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Introduction: "This Damnable Paradoxe"

Michael J. Buckley S.J.

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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 execretion. 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 untrammeled 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. Ironic 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 facilely 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' Ἀποπυργίζοντες 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 [εἴδωλον], 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 [ἀληθής 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 (εἴδωλον) 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 bewitcht."[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-

ity of those called atheists against Holyoake and vowed that he would fight until the designation *atheist* was generally accepted in civic life, allowing atheists to give evidence in court. Upon his own admission into the House of Commons in 1882, he pulled out a Bible and gave himself the oath of office.[35] Holyoake was the last man imprisoned on charges of atheism or blasphemy in England, in 1841; Bradlaugh had to defend himself and his *National Reformer* in 1868 and 1869 against the charge of blasphemy and sedition.[36] What Nashe called "this damnable paradoxe" runs through the history of Western civilization. It is difficult to discuss the issue at all. The ambiguity of name, definition, and instance makes it impossible to give some determination to the problematic situation, or to leave it to the open-field running of the sophists or the polemists.

If, taking another route, one begins with the term *god* instead of *atheism*, the same "damnable paradoxe" emerges. Perhaps its paradigmatic embodiment is best exhibited in the various evaluations which have followed the work of the gentle Jewish genius, Baruch de Spinoza. Spinoza's *Ethics* demonstrated the existence of god; the term pervades his treatise, building finally into an understanding of life in which human "blessedness is nothing but the peace of mind which springs from the intuitive knowledge of God, and to perfect the intellect is nothing but to understand God, together with the attributes and actions of God that flow from the necesity of His nature."[37] Yet this is the same Spinoza whom Pierre Bayle, usually detached and sophisticatedly distant from any dogmatic assertions, introduced in his *Historical and Critical Dictionary* as "a Jew by birth, and afterwards a deserter from Judaism, and lastly an atheist. . . . He was a systematic atheist."[38] The name of God was not in question—both Spinoza and his subsequent critics treated the name with reverence—but the definition. Spinoza's first public biographer, John Colerus (Köhler), put the issue squarely: Spinoza "takes the liberty to use the word *God*, and to take it in a sense unknown to all Christians."[39] For this reason, despite the piety with which his name is surrounded, Colerus and Diderot in the *Encyclopédie* and Hume in his *Treatise of Human Nature* could speak of the "true atheism . . . for which *Spinoza* is so universally infamous."[40] The abbé Claude Yvon, in the extended article on *athéisme* in the *Encyclopédie*, used Spinoza as the archetypal atheist, turning the issue of the existence of God into a contest between Bayle and Spinoza.[41] On the other hand, Novalis celebrated Spinoza as "ein Gottrunkener Mensch" while Lessing, Herder, and Goethe spoke of the religious sentiment which his work evoked in them.[42] The *Pantheismusstreit*, in which Moses Mendelssohn defended Spinoza against his critics, did not end the controversy; perhaps its most rhapsodic moment came when Ernest Renan hailed Spinoza's achievement, claiming, "The truest vision ever had of God came, perhaps, here."[43]

To heap enigma upon ambiguity, Friedrich Nietzsche wrote to Franz Overbeck in 1881 that he recognized in Spinoza his precursor. Three years before, however, at the age of sixteen, Vladimir Sergeyevich Solovyov had begun his acquaintance with Spinoza's writings, and he credited them with his return to the Christian faith he had abandoned. In "The Concept of God: In Defense of Spinoza" (1897), Solovyov, one of the greatest Russian philosophers, theologians, and ecumenists of the nineteenth century, wrote, "The concept of God, which the philosophy of Spinoza gives us, in spite of all its incompletion and imperfection, nonetheless responds to the primary and indispensable demand of a genuine idea and thought of God. Many religious people have found spiritual support in this philosophy."[44] The "atheism" of Spinoza obviously depends upon two distinct, but related, hermeneutical events: how one reads his text and how one interprets *god*.

This ambiguity of *god* and its definition inevitably involves ambiguity of instance, of what is either called "god" or should be characterized as theistic denial. The ironic comment of Harry Austryn Wolfson before a Harvard congregation touched heavily upon this point. Drawing upon his knowledge of the movements of philosophy, this great reflective scholar centered on the new instances of what is called "god" and hence the salvation of religion:

> Nowadays, lovers of wisdom are still busily engaged in the gentle art of devising deities. Some of them offer as God a thing called man's idealized consciousness, others offer a thing called man's aspiration for ideal values or a thing called the unity of the ideal ends which inspire man to action, still others offer a thing called the cosmic consciousness or a thing called the universal nisus or a thing called the *élan vital* or a thing called the principle of concretion or a thing called the ground of being. . . . I wonder, however, how many of the things offered as God by lovers of wisdom of today are not again only polite but empty phrases for the downright denial of God.[45]

Wolfson is not denying the existence of an idealized consciousness, a human aspiration for ideal values, or *élan vital*. He is questioning whether any or all of these instances can supply—even in an imperfect realization and existence—either an image or a subject of which the name *god* can be legitimately predicated. The reduction of the divine to any of these instances seems to be a covert form of denial. On the other hand, Whitehead and the process theologians who followed him characterized the principle of concretion as "god," and Paul Tillich founded his three volumes of *Systematic Theology* on god as the ground of being.

With god identified by Tillich as the furthest reaches of life, the atheist becomes correlatively understood as one who says that life has no depth, that it is shallow. The atheist affirms this in complete seriousness; otherwise

he is not an atheist.[46] Friedrich Jodl's *Vom Lebenswege* takes up the human aspiration for ideal values as divine and contends: "Only the person without ideals is truly an atheist."[47] With so attenuated an understanding of what legitimizes a predication of "god," atheism is never in question. "God" has become so sentimentally amorphous that it admits any statement of meaning, even quite contradictory statements, and can be applied to any treasured phenomenon or friend behind the phenomenon.

Thus the first function of any inquiry into the origins of modern atheism is to determine whether one is talking about something at all, whether one has something definite enough to constitute a problem. The first problem is not to say something about modern atheism; the first problem is to determine the data and resources enough so that there is something, a subject, to talk about at all. "This damnable paradoxe" is constituted not simply by variant predicates attached to the same subject, by unresolved issues about a common topic. It consists, at least initially, in the name of the subject itself. For from the history of the terms and their correlative determinations in meanings and applications to doctrines and persons, a problematic situation emerges that is long on rhetoric and polemics, but short on the precision, the care, the seriousness, and the delimitation that allow an aspect of it to become the source of problem, inquiry, and assertions. The initial question, before any discussion of origins, dialectical or otherwise, is really quite simple: What are we talking about? Is it possible to think in some consistent way about the career of atheism at all? The value of even so cursory an attention to the history of atheism indicates that this question, simple as it is, carries complications which stretch back to writings, stelae, and battles at the beginning of the history of ideas.

