
Atheism without anger or tears*

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A motto should contain, as in a nutshell, the contents, or the drift, or the animus of the writing to which it is prefixed.

—John Henry Cardinal Newman

My atheism squares with my—to engage in a fine fit of self-labelling—anti-foundationalist, anti-rationalist, non-scientistic, historicist, contextualist naturalistic pragmatism. It is very distant from the Enlightenment rationalism Barry Allen inexplicably ascribes to me. Rather, in the course of what I like to think of as my philosophical development, and not my philosophical shilly-shallying, my atheism has come to be housed (perhaps only temporarily) in the metaphilosophical stance expressed in my “Philosophy as Critical Theory” quoted at length by Rodger Beehler in his “Hounding Heaven.”

1

One very central place where I am at odds with Barry Allen is over the characterization of atheism and over the assessment of its import. (The two matters, as will become evident, are linked.) In his characterization of atheism Allen is *très partis pris*, in effect, treating “militant atheism” and “rationalistic atheism” as pleonasms and so characterizing atheism that a type of atheism—the militant rationalistic Enlightenment atheism of Condorcet, Diderot and Holbach—becomes atheism *sans phrase*. My atheism

- * Editor's Note: As noted in the opening editorial, because of the constraints of space, this reply of Dr. Nielsen does not contain the responses he prepared to Drs. Beehler and Langford. The editor would like to thank Dr. Nielsen for his courtesy in allowing the truncation of a thoughtful article.

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gets, without any justification at all, thrown into that rationalistic hopper. But there are militant atheists, James Joyce, Simone de Beauvoir, Jean-Paul Sartre and Friedrich Nietzsche, for example, who were anything but Enlightenment rationalists or rationalists of any sort. Moreover, there is the thorough, but utterly non-militant, atheism of George Santayana. His atheism, though certainly unhesitant and unyielding, was a nostalgic, even wistful, atheism. Santayana, who strongly empathized culturally with Catholic culture, thought, as much as Holbach, belief in God or even belief that God exists a childish fantasy. Indeed he found it difficult to believe that anyone, even Christians, could really believe in God. He thought that deep down they knew better. But, for all of that, he remained immersed in the way of life of Catholicism. There is also the historicized, culturally sensitive atheism of Antonio Gramsci. Gramsci in deeply examining Italian culture and society understood very well indeed the human importance of religion. Then, of course, there is the stark, pessimistic, rather resigned atheism of Sigmund Freud and Max Weber, both of whom, though in different ways, had a very sensitive understanding of religion, but lacked altogether the Condorcetian hope for the attainment of an enlightened and flourishing social order. And so we could go on and on. There are many sorts of atheists and many of them are very distant indeed from any conception of the Platonic good of enlightening truth. They have no such faith in truth, though they recognize that truth is one of our great goods, but by no means always, any more than any other good, an overriding good. Moreover, while there are truths ("objective truth" is pleonastic), there is, some think (including this atheist among others), no such thing as *the* truth, let alone something called the truth which will transform our lives. Treating atheism as a Platonic heresy says more about Allen's own philosophical agenda than it does about atheism.¹

A central thing that is mistaken in Allen's understanding of atheism comes out in his brief concluding paragraph where he remarks, "I doubt the continuing relevance of atheism not because I believe in god or believe such belief to be more reasonable than the atheist allows, but because I do *not* believe what philosophical atheists believe is a necessary step on the historical road to universal enlightenment and human self-perfection."²

- 1 This is not to say that Allen's agenda is not a significant one. Indeed it is, as should become apparent from reading his striking book, *Truth in Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993). It is just that in discussing the present issue it gets in his way and blurs his vision.
- 2 The very notion of "*philosophical atheism*" is far from clear. There are many philosophers, as well as others, who are atheists, but I do not know that anything sensible is added by calling their atheism *philosophical* anymore than anything sensible is added by saying of a philosopher who is a socialist that his socialism is a philosophical socialism. I

Only some philosophers believe that, namely, such *philosophes* of the Enlightenment as Holbach and Diderot and, turning to a later time, Fredrich Engels and V. I. Lenin and perhaps Karl Marx, Ludwig Feuerbach and George Eliot, but certainly not Hume, certainly not Nietzsche, certainly not Santayana, Freud or Weber, certainly not Sartre, certainly not Axel Hägerström, Bertrand Russell, Ingemar Hedenius, A. J. Ayer, Rudolph Carnap, B. A. Farrell, W. O. Quine, John Mackie, Ernest Nagel, Antony Flew, Paul Edwards, Richard Robinson, Russell Norwood Hanson, Walter Kaufmann, Michael Scriven, Richard Ponty or myself.³ Leaving me aside for a minute, all the other contemporary philosophers mentioned in my last sentence think that it is a very considerable confusion indeed to believe that there is any historical road we are travelling which is leading us in some determinate direction, let alone there being anything inexorable here so that we could speak of the necessary steps we are taking on destiny's course. And all of them think, along with Hume and Nietzsche, that belief in universal enlightenment and human self-perfection is religious and certainly not "the truth of atheism." It is precisely such non-fallibilistic metaphysical conceptions that these atheists reject. Some of them, like some non-atheists as well, modestly *hope* that, if social wealth, levels of education and liberal tolerance increase in the world, human flourishing and

wanted my *Philosophy and Atheism: In Defense of Atheism* to be simply entitled, after its lead essay, *In Defense of Atheism*. But this conflicted with another title. My publisher proposed as a title *The Philosophy of Atheism* which I rejected out of hand, and quite correctly so, for there is no philosophy of atheism, though atheism can have a philosophical articulation and defence.

