

The background of the book cover is a dense, overlapping pattern of monarch butterfly wings. The wings are primarily orange with black veins and borders, and some have white spots. The pattern is circular, framing the central text area.

Graham Oppy

# Atheism

the basics

ROUTLEDGE



# ATHEISM

  

## THE BASICS

*Atheism: The Basics* is a concise and engaging introduction to belief in the non-existence of deities. Atheism has long fascinated people but debate around this controversial position may seem daunting. In this lively and lucid book, Graham Oppy addresses the following important questions:

- What does it mean to be an atheist?
- What is the difference between atheism, agnosticism, theism and innocence?
- How has atheism been distributed over time and place?
- What does science tell us about atheism?
- Are there good reasons to be an atheist?
- Are there good reasons not to be an atheist?
- What do we mean by ‘new atheism’?

With a glossary of key terms and suggestions for further reading throughout, the book considers key philosophical arguments around atheism, making this an ideal starting point for anyone seeking a full introduction to the arguments between those who hold atheistic beliefs and those who do not.

**Graham Oppy** is Professor of Philosophy at Monash University, Australia.

# The Basics

Other titles in the series can be found at: <https://www.routledge.com/The-Basics/book-series/B>

**AMERICAN PHILOSOPHY**

*NANCY STANLICK*

**ANIMAL ETHICS**

*TONY MILLIGAN*

**ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE**

*KEVIN WARWICK*

**EVOLUTION**

*SHERRIE LYONS*

**FOOD ETHICS**

*RONALD SANDLER*

**FREE WILL**

*MEGHAN GRIFFITH*

**METAPHYSICS**

*MICHAEL RAE*

**PHILOSOPHY (FIFTH EDITION)**

*NIGEL WARBURTON*

**GLOBAL JUSTICE**

*CARL DEATH AND HUW L. WILLIAMS*

**HUMAN GENETICS (SECOND EDITION)**

*RICKI LEWIS*

**LOGIC (SECOND EDITION)**

*J.C. BEALL*

**BIOETHICS (SECOND EDITION)**

*ALASTAIR CAMPBELL*

**EASTERN PHILOSOPHY (SECOND EDITION)**

*VICTORIA HARRISON*

**PHENOMENOLOGY**

*DAN ZAHAVI*

**ATHEISM**

*GRAHAM OPPY*

# ATHEISM

# THE BASICS

Graham Oppy

First published 2019  
by Routledge  
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge  
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business*

© 2019 Graham Oppy

The right of Graham Oppy to be identified as author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with sections 77 and 78 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

*Trademark notice:* Product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

*British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data*

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

*Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data*

Names: Oppy, Graham, 1960- author.

Title: Atheism : the basics / Graham Oppy.

Description: 1 [edition].. | New York : Routledge, 2018. |

Series: The basics | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2018018350 | ISBN 9781138506916 (hardback : alk. paper) |

ISBN 9781138506961 (pbk. : alk. paper) | ISBN 9781315150383 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Atheism.

Classification: LCC BL2747.3 .O56 2018 | DDC 211/.8--dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2018018350>

ISBN: 978-1-138-50691-6 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-138-50696-1 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-315-15038-3 (ebk)

Typeset in Bembo

by Taylor & Francis Books

# CONTENTS

List of tables	vi
Acknowledgments	vii
<b>1 Hitching a ride with Arthur Dent</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>2 Setting the record straight</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>3 Snapshots from history</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>4 Facts and figures</b>	<b>58</b>
<b>5 Common complaints</b>	<b>87</b>
<b>6 Reasons and arguments</b>	<b>116</b>
<b>7 On the road again</b>	<b>135</b>
What to read next	157
Glossary of key terms	158
Bibliography	165
Index	177

# TABLES

4.1	Religiosity versus societal success	74
4.2	Atheists in the US, 2001, by age bracket	84
4.3	Atheists in the US, 2001, by region	84
4.4	Atheists in the US, 2001, by political preference	84
4.5	Religiosity and mean IQ, US, 2010	85
5.1	Atheism and political affiliation in the US, 2012	91
7.1	Lack of religious identification, Australia, 1996 and 2001	147
7.2	Lack of religious identification, Australia, 1911–1991	148
7.3	Lack of religious identification, Australia, 2006–2016	149
7.4	Total Australian population (millions), 1911–2016	150

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book is for my atheist friends and colleagues.