The Parameters of the Inquiry

The problem with atheism is that it is not a problem. It is a situation, an atmosphere, a confused history whose assertions can be identical in expression and positively contradictory in sense. The ambiguity which marks such terms as *god* and *atheism* can be discovered in almost every critical proposition about this situation. Projection, for example, lies at the origin of religion for both Feuerbach and Freud, but in the *Essence of Christianity* what is projected are the lineaments of the perfectly human, while in the psychoanalytic treatment of Freud what is projected is the protecting and threatening father figure, "so patently infantile, so foreign to reality, that to anyone with a friendly attitude to humanity it is painful to think that the great majority of mortals will never be able to rise above this view of life."[48] In such an atmosphere, the first function of inquiry is not to frame its final and governing question, because the vocabulary in which it would be framed

would be as ambiguous as the situation out of which it arose. The first function is to determine if there are any parameters in the historical career of atheism through which this vague, unsettled, indeterminate situation might be given consistency and consequence. These, in turn, might suggest the conditions necessary for understanding it and disclose some of the procedures by which these conditions could be met. Are there any constants in the history of atheism in Western civilization?

The characteristic of the indeterminate, of any problematic situation, is that its inner consistency is not apparent. Factors are concurrent or successive without their inner relations being established. Beliefs or implications become problematic when their emergence seems random or their conditions are hidden. Statements of meaning and truth become impossible when it is not evident that the phenomenon adequately represents reality or whether its present career exhibits anything about its future. Progression in knowledge is towards control, not in the sense of technical use, but in the sense that wonder or doubt or puzzlement advance toward an adequate grasp of a state of affairs, as the internal coherence of its material elements and their formal relationships is determined. Investigation is this development of a chaotic subject from indeterminacy to determination, and the initial step of this progress lies in discovering those parameters by which the chaos becomes intelligible.[49]

Atheism does not stand alone. The term and the persuasions which cluster around it take their meaning from the divine nature which has been asserted by the religions and the philosophies, by the superstitious practices and the mystical experiences of those who adhere to the divine existence. An essential unity in intelligibility lies between atheism and theism, and if only the negative moment of this dipolarity receives attention, the problematic situation remains undetermined. The reflective experience of millennia demonstrates this. Atheism does not simply displace theism. The conflict between them is mortal because of their more general unity in meaning. If the antagonism does not bear upon a single subject, there is no contradiction. Affirmation and denial are only possible if the subject remains the same.

This subject is determined not by the atheist but by the theist, by the going beliefs, by the popular gods of the city or what the political and social establishment has determined as its god, by the sense of the divine which is the issue of religious or philosophical sensibility and argument, or by the proclaimed personal god of the monotheistic religions. Any or all of these can be the object of skepticism, denial, or uncommitted opinions, but outside these affirmations the correlative negative loses any meaning whatsoever.

Perhaps the first instance of coherence in any attempt to understand

atheism is this: the central meaning of atheism is not to be sought immediately in atheism; it is to be sought in those gods or that god affirmed, which atheism has either engaged or chosen to ignore as beneath serious challenge. The history of the term indicates this constant, and the analysis of its meaning suggests that it is inescapable: atheism is essentially parasitic.

This is the first parameter in any attempt to transform the vague, unsettled, and indeterminate situation of atheism into a serious question. This parameter allows the determination of the subject-matter to proceed one step further. The meaning of atheism is not only fixed by the content of theism: atheism depends upon theism for all three factors isolated by the *Seventh Epistle*. The name, the definition, and the instance for the atheistic negations are all set by the current theism.

Charles Bradlaugh had insisted upon this dependence:

> I am an Atheist, but I do not say that there is no God; and until you tell me what you mean by God I am not mad enough to say anything of the kind. So long as the word 'God' represents nothing to me, so long as it is a word that is not the correlative and expression of something clear and distinct, I am not going to tilt against what may be nothing-nowhere. Why should I? If you tell me that by God you mean 'something' which created the universe, which before the act of creation was not; 'something' which has the power of destroying that universe; 'something' which rules and governs it, and which nevertheless is entirely distinct and different in substance from the universe—then I am prepared to deny that any such existence can be.

Definition and instance must also come from the prior theological assertion. One of the many paradoxes inherent in this history is that the point made centuries before by Justin Martyr for Christianity is retrieved by Charles Bradlaugh in his battle against it: "The Atheist does not say there is no God, so long as the word simply represents an indefinite quantity or quality—of you don't know what, you don't know where: but I object to the God of Christianity, and absolutely deny it."[50] And again: "He did not deny that there was 'a God,' because to deny that which was unknown is as absurd as to affirm it. As an Atheist he denied the God of the Bible, of the Koran, of the Vedas, but he could not deny that of which he had no knowledge."[51] The assertions of the theist provide the state of the question for the atheist, whether that question bears upon the words, the meaning, or the religious subject. The initial parameter of an inquiry into atheism, then, has multiplied. Theism and atheism are not simply an accidental conjunction, a successive accumulation of contradictory opinions. A bond of necessity stretches between them: atheism depends upon theism for its vocabulary, for its meaning, and for the hypotheses it rejects.

Does atheism also depend upon theism for its very existence? This pushes the question of internal coherence one critical step further. Does theism not only shape, but generate, its corresponding atheism? This was the process in certain obvious historical movements. The polytheism of the Egyptians drifted slowly, almost imperceptibly, toward the amalgamation of gods into the single deity, until this development was frozen by the violent attempts in the eighteenth dynasty to force its growth. The cruelty and sexual promiscuity of the Hellenic gods evoked skepticism about their existence. Augustine recorded that the Roman pontiff Scaevola rejected the gods of the poetic tradition because "such deities cannot stand comparison with good human beings. One god is represented as a thief, another as an adulterer, and so on; all kinds of degradation and absurdity, in word and deed, are ascribed to them."[52] When Feuerbach attempted to eliminate any divine reality that is other than the human person, he argued that the intrinsic contradiction in Christian doctrine makes such an imagined subject impossible, that atheism is the secret truth of religion and that the incoherence of Christian dogma discloses that truth.[53] In all of these instances, atheism depends upon the content of the god proposed not only for its terms, its significance, and its adversary, but also for its existence. The internal contradictions within the nature of god generate its denial. In other words, the relationship with theism is not only definitional, it is dialectical.

Does that same relationship obtain in modern atheism? Does theism not only set the meaning, but also generate the existence of the atheism which emerges in the middle eighteenth century? Is the content of god, the idea of the divine, so internally incoherent that it moves dialectically into its denial? Dependence for meaning is one thing; dependence for existence is quite another.

Any attention to the origins of atheism in the West must attend as much—if not more—to the theism of the theologians and the philosophers as to the atheism of their adversaries. Atheism must be seen not as a collation of ideas which happened to arise in Western thought but as a transition whose meaning is spelled out by the process and whose existence is accounted for in terms of the ideas which preceded it. To be indifferent to atheism as a transition is to fix it as an abstraction, and never to understand it in either its starting point or its ideational context. Even more, it is to fail to deal with the deeper question which underlies much of the historical evolution of atheism. If the emergent atheism simply reveals dialectically the internal contradiction which was lodged within the content of theism itself, then the understanding of atheism is possible only through the understanding of its generating matrix, theism. One issues from the other; one cannot make sense unless the other does.