- 3 Allen contests that Hume and Nietzsche are atheists. In the case of Nietzsche this boggles the mind for he is plainly an atheist, though as much out of sorts with rationalism, as is Hamann. But Allen gives the game away when he remarks that like "Voltaire and Hume, Nietzsche is not an atheist, not if that means laying a claim to know the Platonic truth about good." But, as we have seen, this is precisely what being an atheist does not mean for most atheists. Identifying atheism with an absurd rationalism, Allen makes it the case that, by stipulative re-definition of "atheism," neither Nietzsche nor Hume are atheists. But this is just conversion by stipulative re-definition. However, Allen apart, Hume is a more complicated case for classification in this respect than Nietzsche. Hume's elegant posthumously published *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, which he worked on for many years and concluded only on his deathbed, has, as a dialogue, characters taking different positions about religion and Hume, speaking clearly for himself, does not add any commentary independent of what the characters say in the dialogues. There has long been a scholarly dispute about which of the characters most closely expresses Hume's own views. But, if we can use evidence from his other writings as well as biographical and contextual evidence, it seems perverse to identify him with anyone but Philo and this puts Hume into the atheist camp. More exactly, he is what Antony Flew, following Pierre Bayle, calls a Stratonician atheist. Antony Flew, "David Hume," in Gordon Stein, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Unbelief* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Press, 1985), Vol. 1, p. 325. See as well Antony Flew, *David Hume: Philosopher of Moral Science* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), and Terence Penelhum, *Hume* (London: Macmillan, 1975).

human self-understanding might, just might, be somewhat enhanced. But they would agree with Isaiah Berlin about the logical absurdity of historical inevitability.⁴ Their modest whiggish hopes are a far cry from the heavenly city of the *philosophes*.

My atheism is in this respect like Hume's, Ayer's, Robinson's, Ponty's and Nagel's. We certainly see eye-to-eye about the absurdity of an atheism that believes that atheism, or anything else, is a necessary step on the historical road to universal enlightenment and human self-perception. Such conceptions are mythological and are in effect very much like religious notions. They do not square at all with the fallibilistic, utterly secular thought of a thoroughgoing atheism. Because the *philosophes* had some religiously inverted residues linked to it, their atheism, their intentions to the contrary notwithstanding, was not thorough. An atheism that was thorough, fully in tune with our secular world, would be fallibilistic and without the religious rationalistic belief that we are necessarily marching anywhere, let alone that we are marching to some blessed world of universal enlightenment and human self-perfection.

What, at most, some fallibilistic non-rationalist atheists could hope for, if they were also either Deweyan pragmatists or analytical Marxians, would be that it is perhaps, just perhaps, possible to construct a plausible *empirical* theory of epochal social change, à la G. A. Cohen, Andrew Levine or Debra Satz, and that this theory will give us some reason to expect that a non-capitalist socialist society will, if certain circumstances obtain, come into being, sustain itself, eventually become a classless society, and that in such social circumstances there will be considerably more human flourishing than there is now.⁵ It is possible, and I believe desirable, to take that fallibilistically, as an *empirical* hypothesis and, in addition, remembering that one is also a social agent, to work for the bringing into being of such a world. As such an agent, one will hope that such a situation will prevail even though one is very pessimistic about its prospects. It may well be too much like pie in the sky by and by.

A sceptical Marxian who is also an atheist will think like that. But that is still a far cry from Enlightenment rationalism's belief in universal enlightenment and human self-perfection. Moreover, most fallibilistic atheists are not Marxians. Instead they share the atheoriticism of most historians

4 Isaiah Berlin, *Historical Inevitability* (London: Oxford University Press, 1954).

5 G. A. Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defense* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978); G. A. Cohen, *History, Labour and Freedom* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988); Andrew Levine, *The End of the State* (London: Verso, 1987), p. 87-130; Kai Nielsen, "On Taking Historical Materialism Seriously," *Dialogue*, 22, 2 (1983); and Debra Satz, "Marxism, Materialism and Historical Progress," in Robert Ware and Kai Nielsen, eds., *Analyzing Marxism: New Essays on Analytical Marxism* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 1989), p. 393-424.

about accounting for social change and they do not allow themselves even my modest hope.⁶ (Think here of the deep, though in each case differently rooted, pessimism of Freud, Santayana and Weber.)

