

Introduction

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This *Companion* examines philosophical discussion of atheism. In this ‘Introduction’, I shall provide an overview of the work and some preliminary discussion of foundational questions.

It is worth noting at the outset that the overarching aim of the *Companion* is to provide a discussion of some philosophically controversial questions about atheism. It is not the aim of the *Companion* to provide a comprehensive discussion of philosophically controversial questions about atheism; nor is it the aim of the *Companion* to provide a merely partisan survey of philosophy and atheism.

The preliminary discussion of foundational questions considers (a) the characterisation of atheism; (b) the history of atheism; (c) the broad sweep of objections to atheism; and (d) what might be hoped for in connection with arguments about atheism. The remarks made under each of these headings are all brief, but, in some cases, controversial.

1. Overview

The work is divided into eight parts: (1) ‘Individual Thinkers’; (2) ‘Philosophical Movements’; (3) ‘Critiques of Theism’; (4) ‘Metaphysics’; (5) ‘Epistemology’; (6) ‘Ethics’; (7) ‘Politics’; and (8) ‘Critiques of Atheism’.

The first part—‘Individual Thinkers’—considers a range of thinkers who are often said to be atheists but whose views about gods are open to philosophical interpretation. In some cases, dispute about classification of thinkers is a result of dispute about the characterisation of atheism itself; in other cases, dispute arises because of lack of attention to the writings of the thinkers in question. There are many other intrinsically interesting thinkers who might have been discussed in this part of the book. For a different line-up, devised for a similar end, see Oppy (2018): Ajita Kesakambali, Diagoras of Melos, Wang Chong, Abu-L-Ala al-Ma’arri, Jean Meslier, Paul-Henri d’Holbach, Mary Ann Evans, Emma Goldman, Eric Blair, Margaret Kennedy, Maryam Namazie, and Agomo Atambire.

The second part—‘Philosophical Movements’—considers a range of philosophical positions that have often been taken to have clear and straightforward implications for atheism but where the existence of such implications is open to philosophical dispute. As in the first part of this work, philosophical dispute is sometimes the outcome of disagreement about the characterisation of atheism; but, often enough, it arises from lack of attention to the writings of relevant groups of philosophers.

The third part—‘Critiques of Theism’—looks at different kinds of objections to theism: logical objections, evidential objections, normative objections, and prudential objections. Some of the objections that are examined, if successful, would provide grounds for atheism; other objections that are examined, if successful, might only provide grounds for agnosticism.

The fourth part—‘Metaphysics’—takes up some metaphysical topics that have sometimes been taken to have clear implications for atheism: freedom, death, and the supernatural. There are, of course, many other metaphysical topics that have sometimes been taken to have clear

implications for atheism. The topics represented here are chosen merely as representatives of the wider range of intrinsically interesting metaphysical topics that have sometimes been taken to have clear implications for atheism. Other topics that might have been taken up in this part include: abstract objects, causation, cosmological origins, function, mathematics, mind, and reason.

The fifth part—‘Epistemology’—takes up some epistemological topics that have sometimes been taken to have clear implications for atheism: scepticism, methods of science, evidence, and evolutionary theory. Again, there are many other epistemological topics that have sometimes been taken to have clear implications for atheism. The topics represented here are chosen merely as representatives of the wider range of intrinsically interesting epistemological topics that have sometimes been taken to have clear implications for atheism. Other topics that might have been taken up include: divination, expert disagreement, miracle reports, scripture, and superstition. Some of the topics in parts four and five could be considered both from the standpoint of metaphysics and from the standpoint of epistemology; assignment indicates merely where the weight of discussion in relevant chapters lies.

The sixth part—‘Ethics’—takes up some topics in ethics that have sometimes been taken to have clear implications for atheism: meta-ethics, meaning, normative scepticism, and virtue and flourishing. Other topics that might have been taken up in this part include: applied ethics, conscience, consequentialism, moral realism, normative ethics, and welfare.

The seventh part—‘Politics’—takes up some topics in political philosophy that have sometimes been taken to have clear implications for atheism: education, happiness, violence, and separation of church and state. Other topics that might have been taken up in this part

include: autonomy, conservatism, liberalism, and principles of justice. Some of the topics in parts six and seven could be considered both from the standpoint of ethics and from the standpoint of political philosophy; assignment indicates merely where the weight of discussion in relevant chapters lies.