An inquiry into atheism as a serious idea, as a conviction not simply

reducible to external factors, sociological conditionings, or economic pressures, as a conviction that is taken precisely as a judgment that claims insight into the nature of reality, must take the meaning of what it treats from those whose claims are contradictory and must examine the evidence to see whether it supports a dialectical reading of what is already a relationship of dependence. In other words, an inquiry into the origins of atheism must trace the intellectual process from god affirmed to god denied. The content of one constitutes the content and explanation of the other. For atheism as a problematic situation possesses a content which is determined by several critical parameters. Atheism is necessarily dependent upon theism for its vocabulary, its meanings, and its embodiments. Atheism has often been dependent upon theism for its evocation and its existence. These parameters advance the internal possibilities for inquiry significantly because they indicate its methodological direction. Any study or investigation of the origin of modern atheism must be equally a study of the theism of the intellectual world which generated it. Atheism is essentially a transition.

This conviction governs the inquiry in this book. The history of atheism suggests some of the conditions which are necessary for its understanding and discloses the futility of the polemics which have been written to counter its emergence. So strident have both sides become over the past century that the debate itself has lost a good deal of its previous respectability. The voices are too impassioned, the side-remarks too clever, the appeal to the audience too blatant, and the whole quarrel finally sterile. There is no progress in understanding when philosophic history or theology become tactics.

In order to understand atheistic consciousness, then, it is important to investigate in some depth that which is proposed as divine. But there is something further that needs examination besides the content of the divine. It is the form of thought in which that content appears.

The distinction between content and form figures critically in the history of human reflection, a theme running through one variation after another. The *Seventh Epistle* numbered name, definition, and instance as various, imperfect embodiments of reality, but also spoke of the forms of thought—science, insight, and true opinion—by which these three could be grasped, forged into a unity, and made productive of a highest form of knowledge that would unite the knower with reality. In the medieval debates over the existence of universals, the distinction was drawn between the *id quod* and the *modus quo*, the content or essence and the mode of its existence either as particularized in reality or as universalized in thought. The Hegelian dialectic maintained that art, religion, and philosophy all have the same content, the Absolute, but in art it exists in the immediacy of the sensuous and as an individual object; in religion it exists in the mode of figurative representation (*Vorstellung*) and in acts of worship; and in philosophy it

exists in its own proper form, that of thinking knowledge, as pure thought. The form is not identified with the content as such in the Platonic Epistle or in the medieval disputes or in the Hegelian dialectic, and its distinction from content allows various forms of thought and existence to exhibit similarity in content.

This does not tell the whole story, however. Content is not the same thing as form, but content and form are not indifferent to each other; the content will be significantly affected by the form in which it is cast. The Schoolmen of the Middle Ages put it in an axiom: "Quidquid recipitur per modum recipientis recipitur" (whatever is received [content] is received according to the mode [form] of the one receiving it). Aquinas attributed this insight to the Platonic tradition: "Plato saw that each thing is received in something else according to the measure of the recipient."[54] Human nature exists one way as a thought and another way as a particular man. Number is abstract as three and concrete as three cows. So profoundly does the form of thought or existence tell upon what is thought or upon what exists that for centuries philosophers have argued the reality of universals and the irretrievable singularity of each real thing. The content of what is known remains in some way through the various apperceptive forms of the processes by which it is known, but that way must be intellectually understood also if thought is not to be confused with extramental reality. The form in which the content exists must be concomitantly grasped—even if nonthematically—for it will tell upon the content. The modes of thought employed determine the truth or falsity of the statements which are made.

There is nothing all that mysterious in such a parameter. Everyone knows that the propositions made in a drama carry a different sense from those made in a physics or history textbook. One expects one kind of truth from myth, but not the truth of a chronicle. Even if it were possible to frame a single proposition identical in its formulation for drama, physics, history, myth, and chronicle, anyone would recognize that the literary form alters significantly the content of what is said, even if its grammatical structure and language remain the same. So also form will eventually change the meaning of an inappropriate content. What is said sarcastically will eventually become hostile, regardless of protestations that "I was only joking." What is repeated endlessly will eventually become meaningless, regardless of its intrinsic merit.

This gives our inquiry a third parameter: in considering the transition of theism into atheism, it is critically necessary to consider not only the content of the divine that is being negated, but also the form in which that content is advanced, the mode of thought in which it is given meaning, elaborated in a method, and grounded in principle. The dialectical movement of the content into its negation happens not only because of a contradiction lodged at the

very heart of its own meaning, but also because of a contradiction or inappropriateness between the content itself and the form in which it is proposed. The dialectical movement progresses not only toward the internal coherence of the subject, but also toward the methodological coherence of the subject with an appropriate mode of thought or pattern of discourse. In this evolution of understanding, the form of discourse or the mode of thought will eventually work out its truth in the content. What one thinks about will eventually take upon itself the shape given by the way one is thinking.

This parameter is accepted in any philosophic tradition. For Hegel, its formulation is that "method is the absolute foundation and ultimate truth."[55] In Aristotle, it lies in the affirmation that internal privation is the unstable condition for movement and change. Method will eventually produce its idiomorphic, even unexpected, content. Thus it is misleading to abstract from the working context, whether religious, philosophical, scientific, or literary, in which the necessity of the affirmation or denial of god appears. Propositions ripped from their context can never be more than an accumulation of opinions, easily formulated and easily rejected. There is no thinker whose conclusions cannot be made to seem absurd by the reduction of his inquiries to a few pages in a "history of philosophy," where his conclusions are listed as if they were a series of idiosyncratic convictions, and his name placed under such hopelessly misleading titles as "empiricist" or "idealist." Stunted, parodied, and stamped, he takes his place in a series of futile predecessors and successors, each one refuting the one who came before and awaiting in the succeeding generations the turn of opinion against him.

One can only grasp the seriousness and the universal claim of a conclusion if the working inquiries have been carefully and methodically retrieved. This does not mean that the author is simply to be repeated; it does mean that his work is to be traced and analyzed as a whole. A work which is interpreted and sequenced by a succeeding generation of thinkers does not remain the same. The bringing of new questions to these texts, the indexing of them within their "effective history," that is, within the consequences of their thought and the history of their influence, the understanding of their latent power through the traditions which they have fathered—all of these inevitably alter the very works which are the objects of this study. But the alteration is not distortion any more than it is reproduction. It is interpretation, a new "fusion of horizons" in which the past is made present and the virtualities of a tradition may be newly discovered. The event of interpretation is an event of understanding, a dyadic relation, in which both the questioner and the questioned mutually influence one another. "To interpret means precisely to use one's own preconceptions so that the meaning of the

text can really be made to speak for us."[56] But to be a serious part of that conversation, the text which gives permanence to the arguments and evidence and to the principles and conclusions by which an idea develops must be respected in its integrity.

This willingness to enter into the form, the labor of a work, allows it to achieve its rightful integrity that transcends the random citations of the pastiche, the accidental, and the final absurdity of oversimplification and easy dismissal. Atheism is essentially a transition, a movement from the affirmation of the divine into its negation, perhaps a negation awaiting in turn its own negation. Whatever its particular history and development, that transition will never be understood unless it is understood from within, and this interior knowledge will never be obtained unless the positive and the negative of the transition are interpreted both for their content and for the mode of thought in which this content is incarnate. Without this labor, the content is simplified, misrepresented, and misunderstood, and the dialectical movement into contradiction becomes only a surface cleverness. The portrait never comes quite into focus, leaving the impression that all has been polemics and arbitrary choice.

