BEYOND ATHEISM

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This essay defends the idea of drawing a distinction between two modes of not being religious today: between what I will call *atheist disbelief*, on the one hand, and *a-theist non-belief* on the other. The former is the mode which is most often in the news. It is the position that pitches itself *against* religion. The latter is perhaps easily confused with agnosticism as that is popularly understood. Agnosticism in this sense is a position in which you declare yourself undecided or unsure: one is not sufficiently convinced that God does not exist to affirm a full-blooded atheism, but equally, spiritual conceptions, for example as determined by the Christian Churches, do not persuade you either. The situation as regards what I am calling a-theist non-belief is different again: it is not so much a 'position' at all as a non-religious '*habitus*': the understanding of the world and the significance of your life that characterises the a-theist life is one in which religion and religious beliefs, for the most part, just do not figure or play a part. The a-theist does not have positional stance towards religious beliefs – namely a stance of disbelief – but rather, for the most part, simply has no thoughts about God. While not agnostic, the a-theist resembles the agnostic is this respect: conceptually speaking the a-theist is no closer to atheism than he or she is to religious faith. In my view, while the a-theist *habitus* is incredibly widespread today it is nevertheless typically overlooked in discussions of contemporary faith and atheism. Perhaps this is because it seems so comparatively unreflective and uncommitted. Nevertheless, I will champion it in this essay.

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I

What can a philosopher contribute to an understanding of religion? Or again: 'What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?' Tertullian's question is a good one. And I (I, Athenian, as it were) hesitate to add more to a dossier of debate which would probably benefit from being smaller, not bigger. But I feel obligated.

I can explain why I feel obligated with reference to the caption to a photo uploaded on to the Global Secular and Humanist Movement Facebook page. The photo is of two of the most powerful atheist critics of religion of recent times, Christopher Hitchens and Daniel Dennett. The caption is a comment by Dennett on the recently deceased Hitchens:

> What Christopher showed me – and I keep it in mind now wherever I speak – is that there is a time for politeness and there is a time when you are obliged to be rude, as rude as you have to be to stop such pollution of young minds in its tracks with a quick, unignorable shock.

This caption bears witness to something in our contemporary cultural make-up that sustains a powerfully-felt obligation to take a stand against the claims of religious believers. For example, when it is not time to be polite, an atheist might feel fully obliged to insist that 'There won't be a Judgment Day'. But the sense of obligation here arises for the atheist for the sole and simple reason that, as they see the situation, *another person says there will*. In other words, in so far as it is felt, the atheist obligation is not conceived as arising out of a special interest in something but by the presence of beliefs which (by his or her lights) need combating. There is no positive doctrine here; only a felt-obligation to oppose what, in one's own case, one finds one *cannot* believe.

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Whether or not the atheist feels obliged to be rude, his or her taking-an-atheist-position *at all* is irreducibly caught up with his or her finding the believer's beliefs unbelievable. There is what one might call a *double belief* internal to taking-an-atheist-position. It is not sufficient for someone taking-an-atheist-position that, for example, for the most part *he or she has no beliefs about Judgement Day whatever*. This latter possibility, which I am calling a-theism, is very important to get into view, and I will return to it, but the crucial feature of the one who takes-an-atheist-position, is that he or she does so because (by his or her lights) another person believes the opposite. And while some atheist disbelievers of this kind may be more content than others to 'live and let live', and don't make much of their double belief, many, like Dennett and Hitchens, feel the obligation, at least sometimes, to be rude.

People who take an atheist view of the kind I have been focusing on thus far tend to consider themselves open-minded in exactly the sense that they think scientists are about their hypotheses: they cherish the idea that if they were shown good evidence or good reason to abandon a view, they would abandon it. This is a position they take to contrast sharply to the dogmatism of religious believers. There is indeed, as I hope to show later, a crucial contrast between scientific and religious belief. However, I think this contrast is construed in a problematic way by atheists. For atheists what is at issue are divergent routes to a belief: there is a scientific way of forming a belief about *X*, and a contrasting religious way of forming a belief about *X*. The former looks to evidential and other forms of rational support, while the latter appeals to revelations of various kinds or miracles. This makes the beliefs of religious believers akin to scientific hypotheses – but in comparatively abysmal shape.

But this is not the only way to look at the contrast. A more generous interpretation would question whether religious beliefs are the sort of thing that one should expect to require evidential or otherwise rational support. Indeed, that

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interpretation might be thought to find significant pre-theoretical attestation in our everyday ways of speaking, where it is clear that with religious beliefs, unlike scientific ones, 'we don't talk about hypothesis or high probability, nor about knowing'[1]. But the atheist does not and cannot see the contrast in this way. I think we should, and that is why I think there is still something for the philosopher to say in this area.

