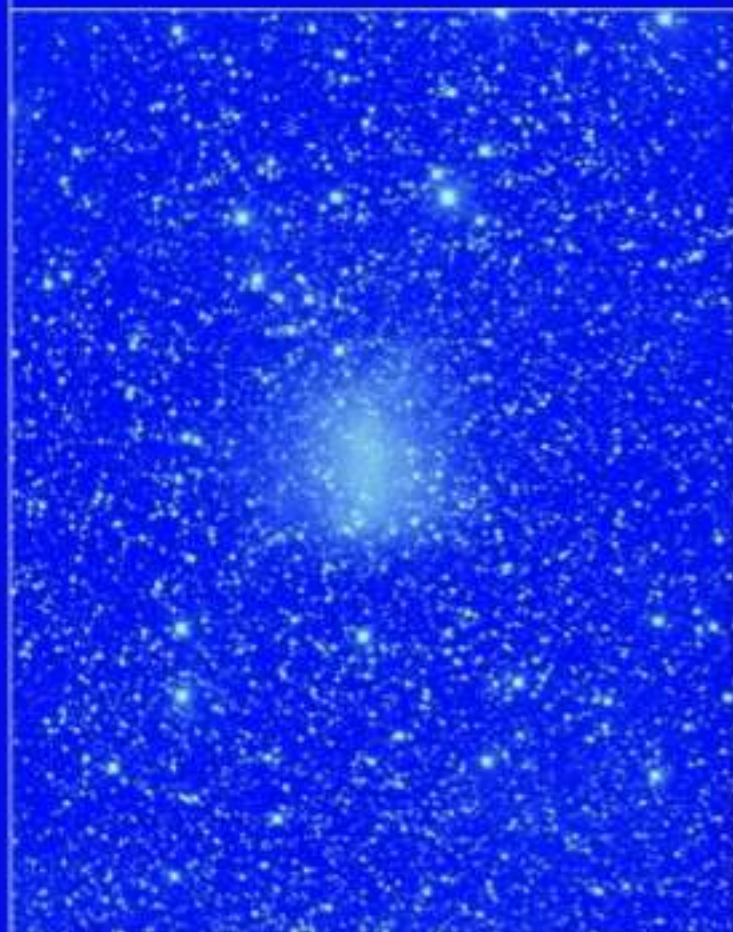


*The  
Cambridge Companion  
to*

# ATHEISM



EDITED BY  
**MICHAEL MARTIN**

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THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO  
**ATHEISM**

In *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism*, eighteen of the world's leading scholars present original essays on various aspects of atheism: its history, both ancient and modern, defense, and implications. The topic is examined in terms of its implications for a wide range of disciplines, including philosophy, religion, feminism, postmodernism, sociology, and psychology. In its defense, both classical and contemporary theistic arguments are criticized, and the argument from evil and impossibility arguments, along with a non-religious basis for morality, are defended. These essays give a broad understanding of atheism and a lucid introduction to this controversial topic.

Michael Martin is Professor of Philosophy Emeritus at Boston University. He is the author of more than 150 articles and reviews as well as several books, including *Atheism, Morality and Meaning*; *The Impossibility of God* (with Ricki Monnier) and *Atheism: A Philosophical Justification*.



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*The Cambridge Companion to*  
**ATHEISM**

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Edited by Michael Martin  
*Boston University*



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## CONTENTS

<i>Contributors</i>	<i>page</i> ix
<i>Preface</i>	xiii
<i>Glossary</i>	xv
<i>General Introduction</i>	I
<b>Part I Background</b>	
1 <i>Atheism in Antiquity</i> JAN N. BREMMER	II
2 <i>Atheism in Modern History</i> GAVIN HYMAN	27
3 <i>Atheism: Contemporary Numbers and Patterns</i> PHIL ZUCKERMAN	47
<b>Part II The Case against Theism</b>	
4 <i>Theistic Critiques of Atheism</i> WILLIAM LANE CRAIG	69
5 <i>The Failure of Classical Theistic Arguments</i> RICHARD M. GALE	86
6 <i>Some Contemporary Theistic Arguments</i> KEITH PARSONS	102
7 <i>Naturalism and Physicalism</i> EVAN FALES	118
8 <i>Atheism and Evolution</i> DANIEL C. DENNETT	135
9 <i>The Autonomy of Ethics</i> DAVID O. BRINK	149



