

A Critique of the Notion of Atheism According to Cornelio Fabro

In a short reflection dated June 10, 1980, the Stigmatine priest-philosopher Cornelio Fabro considered his ‘philosophical itinerary’ to consist in three fundamental phases or ‘paths of research.’ Fabro’s intellectual work on atheism is situated within the second of these three phases, following immediately from his work on the Thomistic doctrine of participation and the emergence of *esse ut actus*, and is, in a sense, its prolongation or application in the critique of modern thought. Father Fontana notes two objectives typical of Fabro’s work during this time: “to draw out the ultimate consequences of immanentist philosophy, revealing its atheism, and then to proclaim the existence of God: Subsistent Truth and Being.”¹ Fittingly, it is within this stage of his intellectual life that Fabro was appointed as *peritus* for the Second Vatican Council and worked intimately with a preparatory commission dealing principally with the issues of Thomism and the eradication of dangerous immanentist philosophies in Catholic seminaries and schools.² And, most pertinent to our current object of study, it is during this time period that Fabro was entrusted with the founding of the *Institute for the Study of Atheism*,³ a project that commenced in 1959, and bore fruit years later, in 1964, with the publication of the first edition of *Introduzione all’ateismo moderno*.⁴

The lengthy introduction to this massive work paints a broad picture of the whole of modern atheism, and in the subsequent body of the book—as we have seen throughout the course of this Thomistic week—Fabro sets forth on the formidable task of giving an in-depth critique of most every philosophical thinker of the modern age. It seems appropriate, then, after having briefly surveyed these thinkers, to return to the question of the very meaning of the notion of atheism.

Initially, it may seem that this question is answered rather simply. “Atheism,” as defined by the 1979 edition of *Encyclopædia Britannica* (*NB*: an entry composed by our Author), “is the denial of God as the first principle and is thus anti-theism, the opposite of theism.”⁵ However,

¹ Elvio Fontana, *Introduction to Cornelio Fabro*, trans. Nathaniel Dreyer, (Chillum, MD: IVE Press, 2016), 10.

² Cf. C. Fabro, “De doctrina S. Thomae in scholis catholicis promovenda,” *Acta et Documenta*, IV/II/1 (Typis 4 Polyglottis Vaticanis, 196?) 177-89.

³ Now called the *Institute for Higher Studies on Unbelief, Religion, and Cultures*.

⁴ This work was followed by the English translation, *God in Exile*, in 1968. A second edition of the Italian was released in 1969.

⁵ Forthcoming in: Cornelio Fabro, *Vol. 2: Atheism and Freedom* (IVE Press, 2018).

after an in-depth exploration of the *resolutio* of the principle of immanentism, it becomes quite apparent that the notion of atheism is anything but simple. Certainly the “nominal ‘notion’ of atheism is quite clear,” writes Fabro in *God in Exile*, “but it is difficult to define the essence of atheism, to pinpoint its content and structure.”⁶ This difficulty lies in the highly dialectical nature of the notion of atheism itself.⁷

Initial Division of Atheism

In both his entry for the *Encyclopædia Britannica* and in a chapter of *God: Introduction to Problems in Theology*, Fabro delineates for his readers a preliminary division of the notion of atheism that will be useful to reproduce at the beginning of our consideration. “Atheism can be divided into theoretical atheism and practical atheism. Theoretical atheism is the denial of God based upon a system of thought that excludes the possibility of the existence of the Absolute,” whereas “practical atheism is the denial of God as reflected in the way one conducts his private and public life, leaving the question of God out of consideration and basing conduct solely on finite values.”⁸

Fabro makes a further division within the sphere of theoretical atheism, asserting that it can be either negative or positive. Regarding the negative, there can be both explicit and implicit atheism. On the one hand, “explicit negative theoretical atheism is attributed to those who unequivocally deny the existence of God and who suppose a concept of the world and of the destiny of man that *radically excludes the necessity of the transcendent first principle*.” While, on the other hand, “implicit negative theoretical atheism, or cryptoatheism, is attributed to those who, although they affirm the existence of God or of the Absolute, *deprive him of some essential attribute*.”

