# A theory of atheology. Reason, critique, and beyond

**Abstract**

The “new atheists” have revived discussions around the role that atheism plays in philosophy. This article proposes to describe this atheistic challenge as a three-fold movement: a negative a-theology, a positive atheo-logy and a critical metatheology. This description of “atheology” allows for a more nuanced and detailed analysis of the importance of atheism in philosophy – with clear implications for ethical and political thought. It challenges the claim by “new atheists” that atheism is to be grounded in scientific rationality alone; proposes a conception of atheism as a *belief in the non-existence of God*; and situates the role of metatheology within a large critical tradition – through Kant, Hegel, Marx and Nietzsche. Finally, this article speculates about the possibility of a spirituality of atheism, pictured as an alternative to a return to orthodoxy.

**Note**

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**Introduction**

Since Georges Bataille's “Somme athéologique”[[1]](#footnote-1) and Michel Onfray's “Traité d'athéologie,”[[2]](#footnote-2) the term *atheology* has entered our vocabularies. Despite the plurality of atheistic perspectives, this article shows that this concept of atheology illustrates a continuity between various strands of philosophical atheism. Moving beyond the school of “new atheists” (Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett), it proposes to show the role that *reason* and *critique* play in atheistic thought, as well as point to speculative developments in philosophy that propose new areas of investigation. The theory of atheology proposed here is three-fold. In the first instance, atheology is analysed as a negative or reactive phenomenon. A negative atheology (a-theology) is still predominant in much atheist thinking. Scholarly analysis, often done by theologians, proposes to portray atheism as a parasitic phenomenon that lives off the meaning of God being denied. But much of the work of the new atheists also falls all-too-easily within this category of negative atheology. While there are potent attacks upon theology, conceptions of God, and religions that come out of these critiques, they often fall short of good atheology as the claims put forward – particularly on the role that scientific rationalism has to explain *all* phenomena and provide *evidence* for atheism – do not stand scrutiny. In the second instance, a positive theory of atheology is highlighted (atheo-logy). In particular, the movement away from scientific reason when it comes to making philosophical claims about atheology is explored, and atheology is exposed a particular belief. By situating atheology in the realm of *doxa*, this part shows that a movement away from dogmatic atheology is possible and desirable. As a *belief in the non-existence of God,* positive atheology desacralizes belief and reclaims its realm against that of faith. Once this move has been made, the power of *critique* within atheology will become clearer, as it always depends on contingent claims. Through Kantian, Hegelian, Marxian and finally Nietzschean critique, a third atheology (metatheology) becomes possible. An agonistic atheology is here sketched, through the dramatic event of the death of God. In a world where the belief in the Christian God is no longer believable, Nietzsche offers a condition of possibility through contingency and pluralism. This contingent pluralism finally opens up the possibility of an atheistic spirituality, a sense of depth and fullness that demands a heroic ethics.

**A-theology**

Atheism as a label carries with it negative connotations. Historically it was an epithet of accusation (imposed upon many who were not atheists, such as Socrates or second century Christians[[3]](#footnote-3)), and atheists were considered as reactionary. Atheism is still considered as parasitic by many, including Michael Buckley, whose seminal study of the rise of modern atheism portrays it as a doctrine denying a particular theology which had become concerned with proofs of the existence of God in the seventeenth century.[[4]](#footnote-4) This common preconception is difficult to dispel, even for contemporary atheism, as the question of which understanding of (G/g)od(s) is being rejected remains at the forefront of atheology as a-theology.[[5]](#footnote-5)

When eighteenth century atheists such as Jean Meslier[[6]](#footnote-6) and the baron d’Holbach[[7]](#footnote-7) defined the “God” they did not believe in as having the attributes of omnibenevolence, omnipotence and omniscience, they were using the attributes of God put forward in their day by theists. The onus of the definition of God can never rest on atheism – which denies the existence of deities – but will always be dependent on those who believe in God’s existence. Similarly, when the “new atheists” negate the idea of God, they negate the one that is commonplace today. Richard Dawkins’ “God Hypothesis” is that “there exists a superhuman, supernatural intelligence who deliberately designed and created the universe and everything in it, including us.”[[8]](#footnote-8) Of course Dawkins is partly attacking a straw man here, and this is the main line of critique by theologians. John Haught, in his response to the new atheists, is adamant that they are responding to “a now-obsolete theology,”[[9]](#footnote-9) and certainly there is little engagement with the kind of theological tradition that Haught is coming from. He defines his own background as a “theistic religious tradition, that is, one that professes belief in a personal God, a God of infinite power and love, who creates and sustains the world […, where an] essentially biblical understanding of God holds that the divine mystery can be approached only by way of faith, trust, and hope.”[[10]](#footnote-10) There is little engagement with this tradition by the new atheists, who for the most part argue that science is best placed to answer questions about the nature of the world, and replace faith with reason.

