A Level Philosophy Bridging Work

Choose as many of the tasks below as you like (one will do!).

1. Make a presentation in whatever way you like (e.g. mind-maps, Google Slides, Google Docs, recording a video of yourself…) about any five of the philosophy key words below.
   * **Philosophy**
   * **Metaphysics**
   * **Epistemology**
   * **Logic**
   * **Logical fallacy**
   * **Reason**
   * **Empiricism**
   * **Rationalism**
   * **A priori**
   * **A posteriori**
   * **Syllogism**
   * **Predicate**
   * **Tautology**
   * **Cosmological**
   * **Teleological**
   * **Ontological**

2. Make a presentation in whatever way you like (as above) about the three key thinkers below. Include biographical information and some of their philosophical ideas.

* + **Plato**
  + **Aristotle**
  + **Rene Descartes**

3. Read *Meditations on First Philosophy* by **Rene Descartes**. You can search and read this text online if you don’t want to find a book copy of it. Take some notes on what Descartes is trying to say and your own thoughts on his ideas.

4. Search ‘Rational Animations’ or go to <https://www.youtube.com/@RationalAnimations> and watch as many of the videos as you like (one will do!). Make a slide / doc etc. to briefly explain your thoughts on the ideas presented in the video.

5. Search ‘The Biggest Ideas In Philosophy’ or go to <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WpM-QjkNufw> and watch the video. Make a slide / doc etc. to briefly explain your thoughts on the ideas presented in the video.

6. Read ‘Atheism on Trial’ (below) from ‘Philosophy Now’ magazine. Summarise the key points and briefly explain your thoughts on the article. (You can do this as a slide / doc - however you like).

# **Atheism on Trial**

### Stephen Anderson sternly judges a *cause célèbre*.

There was a time – some years ago – when to profess disbelief in a Supreme Being could be hazardous to one’s health. You could get hacked to pieces with a scimitar or boiled in oil. Neither the public nor the authorities had much tolerance.

Atheists today never tire of reminding us of that, as if the follies of distant ancestors should make *us* blush. But though in times past publishing one’s skeptical doubts could be daring, it is so no longer. Yesterday’s radical position is today’s orthodoxy. Today, atheism has taken its comfortable seat by the fire and has its feet up. It has *de facto* control of education, the universities, and the academic press. It is the go-to position of our media and the controlling assumption of political discourse. Popular atheist authors have no trouble churning out bestsellers and culling invitations to speak. Atheism has never been so respectable.

That is why perhaps we now ought to pause and ask if it has actually *earned* the easy place it enjoys. For modern philosophy is, among other things, an iconoclastic activity. It’s about examining life, about challenging common assumptions, and about pulling apart the edifices of thought, replacing unexamined ideas with sound thinking and good reasons. That goes for today’s comfortable orthodoxies, no less than for those of the past.

Maybe the really daring thing today is not *being* an atheist, but *challenging* atheism. It can certainly be risky, and can provoke a whole lot of knee-jerk animus, even if one supplies good arguments to back one’s case. Iconoclasts are rarely celebrated in their own day. But in philosophy, no one gets a ‘free ride’ – every worldview, whether popular or marginal, can be brought before the tribunal of reason to present its credentials. And the dominant ones ought to be brought there first. It’s atheism’s turn.

## **What Is Atheism?**

Before we begin the trial, perhaps we ought to clarify the case. What is ‘atheism’?

In answering, let us observe the *principle of charity*. This means we ought to address an opposing view in its strongest and most representative form, rather than in any of its weaker or less representative forms. In charity, then, we must ask ourselves, ‘What is the strongest form of atheism?’

To begin with, we could consider a basic definition. ‘Atheism’ is clearly ‘a-’ plus ‘theism’. Theism is from the Greek for God (or gods), of course; and the ‘a-’ prefix is the Greek negation of whatever it’s prefixing. Thus atheism means simply ‘no God’. It claims there exists no kind of god.

That’s basic. But we might ask, ‘Is it really necessary to understand atheism as so categorical? Can’t we make room for softer versions of skepticism, so as to be more inclusive?’

That does indeed sound charitable. But I’m going to suggest a couple of reasons why I think atheists will surely want to reject that. Firstly, they are bound to realize that there is a perfectly good name for anyone who wants to opt for a less-than-firm stand on the question of the existence of a Supreme Being: they’re called ‘agnostics’. That camp is divided between ‘hard agnostics’, who want to lean hard in the direction of denying the existence of God while leaving the door open a crack, and ‘soft agnostics’, who perhaps would *like* to believe that some sort of Divine Being exists, but who find the evidence still unpersuasive. But secondly, and more importantly, including agnostics in their position is going to give away the game at the start, as any thinking atheist will quickly realize.