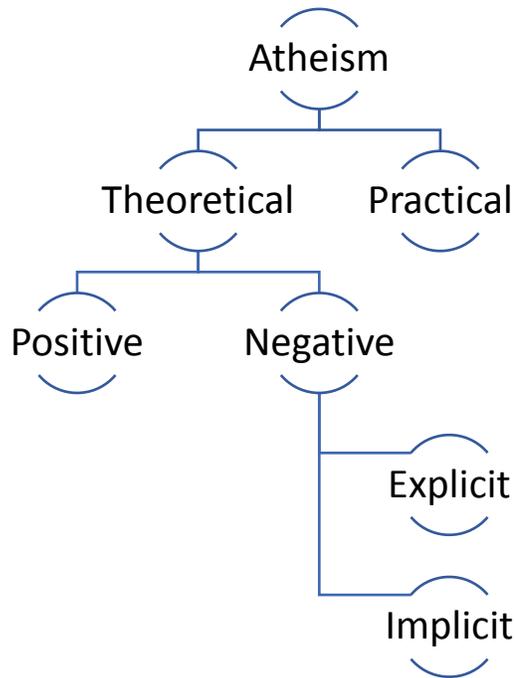
Finally, Fabro speaks of positive theoretical atheism: “[This atheism] replaces the acknowledgment of the transcendent first principle with the autonomy of the subjective thinking

⁶ Fabro, *God in Exile*, trans. Arthur Gibson, (Newman Press, 1968), 22. Certain texts have been modified to correspond more faithfully to the Italian.

⁷ In this case, ‘dialectical’ is not meant in a strictly Hegelian way (dynamic) but insofar as there is a “tension or opposition between two interacting forces or elements” [Merriam-Webster].

⁸ Forthcoming in *Vol. 2: Atheism and Freedom*

element (the *cogito*) within man... for the transcendence of God and for personal immortality, it substitutes the emergence of man in the world.”



For our purposes, we will be focusing primarily upon theoretical atheism.

Dialectic of Atheism: Ontological Structure

Perhaps the very first difficulty in defining the essence of atheism lies in the initial stance taken by the one proposing the definition. Of course, for the theist, atheism is seen “simply as an error, the acme of all errors.”⁹ And for the theologian in particular, a purely theoretical atheism must be rejected *a priori* as impossible; it is a contradiction of terms. The theologian strictly asserts man’s natural inclination to seek God. “There is in man,” writes St. Thomas, “an inclination to good, according to the nature of his reason, which nature is proper to him: thus man has a natural inclination to know the truth about God.”¹⁰ Admission of an authentic theoretical atheism, argues the theist, would be a denial of this very fact. Furthermore, theoretical atheism “claims that an ultimate basis of the real can be arrived at via the exclusion of the Absolute and the simultaneous admission that neither nature nor man can rise to the level of the

⁹ *God in Exile*, 22.

¹⁰ ST I-II, q. 94, a. 2

Absolute in order to occupy the place left vacant by the denial of God.”¹¹ Since the theologian by no means wishes to allow for such conclusions, he denies even the possibility of a theoretical atheism, resolving all manifestations of modern atheism into a type of practical atheism. He considers the problem *in se* and *per se*... but does not take into consideration the current reality of modern thought in its founding principle.

Fabro, on the other hand, insists that such theoretical atheism is a possibility, and more properly, is an evident reality in today’s world. He contests that theoretical atheism can stem from either: a) a particular difficulty encountered when considering the notion of God, or b) an erroneous principle taken as the starting point for philosophical thinking.¹²

The first possibility that might lead to a theoretical atheism is least disconcerting: It consists in difficulties that arise from limitations of the human mind (difficulty conceiving of pure Spirit, reconciling with the problem of evil or of suffering, divine goodness vs. divine justice, etc.) But these difficulties, notes Fabro, “are not really arguments in favor of the atheist position.”¹³ In fact, these same problems can also assault the theist, but they are not inherently problematic to theism. They arise “out of the human situation, that is, from the fact that we can envisage our relationship with God only by departing from [our own] humanity.”¹⁴ But when viewed from the perspective of the Infinite, of God, there is no trouble in reconciling such difficulties. Their very existence merely implies man’s own finitude.