10	<i>The Argument from Evil</i> ANDREA M. WEISBERGER	166
11	<i>Kalam Cosmological Arguments for Atheism</i> QUENTIN SMITH	182
12	<i>Impossibility Arguments</i> PATRICK GRIM	199
<b>Part III Implications</b>		
13	<i>Atheism and Religion</i> MICHAEL MARTIN	217
14	<i>Feminism and Atheism</i> CHRISTINE OVERALL	233
15	<i>Atheism and the Freedom of Religion</i> STEVEN G. GEY	250
16	<i>Atheism, A/theology, and the Postmodern Condition</i> JOHN D. CAPUTO	267
17	<i>Anthropological Theories of Religion</i> STEWART E. GUTHRIE	283
18	<i>Atheists: A Psychological Profile</i> BENJAMIN BEIT-HALLAHMI	300
	<i>Index</i>	319

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## PREFACE

It has been a distinct honor to edit *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism*. To help bring to fruition a volume of original essays published by one of world's great university presses on one of the world's most controversial topics was an unforgettable and thrilling experience. I am grateful to Andy Beck, my editor at Cambridge University Press, who offered me the job as editor and who was patient and willing to answer my questions. I am deeply beholden to the seventeen other contributors to this volume whose essays provide novel insights to various aspects of atheism. It was a pleasure to work with them.

My wife, Jane Roland Martin, provided warm encouragement and wise advice. In addition, many nonbelieving friends and colleagues provided their support and help. In particular, I would like to thank my friend and fellow collaborator on other books on atheism, Dr. Ricki Monnier, whose encyclopedic knowledge on things atheistic was an enormous help and inspiration. I am also grateful to Dr. Tyler Wunder for his comments on chapter 6 and Dr. Wiebke Denecke for her comments on chapter 13.



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## GLOSSARY

For further definitions of the terms found in the volume, see Robert Audi (ed.), *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), and Bill Cooke (ed.), *Dictionary of Atheism, Skepticism, and Humanism* (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 2005).

- a posteriori argument:** an argument based on experience. *See also* teleological argument
- a priori argument:** an argument not based on experience. *See also* impossibility argument; ontological argument
- Anselmian conception of God:** the view attributed to St. Anselm that God is a being such that no greater being can be conceived
- anthropomorphism:** the ascription of human traits to God
- apostasy:** disaffection, defection, alienation, disengagement, or disaffiliation from a religious group
- argument from design.** *See* teleological argument
- argument from evil:** an argument that purports to show that the existence of evil is either incompatible with the existence of God or makes God's existence improbable. *See also* problem of evil
- argument from indexicals:** a type of impossibility argument that maintains that, although allegedly all-knowing, God cannot have certain knowledge expressed in indexicals. *See also* indexical
- argument from miracles:** an argument that purports to show that the existence of God is the most plausible explanation of miracles. *See also* miracle
- argument from religious experience:** an argument that purports to show that the existence of God or other supernatural beings provides the best explanation of religious experience. *See also* mystical experience; religious experience
- autonomy of ethics:** the view that ethics is not based on theology. *Cf.* divine command theory. *See also* ethical naturalism
- Big Bang cosmology:** a theory that holds that the universe originated approximately 15 billion years ago from the violent explosion of a very small agglomeration of matter of extremely high density and temperature. *See also* Kalam cosmological argument for atheism; Kalam cosmological argument for God



