

On the definition of atheism

There is something about (ir)religion and (ir)religious concepts that makes it problematic to fix a definition of them; there is, perhaps, nothing ‘essentially (ir)religious’.¹ Indeed, it has been argued that terminological issues are largely responsible for inhibiting the systematic study of atheism.² The meanings, definitions, and semantic ranges of even the broadest terms ‘atheism’, ‘belief’, and ‘agnosticism’, are highly problematic and controversial. And atheism is often further subdivided: minor and major, positive and negative, strong and weak, militant and fundamentalist.³ These controversial terms are widespread in the Humanities, where they are inconsistently and often unreflexively used.⁴ But lively discussions in the social sciences caution us to avoid using existing terms without further thought and analysis, even with qualifications depending on context (e.g. ‘I am now talking about atheism in X sense’), and particularly to avoid insisting on terms that are ‘imprecise or overly narrow and which are confused and combined with one another without consistency’.⁵

¹ Problematic to fix a definition: Lemert 2002: 247-8. Asad 2003: 25-6 argues that ‘there is nothing essentially religious, nor any universal essence that defines “sacred language” or “sacred experience.”’ See also Weber 1963: 1.

² Lee 2012, 2015: 22, Campbell 1971: 17ff., Pasquale 2007: 760.

³ Minor and major: Smith 1988: 7-8. Negative and positive come from Flew 1976: 14, 1984, and tend to be used by Michael Martin.

⁴ Controversial: e.g. Dawkins 2006: 50-1. Classical scholars: see Bremmer 2007: 1 on ‘soft atheism’ (below), or Parker 1996: 211, who says that the ancient Greeks stayed clear of ‘militant atheism’. Harrison 2000: 22: ‘complete unbelief’; Drachmann 1922: 146 on ‘positive atheism’. Versnel 2011: 292: ‘With the exception of a few isolated cases of ostentatious atheism, the explicit refusal of worship is an unknown phenomenon in the archaic and classical periods’. While discussing the Sisyphus fragment, O’Sullivan 2012: 174, also n.36 derides New Atheism as ‘populist, fundamentalist atheism’, referencing critiques of ‘its most zealous preachers’. This emotional outburst, combined with the use of these faulty and loaded categories, reveals the sort of intellectual baggage that leads O’Sullivan to insistently minimise the import and atheistic nature of the fragment e.g. 2012: 184: ‘not atheistic but philosophically rich’.

⁵ Lee 2015: 22, see also Bullivant 2013: 13, on the importance of not using too-narrow definitions.

In applying vague but overly narrow and anachronistic terms (like ‘positive’ atheism) to historical societies, scholars have failed to recognise the historical, geographical, and social contextuality of atheism, and very often ended up looking for the wrong thing in the wrong places. To expect ‘militant’ or ‘fundamentalist’ atheists, ‘radical atheism’, or ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ forms of atheism in historical societies, as many scholars do, is thinking about things from a treacherously modern perspective. The New Atheist in the modern West – a self-identified atheist or anti-theist, naturalist, scientific pupil, ritual non-participant – (s)he is a product of the very specific time and place in which he lives. It has not been generally recognised that the forms of atheism vary in different societies as much as corresponding beliefs.

Terms like ‘atheism’ have the potential to be both etic, described from the perspective of the observer, and emic, described from the perspective of the subject. So for ‘atheism’ we can embrace a broad definition intended to be applicable to all societies across space and time, or we can use a specific definition, the meaning of which is unique to the society we wish to study. Emic and etic definitions are not incompatible, and both are equally important. It is vital to give an accurate treatment of the evidence which allows the understanding unique to each historical society to define the importance and direction of study, and to avoid enforcing our own concerns over those in historical societies. But it is also crucial that any study of the ancient world recognises the interest of the public in this subject, both historically and presently, as proven by the popularity of works from Christopher Hitchens’ *Portable Atheist*, a collection of historical atheistic extracts, to Tim Whitmarsh’s book on *Battling the Gods*. Therefore, we must define atheism in a way that allows us to ask questions which answer broader interests: about the rational arguments for god; the naturalness of atheism or religion, and the importance of education and socialisation on determining belief; the persecution and marginalisation of atheists; the importance and nature of doubt and