This insistence upon the importance of the mode of thought not only continues a determination of the problematic situation, rendering the indeterminate increasingly open to investigation, but implies still a fourth parameter for the investigation. Theism and atheism are not only mutually dependent in their content and form of argument and hypothetically dialectical in this dependence: they both exhibit modes of thought, which become in their expression modes of discourse. Amid the divergence of meanings and applications, and the dependencies and struggles among the proponents of contradictory positions, they have in common a literary community, a world of available discourse. The transition into atheism is not only a generation of negation; it is a literary event, whose progression spells out a world which remains available long after the agents and actors have passed on. The atheistic transition is available in this world of discourse, maintaining an independent life, in contrast to the thousand contingencies out of which it emerged. "Not only is the world 'world' only insofar as it comes into language, but language, too, has its real being only in the fact that the world is re-presented within it."[57] The modes of thought become concrete in discourse, however abstract the language, and take on a determined quality which opens up to even further investigation the problematic situation of modern atheism. Thus the fourth and final parameter: What theism and atheism have in common is discourse. For their study a neutral instrument is needed by which they may be interpreted in their working inquiries and compared without reducing their pluralism to one mode of thought or another. Discourse allows for this analysis.

For discourse itself contains four coordinates which Richard McKeon has isolated as inherent in any connected pattern of thought: selection, interpretation, method, and principle.[58] These coordinates allow a series of questions to be leveled at any tractate, speech, argument or discursive expression, and a subsequent relationship to be drawn between one text or inquiry and another, without either reducing every philosophy to a single true philosophy or regarding all positions as of equal worth because each represents a different perspective. To ask questions governed by these coordinates is to look for the values given to certain variables in every discourse. Like an operational matrix, these four coordinates of discourse will be progressively clarified as they are employed in the following inquiry, but some formal and initial discussion of them might be helpful.

Selection is operative because discourse must always be about something. Selection indicates the fundamental field or area which will provide the subject-matter and the terms with which the discourse deals. Selection indicates the radical focus of the discourse, whether that focus converges on the structure of things or upon the antecedent processes of thought whereby the structure of things can be known or upon expressions of these thoughts in language and in action. Philosophical periods differ as the major thinkers find their fundamental area of disclosure or of inquiry in the nature of things (a metaphysical selection) or in the structures of cognition (an epistemological selection) or in the nature of language and the implications of actions (a semantic or pragmatic selection). Selection responds to the question: What are you fundamentally talking about? What area is fundamental to all subsequent inquiry? It is usually indicated by the kind of categories which are operative in the discourse. A semantic selection would allow Gilbert Ryle to have categories of words, varieties of the types of proposition-factors that could complete certain "sentence-frames" without absurdity; an epistemological selection would indicate that the categories of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* would be deduced from the kinds of logical judgments deduced as the a priori conditions for all judgments because they make possible the syntheses inherent in experiential knowledge; a metaphysical selection would turn Francisco Suárez's *Disputationes metaphysicae* to a consideration of the categories of being, rather than of judgments or of words. Every discourse must have a focus or area of inquiry which is fundamental to all others. Selection characterizes what that focus or area is.

Interpretation addresses the second question about any discourse: What allows something to be said about the subject? How can statements or propositions be formed that are more than tautologies? This introduces the coordinate of interpretation since all judgments and all propositional knowledge involve an interpretation of a subject-matter. Propositions are made or terms predicated according to what is finally real within the

discourse. Selection asks what are you talking about; interpretation asks how you can say anything about it, how you can form propositions. Statements are made or propositions are formed in accord with what passes as authentic evidence, what Plato called "the really real." There are four basic possibilities. Either the real can transcend the phenomenon, as it does for Plato (an ontological interpretation) or it can underlie the phenomenon, as it does for Freud (an entitative interpretation). In both cases, one distinguishes between the apparent and the real. For the ontological interpretation this distinction becomes that of the phenomenon and the real; for the entitative, this distinction becomes that of the surface or symbolic and the actual substratum. On the other hand, one can maintain that the real and the phenomenal are not to be so distinguished, that in some way it is the real that is phenomenal. This can be either because, as for Aristotle, the essential is the structure of the real (an essentialist interpretation) or, as for André Gide, human perspectives confer on the phenomena whatever meaning and value it possesses (an existentialist interpretation). In Aristotle, the intellect's activity does not give the structure to the real, does not confer its essential patterns, but it does make those patterns intelligible. In the existentialist interpretation of André Gide, on the contrary, it is perspective that constitutes the real, giving it intelligibility as well as structure. How one "interprets" the real, i.e. as transcending or underlying the given phenomenon or as merging either essentially or perspectively with the phenomenon, will provide the warrant for any statement. Interpretation indicates the final evidence on which judgments will be formed, and a difference in interpretation dictates a radical difference in judgments. Selection exhibits what the discourse has taken as subject; interpretation allows predicates to be joined to that subject.

Third, there is method. The word itself has an interesting history. The fundamental metaphor in μέθοδος is ὁδός, a way, road, or journey. Burnet maintains that it was taken originally from hunting, and Liddell and Scott give the "pursuit of a nymph" as one example of this sense. Richard Robinson, noting that only in the *Sophist* do hunting and μέθοδος come together, maintains that it is "more likely that the word came to have its technical meaning through Parmenides' 'way,' which was not a hunt or a pursuit of anything, but a pilgrimage to the presence of a goddess."[59] Etymologically, μέθοδος means the "way after" something, and Robinson argues that by the time of Plato and Aristotle the journey or search was purely intellectual, translating it with the English derivatives "method," "inquiry', "procedure," or "pursuit."

In any case, method indicates a pattern of discourse, a way of procedure, a manner of argumentation in which one is able to move from one proposition to another. Method is indicated by the way that one raises a question, establishes evidence, argues from evidence to conclusions, or verifies the

conclusions tentatively accepted. Selection is a coordinate of discourse because discourse must have that which allows real predication; method is a coordinate of discourse because there must be a pattern to such movements as inquiry, proof, demonstration, and verification. Method allows the question: How is something done, established, composed, or contradicted? Method is the pattern within discourse.

The history of reflective discourse, whether philosophic, scientific, literary, historical, or theological, is rich in the possibilities and varieties of methods it exhibits. Some methods have been proposed as universal, as the single method or pattern appropriate to all serious discourse. The dialectical method of Plato and of the tradition which reaches from him to Hegel and Marx is the only method "that attempts systematically and in all cases to determine what each thing really is."[60] It moves through negation to resolve contradiction in a higher unity. The operational method of Galileo and Bacon lies in the elaboration of an initial matrix or series of distinctions or perspectives and in the bringing of this structure to bear upon any matter in question in order to achieve conclusions whose validity can subsequently be tested. Still other philosophers have proposed a series of differing or particular methods. The problematic method of Aristotle, Aquinas, and Dewey distinguishes a different method for each different kind of problem; much of the work of inquiry consists in discovering the method appropriate to the question to be treated. Finally, from Euclid to Newton to Santayana, the logistic method consists in breaking composites down to their simple elements and then synthetically recombining them, for the whole is nothing but the sum of its parts.

Each of these methods is modified and radically altered as it combines with the other coordinates of discourse, but the isolation of method as one of these coordinates allows an identification of the pattern which the discourse is taking, either initially, to establish questions and evidence, or subsequently, to formulate illation and verification. To ask the question about method is to inquire how it is that this text or this argument embodies coherence and pattern.

