"Science gradually answered the questions religion used to answer. The unraveling of Christendom with the Reformation brought about the 'disenchantment of the world.' These are just two ideologically-driven narratives that Joseph Minich deconstructs. Instead, he employs phenomenological analysis to help us understand why we all feel the absence of God in our 'gut' even before we consciously believe or disbelieve in God's existence. This book not only explains and informs but puts a finger on the sore spots, how even believers *feel* God's presence very differently than their predecessors. If you found Charles Taylor's analysis persuasive, I think you'll find Minich's even more so."

—MICHAEL HORTON,
J. Gresham Machen Professor of Systematic Theology and Apologetics,
Westminster Seminary California

"A work of insight and nuance, featuring a myriad of interlocutors, Minich's perceptive and clever analysis of the plausibility structures that have given way to the possibility of such an impersonal reality as unbelief is penetrating and clarifying. Our world has recently changed, Minich shows us. We now live in a realm where reality is 'manipulable material, meaninglessly arranged' unless the human mind does the work of meaning-making. How did this happen? While disenchantment narratives abound, Minich makes apparent that the move from enchanted ancestors to disenchanted descendants is not primarily ideological. Rather, the answer to the how and why lies nearer the phrase 'God's existence is no longer felt to be obvious.' This is now the go-to work to find out the relationship between this felt divine absence and the development of modern atheism. Written with elegance and a delight to read, Minich also offers a path forward in our age of unbelief, of 'lost faith,' an age of fractured selves in a technocratic world."

—CORY BROCK,
minister at St. Columba's Free Church of Scotland in Edinburgh;
author, *Orthodox Yet Modern: Herman Bavinck's Use of Friedrich Schleiermacher*

"Minich has written a wonderfully scintillating treatment of the spiritual condition of modernity; it's culturally perceptive and psychologically astute. Being especially attentive to the material factors that have rendered atheism so thinkable and attractive, his account offers insights lacking in many ideological fall narratives and resists the temptation of nostalgic laments over disenchantment. His concluding section presents a theological framing for the modern condition that is suggestive and daring, which I will doubtless be reflecting upon for some time."

—ALASTAIR ROBERTS,
adjunct senior fellow, Theopolis Institute

BULWARKS OF UNBELIEF

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ATHEISM AND DIVINE ABSENCE IN A SECULAR AGE

JOSEPH MINICH

LEXHAM ACADEMIC

Bulwarks of Unbelief: Atheism and Divine Absence in a Secular Age

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For Οὖτις, my mentor and friend

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Foreword

Charles Taylor notes in *A Secular Age* that, while one can today believe in the same things as a Christian in the year 1500 (e.g., the Trinity, the Incarnation, the Resurrection), one cannot believe them in the same way. In 1500, such belief was intuitive, resting upon bulwarks of belief that made denial of Christianity, if not strictly impossible, really very difficult. Today, however, the opposite applies: one chooses to believe in the Christian faith, and one does so in the face of a culture where the bulwarks, so to speak, are in favor of unbelief. This is why so many Christians even feel their own hearts often to be battlegrounds, not simply between righteousness and unrighteousness but between faith and atheism.

How this change has taken place has been subject to many forms of analysis. Numerous culprits have been suggested over the years: a decadent late medieval theology; the crisis of institutional authority that flows (and keeps flowing) from the ecclesiastical disruptions at the Reformation; the rise of capitalism; the development of modern science. All have surely played their part. But at the heart of the human experience of the conflict between belief and unbelief lies the way in which individuals intuitively relate to the world around them. Their way of being in the world is central to how they understand and navigate that world.

In this book, Joseph Minich offers an account of the bulwarks of unbelief that ascribes a central role to technology. Martin Heidegger famously commented that the threat from technology to humanity did not come primarily from the ability it gave to destroy the human race through what we now call weapons of

mass destruction. Rather, it came from its ability to completely dehumanize us, to transform our relationship to the world, to each other, in short to reality, in a manner that would fundamentally destroy who we are. In sum, he pointed to a basic but important fact about technology that we are all inclined to miss: technology does not simply allow us to relate to the world in faster, more efficient ways. Technology actually alters our relationship to the world in fundamental ways. Technology is, one might say, ontology.

It is that line that Dr. Minich explores with relation to the experience of belief and unbelief in the modern world. Methodologically drawing upon the tradition of phenomenology, he focuses on how the technologized environment in which we live has transformed us, not simply in the skills we have to possess but in how we intuitively imagine the world and our place within it. Simply put, the world of technology is a world where God's absence is intuitively much more plausible than it was in pre-modern society.

Yet this is neither a lament nor simply a descriptive analysis of where we are today. Dr. Minich also presses forward to positive construction. If unbelief is a problem not simply, or even primarily, of epistemology but rather of the intuitions and narratives that a technological world implicitly embodies, then the apologetic case for Christianity must be pursued in a manner that grips the whole human being.

This is an important book both in its argument and its proposals, a significant contribution to recent conversations about modernity, faith, and what it means to be human in a technological world.

CARL R. TRUEMAN,
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Fellow, Ethics and Public Policy Center, Washington DC

INTRODUCTION

Whence Atheism? Whither God?

THE (RECENT!) PAST IS A FOREIGN COUNTRY

From 1906 to 1911, the Dutch theologian and statesman Herman Bavinck (1854–1921) put the final revisions on his four-volume magnum opus, *Reformed Dogmatics*. Arguably the most learned Reformed theologian of his day, Bavinck filled his *Dogmatics* with asides demonstrating encyclopedic knowledge of and competence in both ancient and contemporary philosophy, law, science, and history. What is more, his ethos throughout is one of cosmopolitan generosity and poise, even while arguing positively for historic Christian orthodoxy. It is fascinating to encounter, therefore, the dismissiveness and brevity (only a few pages in the second volume) with which he treats the subject of atheism. He writes:

> There is no atheistic world. There are no atheistic peoples. Nor are there atheistic persons. The world cannot be atheistically conceived … There is nobody able, absolutely and with logical consistency, to deny God's knowability and hence his revelation … A conscious theoretical atheism in an absolute sense, if it ever occurs, is rare … But this [self-conscious materialism] almost never happens. Taken in an absolute sense, as the denial of an absolute power,

> atheism is almost unthinkable … It therefore requires a certain effort not to believe in a personal God.[1]

Bavinck is, of course, aware of the existence of self-conscious materialists and atheists. He names several of them. He is likewise aware of all the ways in which his claims concerning the universality of a more-or-less personal notion of God could be contested by persons working in the field of religious anthropology, which had been growing since the late nineteenth century. He engages this body of scholarship. What strikes the reader about these particular statements, however, is the absolute (perceived) *implausibility* of atheism for Bavinck. While he interacts extensively with various philosophers throughout his *Dogmatics*, and while he writes frequently in his *Dogmatics* as well as in his larger corpus concerning the relationship between religion and science, the so-called problem of atheism is not treated by him as an item of significant concern.[2]

And yet, at the same time (in 1910), across the Atlantic, John Updike's fictional Reformed Presbyterian minister, Clarence Arthur Wilmot felt the last particles of his faith leave him.

