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# Philosophy of religion and two types of atheology

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Atheism is skeptical towards gods, and atheology advances philosophical positions defending the reasonableness of that rejection. The history of philosophy encompasses many unorthodox and irreligious movements of thought, and these varieties of unbelief deserve more exegesis and analysis than presently available. Going back to philosophy's origins, two primary types of atheology have dominated the advancement of atheism, yet they have not cooperated very well. Materialist philosophies assemble cosmologies that leave nothing for gods to do, while skeptical philosophies find conceptions of god to be too unintelligible or unsupported by evidence to warrant credibility. The origins and genealogies of these two atheologies are sketched and compared over many centuries down to present-day atheism, which still displays signs of this internecine divide between confident naturalists and agnostic skeptics.

**Keywords:** atheism; agnosticism; theology; atheology; skepticism; materialism

Five centuries of European and American freethinking has resulted in the emergence and flourishing of religious criticism, secular philosophizing, and skepticism towards gods. Distinguishing and correlating the resulting forms of freethought, tracking disagreements and alliances between them as carefully as describing their antagonism against religion, is a project still under development. Secularists occasionally produce synopses about their intellectual heritage, but they rarely overcome parochial instincts. Proud narratives about reason's predestined ascendency and worshipful hagiography about bold atheists are typical formats to the present day.[1] Telling unbelief's side of the story was necessary, of course. Although balanced philosophical accounts began appearing in the late nineteenth century, the dominant religious perspective viewed disbelief as the result of nothing but ignorance, irrationality, and immorality.[2] Atheism's defenders have frequently returned those same crude accusations towards believers, perpetuating strident rhetoric that regrettably persists today.

This capacity for strident rhetoric, characteristic of New Atheism in our own times, also gets directed at fellow nonbelievers. The mere existence of varieties of unbelief easily distracts nonbelievers, who can perpetuate atheism vs. agnosticism diatribes when they are not chastising religious narrow-mindedness. Polemics are typically conducted in the absence of intellectual or historical perspective, unfortunately. Schisms have origins in serious disagreements, to which atheism was never immune.

## 1. Atheist schisms

Only a broadly historical view, tracing diverse streams of mutually influential thought across the religious-secular spectrum, can do justice to the development of distinctive

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varieties of disbelief persisting today. Today's atheists appear to be among those least aware of this fact.

According to some atheists, the model atheist is someone who cannot believe in any gods for lack of good reasons to believe: the proper atheist is the epistemic skeptic. Michael Martin's *Atheism: A Philosophical Justification*, for example, argues that the fallacies inherent to arguments for god leave unbelief far more justified than god-belief. Martin adds that atheism does not require science, nor does it entail naturalism.[3]

According to other atheists, the model atheist is a naturalist: an advocate of the scientific worldview against religion. Julian Baggini's *Atheism: A Very Short Introduction* exemplifies this stance, saying that for most atheists, 'their atheism is motivated at least in part by their naturalism, a belief that there is only the natural world and not any supernatural one.' He additionally claims that 'this form of naturalism lies at the core of atheism.'[4]

Alex Rosenberg's *The Atheist's Guide to Reality*, agrees with Baggini. He tells his readers up front,

> There is much more to atheism than its knockdown arguments that there is no god. There is the whole rest of the worldview that comes along with atheism. It's a demanding, rigorous, breathtaking grip on reality, one that has been vindicated beyond reasonable doubt. It's called science. Science enables atheism to answer life's universal and relentless questions with evidence employing a real understanding of the natural world.[5]

Atheists are evidently pulled in different directions. Does a robust atheism require wholehearted commitment to science's worldview, or does it suffice to rely upon logic and reason?

Naturally, one might reply that they are both part of atheism. But that answer has only been generally acceptable among nonbelievers for the past century or so. This atheist schism has a much longer history; the evident way that patch-work alliances are needed only exposes how internal dissent still lurks beneath the surface.

This article explains how two primary forms of philosophical atheology, a skeptical atheology doubting all religion and a materialist worldview to replace supernaturalism, developed out of freethought in Europe after 1500. These two forms have older genealogies extending back to pre-Socratic philosophy. Revived during the Renaissance, their divisive stances apart from each other as well as their opposition against religion have animated the development of atheism in the West. Comprehending the current state of atheism is not possible without acknowledging this long-standing internecine struggle over its meaning and its message for the world. The notion that there is a singular belief system attached to 'atheism' is a myth. Atheism has a definitional identity, but atheism would not ever be a definitive worldview.

## 2. Atheism and atheology

Atheology in general explores kinds of disbelief in religions and their unnatural beings, explains how atheists sustain and encourage disbelief, and defends their engagement with religion and religious aspects of society. Atheology includes the task of correctly identifying and classifying the types of atheists and their atheisms. The field of secular studies is the wider interdisciplinary area of research into the psychological, social, cultural, and political phenomena associated with nonbelief and secularity.[6]

Having just the single word 'atheist' in the English language to indicate the condition of godlessness is an accident of linguistic heritage. The Greek word was ἄθεος – 'without god'. Latin writers relied on a transliteration of this Greek word, spelling it 'atheos' or 'atheus'. During medieval times, the term 'atheismus' was added to mean 'atheism', as a label for the stance taken by an atheist. When vernacular words in Italian, French, German, and English came into use by the sixteenth century to convey the meaning of 'atheos', those words denoted someone who denies the existence of god. Chambers' *Cyclopedia* (1728) says that the atheist is 'a person who denies the deity.' By the end of the eighteenth century, linguistic usage had somewhat shifted. The first edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1771) offers this weaker and hence broader definition: 'a person who does not believe the existence of a deity.' The Oxford English Dictionary recognizes these two ways to be an atheist. The primary definition for atheist is: 'One who denies or disbelieves the existence of a god.' OED definitions offer close synonyms but they rarely stutter. Denying a thing's existence means something a little different from disbelieving. The distinction between a person believing that god does not exist and a person disinclined to believe that god exists is quite real and must not be obscured.