I am bound to forget people, but, among those who should be included, there are: Dirk Baltzly, John Bigelow, Russell Blackford, Warren Bonett, Stuart Brock, Greg Dawes, Evan Fales, Steve Gardner, Al Hájek, Alan Hazen, Jakob Hohwy, Frank Jackson, Lindsay Kleeman, Justin Oakley, Graham Priest, Rob Simpson, Michael Smith, Rob Sparrow, Konrad Talmont-Kaminski and Brian Weatherson.

Thank you one and all (including those I have forgotten to name).



This page intentionally left blank

# HITCHING A RIDE WITH ARTHUR DENT

Whether or not this work contains any glaring—or perhaps even fatal—inaccuracies, it ought to have the words DON'T PANIC in large, friendly letters on the cover. Yes, this is a book about atheism and atheists, but, no, there is no reason to be fearful of its contents. Indeed, if we were to engage in ferocious editing of its contents, we could probably boil them down to the following simple message: MOSTLY HARMLESS.

The plan of the book is very simple. There are six substantive chapters, each of which addresses a different topic. We begin by distinguishing atheism from the many things with which it is often conflated. Next, we consider the lives of a dozen different atheists from very different times and places. Then we consider what the social sciences tell us about atheists. With this material behind us, we turn to consider a vast range of objections to atheism. After that, we consider what kinds of things might be said on behalf of atheism. Finally, we wind up with some speculation about what the future of atheism might be.

Chapter 2—‘Setting the record straight’—explains what I do, and don’t, mean by ‘atheism’. On my account, ‘atheism’, ‘theism’, ‘agnosticism’, and ‘innocence’ are all defined in terms of the claim that there are no gods, where ‘god’ is itself defined (very roughly) in terms of having and exercising top-level power. The definition of these four related terms says nothing about the *strength* or *robustness* of belief, or about the *level of interest* in what is believed, or about whether what is believed is considered to be a *desirable* state of affairs, or about whether it is taken to be important what *other* people believe about the existence of gods, or about how the

*intellectual merits* of those who hold dissenting beliefs should be esteemed, or about claims to *proof*, or about claims to *knowledge*. While there are many other terms and distinctions in play in the literature, I find no use for ‘weak atheism’, ‘strong atheism’, ‘igtheism’, ‘apatheism’, and the like. Accepting that *religion* requires communal displays of costly commitments that enable mastery of existential anxieties, I argue that there can be—and are—religious atheists, but there is no serious prospect of developing artificial ‘religions of humanity’.

Chapter 3—‘Snapshots from history’—briefly describes the lives and times of twelve atheists, or alleged atheists, from very different times and places: Ajita Kesakambali, Diagoras of Melos, Wang Chong, Abu al-‘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 selection of atheists to discuss in this chapter is arbitrary; there are thousands of atheists who have contributed to the development of atheism while leading interesting lives. However, the selection does convey something of the diversity of atheists across a whole range of dimensions while also filling in some of the historical background to the emergence of atheism as a serious intellectual standpoint.

Chapter 4—‘Facts and figures’—considers what the social sciences tell us about atheism and atheists. We begin with a discussion of numbers, noting various difficulties that impede attempts to estimate how many atheists there are, or were, in given populations. We then turn to the use of social scientific data in the assessment of stereotypical beliefs about atheists; for example, that atheists are untrustworthy, law-breaking, immoral, nihilistic, selfish, unhappy, emotionally unstable, mentally deficient, sexually deviant, physically unhealthy and possessed of low life expectancy. We conclude that, to the extent that we can find it, relevant social scientific data do not bear out any of these stereotypes. Moreover, when we look at further social scientific data that is relevant to the profiling of atheists, we find that it suggests that atheists may enjoy some advantages relative to total populations.

Chapter 5—‘Common complaints’—canvasses a wide range of objections to atheism: that atheists are fundamentalists; that atheists are political ideologues; that atheists hate gods; that atheism is just another religion; that atheists are anti-religion; that atheists are

immoral; that atheists are ignorant; that atheists are horrible; that atheism is unliveable; and that atheism is irrational. Some of the discussion in this chapter draws on the social scientific data discussed in the preceding chapter; much of it is framed in more normative terms. The final part of the discussion—on the question of whether atheism is irrational—discusses arguments for the existence of gods, and considers the prospects for convicting atheists of logical, or evidential, or prudential lapses from intellectual grace.