2

What then is the "truth of atheism," if indeed it has any truth? To see what is at issue here we need first to characterize atheism, something Allen hardly obliges us with. There are more and less adequate characterizations of atheism but what is common to all of them is the claim that an atheist is a person who believes that there is no God and, as well, that atheism involves a rejection of all belief in spiritual beings. This, if one thinks about it for a second, makes it evident that atheism rejects Judaism, Christianity and Islam with their common belief, at least as ordinarily understood, that there is a God who created the universe out of nothing and who has absolute sovereignty over his creation. Human beings for these religions are taken to be sinful, utterly dependent on God and they can only make adequate sense of their lives by accepting without question God's ordinances for them. Atheism rejects that conception of human beings as well as, at least, the distinctively religious side of the morality that goes with it. (Recall Hume's impatience with monkish virtues.) Atheists, typically but not invariably, believe that people can make good sense of their lives, including their lives as moral beings, without any belief in God or any other spiritual realities.

Rather standardly, but I think mistakenly or at least inadequately, it is said that to be an atheist is simply to believe either, on the one hand, that it is false or at least probably false that God exists or, on the other hand, that it is unreasonable to believe that God exists.⁷ (Of course such a belief could be both false and unreasonable.) But, considering the way much discussion of religion has gone in the last two centuries, it is better to characterize an atheist as someone who rejects belief in God for one or another of the following reasons (which rejection applies will depend on how God in that instance is being conceived). *First*, for an anthropomorphic God, even an attenuatedly anthropomorphic God, atheists reject belief in that God because they believe that it is false, probably false or unreasonable to believe that there is such a God. *Second*, for a non-anthropo-

6 Andrew Levine, "What Is a Marxist Today?," in Ware and Nielsen, eds., *Analyzing Marxism*, p. 45-48.

7 Kai Nielsen, *Philosophy and Atheism: In Defense of Atheism* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1985), p. 9-31, 55-106, 211-31, and Kai Nielsen, *God, Scepticism and Modernity* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1989), p. 220-52. I am also the author of the articles on atheism in the current editions of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* and *Collier's Encyclopedia*. If I go wrong here, misinformation will be rather widespread.

morphic transcendent God (the God of Maimonides and Aquinas, of Luther and Calvin) atheists reject belief in such a God on the grounds that that concept of god is either meaningless, unintelligible, contradictory, incomprehensible or incoherent. (Which applies depends on two things: (1) just how this God is being conceived and (2) on the meta-account doing the examining.) *Third*, where "God" is simply construed, as "God" is sometimes now construed, as a term standing for love, trust, ultimate commitment or morality touched with emotion, atheists join with many believers in rejecting such a belief in God because such conceptions of God merely mask an atheistic substance. Such conceptions of God, as in the writings of Richard Braithwaite, R. M. Hare and D. Z. Phillips, are atheistic in reality (in substance) but sugar over and sometimes mystify things with soothing and sometimes—in Phillips's case but not in Hare's—obscurantist talk and conceptualizations.⁸

All forms of atheism have in common a rejection of a belief in God, but, as conceptions of God differ, the form the rejection takes will differ as well, though all these atheistic rejections will agree that in rejecting belief in God they are doing so because such belief rests on a mistake. (The remark about "mistake" is essential, for a prideful or sinful person [to speak internally to religion for a moment] could reject God by rebelling against Him while still believing that God exists. That such behaviour is irrational does not mean that it does not occur. But that rebellion, of course, is not any kind of an atheistic rejection.)

The above, though a somewhat more expanded characterization of atheism than the usual one, is still relatively untendentious. It captures the different forms of atheism that are part of our Western tradition and does not let anything in that would not very generally be regarded as atheism.

Diderot and Holbach are, of course, atheists, but of a distinctive sort. While they reject belief in God either because they think it is false that God exists or that the very concept or conceptualization of God is incoherent, what Allen fastens on as essential to their atheism and objects to, namely, their Platonic conception of enlightening and transforming truth, is actually a dangler on their atheism, a fortuitous and inessential feature, easily excisable. It is not what makes their accounts *atheistic* and is not an essential part of atheistic belief for non-atheists could very well have such eschatological beliefs as well and, as we have seen, many atheists utterly re-

8 Richard Braithwaite, "An Empiricist's View of the Nature of Religious Belief," in Malcolm L. Diamond and Thomas V. Litzenburg, eds., *The Logic of God: Theology and Verification* (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1975), p. 127-49, and R. M. Hare, "The Simple Believer," in Gene Outka and John Reeder, Jr., eds., *Religion and Morality* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1973), p. 393-427. See my critique of such Godless Christianity in my *God, Scepticism and Modernity*, p. 172-89. D. Z. Phillips, *Faith and Philosophical Enquiry* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970).

ject such an eschatology. Having such beliefs is not what makes Diderot and Holbach *atheists*.

