What is atheism? Although much used in contemporary language, not many people specify what they mean by the word. ‘Atheism’ has this in common with ‘religion’, at least.

Everyone reading William James’ (1842-1910) seminal 1902 book *The Varieties of Religious Experience* will be impressed by the huge variety of religious ideas. Nevertheless, that variety is to a considerable extent caused by James’ very broad conception of religion, Jamesian ‘religion’ encompasses all the fundamental visions of life, including political, ideological and philosophical stances. Such a view is popular among those who approach religion from a psychological or sociological perspective, as James did. We clearly detect this view in James’s definition of religion as “the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine.” (*The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, Penguin edition, p.31.)

What James called ‘Emersonian optimism’ or ‘Buddhist pessimism’ also betrays a relation to the divine, so these positions are ‘religions’, according to his definition:

“We must therefore, from the experiential point of view, call these godless or quasi-godless creeds ‘religions’; and accordingly when in our definition of religion we speak of the individual’s relation to ‘what he considers the divine,’ we must interpret the term ‘divine’ very broadly, as denoting any object that is godlike, whether it be a concrete deity or not.” (p.34.)

This brought James to a conception of religion as “man’s total reaction upon life.” (p.35.)

What James’ Definition Implies for Atheism

What does that imply for atheism? The result is clear: if atheism means ‘opposition to religion’, it means the complete vanishing of atheism from the world. James approvingly quotes a colleague of his who had talked about a student “who was manifesting a fine atheistic ardor... He believes in No-God, and he worships him.” (p.35.) Believing in ‘No-God’ and worshipping him? Is that possible? Although a bit “inconvenient”, James wrote that this characterization of the student was defensible on “logical grounds”.

Characterizing atheism or non-belief as a special kind of belief has become widespread. Roger Scruton, for example, speaks about “cults like football, sacrificial offerings like Princess Diana and improvised saints like Linda McCartney.” (*Gentle Regrets: Thoughts from a Life*, 2005, p. 232.) The historically recent orientation on human rights is characterized by Scruton as “the new secular religion of human rights.”

A religion? In issuing the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 did the United Nations become some kind of religious organization? Following James’ semantic strategy would rule out not only ‘atheism’, but also ‘secularization’. The “new secular religion of human rights” would actually be a rejection of the secularization thesis.

Although everyone, following Humpty Dumpty, may choose the meaning of his words according to his own purposes, we might question the wisdom of this inflationary approach to the concept of ‘religion’. Would it not be better to reserve this word for an orientation toward some ‘transcendent reality’? Then atheism is not a religion, but the absence of religion. In particular, atheism is atheism: it is the rejection of the *theist* creed, which in particular means the monotheistic conception of God, ie ‘God’. (I will use the words ‘theism’ and ‘monotheism’ interchangeably here.)

A Limited Concept of Atheism: Rejecting Monotheism

We find this more limited definition of religion implied in authors such as Ernest Nagel (1901-1985). Nagel puts it as follows in his ‘A Defense of Atheism’ (1957): “I shall understand by ‘atheism’ a critique and a denial of the major claims of all varieties of theism.” Monotheism is the view which holds that the “heavens and the earth and all that they contain owe their existence and continuance in existence to the wisdom and will of a supreme, self-consistent, omnipotent, omniscient, righteous and benevolent being, who is distinct from, and independent of, what he has created”, says Nagel, quoting Robert Flint, Professor of Divinity at the University of Edinburgh. So an atheist is
someone who denies the existence of a god with the characteristics as mentioned. In other words: he denies the existence of ‘God’. We find this approach not only with Nagel, but also with Robin Le Poidevin, Daniel Harbour and Paul Edwards.