However, modern atheism is generally of the second class of possibilities: It arises out of an erroneous principle taken as the starting point for philosophical thinking. Which principle? The principle of immanentism, “i.e., the elevation of man’s being to the level of the *cogito* (the act of thinking), or, alternately, the reduction of the actualization of being to the actualization of the *cogito*, the limitation of the structure of being to the structure of the *cogito*—to cite a few of the ways in which this crucial claim may be expressed.”¹⁵ This is the key difference between ancient atheism and modern atheism: Ancient atheism was merely skepticism or materialist monism and was confined to a minority that never penetrated the whole of the culture. Modern

¹¹ *God in Exile*, 25.

¹² Cf. *Ibid.* 22.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 24

atheism, however, is distinctly positive and *constructive* precisely because it assumes a new constitutive principle that serves as the foundation for an entirely new ontological structure. It is a question of the *starting point*, of the foundation, the like of which is inherently atheistic and is, in the words of the Stigmatine, “absolutely determined toward the expulsion of God.”¹⁶ Here it is helpful to remember that atheism itself is not the starting point, but it “constitutes the culmination of a certain notion of the world and of man, or rather, a qualified ‘resolution’ of being, whether that of man or of the world.”¹⁷ That last phrase is important: a qualified ‘resolution’ of being. For Fabro, the entirety of modern philosophy after Descartes is part of a resolute process that ends in atheism. “Theoretical atheism,” insists Fabro, “cannot be an originary situation but must be explained as a reflexive phenomenon, as the ‘conclusion’ of a specific rational process based on certain premises.”¹⁸ If, in realist metaphysics, the *resolutio* ends in *esse ut actus*, in an immanence-based philosophy, the *resolutio* ends in a positive, constructive, and anthropological atheism.

We have here, then, the ultimate reason why defining the essence and structure of atheism is so difficult: Indeed, from the perspective or stance of a realist metaphysics, theoretical atheism is necessarily a contradiction. However, when viewed from *within* modern philosophy, “which founds and qualifies being upon thought, that is to say, by departing from the act of consciousness, **the denial of God is in no way contradictory**, but rather it constitutes the essential and inevitable conclusion of the same principle of immanence when brought to its foundation.”¹⁹ When thought is taken as the foundation of being, any penetration to a notion of transcendence becomes impossible—nevermind the particular determination consciousness later imposes upon being (empiricist, rationalist, idealist, materialist, etc.). We can understand now why Fabro asserts that “the resolution of the modern principle of immanence into atheism has rendered the terms ‘theism,’ ‘atheism,’ and ‘pantheism’ radically dialectical.”²⁰ It is a dialectic of starting points: the possibility of a theoretical atheism is determined based upon whether being is the foundation for thought or whether thought is the foundation for being.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 12

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 25

¹⁸ Fabro, *Vol. 9: God: Introduction to the Theological Problem, Atheism*, (Chillum, MD: IVE Press, 2017), 26.

¹⁹ *God in Exile*, 59.

²⁰ *Ibid.* 40

Two further observations are in order:

First, none of this need deter the theologian concerning his objection regarding man's innate desire for God. This desire can be found even within the narrative of modern philosophy. "This urge," contends Fabro, "to seek a foundation—this impelling curiosity to find the principle—is something innate."²¹ Man is impelled, one might say, to search for some rational explanation of the world, to 'effect a regression to some foundation of being.' This is expressive of man's search for God. But the key point is this: that "the conclusive object of this seeking is certainly neither innate nor determined."²² Consequently, access to the transcendental—and therefore, the solution to the question of the existence of God—is essentially determined by the initial principle assumed in this search.