> The sensation was distinct—a visceral surrender, a set of dark sparkling bubbles escaping upward … Clarence's mind was like a many-legged, wingless insect that had long and tediously been struggling to climb up the walls of a slick-walled porcelain basin; and now a sudden impatient wash of water swept it down into the drain. There is no God … Life's sounds all rang with a curious lightness and flatness, as if a resonating base beneath them had been removed. They told Clarence Wilmot what he had long suspected, that the universe was utterly indifferent to his states of mind

1. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics Volume 2: God and Creation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 56–59.

2. This perhaps accounts for his loose-handed relationship to the theistic proofs. Ibid., 77–91.

and as empty of divine content as a corroded kettle. All its metaphysical content had leaked away, but for cruelty and death, which without the hypothesis of a God became unmetaphysical; they became simply facts, which oblivion would in time obliviously erase. Oblivion became a singular comforter. The clifflike riddle of predestination—how can Man have free will without impinging upon God's perfect freedom? how can God condemn Man when all acts from alpha to omega are His very own?—simply evaporated; an immense strain of justification was at a blow lifted. The former believer's habitual mental contortions decisively relaxed. And yet the depths of vacancy revealed were appalling. In the purifying sweep of atheism human beings lost all special value. The numb misery of the horse was matched by that of the farmer; the once-green ferny lives crushed into coal's fossiliferous strata were no more anonymous and obliterated than Clarence's own life would soon be, in a wink of earth's tremendous time. Without Biblical blessing the physical universe became sheerly horrible and disgusting. All fleshly acts became vile, rather than merely some. The reality of men slaying lambs and cattle, fish and fowl to sustain their own bodies took on an aspect of grisly comedy—the blood-soaked selfishness of a cosmic mayhem. The thought of eating sickened Clarence; his body felt swollen in its entirety, like an ankle after a sprain, and he scarcely dared take a step, lest he topple from an ungainly height.[3]

Here we are confronted with a curious juxtaposition. At the dawn of the twentieth century, Bavinck cannot imagine the success of atheism. Toward its close, Updike (perhaps reflecting on his own struggle) can not only haunt his reader with the felt plausibility

3. John Updike, *In the Beauty of the Lilies* (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1996), 5–7.

of a purely materialist universe, but his protagonist's faith quite literally *leaves* him. Throughout the novel, Clarence wishes that he could retain his lost religion, but the former minister cannot force himself to believe what he (despite himself) no longer finds believable. What is more, Updike's protagonist has his crisis of faith in the precise decade that Bavinck declares atheism impotent in its charms.[4] And indeed, despite Bavinck's inability to imagine an atheist universe, the recent historical consensus is that it was precisely during his lifetime that the atheist option (at least in the West) became a widespread-enough temptation to marshal adherents exceeding a handful of European elites.[5] Bavinck's failure of

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4. When this manuscript was first prepared, James Eglinton's *Bavinck: A Critical Biography* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020) was not yet available. Eglinton shows that late Bavinck did (in fact) take atheism quite seriously as a force in European intellectual culture. Nevertheless, the above comment stands as it pertains to the *rhetorical* impact of Bavinck's treatment of atheism in *Dogmatics* (considered in itself). John Updike's own religiosity is perhaps exemplified in his 1964 story in the *The New Yorker*, "The Christian Roommates," a fictionalized account of his early encounter (as roommates) with Christopher Lasch—and in his 1960 poem, "Seven Stanzas at Easter." In the latter, he does not commit to the resurrection of Jesus Christ but criticizes compromised modern accounts of the resurrection. It begins, "Make no mistake: if He rose at all, it was as His body."

5. Relevant sources would include Michael J. Buckley, *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987) and *Denying and Disclosing God: The Ambiguous Progress of Modern Atheism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004); Gavin Hyman, *A Short History of Atheism* (New York: I. B. Taurus, 2010); Alan Charles Kors, *Atheism in France 1650–1729 Volume 1: The Orthodox Sources of Unbelief* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990) and *Epicureans and Atheists in France 1650–1729* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Alister McGrath, *The Twilight of Atheism: The Rise and Fall of Disbelief in the Modern World* (New York: Doubleday, 2004); and James Turner, *Without God, without Creed: The Origins of Unbelief in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985). James Thrower, *The Alternative Tradition: Religion and the Rejection of Religion in the Ancient World* (The Hague: Mouton Publishers, 1980), and Tim Whitmarsh, *Battling the Gods: Atheism in the Ancient World* (New York: Knopf, 2015), argue that we can find precedent for atheism in antiquity and (specifically, Thrower) in the East. Ancient (and even Western paganism) often had the gods as suspended in (sometimes impersonal) movements and forces that transcended them. This could be seen as a form of proto-atheism (i.e., the ultimate metaphysical picture) even for ancient persons who *did* believe in the gods. There are also possible parallels to the modern atheism to be found in certain non-Western contexts, such as the Hindu school of Carvaka. One must be careful, nevertheless, not to read into the sources. On the methodological challenges regarding the handling of the historical material, see Buckley, *At the Origins of Modern Atheism*, 1–36. In any case, none of this stands in tension with historical claims concerning the very specific context within which *modern* Western atheism has emerged—its distinctive character directly formed through

imagination certainly does not imply his inability to intellectually struggle with the intersection between the claims of the Christian faith and the complexities of the modern world. In fact, this struggle largely defined his youth.[6] And certainly, developments that are clear to the historian in hindsight are sometimes muddled for actual historical actors. In any case, it would seem that modern persons do not have to go very far back into history to find themselves in a foreign country.[7] What, then, constitutes this ancestral foreignness as it pertains to the plausibility of atheism? Said differently, what changed between Herman Bavinck and John Updike?

MY HYPOTHESIS

In this volume, I make two parallel arguments. My first claim is that the most illuminating point of departure for interpreting the rise of unbelief over the last century and a half is the modern sense, *shared* by theists and non-theists alike, of divine absence. That is, whatever one believes propositionally about the question of God, God's existence is not *felt* to be obvious in the same way that, for instance, the fact that you are reading this right now seems obvious. It is common for modern religious persons to confess doubts that render the comparative confidence of previous centuries foreign. Certainly, I do not claim that God was crudely *visible* in the past,

the religious discourse in relation to which it developed its identity. Nor does any of this imply that modern atheism is monolithic or that it has responded to its religious alter ego in precisely the same fashion. On this, see Peter Watson, *The Age of Atheists: How We Have Sought to Live Since the Death of God* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014).

6. See Willem J. de Wit, *On the Way to the Living God: A Cathartic Reading of Herman Bavinck and an Invitation to Overcome the Plausibility Crisis of Christianity* (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 2011), 16–51. Unfortunately, de Wit is beholden to a view of Bavinck in which the theologian does not resolve this conflict. His work is helpful for highlighting excellent source material that is difficult to find elsewhere, but a more compelling account of Bavinck's relationship to modernity can be found in James Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism: Toward a New Reading of Herman Bavinck's Organic Motif* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2012).

