

ATHEISM AND THE ARGUMENTUM AD IGNORANTIAM: WHY ATHEISTS CANNOT AVERT THE BURDEN OF PROOF

Shandon L. Guthrie

The road to understanding atheism is no easy venture. When advocates and detractors discuss the notion of atheism at least two questions arise: (i) What is atheism? and (ii) Do atheists shoulder any burden of proof for their world view? The rhetoric of ancient and contemporary philosophical forums on the philosophy of religion still seem to reveal just how muddy the waters of religious discourse are. Within academia, ideological war is literally being waged between theist and atheist. Those that are involved in either teaching or learning philosophy will inevitably be confronted with the question of God's existence. The specific field of inquiry that deals with these particular questions is appropriately blanketed under the field of specialization known as the "philosophy of religion." However, the philosophy of religion itself should not be confused with its sister field of theology. Theology deals specifically with interpretations about God, doctrinal beliefs, and their importance for the spiritual welfare of human beings. The philosophy of religion is a branch of philosophical inquiry that concerns questions about the validity and explanatory extent of religious statements which deal explicitly or implicitly with God. A recent textbook on the philosophy of religion correctly observes:

Philosophy of religion . . . is an area of genuinely philosophical activity that seeks to be as objective and intellectually rigorous as possible, to analyze the major ideas of religion and theology, to synthesize them into a coherent point of view, and to assess the sorts of reasons that thoughtful people have offered for and against a religious belief.⁽¹⁾

Much to the dismay of the theologians who critique atheism without the necessary training in the field of philosophy, atheists rule out such critics as viable candidates for this task. Although everyone should have the benefit of addressing issues that extend beyond one's immediate discipline, the emphasis on the harm that has admittedly been done by well-meaning theologians fails to intimate the Principle of Charity. Whether theologian or philosopher, each should have their respective comments assessed on the basis of their merits, not their source. Yet atheists accurately note that some well-meaning critics often misunderstand atheism. Perhaps this is to be expected. Can you think of any viewpoint that has not been misrepresented in some way by a non-adherent? A proper interpretation of someone else's view is half the battle. Thus the critic of atheism - theologian or otherwise - must not simply have superficial exposure to atheism if she intends to engage in critical reasoning on the issue.

Interestingly enough, atheism has also been wrongly defined by atheist supporters themselves. And the most pedagogical flaw made by contemporary atheists can be seen in the conclusion of the following:

The presence of God is an extraordinary claim that needs extraordinary evidence,⁽²⁾ and it is thus a rational and widely excepted line of reasoning to conclude that such a god does not exist--in other words, atheism is the logical, natural position.⁽³⁾

The important point to be grasped here is the challenge that atheism, at least how it is being presented to us here, is going to enjoy initial plausibility by being a sort of "default position." As the quote above states, atheism is to be seen as *the* reasonable position when allegedly no evidence exists for the existence of God. Thus atheism is being placed amongst the status of other default (neutral?) viewpoints when an investigation into the matter is lacking or inconclusive. For example, for those who have not studied whether or not American democracy is a preferable political system to socialism generally suspend their scholastic judgment. Those who have studied a position and support or reject it will make a conclusion they think is true. This will then influence the critical thinker in choosing to affirm or reject that position. In some cases, one shall retain neutrality if the evidence is not convincing in either direction. For example, many who review their local ballots for upcoming elections no doubt have come across initiatives that do not seem to be either warranted or rejected on the basis of arguments from both sides. Sometimes we have to suspend judgment on those issues whose support and criticisms are to no avail.

A further probe into the pedagogical methodology of atheism that we shall consider is this idea of the burden of proof. Some atheists superficially feel comfortable in making the common sophomoric mistake by presuming that all proponents of positive claims shoulder the burden or proof. More cautious atheists still suggest that theism at least shoulders more of the burden of proof than does atheism. Perhaps something needs to be said at this point about how one appropriately defines *atheism*. Or it is possible that it may depend on a more fleeting presumption that negative claims are to be noetically preferred. It is conceivable that even the definition of atheism has so evolved as to define itself away from the constraint of the burden of proof - an interesting strategy if ever there was one. It shall also be instructive for us to explore the contrary mistake that theists make in suggesting that atheism shoulders the exclusive burden of proof, or that atheism is somehow impossible to defend. If Christian theists are to make any progress in their apologetics then they will need to properly represent atheism and nix the problematic assumptions that its defenders make. If atheists are to convince us of their viewpoint then they cannot begin by exonerating themselves of the burden of proof.

