

MICHAEL J. BUCKLEY, S.J.

At
the
Origins
of
Modern
Atheism



Michael J. Buckley, S.J.

At
the
Origins
of
Modern
Atheism

Yale University Press New Haven and London

For my mother and father
on the
sixtieth anniversary of
their marriage

"El amor, más fuerte es más unitivo"

Copyright © 1987 by Yale University.
All rights reserved.

This book may not be reproduced, in whole
or in part, in any form (beyond that
copying permitted by Sections 107 and 108
of the U.S. Copyright Law and except by
reviewers for the public press), without
written permission from the publishers.

Designed by Sally Harris
and set in Garamond type by Vera-Reyes, Inc., Philippines.
Printed in the United States of America by
Edwards Brothers, Inc., Ann Arbor, Michigan.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Buckley, Michael J.
At the origins of modern atheism.

Bibliography:
Includes index.

1. Atheism—History—Modern period, 1500—

I. Title.

BL2747.3.B83 1987 211'.8'0903 86-28248

ISBN 0-300-03719-8 (cloth)

0-300-04897-1 (pbk.)

The paper in this book meets the guidelines for
permanence and durability of the Committee on
Production Guidelines for Book Longevity
of the Council on Library Resources.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3

Acknowledgments

This book comes to publication trailing clouds of the kindness of others. From its earliest days in classes or seminars at the University of Chicago, Gonzaga University, the Pontifical Gregorian University, and the Graduate Theological Union, its initial investigations and subsequent research were made possible by the encouragement of such administrators as Charles Wegener, Clifford Kossel, René Latourelle, Claude Welch, Andrew J. Dufner, and T. Howland Sanks. I remember Santa Clara University for its great generosity over the two years in which I was its grateful guest, first as scholar-in-residence and then as Bannan Fellow, positions opened to me by the president, William Rewak, and the academic vice-president at that time, Paul Locatelli, and supported by the continual assistance of the chairperson of the Religious Studies Department, James Reites. My brother Jesuits gave me both room and community during those two happy and productive years when I was stashed securely on the second floor of Nobili Hall, and their religious fraternity, breadth of interests, lively conversation, and hospitality have left this book and its author deeply in their debt: "The thought of our past years in me doth breed / Perpetual benediction."

Students and colleagues whose names are too numerous to be mentioned have contributed so much over these years, but a particular place among my benefactors is taken by those who lent their expertise to individual chapters: James Collins, Frederick Copleston, Nicholas D. Smith, Helen Moritz, Anthony Ruhan, George Lucas, Joseph Chinnici, Theodore Foss, Frederick Tollini, Linus Thro, and John Heilbronn. My debt to the great scholarship and original insights of my former mentor and friend, the late Richard P. McKeon, will be obvious throughout this work. Louis Dupré gave this entire project and every chapter of the manuscript his careful attention and insightful suggestions, and I count his openhanded scholarship as well as his friendship among the great gifts of these years. As I recognize the size of this volume, I cannot but ruefully recall from my student days the Greek reproach: A big book is a big evil! Without the generosity of so many colleagues, especially Professor Dupré, it would have been so much worse.

Secretaries and research assistants number among my heroes, doggedly deciphering scrambled handwriting or pouring hours of their days into the dark cavern of obscurities: Ethel Johnston, Amy England, Douglas Burton-Christie, and especially those who helped to pull the project out of danger, Michael Takamoto and Timothy Chambers. Kevin Fitzgerald and Paul Danove proofread much of the text; Kay Shaunessey and Mark Higgins worked indefatigably on the indexes. Without their help I could not have met my deadline in a very crowded academic semester. My deep gratitude, as this book goes into paperbound, must be extended to my friend Professor Nicholas Lash for indicating how contrary to my convictions my understanding of Thomas Aquinas could be read. Though this printing is not a revision of this book, I have attempted to make those minor corrections that would make my original meaning in this matter somewhat clearer.