7. The phrase "The past is a foreign country" is the opening line of L. P. Hartley's famous novel, originally published in 1953, *The Go-Between* (New York: NYRB Classics, 2011). It is relevant to note that Hartley's "foreign past" (even as of half a century later) is the turn of the previous century.

but divine *invisibility* was not ordinarily perceived to be relevant to the question of God's existence as such. When did it become the case, then, that the phenomenon of divine absence pressured human persons in the direction of non-belief? If nothing else, this is a curious property of modern religious consciousness. This contextualizes my second argument. My own hypothesis is that the salient factors that explain the relationship between divine absence and modern atheism are located at the intersection of the vast proliferation of modern technoculture, the way the world *seems* or *manifests* to correspondingly alienated laborers, and the resultant loss of a sense that one belongs to, and is caught up in, a history that transcends one. I use the term "technoculture" because I am not interested in technology or its proliferation in the abstract but in its concrete historical and cultural usage and the manner in which this shapes the human's relationship with his or her self, with others, and with the world. As will be apparent, particularly important and implicit in my usage of the term is an emphasis on the nature and effects of modern labor. In any case, my argument is supported (on the one hand) by noting the rise of unbelief at the same point that these features of our modern world became most prominent. But this is more deeply explained by a phenomenological analysis (defined below) of our technological and practical condition—highlighting *how* these identified features orient us to the world in such a way that it *seems* devoid of non-projected meaning and personhood (and, therefore, of God). This is, again, *irrespective* of whether or not one happens to believe in God. I am also keen to note that this does not constitute a comprehensive moral evaluation of these phenomena. Even in using the term "alienation," I am more immediately interested in a description of our phenomenal relation to the world than I am in questions of goodness or justice.

I locate my attempted contribution here, then, at two points. First is the claim that focusing specifically on this *shared* sensibility of divine absence (as opposed to broader considerations

concerning the sheer number of unbelievers) is the most useful way to illuminate the starting place from which modern persons engage the question of God. Second, I aim to highlight the *specific* manner in which our *use* of modern technology and our *experience* of modern labor cultivate a posture toward reality that reshapes our plausibility structures and our sense of reality such that God's non-obviousness is *now* felt to be an argument against His being at all.

METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

My method in making this argument will typically involve engaging specific questions and texts that help get into or illuminate the theme of the particular chapter considered *broadly*—and then to fill out these broader insights with *specific* examples where relevant and useful. For instance, I will fill out a more general insight concerning the philosophy of technology with a more specific insight drawn from the impact of modern film. Broadly speaking, the interlocutors I engage are influenced by the phenomenological tradition and/or its methods (usually seen as birthed in the work of Edmund Husserl).[8] Generally, this philosophical school is concerned with a fine-grained analysis of the world as it is manifested, even subconsciously or tacitly, in human experience. So, for instance, a phenomenological analysis of a building would be less interested in the process by which it was made than in how the building seems to a person consciously experiencing it. For humans, this seeming is never a bundle of separate perceptions of weight, height, color, and so forth, but a kind of whole that contains implicit interpretations, judgments, and associations. This

8. Phenomenology belongs to the broader tradition of continental philosophy. To see it mapped in the context of that broader tradition, therefore, consult Dermot Moran, *Introduction to Phenomenology* (New York: Routledge, 2000) and David West, *Continental Philosophy: An Introduction* (New York: Polity, 2010). For a contemporary manual, see Robert Sokolowski, *Introduction to Phenomenology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

tradition is useful for my purposes because in asking the question of God in its relationship to the modern technoculture, I want to ask how the world (or reality) seems to those caught up in that technoculture—and evaluate how this might shape our approach to the question of God. To the extent that I depart from this phenomenological method (for instance, in bringing up information drawn from sociological or statistical analysis), it will be in the *service* of claims that are chiefly established through phenomenological observation of the world. My motive here is to demonstrate the consistency between the research that highlights a social or statistical correlation between, say, the parallel emergence of modern technology and unbelief and the philosophical analysis that attempts to get inside and interpret *why* this correlation takes precisely the historical shape and content that it does. In aggregate, this represents a cumulative case for my hypotheses, with phenomenological analysis taking a primary role and sociological/statistical analysis taking a confirming/secondary role.

THE LIMITS AND SCOPE OF THIS PROJECT

It should be clear, then, that this is not (as such) a work of history. What I suggest draws upon the work of historians and the analysis of philosophers to give a *theoretically* plausible account of modern belief conditions. In my judgment, the argument has a prima facie plausibility that consequently generates questions that could potentially be answered by more fine-grained historical analyses. I will try to identify these as they arise in the text.

Furthermore, this volume is *not* meant to make a case for or against atheism. In one sense, the case I make herein is deflationary for atheists who assert that the recent prevalence of atheism is obviously due to its intellectual superiority over other options. Nevertheless, it is entirely possible to be persuaded of atheism and to reject this insufficient explanation of its recent success. In the fourth chapter and in the conclusion, it will be clear that I am nevertheless writing from the position of historic Christian creedal

orthodoxy (specifically in the Magisterial Protestant tradition). In these chapters, I will reflect upon the implications of the first three chapters for practitioners of Christianity within my own branch of Christendom.

My title draws upon Charles Taylor's notion of what he terms the "bulwarks of belief."[9] By this, he refers to those background features of medieval Christian culture that (both consciously and subconsciously) rendered belief in God all but inevitable. By contrast, I speak of "bulwarks of unbelief," or those features of the modern world that render unbelief as at least plausible (a "living option," in the taxonomy of William James).[10]

I execute the above argument, then, in five steps. In chapter 1, I will place my argument concerning atheism in the context of the interdisciplinary scholarly debates over the meaning of modernity, secularization, and the so-called "disenchantment of the world." Herein, I seek to identify what, in my judgment, has been insufficiently weighted in scholarly interpretations of modern unbelief—particularly as it pertains to the above-mentioned relationship between unbelief, divine absence, and modern technoculture. In chapter 2, I will attempt to make a prima facie case that there is enough of a significant correlation between the emergence of these two phenomena to warrant a phenomenological and theoretical analysis of their causal relation. In chapter 3, therefore, I will make a philosophical case for a *causal* link between them. Specifically, I will argue that modern technoculture and labor render unbelief a living option by posturing us toward reality in such a way that it seems devoid of its demonstrable immaterial dimension(s). The case having been made, I will move on in chapter 4 to consider implications—albeit from the particular vantage point of a Protestant interested in maintaining traditional creedal Christian

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9. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard Belknap, 2007), 25–89.

10. In classic 1896 essay, "The Will to Believe," in *Pragmatism and Other Writings* (New York: Penguin, 2000), 191–264.

orthodoxy who nevertheless cannot escape the pressures that mitigate against it. I argue that such persons cannot orient themselves relative to modern atheism without orienting themselves relative to the forces that give rise to it. Rejecting (however) both Ludditist nostalgia and progressivist religious revolution, I will argue that the modern moment is an opportunity to render orthodox belief more substantive and mature. This is because navigating these challenges requires an integration of the mind and will in order to reattune oneself to reality in its fullness. Such mediation (between mind and will) tends to suffocate nominal and shallow mediate positions between mature faith and unbelief. I will further argue that an underappreciated dimension of modern alienation and cultural disorientation is modern humankind's felt inability to be involved with and shape the history to which it nevertheless imagines itself to belong. Consequently, I will argue that recognizing the divine intentionality of the larger story of which this particular moment is a part (the *civitate Dei*) helps orient us to realities from which we cannot be alienated, even in principle. It is in the repentance and re-habituation of the whole person that we re-inhabit the world in such a manner as to render atheism less plausible. Via a new *ordo amoris,* we learn to maturely embrace precisely *this* particular moment and our limitations and opportunities within it (the attempted transcending of which is perhaps the chief idolatry of modernity—as well as its chief anxiety). Finally, in a brief conclusion, I will take stock of the overall argument in relation to the quandary of modern pluralism, and I will attempt to show that the public veracity of the Christian faith depends upon the persuasion of whole persons.