The eighth part—‘Objections to Atheism’—looks at different kinds of objections to atheism: logical objections, evidential objections, normative objections and prudential objections. Some of the objections that are examined, if successful, would provide grounds for theism; other objections that are examined, if successful, might only provide grounds for agnosticism.

2. Characterisation of Atheism

The characterisation of atheism is much contested. I shall give my favoured account of the relevant vocabulary; I shall also discuss alternatives. It should be noted that no interpretation of terms was recommended to the contributing authors; all have used the relevant terms as they see fit.

Atheism is the claim that there are no gods. *Atheists* believe that there are no gods. *Atheistic worldviews* say—by direct inclusion or entailment—that there are no gods.

Theism is the claim that there is at least one god. *Theists* believe that there is at least one god.

Theistic worldviews say—by direct inclusion or entailment—that there is at least one god.

(Some monotheists say that God is not a god. Those who wish to speak this way should take appropriate disjunctive amendments as read: for example, atheists claim that there are no gods and there is no God. It is simpler *not* to talk this way. And talking in my preferred way

carries no implications about commonalities between God and other things: necessarily, if God exists, then there are no *other* gods.)

Agnosticism is suspension of judgment on the claim that there is at least one god. *Agnostics*, despite having given consideration to the question whether there is at least one god, neither believe that there is at least one god nor believe that there are no gods. *Agnostic worldviews* say neither that there is at least one god nor that there are no gods, despite saying other things about gods—e.g. that some people believe that there is at least one god.

Innocence is absence of acquaintance with the claim that there is at least one god. *Innocents* do not have any thoughts about gods; hence, in particular, innocents neither believe that there is at least one god nor believe that there are no gods. *Innocent worldviews* say nothing at all about gods, not even, for example, that some people believe that there is at least one god. In the typical case, innocents do not understand what it would be for something to be a god: they lack the concepts upon which such understanding depends. Examples of innocents include: human neonates, chimpanzees, humans with grievous brain injuries, and humans with advanced neurological disorders.

The fourfold classification—atheism, theism, agnosticism, innocence—instantiates a fourfold classification that applies to all propositions. For any proposition that *p*, there are those who believe that *p*, those who believe that not *p*, those who suspend judgment whether that *p*, and those who stand in no doxastic relationship to the proposition that *p*. Indeed, while the terms ‘atheism’ and ‘theism’ are keyed to the proposition that there are no gods, in other contexts the terms ‘agnosticism’ and ‘innocence’ can be broadly keyed to more or less any propositions. (Some may think that we need to add another term to cover those benighted

subjects who have conflicting attitudes towards a single proposition, for example, both believing that there are no gods and believing that there are gods. If we need a term, then ‘confusion’ will do as well as any. I shall ignore this case in the subsequent discussion.)

Some reject the fourfold classification on the grounds that talk about gods is meaningless: given that the claim that there are no gods is meaningless, there is no proposition whose belief is characteristic of atheism. But it is self-defeating to assert that *the claim that there are no gods is meaningless*: if what is asserted is meaningful, then it is false; and, if what is asserted isn’t meaningful, then it cannot be used to characterise a competing philosophical position. Moreover, there are many claims that we are all inclined to accept that would be meaningless if it were meaningless to say that there are no gods: *some people believe that there are gods; some people deny that there are gods; many people suppose that, if there are gods, then those gods do not belong to the Norse pantheon*; and so on. And, in any case, if talk about gods is meaningless, why not then say that the claim that there are gods is false? After all, if talk about gods is meaningless, then surely there are no gods!

There are many things that some people wish to load into the meaning of the term ‘atheism’: some require atheists to take themselves to *know* that there are no gods; some require atheists to take themselves to have *proof* that there are no gods; some require atheists to be *certain* that there are no gods; some require atheists to be absolutely *fixed* in their belief that there are no gods; some require atheists to *want* it to be the case that there are no gods; some require atheists to *care* whether there are gods; some require atheists to regard those who take different attitudes towards the proposition that there are no gods—theists and agnostics—as *irrational* and/or *unreflective* and/or *unintelligent* and/or *ill-informed*; and so on. Rather than load more into the term ‘atheist’—and into the terms ‘theist’ and ‘agnostic’—we do better to

remember that we can attach modifiers to these terms: atheists, agnostics and theists alike *can be* arrogant, dogmatic, ill-informed, irrational, superficial, unintelligent, and so forth.