uncertainty; and the morality of atheists.⁶ In examining historical atheism, we are constrained to use the same evidence as others have before (of trials and accusations). But if we look at the evidence for religion in any given historical society, and focus on a number of other topics like education or morality (rather than, for instance, ‘accusations of atheism’), we can find traces of atheism in far less directly polemic, loaded, or aggressively normative contexts. This allows us to advance an understanding of atheism broad enough that it avoids ‘Christianising’ assumptions (i.e. projecting Christian assumptions onto historical societies) and can allow for cross-comparison of atheistic phenomena examined here with other cultures (such comparisons are frequently made), while allowing us to emphasise and explore the types of atheism unique to the given historical context.

On the definition of atheism (1). The ternary view: atheism, agnosticism, theism.

Even if an exhaustive and precise definition is not possible (or desirable), it is crucial to at least provide a conceptual base for our understanding of the nature and range of what is meant by ‘atheism’.⁷ Regarding how we categorise belief and unbelief, there are, broadly

⁶ A survey of the topics that the popular works on New Atheism reveals remarkably similar concerns to one another: Barker 1992 (education: ch.1; doubt & morality: ch.7), Dawkins 2006 (doubt and agnosticism: ch.2, esp. 69-76; naturalness of religion/education: chs.5 & 9; morality: chs. 6 & 7, persecution: ch.8, appendix by implication), Dennett 2006 (naturalness of religion: chs.1 & 4; morality: chs. 3, 7, & 10), Grayling 2013 (naturalness & education: ch.3; doubt/agnosticism: ch.6; morality: ch.10 and the entire second half of the book), Harris 2004 (morality: ch.6), 2006 (persecution of atheists: entire work), Hitchens 2007b (morality: entire work; education and the origin of religion: chs.11, 16; persecution: ch.2), 2011 (morality: entire work), Jillette 2011 (doubt: ch.3; morality, persecution), Stenger 2007 (morality: ch.7). All prize rational arguments against gods.

⁷ Campbell 1971: 17, for instance, argues ‘[t]he claim of the sociology of irreligion to be accepted as an important and viable sphere of study clearly cannot be admitted until its specific subject of investigation has been outlined. Irreligion itself must be identified, delineated and defined and its various forms described... Since irreligion is defined primarily by reference to religion, the notable lack of success in defining the latter term is hardly a good omen for success in defining the former... without even a provisional delineation a sociology of irreligion cannot exist’. It is usually claimed that until very recently Campbell’s plea for a new sociology of irreligion had been ignored (e.g. Bullivant and Lee 2012: 19).

speaking, two schools of thought. The first, which is popular in older philosophy, and in modern theology, the Humanities, and among lay communities, proposes a ternary (threefold) structure, with three categories for understanding, interpreting, and classifying different types of beliefs across the spectrum. The main categories are: belief/theism, or acceptance of the existence of a ‘Culturally Postulated Superhuman Agent’ (CPSA); agnosticism, the middle ground of agnosticism or uncertainty in which the existence of a deity is neither accepted nor rejected (and it may be impossible to know anything about the existence of gods); and atheism, or positive disbelief.⁸ This sort of view was advanced by such classical philosophers as Antony Flew and Bertrand Russell. Today, the view that there are three main categories of belief and unbelief is advanced by J. J. C. Smart, the late Australian philosopher, in the *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*. Yet Smart recognises the problems with dividing potential positions towards belief in a deity into three: principally, that there are significant overlaps between the categories of agnosticism and atheism, and agnosticism and theism. His solution is to dilute the boundaries between these categories:

let us consider the appropriateness or otherwise of someone (call him ‘Philo’) describing himself as a theist, atheist or agnostic. I would suggest that if Philo estimates the various plausibilities to be such that on the evidence before him the probability of theism comes out near to one he should describe himself as a theist and if it comes out near zero he should call himself an atheist, and if it comes out somewhere in the middle he should call himself an agnostic. *There are no strict rules*