Given the above characterization of atheism—a reasonably non-tendentious one—Allen is himself an atheist, for he announces he does not believe in god (he, without explanation, puts it with a lower-case “g”). He also remarks that he does not “believe such belief to be more reasonable than the atheist allows.” Many through-and-through secularly minded people, including philosophers who call themselves naturalists, physicalists or materialists, are plainly also in reality atheists. They probably do not call themselves atheists for they may think it sounds too vulgar, too *ordinaire*, too tub-thumping, too *engagé*, or non-fallibilistic and the like. But naturalists or physicalists such as Dewey, Hook, Quine, Stawson, Davidson, Armstrong, Smart and Rorty cannot but be atheists. If you are a naturalist, physicalist or materialist you are thereby an atheist whether you like to make such a self-ascription or not.

There are, of course, troubled atheists, atheists like some of the characters in Dostoevsky’s novels, who suffer because they cannot believe in God, but there are also untroubled atheists (atheists that religious people not infrequently think, quite question-beggingly, are superficial people) such as John Dewey, Sidney Hook and Richard Rorty, who happily concern themselves with the problems of life, perfectly free of the need for religious or metaphysical comfort. Some, as Quine probably is, are just rather indifferent and perhaps somewhat bemused by such matters. But being physicalists or naturalists there is nothing else for them to be but atheists. They cannot (*pace* Hook) even, as naturalists or physicalists, be agnostics, for the agnostic claims we cannot be in a position to either justifiably affirm or deny that God exists for the evidence here, one way or the other, is always insufficient, so the agnostic neither believes nor does not believe that God exists.⁹ He remains in doubt for he believes evidential and other rational considerations are always insufficient to go one way or the other here. But that is not an option for the naturalist or physicalist, for they, as naturalists and physicalists, are saying, or giving to understand, that there are no spiritual or supernatural beings.

They are, of course, if they have absorbed anything of the spirit of modernity, fallibilists, but that just means that, like many believers as well, they do not think we can gain certain knowledge, or knowledge that is not

9 For the exchange see Kai Nielsen, “Religion and Naturalistic Humanism: Some Remarks on Hook’s Critique of Religion,” in Paul Kurtz, ed. *Sidney Hook and the Contemporary World* (New York: John Day, 1968), p. 257-79, and Kai Nielsen, “Secularism and Theology: Remarks on a Form of Naturalistic Humanism,” *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, 13 (Spring 1975): 109-26. Sidney Hook, “For an Open-Minded Naturalism,” *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, 13 (Spring 1975): 127-36, and Sidney Hook’s *The Quest for Being* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1960), p. 115-35 and 145-95.

at least in principle revisable, about any matter of substance. But that is not at all enough to make them agnostics. They are not certain that there is no God, but that signifies for many atheists—certainly for this atheist—little more than something flowing from the belief that we cannot be certain about any matter of substance. But that is fallibilism, not agnosticism.

So what Allen rejects is not atheism, but an inessential metaphysical side of a very particular atheism with “an absolute animus toward religion,” the atheism, that is, of the French Enlightenment of Condorcet, Diderot and Holbach. What he sets himself against is an atheism “born militant, born a “project” of universal ambition . . . a concise and polemical formulation for the determination of intellectuals to rid natural knowledge of theological direction. An absolute god had to be excluded absolutely from the field of evidence and explanation in natural philosophy.” Then, Allen goes on to say, making a bit of a logical leap, that, on such a conception, “there is only one good in terms of which such an absolute proscription can be framed: the classical (Platonic) good of enlightening reason.”

Allen avers that such a metaphysically inverted Platonism is as pointless as the Platonism from which it flows. Platonic heresy and Platonism are both without justification and by now without any rationale. But (*pace* Allen) Platonism and Enlightenment rationalism are not equally beside the track, for the latter does not have a theory of forms and remains physicalistic. That seems at least something of an advance. All metaphysics may be bad but some metaphysics is worse than other metaphysics. “The atheism of the Enlightenment and the theology it sought to displace from the domain of knowledge” may form “a dialectical duo” but one partner may be more hobbled than the other.

3

Following his discourse on the atheism of Enlightenment rationalism, Allen writes of me:

Kai Nielsen’s atheism seems to be a variation on Enlightenment Platonism. His animus toward religion is inspired by its errors, the falsehoods and “unclear representations” upon which religious belief depends. Like the Platonist, he calls for us to “throw” off the shackles of ideology and see the world as clearly as possible. We must renounce metaphor and metaphysical comfort in the name of the literal truth. We must, if we are struggling to see the world rightly in the teeth of centuries of religious talk force ourselves to think literally. If we see the world rightly we will see the truth of atheism. Religion has no literal truth. The key concepts of Judaism, Christianity and Islam are (not) legitimate concepts capable of sustaining truth-claims.