Why do I say that? Well, simply because ‘agnosticism’ means ‘not-knowing’ (*gnosis* is old Greek for ‘knowledge’) That is to say, it is a *personal* declaration of doubt, not a *categorical* one. In its strongest form, agnosticism says something like, “I really, really, really strongly don’t think there is any God, because I’ve seen no evidence anywhere near sufficient to make me think there is one.” But the savvy atheist is going to detect the problem: as a personal declaration, it fails to bind anyone else.

Does Denmark exist? How do you know?

Nyhavn, Copenhagen © Alphalphi 2005

## **Agnostic Limits**

Let me illustrate. I have never been to Denmark. Call me, if you will, a ‘Denmark-agnostic.’ I have seen brochures that show a pretty country; but we all know about Photoshop fakery, so I remain doubtful. I’ve eaten some nice cheese that purported to be from Denmark, but I don’t know how far one can trust the word of cheese. My friends claim to have visited Denmark, and they report having a lot of fun. I have even been told that my ancient ancestors may well have hailed from thence. Still, I have no first-hand evidence that any of this is true.

Should I declare against the existence of Denmark until further notice? Of course that is silly. The fact that I have not personally been to Denmark doesn’t count in the question of its existence. Whether it’s actually *there* is one question; whether or not I have *certainty about it personally* is another. There is simply no reason to jump to the conclusion that because I don’t know a thing, no one else does either. That’s not sound philosophy. Furthermore, is not my skepticism willfully stupid? Suppose my friends really *are* reliable, or the cheese really *is* telling the truth. Suppose I have a personal opportunity to *find* better evidence, or even to visit Denmark – and I refuse, because I can’t be absolutely sure beforehand that it’s there: how silly would that be?

Similarly, the person who declares herself agnostic has only said something about her personal certainty, not about the existence of God. And that lack of certainty is met with a satisfactory rejoinder if someone else can honestly claim to have some real personal knowledge of God, or can describe a way she could obtain better information. But the agnostic has no logical reason at all to insist that *no one else* can possibly have such knowledge.

Agnosticism, then, does not sponsor the kind of firm commitment implicit in atheism. That is why a sensible atheist is going to want to shed the association (even with ‘hard agnosticism’). It does mean that their ranks may be substantially reduced but the atheist isn’t going to want to see his or her fundamental claim sandbagged at the gate.

I also think that the atheist is going to bridle at the suggestion that he or she is less than fully convinced. After all, does not atheism sell itself as logical, rational, evidentiary, truthful and so on? Does it not call the various forms of theism irrational, superstitious, and benighted?

If I’m wrong about this, I’m open to being challenged: maybe atheists don’t mind pulling the deadweight of those who may be less than firm in their metaphysical doubts. But the charity principle seems to suggest we must accord atheism the firmness its most passionate advocates want it to have. Thus we have to take atheists at their word, understanding their claim as being that there is ‘no God.’ Period.

## **What Kind of ‘No-God’?**

If that’s fair enough, then let’s move on. The next step is to study the nature of atheism’s claim. If the fundamental affirmation of genuine atheism is that there is ‘no God,’ then what sort of ‘God’ is it that the atheist aims at denying?

Again, the principle of charity must come into play. In ancient Rome, Christians were persecuted as ‘atheists’ because they failed to believe in *enough* gods. But I doubt very much that sort of characterization of their position would satisfy modern atheists. So we must be clear: do atheists wish to deny only one God, or two gods, or the entire spectrum of possible gods?

I think it must be all. I don’t know of any atheist who would be happy to think that Zeus doesn’t exist but Ares does; that Thor and Loki don’t exist but Allah does; that Yahweh doesn’t exist but the pantheon of Hindu gods is real. For a true atheist, I think *all* gods, no matter of what name or nature, have to be out: and I think I’m staying in the true atheist spirit in saying so.

For that reason, it really can’t matter very much to an atheist what sort of characteristics may be attributed to the various gods that he or she thinks don’t exist. He or she can’t care much whether we’re talking about the supposedly loving, saving God of Judaism or Christianity, the reputedly compassionate Allah, the putative universal god of the pantheists, the indifferent God of the deists, the cruel deities of pagan tribal lore, or even the malevolent demiurgic god of the gnostics: all have to be equally out – good ones, evil ones, and indifferent ones alike. No gods.