⁸ CPSA is the standard and broad definition of a deity in the Cognitive Sciences: see Lawson and McCauley 1990: 5ff. Use of theist-agnostic-atheist in classics: e.g. Bremmer 2007: 13 calls Protagoras an ‘agnostic rather than an atheist’; likewise O’Sullivan 2012: 172, and Meijer 1981: 220, who mentions his ‘agnostic theories’. Whitmarsh grapples with similar problems, e.g. ‘this cannot be a simple statement of agnosticism’, 2016: 88, and calls Protagoras an atheist; and Flower 2009: 11 says ‘it was perhaps not so much the atheism of Prodicus as the agnosticism of Protagoras’ that drove the mystery parodies and mutilations of the Herms.

about this classification because the borderlines are vague. If need be, like a middle-aged man who is not sure whether to call himself bald or not bald, he should explain himself more fully.⁹

But this muddying of the waters, with the expansion of definition without a clear understanding of the core meaning of the terms, only serves to undermine the legitimacy of the three categories. This ternary conception involves defining atheism as its most extreme form – in the classic terms of John Hick, ‘the belief that there is no god of any kind’ – the lack of ‘strict rules’ leading to imprecision and confusion.¹⁰ Moreover, the position of ‘neither believing nor disbelieving’ in the gods (the traditional definition of agnosticism) may not even be a coherent position. For many this falls under *tertium non datur*, the Law of the Excluded Middle: ‘do you believe God/gods/Zeus/etc exists?’ can be answered either yes or no; ‘I don’t know’ is not an answer.¹¹ Excluding the middle leaves us with belief or unbelief.

On the definition of atheism (2). Advocating a binary: belief and unbelief.

The alternative view to the ternary position is that there are two main categories of belief: atheism and theism. This view is that atheism and theism should be understood as the two positions with regard to the existence of god(s), with no middle ground. Atheism, therefore, contains within it the overlapping and not-equivalent irreligion and non-religion, unbelief, and disbelief.¹² Under the binary view, agnosticism answers a different question: it concerns

⁹ Smart 2013, my emphasis.

¹⁰ Hick 1963: 4.

¹¹ Law of the excluded middle: atheist philosopher G. Smith 1989: 8, or the other side of the spectrum, the Evangelical theologian Ron Rhodes 2006: 12.

¹² Lee’s 2012 argument is for ‘non-religion’ as a binary against religion, so the category is much the same as ours of atheism and theism. ‘Non-religion’ implies atheism is ritual non-participation, and implies that one could exist outside of religion, neither of which are true for the ancient Greeks and many other historical societies. See also Eller 2010: 1-18.

the possibility of evidence of god (rather than whether gods exist or not), and this understanding allows for theistic and atheistic agnostics. Though it is often argued agnostics are predominantly atheists, all religions contain core agnostic elements.¹³ It will be argued that the binary position is less problematic than the ternary position and best fits the ancient evidence and atheism in the modern world: however, the binary position has come under criticism.

It has been argued that the binary understanding is inferior to the ternary one because the ternary is more commonly used today. But there is no consensus among the general public about the definitions of atheism, agnosticism and theism; the binary definition was until less than one and a half centuries ago the only definition, and even now it is still a very popular reported definition, and has also lately increasingly gained support in the social sciences and in philosophy (possibly even approaching consensus here, if such a thing is possible in philosophy).¹⁴ We surely should take atheists as a sub-group in society that has been subject to significant persecution over the centuries (an ‘outgroup’), and the term ‘atheist’ used as a weapon in this persecution. If we do this then, in looking for a definition

¹³ On the commonality of atheism in agnostics see Martin 2007: 2, arguing that ‘[s]ince agnostics do not believe in God, they are by definition negative atheists. This is not to say that negative atheism entails agnosticism. A negative atheist might disbelieve in God but need not.’