Above all, at this time, my thoughts turn gratefully to Paul Crowley, once my student in theology at the Graduate Theology Union, for a number of years my research assistant, and now a colleague and friend. He was with this book at its early stages of research, contributed continually to its growth, and has shepherded it through its final moments of redaction. I could not let this book go to press without registering my deep indebtedness and gratitude for his consistent generosity.

The final weeks of editing coincided with a period of difficulty unprecedented in my life. During this time, I was sustained and encouraged by the steadfast support of Archbishop John R. Quinn of San Francisco, Bishop John S. Cummins of Oakland, and Father John R. Clark, the Provincial Superior of the California Jesuits. They turned a dark period into a witness of integrity and fidelity. Great friends and a loving family gathered around me throughout this time. Of what they have been to me, as this book goes to press, I stand in a "grateful, never-dying remembrance."

Finally, the Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley has continually surrounded this work and its author with encouragement. The former vice-chancellor of the school, Terrance Mahan, insisted upon its being given a prime focus in the threatening chaos of other academic demands; presidents and deans have made time available; and the faculty has given that heartening attention through the colloquia and conversations that constitute an academic community. The Jesuits with whom I live at "Virginia West" have supported me in every way possible, patiently enduring periodic torrents of explanation that might mark a breakthrough on Helvétius, Meslier, or Gadamer and sharing an enthusiasm as the inquiry lumbered to its conclusions. For their learning, their kindness, and their religious brotherhood, I am deeply grateful.

Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	vii
<i>Introduction: "This Damnable Paradoxe"</i>	1
The Parameters of the Inquiry	13
The Event and Its Inquiry	25
 <i>Chapter 1: Religion as Bankrupt: Catholic Theologians and the Origins of Modern Atheism</i>	 37
Leonard Lessius and the Retrieval of the Stoic Topics	42
Marin Mersenne and the Platonizing of Epicurus	56
The Issue Becomes Philosophic	65
 <i>Chapter 2: The Existence of God and the New Philosophic Consciousness</i>	 68
SECTION 1. God as the Pledge of a Universal Mathematics: René Descartes	68
God as a Problem for Philosophic Wisdom	73
Certitude and the Method of Universal Mathematics	77
The Demonstrated Existence of God	85
"The Fable of My World"	94
SECTION 2. God in the Discourse of a Universal Mechanics: Isaac Newton	99
A Visit from Edmond Halley	99
The Derivation of the Real: Absolute Space and Absolute Time	110
Toward the Universal: The Importance of System	118
"Thus Far of God . . ."	129

<i>Chapter 3: The Assimilation of Theology into the New Philosophic Consciousness</i>	145
SECTION 1. The Mystical Theology of Controversy: Nicolas Malebranche	145
To Correct the Chinese	149
From Idea to Existence	153
The All-Encompassing God	160
SECTION 2. The Logistic Theology from Mechanics: Samuel Clarke	166
"Propero ad Class. Newtoni Theoriam"	167
To Establish the Necessary Being of the One God	176
The First Foundation of Religion	185
 <i>Chapter 4: The Atheistic Transformation of Denis Diderot</i>	 194
Setting the Stage	197
"La matière se mouvoir et le chaos se débrouiller"	211
The Dream of d'Alembert	225
What Hath Diderot Wrought?	248
 <i>Chapter 5: Atheism as the System of Nature: Baron Paul Henri d'Holbach</i>	 251
"Ce livre effraie tout le monde, et tout le monde veut le lire"	274
Weakness, Ignorance, and Superstition	291
"Nouveaux champions de la divinité"	299
 <i>Chapter 6: The Dialectical Origins of Atheism</i>	 322
The End of the Beginning	322
The Demonstration of History: A Methodological Retrieval	333
The Self-Alienation of Religion	341
 <i>Abbreviations</i>	 364
<i>Notes</i>	367
<i>Name Index</i>	429
<i>Subject Index</i>	437

Introduction: “This Damnable Paradoxe”