Accepting the more generous interpretation would make one reluctant to say that the beliefs of the believer are the sort of thing it makes sense to be, in the way of a scientist, open-minded about. But, in fact, the atheist is not open-minded about that point: the atheist thinks that the believer's religious beliefs are unswervingly held – unbelievably and outrageously so – despite the fact that the evidence for them is *ludicrously* slight. This way of seeing the contrast is extremely important. Not because it shows up a distinction between open-minded and a closed-minded minds, but because it discloses the atheist mind as constituted by the centrality to it of what I have called the double belief. But there is a further point here too. Since the atheist supposes that religious beliefs are akin to scientific beliefs in the sense just outlined, it is not possible for an atheist to regard religious belief *today* as merely one absurdly deluded set of beliefs among others; in their very *survival* they are, *today*, now that most other superstitions have been consigned to the rubbish bin of pre-Enlightenment history, the exemplary paradigm of it, the best example: the worst. There is a background picture of the movement of world history here that is very attractive but also, I think, confused. In the next section I want to look a little more closely at this background picture.

II

In the following passage, Michael Rosen captures something of the background picture that interests me here:

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> Once upon a time, so the story goes, human beings (or Western ones at least) lived in a world in which morality was seen to be embedded in nature. Nature was an expression of the will of a benevolent creator-God, who had revealed his purposes in it, and morality and science went hand in hand. Each was out there to be discovered objectively. Yet the rise of modern science put an end to that. Various rearguard actions notwithstanding, the mechanistic, physicalistic, nomological – in short, disenchanted – view of the universe has triumphed and the natural world has become one of (as William James put it) 'aimless weather'.

Rosen relates here a familiar story about European (or Western, the terms are interchangeable for me here) modernity: the story of a radical break from forms of society dominated by myth and superstition, of a society *en route* to a rational, scientific, and perhaps ultimately Godless future. Although Rosen gives this story a fairy-tale appearance, it is not clear that we have any alternative to it available to us. In our time it seems impossible not to admit that the world that has been spreading out across the globe from Europe for at least the last three hundred years has become remarkably secular. Another way of putting this, one might think, a final flourish and abiding happy ever after in this familiar European fairy-tale, would be to say that our culture – with its disenchanted worldview – has become, predominantly, a culture of atheism.

This final step is not wrong but we have to be very careful making it. There is a view, quite widely held in religious-institutional circles these days in fact, that the increasingly secular character of our world goes hand in hand with an increasingly atheist-dominated culture – a culture dominated, that is, by those whose understanding of the world and the significance of our lives is run through by the obligation-inducing double belief. And then, anxiously, that is what is understood by saying that our

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culture has become, predominantly, a culture of atheism. I think that view is wrong and the anxiety misplaced. Atheists certainly do belong to the culture of atheism as we have it today, but it is not a culture they dominate. I will explain this.

In my view what is undeniable in Rosen's story is the idea that there has been a profound shift in the river-bed of thinking and believing in European societies over the last three hundred years. However, accepting this does not mean that one must also accept what we might call the atheist interpretation of modernity: the interpretation which sees this shift as involving a withering away of religious instincts and the general rise of atheism. For sure (and rearguard actions notwithstanding) we are seeing something like a 'decline of organised religion'. However, as I hope to show, that does not have to be interpreted as evidence for a converse thesis on the rise of atheism.

To understand this one has to completely reject the atheist conception of the story of European modernity – the story of the becoming (to put it quickly) 'rational and scientific' of Europe's culture – the victory-to-come of Athens, as it were. Moreover, one has to reject this without endorsing some idea of the ongoing revival of religion either – of a victory-to-come of Jerusalem. Some rearguard actions notwithstanding there are precious few signs of that. No, at issue is the becoming culturally widespread of a general dimension of experience which has always been central to religious belief, and especially to the Christian religious belief: it is, one might say, the becoming widespread of a culture that is *in principle* open to serious doubts about the existence of God – but *without* their old 'theistic' frame, and hence without those doubts, as it were, typically 'going live'.

Rosen's once-upon-a-time story suggests a withering of religious instincts. But what has really happened is more like the widespread decapitation of theistic construals. The disenchanted conception – where what takes place *in the world* is just 'aimless weather' – is indeed the default

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construal in European societies today. But far from being the end of Christian experience it is the generalisation of its point of departure: the generalisation of a sense of being *totally alone*, of existing in a world without God. This point of departure for faith has become the norm for everyday experience in Europe, but the view I want to defend is that this is not the dominance of an atheist culture of disbelief but the emergence of the *habitus* of a-theism.