¹⁴ On the lack of consensus see e.g. Bullivant 2008: a study of 728 students (4% of the student body at Oxford) found that 28.1% students defined atheism as positive disbelief, and 13.6% as unbelief. Unbelief/lack of belief appears as one of several or the major definition in most general and some philosophical dictionaries, e.g. the *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, ‘either the lack of belief that there exists a god, or the belief that there exists none’. *Oxford Dictionaries* have it as ‘Disbelief or lack of belief in the existence of God or gods’; *Oxford English Dictionary* as ‘Disbelief in, or denial of, the existence of a God. Also, Disregard of duty to God, godlessness (practical atheism).’ Support in the social sciences: Lee 2012, 2015; Eller 2010: 1; Philosophers: the classic advocate is Smith 1989: 7, but atheism encompassing unbelief and potentially (but not necessarily) disbelief is the definition accepted by the authors of the varied articles in *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism* (definition in Bullivant 2013: 11-21), and *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism* (definition in Martin 2007: 1-10). Cf. also Cliteur 2009: 1-2.

that works for the ancient and modern world, we ought to prioritise the definition that (modern) atheists use over those of the religious. This might seem a frivolous point, but the meaning given to the term by theists has been a source of contention from atheists, mostly arguing that the threefold division is used to caricature atheism and show its unreasonableness (as older definitions tended to). Take the observations of the *American Atheists*:

Atheism is usually defined incorrectly as a belief system. Atheism is not a disbelief in gods or a denial of gods; it is a lack of belief in gods. Older dictionaries define atheism as "a belief that there is no God." Some dictionaries even go so far as to define Atheism as "wickedness," "sinfulness," and other derogatory adjectives. Clearly, theistic influence taints dictionaries. People cannot trust these dictionaries to define atheism.¹⁵

As historians, ancient definitions matter at least as much as modern ones, and we must deploy the most suitable definitions for our own subject.¹⁶ Especially when we are discussing belief and other heavily contextual attitudes of the ancients, it is key 'to grasp the native's point of view, his relation to life, to realize his vision of his world'.¹⁷

Atheism has a long history of being viewed as opposed to theism in a binary; it was, for instance, employed to describe failure to properly espouse the new Protestantism from the sixteenth century.¹⁸ The idea of a threefold division is thoroughly modern, that of a middle ground between atheism and theism arising from the invention of the term 'agnostic' by

¹⁵ <https://atheists.org/activism/resources/what-is-atheism>, retrieved 14/03/2016.

¹⁶ Bullivant 2013: 12-13 argues it is legitimate for different disciplines to deploy different definitions suited to them.

¹⁷ Malinowski 1922: 25.

¹⁸ Atheism as failure to espouse Protestantism: Hunter 1985: 139.

Thomas Henry Huxley in the late nineteenth century.¹⁹ Whereas, it is, by now, clear that atheism is a cross-cultural and cross-historical phenomenon, but the form that atheism takes in different societies varies as much as the corresponding varieties of theism.²⁰ One cross-historical feature of atheism is in its opposition to theism: theistic identity is developed and reinforced through opposition with the Other (atheism), and vice versa. This means that atheism is a ‘semantically parasitic category’, only meaningful in relation to its theism.²¹ This is also the case for the other relational terms: ‘religion’ arguably has little meaning without the term ‘secular’, and theism without atheism.²² As Hyman observes:

atheism defines itself in terms of that which it is denying. From this it follows that if definitions and understandings of God change and vary, so too our definitions and understandings of atheism will change and vary. This further means that there will be as many varieties of atheism as there are varieties of theism. For atheism will always be a rejection, negation, or denial of a particular form of theism.²³

This binary is not just the best way of dealing with atheism and theism, but also agnosticism. Allowing agnosticism to be a free-floating concept, and therefore allowing for the idea of ‘agnostic atheists’ and ‘agnostic theists’, is very useful. For instance, it is beginning to be recognised that the term ‘agnostic’ can be a form of social identification often used in theistic

¹⁹ Huxley first used agnosticism in 1869. Agnosticism is not, and never really was, distinct from atheism in any substantial way, e.g. Huxley 1884: ‘It simply means that a man shall not say he knows or believes that which he has no scientific grounds for professing to know or believe.’

²⁰ Whitmarsh 2016: 4ff. observed the cross-cultural and cross-historical nature of atheism.

²¹ Semantically parasitic categories: Fitzgerald 2007: 54.

²² On the co-dependence of religion and secularism, and theism and atheism see Asad 2003: 25-6, Fitzgerald 2007: 54, Lee 2015: 25ff. and McCutcheon 2007: 173-99. See also Bullivant 2013: 13ff, Le Poidevin 1996: xvii: ‘Any discussion of atheism, then, is necessarily a discussion of theism.’ See also Hyman 2007: 28-9.