There are many positions that, at least in some quarters, are routinely taken to be essential to atheism: some suppose that all atheists are committed to *materialism*, the view that there are none but material causal entities with none but material causal powers, where well-established science is our touchstone for identifying causal entities and causal powers; some suppose that all atheists are committed to *physicalism*, the view that there are none but physical causal entities with none but physical causal powers, where well-established physics is our touchstone for identifying causal entities and causal powers; some suppose that all atheists are committed to *naturalism*, the view that there are none but natural causal entities with none but natural causal powers, where well-established natural science is our touchstone for identifying causal entities and causal powers; some suppose that all atheists are committed to *scepticism*, the view that there is very little that we are rationally justified in believing (about, for example, the external world, other minds, the extent of the past, morality, modality, meaning, and so on); some suppose that all atheists are committed to *nihilism*, the view that nothing has any meaning or value; some suppose that all atheists are *fundamentalists* who take particular texts, teachings and ideologies to be true under strictly literal interpretation which grounds conservative insistence on the maintenance of ingroup/outgroup distinctions; some suppose that all atheists are *communists* who wish to establish a socioeconomic order in which there are no social classes, states or currencies and in which there is common ownership of the means of production; some suppose that all atheists are *fascists* who endorse radical nationalism premised on violent elimination of ‘decadent elements’, national reconstruction that reverses alleged decline, humiliation and victimisation, and valorisation of youth, masculinity and dictatorial charismatic leaders; some

suppose that all atheists are *antitheists* who hate gods; some suppose that all atheists are *religious zealots* who fail to recognise their own religiosity; and so on. I take it to be obvious that all of these generalisations are false. Some atheists are religious; some atheists are religious zealots; some atheists are fascists; some atheists are communists; some atheists are nihilists; some atheists are sceptics; some atheists are naturalists; some atheists are physicalists; and some atheists are materialists. But one can believe that there are no gods without being any of these things.

Some wish to distinguish different kinds of atheism; some distinguish between ‘strong’—‘hard’, ‘positive’—atheism and ‘weak’—‘soft’, ‘negative’—atheism. But, given that atheists can differ in all of the ways discussed in the preceding two paragraphs, and in many other ways as well, it is very hard to believe that any useful purpose could be served by stipulation of a context-independent distinction between strong atheism and weak atheism. In particular, it seems to me to be a mistake to use a distinction between strong atheism and weak atheism to subsume agnosticism under atheism: strong atheists reject the claim that there are gods, while weak atheists refrain from accepting the claim that there are gods. For, if we accept that there is this distinction between strong atheism and weak atheism, we should surely accept that there is a similar distinction between strong theism and weak theism: strong theists reject the claim that there are no gods, while weak theists merely refrain from accepting the claim that there are no gods. And then we shall have it that agnostics are both weak atheists and weak theists.

Some wish to treat ‘atheism’ as a context-sensitive term: one is or is not an atheist only relative to some contextually delimited class of gods. On this proposal, given appropriate contextual delimitation, pagan Romans can be strictly said to be atheists by believers in the

Christian God, and Christian Romans can be strictly said to be atheists by worshippers of the pagan gods. While there is a long history of use of the term ‘atheist’—and its equivalents in other languages—to denigrate or abuse those who do not accept the gods of the speaker, it is quite clear that the standard—though perhaps distinctively modern—application of the term is to those who, for every possible contextual delimitation of a class of gods, insist that there are no such gods. When contemporary census papers arrive with a list of checkboxes attached to a question about religious identification, the inclusion of both ‘ other’ and ‘ atheist’ on the list does *not* mark some kind of conceptual or linguistic confusion on the part of those who formulate the questions that are contained in the census.

