

Some Notes on Early Modern Atheism

Wrong Belief vs. Unbelief

- ATHEISM does not necessarily mean the belief that there is no God:
- "GODLESS":
 - Lack of enthusiasm for the state religion;
 - Adherence to Roman Catholicism or pagan systems of belief;
 - Immoral behaviour, evil living;
 - Deployment of the rituals and doctrine of religion for purely political purposes.

'Let me tell you & tel you that it is truth, and let these few lines witness against you: the hypocrite is a close Atheist; the loose wicked man is an open Atheist, the secure, bold, and proud transgressor is an Atheist; he that will not be taught & reformed, is an Atheist'. [John Wingfield, *Atheism Close and Open, Anatomized*, 1634]

"Free thinking" Atheism

Associated with

- EDUCATION: influence esp. of Italian humanist and heterodox ideas derived from the study of Classical sources;

But also:

- UNLEARNED or ISOLATED POPULATIONS whose connection to established religion was merely rote or non-existent

MATERIALISM

- The emphasis on NATURAL rather than METAPHYSICAL explanations for human behaviour and worldly events;
- ➔ DEISM: dismissal of the idea of God as an active overseer or participant in human affairs but does not necessarily deny the existence of God;
- ➔ Challenge the idea of the immortality of the soul;
- ➔ Characterization of religion as human construct mobilized as a form of social control;

Practical Atheism

- Practical Atheism: (immoral) behaviour justified by disbelief in a divinely enforced LAW
- May believe in God, but not in Judgment or Providence;
- Behaviour measured by advantage and personal judgment rather than in reference to an absolute system of morality
- Basic assumption: moral behaviour depends on belief in divine judgment—a system of deterrence and reward.

CONSIDER Bacon re: Superstition vs Atheism

"It were better to have no opinion of God at all, than such an opinion as is unworthy of him. For the one is unbelief, the other is contumely [display of contempt]; and certainly superstition is the reproach of the Deity."

"Atheism leaves a man to sense, to philosophy, to natural piety, to laws, to reputation; all which may be guides to an outward moral virtue, though religion were not; but superstition dismounts all these, and erecteth an absolute monarchy in the minds of men" (Francis Bacon, *Of Superstition*)

EPISTEMOLOGICAL CONUNDRUM

- HOW DO YOU KNOW AN ATHEIST?
- A person may believe in God and still behave badly;
- A person may not believe in God and still behave well;
- Atheist philosophers could argue for the SOCIAL NECESSITY of religion

- Depends on the point of emphasis:

The workings of the individual private (invisible) soul (Salvation)
OR

The workings of the individual's public (visible) behaviour and participation in the social space (Order)

BUT: epistemological limits on our capacity to SEE INTO others.

The Atheist's Tragedy: seeing inside

- How does the play "look into" the other?
- What methods are deployed to open the other to assessment and definition?
- How is the invisible made visible?
- What is the relationship among the material world, the social world and the divine world?
- What is the relationship between the passive revenger, Charlemont, and the atheist, D'Amville with regard to the operations (or not) of a providential deity?

Two Helpful Resources

Hunter, Michael. "The Problem of 'Atheism' in Early Modern England." *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, Vol. 35 (1985), pp. 135-157. JSTOR, Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3679180>

Wotton, David. "Unbelief in Early Modern Europe." *History Workshop*, no. 20, Autumn, 1985, pp. 82-100. JSTOR, Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4288650>