This focus on “rationalistic” explanations by new atheists can still be described as part of a negative atheology. This atheological critique is multi-faceted, and based on a variety of philosophical and scientific arguments in favor of the non-existence of God. There are arguments aimed at refuting theological claims, such as the argument from design, the argument from causation, or the ontological argument, and arguments aimed at providing positive “proofs” for atheism, such as pointing out divine hiddenness, divine impossibility, the meaninglessness of religious discourse or the problem of evil.[[11]](#footnote-11) All of these remain rather *reactive*, and often confuse a variety of concepts, blending them into one another – such as God, religion, religious experience, theology, creationism, etc*.*

Dawkins, however, wants to maintain that “scientific reason” can disprove theological claims, and say something in favour of atheism. For him, the problem of the existence of God is a scientific question, at least to the extent that science can make probabilistic claims about it.[[12]](#footnote-12) Daniel Dennett follows a similar, although slightly more nuanced approach to the scientific study of God and religion. He argues that an interdisciplinary study of religion is essential to understanding its relevance and significance; precisely because “religion is natural as opposed to *supernatural.*”[[13]](#footnote-13) And here there is certainly a role for sociological, historical, psychological, and for political analyses of religion. Yet this approach remains problematic in some of its claims. Although scientific method has a clear role in a fight against superstition, it may be unable to make any claims in favour of *atheism* per se, or against more subtle theologies. This is certainly what Charles Taylor reproaches to this scientific perspective in defence of atheism, as it “only appears so within a certain value-laden construal of agency; […] in which disengaged scientific enquiry is woven into a story of courageous adulthood, to be attained through a renunciation of the more “childish” comforts of meaning and beatitude, that the death of God story appears obvious.”[[14]](#footnote-14) This approach is very condescending to religious thought in general, and may in fact be *bad* science. Dawkins’ claim that “evolution *is* a fact”[[15]](#footnote-15) is one such example of bad science, as it is not a fact, but the best falsifiable theory we have to explain the facts.

However, both Dawkins and Dennett agree that there are limitations to the scientific method. These limits, however, do not require nor justify a return to religion. The fact that the model of agency that scientific examination requires cannot accommodate all forms of knowledge does not necessarily entail that religion can fill in the gap. Dawkins is particularly adamant about this point, highlighting that one of the major challenges that science poses to religion is that it is constantly expanding its field of enquiry, leaving religious knowledge to fill in the gaps. A “gap theology”[[16]](#footnote-16) emerges, especially exemplified in the theory of intelligent design. An incomplete fossil record, in other words, is picked up by theologians who want to stress the possibility (if not the truth) of an intelligent designer, but new fossil discoveries are slowly reducing the scope for such an argument. If Dawkins’ claim that “evolution *is* a fact”[[17]](#footnote-17) is weak from a scientific perspective, the theory of intelligent design is *not scientific at all* – it makes no falsifiable claim. Accepting the limitations of science, in other words, does not necessarily entail a return to religious explanation. But science, *pace* Dawkins, cannot justify atheism.

Scientific claims, I thus argue, are only helpful against superstitious behaviour. The work of B.F. Skinner, who demonstrated that pigeons are capable of exhibiting superstitious behaviour, is one such example. The birds acquired the belief that turning, twisting, pecking or flapping their wings would influence the release of food, which was in fact released at random intervals. “There are many analogies in human behavior”, Skinner argued, such as “[r]ituals for changing one’s luck at cards.”[[18]](#footnote-18) As Dennett points out, though, these attacks on superstition are not necessarily arguments against religion itself, or arguments in favour of atheism.[[19]](#footnote-19) Scientific rationality has a role to play, but only with respect to superstitious belief. It cannot answer the question of the existence of God, either for or against.

**Atheo-logy**

The new atheists would oppose the above classification of their thought as a negative face of atheology, and would insist that they are bringing about a positive theory. In many ways they are. The scientific rationalism that they are building upon may be bad a-theology in that it pretends to prove something that cannot be proven, but it might still be good science. The baron d’Holbach had similarly built an atheistic philosophy that attempted to build a materialist epistemology and humanist utilitarian ethics that provided alternatives to the Catholic Church’s theology and asceticism.[[20]](#footnote-20) A full exploration of these positive atheologies lies outside the realm of this philosophical exploration of atheology presented here, and would merit an exploration of their own. Yet they point to two features that act as challenges to a theory of atheology – the dogmatic potential of these theories and their plurality.

The accusation of dogmatic atheism is one that merits to be dealt with seriously. Does atheism hold a faith of its own?[[21]](#footnote-21) Is there, in the words of Derrida, a “theology of atheistic metaphysics”?[[22]](#footnote-22) The accusation is deep-cutting, as it is precisely a critique of dogmatism and faith that drives much atheistic thinking. A certain faith in reason, in truth achieved through scientific method, or even a belief in grammar – to paraphrase Nietzsche[[23]](#footnote-23) – can act as poor substitutes for religious dogmatism from an atheological perspective. There is, within atheology, an answer to this question – through an affirmation of belief desacralizing belief.