As we have already seen, however, seeing the truth of atheism (if it is indeed true) is not seeing all, or indeed any, of that Platonistic and utopian metaphysical stuff to which Allen refers. Rather, it is simply to come to a soundly reasoned conclusion, if indeed that can be done, that there is no God, that our lives as moral beings need not collapse because of this and *perhaps* could even more adequately flourish. Some atheists, A. J. Ayer, Paul Edwards and Antony Flew, and, classically, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, had the confidence Allen does not share, "that our society is not harmed . . . but made better, more rational, by the withering of religion." But that is surely not *the* atheist's confidence but *some* atheists' confidence. Certainly Santayana, Weber and Durkheim do not share this confidence. I, speaking for myself, am of divided mind about it. It is true, as Allen points out, that *some* churches—it is important to keep in mind that it is only certain ones—are, in many very concrete ways in the forefront of humane and liberating social action. They clearly show by their protective deeds how deeply they value human life, how they seriously treat life as sacred. There is plainly good in the world that would not be there but for their strenuous and often fearless efforts. More generally, religion has often been a humanizing force in the world. People would be even more brutish without the *sometimes* civilizing influence of religion. Or at least so it is not implausible to believe.

I wrote in 1985

. . . since I think a belief in God is either a false belief or an incoherent one, depending on how one construes the term "God," it makes me an atheist, but, while that is compatible with being, irreligious, it does not make me irreligious. To be irreligious is to be scornful of religion or religious people and while I am scornful of some religions—the Mooney religion, for example, or of Christian Science—and some religious people, Ian Paisley, for example, or the late Cardinal Spellman, I am generally not scornful of religions or religious people. And some religious people, Father Daniel Berrigan, Gregory Baum, Dorothee Sölle, or Bayers Naudé, to take some outstanding examples, I regard as my comrades in a common struggle, while I am totally out of sympathy with the reactionary conservatism defended by such professional atheists or agnostics as Antony Flew, Wallace Matson or Sidney Hook. And I am much more in sympathy with much of the social outlook of the World Council of Churches than I am with the generally conservative and overly rationalistic social outlook of many, but by no means all, secular humanists.¹⁰

Whether life in our century and the century to come would be better or worse without religious belief is not easy to know. Whatever we say concerning this will be no more than speculative guessing. There is the humanizing phenomenon Allen points to and I have mentioned above.

10 Kai Nielsen, *God and the Grounding of Morality* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1991), p. 136.

But there are evidence and considerations that cut the other way as well. Iceland, Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Finland, which are all wealthy, or relatively wealthy, very secular societies, seem to be far better places in which to live than societies where religion is strong. Think of Ireland (North and South), Bosnia, North Africa, Iran, Israel, India, Indonesia, Afghanistan, Pakistan and parts of what once was the Soviet Union. Religion in those places and some others as well seems to breed fanaticism, intolerance and extensive brutality, while the secular Scandinavian societies are just the opposite. We need to ask whether, in any very extensive way, there can be intense religious conviction without fanaticism. Though, against the worry that religion is fanaticism-prone, we need to keep in mind that some religious people in the rich liberal societies and as well some of the religious institutions in such societies show none of that fanaticism. But is that due more to their being in rich *liberal* societies, or perhaps just rich societies, or to something about the religious response itself? I do not think we can be very confident about what to say here. But contrasting Scandinavia with Ireland and Bosnia (to stay within European countries), we need to recognize that there are factors at work here other than religion. Still, the religious factors are very prominent and it is not unreasonable to wonder if these societies wracked by fanaticism would not be a lot better off if they were more secular.

There are matters of degree here. Ireland is not Bosnia but it is certainly not Denmark either. And even in some of the wealthy capitalist democracies—the United States and Canada very plainly—with issues such as abortion and euthanasia, which are difficult enough anyway, their reasonable and humane treatment has been made very much more difficult by entrenched, and often very unreflective, religious views. Similar things should be said about attitudes toward divorce, gender and homosexuality.

So I think it is hard to balance things out and come up with a reasonable view about what to say about the human value of religion. Fortunately we do not have to agonize through that. Where religion is stable and secure, wrestling with the above question, given the entrenched state of religion, is all rather hypothetical. What we need to ask instead is what kind of truly human morality can go with it, since we are going to have religion in place anyway. What I have directed my attention to is neither of these questions, but in my writings about ethics and religion I have considered the question of whether, in a disenchanting world where more and more people just cannot believe in God, such people, in such a world, can make firm sense of their moral lives.¹¹ I have, also in that context, struggled with

11 Kai Nielsen, *Ethics without God* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1990); Kai Nielsen, *God and the Grounding of Morality*, and Kai Nielsen, "Atheism," in Lawrence C. Becker, ed., *Encyclopedia of Ethics* (New York: Garland, 1993), Vol. 1, p. 60-64.

the question of whether religious moralities have any ground for a claim to superiority over purely secular ones. I have argued that we can make sense of our lives and find moral orientation even in an utterly godless world and that there is no justification for the belief that religious moralities are superior to purely secular ones. But (*pace* Allen) my argumentation here in no way leans on anything even similar to a Platonic heresy.