The need for two alternative ways to distance oneself from the beliefs of others is not due to an issue with the meaning of 'atheist', but rather with the meaning of 'belief'. If you say, 'I believe X exists,' while I say 'I believe that X does not exist' or 'I deny your belief,' then we are making opposed statements about the existence of X because I am effectively saying that X does not exist. But when you say 'I believe X exists' and I reply 'I do not share that belief' or 'I cannot have that belief,' then our statements are only opposed about that belief, and not about X, because I am not also affirming that X does not exist. Disbelieving is not believing; it is a stance of not sharing a belief of others, and a manner of withholding belief – disbelieving is an expression of dissent without going so far as to disagree. When the milder disbelieving kind of atheism wishes to emphasize its lack of epistemic conviction, the modern term 'agnostic' has proven useful, as a later section explains.

The broader tradition of freethought exemplifies how bold thinkers have expressed their skeptical dissent from orthodoxy to varying degrees, presenting available reasons behind their disbelief in full awareness of argumentative strengths and weaknesses. Atheism has much in common with freethought, but the history of freethought is far wider than atheism. Freethought supplies the general aims and tactics for questioning and criticizing religion, religious leadership, and any other authority relying on religion. Most freethinkers over the centuries have remained religious to varying degrees; they typically get accused of 'impiety', the other term besides 'atheist' in the English language labeling dangerous dissent, to indicate how far from orthodoxy one has deviated.

Freethought need not proceed through all the stages leading to atheism. Freethought does not automatically involve rejecting scripture or defying God's divinity (blasphemy), discrediting religious authorities (anticlericalism), abandoning the true faith (apostasy), or declining to believe God's existence (atheism). Most of the history of freethought involves core concerns such as philosophizing about God, humanity, and nature (forming potential heresies), reforming religious practice and religious institutions (risking schisms), and rearranging church-state politics (seeking religious liberties). Freethought raises challenges to conformist and conservative religion, but only a portion of freethought has been devoted to impiety and irreligion: denying all religious claims, abandoning religion, and encouraging disbelief in religion.[7] The destination of atheism is not the destiny of freethought, but fears over atheism have determined the hostile agenda against all freethought.

As history attests, who gets called an atheist (and who admits to being an atheist) can depend greatly on the geographical region and time period. Nevertheless, there are underlying patterns to the dialogue between religion and irreligion. A stark choice between regarding atheism as a hypothetical construct of theology, or as an independent intellectual movement, is entirely unnecessary.[8] Atheology tells a more complex story.

## 3. Atheology and the gods

Atheology is about as old as philosophy. Indian thought, for example, encompasses skeptical and atheist dissent from Hindu orthodoxies practically from its earliest recorded times. Our story about western atheology begins its invention by the Greeks and perpetuation by the Romans. In these beginnings of philosophy we can already discern two distinct atheologies.[9]

The earliest Greek philosophers from the sixth century BCE such as Anaximander and Anaximenes offered cosmic philosophies assigning no evident role to anything divine or supernatural. By contrast, a handful of presocratics such as Protagorus (c.490–420 BCE), along with Socrates (469–399 BCE), explicitly refused to endorse any overarching cosmic scheme, but they were accused by their communities of impiety towards the gods. Protagorus is the first recorded religious skeptic in the west. According to Eusebius and Diogenes Laertius, Protagorus wrote a treatise titled 'On the Gods' stating his skeptical view that nothing can be known of the gods, not even whether any exist.

Materialists were just as skeptical. The atomist Democritus (c.460–370 BCE) and Epicurus (c.341–271 BCE) offered atheological arguments against popular anthropomorphic gods, reaching towards a complete atheism. They denied that the gods created the cosmos (the gods instead exist within the cosmos). They denied that the gods are unnatural (the gods are made of substances that make up the cosmos). They denied that the gods can have their own eternality or immortality (the gods cannot be older than the cosmos and they could decay away). They denied that the gods guide the cosmos (the gods at most direct vast natural affairs for obscure purposes). They denied that the gods care about humans (the gods are so busy, blessed, or blissful that human affairs cannot interest them). They denied that the gods created humans (disinterested gods would not bother, and nature has ways to create life). Finally, they denied that the gods communicate with humans (distant gods do not send signs and revelations are spurious). These materialists were not atheists in the strictest sense, as they agreed that higher beings can exist in this world. However, by denying divine creation of the world or of humans, denying divine unnaturality, eternality and immortality, and denying divine providence over the destiny of nature or human beings, these materialists rejected core theses of religion during their own times, and most other religions for that matter. The 'summa atheologica' of the classical world was *De rerum natura* (On the Nature of Things) by first century CE Roman philosopher Lucretius. This work explains the Epicurean philosophy in such naturalistic terms, materializing even the spectral gods that humans think they perceive, that it achieved a complete atheist worldview.[10]

A school for severe skepticism, Pyrrhonean skepticism, was reorganized by Sextus Empiricus (c.160–210 CE). Sextus included a section 'On Gods' in his treatise *Against the Physicists* which discusses various hypotheses about the human origins for fanciful ideas about gods. A following section 'Do Gods Exist?' skeptically argues that nothing can be known about gods. Sextus's treatise *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, Book 3, Section 3, presents another brief but incisive atheology of arguments against the Dogmatists, those claiming to know about the gods. He exposes the problems involved with trying to conceptualize a

god, judging if a god makes an impression on anyone, and inferring the existence of god from evidence. He also raises the problem of evil. Despite the resulting skeptical stance according to reason, Sextus allows conformity to customary religious attitudes, presenting us with the philosophical position that one can follow common opinion about the gods and pursue pious religiosity with no further concern for whether anyone can know anything about the gods.[11]

The long medieval interregnum saw little discussion of atheology in its own right, beyond the construction of theological arguments for the Christian supernatural creator and some modest engagement with neoplatonism and classical skepticism.[12] The revival of atheology proper in Europe occurs in the Renaissance, an era when the Greeks and Romans were re-discovered and atomism and skepticism became more widely accessible.[13] The first published work with 'atheist' or 'atheism' in the title appeared in 1552, in Latin: Guillaume Postel's *Liber de causis .. Contra atheos*. Postel was interested in slandering a few heretical reformers such as Rabelais, Aristotelians, and deists; ironically, he was later accused of heretical atheism himself in the Inquisition.