Where a negative atheology was concerned with the *denial* of the existence of God, or *disbelief*, a positive atheology now turns towards a positive affirmation of belief. To avoid the accusation of dogmatism, atheology can make a claim that is less categorical than its negative strands, away from those atheists who affirm that “God does not exist,” towards a more *critical* understanding of reason. Michel Onfray is the best example of this attempt to do so from a positive atheological perspective, as his critique of “reasonable and reasoning reason”[[24]](#footnote-24) surfaces repeatedly in his work. Such use of reason is attacked on several fronts, but Onfray is particularly critical of two aspects of it. Firstly, it is its role as an instrument of social control that is being attacked,[[25]](#footnote-25) when a certain type of rationality acts as a curb on creativity. One can look at the works of Foucault on the power-knowledge complex as an example of such rational scientific control.[[26]](#footnote-26) Secondly, the scientific framework depends on the conviction on which the supposedly convictionless scientific mind based itself. As Nietzsche puts it, “[t]he question whether *truth* is necessary must get an answer in advance, the answer ‘yes’”, which means that the scientist mush prejudge the higher value of an “unconditional will to truth”[[27]](#footnote-27) in himself. Despite these two attacks – on the disciplining nature of scientific reason, and on the presupposed will to truth behind science, neither Nietzsche nor Onfray oppose scientific reason categorically. They only point to its limitations, as they accept that this mode of reasoning does tend towards truth – albeit truth of a particular kind. But the quest of the scientist is no longer perceived as neutral: it relies on a prior conviction. Equally, the quest of atheism can no longer be seen as neutral – as the *absence* of belief – but as grounded in a belief, albeit one that is thought to be more coherent than its alternatives, a *belief in the non-existence of God*.

There is a re-thinking of belief that is going on here. Belief refers to a conviction, more-or-less permanent, about something that cannot be otherwise proven with certainty. Closer to *doxa* (opinion) than to *pistis* (faith), belief recognises the contingent nature of its belief – and atheology as belief is not immune from this. One can speculate that the rise of atheism in modern thought, as opposed to its absence in ancient thought, is that an atheology makes little sense in a polytheist world since there is no theology to oppose. As such it is contingent, but nonetheless affirms itself as better than its alternatives. It is precisely this contingent nature of atheology that Slavoj Žižek reacts against. Žižek refuses to surrender the ground of political advocacy to those who relegate it to the domain of *doxa.* Yet his insistence on a “politics of Truth” (based on Leninism) is too dogmatic for many atheists.[[28]](#footnote-28) Atheology as a belief precisely attempts to avoids the pitfalls of Truth, Divine Unity, and the One True Faith of which Žižek’s works still provide echoes. The recognition of this contingency, *pace* Žižek, builds an atheology in its positive sense as one belief amongst many, a belief that remains at least partly decided on concepts, core values and reactions to other doctrines that are themselves contingent.

Yet a clear separation must be drawn between this atheological *doxa* and faith. Almost all atheists react to faith negatively. Onfray calls it “blind belief,” Dawkins “belief without evidence,” and Dennett “blind faith.”[[29]](#footnote-29) One of the strongest contemporary attacks on faith comes from Sam Harris’ *The End of Faith*. This work is an advocacy, a tract of political theory, more than an analysis of current trends. Its central argument is that faith is harmful – in a variety of different ways – and must be combated politically. Faith is perceived as the turning point from which “Jesus' principal message of loving one's neighbor and turning the other cheek” was turned into “a doctrine of murder and rapine.” [[30]](#footnote-30) Without religious faith, the message of new atheists goes, the world would be a much better place. This attack remains unconvincing for religious believers, of course, as it misportrays faith by focusing on fundamentalist faith.[[31]](#footnote-31) Against such a portrayal of faith, Haught goes back to Tillich, for whom faith is an “ultimate concern,” and is to be opposed to the idolatrous “faith” that the atheists, along with theologians, criticise in some strands of fundamentalisms.[[32]](#footnote-32)

The atheological attack on faith is not to be dismissed altogether, however. Ricœur argues that the “religious significance of atheism” is in fact this fundamental challenge that atheism (through Nietzsche and Freud) poses to faith.[[33]](#footnote-33) The old faith, which was once understood as blind belief (as belief that refuses the evidence of the senses), is no longer plausible even in theology. A positive atheology, that reclaims belief by desacralizing it, has fundamentally altered the possibility of religious faith. It has certainly not annihilated it, and Ricœur is adamant that a new, tragic faith is both possible and needed after the atheist challenge.[[34]](#footnote-34) But it has severely limited the kind of faith that is intellectually defensible.

A further expansion on this critique of faith is the differentiation made by Daniel Dennett between belief *per se* and “*belief in belief,*”[[35]](#footnote-35) which is analogous to faith. Fundamentally, it is the importance of *authority* behind *faith* that Dennett is being critical of.

*“Most* of what you (think you) know you just accept on faith. By this I do *not* mean the faith of religious belief, but something much simpler: the practical, always revisable policy of simply trusting the first thing that comes to your mind without obsessing over why it does so.”[[36]](#footnote-36)

Belief is as much a feature of the secular and of the atheistic mind than it is a feature of the religious mind. Believing in God is an act of faith, but believing in the usefulness of belief in God is from an altogether different category. “People who moreover believe in belief in God are sure that belief in God exists (and who could doubt that?), and they think that this is a good state of affairs, something to be strongly encouraged and fostered wherever possible [...] It is entirely possible to be an atheist and believe in belief in God.”[[37]](#footnote-37) Belief in belief, for Dennett, becomes an enemy of the critical inquiring mind, as it builds barriers to critical analysis around faith that prevent a serious and thorough analysis of such beliefs. Even the belief in science is open to this critique, as “the belief in the integrity of scientific procedures is almost as important as the actual integrity.”[[38]](#footnote-38) Science is not immune from a belief in belief, as a critical appraisal of our belief in science soon highlights cracks in the belief in value-neutral rationalist accounts of scientific understanding and method.