But if this is true, then this thorough-going atheism can no longer get any support from one of the New Atheist’s favourite objections; namely, that things in this world are messed up, and this negates any possibility of there being a good God. For the apparent disorder of the world *could* rather be evidence of an evil or uncaring God. But these possibilities cannot matter here, since atheism has to deny the existence of even an *indifferent* or *evil* Supreme Being. This makes the famous ‘Argument from Evil’ so beloved by New Atheists simply off topic: the existence of evil or injustice does not count as evidence against gods of every possible kind, and leaves harsh, judgmental or indifferent gods as possible. (Though maybe it can even be answered with some explanation that allows for a *benevolent* God, such as the argument from free human will). But atheism says ‘No gods at all’ – good ones, evil ones, whatever. And ‘evil,’ whatever it is, must then also merely be a contingent fact of an impersonal (i.e. godless) universe.



Even Egyptian gods are ruled out by atheism.

## Atheism & Evidence

So atheists say that no god of any kind exists. But we must now ask, do they do so merely out of raw will, or fear, or personal preference, or private taste, or do they sincerely hope to do this on an *evidentiary* basis? The atheists I meet say, “We disbelieve because of the *evidence*.” Usually, they insist that something like history, science, truth or logic is on their side; and that something like credulity, superstition, and foolishness is essentially on the other side. But here, we need to pause to consider rather than assume the nature of appropriate evidence.

Every question we can ask implies a certain kind of evidence necessary for a conclusive answer. If we ask a question like, “What is the rate of an object’s acceleration produced by gravity near the Earth’s surface,” we can design a series of tests. We could drop objects of different weight and similar shape from the same height, and thereby probably arrive at a calculation of around 10m/s2. If we cared to be absolutely precise, we could perform the experiment with objects of widely different sizes and shapes, and do the whole thing in a vacuum to eliminate air friction. We would then discover that gravity pulls objects toward the Earth at a more exact rate of 9.81m/s2. Having then done the complete set of appropriate experiments we would be in a position to know what the evidence was really leading us to believe.

That’s what it means to say we hold a conviction on evidence. What constitutes ‘adequate evidence’ has to be decided on the basis of the ambition of the theory. For atheism, the statement is that “Evidence shows that there is no God.” We need to think now: what is appropriate evidence there? The ‘God’ concept is a lot more complicated than the ‘gravity’ concept. Many theists believe God is eternal, all-knowing, all-powerful, omnipresent. They also believe that He transcends the limits of time and space. They believe He has existed historically, and will continue to exist indefinitely; and so on. We must ask, then, “What is sufficient evidence to rule out the existence of such a being?”

As with the gravity example, one would have to conduct an investigation that fits the scope of the subject. It would certainly not be enough to decide the matter on the basis of personal preference or taste. Nor would it do to make a perfunctory personal search of the local terrain, and then declare victory. For an evidentiary denial of the God concept implies much more substantial proof. One would need to rule out *every* reasonable possibility of positive evidence for his existence.

How is that to be done? Can we go everywhere, at all times, and see everything? And if we could, must such an entity necessarily present Himself upon the whim of the experimenter, to be crammed into a beaker or pinched in calipers, so to speak? (Some theists have argued that, having a sovereign will, God disdains to do parlour tricks to entertain skeptics – but that is another matter.)

If indeed a description of God includes the sort of attributes I listed, then the atheists’ claim of evidence against His existence is completely unfounded. Adequate evidence for atheism would require the observer to go everywhere, at all times, see everything, test everything, and eliminate all possibilities – then, having found that God was neither here nor there, neither in time nor in any dimension of space, neither on earth or anywhere around the universe, not in history and not in eternity – only then could he or she justifiably claim to have sufficient evidence to warrant atheism! (A massive irony issues from this: if anyone had actually *done* the tests required to be able to claim atheism honestly on sufficient evidence, that would mean that he or she had been everywhere, at all times, and under all conditions; in short, it would mean that *there was indeed a God – and it would be the atheist!* Obviously, this is silly. When any claim gets to the point where its success *entails* its failure, it is self-defeating, and hence, illogical.)

What all this means is that the ceiling on the God hypothesis is simply too high for atheism. It is not *possible* to be an atheist on adequate scientific evidence – the claim is preposterous. What kind of an intellectual belief sets epistemological standards so high for itself that no-one can possibly meet them? And if atheism has *not* met its own evidentiary standard, how rational can it actually be?

## **The Negation Problem**

But the situation for atheism gets much worse. For not only does it entail a ridiculous evidentiary claim, but it has also chosen to frame its position in a particularly unfortunate way: as bound to *show a negative*. It is ‘a-’ + ‘theism’ – that is, the negation of the positive claim that God exists. It affirms that He *does not*. By doing this, atheism has put *itself* badly behind the eight ball; for negatives can be extremely hard to prove.