4

What, I think, Allen holds against atheists, and thus against me, is rooted in his belief that atheists must be radical *Aufklärers* bent on sustaining in their conceptions of a good and just world-order a universality and unconditionality that cannot be obtained. In that they are no better—or so he believes—than the religious orientations they seek to replace. There are, Allen believes, no true interests which human beings, *just in virtue of being human beings*, must have, no matter where they are placed or what their particular socialization has been. There is no one true description of the world which will just tell us, independently of our particular human interests, what the world is really like in itself. We have no way of understanding what it would be like to have “the truth of nature” and thus—or so Allen believes—“the truth of atheism.”

In showing (*pace* Aquinas or Scotus) that there is no natural theology which could just tell us what nature and supernature are and must be like, Enlightenment atheology did not finally replace theology with the one true description of the world. As Allen puts it, that “final discreditation of theology for the production of scientific knowledge was not a step in the direction of greater global rationality.” Indeed, Allen has it, there is no such thing. “Reason is a fine thing,” he tells us,

but it is not *one* thing. If you can talk you can reason; there is nothing more to reason “itself” than to language (or communication) “itself.” Just as there is no essential unity to everything that is called “language” neither is there one dimension of “reason” in respect of which historically different styles of reasoning can be compared and ranked.

Allen’s assumption is that atheists must reject such Wittgensteinian contextualism and claim instead that there is and must be a single true description of the world which, in an interest-irrelevant, particular-position and purpose-irrelevant way, will just tell us how things must be: give us the one true—indeed necessarily true—description of the world. He just seems to assume—inexplicably and arbitrarily—that there can be no Wittgensteinians who are atheists as there are Wittgensteinians who are Christians. The reason, presumably, that atheism must go rationalist, and cannot go pragmatist or Wittgensteinian and contextual, is atheism’s claim that Christian, Jewish or Islamic discourses cannot be rationally sustained,

that in the 20th century they are incoherent belief-systems that it is not reasonable for a 20th-century philosophically and scientifically sophisticated person to accept. Allen's point against such an atheistic conception is that reasonability and reason are too contextual for such a grand claim to be something which can be intelligibly made. There is no Archimedean fulcrum from which philosophers or other intellectuals can pass judgment "on the supposedly fundamental cognitive claims of religion." There is no coherent place for philosophers or anyone else to stand in making such a judgment.

Pace Nielsen, to speak of the irrationality, or for that matter the rationality, of religion has no grip at all in our social world. What is reasonable to do, to believe or to commit yourself to goes with some particular styles of reasoning. Our criteria and conceptions of reasonableness are therefore very context-dependent. There is no coherent conception of what is rational *Überhaupt*. It is reasonable to say sometimes that the moon is pink on a given autumn's evening when our interests are roughly aesthetic and we are making casual observations concerning what we see. But when we are doing physics and giving physical descriptions of the moon such remarks about its colour are irrelevant. But there is no one interest-free true description, somehow closer to reality than the others, which tells us what the moon is really like. We can make many true statements about the moon, but there are no elite entities and we have no elite concepts yielding elite descriptions which just tell us, independently of our interests and purposes, what the moon or anything else is like in itself.

If we accept this point about "the one true description of the world," as Hilary Putnam, Richard Rorty, Barry Allen and I all would, then the ground, Allen has it, has been yanked out from under atheism as well as (presumably) from theism, for then there can be no one true description of the world, no global rationality and no interest-independent, interest-free criteria for what it is reasonable to believe and do. From a religious perspective or from within religious language-games and forms of life such and such is reasonable while from a non-religious perspective it is not. But there is no such thing as the one true perspective which will tell us what it is, *sans phrase*, rational or reasonable, to believe or to do. The atheist, Allen has it, thinks there is such an Archimedean fulcrum, but his thought here is at best mythological and perhaps it would be more accurately described as being incoherent.

Religious culture as much as scientific culture or moral culture can have an intellectual integrity of its own that philosophy can perhaps perspicuously represent or helpfully articulate, but it is and can be in no position to judge or assess such cultures with their distinctive practices. It is an illusion—and an arrogant one at that—for atheists (professing a "philosophical atheism" or for that matter any kind of atheism) to think that

they have a doctrine by the use of which they can make such an assessment of religion. It makes no sense to think that they can so stand in judgment of the rationality of belief.

5

I do not think that we general intellectuals, we pragmatist philosophers or Marxian social theorists, are so fettered. To see what I have in mind here let me first bring out some ways in which I agree with Allen. I agree with his arguments that urge an acceptance of something like Rorty's non-scientistic, historicized contextualist pragmatism; and I further agree with him that this does not conceptually, or in any other way, imprison Rorty or us in a relativism (conceptual, meta-ethical, ethical or cultural), but provides Rorty and the rest of us with the resources, both intra-cultural and inter-cultural, to make sense of our lives and assess our lives in an open-ended process where we endlessly repair the ship at sea.¹² We do not have, and cannot get, an Archimedean fulcrum of (*pace* Bernard Williams) an Absolute conception of the world.¹³ We, of course, start from our own culture or own traditions, our own considered convictions—where else could we possibly start?—but we are also in a position to listen to others, sometimes very different others, and to relate and set alongside each other our own beliefs and theirs.¹⁴ Noting what the results of doing so are, and depending on what the result is, we accordingly revise or sometimes even jettison some of our beliefs concerning what is to be thought and done. We endlessly, though with temporary closures, correct ourselves as we go along, sometimes gaining, in this trial and error manner, a better sense of how we should go on. We can in this way gain, for a particular time and place, a somewhat better understanding of what it makes sense to do and believe. We sometimes, at some particular junctures, will fail in these endeavours, but we sometimes will succeed. There is neither *a priori* blockage here nor, of course, a guarantee of success.