Finally, since human thought and speech must have its beginning, principle addresses the fourth question: What holds the whole together as the source of so much diversity? The principle is the source of the discourse, of its truth, its value, or its connection with reality. The question of principle probes for what is ultimate in the presuppositions that so many elements would be combined into what is one play, or that so many conclusions could follow in thirteen books of geometry.

Philosophic history contributes very different kinds of principles to the unity of discourse. For some philosophers, such as Plato or Newton, one single principle (a comprehensive principle) will be the source of all explana-

tion, whether that comprehensive principle is the relationship of being to becoming as knowledge to opinion or whether it is the motive force to which all movement and natural phenomena can be resolved. For others, such as Aristotle and Descartes, the principle in each case is reflexively commensurate with a particular science or area of problem, a reflexive principle. In physics, Aristotle could have nature as a principle, as the source of movement in something which is intrinsically moved; in metaphysics, he could explain generation and corruption by thought thinking itself; he explains predication, finally, through categories which are predicates of predicates. For still others, the principle would be simple, that is, the parts of a whole, the "simple ideas" of Locke or the individual atoms of Democritus. Finally, the principle could be actional as Marx introduced revolutionary activity into the Hegelian dialectic as necessary for continual progress or as William of Ockham made the act of creation the arbitrary source of all finite reality.

The necessities of significant discourse are: a subject and terms of discourse, a reality which makes predication possible, a method by which these propositions can become an argument or an inquiry, and a source by which the discourse can be said to be fundamentally true or valuable or unified. Selection, interpretation, method, and principle, used as the coordinates of discourse, provide a way not of categorizing an author or his work arbitrarily, but of asking questions about a work which brings out its unique procedure. "With their aid, contrasts or corroborations can be asserted, and the real issues of disagreement can be separated from verbal contradictions or philosophical complementarities."[61]

Atheism, then, discloses four parameters by which its ambiguity can be clarified and its claims be made the subject of a consistent inquiry. These parameters dictate both the content and the method of the following inquiry into the origins of modern atheism.

Because atheism is parasitic on theism for its name, its meanings, and its adversary, it is imperative to investigate theism, its use of *god*, those who constitute the "theists," and so on. Because atheism suggests a dependence upon theism even for its generation and existence, it is imperative to investigate the transition in which theism gives way to atheism. This problem constitutes the question of this book. Since the form in which this content emerges is critical to its meaning, it is imperative to analyze the working inquiries in themselves and to notice the shifts from one mode of thinking to another, such as from theology to philosophy, and from one form of philosophy to another. Since both atheism and theism emerge as discourse, it is imperative that some attention be paid through the coordinates of discourse to those differences and interrelations of terms and meaning in which problems are raised and solutions offered. It is not that

one of these imperatives should be followed, completed, and another then engaged. All these imperatives function together to form the structure of this inquiry. The parameters of atheism frame the question which will govern this book: How did the idea of atheism emerge in the modern world and take so firm a hold?

The Event and Its Inquiry

If "atheism" without parameters is not a problem, "modern" without qualifications is not a period. Cassiodorus' *Variarum libri* refers to the institutions or things of the present as the *moderna*, and one current usage has repeated this by identifying modern and contemporary. The word is postclassical in its Latin origins, derived from *modo*, "just now," as *hodiernus* was derived from *hodie*, "today." Cassiodorus employed it to segregate a later civilization from that of the *antiqui*, "ancient."[62] The word traveled from sixth-century Latin into French, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, and German that flowed as tributaries from this original source. Its designation of a distinction from the past allowed periodic advancements or struggles in education to be characterized as battles between the ancients and the moderns. Vituperations between the "ancients" and "moderns" were exchanged by fourteenth-century logicians, the Thomists and the Scotists classified with those who followed the *via antiqua* and William of Ockham heading the *moderni*.[63] In 1585, Thomas Washington distinguished the "writings of the auncient and moderne Geographers and Historiographers," while Francis Bacon predicted to Tobie Matthew in Spain that "these modern languages will at one time or other play the bank-rowtes with books."[64] By the early eighteenth century, the battle had become one over humanistic learning in general, pitting against Richard Bentley the satire of Jonathan Swift's *Full and True Account of the Battle Fought Last Friday Between the Ancient and the Modern Books in St. James's Library* (1704).[65]

While "modern" has been contrasted with "ancient" since Cassiodorus, it has come increasingly to be distinguished from "contemporary." The *Oxford English Dictionary* notes as obsolete a once-accepted meaning,"being at this time; now existing," despite frequent sixteenth-century usage. "Modern" is more generous in its meanings now: "of or pertaining to the present and recent times," and in historical studies it denotes that period which begins after the medieval.[66] Some authors speak of the twentieth century as introducing the "post-modern world," and terminate the modern period with the end of colonialism, the emergence of atomic energy, the decline of Europe, the unifications of mass communication and transportation, or a particular turn in world consciousness or philosophic focus. James Collins opens his magisterial *God in Modern Philosophy* with the distinction be-

tween "the modern history of the problem of God and contemporary speculation about Him," and in two other works he confines the range of modern European philosophy to the three centuries between 1600 and 1900, while insisting that there is always something extrinsic and arbitrary about such boundaries in the history of thought or in the actions and persuasions of human beings.[67]

The overlapping of boundaries, the consequences of rereading ancient authors and former accomplishments and of their retrieval through new exegesis and commentaries, the parallel but independent streams of traditions which intersect at unexpected, unforeseen junctures, the interventions of genius and the misinterpretations by the faithful disciple,—all of these make any simple sequencing or sectioning of the history of philosophy or theology finally false. The series over time is true enough at first blush, but the interconnections of influences and inquiries render any dispersal over time or within a period only initial and tentative. It is true to say that Thomas Aquinas preceded David Hume by hundreds of years and held sway in a profoundly different philosophic and theological culture. It is also true, however, and perhaps even more accurate, to urge that Aquinas and Hume are intellectual contemporaries; part of the hermeneutical task is to overcome the historical and linguistic distance between them so that their concerns about god, freedom, causality, and understanding can be mutually related, differentiated, and criticized. In other words, it is banal to note that the procession of figures moves successively through the history of thought; the part of wisdom is to find a continual conversation taking place, a conversation to which each generation makes its contribution and from which it derives its tradition as it evokes from the older members latent insights and discoveries which emerge only during this continued encounter. Chronology is appropriate in intellectual history, but it is not the final word.

