/negative, weak/strong, anti-theism, agnosticism, etc.). Secondly, this usage has both a strong tradition within atheist literature, and has gained a wide acceptance among atheist scholars. Beginning at least with Charles Bradlaugh, who in 1866 founded the National Secular Society, many prominent atheists have argued for the accuracy of this definition (e.g., Flew 1976: 14; Smith [1979] 1989: 8; Hiorth 2003: 9). Frequently, appeal is made to the etymology of *atheos/atheist* on comparison with similarly constructed words such as 'amoral' and 'asexual'. Given that its

theology. This raises interesting terminological questions in itself (especially surrounding the concept of 'practical atheism'), which I have written about elsewhere.

alpha privativum prefix strictly means ‘without’, *a-theist* ought literally to mean ‘without (a belief in) God’. Admittedly, bearing in mind that historically the word has only rarely meant this (and even did not, as we have seen, in classical Greece), there is danger here of falling prey to the etymological fallacy. Nevertheless, the great utility of this definition, and its pervasive – although not universal (see Baggini 2003: 3; Cliteur 2009; Eller 2010) – deployment in recent scholarship on contemporary atheism, more than support its usage. Finally but by no means insignificantly, it is the definition already established in at least one major reference work.³ Thus the very first page of Michael Martin’s ‘Introduction’ to *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism* states:

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.’ 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. (2007: 1; see also Martin 1990: 463)

It is this basic definition of atheism/atheist – contingent though it indeed is on our definitions of ‘belief’, ‘existence’ and ‘God/gods’ (though, to be fair, since all definitions are contingent on the meanings of the words they contain, this objection is hardly fatal) – that I propose nonreligion scholars should adopt.

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³ It will also, incidentally, be adopted in the forthcoming *Oxford Handbook of Atheism*, edited by myself and Michael Ruse.

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