I. WHAT IS ATHEISM?

Seminal to any investigative work on a given subject, one requires an honest and forthright rendition of what the given subject entails. Sometimes we think that a deskside dictionary is all that is needed to "ground" the definition we seek. Others prefer a more verbose source such as an encyclopedia. Still others prefer to see how proponents of the subject matter define their own view. It is needless to state that it is no easy matter to bring together a univocal definition that shall meet the satisfaction of the broadest representatives of the view. No matter what the subject matter is, there will always be representatives that will seek refinement. But because one cannot make a mathematical proof for preferring one definition over another, and that representatives will always have the final say as to their own viewpoint, then it seems that we ought to approach understanding terminology by seeking mainstream representatives of the view in question even to the detriment of a minority. For example, discussing astrophysics in a college classroom will inevitably entail a discussion on the ontology of earth as a terrestrial planet in our solar system. There are fringe movements as of recent such as the so-called Flat Earth Society that will beg to differ about the common notion of earth's shape as being rounded. But academicians cannot curtail their curriculum in the name of sensitivity to these fringe movements. In these cases, the mainstream authorities on astronomy and astrophysics will have to guide the material therein even if it fails to account for every conviction on the matter. With respect to a definition that carries little import or relative indifference, we should rest our case for a term's definition simply on a dictionary or encyclopedia. For example, perhaps the reader of this article is unfamiliar with the word "terminology" that was invoked above. It would be sufficient for that

individual to access a dictionary to discover its meaning as "the terms used in a specific science, art, etc."⁽⁴⁾ If our topic of conversation was about the demographics of religion then we might not think that a dictionary could properly capture it in its definitions of "religion" and "demographics." Instead, one may find it preferable to access a commonplace encyclopedia. Perhaps the encyclopedia, under a heading such as "Religion," may not only discuss how religion is to be defined but may explain the different cultural and methodological practices involved in various religions. Still, if we wanted to understand, say, the doctrine of Hell in the Christian religion then we might not find it arguably sufficient to utilize either a dictionary or an encyclopedia. Christian adherents may find the doctrine of Hell defined in a nonstandard manner by both dictionaries and encyclopedias. The dictionary will only compare various superficial uses of "hell" whereas the encyclopedia may skew its definition in terms of fictionalized representations like *Dante's Inferno*. Still others might accurately represent the classic Christian perspective. But, which does the reader choose? The careful detractor of this doctrine will desire to seek the best representation of the view she could possibly muster. This might be best accomplished by seeking representatives of the viewpoint whether it be through literature written by proponents or by accessible adherents who can be interviewed. If more than one definition is equally possible and there is no standard view then the critic will have to spend the extra energy in treating its diverse concepts.

Any treatment of atheism ought to be considered in the same fashion as theological doctrines. We must seek representatives of the view in order to best define the subject matter in the most standard and charitable way. If no standard definition exists on the matter then we shall highlight the differences accordingly. Although appeasing every atheist will not be the purpose of defining atheism here, I shall seek the standard representations where they exist.

The term *atheism* comes directly from the Greek language. It is a combination of *a-*, which means "not" or "without," and *theos*, which means "God." The etymology of a term can sometimes be helpful as to *why* a term may have been coined, but it generally contributes very little toward defining the term. For example, *theology* comes from the combined Greek words *theos* and *logos*. *Theos* is the Greek word for "God" (which is where *theism* gets its designation) and *logos* generally means "discourse," "speech," or "teaching."⁽⁵⁾ Nothing about the etymology of *theology* will help too much with understanding what theology is all about or what it evinces. We can ascertain that "God" and "teaching" may tell us that theology is somehow teaching about God. However, one can be a philosopher and do this outside of a theological context (e.g., Can an all-good God exist if evil also exists?). Hence theology must encapsulate something more than invoking "God" in one's dialogue or teaching. Equally difficult is the term *atheism*. Although atheism entails *a-* and *theos*, we are not entirely sure to what extent and under what rubric the term should be defined. For example, what is being negated by *a-*? If one acts in an *amoral* fashion then such an action is simply without morality and would not be considered good or bad. What is it about theism that *a-* negates? Does it negate the *belief* in God/gods or does it negate *God* or *gods* themselves?