²³ Hyman 2007: 28-9.

communities to avoid conflict, rather than a philosophical position.²⁴ The distinction between agnostic and atheist as distinct positions regarding belief in god was also far less clear (if present at all) in thought before the nineteenth century.²⁵ The controversial phrase used by Plato and at the centre of the Socrates debate, *ou nomizeî theous* (variously translated as ‘does not believe in’, ‘does not accept’, ‘does not worship’, etc, the gods), has caused so much controversy in translation partly because it does not distinguish between agnostic and atheistic positions as they have been traditionally envisioned using the binary system.²⁶

Ritual and belief: using definitions to exclude or include atheism

Part of the issue here is in how we understand belief, and the ‘beliefs’ of the atheist. Belief in the religious sense might take the form of a type of certainty, but belief in a more general sense of assenting to a proposition does not imply absolute certainty. The modern rational atheist, typically, will no more or less believe in gods than he will in the celestial teapot, the invisible dragon in the garage, or fairies at the bottom of the garden.²⁷ Wootton has observed that ‘[p]robability judgements are not central to the positive arguments of atheism and deism;

²⁴ Social identification was at the core of Huxley’s redefinition. At a dinner party in 1881 Darwin asked his guests why they called themselves atheists, preferring agnostic for himself; a guest replied that ‘agnostic was but atheist writ respectable and atheist was but agnostic writ aggressive’ (see Pleins 2013: 93). Also note Huxley records in ‘Agnosticism’, 1889: 750, that Rev. Dr. Wade, principle of King’s College, remarked of him: ‘He may prefer to call himself an agnostic; but his real name is an older one – he is an infidel; that is to say, an unbeliever. The word infidel, perhaps, carries an unpleasant significance. Perhaps it is right that it should.’ The socially acceptable nature of atheism and agnosticism as self-identifiers in the USA is discussed in Putnam and Campbell 2010: 16ff., and 104ff.

²⁵ Kearns 2010: 141-2 observes likewise that the distinction between atheism and agnosticism was far from clear in ancient Greece.

²⁶ Accusations against Socrates: Pl. *Ap.* 24b-c. On the ritualist position (that belief was not a part of the accusation) see Giordano-Zecharya 2005; for the most exhaustive rebuttal of the ritualist position on the accusation see Versnel’s 2011 fourth appendix: 539-59. See also Harrison 2015a: 23, and Parker 2011: 36.

²⁷ The celestial teapot: Bertrand Russell ‘Is there a God?’, 1997: 547-8; the invisible dragon in the garage: Carl Sagan 2008: 169-88; Fairies at the bottom of the garden: Douglas Adams and Richard Dawkins 2006: front quote; see also 51-4.

but they lie at the heart of the negative claims of unbelief.²⁸ But probability judgements are central to ‘positive arguments’ of atheism. The naturalist or scientific modern atheist has sufficient evidence to assent to the view that god does not exist. This sort of atheism is fundamentally a probability judgement, which ought to be expressed thus: ‘there are very likely no gods’, yet it is frequently expressed: ‘there are no gods’. This is the rational conversion of a sufficiently established probabilistic statements into an absolute one, like that the sun will rise or that rain will make us wet. In the mind of the atheist, gods are sufficiently unlikely and so this is converted, for ease and practicality, into the absolute form that gods do not exist. We could define the difference as between belief and judgement, following David Hume.²⁹ This position, in which an individual rejects the gods, perhaps accepting a general rational belief that on all probability they do not exist, is frequently termed ‘intellectual atheism’.³⁰

But ‘intellectual atheism’ is not the only type of atheism. There are many other reasons why one might be an atheist other than as the result of a rational summing up of the available evidence.³¹ In the modern world, an atheist might reject their religion or beliefs because they have become disillusioned with God or their religious institutions due to human rights abuses, such as the Catholic child abuse scandals.³² Alternately, they might become disillusioned with God because a close family member died in an unpredictable or painful

²⁸ Wootton 1992: 52.

²⁹ Hume ‘On Miracles’ 1748, E10.3-4. See also Skorupski 1976: 238.

³⁰ ‘Intellectual atheism’: Silver et al. 2014.