ONE

Atheism and Narrative

PRELIMINARIES AND BOUNDARIES

Putting atheism in historical perspective turns out to be quite tricky. Certainly, we can identify (broadly speaking) its Enlightenment emergence, its Victorian-age overhaul, and its post-1960s popularization. Interpreting the historical forces to which this story belongs, however, is the subject of enormous controversy. Narratives of atheism are, in the relevant literature, bound up with narratives of modernity, secularization, and the so-called disenchantment of the world more generally. In seeking to interpret atheism, then, it is useful to summarize interpretations of its emergence in this larger scholarly conversation and to identify where I detect a curious gap, which I aim to (at least suggestively) fill in.

First, however, it is worth addressing the most common *popular* narrative concerning modern atheism—because it is not prima facie implausible and therefore worthy of a brief retort. Its constitutive features, suspended atop a kind of historical uniformitarianism, might simplistically be identified with two plot-points: (1) There have always been atheists lying around—for example, the trope of the village atheist—but we do not hear about most of them because they have historically been afraid to speak up (on account of probable persecution) or because they *hid*

their atheism in the acceptable language of Christian orthodoxy.[1] (2) Nevertheless, religion used to seem more plausible when we knew less about the inner workings and origins of the material world. The scientific method successfully exposed these inner workings as predictable in nature—lacking the agency that was projected onto nature beforehand and that supposedly revealed God's primal agency. With respect to the question of origins, developments in biology (the theory of evolution) and physics (such as quantum theory) furnished humankind with all that was needed to explain, at least in principle, cosmic and human origins.[2] God, we might say, was out of a job—our progress in knowledge directly proportionate to the narrowing gaps left for God to fill. Carried along in these cultural winds, atheism was not a positive program as much as the remainder of a cosmic hourglass that ran out of God-grains. Certainly, there were and still are attempts to carve out a space for the divine in the (allegedly immaterial) private cabinet of the human soul, but the program of modern science is a universal acid[3] whose dissolution of the cosmos does not stop at the boundary between the material and the mental. The world of *mind* is increasingly reduced to the goings on of chemistry alone.[4] Whether it be the musings of Freud or the lab of the neuroscientist,

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1. Jonathan Israel, the learned Enlightenment scholar, fairly frequently reads historical actors as closet atheists in his corpus.

2. Two eminently readable accounts of this sort can be found in Daniel Dennett, *Darwin's Dangerous Idea: Evolution and the Meaning of Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996) and Victor Stenger, *God and the Folly of Faith: The Incompatibility of Science and Religion* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2012).

3. I am borrowing this acid image from Dennett, *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*, who uses the image of Darwinism more specifically.

4. A significant number of modern atheists have been influenced by the claims and arguments of neuroscientists like Paul and Patricia Churchland. Two of the four so-called new atheists (Daniel Dennett and Sam Harris) have done extensive work in the field of neuroscience and/or the philosophy of mind. P. M. S. Hacker and M. R. Bennett have written a minority report as it pertains to neuroscience, *Philosophical Foundations of Neuroscience* (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2003), and Edward Feser has written a minority report as it pertains to philosophy of mind, *Philosophy of Mind* (Oxford, UK: OneWorld Publications, 2006).

our understanding of the soul morphs (along with any supposed immaterial scaffolding that accounts for it) into an *epiphenomenon* of the real causal features of reality—none of which require divine aid to be what and as they are.

This particular reading of the situation is perhaps the most *culturally* significant one. For those lacking historical awareness (and sometimes even those with it), it is the most plausibly intuitive telling of the tale—written into our *gut* interpretations. Indeed, for this reason, not only is the emergence of atheism of curiosity to historians, but so is the meta-history of this *reading* of its emergence. That is to ask, just how did the relationship between religion and science come to be construed in this way? It is sometimes surprising for modern persons to discover that their perception that there has been a long war between science and religion, the so-called warfare model of their relation, is all but a relic among historians.[5] By the end of chapter 3 of this work, it should be clear why this might have become a plausible historical and normative picture.

In any case, of the two above-mentioned plot points, the first is the easier to address. In actual fact, heretics who have been persecuted for their beliefs have often been open about them. Many were willing martyrs for their cause(s). It would not seem likely that there is something unique about atheists that would prevent a

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5. The paradigmatic statements of the view were John William Draper's *History of the Conflict between Religion and Science* (New York: d. Appleton, 1875), and Andrew Dickson White's two-volume *A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom* (London: Macmillan and Company, 1898). For up-to-date assessments, see John Hedley Brooke, *Science and Religion: Some Historical Perspectives* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991); David Lindberg and Ronald Numbers, eds., *God and Nature: Historical Essays on the Encounter between Christianity and Science* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986) and *When Science and Christianity Meet* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); and Ian Barbour, *Religion and Science: Historical and Contemporary Issues* (New York: HarperOne, 1997). See especially Derrick Peterson, *Flat Earths and Fake Footnotes: The Strange Tale of How the Conflict of Science and Christianity Was Written into History* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2021). In it, he traces the fine-grained historical steps by which this became a popular narrative—whereas I consider my own work a *theoretical* attempt to understand why this might be a very natural and obvious reading of the situation given a particular (to be explored) relationship to the world itself.

few of them from occasional boldness in this respect.[6] And hence, in the absence of explicit counterexamples, it seems unfitting to read closet atheism into all sorts of historical actors before it is clearly an expressed option (i.e., the explicit atheism or materialism, of persons such as d'Holbach and Diderot).[7] In many instances, prominently Baruch Spinoza and Pierre Bayle, excellent scholars are in profound disagreement about their religious orientation.[8] To be clear, the issue is not whether a thinker might have hidden heterodoxy in orthodox vernacular. This can and did occur frequently. The issue is whether we have any positive reason to think that there were *atheists* (or materialists) who did so prior to the middle of the eighteenth century.

The second plot point in this popular narrative is more difficult to address. And indeed, one might say that the whole of this work constitutes an attempt to problematize it. For all the ways it might be qualified, however, it will become clear that a stubborn grain of truth remains in the popular narrative. The question becomes what this truth *implies*. Is not the import written into the tale itself? To wit: (1) God used to explain things. (2) Now science does. (3) Therefore, there is no need for the God hypothesis. What complicates this is a corresponding historical transformation concerning the very definitions of explanation and God. I herein argue that the God-explanation rejected in modern atheism is neither the God nor the explanation affirmed

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6. On premodern unbelief, see John Arnold, *Belief and Unbelief in Medieval Europe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

7. This starting point is argued in Buckley, *At the Origins of Modern Atheism*, 34. James Thrower argues that atheism is preceded by several anticipatory elements, but "D'Holbach is probably the first unequivocally professed atheist in the Western Tradition." *A Short History of Western Atheism* (Bungay: Pemberton Books, 1971), 106. For the argument of probable atheism prior to this, see David Berman, *A History of Atheism in Britain: From Hobbes to Russell* (London: Routledge, 1990), and Michael Hunter and David Wootton, eds., *Atheism from the Reformation to the Enlightenment* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992).