According to philological sources, the term *atheism* ought to be historically understood as the pure denial of the existence of any deity. Two of these sources include the *Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology* and the *Etymological Dictionary of English Language*. Some encyclopedic and mainstream philosophical sources that broach the subject with this understanding include the *Academic American Encyclopedia*, *Random House Encyclopedia*, *Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, *Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, *The World Book Encyclopedia*, *Encyclopedia Americana*, *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, *Encyclopedia of Religion*, and *Funk and Wagnall's New Encyclopedia*.⁽⁶⁾ To illustrate just one such example, the *Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* defines atheism as the "belief that there is no God."⁽⁷⁾ However, the term *atheism* itself has undergone a considerable transformation ever since the Enlightenment. Today, self-proclaimed atheists maintain that *atheism* only denies the belief in God or gods. No less an atheist and philosopher Antony Flew makes the following case:

"The word 'atheism', however, has in this contention to be construed unusually. Whereas nowadays the usual meaning of 'atheist' in English is 'someone who asserts there is no such being as God,' I want the

word to be understood not positively but negatively. I want the originally Greek prefix 'a' to be read in the same way in 'atheist' as it customarily is read in such other Greco-English words as 'amoral,' 'atypical,' and 'asymmetrical'. In this interpretation an atheist becomes: someone who is simply not a theist." ⁽⁸⁾

Although it is noble for one to admit that their personal desire motivates their conclusion so that it is not confused with scholastic evaluation, I fear that Flew disguises what he believes to be the proper definition of atheism with this misunderstood appeal. In no way does Flew mean for the reader to depart from this passage thinking that a petition for an alternative definition is to be understood. Rather, Flew directly appeals to other terms where *a-* is employed and concludes that atheism ought to have the same perception. ⁽⁹⁾ Flew's novel understanding would leave it open for the critic to suggest that morality and symmetry, for example, may yet still be present but are simply not acknowledged by someone. But even this more evidential grounding backfires on Flew because the terms such as *amoral*, *atypical*, and *asymmetrical* do not imply "someone who is not a moralist," "someone who is not a 'typicalist,'" and "someone who is not a symmetrist." So these terms do not capture what Flew hopes to accomplish with atheism. The negation *a-* applies directly to the term and to that which it describes. For something to be asymmetrical is to actually be something where no symmetry is present. For something to be without morality is to be something that has no morality present. We should thus expect that to be without God is to be something that has no God present.

A popular philosopher and atheist from Boston University, Michael Martin, has also shirked the role of classical atheism as seen in the following argument:

"In Greek 'a' means 'without' or 'not' and 'theos' means 'god.' From this standpoint an atheist would simply be someone without a belief in God, not necessarily someone who believes that God does not exist. According to its Greek roots, then, atheism is a negative view, characterized by the absence of belief in God." ⁽¹⁰⁾

In this case another "bait and switch" method is being employed but in a more obvious contradictory setting. On the one hand we are to concur that "'a' means 'without' or 'not' and 'theos' means 'god.'" On the other hand we are supposed to conclude from this that "without a belief in God" is what the term means. This is perhaps to the hope that the reader will not see the imported word "believe" from one sentence to the next. I do agree with Martin that the term is certainly a *negative* view in that it negates something. But, as Martin unwittingly admits or intentionally distorts, it is the negation of God himself not a negation of a belief in God given Martin's comment that "'a' means 'without' or 'not' and 'theos' means 'god.'" ⁽¹¹⁾ Wouldn't this suggest that atheism is to be etymologically understood as *without/no - god?*