Nevertheless, it is a word that should be spoken. It is one thing to insist that wisdom is sempiternal; it is another to argue that it is static. Philosophy and theology contain events of inner development in which the initial principles of a system are allowed time for the maturation and emergence of their organic consequences. Often the master has not spelled out these conclusions of initial presuppositions; it is a task done within and over history. History seems in this sense to be the laboratory for ideas and assumptions. What lies hidden in the presuppositions only develops as the conversation continues; what is false or misleading is often recognized only when a hypothesis finally fathers a conclusion that is untenable. The history of philosophy or the history of theology in this sense is part of philosophy or theology in a distinctive manner. The verification principle for theoretic investigations often lies in the irreversible sequel of their presuppositions—not that these can be established as true by their conclusions, but they can be

established as false by them. A true conclusion can come from a false or a true premise; a false conclusion can come only from a false premise. And when a philosophic or theological conclusion does not explain reality, but explains it away or contradicts something unquestionably established, the premises under which the inquiry was conducted become problematic. The conclusion translates what the assumptions mean; it spells out their implications. An assumption it is a statement about the world, and eventually the world will be formed which tells you what you have said. A plot must have an organic beginning, middle, and end, but the beginning will only deliver its latent sense when the end has been reached. The beginning is only a beginning because there is an end. In philosophy or theology, the plot is an inquiry or an argument, which also needs time to disclose the full power and significance of its principles, for these principles are only understood in their conclusions.

Within what is now called the modern period, a new conclusion appeared. It was not a judgment about atheism or books about atheistic doctrine, nor about adversaries who were judged atheists. The conclusion was that there were men who judged themselves to be atheists, who called themselves atheists. In the ancient world, and even more in the medieval world, this was unheard of. "Atheist" had been vituperative and polemic; now it became a signature and a boast. David Hume commented casually that he had never met an atheist, as John Duns Scotus or Aristotle might have said before him. But Baron Paul d'Holbach did what no one had done with Duns Scotus or Aristotle: he introduced Hume to a society he claimed to be filled with them![68] Paris boasted what medieval Oxford and ancient Athens did not command: a band of thinkers who celebrated their denial of anything which one could call "god."

Hegel recognized that something distinct had occurred in the Paris of the Enlightenment: "We should not make the charge of atheism lightly, for it is a very common occurrence that an individual whose ideas about God differ from those of other people is charged with lack of religion, or even with atheism. But here it really is the case that this philosophy has developed into atheism, and has defined matter, nature, etc., as that which is to be taken as the ultimate, the active, and the efficient."[69] Hegel was correct in recognizing that something new had occurred. What he could not know was that this persuasion of a very few would wax throughout the next century and increasingly become the mark of an elite. The opening of the twentieth century found that number swollen to a few hundred thousand, but it increased by 1985 to over two hundred million. (If one includes those devoid of any religious belief or interests, the total is over a billion, more than twenty percent of the world's population.) What began in Paris reached this extent in only two hundred years.[70] Some twenty years ago, Professor

Schubert M. Ogden registered his agreement with the German theologian Gerhard Ebeling that our culture is characteristically "the age of atheism," and explained his agreement in terms of context and alienation: "If the reality of God is still to be affirmed, this must now be done in a situation in which, on an unprecedented scale, that reality is expressly denied." Karl Rahner in his interview with Gwendoline Jarcyk spoke of world atheism as "un phénomène qui jusqu'à présent n'a jamais eu cette extension dans l'histoire de l'humanité. . . . Une telle réalité, voilà qui n'a jamais existé jusqu'à présent." What began in the Paris of the Enlightenment has become a religious phenomenon which Western civilization has never witnessed before. It is critical to notice the historical uniqueness of the contemporary experience: the rise of a radical godlessness which is as much a part of the consciousness of millions of ordinary human beings as it is the persuasion of the intellectual. Atheisms have existed before, but there is a novelty, a distinctiveness about the contemporary denial of god both in its extent and in its cultural establishment. The recent judgment of John Paul II coincides with these readings of the present situation: "L'athéisme est sans conteste l'un des phénomènes majeurs, et il faut même dire, le drame spirituel de notre temps."[71]

This massive shifting of religious consciousness was recognized as the nineteenth century drew to a close by men as diverse as John Henry Cardinal Newman and Friedrich Nietzsche. In 1887, after Nietzsche had published the initial edition of *The Gay Science* and followed it with *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and *Beyond Good and Evil*, he returned to the prior work to complete it with the great fifth book. Earlier, the Madman in the marketplace had announced the death of God. Now Nietzsche spelled out the precise meaning which this striking parable carried: "The greatest recent event—that 'God is dead,' that the belief in the Christian god has become unbelievable—is already beginning to cast its first shadows over Europe. For the few at least, whose eyes—the *suspicion* in whose eyes is strong and subtle enough for this spectacle, some sun seems to have set and some ancient and profound trust has been turned into doubt."[72] In England, the aging Newman felt the same drawing on of night, the same shadow lengthening over what had once been Christian civilization. In the *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, he wrote of the religious disintegration of Europe: "In these latter days, in like manner, outside of the Catholic Church, things are tending,—with far greater rapidity than in that old time from the circumstance of the age,—to atheism in one shape or another. What a scene, what a prospect, does the whole of Europe present at this day . . . and every civilization through the world, which is under the influence of the European mind!"[73] For both Newman and Nietzsche, this gradual but profound erosion of religious belief, an erosion not halted but promoted and embodied in the liberal

attenuation of dogma, constituted a massive cultural phenomenon, the emergence of a certain cast of mind in greater and greater predominance, one whose sensibilities and educational background, whose ambit of intellectual interests and engagements, defined human beings constitutionally unable to believe, to know, or to be convinced in any way of the existence of the Judeo-Christian god. What Nietzsche and Newman foresaw was that religious impotence or uninterest would not remain a private or an isolated phenomenon, that it would increasingly characterize the "educated intellect of England, France, and Germany," and that its influence would eventually tell upon every routine aspect of civilization.[74] Both Nietzsche and Newman, albeit with vastly different evaluations, gauged the enormous importance of what was taking place, and in their assessments they stand as prophetic figures within the twilight of the nineteenth century.

In the oft-repeated scene from the third book of *The Gay Science*, when the Madman lights a lamp in the day and rushes screaming into the marketplace, it is the Madman alone who cries out: "I seek God! I seek God!" The marketplace convulses in ridicule: "Has he got lost? asked one. Did he lose his way like a child? asked another. Or is he hiding? Is he afraid of us? . . . Thus they yelled and laughed." The difference between the Madman and the market crowds was not that one believed in the reality of god and the other did not. Neither believed, and god died in the event of his own incredibility. But the Madman alone knows what they have done, what they have lost. "I will tell you. We have killed him—you and I. All of us are his murderers. But how did we do this? How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? . . . What was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives." Here the Madman falls silent before the astonished listeners. He throws his lantern upon the ground, smashing it into pieces. "I have come too early, he said then; my time is not yet. This tremendous event is still on its way, still wandering; it has not yet reached the ears of human beings. . . . This deed is still more distant from them than the most distant stars—*and yet they have done it themselves.*"[75]

In his lectures with Paul Ricoeur, Alasdair MacIntyre maintains that the characteristic of the contemporary debate between the atheists and the theists is the decline in the cultural urgency of the question. It doesn't make any difference. The tension between religious belief and unbelief in the nineteenth century, which one can trace in the lives of Matthew Arnold and Henry Sidgwick, cannot be found in contemporary culture.[76] But this is to miss much of the point of Nietzsche's myth. It is precisely the absence of this tension within the latter-day nineteenth-century marketplace which convinced the Madman that human beings do not understand what they have done. Two things were poignantly obvious to Nietzsche: that the

incredibility of god within the bourgeois world constitutes his death, and that this was the elimination of a god radically unimportant to those who clustered there. The god who had disappeared from conviction was finally irrelevant.