³¹ On the distinction between the concept of atheism and the motivation for it see Cliteur 2009: 10-11.

³² Reed 2002 gives his account of leaving the Catholic Church and priesthood for various emotional reasons. Dan Barker in his *Losing Faith in Faith*, 1992, insists that his ‘deconversion’ to atheism was entirely due to an addiction to reason, but he also describes how the corruption of his fellow preachers turned him away from the church. ‘non-intellectual’ reasons are rarely offered by ‘deconverts’ as the reason they lost their faith – rationality, reason, and intellectual integrity provide a more easily defensible platform – but non-intellectual reasons almost always play a part.

way. Or, though this would be rare in the modern world, a child might simply never encounter religion or religious ideas. Or they might be an ‘apatheist’, someone who is simply uninterested in gods, belief-claims, or religion. There are cultural atheists now, raised under the atheistic regimes of the Soviet Union or modern China, or even in culturally atheistic families or communities in the UK. The varieties of non-intellectual atheism are hardly recognised in modern academic works, though estimates of the frequency of different types of atheism place ‘intellectual’ atheists only at around forty-percent of the whole.³³ Of course, these are certainly not exclusive categories: many atheists reject religion and belief for a particular reason that might be emotionally driven, for instance, and later develop their atheism in an intellectual direction. It makes sense to group all of these different types of people into a single group (as atheists); but if we were to advance the ternary view, it is difficult – if not impossible – to decide where these sorts of ‘non-intellectual’ atheists ought to be placed.

The necessity of having an expansive binary definition is further emphasised if we consider the varying emphases of belief and ritual in different societies. One of the things that confounds any attempt to locate historical belief or unbelief is the ‘belief in belief’. As Steven Weinberg observed, ‘one often hears that theology is not the important thing about religion – the important thing is how it helps us to live’.³⁴ This is the idea that belief is a good thing in itself, a kind of second-order belief, so called (by the American philosopher and cognitive scientist Daniel Dennett) ‘belief in belief’.³⁵ Believers in belief are people who believe that believing in *P* is good, valuable or noble, though they may not believe in *P* themselves. As

³³ Silver et al. 2014: 998.

³⁴ Weinberg 1993: 193ff.

³⁵ Dennett 2006: 9-12, 200-240 on belief in belief. See also Helm 2000: 158-78, for a religious perspective on belief in belief.

well as the tendency of scholarship to avoid attributing atheism to historical individuals, the ‘belief in belief’ that Weinberg is talking about can help us to understand the social stigma on atheism and the tendency to support belief and religion even when one does not personally believe in its truth. Belief in belief is a socially useful idea. People are frequently less concerned with the philosophical question of whether there is sufficient evidence to justify their belief (or unbelief) than with the practical question of whether there is sufficient evidence to others that they do believe.³⁶ It is just this sort of thing that is the concern of Xenophon’s Socrates in his *Apology*. When pushed to prove his conformity during his trial, Socrates observed that everyone had seen him sacrificing at the public altars around the city and attending the various festivals of the gods.³⁷ Likewise, as Gibbon remarked of Roman religion:

The various modes of worship which prevailed in the Roman world were all considered by the people as equally true; by the philosopher as equally false; and by the magistrate as equally useful. And thus toleration produced not only mutual indulgence, but even religious concord.³⁸

Gibbon grasped the pragmatic foundation of religion: mutual concord in society relied at least on collective participation. No matter the variety of individual beliefs people held, they were expected to share only the broadest belief in the usefulness of religion: to believe in belief. Indeed, it has been argued that the Sisyphus fragment – probably the most notorious atheistic document from ancient Greece, from a play probably written by the Athenian oligarch Critias in the fifth century BCE – is dangerous not because the character advocates unbelief in specific gods or in general, but because it undermines the legitimacy of belief itself:

³⁶ Helm 2000: 159.

³⁷ Xen. *Ap.* 11.

³⁸ Gibbon 1776 [1995 ed.]: 1:22.