Second, given that a theoretical atheism really can and does exist, it seems that we must also allow for—as strange as it might sound—the phenomenon of 'atheists of good faith.' This would theoretically be said of those who have arrived at the denial of God "by way of a process endowed with an intrinsic consistency of its own."²³ This certainly implies a serious problem for the theologian: Is it possible for a man, having assumed the principle of immanence, to dispense with God entirely (as his reason rightly demands him to do), without incurring any guilt? Graver still is the reality that today it is more than possible that man's education and cultural environment may result in him "absorbing the principle of immanence" such that it leads him inevitably to atheism. However true this may be, Fabro quickly adds that such a man cannot authentically rest in said position indefinitely: "For he [man] is living in a world with a historical past," explains Fabro, "and 'ought to' ask himself, first of all, why philosophy was never atheistic prior to the appearance of the *cogito*... and why some philosophers, even after the *cogito*, still continued to impugn the principle of immanence as intrinsically meaningless and contradictory."²⁴ At a certain point man must return to the question of the foundation.

The Dialectic of Atheism: Implicit Atheism

²¹ *Ibid.* 25

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.* 28

²⁴ *Ibid.*

At this point, Fabro directs our attention to another problem: the question of *implicit* atheism and the accusation of atheism. This is “the problem of the position held by those philosophers who base their own philosophy on principles which, according to their logic, inevitably lead to atheism and, in fact, such principles have led to atheism in their subsequent historical development by others thinkers.”²⁵ These philosophers continue to affirm the existence of God, despite the logic of their own system. Here we might name such philosophers as Descartes, Malebranche, Leibniz, Locke, Berkeley, Kant, Hegel, *et al.*

But why are their philosophies not immediately recognized as atheistic? On the contrary, many contest that their systems seek to defend theism. Part of the answer, according to Fabro, is to be found in the emergence of a ‘new’ principle (distinct from the principle of immanence) in the proofs offered by these philosophers. This ‘new’ principle—for example, the *Idea* of the most perfect Being, or the *Idea* of the Infinite—intervenes in such a way that it “slows the ‘atheist resolution’ of the principle of immanence,” because this new principle cannot be explained “by departing solely from man and therefore requires the admission of a supreme Being.”²⁶

This ‘slowing down’ of the *resolutio* of the principle of immanence constitutes the drama of 17th and 18th century European thought, admitting of a wide array of positions slipping from theism to deism and finally to atheism—a drama that, according to Fabro, provides the “key to an understanding of 19th century atheism.”²⁷ Throughout this entire drama we find that the dialectical nature of the notion of atheism intensifies, as whole series of accusations and defenses are made regarding ‘atheism.’ Take, for example, Kant: All metaphysical proofs for the existence of God are rendered null in his *Critique of Pure Reason* (becoming an *objective* atheism) and the existence of God is relegated to the subjective realm of practical reason (still allowing for a *subjective* theism). With an objective atheism but a subjective conviction of the existence of God... does Kant, therefore, classify as an atheist?

Then there is the accusation of atheism within the Spinoza-Hegel and Spinoza-Schleiermacher connections. Baruch Spinoza was charged with atheism by not a few

²⁵ *Ibid.* 29

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.* 30

contemporary critics, including Friedrich Jacobi and Lambert van Velthuysen. The latter wrote in the conclusion of an early critique, “I reckon therefore that I shall not have strayed far from the truth, nor yet that any injury will have been done by me to the author [Spinoza], if I denounce him as teaching sheer atheism by covert and counterfeit arguments.”²⁸ Spinoza adamantly denied the charge and, as we have heard, over a hundred years later Hegel joins the renewed discussion, becoming a fierce defender of Spinoza’s theism (denying even the charge of pantheism!). Hegel argues that Spinoza did not, in reality, confuse God with nature or make the world into God, because the world is nothing but mere phenomena—particular manifestations of the absolute Substance. God is not all things, but the essence of God is in all things, is manifested by all things. So, actually, what Spinoza denies is the world and what he asserts is “that God and only God is.” According to Hegel, Spinoza “has overcome and negated the world of the finite in the unicity of substance, and therefore his system may well be called, and indeed must be called, *Monotheism*.”²⁹

Hegel’s own philosophical system adds a whole new layer of complication regarding the accusations of atheism and pantheism. Part of the brilliance of his system is that its very nature is calculated to explain away such accusations, interpreting them within the narrative of the dialectic and thereby overcoming “the inadequacies of the ways in which past thinkers conceived of God.”³⁰ There is present here a flare of superiority: For Hegel, the very act of accusation merely reveals that the accuser is still imprisoned within an inferior system.