Due to the disparity between conventional and contemporary understandings (revisionist views?) of atheism, philosophers have attempted to branch atheism into two separate categories: *positive atheism* and *negative atheism*. ⁽¹²⁾ Positive atheism is the classical understanding *contra* Martin. It is the definitive view, the *strong* view, that God (or any god) does not exist. Negative atheism, the *weak* view, is the mere absence of belief in God (or any divine being - sometimes it serves as a synonym for *naturalism*). In this relatively new understanding atheism enjoys a category split so that *both* definitions can maintain their place amongst their parent heading *atheism*. However, this amounts to reducing atheism to nothing more than *agnosticism*. *Agnosticism* was originally coined by the 19th century lecturer at the School of Mines in London, Thomas Henry Huxley. He is best noted as being "Darwin's bulldog" since he adamantly defended Charles Darwin's infant theory of evolution. Huxley himself, concerning his adoption of the term *agnostic*, writes:

"Some twenty years ago, or thereabouts, I invented the word 'Agnostic' to denote people who, like myself, confess themselves to be hopelessly ignorant concerning a variety of matters, about which metaphysicians and theologians, both orthodox and heterodox, dogmatise with utmost confidence . . . 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."⁽¹³⁾

"Soft" agnosticism, shall we say, is the mere absence of belief in God (or any deity) since it suspends judgment about matters of metaphysics and theology. The more appropriate epistemological position that Huxley may of had in mind is what is known as "hard" agnosticism - it is impossible to determine whether or not God exists. In either case, agnosticism neither confirms nor denies any epistemological claims about God and thus it properly satisfies the status of being a default position. In a sense, the agnostic places phenomenological brackets⁽¹⁴⁾ around the propositions "God exists" and "God does not exist" to explore uncharted areas of research that may offer insight toward reaching a conclusion.

Despite the historical and philological difficulty with deviating from the roots of atheism and its mainstream approaches to it, perhaps we shall have to consider the matter open to the atheist who wears the label *negative* or *positive atheist*. In the spirit of charity, we may be forced to acknowledge against the most reliable and broadest understanding of atheism to include mere deniers of belief in any god in our casual encounters and dialogues. But it should not cause us to go astray from the conventional and usual meaning of the term from which many modern atheists have deviated.

II. ATHEISM AND THE BURDEN OF PROOF

When a viewpoint of a particular issue is said to shoulder the *burden of proof*, it means that the proponent who shoulders the burden must be the party to advance reasons in support of its affirmation. Deciding which side of an issue shoulders the burden of proof is not always easy to decipher, but there are some good indications that we can intimate. In their third addition to their popular logic textbook used in curricula throughout the United States, the authors Brooke Noel Moore and Richard Parker of California State University, Chico, make an instrumental observation with respect to identifying just who shoulders the burden of proof:

How do we know where the burden of proof should be equally shared by those on different sides of an issue? In general, we might think that the burden of proof should be equally shared by those on different sides of an issue, and there are times when that is indeed the proper way to distribute it . . . But such equal sharing is not always appropriate. In most cases, the initial plausibility of the claim itself determines whether the burden of proof should fall more on those who advance a claim or on those who object to it.⁽¹⁵⁾

With respect to the one who advances an affirmative position, such as theism, Moore and Parker write,

In some cases, too, the burden of proof falls automatically on the person taking the affirmative side of the issue . . . When there is conflict, generally the initial-plausibility principle wins out. If the issue is whether you will die someday, then the burden is on the person who takes the negative side and says that you will not, since the claim that you will not is most implausible.⁽¹⁶⁾

Not too many critically thinking philosophers disagree with this rule of thumb for placing the burden of proof on deserving sides of issues. It seems to comply rather coherently with this idea of initial plausibility. And if one consults what Flew says about the "presumption of atheism," one will notice that he admits that in the end any statement can be converted into a positive or negative claim anyway.⁽¹⁷⁾ So the positive/negative distinction is not entirely helpful. But what is disturbing is that Moore and Parker have since revised this section to be a little bit more conducive to those atheists who perceive that all positive claimants automatically shoulder all of the burden of proof.⁽¹⁸⁾ In their sixth edition, after introducing the notion of initial plausibility, they write:

Other things being equal, the burden of proof falls automatically on those supporting the affirmative side of an issue rather than on those supporting the negative side . . . This rule applies to cases of existence versus nonexistence, too. Most often, the burden of proof should fall on those who claim something exists rather than on those who claim it doesn't.⁽¹⁹⁾