A *damnatio memoriae* followed the death of Akhenaten. His son-in-law reverted to the religious beliefs that had lain under ban and persecution. The Egyptian monarch's massive granite sarcophagi and alabaster Canopic chest stood unused. His body was either interred in a secondhand coffin or torn to pieces and thrown to the dogs. His capital stood abandoned to the desert, never again to serve as a royal residence and only to be recovered from the sands thousands of years later by German and English archaeologists in the decades surrounding the World Wars. The Ramessides of the succeeding dynasty worked out this obliteration, even excluding Akhenaten and his immediate progeny from the king-lists of Egypt. Whenever possible the symbols and figures of the hated Pharaoh were erased from monument and stele. His name was execration. If reference had to be made to his reign, he was characterized in a circumlocution as “that criminal of Akhet-Aten.”¹ For his had been a regime, described by his successor, Tutankhamun, in which

the temples of the gods and goddesses from Elephantine [down] to the marches of the Delta [had . . . and] gone to pieces. Their shrines had become desolate, had become *mounds* overgrown with [*weeds*]. Their sanctuaries were as if they had never been. Their halls were a footpath. The land was topsy-turvy, and the gods turned their backs upon this land. If [*the army* was] sent to Djahi to extend the frontiers of Egypt, no success of theirs came at all. If one prayed to a god to seek counsel from him, he would never come [at all]. If one made supplication to a goddess similarly, she would never come at all. Their hearts *were hurt* in their bodies, (so that) they did damage to that which had been made.²

The repudiated monarch is indicted not for heresy, as has been so often and so mistakenly alleged, but for an antitheism in which he opposed the other

gods of Egypt in favor of Aten, the Sun-God, an antitheism that led to a divine abandonment of the nation as all “the gods turned their backs on this land.”

What this stele inscription decried as impiety and antitheism, however, successive generations read as religious advancement. For the scandal of Akhenaten, his true originality, lay with his uncompromising solar monotheism. Egypt had flourished for fifteen hundred years in religious peace through the assimilation of tribal cults into its hospitable pantheon. Hundreds of animalic heads perched on human bodies with a multiplicity that bespoke their origins, and a tendency to identify one with another indicated a strong drift toward monotheism or at least syncretism. Akhenaten brought that tendency to fulfillment not by assimilation, but by repudiation and proscription. The one god was the solar disk; the others were discarded and suppressed. Their temples were unsupported, their priests ignored, their names hammered away. Directives were issued for the plural form of the word *god* to be eradicated wherever it appeared.³ The capital was moved from Thebes to El-'Amârna, and the site was rebuilt into the new city named Akhetaten to celebrate the Sun-God.

In a lyrically lovely hymn, Akhenaten worshiped Aten, the solar disk, as the “sole God, like whom there is no other! Thou didst create the world according to thy desire, whilst thou wert alone: all men, cattle, and wild beasts, whatever is on earth, going upon (its) feet, and what is on high, flying with its wings.”⁴ His successors and even more the next dynasty judged that such a worship and such a king had turned Egypt *seni-meni*, “passed-by-and-sick.”⁵ It had deprived the nation of its temples, the army of its victories, and the people of its recourse to the divine. In the middle of the fourteenth century B.C., as the eighteenth dynasty ran its course, Egypt made the collective judgment: monotheism was antitheism. The denial of the gods of the people destroyed the living presence of any god.

A thousand years later, in 399 B.C., Socrates drew from Meletus that same easy equation between the gods of popular belief and all divinity. Forensic theology had divided Athens since Anaxagoras of Clazomenae had introduced philosophy into this center of Hellenic culture. Anaxagoras had been indicted under the city's decrees against those “who do not believe in the divine or who teach *logoi* about matters transcendent” and had fled for his life to Lampsacus.⁶ A bronze tablet displayed on the Acropolis publicly proscribed Diagoras of Melos, and a reward of one talent was posted for those who would kill him and two talents for those who would bring him captive into Athens. Diagoras was an “atheist.” Indeed, his fame was to rank him among the great classic atheists in the ancient world, with his name heading the canonical catalogues of the godless. The tablet explains his atheism: he had ridiculed the Eleusinian Mysteries and spoken about what