“Do you believe that *e* = *mc2*? I do. […] What we are doing, in these instances, is not really *believing the proposition.* For that, you'd have to *understand* the proposition. What we are doing is believing that *whatever proposition is expressed by the formula "e* = *mc2"* is true.”[[39]](#footnote-39)

For Dennett, there remains a fundamental difference between belief in belief in God, and this belief in propositions of science; in that religious belief is not always belief at all. Instead, Dennett argues that religion is a separate kind of belief in that it demands a *profession of faith*. The accusation is that there is no understanding by religious believers of what they are professing.

“[u]nlike academic professors, religious professors (not just priests, but all the faithful) may not either understand or believe what they are professing. They are *just* professing, because that is the best they can do, and they are *required* to profess.”[[40]](#footnote-40)

It is the acceptance of authority, uncritically, that is once again the challenge here. Inasmuch as science rests on a belief, Dennett concludes, it is fundamentally different from other beliefs in that there is no requirement to profess.

Atheology as a belief may remain in the field of *doxa,* but it does not require a profession of *faith*. In demanding a particular outlook towards life – one based on critique and scepticism rather than a “culture of credulity,”[[41]](#footnote-41) atheology draws a sharp boundary between these two concepts. *Belief* in the power of critique is saved from the uncritical demands of *faith*.

**Metatheology**

The power of critique becomes immanent to an atheology. Immanuel Kant had already proposed an analysis of critique in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, where he was concerned with moving past the dichotomy found in epistemology at the time between rationalists and empiricists.[[42]](#footnote-42) The first *Critique* is an attempt to move beyond the limitations of scientific reasoning – whether one accepts its rationalist or empiricist premises – by accepting that the thing-in-itself exists, while simultaneously denying that reason is ever able to know it.[[43]](#footnote-43) As Strawson notes, this movement was already partly present in the thought of Locke. “The way in which objects *do* appear, what characteristics they appear as having, depends in part upon the constitution of the being to which they appear. Where that constitution different, the same things would appear differently.”[[44]](#footnote-44) Hume’s challenge will build on this insight, as he “denies the possibility of any empirical knowledge at all of those things, as they are in themselves, which affect us to produce sensible experience.”[[45]](#footnote-45) Kant then radicalized the anti-epistemic argument. But Kant’s *Critique* does not, by itself, provide support for an atheology, as he had postulated free will, God and the immortality of the soul.

Atheology can be critically understood as a negation of a negation. This is, in essence, also Hegel's argument against Kant. Kant's return to dualism, through the differentiation of noumena and phenomena, is rejected by Hegelian dialectic,[[46]](#footnote-46) which attempts to build a bridge between the two dualistic positions by appealing to consciousness as a means of creating reality.[[47]](#footnote-47) “The problem of the thing-in-itself and its irrationality falls away if one accepts Hegel’s principle of the identity of thinking and Being.”[[48]](#footnote-48) The argument that atheism is a negation of a negation can nicely fit within a Hegelian dialectic that is turned on its head. There had been a kind of “thesis,” which the “atheistic” peoples of Tahiti or the works of some of the Ancients, particularly Epicurus, represent. On top of this thesis, comes a dualistic, Platonic and Christian conception of the world as a kind of “anti-thesis” with its own ontological claims; and finally atheology emerges as a kind of “synthesis,” whereby the immanence of the thesis and the rationalism of the anti-thesis are taken on board by an empirico-rationalist atheism. Of course, Hegel would have been horrified at such an application of his dialectic. It can however allow us to think of the complex relation in the emerging atheology between reason and critique on the one hand, and empiricism and scepticism on the other. Reason as a transcendental principle, as a Platonic principle, is substituted for a more immanent reason, which accepts that all our knowledge is only knowledge *for us*, and that it would be different were we to be constituted differently.

The Hegelian move is not without its problems for an atheology, however. Needless, to say, the movement of *Spirit* (*Geist*) throughout history has theological implications that atheists cannot accept. The “purification of the empirical “I” to the transcendental “I” [… which] Hegel now claims to have accomplished through his *Phenomenology of the Spirit*”[[49]](#footnote-49) is inherently problematic for an immanent atheology. Yet as Gadamer shows, the role that Hegel plays in the history of Western thought is still ambiguous in this respect. “Is his thought the end? Is it a completion or fulfilment? Is this completion or end the fulfilment of Christian thought in the concept of philosophy, or is it the end and dissolution of everything Christian in the thought of the modern period?”[[50]](#footnote-50) Through Hegelian dialectic, there is potential for atheology to move past Christian thought, a movement which itself cannot fully rest on Hegel but which needs to move past Hegel's conception of contradictions and of the movement of *Geist*.

Marx posed a challenge to both Hegelian dialectic and atheism in his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844,* as Parinetto points out.[[51]](#footnote-51) Marx critiques atheism for being a denial of unreality, a “*negation of God*, through which negation it asserts the *existence of man.*”[[52]](#footnote-52) This negation, Marx argues, is no longer necessary in communism, whose starting point is man and nature as “*essential beings.*”[[53]](#footnote-53) Yet, as I have shown, this does not take seriously the atheistic critique of eighteenth century atheists – notably Holbach’s, whom Marx had read – who posit atheism as a first movement in dialectic. Against the Helgelian model, described by Parinetto as theism – atheism – return to theism; an atheology proposes to start with atheism, describe theism as a negation of atheism, and returns to atheism as a synthesis. This turning on its head of Hegelian dialectic permits a critique of theism while maintaining the power of contradictions that both Hegel and Marx preserve. An immanent atheology thus conceives of itself not merely as a negation of theology, but as a negation of a negation and thus as a return to pre-theological philosophy.