The first work of atheology published by a European atheist who openly endorsed atheism was probably by Giulio Cesare Vanini, *De admirandis naturae reginae deaeque mortalium arcanis* (On the admirable secrets of nature, queen and goddess of all mortal things, 1616). This work is both skeptical and materialist in design, but its long list of disputes against scripture, theology, and god's existence are thinly argued and unsystematic.[14] Vanini's writings were suppressed and he was burned at the stake in 1619. Very few examples of atheology by atheists admitting to atheism surfaced during the seventeenth century, for obvious reasons. Both skeptics and materialists defying scripture and theology almost invariably ensured that their writings affirm God's existence. However, Biblical criticism was common among atheological thinkers, especially deists and unitarians.[15]

Leonardus Lessius does not mention Vanini or any other living atheist in his *De providentia numinis et animi immortalitate libri duo adversus atheos & politicos* (On the Providence of God and the Immortality of the Soul written against the Atheists and Politicians, 1613). The 'politicians' to which the book title refers are Machiavelli and his imitators, who never endorse atheism yet treat religion as a useful tool for sovereign manipulation. Noting how atheists would not announce their impiety to the public, Lessius reaches back to ancient philosophy to acquire atheist targets: sophists, atomists, and satirists. The sophists are Diagorus of Melos and Protagorus of Abdera; the atomists are Democritus, Epicurus, and Lucretius; and the satirist is Lucian. The Roman Stoic Cicero provides many of Lessius's arguments, borrowed from Cicero's *On the Nature of the Gods*.

A decade later, Marin Mersenne was willing to name some contemporary names of atheists in *L'Impiété des déistes, athées, et libertins de ce temps* (The Impiety of the Deists, Atheists, and Libertines of these Times, 1624). There is no mention of scandalous satire against religious superstition, but Mersenne does identify one potential skeptic, Pierre Charron, and two metaphysicians, the neo-Aristotelian Geronimo Cardano and the scientific rationalist Giordano Bruno. All three 'atheists' were intellectuals of faith, but their indictment of atheism was regrettably based, according to Mersenne, on an excessive reliance on reason and philosophy. Mersenne himself followed his skeptical inspiration, Sextus Empiricus, agreeing that faithful conviction need not be disturbed after one is no longer troubled by (interminable) philosophical disputations over knowledge of god.

After throwing doubt upon revelation, what can philosophy still say about God? Fully secular philosophy was hardly a possibility for Europe just yet and atheists made

themselves scarce, but atheology was now everywhere. Using reason to discern a supernatural Creator was nothing new; theology had shown the way centuries before. The real danger, as theologians sensed, was relying on reason alone. And they did not have long to wait for a robust atheology to fulfill their worst fears.

The great rationalist and atheologian of the seventeenth century, Thomas Hobbes, skeptically questioned the Bible, declared theology devoid of sense, and derided metaphysics as an abuse of language. He designed a reasoned materialism and an approach to religion so comprehensive in his *Leviathan* (1651) that little about Christianity (or any theism, or any deism as well) could be true. Hobbes's scientific view of the cosmos was materialist, his philosophical skepticism reduced faith to common opinion, and his recommendations for controlling religion were Machiavellian. Hobbes permitted a vague notion of a material god within nature to survive his skepticism, but theologians could understand rejections of Christianity and justifications for philosophical atheism when they read them. Despite theological contempt towards those daring to rationalize atheism, a contempt so great that the very existence of an intellectual (yet so irrational!) atheist was the object of intense skepticism, theologians suspected the rise of atheism around them, and they certainly could not deny the existence of verifiable atheists among philosophers of antiquity. A direct confrontation with atheism was required.

## 4. Atheology exposed

The term 'atheology' was brought into usage by Ralph Cudworth, the great Cambridge philosopher of the late seventeenth century. Joining the revival of Platonism in Christian thought during that period, Cudworth was particularly antagonistic towards upstart materialisms such as that of Thomas Hobbes. Understanding little about the new experimental sciences, however, Cudworth's published works during his lifetime focused mainly on the classical pagan philosophies of Greeks and Romans, and his examinations of Hobbes concerning morality were published after his death. Cudworth vaulted to prominence with a single great work. In 1678, his defense of religion appeared, titled *The True Intellectual System of the Universe*, with the subtitle *Wherein All the Reason and Philosophy of Atheism is Confuted and its Impossibility Demonstrated*.

Chapter two of the first volume makes a series of accusations against atheism. Cudworth first defines a 'system of Atheology' as 'Atheism swaggering under the glorious appearance of philosophy.'[16] In his view, setting aside the evident scorn, atheism is the denial of religion, and atheology is the effort to rationally justify atheism by constructing an intellectual worldview that lacks god – or at least the one true god. Cudworth was not deceived by those materialists and Stoics who labeled as 'gods' some important components of the natural cosmos. Atheism may think that gods can be found in the natural world of matter, but that worldview is an atheology all the same for Cudworth, since it has no place for Christianity's God. Atheism is not just another sort of heretical dispute over what the divinity of god is like or how a god should be worshipped and obeyed. A materialist atheology abandons religion's god entirely. Cudworth therefore regarded atheology as the greatest rival to true religion.

Cudworth could not find a fulfilling philosophy in the atheology of the pagan worldviews he surveyed, because he set a high standard for success. These worldviews had to be rejected – especially atomistic materialism – due to their failure to account for the world's lawful order and their tendencies towards determinism, and their inabilities to explain mind, freedom, and morality. Not Democritus, not even Aristotle – only aspects of Plato were able to pass Cudworth's severe philosophical tests, so he could incorporate

platonic themes into his own Christian theology. All the same, Cudworth treated atheology as the construction of a rival philosophical system, and he presents each system as a serious body of thought, worthy of careful dissection and intellectual refutation. His explorations into the philosophies about nature crafted by the Greeks and Romans remain valuable to this day.