So Moore and Parker are now implying that atheism is much weightier (not to mention most statements of nonexistence), if not the default position, prior to any investigation into the matter. According to this statement, theists will "most often" shoulder the burden of proof. What is curious here is the phrase "other things being equal." If this phrase implies the criterion of initial plausibility then the affirmative/negative distinction is irrelevant. If the phrase implies the stipulation that certain *circumstances* associated with the claim's context decides the relevancy of the affirmative/negative distinction then this criterion is vacuously true for it now tells us that the burden shifts when the burden should shift. Upon further reading of Moore and Parker's book, the latter seems to be implied when they write:

Sometimes getting at the truth is not the only thing we want to accomplish, and on such occasions we may purposely place the burden of proof on a particular side. Courts of law provide us with the most obvious example . . . One important variety of special circumstances occurs when the stakes are especially high. For example, if you're thinking of investing your life savings in a company, you'll want to put a heavy burden of proof on the person who advocates making the investment.⁽²⁰⁾

In this context, the theist is not let off the hook for she now possesses the initial burden of proof unless atheism can be shown to be a circumstance where "the stakes are especially high." The general conclusion one is to draw from Moore and Parker's "revision" is that in addition to positive claims of great import most positive claims are to automatically shoulder the burden of proof. The inference from this is that theism will shoulder the burden of proof because the burden of proof especially belongs to positive claimants in "cases of existence versus nonexistence."

As a confessing theist, I would certainly find this conclusion unsavory to my own approach on the subject. Fortunately, I do not have to make irrational pleas for Moore and Parker's contention to be overturned. Well-informed sources are more careful to think in terms of Moore and Parker's third edition rather than in terms of their sixth. It is possible, given the high epistemic status granted to nonexistent things, to summarize Moore and Parker's sixth edition statements by the maxim: "Absence of evidence is evidence of absence."⁽²¹⁾ It might interest the reader to know that the late atheist Carl Sagan himself made an opposite maxim that "absence of evidence is *not* evidence of absence" in his book *The Dragons of Eden*.

It needs to be noted here that there are counterexamples to the Moore-Parker position that most affirmative claims (presumably the ones where initial plausibility cannot be assessed) shoulder the burden of proof. For example, if I said "There are no jeps in the jop" it is not clear that this is *a priori* more likely to be true than "There are jeps in the jop." In this example, I have intentionally used nonsense words to represent a situation of *ceteris paribus* ("all things being equal"). And the initial plausibility criterion will not be particularly helpful here even if jeps and jops are cognitively meaningful tokens that refer to things we happen to be unfamiliar with. But there is clearly something strange in suggesting that the positive claim about there being jeps in the jop shoulders the burden of proof and its negation, there are no jeps in the jop, does not. So I really do not think that the Moore-Parker maxim is to be haphazardly preferred over Sagan's maxim.

Now, there surely are situations where the "absence of evidence is evidence of absence" maxim may enjoy some warrant in the right circumstances. If I said that there is a boulder in the middle of the lobby in the Library of Congress, then someone's failure to observe a boulder in the lobby of the Library of Congress would constitute grounds for there not being one. But if someone said that there is a grain of sand in the middle of the lobby of the Library of Congress, then if an observer claimed to not have observed the grain would not constitute sufficient grounds for rejecting the existence of the grain of sand in the lobby. The difference between the two situations is that an absence of evidence for the boulder's existence constitutes evidence of absence because we should *expect* to see evidence where there is none. The grain of sand is clearly more elusive than a boulder and so an absence of evidence would be expected even if there really is a grain of sand in the middle of the lobby. As you can imagine, there is an expectance of evidence that is proportional to the actual evidence if such an entity exists. In the case of the atheist who wants to utilize the "absence of evidence . . ." maxim for proving the nonexistence of things, then to decide if one *should* expect evidence for God's existence where there is none is tantamount to saying that (i) God, if he exists, would leave more evidence than what we presently possess; and (ii) the area of expected evidence for God's existence has been sufficiently combed for such evidence. But this is the same thing as saying that the atheist, in order to surmise this maxim for God's existence, still has to shoulder a burden of proof for (i) and (ii).⁽²²⁾