- cancellation agnosticism:** the view that the arguments for and against belief in God are equally strong and cancel each other out. *Cf.* skeptical agnosticism
- clairvoyance:** the power to see objects or events that cannot be perceived by the senses. *See also* paranormal phenomena
- cosmological argument:** an argument that seeks to give a causal explanation of why some universe exists
- deism:** the view that God created the world and then had no further interaction with it; also, a view of God based on reason and not revelation. *Cf.* pantheism; theism
- devas:** the finite and impermanent gods described by some Eastern religions
- divine command theory:** the theory that ethical propositions are based on what God commands. *Cf.* autonomy of ethics; ethical naturalism. *See also* voluntarism
- eliminative materialism:** the view that despite appearances, there are no mental entities or processes. *Cf.* reductive materialism
- empiricism:** the theory that all knowledge is based on experience. *Cf.* rationalism
- epicureanism:** a leading Hellenistic philosophical school that advocated an atomistic metaphysics and a hedonistic ethics
- epistemological naturalism:** the thesis that the supernatural lies beyond the scope of what we can know, hence theology is rejected as a source of knowledge
- epistemology:** the theory of knowledge
- ethical naturalism:** the theory that the ethical properties of situations depend on the nature of those situations. *Cf.* divine command theory. *See also* autonomy of ethics
- Euthyphro problem:** a dilemma posed in the Platonic dialogue *The Euthyphro* and used as a critique of religiously based ethics. *See also* autonomy of ethics; divine command theory; voluntarism
- fine-tuning argument:** a teleological argument based on the alleged improbability that the fundamental physical constants in the universe are compatible with life. *See also* teleological argument
- free-will defense:** the response to the argument from evil that evil is the result of free will and cannot be blamed on God. *See also* argument from evil; theodicy
- impossibility argument:** an a priori argument against the existence of God that purports to show that the concept of God is inconsistent. *See also* argument from indexicals; paradox of the stone
- indexical:** a type of expression whose meaning varies with the context; e.g., "I," "here," "now." *See also* argument from indexicals
- intelligent design theory:** a theory that does not reject Darwin's theory completely but maintains that evolution needs to be explained in terms of the working out of some intelligent design
- Kalam cosmological argument for atheism:** an argument that purports to show that according to the latest scientific cosmology, the origin of

- the universe is incompatible with the existence of God. *Cf.* Kalam cosmological argument for god
- Kalam cosmological argument for God:** an argument that maintains that the most plausible explanation for the universe coming into being is that God brought it into existence. *Cf.* Leibniz cosmological argument
- knowledge by acquaintance:** knowledge based on direct experience. *Cf.* propositional knowledge
- Leibniz cosmological argument:** an argument attributed to Leibniz that the whole series of contingent beings that make up the universe requires an external cause that is not contingent but necessary and that this cause is God
- logical positivism:** a philosophical movement in Anglo-American philosophy in the 1930s and '40s advocating the rejection of metaphysics because it is unverifiable and hence meaningless. Both belief in God and disbelief in God are thought to be meaningless. *See also* metaphysics; negative atheism
- metaphysics:** the philosophical investigation of the nature, composition, and structure of ultimate reality
- miracle:** an event that is not explainable by laws of nature known or unknown. *See also* argument from miracles
- modus ponens:** the argument form: If A, then B; A therefore B
- modus tollens:** the argument form: If A, then B; not-B therefore not-A
- mystical experience:** religious experience that transcends ordinary sense perception and purports to be a direct experience of ultimate reality
- naturalism:** the view that everything that exists is composed of natural entities and processes that can in principle be studied by science
- naturalized epistemology:** an approach that views human beings as natural entities and uses the methods of science to study epistemological processes; sometimes considered a branch of cognitive science
- negative atheism:** absence of belief in any god or gods. More narrowly conceived, it is the absence of belief in the theistic God. *Cf.* positive atheism. *See also* logical positivism
- neo-Darwinian theory:** a synthesis of Darwin's theory and genetic theory
- Occam's razor:** a methodological principle advocating simplicity in theory construction
- omnibenevolence:** the property attributed to God of being all good
- omnipotence:** the property attributed to God of being all powerful
- omniscience:** the property attributed to God of being all knowing
- ontological argument:** an a priori argument that maintains that God's existence is true by definition
- ontology.** *See* metaphysics
- out-of-body experiences:** the experience of floating free of one's body; used by believers as evidence of an immaterial soul
- pantheism:** the view that God is identical with nature. *Cf.* deism; theism