Historical use of the term ‘atheist’—and its equivalents in other languages—throws up other challenges. In Western Europe, in the early modern period, it was a commonplace in some intellectual circles that there could not be reasoned, reflective, thoughtful rejection of the existence of the Christian God; there could not be ‘theoretical atheists’. Instead, according to the views maintained in those circles, there could only be ‘practical atheists’: those who, while well aware of the existence of the Christian God, acted as though the Christian God did not exist because of defects of character: pride, or greed, or sloth, or the like. (See Berman (1988: 2).) Much more recently, in some intellectual circles, a view has arisen that there cannot be reasoned, reflective, thoughtful acceptance of the existence of gods: there cannot be ‘theoretical theists’. Instead, according to the views maintained in those circles, there can only be ‘practical theists’: those who, while aware at some level that there are no gods, act as though there are gods because of defects of character: cowardice, or resentment, or self-loathing, or self-pity, or sentimentality, or servility, or the like. (See Rey (2007).) I do not think that any good comes from preserving ‘theoretical’/‘practical’ distinctions for atheism, theism and agnosticism in philosophical theorising.

3. Historical Considerations

Given that atheists are those who suppose that there are no gods, it is not easy to trace the historical contours of atheism. In most times and places, there has been serious risk attendant on denial of the existence of locally popular gods. In most times and place, if there have been atheists, they have had good prudential reasons to keep their view to themselves. While, as we have already noted, accusing others of atheism has been a popular pastime throughout recorded history, it is typically impossible to determine whether those at whom the accusations are directed believe that there are no gods rather than merely believing that the locally popular gods do not exist.

There are ancient candidates for atheism. It seems plausible that the Cārvākas were atheists; it seems very likely that Ajita Kesakambali was an atheist. This case aside, it is hard to find any uncontroversial cases of atheism prior to its appearance in Western Europe in the late seventeenth or early eighteenth century. While claims have been made for Diagoras of Melos, Wang Chong, and Abu-L-Ala al-Ma'arri, among others, the best that can be said, I think, is that we cannot be sure. However, it is likely that Matthias Knutzen and Kazimierz Łyszczyński were atheists; and it uncontroversial that Jean Meslier was an atheist. Knutzen is reported to have published three atheist tracts in Jena in 1674, after which he vanished into history; Łyszczyński is reported to have been beheaded in Warsaw in 1689 for his authorship of a treatise on the non-existence of God; and Meslier, who died in 1729, certainly authored a posthumously circulated *Testament* in which he defends atheism, materialism, hedonism, anarchism, and internationalism.

It is an interesting question why atheism became visible in public in Western Europe at the time that it did. In the 1660s, in England, repeated public affirmation of atheism was a capital offence; in the 1770s, authors in England started to put their own names to atheist publications. I suspect that the eventual emergence of public atheism was the conclusion of a very long slow burn that can be traced back to the beginnings of the second millennium.

From the eleventh century until the Reformation, there were localised agitations for reform of Church and clergy, by, for example, Patarines, Bogomils, Waldensians, Cathars, Dulcinians, Lollards, and Hussites; these were typically terminated with extreme prejudice by Church-backed nobility, leaving longstanding enmities as their legacies. In the Church schools, there was a significant broadening of curriculum that began with the reception of ancient texts preserved in the Islamic world and continued with the emergence of Renaissance humanism. More broadly, the aftermath of the Black Death, the Western Schism, the rise of professional armies, and the associated rise of proto-nationalism all contributed to a redistribution of political power away from the nobility and the Church and towards ruling monarchs. The Reformation, Council of Trent and Counter Reformation triggered a bloodbath that engulfed much of Western Europe; the Westphalian treaties established a new political order based on national self-determination. Given the role that religious differences played in the bloodbath, many intellectuals came to question organised religion; deism, inaugurated by Herbert of Cherbury, became firmly established in many intellectual circles. From Copernicus to Newton, there was an enormous flowering of scientific advances that encouraged confidence in the power of human beings to understand and improve the world without religious assistance, and, in some cases, despite religious resistance. The European circumnavigation of the globe, and the subsequent centuries of European colonisation brought knowledge of the diversity of human religious and social practices to European thinkers, and provoked serious