III

Looking out over the ramparts of contemporary Europe, Nietzsche asked himself in his today, which is not so very far from our today, '*Why atheism today?*' His slightly baffling answer is worth examining:

> *Why atheism today?* – 'The father' in God is thoroughly refuted; likewise 'the judge', 'the rewarder'. Likewise his 'free will': he does not hear – and if he heard he would still not know how to help. The worst thing is: he seems incapable of making himself understood: is he himself vague about what he means? – These are what, in the course of many conversations, asking and listening, I found to be the causes of the decline in European theism; it seems to me that the religious instinct is indeed in vigorous growth – but that it rejects the theistic answer with profound mistrust.

This is a very difficult passage to interpret, and perhaps it does not fit completely with the view I want to defend, but it seems clear that one should not even try to read it as advocating taking-an-atheist-position. It is more like a '*vox pop*' of Europeans on their views of the decline in theism. And whatever Nietzsche supposes himself to have heard here has given him the impression that 'the religious

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instinct is indeed in vigorous growth'. But what can this mean?!

To illustrate what Nietzsche may have had an exceptionally well-tuned ear to here, I want to cite from a recent 'Thought for the Day' on the *Today* programme on BBC Radio 4. The day's TFTD was given by the Christian author Anne Atkins, and her theme was ways of knowing others that are made possible with words, with language. She began by talking about modern technologies of communication, which open channels of speech to people well out of earshot. She spoke next about the idea of communication with non-humans (dogs, specifically) where there is some communication but where expression in language on our part gets us only so far. Finally she considered the question of communicating with God, and invited us to imagine a curious scenario in which a channel for communication could be opened here:

> Now suppose for a moment God could communicate with us. We can't see Him, touch Him, or smell Him. But imagine how it would revolutionize the human condition if we could hear His voice; we would be able to know his will, understand his character, and follow his ideas. If he could speak to us, we would be able to know him, as a friend.

Here, I want to say, what Nietzsche is calling 'the religious instinct' is clearly flourishing. The human condition *as it actually is*, is one in which God is absent, it is one in which we cannot know his will, and so cannot be sure of his ideas, etc. We cannot know God even as we might know our dog. He is incapable of making himself understood. In short, everything that Nietzsche's *vox pop* disclosed as causes of the decline of European theism belongs precisely to the understanding of the human condition that characterizes a religiously construed life. Of course, Anne Atkins did not leave it there. On the contrary, for her the 'theistic answer' remains alive and available. Immediately following

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her acknowledgement of everything that is cited as a reason for the decline in European theism, she breaks into a different mode altogether:

> 'In the beginning was the word'. He came to earth, not just God as man, but his very thoughts expressed in language we can understand.

The idea of a divine sacrifice or the idea that our prayers might be heard . . . these are not rejected as absurd conjectures, but beyond the possibility of knowledge, embraced by faith. In other words, the most radical *objection* to faith, what we might call therefore a radical atheism, ('We can't see Him, touch Him, smell Him') is what gives the theistic answer its measure, its movement. Our being alone, the non-presence of God, is experienced here as something with which we must grapple in order to make our way. Today, the theistic answer to those doubts is no longer the default construal, and atheists take the non-presence of God in the world ('We can't see Him, touch Him, smell Him') as an immediate refutation of any theistic construal whatsoever – but that is not the default construal today either. What might a-theists, the ones who have no religious thoughts for the day, make of such thoughts. That is, I would suggest a properly open question. In any case, what Nietzsche's Europeans relate as the cause of the decline in European theism is, fundamentally, a kind of variation of Christian belief or of Christian experience itself.

And, really, in a Europe in which Christianity has not been a mere walk on part but for nearly 2,000 years the playwright, set designer, lead actor and critic, how could it be otherwise? Unfortunately, most European atheists are strongly disinclined to see their own sensibility as rooted in a Christian one. But the doubts that were the point of departure for militant atheist disbelief are, I am suggesting, the point of departure for religious faith too; they belong, as it were, to the first level of religious life. At this level or from this level, it really can be hard to make any sense of the

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completely different plane occupied by those who experience our abandonment as a dimension of their faith in God. Atheist double belief, however, comes to erase these differences. Instead of *different levels*, the atheist sees *opposed beliefs*. But this view is not compulsory. Indeed, it should, I will argue in the final section, be rejected.