occurred within them.⁷ Around the same time, 415 B.C., Protagoras of Abdera was reportedly banished from Athens and his book burnt in the *agora* for theological skepticism: "About the gods, I do not have [the capacity] to know, whether they are or are not, nor to know what they are like in form; for there are many things that prevent this knowledge: the obscurity [of the issue] and the shortness of human life."⁸ Whatever solid ground of actual event and word lies beneath the mist and haze of story, allegation, and maxim surrounding Anaxagoras, Diagoras, and Protagoras, Athens was never the territory of untrammelled inquiry that the Enlightenment projected. It was protective of its gods, and Meletus accused Socrates of denying them.

Initially, Meletus denounces Socrates for corrupting the city's youth "by teaching them not to believe in the gods in which the City believes, but in other *daimonia* that are new." With breathtaking ease, Socrates induces Meletus to identify this indictment with a total denial of any divine reality: "This is what I say, that you do not believe in gods at all. . . ." "Do I believe there is no god?" "You certainly do not, by Zeus, not in any way at all." Socrates is τὸ παράπαν ἄθεος, completely godless.⁹ Meletus associates him with Anaxagoras in the conviction that the sun is only a stone and the moon is only earth. Socrates finds the general charge of atheism so absurd that he treats Meletus like a jester, one who like Aristophanes features serious issues in the corruptingly inappropriate medium of flippancy. Socrates had taken the direction of his life from the revelation of Delphi and its negative governance from his *daimon*. His life was to be lived as "the god stationed me, as I supposed and assumed, ordering me to live philosophizing and examining myself and others."¹⁰ If he had abandoned this station, then with some assurance one could have discerned disbelief in his conduct, since out of fear of unpopularity and death he would have disobeyed the divine directions given him by the oracle. The ambiguity of "atheism" in the *Apologia* stems essentially from the identification of the gods of the city with all gods, of an understanding of divinity accepted within one society with any understanding of the divine. Ironical as this identification might have seemed to Plato's Socrates, it resulted in the tragedy of his execution. One man's theism proved to be his indictor's atheism, the incarnation of impiety.

Socrates also introduced another factor into atheistic discernment: the differentiation of levels of confession between true and specious religious belief. Meletus insists upon an obvious profession that corresponds with the acknowledgment of the gods of the city; Socrates offers a quality of commitment in life that indicates actual conviction. Meletus does not attend to practice; Socrates collapses any ultimate distinction between theory and practice and makes practice an embodiment or instance of theory. This added consideration does not center on the kinds of gods who are

worshipped, but on the difference between inauthentic and authentic confession, a distinction that the works of Plato broadened into the differentiation between the apparent and the real, between the phenomena and the truth of the phenomena. Plato did not distinguish, as he has been continually and facetiously dismissed as distinguishing, between two different and independent worlds, the world of appearance and the world of ideas—as if these were two autonomous spheres. He does distinguish between the apparent and the form that is the truth of the apparent. There are not two worlds, but the imperfect phenomenon and its perfect truth now grasped in the modes of religious affirmation and denial. Socrates' discernment insisted both upon the differences among gods and upon the differences among the levels of knowledge.

The early opposition to Christianity would be unintelligible outside this ambiguity. Justin Martyr's *First Apology*, written at Rome in the middle of the second century, recognized the charge made against the Church, now a little over a hundred years old: "Thus we are even called atheists [ἄθεοι]. We do confess ourselves atheists before those whom you regard as gods, but not with respect to the Most True God."¹¹ Christians absented themselves from state temples and from common cults; they refused the recognized acts of reverence to imperial symbols and to the statues of the gods whom they called idols. Thus they stood apart from the cities and from the festivals which marked social religious life; at the same time, they were not assimilated into the Jewish nation. The scandal of such a refusal is hard to recapture, but it led the early Christians to the same indictment as that of Socrates. They were obviously atheists, despite the appeal that Justin, as so many of the apologists before and after him, lodged: "What sensible person will not admit that we are not atheists, since we worship the Creator of this world and assert, as we have been taught, that He has no need of bloody sacrifices, libations, and incense."¹² It is little wonder that the early Christians found in Socrates a common heritage and postulated Moses as his influence. The same charge that had led to his death introduced their centuries of persecution. Both philosophic convictions and religious commitments suffered the charge of atheism.