Chapter 6—‘Reasons and arguments’—surveys five types of claims that have been made on behalf of atheism: (a) that atheism is the default position; (b) that stating that there are gods is meaningless or logically inconsistent; (c) that best theistic worldviews are logically inconsistent; (d) that best theistic big pictures are logically inconsistent; and (e) that best theistic big pictures are not as good as best atheistic big pictures. Roughly: a *best theistic big picture* is an idealisation of everything that theists believe that is relevant to their theism, and a *best atheistic big picture* is an idealisation of everything that atheists believe that is relevant to their atheism. Anything that is common to competing best theistic and best atheistic big pictures is *data*; *best theistic worldviews* and *best atheistic worldviews* are what you arrive at by omitting data from best theistic and best atheistic big pictures. So, even more roughly, (c) claims that theistic theories are ‘internally’ inconsistent; (d) claims that theistic theories are inconsistent with data; and (e) claims that atheistic theories make a more virtuous fit with data than theistic theories. I argue that there is good reason to *deny* that atheism is the default position, that the claim that there are gods is meaningless or logically inconsistent, that best theistic worldviews are logically inconsistent, and that best theistic big pictures are logically inconsistent. Moreover, I argue that it is ultimately a matter for judgment whether best atheistic big pictures are more theoretically virtuous than best theistic big pictures: this is something about which thoughtful, reflective, intelligent, well-informed people can only agree to disagree.

Chapter 7—‘On the road again’—examines the future prospects for atheism. First, I consider—and reject—the suggestion that the rise of ‘new’ atheism is a straw in the wind suggesting that atheism is on the rise. Next, I consider—and reject—the claims of some philosophers, theologians and sociologists that we currently have good empirical and theoretical reasons for thinking that atheism is

in terminal decline. Finally, I make some observations about just how hard it is to provide accurate predictions about the large-scale future of humanity.

While the book is designed to be read from beginning to end, readers might choose to begin with almost any of the chapters. The one caution that I will give is that I suspect that Chapter 6 is harder to come to grips with than the other chapters. If you are not particularly interested in arguments about the existence of God, then you might do better to *omit* Chapter 6 from your first reading of this book. (A similar caution is in place for §5.10 of Chapter 5, and in particular for §5.10.2 within it.)

Apart from the substantive chapters, this book also includes a guide to further reading, a glossary of key terms, and a bibliography.

## SETTING THE RECORD STRAIGHT

In this chapter, I say what atheism is, and what it is not. Different people have very different conceptions of atheism, and they make very different identifications of atheism with things from which it should be carefully distinguished. Here are some things that people have said about atheism that you might like to think about before you proceed to hear what I have to say on the matter:

We are all atheists about most of the gods that humanity has ever believed in. Some of us just go one god further.

(Dawkins 2004: 150)

To say that atheism is not a religion is the equivalent of saying that anarchy is not really a political creed.

(Jinn 2013: 311)

All children are atheists, they have no idea of God.

(Holbach 1772/1900: paragraph 30)

Atheism is the philosophical equivalent of a fish denying the existence of land because he lacks the means to experience it.

(Snyder undated)

I will return to these quotations at the end of this chapter. (No peeking ahead!)

## 2.1 ATHEISTS AND ATHEISM

Not everyone uses the words ‘atheism’ and ‘atheist’ in the way that I do. According to the way that I use these words, **atheism** is the claim that there are no gods, and **atheists** are those who believe that there are no gods.

Given the way that I use these words, I maintain that it is true that atheists also fail to believe that there are gods. However, there are at least two other groups of people who fail to believe that there are gods.

First, there are what I shall call ‘**innocents**’: those who have never considered the question whether there are gods and who, for this reason, have no opinion on the matter. Typically, innocents are those who do not possess the concept of *god*; they are not able to form the thought that there are gods. Examples of innocents include: infants, those with advanced Alzheimer’s, adults who never acquire the concept of *god*, and so forth. In all of these cases, there is failure to believe that there are gods but not atheism.

Second, there are **agnostics**: people who have considered the question of whether there are gods but have suspended judgment, neither believing that there are no gods nor believing that there is at least one god. While atheists and agnostics (and innocents) are alike in failing to believe that there are gods, atheists are distinguished from agnostics (and innocents) in believing that there are no gods.

Given that **theists** are those who believe that there is at least one god, we have a nice fourfold distinction among beings that are capable of having beliefs: at any given time, each of these beings is either an atheist, or an agnostic, or an innocent, or a theist, and none of these beings falls into more than one of these categories. Perhaps you might think that there is room for a fifth category: benighted beings who believe both that there are no gods and that there is at least one god. It is not clear to me that there could be such beings. Even if there can be such beings, they have no role to play in the further discussion in this book. Perhaps you might think that there can be borderline cases where it just isn’t clear whether someone does or does not believe that there are no gods; at worst, borderline cases add an oft-seen level of complexity to the fourfold distinction.