The essential relation of God to the world, according to Hegel, is one that is necessarily of dialectical unity. Although Spinoza rightly identified the absolute Substance, he did not go far enough: His absolute Substance remained “unique, rigid, and immobile,” whereas it ought to be conceived as self-developing ‘process,’ the Absolute *Spirit*. Regarding this dialectical nature of Hegel’s Absolute, Fabro explains: “Initially, God is separated from the world as essence from phenomenon, the Infinite from the finite, but this very separation is calculated to entail (and *involve*) a conviction of the relation of the appearance to the essence, of the finite to the Infinite.”³¹ What is remarkable here is that the unity of the Absolute is preserved together with

²⁸ Quoted in *God in Exile*, 125

²⁹ Quoted in *God, Introduction to the Theological Problem*, 39

³⁰ *God in Exile*, 33

³¹ *Ibid.*

the distinction of the components, or better, *requires* the distinction of the components (appearance –essence; finite – Infinite). It is philosophy that can give this adequate expression of the true definition of God, of the true relation of God to the world—not religion. Religion conceives of the Absolute from within the context of only *one* of its manifestations, one of the moments of relating finite and infinite, but philosophy is able to interpret the entire progress of the Absolute’s manifestations—which is indeed *progress* (through the dialectic). Thus, religion becomes the ‘handmaid of philosophy’; philosophy, being superior to religion, is “in a position to comprehend the truth of the religious sphere,”³² and not viceversa. And so, when understood in this way, the accusations of atheism (made by theologians) and of pantheism (leveled by other philosophers) are emptied of any true meaning. Those who make them are merely proceeding “from their own abstract way of conceiving unity and identity,”³³ a way that is not dialectical. Thus, in one sweep Hegel both proclaims a new idealism and avoids any potential accusations of atheism against his system.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, although still as deeply immersed in Spinozism, is Freidrech Schleiermacher. He, too, hopes to avoid all speculative atheism, not by any metaphysical idealism, which “makes of the world and God a simple reflection of the human mind,” but rather by a return to religion, the ‘intuition of the universe’. His is an intuitionist pantheism and for him “the question whether God be within or beyond the world is meaningless.”³⁴ Religion is a feeling that sheds a clearer light upon the immediate Being of God within man; God appears *immediately* to man’s consciousness, or rather, it is God who becomes conscious in man, especially by means of the ‘sense of dependence.’ This is a universal ‘self-consciousness’ that is finite and identical in the experience of every man. Interestingly, for Schleiermacher, the idea of God is not as important as the religious experience of the All—and it is on this point that Fabro points out the intimate connection between Protestantism and the principle of immanentism.

Atheism, according to Schleiermacher, is found under three main guises: (1) delirium and illusion (*Wahn und Schein*); (2) sense-hampered (regarding the sense of dependence); and (3) a sort of fear of the demands involved in the knowledge of God. The first form is due to an

³² *Ibid.* 32

³³ *Ibid.* 33

³⁴ *Ibid.* 35

underdeveloped mind—a type of ‘infancy’ (individual or social); the second occurs when the religious feeling of dependency is transferred to some external reality (like the forces of nature); and the third, asserts Schleiermacher, is a “product of unbridled license...and must be denied all genuine ontological status.”³⁵

One might say, then, that there is in Hegel a *dialectical* Spinozism (via mediation), whereas in Schleiermacher, there is an *immediatistic* Spinozism (via direct experience). Both are implicitly atheistic, although both adamantly deny the charge of atheism and even seek to give greater foundation to the existence of God.