Akhenaten was never called an atheist, but he was described as such. Socrates was called an atheist but rebutted the charge. Justin Martyr was called an atheist and admitted the sense in which that indictment was true. These three figures expose the paradoxical history of a continually ambiguous term. Irenaeus accepts the term as applicable to Anaxagoras, but Augustine celebrates Anaxagoras' belief "that the author of all the visible world is a Divine Mind" and places him with the great natural theologians of antiquity.¹³ Cicero, Sextus Empiricus, and Claudius Aelianus drew up lists of the atheists, but their indices covering so many centuries bear the same

internal contradictions as the histories from which they draw.¹⁴ Never do those named in the catalogues or in the remarks of others come to more than ten. Seldom would one of those so named admit the justice of the title; even more rarely would subsequent historians of philosophy insist upon it. Diogenes of Apollonia, Hippon of Rhegium, Protagoras, Prodicus, Critias, Diagoras of Melos, Theodore of Cyrene, Bion of Borysthenes, Euhemerus and Epicurus: almost always their "atheism" was an alien, unsympathetic reading of their theism or their natural philosophy. Too little is known about most of them, naturalists, sophists, and skeptics, to assert much with certitude. The naturalists won the name because they made air or water the primary substance, but Diogenes, like Anaxagoras, attributed Mind to his primary substance and identified it with Zeus, and Hippon was listed by Clement of Alexandria among those who were given the name of atheist without deserving it.¹⁵

A sophist, a politician, and a Cyrenaic won the name because they investigated the origin of the divine names: Prodicus of Ceos found that Hephaestus was a synonym for fire in Homer and that the Nile was worshiped as the source of life in Egypt. Linguistic analysis discovered that the term *divinity* was predicated in its original usage of that which is beneficial to humanity. Some in Athens found this atheistic, but others defended it as historically accurate and as profoundly insightful in identifying the divine with the universally beneficent.¹⁶ Critias of Athens placed in the mouth of Sisyphus, in the satyric play by the same name, another explanation for the origin of religion. It arose not from the experience of beneficence, but from the primitive experience of limitless human exploitation. Laws by themselves do not eliminate crime; they only encourage secrecy in its commission. So a "wise and clever man invented fear for mortals. . . . He introduced the Divine, saying that there is a God flourishing with immortal life, hearing and seeing with his mind, and thinking of everything and caring about these things. . . . And even if you plan anything evil in secret, you will not escape the gods in this."¹⁷ *Sisyphus* enunciated for the first time in Western civilization a political or social motivation for the origin of the gods. On the other hand, there is no reason to ascribe to Critias the opinion which he put into the mouth of his shifty protagonist; in fact, the location and the character of the speech should indicate the distance between its judgment and that of the author of the play.¹⁸ Euhemerus, finally, never denied the gods. He asserted in his book of travels that the heavenly bodies were divine but that many of the popular gods were great men whose achievements earned their divinization after death.¹⁹ Epicurus asserted the existence of the gods; indeed, he so asserted their happiness that he excluded from them any providential care for the human condition.²⁰ For Diagoras, Theodore, and Bion, and perhaps one or two more, the case was

different: their atheism consisted neither in whom they identified as divine nor in what they characterized as divine activity, that is, in how they defined the gods. Diagoras' Ἀποφυγίζοντες Λόγοι attacked any divine existence.²¹ Theodore's *On the Gods* submitted them to a searching criticism and final denial, Bion initially denied their existence but underwent conversion before his death.²²