This nice fourfold distinction is a very recent achievement. There is no widely established use of the word ‘innocent’ for those who have never considered the question whether there are gods, and the word ‘agnostic’ was only introduced into the English language by Thomas Huxley in the second half of the nineteenth century. Moreover, the virtues of adoption of this nice fourfold distinction are obscured by the long history of pejorative use of the terms ‘atheism’ and ‘atheist’. For as far back as we have written records, there is a history of persecution of ‘atheists’ (as there is of ‘apostates’, ‘blasphemers’, ‘heretics’, and the like). Denial of the existence of gods worshipped in particular places at particular times often attracted charges of ‘atheism’ despite the fact that those at whom the charges were levelled believed in other gods. For example, many Romans called early Christians ‘atheists’ because those Christians denied the existence of the Roman gods; and, in the later stages of the empire, many Christians called pagans ‘atheists’ because those pagans denied the existence of the Christian God.

It is clear that we *could* endorse context-sensitive uses of the terms ‘atheist’ and ‘atheism’ that fit historical usage: we could say that, from the standpoint of the Romans, Christians are atheists, and that, from the standpoint of the Christians, Romans are atheists, and so on. But this is all just needless prolixity. Christians and Romans alike believe that there is at least one god; what they disagree about is which gods there are. On the other hand, there are those who claim that there are no gods; those are the people who genuinely deserve the label ‘atheist’.

## 2.2 GODS

My characterisation of ‘atheism’ and ‘atheist’ refers to *gods*. What are they? As is almost always the case, it is easiest to give examples: Allah, Baïame, Cheonjiwang, Dagda, Eledumare, Freya, Guta, Horus, Ishara, Julunggul, Kāne, Lir, Minerva, Nabia, Omoikane, Pundjel, Quetzalcoatl, Ra, Shiva, Tengri, Ukko, Vesta, Wiraqucha, Xolotl, Yahweh, and Zeus. Gods are the kinds of things that can properly be added to this list.

Here is a rough attempt at something more like a traditional definition: **gods** are sufficiently highly ranked supernatural beings



who have and exercise power over the natural universe. This attempt is rough not least because ‘sufficiently highly ranked’ is vague. In many pantheons, there are major gods, minor gods, and ranges of lesser entities that may or may not properly be called ‘gods’.

**Theists**—those who believe that there is at least one god—divide into two classes. **Polytheists** believe that there is more than one god. **Monotheists** believe that there is exactly one god. Typically, monotheists are happy to call the one god in which they believe ‘God’, though they very often have other names for it as well. Some monotheists object to the suggestion that God is a god, typically on the grounds that their God uniquely resists categorisation. Since these monotheists affirm that God has and exercises power over the natural universe and is not under the power of any more highly ranked being, it is hard to see why they balk at the claim that God is a god. But, in any case, we could adjust our definitions to fit their whim: monotheists believe either that God exists, or that there is exactly one god, and atheists believe that there are no gods and that God does not exist. In the interests of brevity, I shall stick with the simpler formulations that I gave initially; those who need them can take the adjustments as read.

## 2.3 *MODES OF BELIEF*

My characterisation of ‘atheists’ says nothing about the strength or robustness of atheistic belief.

Sometimes, we think of belief as an **all-or-nothing** affair: for any given claim, either you believe that claim, or you believe the negation of that claim, or you suspend judgment between the claim and the negation of the claim, or you have never paid any attention to the claim. When we introduced our fourfold distinction, we were thinking about belief in this all-or-nothing way: given the claim that there are no gods, either you are an atheist who believes this claim, or you are a theist who believes the negation of this claim, or you are an agnostic who suspends judgment about this claim, or you are an innocent who has never paid any attention to this claim.

That we think about belief in this all-or-nothing way does not prevent us from drawing distinctions between different ways in

which beliefs can be held. Even though belief is all-or-nothing, beliefs can be held with different kinds of conviction: some atheists are certain that there are no gods; some atheists are very strongly persuaded that there are no gods; some atheists are fairly sure that there are no gods; some atheists are only slightly swayed in favour of there being no gods; and so on. Moreover, even though belief is all-or-nothing, beliefs can be held with different levels of resistance to revision: for some atheists, the belief that there are no gods is unshakeable; for some atheists, the belief that there are no gods is not so deeply rusted on that it could not be given up; for some atheists, the belief that there is no god is one that they might readily lose; and so forth. The two scales that we have just introduced—*strength* and *resilience*—are largely independent: an atheist could be currently certain that there are no gods while nonetheless being quite open to giving up the belief; and an atheist could currently be only slightly swayed in favour of there being no gods while also having no inclination to move away from *that* position.