Although Cudworth respected these nature philosophies enough to analyze them for refutation, he had no respect for the typical atheist carried away by ignorance and folly:

> Besides these philosophic Atheists, whose several forms we have now described, it cannot be doubted, but that there have been in all ages many other Atheists that have not at all philosophized, nor pretended to maintain any particular Atheistic system or hypothesis, in a way of reason, but were only led by a certain dull and sottish, though confident disbelief of whatsoever they could not either see or feel; which kind of Atheists may, therefore, well be accounted enthusiastical or fanatical Atheists.[17]

These irrational atheists lack any serious atheology, they have no excuse for their fanaticism, and they deserve no protection from society's reproval and punishment because their behavior is so reprehensible. Cudworth's distinction between 'intellectual' and 'practical' atheism was widely applied, and its application was bound up with wider political implications to dealing with radical dissent.[18]

The next prominent use of the term 'atheology' came from the sharp pen of satirist Jonathan Swift. Swift's meaning for atheology was quite different from Cudworth's. In 1713 he published 'Mr. C – ns's Discourse on Free Thinking, put into plain English, by way of Abstract, for the use of the Poor.' Swift was no friend of religious toleration. He detested the surfacing of heretical and blasphemous writings, and the publication in that year of John Anthony Collin's *A Discourse of Free-Thinking* aroused Swift's angry scorn. Swift equated free-thinking with atheology by writing that 'a brief complete body of Atheology seemed yet wanting till this irrefragable discourse appeared.'[19] Collin's discourse of 'atheology', as Swift labeled it, was designed to primarily defend the principle of free thought (an idea only a few decades old by them) and free speech (also a rather new concept) for the advancement of reason. Like his good friend John Locke, Collins was an Enlightenment figure convinced that people have the right to rationally judge what should be believed and not believed. He wrote,

> By *Free-Thinking* then I mean, *The Use of the Understanding, in endeavouring to find out the Meaning of any Proposition whatsoever, in considering the nature of the Evidence for or against it, and in judging of it according to the seeming Force or Weakness of the Evidence*.[20]

What did Swift find so objectionable in this work of 'free-thinking'? Swift established his writing career and public fame by openly publishing his provocative thoughts on a wide variety of moral, social, and political matters. Yet he disapproved of free speech for ideas contradicting the ecclesiastical and ruling establishment. A minister himself, he regarded discussion of theological issues as the exclusive domain of Church elites. Theological disputation among bishops is hazardous enough. What Swift found far more dangerous is the very idea of permitting laypeople, even educated scholars and philosophers such as Collins, to openly question the foundations of Church authority, which directly leads to questioning government authorities. In Swift's view, the rationalism, the deism, and the denial of revelation advocated by Collins is a virulent atheism that must be silenced. Collin's impudent defense of the right to publicly speak about how to question religion is a terrible anarchism that must be combated. Encouraging the free disputation of religion is

not really any different, according to Swift and so many of his elite class of the day, from encouraging a license to violate the law and solicit revolt.

Swift judged that these self-styled 'free thinkers,' regardless of their philosophical pursuit of reason, do not possess the right to disturb the mind and peace of the public, so they do not deserve any intellectual response at all. There is no point to debating a book like Collins's, since that effort would create the appearance of validating the very idea of free-thinking. Swift uses scornful satire against Collins instead, in order to insinuate Swift's fears that free-thinking inspires pointless conflict among the uneducated masses and diminished respect for proper authorities, and hence it leads to reckless endangerment of the civil peace, causing grave harm to the entire social order. Unlike Cudworth, Swift refused to acknowledge atheology as a system of thought in the first place, since that would bestow far too much intellectual credit. Instead, Swift equated defenses of atheism with depraved and chaotic free-thinking, and treated free-thinking as destructively unacceptable free speech.

The causes and consequences of atheism were matters upon which Cudworth and Swift could agree. Atheism is caused by excessive reliance on reasonings unguided by religion, and atheism sends all but the most philosophical minds towards distempered rebellion against morality and public order. However, atheology meant two different things for Cudworth and Swift, and these alternatives have dominated discussion of atheism ever since. Is atheism the acceptance of a worldview without god, so that atheology is the construction of a nonreligious cosmological system? Alternatively, is atheism the single-minded exaltation of reason, so that atheology is the rejection of anything, such as religion, failing to meet reason's standards? These two contrary positions, even in their best light, cannot be blended together, since they do not agree on how to challenge religion and how to uphold atheism. An atheism requiring an affirmation of a systematic worldview is not the same as an atheism expecting only dissent from religious doctrines.

Nonconformists and outright atheists in the intellectual world agreed in principle on the value of reason, freethought, and religious criticism. Yet they disagreed about the best philosophical course to take for leading atheism and developing an atheology. From the seventeenth century down into the twentieth century these two atheologies, a 'worldview atheology' and a 'rationalist atheology', were stridently opposed, each one accusing the other of betraying freethought and reason.

Worldview atheology continued the philosophical project of building a natural cosmology based on science, unable to find in rationalist atheism enough resources to offer an alternative to religion. Thomas Hobbes, La Mettrie, Baron d'Holbach, and Ludwig Büchner were among its prominent advocates. Under banners such as 'materialism' or 'naturalism', worldview atheism continued to advance science as not just a method superior to religion, but capable of potentially knowing all reality. Rationalist atheism tended to reject the label of 'atheism' in order to reject worldview atheology's ambitious agenda of disproving god by assembling a nonreligious materialism. Rationalist atheology found science more reasonable than religion, but it emphasized science's limitations too. It held on to labels such as 'rationalism', 'skepticism', and 'agnosticism' while rejecting materialism in the course of doubting all religious, metaphysical, and cosmological worldviews. This athelogical stance was adopted by several prominent nonbelievers, including David Hume, John Stuart Mill, Thomas Henry Huxley, and Bertrand Russell.

## 5. Materialism

Cudworth discerned how Hobbes displayed similarities to Epicurean materialists theorizing how matter had a variety of forms, some visible and some invisible, including

invisible beings that people call gods. Hobbes's *Leviathan* (1651) declares that reality can only consist of material bodies.[21] This natural philosophy rejected the core metaphysical and spiritual claims of Christianity, and it similarly rejected any dualistic metaphysics, such as that of René Descartes. Hobbes regarded the existence of a supernatural realm beyond this world, the existence of any immaterial beings, and immaterial souls or minds, as matters beyond reasonable conception. He also denied any independent legitimacy to religion or religious leaders. He skeptically denied religion as an authority, either over intelligence or society. Revelation cannot arrive from any unnatural or spiritual being (none exist) by immaterial means (none exist either), scripture is genuinely about god only so far as reason permits, and scripture is regulative for conduct only so far as a lawful commonwealth commands. Hobbes was willing to grant that nature's order suggests an all-powerful (yet material) god. All the same, he insisted that god could not be scientifically approached, god is not even the proper subject of any area of knowledge, and the human mind cannot comprehend hardly anything about this infinite being.