questions about the universality of European religion. In the shadows of the European wars of religion, other intellectuals joined deists in supporting calls for religious toleration, secular states, public education, penal reform and the abolition of slavery. The lack of enthusiasm for all of these things on the part of the Churches raised new questions for a wider public about the moral authority of those Churches. While, in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, Church-backed states still had enough public support for brutal suppression of atheism—as in the case of Łyszczyński—the balance of public opinion swung sufficiently in the middle part of the eighteenth century to allow atheists to feel confident that they would not be put to death by the state merely for affirmation of their opinions. And, in upper class circles, d’Holbach’s coterie did much to establish the respectability of atheism as an intellectual option across most of Western Europe. Of course, this account is hopelessly brief and superficial. However, there must be some way of filling it out that explains the flowering of atheism—and agnosticism, and freethought more broadly—in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The period between the French Revolution and the First World War has often been described as a golden age for atheism, agnosticism and freethought in the global West. It is worth listing some of the nineteenth century atheists and freethinkers who made notable contributions to the development and promotion of atheism and atheistic worldviews: Francis Abbott (1836-1903), Robert Adams (1839-1892), Jane Addams (1860- 1935), Matthilde Anneke (1817-1884), Mikhael Bakunin (1814-1876), John Ballance (1831-1893), Bruno Bauer (1809-1882) Frank Baum (1856-1919), Derobigne Bennett (1818-1882), Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832), Vissarian Berlinskii (1811-1848), Lillie Blake (1833-1913), Hypatia Bonner (1858-1935), Charles Bradlaugh (1833- 1891), Georg Brandes (1842-1927), George Brown (1858-1915), Ludwig Büchner (1824-1899), Georg Büchner (1813-1837), Richard

Carlile (1790-1843), Lydia Child (1802-1880), Samuel Clemens (1835-1910), William Collins (1853-1923), Auguste Comte (1798-1857), Moncure Conway (1882-1907), Viroqua Daniels (1859-1942), Voltairine De Cleyre (1866-1912), Eduard Dekker (1820-1887) Frederick Douglass (1818-1895), Emile Durkheim (1858-1917), Friedrich Engels (1820-1895), Marian Evans ('George Eliot') (1819-1880), Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872), Edward Foote (1829-1906), Edward Foote (1854-1912), Helen Gardener (1853-1925), Ella Gibson (1821-1901), Charlotte Gilman (1860-1935), William Godwin (1756-1836), Emma Goldman (1869-1940), John Gott (1866-1923), Ernst Haeckel (1834-1919), Lillian Harmon (1869-1925), Moses Harmon (1830-1910), Karl Hartmann (1842-1906), Josephine Henry (1846-1928), Henry Hetherington (1792-1849), Ezra Heywood (1829-1893), Julian Hibbert (1801-1834), Austin Holyoake (1826-1874), George Holyoake (1817-1906), William Hone (1780-1842), Elbert Hubbard (1856-1915), Jacob Ilive (1705-1763), Charles James (1846-1911), Abner Kneeland (1774-1844), Charles Knowlton (1800-1850), Mattie Krekel (1840-1921), Pëtr Kropotkin (1842-1921), Harriet Law (1831-1897), Henry Lea (1825-1909), Émile Littré (1801-1881), Alfred Loisy (1857-1919), George MacDonald (1857-1937), Emma Martin (1812-1851), Harriet Martineau (1802-1876), Karl Marx (1818-1883), Josiah Mendum (1811-1891), Chilton Moore (1837-1906), Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), Benjamin Offen (1771-1848), Robert Owen (1771-1858), Robert Owen (1801-1877), Hugh Pentecost (1848-1907), Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1809-1865); Samuel Putnam (1838-1896), Charles Reynolds (1832-1896), Marilla Ricker (1842-1920), John Robertson (1856-1933), Charles Robinson (1818-1894), Ernestine Rose (1810-1891), Horace Seaver (1810-1889), Etta Semple (1855-1914), Juliet Severance (1833-1919), Eliza Sharples (1805?-1852), Percy Shelley (1792-1822), Elmina Slenker (1827-1908), Katie Smith (1868-1895), Charles Southwell (1814-1860), Elizabeth Stanton (1815-1902), Max Stirner (1806-1856), Robert Stout (1844-1930), David Strauss (1808-1874), Joseph Symes (1841-1906), Robert Taylor (1784-1844),