8. See the excellent treatment of this issue by Dominic Erdozain, "A Heavenly Poise: Radical Religion and the Making of the Enlightenment," *Intellectual History Review* 27, no. 1 (2017), 71–96.

by, for instance, Thomas Aquinas. For believers and unbelievers alike, however, those definitions underwent a shift (sometimes quite unconsciously) in the early to late modern periods. In any case, only by using the definitions woven into the fabric of our current understanding do we then project onto the past the negative photocopy of this understanding and its inevitable inversion in ourselves. Left unimagined are historically commonplace frames of reference that we have forgotten and inside of which our current situation does not appear inevitable. And so, while our story is not entirely wrong, we have inherited and been shaped by its *distortions* as well as its truths. But philosophical and historical inquiry can problematize what might otherwise seem plain, pushing us toward the *gestalt* shift required to properly modify and maintain the popular narrative.

In order to gain some understanding conducive to achieving this *gestalt* shift, it is fitting to catalogue something like "schools of interpretation" as they pertain to the question(s) of the historical emergence (and meaning) of atheism, secularization, and modernity. Admittedly, this is to traverse a jungle and to lose the specificity of trees for the clarity of the forest. This is so not only with respect to carving out schools as such (since most of the writers I will consider do not fit so neatly into any box) but also in the attempt to treat such big questions as the emergence of atheism, the phenomenon of secularity, and the interpretation of modernity together. However, such costs are warranted. Important ground-level details are lost in any useful map. In our case, while the boundaries between the interpretive trends that we will identify are fluid, they are not arbitrary. It need not be particularly controversial to state that persons who might account for many factors nevertheless do not give equal explanatory weight to all of them. Furthermore, the blending of discussions concerning atheism, secularity, and modernity is not a matter of smashing together elements that are otherwise separate. Rather, while treatments of

these topics might focus upon one of these labels, the concrete discussions often treat these as mutually defining phenomena.

Nevertheless, others' habits do not automatically justify one's own. Consequently, it is worth making explicit my own motivations for my own loose-handedness with the labels. We will have occasion to speak of each (disenchantment, modernity, secularization) more specifically as the argument develops. Nevertheless, each will be treated simultaneously for the following reason. In treating the rise of atheism, I am interested in not so much the simple fact and spread of atheism but rather the condition within which atheism becomes a plausible option in the first place.[9] Framed in this manner, the question concerning the emerging and increasing *plausibility* of atheism specifically cannot be separated from the phenomenon of secularization (i.e., the rise of unbelief and the decline of belief) more generally. The debate concerning the oft-cited disenchantment of the cosmos becomes relevant precisely because of its popularity as an explanation of these twin features of the modern world. And here we encounter our final term. While certainly the most elastic of our set in its many meanings (in sociology, religion, the arts, etc.), the phenomena we seek to describe are such a constitutive feature of whatever we tend to label modernity that the latter is inconceivable apart from the former—whether it is interpreted as the cause or consequent of the other terms. What straddles my interest with each of these labels, then, is only the extent to which they collectively elucidate how a metaphysically unfurnished cosmos becomes both possible and prevalent.

9. Taylor frames the question similarly in *A Secular Age*, as does James Turner in *Without God, without Creed*.

How Atheism Became Possible: Schools of Interpretation

The most basic division in the taxonomy that follows is between those scholars who emphasize intellectual versus those who identify practical causes of our religious condition.[10] We will have occasion to complicate this below. More immediately, those who emphasize predominantly intellectual factors can be further divided into those who stress broadly scientific versus specifically philosophical transformations. We have briefly alluded to the former above but will mostly focus on the latter here.

Ideological Interpretations

Standing above everyone else in this camp (certainly in energy, debatably in cogency) is the historian of the Enlightenment, Jonathan Israel, whose impressive corpus of thick volumes sets him apart not only for his matchlessly encyclopedic knowledge but also for his controversial and unabashed criticism of the postmodern tendency to reduce intellectual history to an epiphenomenon of material factors.[11] Not only do intellectual arguments demonstrably shape history (in his judgment), but they often do so precisely to the extent that they are correct. Characteristically reflecting upon Spinoza or "Spinozism," Israel writes of the latter:

> What is that position? In essence, it is the acceptance of a one-substance metaphysics ruling out all teleology, divine providence, miracles, and revelation, along with spirits separate from bodies and immortality of the soul, and denying that moral values are divinely delivered (with the corollary that therefore they have to be devised by men using terms relative to what is good or bad for society). Logically,

10. Here I am drawing on Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 25–89, in his notion of "bulwarks of belief," which (in our era) might be called bulwarks of unbelief or at least of neutrality.

11. A spirited defense of his project can be found in Jonathan Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment: Philosophy, Revolution, and Human Rights, 1750–1790* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 1–35.

> "Spinozism" always went together with the idea that this man-made morality should provide the basis for legal and political legitimacy—and hence that equality is the first principle of a truly legitimate politics. Always present also is Spinoza's concomitant advocacy of freedom of thought.[12]

Israel later writes:

> Spinoza's seemingly incomparable cogency (which greatly troubled Voltaire in his last years) cannot be dismissed, as many try to, as some sort of philosophical judgment on my part. Rather it is a historical fact that in the late eighteenth century, many people believed or feared (often much to their consternation) that one-substance monism, at least to all appearances, was much the most formidably coherent philosophy obtainable.[13]

According to Israel, the success of the so-called Radical Enlightenment (emphasizing monism, democracy, and freedom of thought) over against its moderate counterpart (the Lockean variant that supported God and monarchy and emphasized mere freedom of religion specifically rather than freedom of thought more generally) was largely a matter of David defeating Goliath—the slow march of philosophical competency disintegrating philosophical compromise. The dialectical tension between these enlightenments, indeed, has birthed our world—the moderate movement a sort of cultural and historical surrogate for the eventual triumph of its radical cousin in our own time.[14]

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12. Ibid., 11.

13. Ibid., 15.

14. The distinction between radical and moderate Enlightenments is perhaps to be traced to the pioneering work of Margaret Jacob, *The Radical Enlightenment: Pantheists, Freemasons, and Republicans* (Lafayette, LA: Cornerstone, 2006). I have taken the image of a surrogate from Jonathan Israel's lecture, "Freedom of Thought Versus Freedom of Religion: An Eighteenth-Century—And Now Also a Twenty-First-Century Dilemma" (Thomas More Lecture, Radbouduniversiteit, November 10, 2006). Israel has made this case more

Of course, one cannot do justice to Israel in this small space, but a few brief comments are in order. Most obviously, the success of an idea is not necessarily a mark of its cogency. Israel's own frustration with the reign of postmodern scholarship would seem to suggest this. What is more, in this particular case, it is demonstrably not Spinoza's greater cogency that accounts for the success of his ideas. Nevertheless, following in Israel's own footsteps, I will forego the actual demonstration.[15] More substantively, even if freedom of thought and anti-monarchical tendencies are consistent with Spinozism, they are arguably not reducible to it. Indeed, one of the chief purveyors of the former was Pierre Bayle. Perhaps because of this, Israel reads Bayle as a cryptic monist. But this is a highly contested reading. T. J. Hochstrasser has argued that not only Bayle but many French philosophers argued for the freedom of conscience (and against political coercion) on the basis of a distinctive argument rooted in natural law.[16] Dominic Erdozain has likewise competently challenged an areligious reading not only of

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sweepingly in his *A Revolution of the Mind: Radical Enlightenment and the Intellectual Origins of Modern Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

15. A brief summary of a critique would be that Spinoza attributes a fairly classical notion of divine simplicity to things that are irreducibly composite in nature. Importantly, however, this calls into question Spinoza as a foundation for modern atheism. What is often missed is that Spinoza's monism collapses not only mind into matter but matter into mind. Spinoza argues for not merely a singular, but a simple substance, the metaphysical pedigree of which is more medieval metaphysics than anything else. That is, Spinoza could just as easily be called a "weird monotheist" (fusing the world into the medieval picture of a simple, non-composite God) as a "proto-atheist." In propositions 12 and 13 of his posthumously (1677) published *Ethics* (New York: Penguin, 1994), he denies that even material things are composed of parts, treating both as aspects of infinity. But this is as much evaporating any classical conception of nature as it is evaporating a classical conception of God, and it accounts for why Spinoza could be appropriated by several traditions with equal plausibility. A fitting critique is to be discovered in Herman Bavinck, *Philosophy of Revelation* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1908; critical edition due from Hendrickson in 2018), and W. Norris Clarke, *The One and the Many: A Contemporary Thomistic Metaphysics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001).