Hobbes was a freethinker, a rationalist, and a secular philosopher, which made him skeptical towards religious claims and hopeful about replacing religious dogma and sacred theology with natural philosophy, natural law, and civil politics. How could a scholar so learned in Biblical interpretation, warmly agreeable with many of its ethical precepts, and comfortable with intimate church-state relationships, be an atheist?[22] Nevertheless, correctly classifying Hobbes as the architect of a worldview atheology, designed not just to elevate reason and science but also to replace almost everything religious in Christianity, allows us to understand the kind of atheist he was. Hobbes had to deny being an atheist, not merely for fear of punishment, but because he took an atheist to be someone who denies god's existence, disrupts public worship, and disturbs civil authorities.[23] Hobbes asserted that a material god exists, required a single form of public worship, and condemned challenges to ecclesiastical power backed by government authority. Religious faith was useful for the masses so long as the sovereign, not the theologians, controlled religion. Like Swift, Hobbes understood the atheist as a dangerously unsound freethinker, yet Hobbes was no theist either; he was a supreme atheologian.

Why would an atheologian permit any vestige of a god to stain an otherwise consistent worldview? Worldview atheologies by their nature try to be inclusively syncretic where they can. They frequently intermix scientific knowledge of their day with reasoned ontology or metaphysics to round out a comprehensive system of reality. Many of these systems regard 'materialism' as too shallow, deterministic, or nihilistic, so denials of materialism (or physicalism, etc.) are often heard, yet they remain worldview atheologies. They typically try to accommodate, as far as possible, matters that religion had controlled, without going as far philosophical theology's rationalization of religious dogma. In Hobbes's case, he was only willing to grant the bare possibility that a supreme material being guided the cosmos from within, an admission consistent with his view that the people would worship a god anyways, so religion about god should at least be thoroughly rationalized. Philosophers from Giordano Bruno, Thomas Hobbes, and Baruch Spinoza down to C. S. Peirce, John Dewey, and A. N. Whitehead – all of them worldview atheologists – have applied the label of 'god' to essentially natural realities while denying that religion has superior knowledge about such matters. The title of 'pantheist' or 'religious naturalist' may apply to these thinkers, but all of them are within this tradition of worldview atheology, since they expressly reject as unreal the nonnatural or transcending god(s) that religions assert, and they radically alter what form religiosity could take.

Accommodating any religious ideas and sentiments is out of the question for more radical materialists. The first thorough work of atheology by an atheist after Vanini is

impressive: Jean Meslier's *Mémoire* (1729). Despite Voltaire's published 'extract' in 1761, which added passages to make Meslier appear like he was a pious deist like Voltaire, the original lengthy volume was an exercise in nothing but atheism, covering core atheological arguments with erudition.[24] Pursuing claims that science will not confirm god but it will prove minds to be thinking material bodies, eighteenth century materialists such as Julien Ofray de La Mettrie and Baron D'Holbach did not pause at deism (like Voltaire) or dualism (like John Locke). La Mettrie's book *L'Homme machine* (Man the Machine, 1747) was in many ways the first treatise to be entirely materialistic and secular since Lucretius's *On the Nature of Things*.

This tradition continued in next notorious materialist, Baron D'Holbach, in his anonymously published *La Systeme de la Nature, ou Des loix du monde physique et du monde moral* (The System of Nature, or The Laws of the Physical World and Moral World, 1770).[25] He formulated materialism to refute the design arguments and first cause arguments for god, rule out divine action in the world, and suggest that life arose from matter. Strict materialism during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries typically involved an acceptance of determinism by natural laws. This determinism ruled out, in many materialist's minds, not only the immortal soul and god's providential guidance, but free will as well. Because theological and metaphysical conceptions of moral agency and free will had bonded them together, a materialist denial of free will seemed to deny that morality is possible for humanity. (The way that materialism and atheism was associated with hedonism and libertinism did not help.) The theological response to this situation, that religion must serve as the guardian of morality, echoes down to our own times.

For many reasons, materialism made little headway before the early twentieth century. The vast majority of freethinkers until then were content with unitarianism, deism, sensationalist empiricism, or mind-body dualism – not only in England, but across Northern Europe. Into the nineteenth century, Germany (soon followed by France and England) experimented with the idealist legacies of Leibniz and Kant, but a god almost always had a place. The few philosophical systems omitting a supernatural god and an immortal soul either stayed close to pantheism and/or idealism (such as F.W.J. Schelling, G.W.F. Hegel, Arthur Schopenhauer, and F.H. Bradley), or preferred an empiricist and historicist materialism (Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, for example). A fully scientific worldview enlivened Marquis de Condorcet's *L'Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humain* (1795, published as Outlines of an Historical View of the Progress of the Human Mind in 1796), along with his later writings, advanced the atheological project of applying human sciences such as medicine, anthropology, and sociology. Mary Wollstonecraft expected the scientific worldview to support her secular stance in *Vindication of the Rights of Man* (1790) and *Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792). Her husband, socialist William Godwin, applied that stance in his *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice, and Its Influence on General Virtue and Happiness* (1793).

Worldview atheology during the nineteenth century continued to advance this project of understanding human society in entirely materialistic terms, exemplified by Herbert Spencer's *Social Statics* (1851), along with his subsequent works assigning evolution a central cosmic role. Scientific secularism was also advancing. Ludwig Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity* (1841) explained how religion's essence resides in the feeling and imagination of the human mind, and his *Lectures on the Essence of Religion* (1848) proposed that gods are projections of psychological drives to personify nature.

As it happened, it was Germany that eventually produced the next great worldview atheology. Ludwig Büchner's *Kraft und Stoff* (Force and Matter, 1855) was just the first in a lengthy series of volumes in which he elaborated a materialist philosophy. Matter and

force are essentially connected, and that the total energy of the world must be constant; therefore science 'teaches that nothing is generated anew, that nothing disappears, and that the secret of nature lies in an eternal and immanent cycle in which cause and effect are connected without beginning or end.'[26] Büchner's writings are replete with declarations such as, 'Man is a product of nature in body and mind.'[27] Taking a close interest in social welfare and the advancement of science, he viewed himself principally as a freethinker, and he founded the German Freethinkers League in 1881 to oppose the domination of the Lutheran Church over society.