Atheism as a-theism has clear advantages. We know what we’re talking about, and an impressive tradition in the history of Western thought can be interpreted as a discussion of the existence of a God with clearly-definable characteristics. Great philosophers and theologians from Plato, through Augustine, Avicenna and Aquinas, to Rene Descartes, Blaise Pascal, and these days, Richard Swinburne, Daniel Dennett and Richard Dawkins, have all participated in this discussion concerning the existence of a theistic god with characteristics defined by the church or based on the interpretation of Holy Scripture (Qur’an or Bible). This is not a conversation about the different attitudes people have with regard to the ‘ultimate ideals of life’ (James’ definition of religion), but about the characteristics of the theistic God, and in what sense these are compatible with each other and with other human ideas. For examples: if God knows the future, how can we have free will? (Cicero.) What was God doing before He created the world? (Augustine.) Must God, if he exists in the mind, also exist in reality? (Anselm.) Can an omnipotent being be constrained by justice and goodness? (Al-Ghazali.) As the author of a recent overview of these arguments puts it: “thinkers from all three faiths [Judaism, Christianity and Islam] grappled with the general philosophical problems that needed solving if the great monotheism they were jointly constructing was to be viable, developing not merely sophisticated proofs of God’s existence, but also detailed conceptions of God’s various key attributes: omnipotence (or power), omniscience (or knowledge), perfect goodness, eternity, immutability, and so on.” (Andrew Pessin, The God Question, 2009, p.20.) What this amounts to is that discussions about the existence of God very often were discussions about the compatibility of the characteristics ascribed to the divine in the theistic tradition. Those who held that those characteristics are compatible were called ‘theists’: those who did not, ‘atheists’.

Seeing atheism as the denial of the theistic conception of god (God) is clearly different from seeing atheism as ‘the rejection of all things supernatural’. Yet as Julian Baggini says in Atheism: A Very Short Introduction (2003), “The atheist’s rejection of belief in God is usually accompanied by a broader rejection of any supernatural or transcendental reality. For example, an atheist does not usually believe in the existence of immortal souls, life after death, ghosts, or supernatural powers.” (p.4.) He acknowledges that strictly speaking an atheist could believe in any of these other things, but, as he contents, “the arguments and ideas that sustain atheism tend naturally to rule out other beliefs in the supernatural or transcendental.”

A Common Objection

By the more limited definition of atheism as the denial of the God of the monotheists, polytheists are atheists. From the perspective of atheism as a-theism, Greek and Roman polytheism has to be called ‘atheist’, for instance. The depiction of ultimate reality as impersonal (as we find in the earlier Hindu Upanishads) would also be classified as atheist. Theravada Bud-
“I argued that these three attributes were incompatible with one another, as could be seen by reflection on the relationship between divine power and human freedom. If God is to be omniscient about future human actions, then determinism must be true. If God is to escape responsibility for human wickedness, then determinism must be false. So there cannot be an omniscient, omnipotent, all good being.” (What I Believe, p.8)

Kenny concluded from this that there cannot be such a thing as the God of scholastic or rationalist philosophy. Nevertheless, this did not bring him to an absolute atheist position.

Why not? Kenny answers: “I left the question open whether it is possible to conceive, and believe in, a God defined in less absolute terms.” Is that a reasonable position to take? From the perspective of atheism as a-theism it is not. (Although some scholars claim one can adhere to monotheism and yet reject the belief that an omnipotent God exists.) Kenny seems to think that he has only rejected the God of scholastic or rationalist philosophy, but is that true? Hasn’t he done much more? I think he has. He has rejected the idea of God as defended through the ages by the church, and also, I’m inclined to think, God as He appears to us in some important passages in Holy Scripture.

Whether that last contention is true depends of course on the question whether the attributes of God as defended by the church have a firm basis in Scripture. Is it true the Bible presents us with an omniscient, benevolent and omnipotent personal deity – or is God an invention of scholastic and rationalist philosophy, as Kenny seems to suppose?

My impression is that the church is on much firmer ground here than liberal theologians like to acknowledge. I think the characteristics that the church, the church fathers and the scholastic philosophers have attributed to God do have a firm basis in Scripture. The Bible does not present us with an impersonal God who is limited in power, for instance.