The defence of contradictions in Hegel's thought is in itself the positive factor behind his dialectical method. Against Kant, Hegel attempts to show that contradictions are a positive driving force. If an atheology is to use this positive driving force of contradiction, without reference to a universal spirit, it is in the thought of Nietzsche that one needs to look, not in Hegel. Nietzsche’s recognition of the importance of agonistic viewpoints, exemplified through Greek tragedy, the master-slave dichotomy and the struggle between the Apollonian and the Dionysian, enables the force of contradiction to move us beyond Hegel. It is in this movement – from scientific reason, through Kantian critique, Hegelian dialectic and Nietzschean agonism, where the possibility of a negative atheology turning into a positive atheology lies; now taking the form of a *metatheology*. Without abandoning the ground to transcendental critique or *Geist*, Nietzsche posits the possibility of the *übermensch*, not understood as a super-man – for such an interpretation is too transcendental – but understood as a trans-man. As Peter Pütz shows[[54]](#footnote-54) when discussing the concept of the übermensch in Nietzsche’s thought, the prefix *über* is less to be understood as the Latin *supra* (on top of), but rather by the Latin *trans*, meaning beyond, which implies the notion of movement. As is evident in the ethical movement of the *trans*valuation of values, it is this movement, which fully incorporates the destructive as well as creative power of critique, while firmly embedding it in the immanent, that metatheology can be created. In Nietzsche, it is through the will – rather than the Hegelian identity and *Geist* – that such a movement can ground itself. *Contra* Hegel, however, this opposition of wills which forms part of Nietzsche's ontology does not suppose the possibility of reconciling the contradictions, but accepts the necessity of contingent viewpoints in opposition with each other.

There is one conclusion, derived from Kant that an atheology moving to a metatheology cannot accept. Meillassoux, concerned with the consequences of the Kantian critique, notes that Kant’s philosophy “ends up producing a *fideist* argumentation.”[[55]](#footnote-55) Kant's critique ends with a return to faith. For Meillassoux, this fideism provides a justification of all absolutes as long as they do not pretend to base themselves on reason. These Kantian fideistic conclusions cannot hold.[[56]](#footnote-56) The return to faith is no longer possible given the above-mentioned critique. The *agon* upon which a metatheology is based *requires* the use of critique against the beliefs of other believers. Faith, which demands the protection of certain beliefs from critique, is unacceptable. *Belief* in God may still be possible, but the demands of faith protected from critique are too high. The *agonism* upon which a metatheology is based demands the opposition of value-systems, which faith denies by ring-fencing belief under the cover of respect. A metatheology, in other words, necessarily engages with, is critical of, and attacks the claims of other belief-systems, and demands that critique be able to access the claims of other systems of belief, just as its own claims are open to critique.[[57]](#footnote-57) Reason may be insufficient to destroy belief in God, but a metatheology moves past reason, incorporating critique, while still aiming at this destruction. In Nietzsche, such a destruction is effectuated through the death of God. The very formulation of the thesis bypasses rational argument – how can God *die*? – and firmly places the death of God in *critique*.

“The greatest recent event – that ‘God is dead’; that the belief in the Christian God has become unbelievable – is already starting to cast its first shadow over Europe.”[[58]](#footnote-58) What does the death of God symbolise for a metatheology? The first genealogy of the death of God is here a historical one. God has *already* died, the belief in the Christian God has become unbelievable, to the point where theology had to re-invent itself to accommodate the challenge posed to faith. Yet this historical understanding is not exhaustive of Nietzsche’s “death of God.” With Gilles Deleuze, the death of God can be understood as a dramatic notion.[[59]](#footnote-59) The forces of life and death cannot be excluded from the notion of God, and were inherent in Christian theology, where God put his own son to death. But the dramatic consequence of this death, that the very belief in God is unbelievable, has been lost throughout the centuries of Pauline theology. What Nietzsche brings to the fore is the radical scepticism of any ontotheological claim, and it is the God of metaphysics, as Ricœur claims, that has died[[60]](#footnote-60). But while Ricœur’s solution to the death of God is a return to a “Logos which “gathers together” all things,”[[61]](#footnote-61) Nietzsche’s scepticism towards our belief in grammar remains a challenge to this return to divine unity through language and being.

A pluralist ontology, where fundamental forces *agonize* against one another, is more convincing than the desire of unity still present in Ricœur’s theology. A model of such contingent philosophy based on pluralism is proposed by William Connolly. For him, Nietzsche’s “enchantment with the plurovocity of being”[[62]](#footnote-62) is the most powerful alternative to the univocity of being advocated by Ricœur and others. The Nietzschean death of God described a world where the myth of divine unity was no longer believable, and where the forces of the Dionysian and the Apollonian are more believable, pluralist alternatives that recognise the contingency of being. Against mere relativism, Connolly puts forward a convincing alternative that portrays pluralism as a philosophy where there remains a possibility of affirming one’s contingent beliefs. In such a philosophical stance, one “is ready to join others in militant action, when necessary, to support pluralism against counter drives to unitarianism.”[[63]](#footnote-63) Such pluralism is furthermore *internal* to the present theory of atheology. It is clear that negative atheology, positive atheology and metatheology all point to pluralism within atheology itself. It involves recognition of rational limits, a “relational modesty”[[64]](#footnote-64) between different beliefs with a firm commitment to one’s particular belief and to the plural possibility of others’ beliefs. Such a metatheology is less antagonistic than *agonistic*; recognising the importance of good adversaries rather than enemies.