Benjamin Underwood (1839-1914), Lois Waisbrooker (1826-1909), Thaddeus Wakeman (1834-1913), Thomas Walker (1858-1932), Lemuel Washburn (1846-1927) James Watson (1799-1874), Charles Watts Sr. (1836-1906), Charles Watts Jr. (1858-1946), Kate Watts (1849-1924), John Watts (1834-1866), Max Weber (1864-1920), Richard Westbrook (1820-1899), Joseph Wheeler (1850-1898), Walt Whitman (1819- 1892), William Whittick (1847-1897), Susan Wixon (c.1850-1912), Thomas Wooler (1786-1853), Elizur Wright (1804-1885), and Frances Wright (1795-1852). Among these figures, there were abolitionists, anarchists, bible critics, birth control advocates, church-state separatists, editors, entertainers, feminists, journalists, novelists, pamphleteers, poets, politicians, publishers, sex educators, sex radicals, social reformers, suffragettes, and writers. All were engaged, in one way or another, in the broad project of developing atheistic worldviews and figuring out ways to live consistent with those atheistic worldviews.

The contrast between the period prior to 1770 and the period after 1770 is stark. When Hume dined with Holbach's coterie, he asked his host whether he knew of anyone who was genuinely an atheist, and was quite surprised to learn that he was in the presence of more than a dozen people who self-identified as atheists. Within a few short decades, there were significant numbers of people *openly* self-identifying as atheists across significant sectors of society, and—in most of Western Europe—those who did so were not made to fear for their lives in consequence, though, for quite some time, many were still made to worry about their public reputations.

4. Objections to Atheism

According to Psalms 14:1, 'The Fool says in his heart "There is no God". They are corrupt, they do abominable deeds, there is none that does good'. Many common stereotypes of atheists agree with the Psalmist. Widely shared stereotypical beliefs about atheists and atheism include all of the following:

- Atheists are irrational
- Atheists are ignorant
- Atheists are immoral
- Atheists are horrible
- Atheists are untrustworthy
- Atheists are criminals
- Atheists have no values
- Atheists do not believe in anything
- Atheists are selfish
- Atheists are unhappy
- Atheists hate God
- Atheists are sexually deviant
- Atheists are physically unhealthy
- Atheists have low life expectancy
- Atheists are fundamentalists
- Atheists are political ideologues
- Atheists are anti-religion
- Atheism is just another religion
- Atheism is unliveable
- Atheism is self-defeating
- Atheism is defeated by logic

- Atheism is defeated by evidence
- Atheism is defeated by evaluative considerations
- Atheism is defeated by pragmatic considerations

Many of these claims are open to empirical investigation. However, until very recently, most relevant social scientific research has focussed on those who fail to believe that there are gods rather than on those who believe that there are no gods. Nonetheless, it seems fairly safe to say that, to the extent that these stereotypes have been subject to empirical investigation, the results of that research show (a) that these stereotypes are broadly accepted, even, in some cases, by atheists themselves, but (b) that there is no unambiguous empirical support for these stereotypes. While it is true, for example, that atheists are widely perceived to be less trustworthy than their religious peers, there is no evidence that atheists are more deserving of distrust than those religious peers.

Of course, not all of the claims listed above are decidable by merely social scientific investigation. Questions about rationality, morality, and defeat are, at least in part, normative questions. Insofar as stereotypical claims about atheists are expressions of normative and ideological commitments, those claims are immensely controversial. Some—e.g. the claim that atheists are fundamentalists and the claim that atheism is just another religion—are, at best, products of conceptual confusion: no one who understands what religion and fundamentalism are could possibly endorse these claims. Others—e.g. the claim that atheism is self-defeating, or defeated by logic, or by evidence, or by evaluative considerations, or by pragmatic considerations—are properly philosophical, and the subject of extensive, on-going dispute.

The stereotypical beliefs about atheists listed above are given detailed critical examination in Blackford and Schuklenk (2013) and Oppy (2018).