We have our various interests and purposes and we set them, in trying to get a coherent package, in relation to those of others, including some-

12 Allen is justified in claiming that I misread Rorty in ascribing relativism to him. But Rorty certainly wrote in a misleading way there. Almost all of his critics, to say nothing of his casual readers, including among his critics, Hilary Putnam, so misread him. It seemed to many people that, whether he liked it or not, his views committed him to relativism. But Rorty has by now made it clear how his views are not relativistic (Richard Rorty, "Putnam and the Relativist Menace," *The Journal of Philosophy*, 90, 9 [September 1993]: 443-61).

13 I have criticized such conceptions in my "Perspectivism and the Absolute Conception of the World," *Critica*, 25, 74 (August 1993).

14 Charles Taylor, *Philosophy and the Human Sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 116-51.

times culturally very different others. This is what I have called the method of reflective equilibrium, but it could also be called the pragmatic method, where, in a completely open-ended process, we correct our beliefs, factual, normative, conceptual, what you will, in the light of our other beliefs or beliefs from other cultures and other times, without ever *per impossibile* standing free of our own culture or gaining an Archimedean fulcrum, but still without being imprisoned by or in our culture either.¹⁵

There are religious language-games, scientific ones, political ones, legal ones, culinary ones, basketball ones, literary ones and the like. They all have criteria *in part* particular to themselves, but the criteria are also in part aligned with the criteria of other language-games. There is overlap and much reinforcement and, as well, sometimes strain, between different language-games. Some, of course, are more closely related to each other than others. But they are all rooted in natural languages (French, English, Chinese, German, Russian, etc.) and in various traditions. In following the style or reasoning of a particular language-game, we have something which is not balkanized such that the various language-games are like windowless monads with their own utterly local and utterly language-game-dependent conceptions of reasonability, intelligibility and criteria for what is taken to be true and what is not. Thus, if in morality, I ought to consider impartially the interests of all those involved in a moral situation, I will also, if I think for a moment, realize that to do this I must be able to determine what their interests are and how they can be satisfied and that this involves factual and at least rudimentary scientific styles of reasoning. The moral styles of reasoning, as Dewey stressed, do not stand free from the factual and scientific ones.¹⁶ Similarly the scientific ones do not stand free of the moral ones either. In taking account of the evidence in science, if we are to do it in a scientifically proper way, we must consider the evidence impartially. We cannot cook the books in doing science anymore than we can simply consider the interests of our friends and ignore the interests of others in morality. The appropriateness and indeed the necessity of impartiality cuts across contexts here.

In establishing the identity of persons—to switch to another example of the general point I wish to make—bodily criteria play an essential part

15 Kai Nielsen, *After the Demise of the Tradition* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991), p. 195-248; Kai Nielsen, "Reflective Equilibrium and Relativism," *The Monist*, 76 (1993): 316-32; and Kai Nielsen, "Philosophy within the Limits of Wide Reflective Equilibrium Alone," *Iyyun*, 43 (1994): 3-41.

16 John Dewey, *Intelligence in the Modern World* (New York: The Modern Library, 1939), p. 761-94; John Dewey, *Theory of the Moral Life* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960); John Dewey, *Problems of Men* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1948), p. 211-49 (the essay cited here was written in 1903); and John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct* (New York: The Modern Library, 1936).

in identifying individuals, in determining who they are. "Discrete individual" seems at least to be pleonastic.¹⁷ "Infinite" cannot be conjoined with "individual" in the language-games we play in talking about persons.¹⁸ There is no use for "infinite individual" or "infinite person" in such language-games. If in engaging in religious language-games, utilizing what are the practices and styles of reasoning of religion, I come to try to speak of a bodiless person or, taking it as a background assumption that there are such mysterious persons, I try to identify such an alleged bodiless person in such a context, I end up being, to understate it, rather baffled. I am even more baffled when I try to speak of "infinite individual" or of an "infinite person." And, as far as comprehensibility is concerned, I add insult to injury when I speak of such an infinite individual being transcendent to the universe. Such ways of talking do not go together with our familiar ways of talking and of conceptualizing things in the language-game of persons. Perhaps, by weaving and reweaving our web of thought and belief, we can put things together so as to achieve sense here, but perhaps we cannot, and perhaps we will continue to find such a way of putting words together incoherent.