IV

Not everyone who is not religious has an atheist view of religion. Wittgenstein was not a religious man, but he knew that when it came to his relations with people who hold what we call religious beliefs he was not – at least not always and at every moment – in a marketplace of conflicting beliefs. For example, regarding someone who believes in the Last Judgment – and by this he meant someone whose life was run through with this belief so that 'whenever he does anything, this is before his mind' – he says this:

> If someone said: 'Wittgenstein do you believe in this? I'd say 'No.' 'Do you contradict this man?'. I'd say: 'No.' . . . If he said 'There is a German aeroplane overhead,' and I said 'Possibly. I'm not so sure,' you'd say we were fairly near. [But with religious belief] it isn't a question of my being anywhere near him, but on an entirely different plane . . . If you ask me whether or not I believe in a Judgment Day in the sense in which religious people have belief in it, I wouldn't say 'No. I don't believe there will be such a thing.' It would seem to me utterly crazy to say this.

Wittgenstein accepts that you can call his position, or better *his level*, as a matter of 'believing the opposite', but it is he insists 'entirely different from what we would ordinarily call believing the opposite'. It is not about having the opposite

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thoughts – but of having different sorts of thoughts altogether and of *having no thoughts at all* about the thing that is to the fore in the believer's life. So when Wittgenstein writes and teaches in philosophy there is this effort to think well and to say what he thinks about different matters – and because of what he writes and teaches one might say about him as a result that he rightly passes for an atheist. But this does not mean he writes against religion or is an enemy of religion. He just writes certain things – from his level. Wittgenstein said of himself that he was 'not a religious man'. But I don't think he was an atheist either. He was, I think, a new sort of European theoretical or intellectual non-believer: a reflective a-theist.

There is a sequence of remarks in Wittgenstein's discussion of the little scenes of 'believing the opposite without believing the opposite' or 'contradiction without contradiction' in his encounter with the religious believer that is less overt or thematised but which can help bring out this contrast with the atheist position. As we have just seen, Wittgenstein presents himself as being asked by another: 'Wittgenstein, what do you believe, what do you think, what would you say?' And he then presents himself as giving his answer, or imagines giving his answer. He does not imagine these scenes as ones in which the believer and himself are in dialogue. No, we are given a believer's belief and Wittgenstein imagines being asked if he would say he believes the same or not. And he says that, in the sense in which a believer believes, it would be crazy to say he held a view which contradicts it. His beliefs and the beliefs of the believer are, as he says, on different planes.

However, once, just once, in the discussion he speaks not of his own response to a believer, but about what 'an atheist' might say. The sentence in the published text is both sketchy and (it would seem) poorly typeset. It runs as follows: 'If an atheist says: 'There won't be a Judgment Day, and another person says there will,' do they mean the same? – not clear what criterion of meaning the same is'.

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There really is no clearly expressed thought here. Indeed, there seem to be two distinct but equally plausible ways of rendering the sketchy notes into good sentences. First, we could read it as an illustration of the basic scene of contradiction and its complexity, with Wittgenstein replacing himself with an atheist, as one might well suppose he might. We could then read it like this:

> Suppose an atheist says: 'There won't be a Judgment Day', and another person says: 'There will be a Judgment Day'. Should we say that these two people *mean the same* by 'Judgment Day'? The question is not so simple because it is not clear what criterion of 'meaning the same' is in play here.

This seems natural enough, but one can also give the recorded lecture notes a slightly different rendition, one which belongs to a reading of a distinctively atheist interpretation of the scene of contradiction:

> An atheist might say: 'There won't be a Judgment Day, but another person says there will.' Should we see it like this? Should we suppose that we can line up the beliefs like this, as the atheist supposes, can we put them side-by-side like this, one affirming and the other denying the same thing? Can we affirm that the two mean the same? What criterion of 'meaning the same' would speak for this?

The continuation does not speak conclusively in favour of one way of rendering the oddly recorded remark. The text continues: 'They might describe the same things. You might say this already shows that they mean the same thing.' On the other hand, this continuation can also be read in two ways, in line with the two former renditions:

> There is a criterion of meaning that would seem to settle this question conclusively: namely, if they

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> describe the same things when they are asked what Judgment Day is. If they both describe the same things this shows they mean the same thing.

Or, alternatively:

> The atheist is sure they do mean the same. He says that they might describe the same things and that this is the criterion for them meaning the same thing. He says that if they do describe the same thing, then this settles the matter: they mean the same.

I favour reading these notes as probing a distinctively atheist interpretation of the scene of contradiction. And I think the reference to 'You' in his discussion implicitly means, 'You, atheist', as I believe it fairly clearly does again in the remarks that follow that I will cite in a moment. I do not want to make too much hang on this. Nevertheless, I would still say that the reading I am preferring seems quite natural (and interesting!), and that what follows them seem certainly intended to show that the conviction that we should say they 'mean the same' in the scene of contradiction is a characteristically atheist interpretation, and that Wittgenstein rejects it.