16. T. J. Hochstrasser, "The Claims of Conscience: Natural Law Theory, Obligation, and Resistance in the Huguenot Diaspora," in *New Essays on the Political Thought of the Huguenots of the Refuge*, ed. J. C. Laursen (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 15–51.

Bayle but of Spinoza himself.[17] Arguments concerning Bayle's religious sentiments do not, of course, resolve whether he held ideas in tension that history resolved in the direction of a more consistent monism. Consequently, it is important to note that there are many pedigrees of modern liberalism that (1) focus on intellectual development but also (2) identify different bases than Spinozism. Eric Nelson, for instance, has argued that both republicanism and the notion of freedom of thought largely emerged from Western engagement with Jewish sources.[18] Freedom of thought, or something moving obviously in that direction, was also given an explicitly theological foundation in the systems of Christian Thomasius, Samuel Pufendorf, Johann Hamann, and Johann Herder.[19] This is not to mention the development of the doctrine of the freedom of conscience during the Reformation and its political consequences.[20] And even this is arguably grounded in tensions within Western

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17. See Erdozain, "A Heavenly Poise." Jacob, *The Radical Enlightenment*, 135–36, concurs that Bayle's religion was genuine. Bayle's defense of freedom of thought is given explicitly theological foundation in his *A Philosophical Commentary on These Words of the Gospel, Luke 14:23, "Compel Them to Come In, That My House May Be Full,"* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2006), 82–83, 77–78, 174–84, 202–3.

18. Eric Nelson, The Hebrew Republic: Jewish Sources and the Transformation of European Political Thought (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001).

19. See Christian Thomasius, Institutes of Divine Jurisprudence (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2011), 148, 509; Thomas Ahnert, Religion and the Origins of the German Enlightenment: Faith and the Reform of Learning in the Thought of Christian Thomasius (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2006), 53–56, 126; Ian Hunter, Rival Enlightenments: Civil and Metaphysical Philosophy in Early Modern Germany (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 195, and his The Secularization of the Confessional State: The Political thought of Christian Thomasius (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 166–67; Samuel Pufendorf, On the Duty of Man the Citizen According to the Law of Nature (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 9, 35, 152; Oswald Bayer, A Contemporary in Dissent: Johann Georg Hamann as a Radical Enlightener (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012); and Johann Herder, Philosophical Writings (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 370–74.

20. See especially Barry Shain, The Myth of American Individualism: The Protestant Origins of American Political Thought (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); W. Bradford Littlejohn, The Peril and Promise of Christian Liberty: Richard Hooker, the Puritans, and Protestant Political Theology (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017).

Christian thought that lay dormant until post-Reformation political realities made their relief possible.[21]

Israel might not contest these points but simply argue that Spinoza's influence had a greater causal effect. Indeed, a large portion of his scholarship is a detailed outlining of Spinoza's reception in Europe.[22] But it would be likewise quite possible to trace the pedigree of a great number of thinkers whose influence was ubiquitous in Europe and continues to this present day and whose résumés involve several claims to contributing to the emergence of modern liberalism.[23] Moreover, it is quite obviously the case that there are those who have read and who still read Spinoza, disagree with him, but nevertheless defend the modern order on grounds other than monism or rationalism.[24] As it turns out, the historical record is as messy as the contemporary reality it presumably explains. Common cause can be had with uncommon justification, cobelligerency being one of history's few constants.

Perhaps most problematic in Israel's treatment, however, is that he does not clearly treat the medieval backdrop against which early modern views (including Spinoza's) were developed. The content of what he frequently terms "scholastic Aristotelianism" is more assumed than developed, with the inevitable effect that the modern reader need only project a slightly altered version of

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21. Note the varying theses of Remi Brague, *Eccentric Culture: A Theory of Western Civilization* (South Bend, IN: Saint Augustine Press, 2009); Larry Siedentop, *Inventing the Individual: The Origins of Western Liberalism* (Cambridge: Harvard Belknap, 2014); and the treatment of the modern appropriation of "covenantal" thought in Glenn Moots, *Politics Reformed: The Anglo-American Legacy of Covenant Theology* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2010).

22. This theme takes up a large portion of *Israel's Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650–1750* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

23. See the roles of Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Richard Hooker as discussed in Littlejohn, *The Peril and Promise of Christian Liberty.*

24. Most obvious to the author—the author. Most prominently to the reader, the recent rights-discourse in its relationship to God as a guarantor of rights. Even among unorthodox branches of the major faiths in America, such discourse is extremely common and arguably quite heartfelt. President Barack Obama is certainly an example of one for whom these moral sentiments are not ultimately extractable from his spiritual and theological beliefs.

modern sensibilities onto our ancestors to determine their views rather silly and superstitious—for example, instead of believing in forests and fairies, presumably, we now simply believe in forests. Or, instead of believing in chemicals with intrinsic mind-like directedness, now we believe in chemicals moving mindlessly and mechanistically in obedience to extrinsic laws of physics. Of course, one cannot be expected to do everything in a book (even a large one), but this is arguably an illicit oversight. Properly understanding and evaluating the historic responses to Descartes and Spinoza requires a non-trivial grasp of the quite varied scholastic tradition.[25] And for modern persons, this arguably requires a *gestalt* shift in perspective. Most relevant for our purposes, we will not be able to understand the above-mentioned transitions in the very meaning(s) of cause and God in the early modern world without considering this development. As such, we move from our discussion of Israel to consider scholarship that identifies (1) shifting concepts of causality in the early modern period and (2) the Medieval foundation that allegedly made these shifts possible.

Many historians have identified the oft-termed "mechanical philosophy" of the early modern period and its attendant denial of final causes as the original philosophical fracture that terminated in a now unfixable fault line between reason and religion.[26] Several items have been emphasized in this development. First was the paradigmatic significance of mathematics as a standard for epistemic certainty in late medieval and early modern natural philosophy.[27] As noted by Gary Deason, "The successful application of mathematics to the physical world in the seventeenth

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25. By contrast, see Richard Muller's method in his four-volume *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), in his treatment of early modern thought.

26. On the origin and development of the mechanical philosophy in general, see Brooke, *Science and Religion*, 117–51, and Steven Shapin, *The Scientific Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 15–64.