5. Arguing about Atheism

Argument about the existence of gods has occupied a central position in recent philosophy of religion. It is controversial whether argument about the existence of gods *ought* to occupy this central position in philosophy of religion. It is not controversial that philosophy of religion should be interested in worldview differences about religious matters. But whether an interest in worldview differences about religious matters ought to manifest in scrutiny of arguments about the existence of gods is much less clear.

If we understand ‘argument’ in the technical sense that is common in recent philosophy of religion—according to which an argument is a collection of propositions, one of which is distinguished as conclusion and the rest are identified as premises—then it is doubtful that philosophy of religion ought to be focussed on arguments for claims that are contested across worldviews. In particular, if we understand ‘argument’ in the technical sense that is common in recent philosophy of religion, then it is doubtful that arguments about the existence of gods should occupy a central position in philosophy of religion.

Of course, if we understand ‘argument’ in a more everyday sense—according to which any contribution to debate about worldview differences counts as provision of an argument—then, as noted above, it is not controversial that philosophy of religion should be centrally interested in arguments concerning worldview differences about religious matters. But, even in this more everyday sense, it is not clear that philosophy of religion should be centrally

preoccupied with arguments about the existence of gods. Disagreement about which, if any, gods there are is only a small part of disagreement between worldviews: worldviews that agree that there are no gods disagree about an enormous range of other matters, as do worldviews that agree about which gods there are.

One important consequence of the points just made is that, when we compare particular atheistic worldviews with particular theistic worldviews, we should not get too hung up on the fact that there is disagreement between these worldviews on the question whether there are gods. Of course, given that we are comparing theistic and atheistic worldviews, there is disagreement on that question; but, when we construct detailed elaborations of these worldviews, we may well find that it is both more interesting and more profitable to devote attention to the many other claims upon which they disagree.

There is not much that is entailed by the claim that there are no gods. In particular, there are few, if any, substantive metaphysical, or epistemological, or ethical, or political propositions that are entailed by the claim that there are no gods. Consequently, there is not much that atheists are committed to merely by their endorsement of the claim that there are no gods.

What atheists are committed to depends entirely upon the further claims that they accept. In order to argue for atheism (in the everyday sense of ‘argue’)—or to make informed criticism of atheism—we need to make a study of carefully articulated atheistic worldviews: we need to spell out the metaphysical, epistemological, ethical, political and practical commitments of particular atheistic worldviews. When we make our arguments for—or give our criticisms of—atheistic worldviews, what we are primarily interested in is assessing whether there are carefully articulated theistic worldviews that are better—more virtuous—than the atheistic worldviews up for consideration. If we make a fair and thorough weighing, and come to the

conclusion that the best atheistic worldviews are more virtuous than the best theistic worldviews, then there is no further question about our entitlement to the belief that there are no gods. If we make a fair and thorough weighing, and come to the conclusion that the best theistic worldviews are more virtuous than the best atheistic worldviews, then there is no further question about our entitlement to the belief that there are gods. And if we make a fair and thorough weighing, and come to the conclusion that it is neither the case that the best atheistic worldviews are more virtuous than the best theistic worldviews nor the case that the best theistic worldviews are more virtuous than the best atheistic worldviews, then there is no further question about our entitlement to suspension of belief on the question whether there are gods.

It does not follow from what I have just said that there can be no role for arguments (in the technical sense common in recent philosophy of religion) in the assessment of the virtues of worldviews. We might use arguments—derivations—to show that worldviews have commitments that have hitherto been unrecognised; in particular, we might use them to show that worldviews harbour hitherto unrecognised contradictions. But, if we are using arguments for either of these purposes, it must be that the premises of those arguments all belong to the worldview under assessment. A worldview is not impugned merely by the fact that it is committed to claims that are denied in competing worldviews. Moreover, worldviews are not impugned merely by the fact that, for all we know so far, those worldviews do, in fact, harbour contradictions. Those who claim that there are arguments that impugn particular worldviews or types of worldviews should put up or shut up: if you cannot derive a contradiction from claims all of which belong to a given worldview, then you have no argument (in the technical sense common in recent philosophy of religion) against that worldview.

For further discussion of the issues hinted at in this section, see Oppy (2015).