V

To continue then. We have just been given a criterion for the two 'meaning the same'. In the remarks that follow I take Wittgenstein to be trying to help us to see and acknowledge a difference between religious statements and other things we say, and to see the apparently side-by-side statements of beliefs of the atheist and believer in the scene of contradiction as lying on either side of this difference, on different levels:

> We come to an island and we find beliefs there, and certain beliefs we are inclined to call religious. What

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> I am driving at is, that religious beliefs will not… They have sentences, and there are also religious statements.
>
> These statements would not just differ in respect to what they are about. Entirely different connections would make them into religious beliefs, and there can easily be imagined transitions where we wouldn't know for our life whether to call them religious beliefs or scientific beliefs.
>
> *You* [my stress SG] may say they reason wrongly.
>
> In certain cases you [we could stress this to stress that Wittgenstein is inviting someone to think about what they in fact do say SG] would say they reason wrongly, meaning they contradict us. In other cases, you would say they don't reason at all, or 'It is an entirely different reasoning.' The first, you would say in the case in which they reason in a similar way to us, and make something corresponding to our blunders… You [if you were to be a bit more thoughtful and generous about this SG] could also say that where we are reasonable they are not reasonable – meaning they don't use *reason* here.

The effort to see the beliefs as side-by-side contradictions requires a specific interpretation of religious statements: one has to think of the believer as someone who 'reasons wrongly', and whose view needs correcting. Wittgenstein's interlocutor gives just such an interpretation, and he is also the one who wants to insist that 'There won't be a Judgment Day, but another person says there will.' In other words, the interlocutor is the one Wittgenstein calls an 'atheist'.

Wittgenstein accepts that some people are convinced by what he calls 'superstitions'. These will be cases where (among other things) someone draws conclusions on the basis of extremely *weak* reasons or on the basis of *faulty*

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reasoning. These are the cases where we really do contradict them: there are deluded folk out there who believe *p* but, really, not *p*. And Wittgenstein further accepts that if a believer were to think that he holds his beliefs in the kind of 'rational' manner characterizing scientific statements then we should certainly say at this point: 'here is a man who is cheating himself'. But this is not the position that interests Wittgenstein. What we might call the 'authentic' believer (Wittgenstein does not use this word, but the contrast case of *a believer who is not cheating himself* is, in any case, implied) is *not* someone who, as the atheist supposes, 'reasons wrongly' on some question. Their beliefs are of a very distinctive sort, quite different to rational beliefs, but the atheist's assertion that 'There won't be a Judgment Day, but another person says there will.' supposes that there are two beliefs in view here that can be traded in the marketplace of reason; just as if one were to assert that 'There won't be an eclipse tomorrow, but another person says there will'. In the latter case the two market sellers contradict each other, 'they mean the same'. To think the same about a believer and someone who has no religious beliefs at all – and this is the interpretation of the typical atheist – is, Wittgenstein thinks, crazy. He would never say such a thing, he would think it obscene to say such a thing.

Wittgenstein is not a religious man, and so (one might say) he rightly passes for an atheist, but if the atheist is the one who says 'There won't be a Judgment Day, but another person says there will.' he would never say of himself: 'I am an atheist', as if he knew exactly how he stood, and knew what to say, at every step, about his relation to religion, to reason, and to faith. Wittgenstein was not simply an a-theist naively inhabiting the default construal of our time. On the contrary, he was a great and subtle *reflective* a-theist, and in my view a model for us all in that condition.

In this essay I have argued that what is taking place in our culture when faith in God dwindles away should not be understood in terms of the gradual emergence of a culture

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of atheist disbelief. It is, I have suggested instead, the emergence and growth of a culture of a-theism. How should we feel about this? Can the a-theist default *habitus* of our world be regarded as in any sense a welcome one for believers who sincerely retain an interest in the conversion of others to a religious life? Indeed, it can. For, as we have seen, unlike atheist disbelief the a-theist default remains, *in principle*, fundamentally open to questions about the existence of God: it is, one might say, as much the point of departure for faith as it is the point of departure for atheism. And, in the end, if those who call themselves atheists are not really open to serious questions about the existence of God, it is not clear that their regular appeal to the need for open-mindedness need be taken very seriously either: it is nothing more than a scientistic pose, and should be treated as such.

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Note

[1] Wittgenstein, L. *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthenics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, ed. C. Barrett (Oxford: Blackwell, 1967), 57.

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