Nietzsche never draws out the implication of these two insights, but they are points of critical importance. For if the death of god is constituted by his massive incredibility and if this incredibility rests upon one who is fundamentally trivial, then the issues of the *Seventh Epistle* about meaning and instance can be legitimately leveled at the Madman of *The Gay Science* and the prophetic Zarathustra: What god has died beneath these knives? What is the content of theological meaning and the instance of its embodiment which has perished?

But Nietzsche's Madman does pose a central question, whose import bears more upon the modes of thought or the forms of discourse than upon the content: "We have killed him—you and I. All of us are his murderers. But how did we do this?"[77] *The Gay Science* sketched a very general answer by tracing out the history of science and morality, but the question still hangs on the air. How was it possible that such an event came about? The question of the Madman is not about cultural disappearance, as some have argued; much less is it a return to some lighter version of Hegelian projection into otherness through the incarnation. Nietzsche himself specified its meaning: God has become incredible. What was once the content and subject of unhesitant conviction and religious confession has become unwarranted. It is not that Europe has stopped defending or believing in the Christian god. The statement is not about Europe, but about god, about the transition from being credible to becoming incredible. This transition has been made, but it will take centuries for Europe or for the world to accept it. "In the main one may say: The event is far too great, too distant, too remote from the multitude's capacity for comprehension even for the tidings of it to be thought of as having *arrived* yet. Much less may one suppose that many people know as yet *what* this event really means."[78] Nietzsche's Madman and Zarathustra announce "this tremendous event" itself: the transition into incredibility, as belief in the Christian god became unbelievable, which demands inquiry. What is this transition, this event still so far distant from most human beings?

When a judgment so recent in its earliest proponents and so massive in the contradictions it offers to religious consciousness gathers force and adherents so swiftly that within two hundred years it commands the convictions of numerous major thinkers in the West and the attention of all, the event out of which it issued legitimately and urgently claims examination. Something crucial has happened in the realm of ideas.

Atheism cannot be dismissed simply as an epiphenomenon of the social

order or as an understandable psychological maturation or, conversely, as another symptom of moral degeneracy. Whether it measures a remarkable advance in the revolutionary arrangements of social classes; or emerges in the conversion of common interests from the transcendent to the exploration and conquest of this world, a conversion for which enthusiasm is fed with heady advances in technology and science; or whether it appositely fits a world of comforts and alienation undreamed of by our ancestors, the disintegration of monogamous marriage, the widespread industry in death, the rise of totalitarian governments, and the recent nihilism of total war, atheism remains a judgment, a statement about the nature of things. What is more, it is primarily a religious judgment, whether that "religion" adopts the form of natural or revealed religion, of philosophy or humanism. As a religious judgment, atheism possesses its own plot, its own argument in the history of ideas, its own demands for coordinated inquiry. To postulate that religion arose and held its sway because of an ill-ordered society or an ill-ordered psyche was an option indulged in the nineteenth century, just as atheism had been reduced in earlier polemics to a collapsing social order or a guilty conscience. All of these hermeneutics have claimed their advocates and yielded diverse readings of the cultural histories they attempt to explain, yet all of them explained a conviction through its genetic occasion. But genesis and development exhibit the meaning and truth of ideas and of judgments only if the theoretical motives which justify these concepts and statements integrate that history and are submitted to an appropriate criticism. The empirical necessities of the irrigation of the Nile Delta may well have been the social and economic occasion for the formation of the early geometries, but this agricultural genesis says nothing about the truth of the theorems elaborated or the accuracy of the corollaries drawn. How an idea emerges from society or from interior and unconscious states is one question. Whether an idea is valid in both its content and its form of thought is quite another. The genesis of a conviction is philosophically or theologically critical to its understanding if the idea is not reduced to a social product or a psychic inevitability, that is, if it is not explained or explained away by contraction to something else, if the ideational integrity of idea, argument, facts, and principles is kept and submitted to a history and a critique on its own terms. Affirmation and negations have a right to be judged on their own evidence and traced out in their own presuppositions and sequels. Social histories and psychological analyses are rich in the illumination they provide, but they finally impoverish if they reduce the central judgments studied to symptoms of myriad hidden factors and refuse to take a conviction seriously enough to consider it in itself, with its own content and forms of appropriate discourse.[79] A doctrine so defrauded of its proper coordinates in history and in evidence becomes an ideology only symptomatically

interesting: its metaphysical persuasions have only a subjective character and the influences which bring it about are seen as independent of all reasonable grounds and working with blind necessity. It is an idea alienated from its own grounds and argument.

This book proposes to investigate the origin of an argument, to explore the beginnings of a plot, not to follow its development through the great *dramatis personae* of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries or through the shifting patterns of the evidence then alleged and the methods employed. The question for this inquiry is prior to that development. What lies at the origins of modern atheism? How was it that over the period which Owen Chadwick has called "the seminal years of modern intellectual history" one of the seeds which germinated and flourished was that of atheistic consciousness?[80]

To this question the prior parameters of an inquiry into atheism must be brought. To understand the origins of atheism as an idea rather than as a cultural by-product, it is necessary to track the theisms out of which it came and to which it considered itself a counterposition. This job may not be prohibitively difficult if we begin with the great work of Baron Paul Henri d'Holbach, to which this comprehensive promoter of philosophic atheism brought the conversations of his friends, and by which he turned the long journey of Denis Diderot into system, the *Système de la nature*. The *Système* unquestionably deserves the assessment which succeeding generations have made of it: "the most important demonstration of materialism and atheism" until the middle of the twentieth century.[81] D'Holbach's book brought to culmination the philosophes' religious cynicism, and it made even such hardy patrons as Frederick the Great join the opposition with his *Réfutation du Système de la nature* and Voltaire enter the lists against it in his *Dictionnaire philosophique*. In the *Système*, the atheism of the Enlightenment had assembled its most careful argumentation and sounded its frankest insistence upon the atheistic conclusion. One can begin with this work and with the works of the philosophes out of which it came and to which it was sequel and crown. Then the theisms that are being attacked are immediately evident. Theology is considered in general confused and contradictory, yet two theologians are singled out as of principal importance: Dr. Samuel Clarke of England and Father Nicolas Malebranche of France. But both of these theologians are descended from figures that dominated the European philosophic and scientific world: Clarke sits at the feet of Newton and Malebranche on every page bears witness to his extraordinary conversion to Descartes. So d'Holbach and Diderot reached back to Newton and Descartes for their principal opponents.

Certainly there were other figures who stepped on the stage at diverse moments and who occupied it in more than a secondary role. Giordano

Bruno anticipated Diderot's dynamic matter by a century and a half, while the history of atheistic polemics could be written through the books composed to counter Spinoza. But Bruno and Spinoza were either too removed from the discussions in natural philosophy or too intrinsically ambiguous to form a concatenated series of disciples that advocated their heritage within the Enlightenment. Spinoza drew the fire of both Malebranche and Clarke, but it was not Spinoza's influence which told on Diderot and d'Holbach. Descartes and Malebranche, Newton and Clarke generated a tradition in a way that neither Bruno nor Spinoza did. These theistic traditions finally generated their own denials. One of the many ironies of this history of origins is that while the guns of the beleaguered were often trained on Spinoza, the fortress was being taken from within.