27. The classic essay on this is E. A. Burtt, *The Metaphysical Foundations of Modern Science* (New York: Doubleday, 1932).

century called into question the Aristotelian conception of the world and necessitated the development of a new conception that allowed the applicability of mathematics to nature."[28] He later states, "The driving force behind the development of mechanism was the belief that recent discoveries by Kepler, Galileo, Descartes, Stevin, and others of mathematical formulae describing physical phenomena could be given conceptual foundation if nature were seen as a collection of inert material particles governed by external mathematical laws."[29] In sum, those natural philosophers who used mathematical models to understand the goings-on of the material world were *successful*, and this success suggested some underlying picture of a universe that was subject to mathematics. A fairly natural response to these intellectual pressures would be the development of a notion of the universe as mechanical and a corresponding paradigm of causality as located in sequences of material contact (i.e., corpuscularianism). What needs emphasis here, however, is that this shift was one not merely of broad intellectual paradigm but also of method. Even if the overly grandiose world-picture were rejected as speculative, what might be retained is the *method*.[30] That is, whatever has predictive power and results is useful for excavating reality. And as it turned out, philosophically inflected or not, the world yielded its secrets to this posture.[31] And this, it is important to highlight, was an impressive contrast to the seemingly endlessly debated minutiae of medieval scholasticism. Like a universal acid, the story goes, the mechanical world-picture dissolved its ideological ancestors as well as any of its ideological

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28. Gary B. Deason, "Reformation Theology and the Mechanistic Conception of Nature," in Lindberg and Numbers, *God and Nature*, 168.

29. Ibid., 169.

30. That these could be separated is emphasized by Shapin, *The Scientific Revolution*, 57–64.

31. On the development of the scientific method, the most up-to-date study is Stephen Gaukroger, *The Emergence of a Scientific Culture: Science and the Shaping of Modernity, 1210–1685* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), which is part of a multi-volume effort.

progeny who sought to follow their grandparents in carving out a space of non-mechanical explanation and being.

Iconic in both mathematical and methodological emphases is, of course, Rene Descartes. In his famous *Discourse on Method* (1637), he recalls the moment in the development of his methodology in which he decided that he "would be borrowing all that is best in geometrical analysis and algebra, and correcting all the defects of the one by means of the other."[32] Of course, Descartes also embodied the tensions of such a view. Reducing the world to passive matter subject to mathematical laws and whatever did not fit into this material scheme to a projection of the human mind (i.e., the famous distinction between primary and secondary qualities), Descartes ultimately separated the mind, not to mention all spiritual realities, from the material world—a dualism that has occupied Western philosophy ever since.[33]

It is important to highlight, however, that in the early modern period, it was not always considered obvious that the mechanical paradigm of causality stood in any necessary tension with traditional Christian orthodoxy.[34] In point of fact, many (particularly among the Cartesians) believed that the arguments for the existence of God were better secured under it than in traditional scholastic categories.[35] What is more, much of the negotiation

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32. Rene Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy* (New York: Hackett, 1999), 12.

33. Important studies can be found in Theo Verbeek, *Descartes and the Dutch: Early Reactions to Cartesian Philosophy 1637–1650* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1992), and Walter Ott, *Causation & Laws of Nature in Early Modern Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

34. An important study along these lines is Aza Gourdriaan, *Reformed Orthodoxy and Philosophy, 1625–1750* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), who shows that orthodox reformed theologians extensively defended the same confessional dogmas with different philosophical systems. A famous tension was that between Gisbertus Voetius (1589–1676) and Johannes Coeccius (1603–1669). Standard studies of them are to be found in J. A. van Ruler, *The Crisis of Causality: Voetius and Descartes on God, Nature, and Change* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), and Willem van Asselt, *The Federal Theology of Johannes Cocceius* (Leiden: Brill, 2001).

35. See William Ashworth Jr., "Christianity and the Mechanistic Universe," in Lindberg and Numbers, *When Science and Christianity Meet*, 61–84.

between scholastic and mechanistic conceptions of the world involved highly nuanced mediating positions at every point on the spectrum.[36] Nevertheless, it would be accurate to state that the mechanism-cum-atheism concern was an immediate and perpetual reaction to the mechanical philosophy among at least *some* European intellectuals.[37] And whatever *might* have potentially occurred, arguably the cynical prediction *actually* came to pass.[38]

However, a sufficient account would need to emphasize the progressive *abandonment* of scholasticism rather than simply the *emergence* of new ideas that, as just suggested, admitted of some variety. It would nevertheless be fair to say that to whatever extent these occurred together and in a zero-sum fashion, several consequences tended to follow. Different historians give prominence to different elements. Deason, for instance, writes, "When the mechanists rejected Aristotle's understanding of nature, they simultaneous rejected the theory of God's cooperation with nature."[39] Given the prominent role that I will later argue belongs to modern technology, Steven Shapin highlights what I consider to be a particularly important change: "The very idea of construing nature as a machine, and using understandings derived from machines to interpret the physical structure of nature, counted as a violation of one of the most basic distinctions of Aristotelian philosophy. This was the contrast between what was natural and what was contrived or artificial."[40] In a now famous study, Amos Funkenstein further argues that in the early modern period, we witness a philosophical shift wherein several of God's attributes are problematized and reexplained in ways consistent with early modern intellectual

36. See Ott, *Causation & Laws of Nature in Early Modern Philosophy*.

37. See, for instance, Brooke, *Science and Religion*, 139–44.

38. An important, careful, and nuanced attempt to draw some fine-grained connections can be found in David Leech, *The Hammer of the Cartesians: Henry More's Philosophy of Spirit and the Origins of Modern Atheism* (Leuven: Peeters, 2013).

39. Deason, "Reformation Theology and the Mechanistic Conception of Nature," 169.

40. Shapin, *The Scientific Revolution*, 30.

trends.[41] While these might seem like trivial concessions to modern ears, what unites each of them is an increasing collapse of God's being into the being of the world, such that the being of God and of creatures exists in a common reservoir of being-as-such. This stands in contrast to the Thomist and more traditional notion of the "analogy of being," wherein God just is Being-as-such and the being of creatures (including creaturely causal-space) is a donation of God's own radically other Being by virtue of his (ultimately singular) wisdom and will.[42]

In the above view, then, the transformation of the early modern notion of causality is arguably suspended atop (or at least attended by) an even more fundamental transformation in the understanding of God.[43] Now in a zero-sum match with creaturely being/cause, it was then important to state that the natures of the various things that furnished the cosmos did not limit God. Indeed, rather than having their own causal space, what we call their nature is not a formal reality but simply an ordinary name (hence the nomenclature of nominalism) attributed to a regularity in God's will as he effects material causes. Rather than active in nature, material items are passively moved according to laws of nature or forces that move them about (ultimately God's own will). This voluntarism, in its insistence on the relation of created things to God's will rather than to his mind, presumably laid the groundwork for the scientific method. That is, since God cannot be constrained and his will could have been otherwise, there is no necessary connection between causes and effects. Therefore, things are to be understood not through philosophical reflection upon their

41. Amos Funkenstein, *Theology and the Scientific Imagination from the Middle Ages to the Seventeenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986).

42. See Clarke, *The One and the Many*, for a fuller explanation. This theme will also become relevant in subsequent chapters.