An even more radical advocacy of contingence can be put forward following Quentin Meillassoux, and strengthen the argument in favour of the implausibility of the existence of God. Formulated in a post-Kantian, post-rational critique, Meillassoux attacks the tendency of modernity to put forward a “surrendering of body and soul to the equal legitimacy of the truth of all cults.”[[65]](#footnote-65) Meillassoux does not agree with the equal legitimacy of all claims to absolute belief, but he sees it as a direct consequence of Kantian critique, which culminates in fideism. Against Kant however, Meillassoux shows that the conclusions of speculative realism in regards to the necessity of contingency arrives at a very different conclusion. Against the scepticism of Hume, Meillassoux argues that

“instead of saying that the thing-in-itself could be anything, without one knowing what it is – we say that that the thing-in-itself can indeed be anything, and that we know it. What was an unknown – everything is possible – is taken for a known.”[[66]](#footnote-66)

With the necessity of contingency, and with the knowledge that only contingency is necessary, Meillassoux concludes that something will never be produced. “[T]his something, that Chaos will never produce, *is a necessary being.* Everything can be produced, everything can happen – except something necessary.”[[67]](#footnote-67) In other words, God, whether it is the theistic, deistic, or even pantheistic God, is no longer possible under the conditions of the necessity of contingency. The corollary to Meillassoux's argument is that critique, once pushed to its limit, beyond what Kant had admitted himself, will critique necessity itself, arrive at contingency, and render a necessary God impossible. Speculative in method, this argument goes further than any other metatheological critique in that it pushes Kant's irrationalism towards the denial of a necessary being, towards the denial of God.

“The absolute having become unthinkable, even atheism – that also aims at the inexistence of God as an absolute – will be reduced to a simple form of belief, thus to a religion, be it nihilistic.”[[68]](#footnote-68) One does not need to follow Meillassoux to the letter here, however. An atheology that accepts itself as belief need not become a religion, and even less so a nihilistic one. It can, however, turn to a kind of “spiritualism.” The role of spirituality in atheology, despite its denial of God, is by no means abandoned. Comte-Sponville is an adamant defender of such atheized spirituality. Drawing a distinction between theistic and atheistic religions, Comte-Sponville makes the claim that spiritual experience is independent from the existence of God.[[69]](#footnote-69) On the elevated summits of the Alps and Andes, it is difficult not to feel this sense of immensity and greatness around and beyond oneself; although it need not leave the sphere of immanence to impress its marks. The mountaineer Joe Simpson expresses such an atheized spiritual experience beautifully when he says that

“I no longer hold to a religion, a theology or any system by which I can understand my world. Without beliefs I try simply to accept a spiritual sense of the world as life passes by. It is an overwhelming combination of all that I’ve experienced, felt, seen and cannot explain. It stays with me and refuses to depart, and it drives me again and again back to a place in which I am never certain; a place that is alluring because it will not be defined. It is intangible and must simply be lived.”[[70]](#footnote-70)

Beyond theology, but not beyond a certain spiritual sense, atheology puts forward the possibility of spirituality without God. Charles Taylor had argued that “that the reductive materialist accounts of human beings leave no place for fullness” that spirituality typically requires[[71]](#footnote-71). But the return to “orthodox faith” that Taylor advocates is no longer believable for many. An immanent spirituality is not outside the realm of possibility, where spirituality is understood as a human phenomenon. There is a possibility for an atheology to turn towards spirituality, rather than away from it. The arch-atheist Holbach had put forward a kind of religion of nature thus falls under the category of spirituality, as his ethic of sociability remains enshrined in the here-and-now.

“Is something sacred?” Dennett ponders. “Yes, say I with Nietzsche. I could not pray to it, but I can stand in affirmation of its magnificence. The world is sacred.”[[72]](#footnote-72) Atheology is not insensitive to a sense of the sacred, of greatness, of things beyond oneself. The death of God, in Nietzsche, has cheerful consequences. “Indeed, at hearing the news that ‘the old god is dead’, we philosophers and ‘free spirits’ feel illuminated by a new dawn; our heart overflows with gratitude, amazement, forebodings, expectation.”[[73]](#footnote-73) We are far from the nihilistic Nietzsche of so many commentators or the nihilistic religion of Meillassoux. Most atheists just refuse to accept that because we feel this, it means that this greatness must lie beyond the immanent in the realm of the transcendent. Nietzsche is perhaps the most articulate of these atheists that long for an ethics of heroism. It is the source of his admiration of the Old Testament, and a source of fundamental disagreement with the New Testament and the values expounded by Jesus.[[74]](#footnote-74) This ethics of heroism demands greatness that can interpreted as greatness in the hearts and minds of future generations. Heroism, here understood as a continual agonistic struggle between great forces that drive our human lives opens the door to the sense of fullness that spirituality requires. Like Machiavelli's *Prince*, the hero may be the one that is needed for great works, for building a polity that is the base of the well-being of others. Meslier had called for great heroes to deliver peoples from the yoke of tyrants, although he did not live up to these expectations. The role of a spiritual atheology is to theorise these various ethical paths to be explored, to formulate a theory of plurality whereby humanist tendencies are reconciled with an ethics of heroism that posits a self-seeking greatness.