The remarkable thing is not that d'Holbach and Diderot found theologians and philosophers with whom to battle, but that the theologians themselves had become philosophers in order to enter the match. The extraordinary note about this emergence of the denial of the Christian god which Nietzsche celebrated is that Christianity as such, more specifically the person and teaching of Jesus or the experience and history of the Christian Church, did not enter the discussion. The absence of any consideration of Christology is so pervasive throughout serious discussion that it becomes taken for granted, yet it is so stunningly curious that it raises a fundamental issue of the modes of thought: How did the issue of Christianity vs. atheism become purely philosophical? To paraphrase Tertullian: How was it that the only arms to defend the temple were to be found in the Stoa?

This question pushed the inquiry back to the guardians of the temple, the theologians of the dawning seventeenth century. Two of them wrote elaborately and influentially against the atheists: Leonard Lessius of Louvain and Marin Mersenne of the Parisian Priory. One was a Jesuit, the other a Minim; both were scholars of immense erudition, and both took their posts in the great intellectual battles that brought the modern world into its initial configurations. Lessius and Mersenne shaped something of the intricate pattern which this new age was to assume; both of them told upon their culture. But perhaps more important, both were symptomatic of forces and persuasions more powerful than themselves and more pervasive than their teaching. It is with them, then, either as influences in the history of thought or as indications of its drift, that our story can begin. For these successive questions, cumulating one on top of another, suggest this history the way that history is always suggested, backwards. They arise from the religious storm that broke over Europe during the Enlightenment and probe for its origins, for beginnings which remained silent, unnoticed, a subtle drop in the temperature and a change in the humidity, clouds forming far on the horizon, stealing into the atmosphere and altering its climate, gathering

moisture as almost imperceptibly they progress from albumen to slate gray to black, the first few drops of rain, then the torrents and the earth awash with water. From this, the governing question: How was it possible?

The emergence of modern atheism lies with Diderot and d'Holbach. This fact seems uncontestable. The inquiry of this book does not establish that fact; it presumes it. The problem for this book is how was such a fact possible? It is not remarkable that an atheist or two or three would appear in Paris. Almost anything will eventually appear in Paris! But how could such an idea appear with force sufficient to initiate the massive negation which has cast its shadow over Europe? Why could Nietzsche legitimately call this idea a "tremendous event?" "We have killed him—you and I. All of us are his murderers. But how did we do this?"[82] This question expresses as well as possible the problem of this book, an inquiry in agreement with Aristotle that the one "who considers things in their first growth and origin, whether a *polis* or anything else, will obtain the clearest view of them."[83]

Our effort, then, is to understand what has taken place as it emerged, rather than mount an effort of advocacy or of attack. The question which shapes this effort is twofold. In the generation of ideas, how did so powerful an idea as atheism arise? In the reflections of theology, what can be learned from such "a tremendous event"?

The first issue is one in the history of ideas rather than sociology, cultural anthropology, or psychology. Human beings wrote works which advanced ideas, urged convictions, appealed to evidence, and mounted arguments, and these works evoked agreements which combined into an intellectual tradition unique in the history of Western civilization. They established a community of meaning, even within clashing disagreement and violent repudiation, for one of the ways in which human beings can come together is to fight. Within the unity of this struggle may be hidden the possibilities of a further or more comprehensive truth for whose realization these contradictions are necessary, dialectical moments. But whatever the outcome, the first issue is that of the continuity, interaction, and genesis of ideas. The second issue is directly theological, constructive in its inquiry and inductive in its conclusions: Does this history of ideas exhibit anything that should bear upon the reflections of the theologian and upon the design of theology? Can the theologian learn from history, especially the history of the contention that the theologian has nothing to talk about? Granted that there is such a pattern in the origins of atheistic consciousness, granted even that this pattern is dialectical, that is, generated out of contradiction, what can theology gain from the knowledge that this structure lies at the procreation of atheism?

The task of hermeneutics is the restoration of communication, a fusion of horizons in which significant works are made present and fruitful in their

effective history, in which what is alien is made familiar and restored to continuity, presence, and importance. Not only does the present ask of past assertions and texts questions about meaning and truth, but this restored tradition poses questions to contemporary reflection. Even the negativity of such an experience implies a question. The origins of atheistic consciousness place demands and challenges before contemporary theology, and perhaps the ensuing dialogue can discover new significance in both.

The first issue, then, bears upon the establishment of a tradition; the second, upon the discovery of its theological meaning. The inquiry is one of tradition and discovery. For there is only an apparent contradiction between discovery and tradition. The disclosure or the invention of what is new only superficially excludes the transmission or reception of what is old. Actually, discovery can only light upon what is hidden within the given, while a tradition can possess significance, can perdure, only if that which is past is continually made present, changed, reinterpreted, and transposed—if only to be understood by succeeding generations. Discovery is the grasp of new meaning; tradition is its mediation, posing the elements and the problematic situation which enables new disclosures. Discovery and tradition are not opposed; they are coordinated. They constitute the rhythm and the unity of inquiry. Tradition embodies an evolving history, symbolic continuities, resonances with varied human experiences. Discovery seizes upon a newness of meaning or a retrieval of significance, but the matter of discovery is tradition.

Discovery alone can have something hypothetical about its insights and something abstract about that which stands as revolutionary or as untried. Tradition adds time and development, consequences and implications, within conflicting conceptual schemata until the idea becomes a topic in the history of ideas and its propositions take on the flexibility of a theme. The new idea is an abstraction; tradition gives the idea an effective history, following its internal possibilities through the growth and testing of subsequent experience. In its initial invention, an art object or a literary work may possess a richness unseen by its author. History traces the consequent reflection of other minds and the cultural embodiment in different practices to bring out these hidden virtualities.

A tradition in the history of ideas, then, presents theological discovery with its own prior and repeated discoveries and verifications. Theology finds in this consequent history a field of experimentation, a laboratory in which its possibilities are elicited and tested. Tradition is this discovery in its continued richness, with some of its developmental promises or sequels realized. In this sense, tradition is the truth of discovery. Tradition confronts the present with a depth that nothing less settled can match.

This is deeply true of theological reflection. One does not reach back into

the past to resurrect figures and arguments. Vital traditions are the situations of the present. Tradition is the contemporary presence of the past. It forms, as it surrounds, both the issues which are raised and the subject who questions. Theology and its research always stand within a tradition, not at a distance from it. And the richness of its reflection depends upon its awareness of this tradition.

This relationship between tradition and discovery is critically important to any understanding of atheism, perhaps especially so in an inquiry into the theological meaning of its origins. For the Western world, as indicated above, is presented now with a radically different state of the question. Unlike any civilization or intellectual culture that has preceded it in the past or accompanies it today, Western philosophical and theological reflection now confront the denial of god no longer as a random option or as an idiosyncratic philosophy, but as a heritage of two centuries. Atheism exists now in the West with a length of lineage and with a comprehensiveness of human commitments unlike anything which it has enjoyed before. Atheism has become a tradition, rather than a revolution. It possesses its own reading of the past as moments of crisis, insights, and a labored evolution towards its present moments of freedom and rationality. The twofold task of this book, then, is to trace out the origin of this atheistic tradition, or origin which is its transition from theism to atheism, and to understand its theological significance.