Conclusion

Let us recall once again the words of St. Thomas: “Man has a natural inclination to know the truth about God.”³⁶ This is, according to Fabro, the “primary kernal of religious piety.”³⁷ However, as we noted above, this innate desire is not determined in terms of object. So, what happens when, as it does in radical atheism, man sets forth, aroused by this desire to find an ultimate foundation... and ends in a full-fledged denial of God’s very existence? Does religious piety then disappear completely?

The question may seem a little strange: How can we speak of ‘religious piety’ and ‘religious devotion’ when God is entirely removed from discussion? Nevertheless, Fabro firmly maintains that such a ‘kernal’ continues to exist in the atheist as a “tendency toward the transcending of the egotistical striving of the individual.”³⁸ Logical? Perhaps not. But an existential consistency? Certainly. It is seen in humanitarian efforts, dedication to scientific investigation for the good of society, and a passionate devotion to the arts and politics. Fabro even names Feuerbach’s anthropology and the Marxist atheism with its ‘class struggle’ as “a dynamic impulse of religious feeling and piety.”³⁹ Yet, from the perspective of logical consistency, “the proponents of atheism ought to be sheer nihilists and end up as suicides.”⁴⁰

³⁵ *Ibid.* 36

³⁶ ST I-II, q. 94, a. 2

³⁷ *Ibid.* 37

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.* 38

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

Nevertheless even Sartre “gives evidence of being quite satisfied to remain on this ‘nauseating earth of ours.’”⁴¹

In these cases, man effects a sort of *transference*, “channeling that innate drive toward transcendence. . . to the pursuit of finite reality.”⁴² Religious piety, then, is no longer found in the objective plane; it is transferred to and becomes a reality of the existential-subjective plane. The Infinite is exchanged for the finite; the finite is exalted to the status of infinite.

Radical atheism accuses theism on the objective plane. Among such accusations are “exploitation of the ignorance of others. . . seeing God as a reality immediately present to themselves. . . claiming experimental knowledge of God. . . claiming to enter into communion with God at their own whim”—in a word, of “anthropomorphism.”⁴³ One can see their logical consistency, especially in the two major fields of intuitionist metaphysics and in rationalist metaphysics, where in the first there is an unfounded leap from immediate experience to the experience of God, and in the second there is an unfounded leap from abstract principles (like the *cogito*, or the *Idea* of God) to the reality of God.

However, these accusations do not hold when presented against a Thomistic metaphysics. Here finite being is the *proportionate* object of human knowledge; the Infinite can only be known by means of analogy, of the *via negativa*. Thus, in response to these accusations, Thomistic metaphysics is able to assert “the priority and epistemological worth and solidity of the finite against all forms of intuitionism and idealism.” There is no *anthropomorphism* in this conception—God is not seen as ‘deified man’, but rather is an entirely transcendent reality who is known only “in terms of the negation of all the modalities and limits accessible to human experience.”⁴⁴

Thus, through this brief critique of the dialectical notion of atheism, we return once more to the decisive importance of the metaphysical foundation and the consequent conception of being in defining the essence and nature of atheism. As we have seen—in a condensed and modified form in this paper, but in a more in-depth way throughout this Thomistic studies—the

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Cf. 39

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

principle of immanentism is itself inherently atheistic. The Cartesian *cogito* is necessarily determined toward the eradication of God; founding being on thought is both the initial and fatal step of modern philosophy. On the contrary, in a Thomistic metaphysics, being is the “inexhaustible foundation for the activity of consciousness.”⁴⁵ Such a foundation allows for a true openness to the Infinite. Thus we can echo, together with Fabro, through the words of Martin Heidegger, the necessity for philosophy to ‘return to the foundation’ and to ask itself anew, “What is being?” Only through a return to being as the foundation for reality and thought can there be any possibility of reaching an authentic concept of God. Let us then firmly repeat with St. Thomas: “quod primo intellectus intelligit est ens. . . in quo omnia fundantur.”⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Fabro, *Vol. 1: Selected Articles on Metaphysics and Participation*, Philosophy and Thomism Today, (Chillum, MD: IVE Press, 2017), 36

⁴⁶ *De Veritate*, q. 1, a. 1.