III. THE ARGUMENTUM AD IGNORANTIAM

Most works on the subjects of logic and critical thinking are generally more careful about misappropriating the burden of proof on the wrong side of existential claims. So the question that naturally arises is, What exactly is the wrong side of an existential claim? So far we looked at good grounds for thinking why a particular claim may shoulder the burden of proof in a dispute. But Moore and Parker, in their sixth edition, suggest that only the positive claimants in existential questions shoulder the burden of proof. Contrary to their view on the matter, professor of philosophy at Bemidji State University David H. Lund writes:

The truth-tracking method of effective philosophic inquiry would lead us to believe a proposition when the evidence available to us justifies our believing it, to reject a proposition when our evidence disconfirms it, *and to suspend judgment about it when our evidence neither confirms nor disconfirms it.*⁽²³⁾

Lund makes the common sense assessment understood by the broad mainstream of philosophers. As Lund notes, the conclusion one draws from an absence of evidence for a positive existential claim (e.g., Quarks exist) does not lead one to its denial (e.g., Quarks do not exist). Rather, an absence of evidence or an insufficient level of evidence related to the case leads one to "suspend judgment about it." This means that "Quarks do not exist" does not win by default. In fact, this unwarranted move invokes a common informal fallacy known as the *argumentum ad ignorantiam* or the *argument from ignorance*.

The fallacy of *argumentum ad ignorantiam* occurs when someone concludes that a proposition is true because there is an absence of evidence to the contrary. For example, suppose someone believes the claim "There are Microsoft products in the Chrysler Building." We should not think that this person has a warranted belief just because she is ignorant of potential reasons for its contradictory, e.g., "There are no Microsoft products in the Chrysler Building." In his most widely used textbook for introductory philosophy courses, professor Ed Miller explains that the

Argumentum ad Ignorantiam ("appeal to ignorance") affirms the truth of something on the basis of the lack of evidence to the contrary.⁽²⁴⁾

There is no doubt that such a fallacy is rightly leveled against the theist who says, "I believe God exists because you have no reason to suggest that He does not." It is justifiable for the critic to dismiss the theist's statement here as a case of the *argumentum ad ignorantiam*. But this is only half of the controversy. It is not any more reasonable to say, "I believe God does not exist because you have no reason to suggest that He does." According to the best philosophical information available to us we should return the favor and decry this claim as an *argumentum ad ignorantiam*. The late atheist professor of philosophy at the University of Pittsburg, Wesley Salmon, rightly denotes:

We shall regard assertions as unsupported unless evidence is actually given to support them, whether or not anyone has evidence for them . . . An argument consists of more than just a statement; it consists of a conclusion along with supporting evidence.⁽²⁵⁾

Making mere assertions about a matter without any support does not constitute an argument. Facilitating arguments entails that supporting evidence must be provided. In matters of existential dispute, no side should hold the "default" banner. Each side of an existential issue should supply evidence for or against its claim, respectively. Concerning the specific question of God's existence, the noted atheist professor of philosophy Kai Nielson admits:

To show that an argument is invalid or unsound is not to show that the conclusion of the argument is false. . . All the proofs of God's existence may fail, but it still

may be the case that God exists. In short, to show that the proofs do not work is not enough by itself. It may still be the case that God exists.⁽²⁶⁾

Stephen Naylor Thomas, a philosopher and author of *Practical Reasoning in Natural Language*, ties in how atheism (as well as theism) commits the *ignorantiam* fallacy when it claims existential affirmation via denying evidence to the contrary when he says:

This fallacy occurs in both of the following examples: There is insufficient evidence to establish that God exists. Therefore, God does not exist.

There is no proof that God does not exist. Therefore, God exists.

The reasoning in both these arguments is fallacious, because ignorance or lack of proof or evidence about a claim establishes neither that it is true nor that it is false.⁽²⁷⁾

If one wishes to retain the "default" position on the question of God's existence, that person would need to avoid a preference for affirming or denying the claim. She should be regarded as an *agnostic*. And the lesson to be emphasized here is that to deny that theism is true is not to be an atheist. Neither is being an atheist an epistemically default position. Any claims, whether affirming or denying, when they attempt to add to our knowledge of the world shoulder some level of the burden of proof, notwithstanding those cases where initial plausibility or special circumstances may tilt the burden in another direction.