...some shrewd man, wise in his counsel, discovered for mortals fear of the gods, so that the base should have fear, even if in secret they should do or say or think anything. So he thereupon introduced religion... Thus I think did someone persuade mortals to believe that there is a race of deities.³⁹

Since Fontenelle in his *Histoire critique des oracles* (1687), it has been argued that earnest ritual participation can be motivated by many culture-driven alternatives to genuine belief, and can also coincide comfortably with the ridicule of those beliefs. That is to say, ritual participation does not mean that the participant believes in the existence of any god or accepts any related supernatural propositions at all, and they may even have really believed that it was false; they shared the collective belief in the usefulness of religion to society or themselves.⁴⁰ This is especially the case for atheists, for whom ritual participation was strongly incentivised.⁴¹ We certainly might, with Tom Harrison, ‘reasonably suppose that the performance of ritual was accompanied by attitudes’, and we have already observed that beliefs frequently coincided with or drove ritual performance.⁴² But there is a difference between society and the individual that Harrison and other proponents of belief have glossed or ignored.⁴³ These ‘attitudes’, or motivations for ritual participation, need not be related to

³⁹ Critias (*TGrF* F1), ad. Sext. Emp. *Adv. Math.* 9.54, trans. Whitmarsh 2014. Undermines legitimacy of belief: Bremmer 1996: 15-17, Kearns 2010: 149. Fragment as ‘dangerous’: Burkert 1985: 314-5. Parker 1996: 212 said that the ‘radical criticisms’ of the fragment had ‘ugly atheistic implications’, while for Sutton 1981 Whitmarsh 2014 is the best modern scholarly discussion of this fragment, but O’Sullivan 2012 is also a welcome discussion on how the fragment goes beyond atheism into a more positive and productive view of religion.

⁴⁰ That ritual does not mean belief in gods: e.g. Brelsford 2005: 176: ‘actions or behaviors do not derive from and are not readily governed by beliefs’. See also Rossano 2012: 81-3 on ‘Ritually faking belief’.

⁴¹ As it is in Christian and Jewish communities, e.g. in Putnam et al. 2010, chapter 10: nearly half of orthodox Jews have doubts about the existence of God, while still practising and paying subscription to synagogues.

⁴² Harrison 2007b: 133.

⁴³ Rupke 2013: 3-40 discusses the differences between individual and polis-based approaches to religion, and the variety of individual beliefs even in a normative system (16ff.), as does Rubel 2011, 2013; and Woolf 2013: 136-63, on the differences between individual and collective identities in ritual participation, and the centrality

any supernatural beliefs in any given individual. We might accept ritual practice as general evidence for belief in a historical society but we cannot use ritual participation as evidence for the belief of an individual.

To say that beliefs are very difficult to investigate is not to say that people behave completely randomly, or have no motivations. Actions do reflect beliefs, but a single action does not unproblematically and predictably reflect a single belief: when an individual attends church, for instance, they may have sufficient reasons outside of belief in a deity to do so, and as such we cannot soundly argue that they believe in God (or in the efficacy of worship) on the basis of going to church or sacrificing at an altar. It is our responsibility to try to understand the alternative influences on ritual actions: social, political, financial, and so on. For this, we need to root our examination of atheism in the specific concerns of each historical society.

Conclusion

By embracing an expansive definition of atheism and theism, we can allow for both ritual non-participation *and* ritual participation as potential behaviours of atheists. Conversely, by insisting on the ternary view, which posits atheism as an extreme, we would have to exclude ritual non-participants from atheism, which would allow us to (erroneously) conclude that there were no atheists in many societies, like that of ancient Greece. In short, from an emic perspective, the binary concept of atheism and theism maps quite well on to the phenomena of belief and unbelief in a variety of historical societies, and allows for a greater flexibility in

of choice and difference to polytheism. See also Kindt 2012: 36-54 on personal religion and modes of thinking versus the abstracted and formulaic models like Polis Religion. Cf., for instance, Jim 2014: 59: ‘At the most fundamental level, as some scholars have recognized, ritual performance – or indeed the whole fabric of ancient Greek religion – presupposes the beliefs that the Greek gods existed, that they had power to influence human affairs, and that they took delight in being worshipped and honoured.’

customising the definition based on each society without compromising it. From an etic perspective, the binary is also more coherent and consistent, and allows for the best understanding and comparison of beliefs across different societies. The binary division is simply more functional, comprehensive, flexible, and representative of people's real beliefs.

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