Worldview atheology in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries continued to follow the schematic organization laid down by Büchner: appeal to science for the self-sufficiency of nature, deny ultimate teleological ends to the world or to life, reject vitalistic or mentalistic forces inexplicable by science, and tell humanity's story using natural evolution and a history of culture's progress. Biologist Ernst Haeckel was the next great German evolutionary atheologian, publishing his *Natürliche Schöpfungsgeschichte* (The History of Creation, 1868) and then *Die Welträthsel* (The Riddle of the Universe, 1895–99). Chemist Wilhelm Ostwald's *Grundriss der Naturphilosophie* (Outline of Natural Philosophy, 1908) advanced this broadly scientific materialism. In France, physician and sociologist Charles Letourneau told this kind of expansive story in *Science et matérialism* (1891).[28]

In England, the atheology of scientific humanist Julien Huxley during the mid-twentieth century exemplifies this organization, as do the writings of Richard Dawkins today. In America, this comprehensive naturalistic philosophizing arrived with George Santayana's *The Life of Reason: The Phases of Human Progress* (1905–06) and John Dewey's *Experience and Nature* (1925). Later philosophers such as W. V. Quine in *Word and Object* (1960) and Patricia Smith Churchland in *Neurophilosophy* (1986) have unrelentingly compelled all existence to conform to scientific theorizing or face elimination. Worldview atheology's confrontations with religion have received their updated expression in the books of Antony Flew and Paul Kurtz towards the end of the twentieth century.[29]

## 6. Skepticism

During the period 1500–1800, European skepticism as inherited from the Greeks took its own path, largely separated from materialism. By 1800, the acceptability of scientific knowledge to the philosophical skeptic was becoming conceivable, and the now-familiar alliance between science and skepticism began to emerge. Before the Enlightenment, philosophical skepticism involved serious doubt concerning knowledge of the external world, and perhaps doubt about the capacities of reasoning faculties as well. Scientific theorizing about invisible matters could only seem dubious at best for such skepticism, and metaphysical speculating could not be encouraged at all.

The implications of extreme skepticism were taken most seriously. Renaissance defenders of Aristotelian or Platonic systems grappled with skepticism and its implications for theology.[30] But Michel de Montaigne had foreseen both metaphysical philosophy and sacred theology's downfall. His 'Apologie de Raimond Sebond' in the first (1580) edition of his *Essais* reproved all philosophical theorizing, and any theology reliant on that theorizing, for exceeding the reach of human understanding. A century before Cudworth, Montaigne appealed only to the basics of the Pyrrhonian skepticism relayed by Sextus Empiricus to argue that no worldview, pagan or Christian, could enjoy rational justification. This is a skeptical atheology indeed, and not the less impressive just because Montaigne remained religious by appealing to faith alone.[31]

René Descartes similarly assembled components for a skeptical atheology in his *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641). Complex (and possibly circular) arguments trying to demonstrate God's existence, and consequent divine guarantees that human observations of the world are reliable, permitted Descartes to justify scientific theorizing. Even eighteenth century empiricism, firmly accepting the immediately perceivable world, left little opportunity (or so it seemed then) for knowing anything behind it. Isaac Newton's physics lent great credibility to empirical science, but much of philosophy was slow to follow. Empiricism treated science instrumentally, not realistically (a strategy pursued down to this day), while a realistic appreciation for lawful nature led through deism on the way to materialism, so empiricism and materialism remained largely separated.[32]

The possibility of a united skeptical and materialist position, exemplified already in Hobbes, is illustrated again in Denis Diderot. His *Pensées philosophiques* (1746) applies a reasoned skepticism leading towards deism, while his *Lettre sur les aveugles* (Letter on the Blind, 1749) refute all theological arguments for god in the course of defending the self-sufficiency and deterministic fatalism of materialism. After three month's imprisonment, Diderot's atheism only grew, but his essays in the monumental *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences* (1751–72) veered over to a cautiously skeptical approach instead, and his materialist views remain unpublished until after his death. Diderot exemplifies the philosophical dilemma, not to speak of the political dilemma, over whether to construct a fully materialistic worldview using the little knowledge science could then provide, or to skeptically take apart the supports for theism using all the resources of rationalist thinking.[33]

David Hume, the Scottish empiricist and common sense realist (but not materialist), was skeptical about more than revelations and tales of miracles. He wrote his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1779) to raise doubts about the capacity of any human mind to know the ultimate causes of the world or supreme realities beyond the observable realm. Hume's atheology did not endorse atheism, since he took 'atheism' to be knowledge of a natural worldview without gods, yet he asserted that such knowledge is impossible, leaving atheism an impossibility. Hume therefore refused to call himself an atheist, since his skeptical stance did not develop a positive worldview about gods not existing – skepticism only shows that nonbelief can be reasonable. Hume's far greater concern was to affirmatively defend respect for intellectual freethought itself. In Part 1, Hume's character Philo (often speaking for Hume's own views) raises those harsh accusations against freethought and atheology, that they foolishly cause social disruption. Philo quotes Francis Bacon, an earlier English empiricist and firm Anglican, as follows: 'atheists nowadays have a double share of folly; for they are not contented to say in their hearts there is no God, but they also utter that impiety with their lips, and are thereby guilty of multiplied indiscretion and imprudence.'[34] Philo immediately defends people who intelligently question priests, the Church, and even God – but Philo does not bring up atheism again.

John Stuart Mill's autobiography recounts how he was raised by his nonbelieving father, James Mill, as a nonbeliever too. Having never accepted theism, the son rejected the label of atheism just as his father did. John Stuart continued the empiricist tradition, and when his philosophical mind turned to religion in a handful of essays, his atheological criticisms of theology rejected atheism as well. The conclusion of his essay 'Theism,' published in the volume *Three Essays on Religion* in 1874 after Mill's death, affirms skepticism (spelled 'scepticism' in England) but not atheism:

> ..the rational attitude of a thinking mind towards the supernatural, whether in natural or in revealed religion, is that of scepticism as distinguished from belief on the one hand, and from atheism on the other: including, in the present case, under atheism, the negative as well as the positive form of disbelief in a God, viz. not only the dogmatic denial of his existence, but the denial that there is any evidence on either side, which for most practical purposes amounts to the same thing as if the existence of a God had been disproved. If we are right in the conclusions to which we have been led by the preceding inquiry there is evidence, but insufficient for proof, and amounting only to one of the lower degrees of probability.[35]

Mill pointedly characterized atheism as the unreasonable position that god's existence can be denied, or at least that no evidence exists for considering god's existence. Mill regarded atheism in general as dogmatic. It is dogmatic to reject without reason a fair consideration of the evidence, and it is dogmatic to confidently deny god's existence when the balance of evidence only supports skeptical doubt.