**Conclusion**

This theory of atheology is pluralistic in essence. There is no “one true” atheism, which is to be represented in a secular “Good Book,” despite Grayling’s attempt.[[75]](#footnote-75) Why then, hold on to atheism? Is an atheology not too diverse, segmented, and disparate a theory to be espoused? This article argues that it is this pluralistic atheology, or metatheology, that makes it possible to hold on to atheism as a philosophy. By constructing a plurovocity within atheism, it shows that simple dismissals of the theory are not necessary. An atheology can accommodate for the critiques that atheism is arch-rationalist, lacks adequate positive dimensions, and cannot sustain a human need for spirituality. By describing negative atheology, I have shown that the theory provides useful insights into some atheistic claims. Rather than dismissing this a-theology, I have shown that its claims can be useful and convincing if limited in scope. Historical, ethical, psychological, and sociological critiques of religion, religious belief, claims about God, are important in an agonistic relation between various belief-systems. An a-theology still has a role to play in dispelling some myths. The fact that some atheists overstate the explanatory power of evolutionary biology for all questions about life does not mean, I have shown, that a return to religious explanations is a better candidate. Instead, a sharper understanding of scientific method, including its limitations, helps us make claims that still have a powerful edge against superstitious belief. The power of negative atheology, in other words, is not to be dismissed altogether. But many of the claims made here are liable to being adopted by many religious believers. It is often too antagonistic to group all religious believers in the same category, and an atheology has to be careful not to oversimplify theology. Following Thomas Aquinas, the theologian Denys Turner tells atheists that “it is no use supposing that you disagree with me if you say, ‘there is no such thing as God’. For I got there well before you.”[[76]](#footnote-76) If these misplaced antagonisms can be escaped, a certain agonism remains present between various beliefs. A positive atheology posits itself as a belief, in the non-existence of God, and defends this *Weltanschauung* against others. Defending atheism as a *doxa* does not mean surrendering the ground to faith. A sharp distinction between the two is needed, and potential avenues open up for further investigation here. How is a positive atheology to formulate an ethics? Is there a positive political theory emanating from this atheological position? There are important consequences of an atheology in these two areas, and these would merit further exploration. In the field of ethics, it seems that atheology would de-absolutize morality, moving away from the – all too Godly – imperatives of deontic codes; including secularized ones such as Kant’s categorical imperative. An alternative vision of ethics will be required here, one based on contingency rather than a quest for certainty. In political philosophy, a theory of atheology would have serious consequences for theories of toleration, and theories of secularism. If one is to defend an agonism of competing claims, the limits of the legitimacy of these claims need to be established. Out of the present theory, it is clear that political claims that demand uniformity and a single model of belief are unacceptable. But models that accept a pluralism, all be it a weak version of it, would demand radical toleration. Since atheism itself is a belief, it needs to defend a universal tolerance of other beliefs. Secularism is also to be re-thought, as it seems impossible to sustain a clear private/public split between beliefs and political action. One’s beliefs always already impact one’s stance in politics – albeit in a non-linear manner. The rules of the political game are up for debate, but if they are to recognize a pluralism of beliefs, they should exclude rules that impose one belief over others. A pluralism of political opinions exists within atheology itself, and as such an atheology is well-placed to make the argument for a plural model of politics. By anchoring itself in plurality, metatheology allows for the possibility of an irreducibly plural world where contingence is not longer to be perceived as a concept to be combatted; but as a proposition to be embraced. Far from relativism or nihilism, a pluralist atheology which comprises all three movements described above advocates for the legitimacy of many (but not all) claims to knowledge. Spiritual atheism finally becomes a possibility, where one’s experiences can still provide the fullness of life that religious experience typically provides; without abandoning other forms of knowledge.