A person who believes in a God with the characteristics described above is generally considered to be a ‘theist’. That is not very controversial. The controversy centers on the atheist. What should we call the person who does not believe in that specific concept of God? One reasonable answer, so it seems to me (following Harbour, Nagel, Le Poidevin, and the scholars), is ‘an atheist’. So it seems to me Kenny is an atheist in this sense.

A Broader Definition of Atheism

It’s not only believers who feel a little uncomfortable with this limited definition of atheism, but self-confessed atheists as well. Often atheism is characterized in a broader way. Michael Martin, one of the most interesting contemporary authors on atheism, writes: “In its broader sense atheism, from the Greek a (‘without’) and theos (‘deity’), standardly refers to the denial of the existence of any god or gods” – any god or gods. ‘Atheism’ does not only refer to the denial of the God of monotheism, then, but to the denial of the God of liberal theism and the gods of polytheism too.

Leslie Stephen (1832-1904) wrote: “Dogmatic Atheism – the doctrine that there is no God, whatever may be meant by God – is, to say the least, a rare phase of opinion.” Whether this is indeed rare is difficult to say, but it seems senseless to simply deny the existence of whatever may be meant by ‘God’; rather, we’d need to first intelligently define what is meant by a ‘God’ – say, ‘a self-sustaining creative personal being’. It is just as senseless to affirm the existence of a God we know nothing about – who is completely undefined. Or let me say that discussing the existence of a God with no characteristics, or characteristics too vague or undetermined to know, implies that affirming the existence of such a God would be as senseless as denying the existence of such a God. The liberal theologian who leaves the existence of such an undefined God ‘open’ is naturally allowed to do so; but this position is more problematic, and also a little bit more trivial, than he assumes.

The broader definition of atheism as the denial of any divine entities, as adopted by Michael Martin, George Smith, et al, has an evident disadvantage though: it is not clear that there is one single argumentative strategy that can be directed against all the different ideas of god. When someone says: “I believe that the shipwreck was prevented by Poseidon,” it is not so clear how we can ‘prove’ that ships are not rescued by Poseidon but by natural causes. Or if a Spinozan says: “I believe that God and nature are the same”, how could we refute this? Whatever we may think of these two statements of religious confession, it’s clear that rejecting polytheism (Poseidon rescuing the sailors) or pantheism (Spinoza) requires a completely different argument from that of rejecting theism in the classical, orthodox sense.

The discussion on the merits of classical theism proceeds according to the pattern of classical philosophers, some trying to defend theodicy (eg Leibniz), others trying to attack it (Hume, for instance). [Theodicy is the attempt to rationalise the goodness and omnipotence of God in an evil world full of suffering – Ed.]

I think George Smith is on firmer ground when he says that some theists have been called ‘atheists’ for disbelieving in the God (or gods) of the ‘orthodox majority’. This focuses on the narrower definition of atheism. This is also the case when Martin notes: “in Western society the term atheism has most frequently been used to refer to the denial of theism, in particular Judeo-Christian theism. This [theism] is the position that a being that is all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-good exists who is the creator of the universe, and who takes an active interest in human concerns, and guides his creatures by revelation.” (‘Atheism’, in The New Encyclopedia of Unbelief, edited by Tom Flynn, 2007, p.88.) Also, the ‘New Atheism’ by Dawkins, Harris, Hitchens and Dennett is mainly atheism as a-theism, that is, against classical monotheism. Dawkins makes this clear when he writes about the so-called ‘religion’ of Albert Einstein, for example. Einstein does not believe in a ‘personal God’. His ‘religion’ is based on (and identified with) “the unbounded admiration for the structure of the world so far as our science can reveal it.” But if this is religion, then Dawkins is religious as well.

James and his many contemporary followers may define their concepts as they like, of course; but again, we clearly need a special word for the denial of the orthodox idea of the divine which the Jewish, Christian and Islamic religions share: the idea of God. ‘Atheism’ seems not a bad choice for this word.

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8 Philosophy Now • April/May 2010