Greek philosophic history, then, exhibits the enormous paradox of "atheism." The word could carry vastly divergent and even contradictory meanings and could consequently be applied to figures whose ideas were radically opposed. But its history does more than embody the ambiguity of the term; it also exhibits something of the anatomy of the ambiguity. Men were called *atheists* dependent upon a limited number of variables: whom they identified as gods; the understanding they gave to the term; the activities they defined as divine; the kind of denial attributed to them. Any of these factors could tell critically in the attribution of atheism. A naturalist could most easily be identified as an atheist by the first factor; the sophist and the mythographer by the second; the atomist and the superstitious by the third; the agnostic and the antitheists by the last. In other words, the ambiguity of *atheist* is the classic indeterminacy that the Platonic tradition held was true of any linguistic unit, of any word: ambiguity about the appropriate instance, the appropriate definition, and the appropriate word, with all of these framed within varying degrees of knowledge, the kind of affirmation or denial, the difference between appearance and reality, the definition and the word. The term *atheist* is not hopelessly vacuous, but unless the instance to which it is applied and the meaning in which it is used are determined, its employment is profoundly misleading.

The Platonic tradition maintained that ambiguity characterized any word or any instance or any definitional articulation. The word does not define itself, and the individual case does not explain itself. The need for the dialectical method lies precisely in the discontinuity among these three, and the movement of the dialectical conversation is toward their resolution, toward a coincidence of word, thought, and thing. Thus the author of the *Seventh Epistle* could summarize the elements and procedures of any method:

For each of the things which are, there are three necessary means through which knowledge is acquired. Knowledge itself is a fourth factor. And the fifth, it is necessary to posit, is the thing itself, that which is knowable and true. Of these, the first is the name [ὄνομα], the second is the definition [λόγος], the third is the image [εἶδωλον], and the fourth is the knowledge [ἐπιστήμη]. If you wish to understand what I am now saying, take a single example and learn from it what applies to all. There is [5] that which is called a circle, which has for its [1] *name* the word we have just men-

tioned; secondly, it has a [2] *definition*, composed of names and verbs: “that which is everywhere equidistant from the extremities to the center” will be the definition of that which has for its *name* “round” and “spherical” and “circle.” And in the third place, there is [3] *that which is being drawn or erased or being shaped on a lathe or destroyed*—but none of these processes affect [5] the *real circle*, to which all of these other [circles] are related, because it is distinct from them. In the fourth place, there is concerning these [4] *knowledge* [ἐπιστήμη] and *insight* [νοῦς] and true opinion [ἀληθὴς τε δόξα], and these must be assumed to constitute a single whole which does not exist in either vocal sounds or in bodily forms but in souls. Thus it is clear that it [4, knowledge] differs from [5] the nature of the circle itself and from [1, 2, 3] the three factors previously mentioned.²³

No sensible person confuses the three physical or external means or factors that enter into the generation of knowledge.

The *Seventh Epistle* affords a very good instance of three expressive factors which must enter into any movement toward knowledge: [3] instance, [2] definition, and [1] word: To confuse [5] the circle that one [4] understands with [3] this *particular* circle that is being shaped on the lathe would deny all universal knowledge; to identify [5] the circle with the words of its [2] definition would fail to see that [1] words are always indeterminate apart from [3] instance, and that a [2] general definition never perfectly fits its [3] imperfect and phenomenal realizations; to seize upon the [1] word as if it were without divergent [2] definitions and contradicting [3] applications is to reduce language to sophistry and invective. The three must be coordinately present and grasped: word, articulated meaning, and imperfect realizations. Otherwise there is no knowledge. Knowledge itself may range from opinion to science to intuition.

What holds true in so simple an example of geometry becomes even more telling in the history of ideas. This Platonic enumeration identifies the elements which constitute the culture: the words we use, the understanding they are given within this use, and the stories, legends, persons, events, and theories in which they are appropriately used. Culture, the achievements of the past, is irreducibly linguistic. Whatever the kind of language, in culture the inner word has become the outer word, and this outer word remains to be read, assimilated, and interiorized in another generation's inner word.