It seems curious to me that if this analysis about *atheism*, *agnosticism*, and the burden of proof were not the case then *theism* itself could rightly appropriate itself into two brackets: *positive theism* and *negative theism*. Perhaps the theist could wittingly retreat from her positive stance and declare that she is, in all reality, a *negative theist*. Our theist here would no longer be advocating a positive case for the existence of God for her definition would now be understood as "the absence of belief in the non-existence of God." When this theist is pressed for establishing a case, she may with great brazenness respond by emphasizing that her stance is not about adding knowledge to the world but about suspending belief on atheism. Superficially, then, the theist has played the *tu quoque* game and arbitrarily and frivolously averted any need for shouldering any burden of proof. It should be clear that retreating around fabricated definitions of atheism no more validates it than redefining theism in this hypothetical situation. If it is false for theism to employ it then it must equally be evacuated as support for atheism.

IV. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we have seen various pedagogical ways one can define a term or phrase. And the controversial or nuanced nature of the term or phrase will no doubt suggest which source would be the most appropriate. Defining atheism seems to fall into the controversial category. With respect to the burden of proof, many atheists attempt to absolve themselves from shouldering any burden by appealing to recent and superfluous definitions of atheism that was developed more or less out of personal motivation. Typically, atheism is to be understood as the denial of God's existence. However, more novel approaches to the definition perceive atheism as more of a family of positive and negative (or strong and weak) claims.

But negative atheism appears to be nothing short of simple agnosticism which neither affirms nor denies the existence of God. The clouding of concepts does not end here. Some philosophers defend the idea that an "absence of evidence is evidence of absence." This has either directly or indirectly contributed to making atheism the default position, and hence making it the *a priori* victor in a dispute before any counterevidence is provided. But this is misplaced. The maxim "absence of evidence is evidence of absence" commits the *argument ad ignorantiam* fallacy that makes any claim true in the absence of evidence to the contrary. Atheism is as much a claim to know something about the actual world as theism and, as such, requires its own positive case to support it. When theists commit the error of overplaying the epistemic status of atheism, the scales are tilted too far in the other direction. Making atheism impossible to defend raises the bar on *atheism's* definition too high for the theist to adequately maintain. The usual definition of *atheism* should be the standard by which we understand its affirmation. Anything else only manages to point to an ideological slant prior to its evaluation. And this shouldn't be.

ENDNOTES

1. M. Peterson, W. Hasker, B. Reichenbach, and D. Basinger, *Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 1.
2. Many non-theists relish in the seemingly common sense dictum that "extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence." However meaningful this phrase may appear, it actually ends up masking a deeper skepticism. The *extraordinary evidence* that is sought does not have a univocal criterion. In actuality it ends up being more of a synecdoche for "evidence that will not lead to anything supernatural." But this only amounts to denying the feasibility of a supernaturally existing thing in the actual world - the very thing that needs to be proven. What is common sense about the phrase is the idea that claims that have significant consequences or that can be life-changing require that the claims have no better, competing alternatives once the evidence is in. The rigidity in this goal will be to leave as little as possible any "stones unturned." For example, say a Dr. I. Sur Jerry claims to be the best eye surgeon in the United States. This would qualify as an extraordinary claim since Dr. Jerry's claim involves being the best at something that is life-changing in a field where thousands of alternatives exist. But to satisfy Dr. Jerry's ego, one would need to investigate the relevant ratios between successes and failures of as many eye surgeons as feasible in the United States. If one were simply looking to see if Dr. Jerry was just a *good* doctor or an *adequate* surgeon in the United States, then a local investigation would be sufficient - perhaps a look at his success record compared to two or three other surgeons in the area.
3. This citation is taken from a personal web page. See "Atheism: The Default Position," <<http://www.geocities.com/anatheist2001/subdefault.htm>>.
4. *Webster's New World Dictionary* (New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1990), p. 609.
5. See T. Friberg, B. Friberg, and N.F. Miller, *Analytical Lexicon of the Greek New Testament* (Michigan: Baker Books, 2000), p. 248.
6. I owe this list of resources to Donn Day and the Solid Rock Ministries. Detailed citations of these sources can be accessed on their site at <http://home.infostations.com/quietsun/athart3.htm>.
7. Robert Audi, ed., *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 51.
8. A. Flew, *God, Freedom, and Immortality: A Critical Analysis* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1984), p. 14.