43. Two important treatments of the modern transformation of God are William Placher, *The Domestication of Transcendence: How Modern Thinking about God Went Wrong* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), and Philip Clayton, *The Problem of God in Modern Thought* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000).

natures and their powers but rather by the observed regularity of one thing following another. Often said to have been mediated by the Reformation, these emphases laid the groundwork for the kind of epistemic skepticism fitted to a burgeoning scientific culture.[44] Indeed, this narrative (or versions of it) has perhaps become *the* dominant account in scholarship concerning the original fracture that terminated in modern secularization.[45]

While an elegant account, it has the significant deficiency of being almost entirely wrong—at least as a historical hypothesis. Michael Horton has recently pointed out several of its flaws, including its neglect of recent scholarship on the key figure of John Duns Scotus (the alleged source of the problem) as well as the neglect of primary source evidence in the above historians' typical treatment of the Reformation.[46] Concerning the latter, Richard Muller has devastatingly argued against a Reformation rejection of the analogy of being,[47] and Peter Harrison has extensively shown that the primary sources argue against the role suggested for voluntarism by this narrative in the development of early modern science.[48] What is more, the emergence and influence of early modern

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44. An influential account is that of Louis Dupre, *Passage to Modernity: An Essay in the Hermeneutics of Nature and Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).

45. Pioneered in some of its particulars by Etienne Gilson, Francis Oakley, and Louis Dupre, this story has been developed and defended more recently by historians and philosophers such as John Milbank, Michael Gillespie, and Brad Gregory. On Dupre, see ibid. On Milbank and his intellectual conversation-partners, see James K. A. Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy: Mapping a Post-Secular Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004). Gillespie's account can be found in *The Theological Origins of Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), and Gregory's in *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge: Harvard Belknap, 2015). Gregory's account, as the title suggests, ropes in the typical treatment of the Protestant Reformation in this school of thought.

46. See Michael Horton, Review of Brad Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation* (The Gospel Coalition, February 15, 2016), https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/book-reviews-the-unintended-reformation.

47. Richard A. Muller, "Not Scotist: Understandings of Being, Univocity, and Analogy in Early-Modern Reformed Thought," *Reformation and Renaissance Review* 14, no. 2 (2012), 127–50.

48. Peter Harrison, "Voluntarism and Early Modern Science," *History of Science* 40, no. 1 (2002), 63–89.

skepticism can just as well be related to specific political and religious events (such as the spiritual turmoil caused by the Avignon papacy) as well as to the simple fact that certain ancient skeptical texts had been recently rediscovered during the Renaissance.[49] And if this were not enough, the primary hosts of these intellectual trends were actually Roman Catholic rather than Protestant. In the Catholic Counter-Reformation, it was common to use skeptical arguments to mitigate against the newer Protestant emphasis on the veracity of Scripture.[50] Granted, the early modern epistemic crisis did have a Protestant inflection because such crises were a part of much larger trends in the early modern period—covering questions ranging from soteriology to science. This was an era asking both "How can I be saved?" and "How can I know anything at all?"[51] This is not to mention the post-Reformation political contexts (such as the religious wars) that gave these intellectual trends urgent practical purchase. Stephen Toulmin has famously argued that Descartes's project makes sense largely against the frustrated efforts of European confessionalists to find common ground to resolve their differences. The development of his method, then, was an attempt to discover a way beyond such impasses.[52] In any case, there were also intellectual questions and trends for which the Protestant Reformation acted as a natural parent rather than as a

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49. See Horton, Review of Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation*, for the former point, and Richard Popkin, *The History of Scepticism: From Savonarola to Bayle* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), for the latter point.

50. See Richard Popkin, "Skepticism and the Counter-Reformation in France," *Archive for Reformation History* 51 (1960), 58–88.

51. See Susan E. Schreiner, *Are You Alone Wise: The Search for Certainty in Early Modern Europe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), as well as the important study of Henry van Leeuwen, *The Problem of Certainty in English Thought 1630–1690* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1963). An extremely important contributor to the overall discussion of certainty (both religious and philosophical) was Richard Hooker, on whom see Littlejohn, *The Peril and Promise of Christian Liberty.*

52. See Stephen Toulmin, *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

mere surrogate for medieval progenitors.[53] As well, it is important to reiterate that all sorts of hybrids were available. It was entirely possible in the early modern period to blend scholastic medieval philosophical sensibilities alongside a positive evaluation of early modern science and its attendant attitudes. An especially important hybrid in this respect is Leibniz.[54]

Before moving on from this view, I want to hold in reserve its explanatory use as at least having identified the *substance* of the shift between a medieval and a modern conception of being in its relationship to God and to causality. We can reasonably debate when, by whom, and for what reason(s) this transformation occurred, but not *that* it occurred. I will attempt to salvage elements of this narrative below. For the moment, let us move on to other idea-centric hypotheses concerning the pedigree of unbelief.

Of course, some stories of modernity reach far enough into antiquity to be described as epic, and some, by contrast, trace the salient moments of modernity-cum-materialism to specific occurrences after the European Enlightenment. Epic accounts usually genealogize specific features of modernity that would eventually render atheism ideologically or politically possible. Of particular importance here is the work of Hans Blumenberg, whose *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* portrays modernity as the resolution of a tension that is as old as the Christianity-Gnosticism conflict, whose partial resolution is achieved by the time of Augustine but whose final resolution awaits the modern triumph of an ethos of curiosity as a virtue.[55] Blumenberg was, of course, responding to

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53. Peter Harrison's revisionist efforts are key here. See especially *The Bible, Protestantism, and the Rise of Natural Science* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998) and *The Fall of Man and the Foundations of Science* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

54. On whom see Irena Backus, *Leibniz: Protestant Theologian* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016) and Arnaud Pelletier, ed., *Leibniz's Experimental Philosophy* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2017). Peter Harrison, "Voluntarism in Early Modern Science," also calls into question certain often-thought anti-scholastic elements in Boyle.

55. Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983).

another historical genealogy of modernity, that of Karl Löwith, whose *Meaning in History* traces our current fragmentation to the secularization of Christian eschatology in the modern science of history.[56] Moving toward more recent efforts, Charles Taylor (whose most significant contribution will be discussed below) puts the modern world against the backdrop of a history of understandings of the *self*.[57] The modern concept of the self was not intended to terminate in modernity but was necessary to ground the self/world, public/private, and faith/reason dichotomies that are definitive of the modern order. Without this fundamental dualism, the reduction of the world to passive and agentless material (with the Humean implications of a split between fact and value) would not even be possible, or perhaps even conceivable.[58] Perhaps not in content, but arguably in scope, these scholars are largely working within the genealogizing tendencies of twentieth-century continental philosophy, whose patron saint and exemplar in precisely this regard is Martin Heidegger.[59]

These tales are not usually clean linear narratives but attempt to identify the development of patterns that would eventually become

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56. Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949). For the Löwith/Blumenberg debate, see Stephen A. McKnight, "The Legitimacy of the Modern Age: The Löwith-Blumenberg Debate in Light of Recent Scholarship," *The Political Science Reviewer* 19 (1990), 177–95.

57. Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992). Taylor's hypothesis could also be paired with Siedentop's *Inventing the Individual*.

58. I will have occasion to return to this theme in later chapters. This argument has been made in ways ranging from brilliant to bizarre by Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (New York: Vintage, 1970); George Steiner, *Real Presences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989); and Owen Barfield, *Saving the Appearances: A Study in Idolatry* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan, 1988).

59. Heidegger, of course, traces the origin of our modern dilemma all the way back to the beginning of Western dualism. See Martin Heidegger, *Early Greek Thinking: The Dawn of Western Philosophy* (San Francisco: Harper, 1985). An important conversation along these lines is in David Michael Levin, ed., *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).