Thomas Henry Huxley, the public advocate for evolution and freethought during the late nineteenth century, carried the banner of skepticism by renaming it 'agnosticism'. His 1889 essay 'Agnosticism' relates how he arrived at this new name, standing for an old principle: 'In matters of the intellect, follow your reason as far as it will take you, without regard to any other consideration. And negatively: In matters of the intellect, do not pretend that conclusions are certain which are not demonstrated or demonstrable.'[36] Huxley's philosophical method of rationalist atheology, which he called agnosticism, requires the freethinker to skeptically withhold assent from any metaphysical or theological worldview – where every natural worldview based on science gets lumped together with unreasonable metaphysics about ultimate realities. By specifically rejecting materialism right along with theism, Huxley widened the schism growing between scientific knowledge and philosophical materialism. According to agnosticism, while a materialist worldview surely needs science, scientific inquiry has no need for materialism. Indeed, according to Huxley, science would be unreasonable and unwise to get involved with metaphysical assertions about all reality and all-knowing denials of god, just as it must stay aloof from affirming any god. No atheism at all follows from accepting reason and science – only agnosticism – and agnosticism, according to Huxley, will forever be far more reasonable than atheism.

Empiricists were not alone assigning the question of god's existence to that agnostic status. Some post-Kantians on the Continent omitted a deity from their philosophical systems while taking close interest in human religiosity. Prominent examples are Charles Renouvier's four-volume *Essais de critique générale* (1854–64), Ernst Cassirer's three-volume *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* (1923–29), and Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time* (1927).

Bertrand Russell, sustaining British empiricism into the twentieth century, did call himself an atheist on occasion. He arrived at disbelief in God in early adulthood, as his autobiographical reflections recall.[37] Yet Russell did not philosophically endorse atheism wholeheartedly. His philosophical loyalties rested with freethought, rationalism, empirical skepticism, and science. He explicitly rejected materialism as metaphysically implausible, despite its methodological utility for scientific research.[38] However, a firm alliance between skepticism and science had emerged, because established scientific knowledge can in turn be applied to reach skeptical verdicts against religious claims involving this world. Regrettably, religions demand social conformity to creeds contradicting science. As for creeds only about supernatural matters, they are not but they do not irrationally contravene materialism, since materialism cannot be justified either. 'A purely personal

religion, so long as it is content to avoid assertions which science can disprove, may survive undisturbed in the most scientific age.'[39]

Russell's considered thoughts on atheism and agnosticism are well expressed in a brief address titled 'Am I an Atheist or an Agnostic? A Plea for Tolerance in the Face of New Dogmas' (1949). Russell acknowledges the philosophical way that 'atheism' has been associated with allegedly demonstrable knowledge that no god exists. His own scientific empiricism prevents an affirmation of that philosophical atheism. However, he does say that the ordinary meaning to 'atheism' only involves reasonable disbelief in gods, not knowledge of transcendent matters. He says of any gods: 'I do not think that their existence is an alternative that is sufficiently probable to be worth serious consideration' and he says of his fellow rationalists, 'speaking popularly, I think that all of us would say in regard to those gods that we are Atheists.'[40]

## 7. Coordinated atheology

Russell pointed the way for forging cooperation between skepticism and materialism. Cooperation requires compromise, and a mutually beneficial compromise is available. The rationalist atheology of freethinking skepticism has to admit that ordinary atheism is simply the reasonable refusal to believe in gods, so agnosticism is a kind of atheism. Skepticism benefits from this compromise by becoming the firmest basis for atheism's tenet that disbelief in gods is reasonable for anyone.

For its part, worldview atheology has to surrender any notion that only the possession of a scientific worldview could be sufficient for atheism. By modestly retreating to an empirically scientific worldview only showing how there is no place for divine action in the world, worldview atheology provides crucial support for rationalist atheology's view that little or no evidence for a god has been found.

Russell's coordinated atheology is well expressed by a contemporary skeptic, Michael Shermer, who deftly expressed this unification: 'Modern skepticism is embodied in the scientific method, which involves gathering data to test natural explanations for natural phenomena.'[41] On this view, where empirical science cannot go, one's worldview must halt in intellectual humility. There can be no question of the scientific worldview engaging in metaphysical speculation or making exaggerated claims about all of reality beyond the supervision of empirical evidence. This cooperative teamwork between skepticism and science cannot eliminate the distinction between an inability to believe in gods and an ability to affirm a natural worldview.

The competitive divide between a skeptically agnostic rationalism and a scientifically atheist naturalism can point to long traditions behind these opposed positions.[42] Those interested in forging a coordinated atheology can also point to successful historical and contemporary examples. These three alternatives would not subsume each other, and they will continue to enliven the ongoing god debates. Those hoping to bypass the uneducated polemics aroused on all sides by New Atheism, among nonbelievers and believers alike, have three rich heritages to carefully consider.