9. If Flew were correct about his analysis of *atheism*, then how would one define *nontheism*? It seems that there would be no distinction of these terms or their meanings so that

One is a nontheist if and only if one is an atheist.

But there is a sufficient counterexample that would make this understanding false. Perhaps there are people who do not know whether or not God exists. These people should be classified as people who are nontheists. But there is something unsettling about classifying them also as atheists. In fact, Flew's understanding would guarantee that babies are atheists, too!

10. M. Martin, *Atheism: A Philosophical Justification* (Pennsylvania: Temple University Press, 1990), p. 463.

11. Some may find it difficult to see what the difference is between "I believe there is no God" and "I do not believe there is a God." The former statement makes a claim to know something about the actual world. It appears almost as a conclusion to a thought about the subject. The latter phrase seems to be taking the speaker by surprise. The statement almost sounds as though the thought had never occurred previously and no belief in God had been added to this person's collective knowledge. Logically, the former statement makes the assertion that God does not exist in the actual world and that this constitutes what the person believes whereas the latter statement simply suggests that there is one less belief not (yet?) added to the person's collective knowledge.

12. Some have used different terminology than *negative* and *positive* atheism. They prefer the terms *weak* and *strong* atheism which ultimately imply the same thing. For example, the former atheist professor of biology and geology with SUNY, Frank R. Zindler, says, "The weak Atheist is an a-theist - a person without theism, someone in whom god-belief is absent . . . the strong Atheist positively denies the existence of one or more gods" ("Atheism: Its Logical and Philosophical Foundations," Lecture given at the 26th National Convention of American Atheists in San Francisco, Saturday, April 22, 2000).

13. T.H. Huxley, "Agnosticism: A Symposium," *The Agnostic Annual* (1884).

14. Edmund Husserl, "Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology (in part)," *Philosophic Classics Volume 4: Contemporary Philosophy*, edited by W. Kaufmann and F.E. Baird (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1994), p. 312.

15. Brooke Noel Moore and Richard Parker, *Critical Thinking*, 3rd ed. (California: Mayfield Publishing Company, 1992), pp. 193.

16. *Ibid.*, pp. 194.

17. "'Ei incumbit probatio qui dicit, non qui negat.' Literally and unsympathetically translated this becomes: 'The onus of proof lies on the man who affirms, not on the man who denies.' To this the objection is almost equally obvious. Given just a very little verbal ingenuity, the content of any motion can be rendered alternatively in either a negative or a positive form: either, 'That this house denies the existence of God'; or, 'That this house takes its stand for positive atheism'. So interpreted, therefore, our axiom provides no determinate guidance" (Flew, *God, Freedom, and Immortality*, p. 20).

18. I do not mean to suggest that Moore and Parker have intentionally guided their discussion on initial plausibility with atheistic sympathies. I actually do not know where they officially stand. But there is no doubt that their analysis is guided by an antisupernatural bias.

19. Brooke Noel Moore and Richard Parker, *Critical Thinking*, 6th ed. (California: Mayfield Publishing Company, 2001), pp. 180-81.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 181.

21. Some atheists have pressed the limits of credulity in trying to establish this "maxim" as axiomatic. For example, see Farrell Till, "Absence of Evidence," *Skeptical Review*, Vol. 13, Num. 2 (March/April, 2002) reprinted at <<http://www.infidels.org/library/magazines/tsr/2002/2/022abs.html>>.

22. This discussion is encapsulated nicely in J.P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2003), pp. 156-57.

23. David H. Lund, *Making Sense of It All: An Introduction to Philosophical Inquiry*, 2nd ed. (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2003), pp. 15-16. The emphases here are mine.

24. Ed L. Miller, *Questions that Matter: An Invitation to Philosophy*, 4th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1996), p. 46.

25. Wesley Salmon, *Logic*, 3rd ed. (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1984), p. 2.

26. Kai Nielson, *Reason and Practice* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), pp. 143-4.

27. S.N. Thomas, *Practical Reasoning in Natural Language*, 5th ed. (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1997), pp. 321-22.

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