The terms that run through intellectual history exhibit all the indeterminateness cited by this Platonic epistle against written or literary philosophy. These units do not keep a constant meaning. They function more like variables than constants in intellectual history. *Nature*, *substance*, *person*, and *principle* vary essentially in their meanings and in their applications in

various philosophic or theological systems. To ask what is nature, outside such a context of relationships, is to ask a meaningless question. To assert that the notion of cause can no longer be admitted may evoke solid feelings of metaphysical rectitude, but this statement carries little but pathos when taken apart from a context of discourse in which it makes sense. The problem of language, though exhibited in language, is not simply linguistic, however.

It is equally, and perhaps more profoundly, a problem of thought, of the grasp of meaning and of the world. For thought exists only within language, whether this language be expressed vocally or remain in the inner *verbum*: "Thinking and discourse are the same thing, except that what we call thinking is, precisely, the inward dialogue carried on by the mind with itself without spoken sound."²⁴ The history of ideas can be formulated only if these ideas emerge as words; the history of terms can be illuminating only if this intrinsic unity between thinking and speaking is maintained. Expression is not artificially added to thought. Thought only takes place within inner expression, within an inner word, of which either written or oral discourse can properly be called an emanation.²⁵ External expression is not identical with thought. Our expression may be more than we understand or realize; it may also be inadequate to our thought. Both are possible. "That is not what I meant." "But it is what you said." And again: "In telling me that, he had no idea how much he was revealing about the matter." External word and concept are not identical, and a text can obtain a life of its own. But language is not external to concept; it is literally its ex-pression. There is no thinking without correlative expression. In terms of the Platonic triad, a definition is given in terms of names and verbs.

But the last member of the external triad is the single instance (*εἶδωλον*) to which it may refer, by which it may be exemplified, or in which it may be realized, however imperfectly. The instance embodies the meaning and carries the language in discourse, or it is the particular from which the universal can be induced or by which the word is judged in its appropriateness. The instance, "the case in question," is so critically important in the clarification of meaning that, above either word or meaning, it exhibits the intelligibility of that which is the object of discourse. It is not enough to have the word *justice* singled out as a unique term; the greater the instance of justice—as in the polis rather than the individual person—the more readily an exact meaning for it is discernible.²⁶

Word, definition, and instance: knowledge must cover each of these, form them into a single whole. Knowledge in some lesser degree of perception or opinion can begin with any of them, for each is an expression—a limited expression—of the reality which one is attempting to reach in inquiry.

Any inquiry into an aspect of atheistic affirmation encounters all the

twisted contradictions that the *Seventh Epistle* noted in the path toward knowledge. The word *atheist* presents unique problems. It occurs almost exclusively in a polemic context; it is the designation of another person; it is invective and accusation. It rides into the quarrels of human beings as the term *heretic* functioned in Europe's Middle Ages or as the word *fellow traveler* terrified the United States in the middle of the twentieth century. Those who were called heretics insisted almost universally that they represented genuine and purified belief; few of those branded as fellow travelers characterized themselves as such. So also ἄθεος. It is a brand imprinted by one's enemies. Its definition is parasitic; like any denial, it lives off the meaning denied. The amphibologies it gathers to its history are a product of the hostile interpretation of unsympathetic critics. As it occurs in Greek antiquity after names such as Anaxagoras or Epicurus, *atheism* denotes a denial not of all transcendent personal divinity but of popular gods, the figures of civic legend and preference. Thus, the use of the epithet is dictated by the definition of the gods denied or by the instances of those to whom worship is offered or refused.