Sometimes, we think of belief in terms of **credences**: for any given claim, you assign some probability to that claim. When we think of beliefs as credences, we suppose that, if you assign probability  $p$  to a claim, then you (ought to) assign probability  $1 - p$  to the negation of that claim. If an atheist assigns a credence of 0.85 to the claim that there are no gods, then that atheist assigns a credence of 0.15 to the claim that there is at least one god. On the assumption that credences are best represented by single probabilities, an atheist will have a credence that falls somewhere in the interval that is greater than 0.5 and no greater than 1. While there is some loose correspondence between these credences and what we called ‘strength’ in the case of all-or-nothing belief, there is no straightforward mapping from belief as credence to all-or-nothing belief. Most of the following discussion will be framed in terms of all-or-nothing belief.

## 2.4 OTHER ATTITUDES

Belief is not the only attitude that can be taken up towards claims. While atheists are united in *believing* that there are no gods, atheists differ in other attitudes that they take towards the claim that there are no gods.

Some atheists are deeply *interested* in the claim that there are no gods: some atheists devote their lives to investigating this claim, and to arguing about it with theists and agnostics. Other atheists have little or no interest in the claim that there are no gods; having reached the view that there are no gods, these atheists turn their attention to other matters, steering clear of controversies that arise in connection with the claim that there are no gods. And, of course, other atheists fall somewhere on the spectrum that lies between the two positions just mentioned.

Some atheists *want* it to be the case that there are gods. Often enough, these atheists want it to be the case that there are particular gods. Many atheists who were previously theists regret their loss of belief; they would like it to be the case that the gods in which they once believed exist. However, there are atheists who want it to be the case that there are no gods; these atheists typically suppose that the value of our existence—and the value of the universe in which we exist—would be diminished if there were gods. And there are atheists who occupy intermediate positions: for example, there are atheists who simply do not give a fig whether there are certain kinds of gods. (Plausibly, more or less everyone would want it to be the case that particular gods do not exist. Surely very few people *want* it to be the case that Adro, Ahriman, Batara Kala, Coatlicue, Cronobog, Elrik, Hel, Sedna, and Sekhmet exist.)

Some atheists *care* about the attitudes that other people take towards the claim that there are no gods. Often enough, these atheists think that it is bad that there are people who believe that there are gods. Sometimes, though, atheists who care about the attitudes that other people take towards the claim that there are no gods suppose that it is good that there are people who believe that there are gods. Many freethinkers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries thought that belief in gods serves important social functions that might be lost if no one believed in gods. It is not a for-gone conclusion that you want everyone else to share the beliefs that you hold.

Some atheists suppose that all thoughtful, reflective, sufficiently intelligent, sufficiently well-informed people who give serious attention to the matter believe that there are no gods. That is, some atheists suppose that those who do not believe that there are

no gods are *thoughtless*, or *stupid*, or *ignorant*, or perhaps all three together. (It takes no effort to find atheist memes with tags like the following: ‘The human brain is an amazing organ. It keeps on working 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, and 52 weeks a year, from before you leave the womb, right up until you find God.’ ‘If you could reason with theists there would be no theists.’ ‘The lions generally did not like eating monotheists because they were so full of shit.’ ‘Aren’t you a little too old for an imaginary friend?’ Etc.) Other atheists suppose that there are thoughtful, reflective, sufficiently intelligent, sufficiently well-informed people who give serious attention to the matter who fail to believe that there are no gods. These atheists suppose that there can be reasonable disagreement, between thoughtful, reflective, sufficiently intelligent, sufficiently well-informed people, about the existence of gods. Given that there are hundreds of millions of atheists in the world, it should not be the least bit surprising that, while *some* of them are bellicose, bigoted, churlish, cocksure, flippant, graceless, phoney, pretentious, rancorous, smug, spiteful, vain, and so on, there are many atheists who are none of these things.

## 2.5 PROOF AND KNOWLEDGE

Some people suppose that one does not count as an atheist merely because one believes that there are no gods; rather, in order to count as an atheist, one must further suppose that one has *proof* that there are no gods, or that one *knows* that there are no gods, or that one is *certain* that there are no gods. I take it that all of these views are mistaken. True enough, there are some atheists who claim to have proofs that there are no gods; and there are some atheists who think that they are required to make the further claim that they know that there are no gods; and there are some atheists who are certain that there are no gods. But there are many atheists who deny that they have proofs that there are no gods; and there are many atheists who deny that they need to make the further claim that they know that there are no gods; and there are many atheists who do not claim to be certain that there are no gods.

The natural home of proof is the formal sciences: mathematics, logic, statistics, game theory, and the like. There are two features that are required in order for derivations to be proofs. First, each of