1. Georges Bataille, *Œuvres Complètes VI. La Somme athéologique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Michel Onfray, *Traité d’athéologie: Physique de la métaphysique* (Paris : Grasset, 2005). The title of this book has been inaccurately translated for the English edition, losing the powerful neologism of atheology. See Michel Onfray, *Atheist Manifesto. The Case Against Christianity, Judaism, and Islam*, trans. Jeremy Leggatt (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Alexandre Roberts, *Justin Martyr and Athenagoras,* trans. James Donaldson (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1867), p.11. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Michael Buckley, *At the origins of modern atheism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Alasdair MacIntyre in Alasdair MacIntyre and Paul Ricœur, *The Religious Significance of Atheism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), p.14. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Jean Meslier, *Testament. Memoir of the Thoughts and Sentiments of Jean Meslier.* Michael Shreve, trans. (New York: Prometheus Books, 2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Most of Holbach’s works are not available in English translations, but a four-volume edition is available in French. Paul Henri Thiry d’Holbach, *Œuvres Philosophiques,* Jean Pierre Jackson, ed. (Paris: Alive, 1998, 1999, 2001 and Paris: Coda, 2004). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London: Bantham Press, 2006), p.31. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. John F. Haught, *God and the new atheism. A critical response to Dawkins, Harris, and Hitchens* (Louisville and London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), p.5. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Haught, *God and the new atheism,* p.xii. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See Kerry Walters, *Atheism: A Guide for the Perplexed* (New York and London: Continuum, 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Dawkins, *The God Delusion,* p.48. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell. Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (London: Penguin Books, 2007), p.25. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press and The Belknap Press, 2007), p.565. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Dawkins, *The God Delusion,* p.300. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Dawkins, *The God Delusion,* p.127. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Dawkins, *The God Delusion,* p.300. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Burrhus Frederic Skinner, “Superstition in the Pigeon,” *Journal of experimental psychology*, Vol.38, No.2, pp. 168-172. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Dennett, *Breaking the Spell,* p.124. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Reference removed for peer review process. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Haught, *God and the new atheism,* p. 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. John Caputo, “Atheism, a/theology and the postmodern condition” in Michael Martin (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 269. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. “I am afraid that we have not got rid of God because we still have faith in grammar.” Friedrich Nietzsche, Twilight of the Idols in Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols And Other Writings*, Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p.170. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Michel Onfray, *Les Bûchers de Bénarès. Cosmos, Eros et Thanatos* (Paris: Galilée, 2008)*,* p.69. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Michel Onfray, *Politique du rebelle. Traité de résistance et d’insoumission* (Paris: Grasset, 1997)*,* p.77. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Michel Foucault, *Surveiller et punir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science,* Bernard Williams (ed.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p.200. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Slavoj Žižek, *On Belief* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), pp.1-2. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Onfray, *Traité d’athéologie,* p.55; Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p.199; Dennett, *Breaking the Spell,* p.311. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. See Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: religion, terror, and the future of reason* (Cambridge: The Free Press, 2006)*,* p.85. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Harris, *The End of Faith,* 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Haught, *God and the new atheism,* pp.61-3 [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Paul Ricœur in Alasdair MacIntyre and Paul Ricœur, *The Religious Significance of Atheism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), p.59. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Ricœur, *The Religious Significance of Atheism,* p.82. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Dennett, *Breaking the Spell,* p.6. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, p.160. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, p.221, See Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p.20 who also criticises the consensus on protecting religious faith. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, p.201. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, p.218. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Dennett, *Breaking the Spell,* p.228. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Dennett, *Breaking the Spell,* p.335. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Josef Maier, *On Hegel’s Critique of Kant* (New York: AMS Press, 1966), pp.35-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. This conclusion is challenged by Kant himself in the third critique, as Deleuze points out. Gilles Deleuze, *La Philosophie Critique de Kant* (Paris: PUF, 1963), p.98. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Peter Frederick Strawson, *The Bounds of Sense* (London: Methuen & Co, 1966), p.39. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Strawson, *The Bounds of Sense,* p.40. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Richard Norman and Sean Sayers, *Hegel, Marx and Dialectic: A Debate*. (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1980), p.25. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Maier, *On Hegel’s Critique of Kant,* pp.37-41. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Maier, *On Hegel’s Critique of Kant,* p.45. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Hegel’s Dialectic. Five Hermeneutical Studies,* P. Christopher Smith, trans. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), p.77. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Gadamer, *Hegel’s Dialectic,* p.101. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Luciano Parinetto, “The Legend of Marx’s Atheism,” *Telos*, No. 58, Winter 1983-84, pp.7-19. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Karl Marx, “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts,” in *Early Writings* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1975), p. 357. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Jean Lacoste, ed., *Friedrich Nietzsche Œuvres* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1993), p.275. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Quentin Meillassoux, *Après la finitude* (Paris: Seuil, 2006), p.63. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Bayle had also appealed to fideism to prevent further movement into *critique.* Maria Rosa Antognazza, “Revealed Religion: The Continental European Debate,” in Knud Haakonssen, ed., *The Cambridge History of Eighteenth-Century Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p.671. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. For a similar argument, see Gary Drescher, *Good and Real. Demystifying Paradoxes from Physics to Ethics.* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), p.330. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science,* p.200. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche et la philosophie* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1962), pp.176-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Ricœur, *The Religious Significance of Atheism,* pp.65-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. Ricœur, *The Religious Significance of Atheism,* p.93. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. William E. Connolly, *Why I am not a secularist* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), p.16. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. William E. Connolly, “Pluralism and Faith,” in Hent De Vries and Lawrence E. Sullivan (eds) *Political Theologies* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), p.280. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. Connolly, “Pluralism and Faith,” p.280. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. Meillassoux, *Après la finitude,* p.66. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. Meillassoux, *Après la finitude,* pp.88-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. Meillassoux, *Après la finitude,* p.89. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. Meillassoux, *Après la finitude*, p.63. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. André Comte-Sponville, *L’esprit de l’athéisme. Introduction à une spiritualité sans Dieu* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2006)*,* p.15. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. Joe Simpson, *The Beckoning Silence* (London: Vintage, 2003), p.114. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. Taylor, *A Secular Age,* p.596. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. Dennett, *Breaking the Spell,* p.245. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science,* p.200. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ* in Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols and other writings*. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. A.C. Grayling, *The Good Book. A Secular Bible* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. Denys Turner, *How to be an atheist. An Inaugural Lecture given in the University of Cambridge 12 October 2001* (Cambridge: CUP, 2001), p.33. [↑](#footnote-ref-76)