- paradox of the stone:** if God can make a stone that he cannot lift, he is not all-powerful; but if he cannot make such a stone, he is also not all-powerful. *See also* impossibility argument
- paranormal phenomena:** phenomena such as ESP, clairvoyance, and psychokinesis that at the present time are unexplainable in terms of science
- physicalism:** the claim that minds are not distinct from matter and hence cannot exist apart from it. *See also* reductive materialism; supervenience theory
- polytheism:** the view that there are many gods
- positive atheism:** disbelief in any God or gods. More narrowly conceived, it is disbelief in the theistic God. *Cf.* negative atheism
- postmodernism:** a complex set of reactions to modern philosophy and its assumption that typically opposes foundationalism, fixed binary categories that describe rigorously separable regions, and essentialism and affirms a radical and irreducible pluralism
- problem of evil:** the problem of why there appears to be gratuitous evil although God is all-powerful and all-good. *See also* argument from evil
- procedural knowledge:** knowing how to do something. *Cf.* knowledge by acquaintance; propositional knowledge
- propositional knowledge:** factual knowledge that something is, was, or will be the case. *Cf.* knowledge by acquaintance; procedural knowledge
- psychokinesis:** the ability to affect physical objects without physical contact by using powers of the mind
- rationalism:** the theory that reason is the primary source of knowledge. *Cf.* empiricism
- reductive materialism:** the theory that mental states and processes are identical with brain states and processes. *Cf.* eliminative materialism; supervenience theory
- religious experience:** a wide variety of experiences, such as hearing voices and having visions, of supernatural beings such as God, angels, and Satan
- skeptical agnosticism:** the rejection of both belief and disbelief in God because there are no good arguments for or against such belief. *Cf.* cancellation agnosticism
- Sophists:** a group of itinerant teachers of rhetoric and philosophy in ancient Greece
- supervenience theory:** the theory that when a certain physical state obtains, so does a certain mental state. *Cf.* eliminative materialism; reductive materialism
- teleological argument:** an argument for the existence of God based on the apparent design and order in the universe. Also called the argument from design. *See also* fine-tuning argument. *Cf.* cosmological argument

- theism:** belief in an omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent, personal God who created the universe, takes an active interest in the world, and has given a special revelation to humans. *Cf.* deism
- theodicy:** a theory attempting to explain the problem of evil and answer the argument from evil. *See also* argument from evil; free-will defense
- verificationism:** the theory that the meaning of a statement consists in its method(s) of verification; usually associated with logical positivism
- voluntarism:** the view that something's being good depends on God's will. *See also* Euthyphro problem



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# General Introduction

The purpose of this volume is to provide general readers and advanced students with an introduction to atheism: its history, present social context, legal implications, supporting arguments, implications for morality, and relation to other perspectives. This general introduction will set the stage for the chapters that follow.

## ATHEISM, AGNOSTICISM, AND THEISM

The concept of atheism was developed historically in the context of Western monotheistic religions, and it still has its clearest application in this area. Applied, for example, to premodern non-Western contexts, the concept may be misleading. Moreover, even in the modern Western context "atheism" has meant different things depending on changing conceptions of God. Nevertheless, it will be assumed in this volume that, if applied cautiously outside its clearest historical context, the concept of atheism can be illuminating for contemporary Western readers.

If you look up "atheism" in a dictionary, you will find it defined as the belief that there is no God. Certainly, many people understand "atheism" in this way. Yet this is not what the term means if one considers it from the point of view of its Greek roots. In Greek "a" means "without" or "not," and "theos" means "god."<sup>1</sup> From this standpoint, an atheist is someone without a belief in God; he or she need not be someone who believes that God does not exist.<sup>2</sup> Still, there is a popular dictionary meaning of "atheism" according to which an atheist is not simply one who holds no belief in the existence of a God or gods but is one who believes that there is no God or gods. This dictionary use of the term should not be overlooked. To avoid confusion, let us call it *positive atheism* and let us call the type of atheism derived from the original Greek roots *negative atheism*.

No general definition of "God" will be attempted here,<sup>3</sup> but it will prove useful to distinguish a number of different concepts of God that have figured in the traditional controversies and debates about religion. In modern times "theism" has usually come to mean a belief in

a personal God who takes an active interest in the world and who has given a special revelation to humans. So understood, theism stands in contrast to deism, the belief in a God that is based not on revelation but on evidence from nature. The God assumed by deists is usually considered to be remote from the world and not intimately involved with its concerns. Theism is also to be contrasted with polytheism, the belief in more than one God, and with pantheism, the belief that God is identical with nature.