**Conflict of interest statement**

The author declares that this research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

## Notes

1. George Jacob Holyoak, England's principal secularist of the nineteenth century and the first atheist historiographer of his movement, structured this optimistic genre in *The Origin and Nature of Secularism*, claiming that secularism was inevitable as soon as reason was liberated from religion and freethought reached its maturity. John B. Bury's *A History of Freedom of Thought* concurs with this dramatically victorious plot. At the other end of the twentieth century, Gerald Larue's *Freethought Across the Centuries* is a recent example of this same plot.
2. John Cairns's *Unbelief in the Eighteenth Century as contrasted with its Earlier and Later History* is a notably balanced work, but it had little company in civility. John Stuart Blackie accused atheism of arising from every malevolent cause in *The Natural History of Atheism*, as did Robert Flint's *Anti-Theistic Theories*. Adam Storey Farrar's *A Critical History of Free Thought in Reference to the Christian Religion* is more thorough by comparison, and lends religious dissent far more credit for reasoned argument. Only German readers had access to fair accounts of unbelief in the early nineteenth century, such as J.A.H. Tittmann's *Ueber Supranaturalismus, Rationalismus und Atheismus*.
3. Martin, *Atheism: A Philosophical Justification*, 470. Other examples in this genre of skeptical atheology are Everett, *The Non-Existence of God*; and Shook, *The God Debates*.
4. Baggini, *Atheism*, 4, 5.
5. Rosenberg, *The Atheist's Guide to Reality*, viii. See also Fales, "Naturalism and Physicalism."
6. Current research in secular studies is well represented by the two volume collection *Atheism and Secularity*, edited by Phil Zuckerman. On debates over social secularization, consult Bruce, *Secularization*. On political secularism's stance, see Berlinerblau, *How to Be Secular*.
7. The examples of freethinking deism, Unitarianism, and pantheism in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries are instructive; consult Waligorea, "Christian Deism in Eighteenth Century England"; and Howe, *For Faith and Freedom*. Freethought and atheism in world history is recounted by Bury, *A History of Freedom of Thought*; Robertson, *A History of Freethought*; and Larue, *Freethought Across the Centuries*. See also Lange, *The History of Materialism*; and Buckley, *At the Origins of Modern Atheism*. Surveys of England and America are supplied by Berman, *A History of Atheism in Britain*; and Turner, *Without God, Without Creed.* For France, see Kors, *Atheism in France, 1650–1729*.
8. See Wotton's discussion of main alternatives in "New Histories of Atheism."
9. See Thrower, *The Alternative Tradition*; and Bremmer, "Atheism in Antiquity." Also consult Vlastos, "Theology and Philosophy in Early Greek Thought"; and Morgan, *Myth and Philosophy from the Presocratics to Plato*. On ancient India, see Raju, *Structural Depths of Indian Thought*.
10. See Sanders, *Epicurus and the Epicurean Tradition*; and Gillespie and Hardie, *The Cambridge Companion to Lucretius*.
11. Empiricus, *Selections from the Major Writings on Scepticism*; and Long, *Hellenistic Philosophy.* See also Thorsrud, "Sextus Empiricus on Skeptical Piety"; and Bailey, *Sextus Empiricus and Pyrrhonean Scepticism*.
12. See Lagerlund, *Rethinking the History of Skepticism*.
13. See Floridi, *Sextus Empiricus*; Paganini and Maia Neto, *Renaissance Skepticisms*; and Brown, *The Return of Lucretius to Renaissance Florence*.
14. See Davidson, "Atheism in Italy, 1500–1700", 73–74. On Vanini's atheism, and other Renaissance figures skirting atheism, see Allen, *Doubt's Boundless Sea*.
15. See for example Lucci, *Scripture and Deism*.
16. Cudworth, *The True Intellectual System of the Universe*, 175.
17. Ibid. 290.
18. See Zurbuchen, "Religion and Society"; and See note 7 above.
19. Swift, *The Works of the Rev. Dr. Jonathan Swift*, 193.
20. Collins, *A Discourse of Free-Thinking, Occasion'd by the Rise*, 5 (italics in original).
21. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chap. 34, sect. 2.
22. Martinich explores this question in "The Bible and Protestantism in *Leviathan.*"
23. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chap. 31, sect. 2.
24. The complete English translation is *Testament: Memoir of the Thoughts and Sentiments of Jean Meslier*, trans. Mike Shreve.

25. See La Mettrie, *Man a Machine and Man a Plant*. The complete translation of D'Holbach's *The System of Nature* is by H. D. Robinson. Mark Curren traces the impact of D'Holbach in France in *Atheism, Religion and Enlightenment in Pre-revolutionary Europe*.
26. Büchner, *Force and Matter*, 21–22. Consult Gregory, *Scientific Materialism in Nineteenth Century Germany.*
27. Ibid. 239.
28. See Hecht, *The End of the Soul*.
29. See Flew, *Atheistic Humanism*; and Kurtz, *The Transcendental Temptation*.
30. See note 13 above.; and Sinnott-Armstrong, *Pyrrhonian Skepticism*. Broader perspectives on skepticism, religion, and culture are provided in Laursen, *The Politics of Skepticism in the Ancients, Montaigne*; and Zerba, *Doubt and Skepticism in Antiquity and the Renaissance*.
31. See Curley, "Skepticism and Toleration: The Case of Montaigne"; and Popkin, "Michel de Montaigne and the *Nouveau Pyrrhoniens*" Ann Hartle balances Montaigne's humanistic ethos against his skepticism, viewing Montaigne's faith as humbly chastened by doubt, in "Montaigne and Skepticism."
32. See Guicciardini, *Reading the Principia*; and Yolton, *Thinking Matter*. Descartes's relationship with skepticism is too complex to outline here, but consult Curley, *Descartes Against the Skeptics*; and Lennon, *The Plain Truth*.
33. On Diderot, see Brewer, *The Discourse of Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century France*; Blom, *A Wicked Company*; and Fowler, *New Essays on Diderot*.
34. Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, 15. See Lemmens, "Hume's Atheistic Agenda: Philo's Confession in *Dialogues*," 12; and Russell, *The Riddle of Hume's Treatise*. Natural religion and natural theology presented shifting targets for skepticism before and after Hume; consult Peterfreund, *Turning Points in Natural Theology*; and van der Zande and Popkin, *The Skeptical Tradition around 1800*.
35. Mill, *Three Essays on Religion*, 242. Consult Rosen, *Mill*, chap. 12.
36. Huxley, "Agnosticism" 43. See Lightman, *The Origins of Agnosticism*.
37. Russell, *The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell, 1872–1914*, 36.
38. See for example Russell's "Introduction: Materialism, Past and Present," xix.
39. Russell, *Religion and Science*, 9.
40. Russell, *The Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell*, 91–92.
41. Shermer, *Why People Believe Weird Things*, 16.
42. Primary atheological arguments from the skeptically rationalist tradition are surveyed in Shook's "Rationalist Atheology." Typical arguments made in the scientifically naturalist tradition are discussed in Shook's "Scientific Atheology."

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