Okapis trying to hide

Unsuccessful ninja okapis © Raul654, 2005

To see why, it will help if we take a brief aside on the proof of negatives. Let us suppose that there is reputed to be an animal called an okapi. It is rare and strange, and being an a-okapi-ist, I do not believe in them. Some more optimistic souls among my scientific colleagues insist that it is not: we both set out to prove our cases – I, to prove there are no okapis; my colleagues, to prove there are.

Now ask yourself: what sort of evidence will be necessary if I am to win? It’s not impossible. I will have to travel to all the places where an okapi could be found – the deep jungles, the grassy plains, the mountain valleys, and perhaps as well the zoos, the private collections and the illegal markets for animals. Having done all that, I could say, “I was right; no okapi exists.” Now, in contrast, ask yourself this: what would my colleagues, the okapi-believers have to do? How far would they have to go, and how many okapis would they have to locate in order to falsify my skepticism? That’s right: one. One single, solid, verifiable counter-case would be sufficient to bring my whole okapi-skepticism down.

You see, by positioning themselves as defending a negative, atheists have put themselves at a horrible disadvantage. If it should turn out to be the case that *just one* of the various sources of religious revelation claimed by the many varieties of theists should turn out to be true, if *even one* of the many phenomena attributed to the Supreme Being should turn out to be genuine, or if *just one* of the people on the earth had ever had a real experience with God, then atheism would be decisively defeated. And this explains yet another reason why atheists are forced to pretend they’ve rationally eliminated the possibility God exists – they are terribly vulnerable to disproof. Only if *all* religions are bunkum, only if *all* believers are deluded, only if *all* Gods are eliminated is atheism secure.

Worse still, atheism cannot win its case by default. Even if the okapi-believers are unable to produce conclusive evidence, all that rationally follows from insufficient evidence is *agnosticism* about okapis, not a-okapi-ism. A rational person has to stay open-minded and ready to review the case again if new evidence should ever appear.

Some atheists think that their view bears no burden to prove anything at all. Not true: at the very minimum, it owes its adherents a proper defense for its most basic claim, that is, the claim of the non-existence of any gods. And this, as we have seen, it simply cannot do.

## **Atheists Dodging the Bullet**

Now, we have been trying to be kind to atheism, not going beyond what it claims. We have done our best to observe the principle of charity in describing its essential features. However, our search has forced us to a conclusion that may sound somewhat uncharitable, and there is no longer a way to avoid it: atheism is irrational.

I am not saying that just because atheism is irrational we must all become theists immediately – various forms of agnosticism are still viable. It is however true that we have already detected significant vulnerabilities in these alternatives, and that is why we did not burden atheists with them in the first place. This has spared atheism instant humiliation, perhaps; but we have not been able to save it. Atheism simply isn’t a rational choice.

Its chief proponents know it. I can think of no atheist of recent times more celebrated than the late Antony Flew. But he died a Deist, leaving an account of his transformation titled, *There is No A God*. What about contemporary atheism’s most famous proponent, Richard Dawkins? He’s not much help: he’s realized the problem and publicly declared himself a ‘convinced agnostic.’ (Witness it for yourself: [youtube.com/watch?v=dfk7tW429E4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dfk7tW429E4)). This, of course, raises the question why, on other occasions, Professor Dawkins still allows himself to be called an atheist. Perhaps he senses that agnosticism simply cannot offer the kind of serious resistance to the idea of God that he wants to promote; and as a rhetorical flourish, atheism makes better press. But whenever he is pressed on the irrationality of that term, you can see that he lapses into calling himself a ‘convinced agnostic’ instead.

It clearly does not escape *his* attention (as it ought not to escape ours) that atheism cannot be rationally defended. Even when we treat it most charitably, what we end up with is the realization that it is nothing more than a posture of empty dogmatism.

## **The Verdict**

Why then, we might ask, is atheism so popular? Why does it enjoy so much grace in the public eye, and why is it so often the default position in the academy? The motives cannot be philosophical, for atheism is not a position that can be compelled or sustained by logic. It is perhaps tempting to observe that something more visceral is at work. Ignorance? Evasion? Faddism? Or posturing? (After all, there is a considerable difference between wanting to *appear* intellectual and actually *being* intellectual). Whatever the case, it’s hard not to see that reason has left the building.

As for the Supreme Being, if He has seemed reticent to weigh in on this debate, it is not too surprising. Those who claim to know something about Him have often insisted that God is particularly uninterested in bowing to the demands of the hard-hearted cynic. As the *Tanakh* says, “The fool has said in his heart, ‘There is no God’.” That looks justified. Even by our most charitable account, we have seen that atheism is a disingenuous, bombastic claim to certainty, one without evidence or logic. What then can one call it but foolishness?

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