Negative atheism in the broad sense<sup>4</sup> is then the absence of belief in any god or Gods, not just the absence of belief in a personal theistic God, and negative atheism in the narrow sense is the absence of belief in a theistic God. Positive atheism in the broad sense is, in turn, disbelief in all gods, with positive atheism in the narrow sense being the disbelief in a theistic God. For positive atheism in the narrow sense to be successfully defended, two tasks must be accomplished. First, the reasons for believing in a theistic God must be refuted; in other words, negative atheism in the narrow sense must be established. Second, reasons for disbelieving in the theistic God must be given.

These categories should not be allowed to mask the complexity and variety of positions that atheists can hold, for a given individual can take different atheistic positions with respect to different concepts of God. Thus, a person might maintain that there is good reason to suppose that anthropomorphic gods such as Zeus do not exist and therefore be a positive atheist with respect to Zeus and similar gods. However, he or she could, for example, be only a negative atheist with respect to Paul Tillich's God.<sup>5</sup> In addition, people can and often do hold different atheistic positions with respect to different conceptions of a theistic God. For example, someone could be a positive atheist with respect to Aquinas' God and only a negative atheist with respect to St. Teresa's God.

Agnosticism, the position of neither believing nor disbelieving that God exists, is often contrasted with atheism. However, this common opposition of agnosticism to atheism is misleading. Agnosticism and positive atheism are indeed incompatible: if atheism is true, agnosticism is false and conversely. But agnosticism is compatible with negative atheism in that agnosticism *entails* negative atheism. Since agnostics do not believe in God, they are by definition negative atheists. This is not to say that negative atheism entails agnosticism. A negative atheist *might* disbelieve in God but need not.

Elsewhere I have evaluated the main arguments for agnosticism.<sup>6</sup> Here I will explore what is at issue between positive atheism and agnosticism. An agnostic, one might suppose, is skeptical that good grounds exist, whereas an atheist is not. However, this is not the only way the

difference between these positions can be construed. An agnostic might think that there are good grounds for disbelieving that God exists but *also* believe that there are equally good grounds for believing that God exists. These opposing reasons would offset one another, leaving no overall positive reason to believe or disbelieve.

Let us call the view that there are no good reasons for believing that God exists and none for believing that God does not exist skeptical agnosticism and the view that there are equally good reasons for believing both theism and atheism that offset one another cancellation agnosticism.

Arguments that are intended to establish both negative and positive atheism refute both skeptical and cancellation agnosticism. Showing that negative atheism is justified undermines cancellation agnosticism, for it assumes that both atheism and theism have good grounds that cancel each other out, and negative atheism entails that there are no good grounds for theistic belief. Moreover, arguments showing that there are good grounds for the nonexistence of God undermine skeptical agnosticism since skeptical agnosticism assumes that there are no good grounds for either atheism or theism.

#### BACKGROUND, THE CASE AGAINST THEISM, AND IMPLICATIONS

Atheism has a long and distinguished history as several of the background chapters in this volume attest. Jan Bremmer in "Atheism in Antiquity" argues, on the one hand, that the Greeks discovered theoretical atheism, which some scholars maintain is one of the most important events in the history of religion. On the other hand, Bremmer maintains, "Greeks and Romans, pagans and Christians, soon discovered the utility of the term 'atheist' as a means to label opponents. The invention of atheism would open a new road to intellectual freedom, but also enabled people to label opponents in a new way. Progress rarely comes without a cost." Gavin Hyman in "Atheism in Modern History" outlines the development of atheistic thought in the Western world, arguing that atheism and modernity are so linked that modernity seems almost necessarily to culminate in atheism. He concluded that we can be sure of one thing: "the fate of atheism would seem to be inescapably bound up with the fate of modernity." And Paul Zuckerman in "Atheism: Contemporary Numbers and Patterns" brings together a vast amount of data on the number and distribution of atheists throughout the world. Among other things, he shows that atheists make up a significant portion of the world's population, that nonbelief tends to be associated with social health, and that the pattern and distribution of atheists in the world calls into question the now fashionable theory that belief in God is innate.



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