"Atheism," then, exhibits in a double manner the indetermination embodied in each member of the Platonic triad. The name, the definition, and the instance both of the god or gods and of the "atheism" that constitutes their denial are undetermined. This sixfold ambiguity is increased almost beyond hope when one recognizes the forensic context in which all six occur, the passions that are engaged and the recriminations that are easily called into play. For, unlike the Platonic example of the circle, the affirmation or denial of god touches something so deep and so basic within human experience that it involves radical drives for meaning, for unity within experience, for final security, for autonomous freedom and self-determination—longings which have run through human history and choice.

If one begins with the term *atheist*," the promiscuity of its definition and application is evident from its first use in England. To Sir John Cheke, first Regius Professor of Greek at Cambridge, seems to belong the honor of its introduction.²⁷ In 1540 Cheke translated into Latin Plutarch's *On Superstition*, in which both superstition and atheism are condemned, but with different evaluations: the atheist thinks there are no gods, while the superstitious man, haunted by fear, "though by inclination Atheist, is yet far too weak-minded to think about the gods what he wishes to think. And again Atheism is in no way responsible for Superstition—Whereas Superstition has both supplied the cause for Atheism to come into being, and after it is come, furnished it with an excuse."²⁸ In Plutarch, atheism seems the mistake of the brave and superstition the conviction of the coward. In an essay appended to his translation, Cheke strove to redress the balance. His was an attack on the atheist, but atheism conceived as a denial not of the existence of

god but of the interventions of providence, an atheism that traces itself back to Epicurus and Lucretius and that finds its practical, political embodiment in Machiavellianism.

Books were coming out by the gross against atheism in England, which is not so strange if one remembers the report made to Lord Burleigh in 1572 in Carlton's *Discourse on the Present State of England*: "The realm is divided into three parties, the Papists, the Atheists, and the Protestants. All three are alike favoured: the first and second because, being many, we dare not displease them; the third, because, having religion, we fear to displease God in them."²⁹ Walter, Earl of Essex, died in 1576 seeing only religious ruin: "There is nothing but infidelity, infidelity, infidelity, atheism, atheism, atheism, no religion, no religion."³⁰ Twenty years later, Thomas Nashe's "Christs Teares over Jerusalem" would find the atheists everywhere: "There is no Sect now in England so scattered as Atheisme. In vayne doe you preach, in vayne doe you teach, if the roote that nourisheth all the branches of security be not thorowly digd up from the bottome. You are not halfe so wel acquainted as them that lyue continually about the Court and City, how many followers this damnable paradoxe hath; how many high wits it hath bewicht."³¹ Cheke was not alone in his refutation of "this damnable paradoxe." In 1530 John Rastell's *New Boke of Purgatory* took up the gage. Roger Hutchinson's *Image of God or Layman's Book* (1550) identified the group that had "already said in their hearts, 'There is no God'; or that they may easily be brought thereunto," with the radical religious sects closely akin to the Anabaptists. Perhaps no one surpassed the rhetorical zeal of John Veron's title, *Frutefull Treatise of Predestination and Providence . . . against the Swynysche Gruntings of the Epicures and Atheystes of Oure Time* [1561], lumping together "all the Vayne and Blasphemous Objections That the Epicures and Anabaptistes of Oure Time Can Make."³² John Veron was not original, but he was straightforward. In general these sallies possessed all the accuracy of the newly developed musket. For all the powder poured down the barrel, the shot was wild. What sense could be found in a word that could cover Machiavelli, Christopher Marlowe, the Anabaptists, and even Thomas Nashe himself, a word of which the growing influence could be engaged by men of the religious quality of the Earl of Essex and Lord Burleigh?

During the great controversies at the end of the nineteenth century, George Jacob Holyoake coined a new term, *secularist*, to distinguish himself from those who were called atheists. The distinction was imperative: *atheist* was often taken to denote one who is not only without god, but without morality.³³ At the same time, Thomas Huxley created the word *agnostic* to distinguish his own skepticism, as well as that of John Tyndall before him and Clarence Darrow in the next century, from the outright denial explicit in *atheist*.³⁴ On the other hand, Charles Bradlaugh maintained the respectabil-