There can be no *a priori* claims here one way or the other. If we end up on the atheist side saying that "talk of an infinite individual transcendent to the universe" and of "a person who is pure spirit and, as such, utterly bodiless" are incoherent strings of words, as I would argue in discussing Langford and have argued in more detail elsewhere, it is for the reason that we find we can make nothing of such a way of putting words together.¹⁹ We could, of course, *give* them a sense, but they do not *have* a sense. We cannot figure out what we mean by them: what we are trying to say. They are bizarre collocations of words. Moreover, we cannot fit them together with the other ways we speak and think. All we have are some strange pictures.

We may say then either that for these reasons such talk is incoherent or, alternatively, in a more Quinean spirit, that such baffling utterances are false. They say things that are best taken to be false because they are not only baffling, they are incompatible with other ways we speak and think, ways that are pervasive in our thought and speech. In either case, we cannot get our beliefs and conceptions into reflective equilibrium. We may find the religious ones incommensurable with the others, even after taking to heart the fact that as religious utterances they have to be mysteri-

17 Axel Hägerström, *Philosophy and Religion*, translated by Robert T. Sandin (London: Allen & Unwin, 1964), p. 175-305.

18 Kai Nielsen, "Perceiving God," in J. J. C. MacIntosh and Hugo Meynell, eds. *Faith, Scepticism and Personal Identity* (Calgary, AB: University of Calgary Press, 1994), p. 1-16.

19 Kai Nielsen, *Scepticism* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1973), p. 41-48.

ous. (A God who was not mysterious would not be the God of Judaism, Christianity or Islam. This, note, is what Wittgenstein would call a grammatical remark.) Still, even after acknowledging that, they remain *so* mysterious that we can make nothing of them. We either simply do not understand them or, looking at things differently, we understand them sufficiently well to recognize that we have very good reasons to think they are false because they are so out of joint with the other things we think, say and believe. In that way they are reasonably taken to be incomprehensibly false.

So in either case we cannot, keeping the religious beliefs, get our beliefs and conceptions into reflective equilibrium; we find the religious ones the odd ones out: they do not fit with the rest of what we believe and think. And this in turn leads us either to the belief that these key religious beliefs are incoherent or incomprehensibly false. Either way of looking at things is, of course, atheistic, but in both instances it is an atheism that fits perfectly well with a Rorty-Putnam pragmatist anti-foundationalist, anti-representationalist metaphilosophical stance and does not at all commit the atheist to a non-historicist, non-contextualist belief in the one true description of the world or to some obscure notion of a substantial reason marching through history.

In short, while there remains in such an atheist a loyalty to the Enlightenment, as there is in Rorty, Putnam and Foucault as well, there remains nothing of Enlightenment *rationalism* or Platonism, heretical or otherwise. The critique of the cognitive claims of religion and of the rationality of religious beliefs—here much too abrupt, the dialectic of argument is more complex than that—come from within our forms of life and require no appeal to some Absolute conception of the world or some view from nowhere. It requires no belief that there can be such a thing as the one true description of the world. That is, I can and do share Allen's, Rorty's and Putnam's views that such Absolutistic conceptions make no sense. But I do this without abjuring naturalism and physicalism. In this respect my views and Rorty's are identical.

6

I would like to see, as would Rorty, the practice fade away of luring beginning undergraduates in philosophy courses into taking seriously "the problem of the external world" and "the problem of other minds." In the same spirit, Allen would like to see discussions of whether we can in any sense at all prove the existence or non-existence of God, and, more generally, discussions of atheism versus religious belief, come off the philosophy curriculum and cease to preoccupy philosophers. That such things still get discussed, he seems to think, is a kind of intellectual and cultural disgrace.

Like Allen, I wish philosophy would move on to other things: things I regard as both more humanly useful and more intellectually challenging. I share Dewey's conception of the way philosophy should be transformed.²⁰ But that is a metaphilosophical issue about where philosophy should go and what it should try to be and not a pedagogical point about what should be in a university curriculum. I am thoroughly bored by the discussions of the proofs for the existence of God. I think Hume and Kant together essentially settled those issues. Wallace Matson, Michael Scriven, Michael Martin and John Mackie, in returning to those issues, are just carrying out mopping-up operations. But others—reflective and informed others—are not so bored and some few philosophers, Hugo Meynell and Richard Swinburne, for example, to mention able defenders of a very old tradition, think such issues are still very much alive and should remain so. Moreover, there are not a few reflective and intelligent students and people in the community beyond the university who care very much about such issues and care, as well, and connectedly, about the options atheism or religious belief. Because of these various people, we should keep these questions on the philosophical agenda. There should—and it seems to me that this point *should* be a commonplace—be forums left open for giving these issues the most intelligent, informed and dispassionate airing we can muster. That Allen and I wish to go to other things and that we believe that the philosophy of religion is not at the cutting edge of philosophy is a very different matter.

20 Kai Nielsen, "Dewey's Conception of Philosophy," *The Massachusetts Review*, 2, 1 (Autumn 1960): 110-34, and Kai Nielsen, "Transforming Philosophy," *Dalhousie Review* (1989).