

## Article



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## Discourse Analysis and the Definition of Atheism

Ethan G. Quillen

*Religious Studies, The University of Edinburgh, Mound Place, Edinburgh, Scotland, EH1 2LX, United Kingdom.*

**Abstract** | In recent years the study of Atheism has grown in popularity, leading to both positive and negative results. On one end, this has engendered a polyvocal and polyfocal discourse, garnering perspectives from a number of different methodological and theoretical approaches so as to develop a truly inter- and multi-disciplinary understanding about what we mean when we discuss Atheism. On the other, this myriad of voices has equally led to an ever-broadening discordancy, an equivocal discourse that makes it all the more difficult to identify any sort of common or universal definition. This latter issue is, as this paper will argue, the result of a theoretical abstraction, a scholarly attempt at theorizing a general interpretation. This is evinced not just by the way the term has been contrarily defined, but by a number of novel approaches, such as the creation and use of umbrella terms such as ‘non-religion,’ or the precarious notion of a division between ‘positive’ and/or ‘negative’ Atheism. This article will attempt to assuage this issue by mapping out the discursive shifts presented within the discourse on defining the term, as well as promote a more discursive approach, linking the study of Atheism with the study of religion, and thereby the issues addressed in defining ‘religion’ with those affecting the definition of ‘Atheism.’

\*Correspondence | Ethan G. Quillen, Religious Studies, The University of Edinburgh, Mound Place, Edinburgh, Scotland, United Kingdom;

Email: e.g.quillen@sms.ed.ac.uk

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Guest Editors | John R. Shook PhD, Ralph W. Hood Jr. PhD, and Thomas J. Coleman III

## Introduction

While it might often seem the case, Atheism is not, in fact, “extremely simple to define” (Baggini, 2003: 3)<sup>1</sup>. Rather, it is increasingly difficult to say, with any sort of consensus, exactly *what* it is. This is not, however, simply the result of individuals identifying themselves as different ‘types’ of Atheists, or the many ways these same individuals either avoid using the term, or refer to themselves as something less ‘risqué.’ Rather, it is equally the product of our own disparate theoretical stipulations. In fact, and though the term—and thus concept—‘Atheism’ is as precarious a signifier as ‘religion,’ the current discourse on defining it seems to generally overlook this issue. As such, it is increasingly convoluted, filled with different

interpretations, and mired in new terminology constructed with the pragmatic purpose of generalizing an umbrella term under which this very discourse itself might thrive. For the academic study of Atheism this has generated a number of problems, perhaps the direst of which is a double-edged issue concerning the necessity to either stipulate what we mean each and every time we use the term, or worse, the creation of the aforementioned new terminology.

For these reasons, this article will attempt to do two things: first, and by comparing this issue with the same sort of terminological or conceptual disparity we have seen plaguing the discourse on defining religion, it will promote a more discursive, and thus less definitional, manner of approaching the subject

'Atheism.' Second, this new approach will hopefully alleviate much of the ambiguity and cyclical discordancy presently infecting the language we use in our research on Atheism and Atheists. To begin, however, we must first address this issue, not just in order to introduce that which this article intends to remedy, but equally to locate from where this issue originated. Thus, the following critical analysis will look inward, rather than outward, an internal introspection meant to address the ways in which our definitions of Atheism have progressively led to the necessity of this very discussion.

## Defining Atheism

A critical analysis of the existing literature on defining Atheism reveals a two-part conceptual differentiation, a split between what we might determine as historical—lexical—definitions, and theoretical—essentialist—ones. As such, the former consists of definitions based upon first-order examples, wherein the Atheism being described is based upon the ways in which Atheists have either been defined by others, or have defined themselves, within particular historical contexts. The latter, then, consists of attempts at combining these historically different definitions into something more general, and thus applicable across a much larger contextual field. Perhaps one of the most ideal examples of this secondary type is that offered by the [Non-Religion and Secularity Research Network's Glossary of Terms](http://nonreligionandsecularity.files.wordpress.com/2011/11/nsrn-glossary-28-apr-2011-lois-lee1.pdf): "A conscious or unconscious lack of commitment to God(s)" (<http://nonreligionandsecularity.files.wordpress.com/2011/11/nsrn-glossary-28-apr-2011-lois-lee1.pdf>). Though quite clearly an example of the sort of definitions that arise from the essentialist category, this definition is no less sufficiently constructed. Within its language reside elements from each of these two categories, so that we might even utilize it as a guide for our purposes herein.

As historical signifiers, 'lack' and 'God(s)' determine Atheism's pre and post-enlightenment emergence. To further clarify these two types, we can distinguish them between ancient—*ἄθεος*—and modern—Atheism. In the first, the term is a type of political imputation, an expression of censure given to an individual for believing or acting in a manner that appears threatening to the social status quo of their individual contexts. As first order examples we can look at the narratives concerning Socrates' trial and execution, or the philosophical ideologies of the pre-Socratic Mile-

sians such as Thales, Anaximander, or Anaximenes, and how these were depicted artistically through sources such as Euripides' *Sisyphus Fragment*. Likewise, we can further determine these etymological roots as something imputed upon another via the way the term is used by third century Christians, such as Polycarp, Justin Martyr, Origen, and Clement of Alexandria, who not only depicted themselves as *ἄθεος*, but used the term to describe their fellow Christians and pagan counterparts as well.

The scholastic origins of this definition have been mapped out for at least a century. Beginning with the Catholic Theologian Francis Aveling's description in 1907, *ἄθεος* is likewise defined as a sort of political dis-allegiance (Drachmann, 1922); a manner of moral condemnation (Buckley, 1990); is exemplified discursively as a philosophical and ethical explanation for the 'creation' of the gods (Kahn, 1997); as a demotion of the gods, rather than a denial, made in order to secure a sense of natural 'independence' (Gordon, 2002); a philosophical position originating out of the naturalism inherent in the thinking of Milesian philosophers wherein mythological explanations were replaced by human reason (Baggini, 2003); a political stance directed against the 'prevailing civic religion' of the ancient world, particularly concerned with 'overthrowing' any conventional ideas pertaining to moral interests (Reid and Mondin, 2003); a term that explains the Biblical differentiation between God's absence during certain rituals—such as Deuteronomy 31:17, 32:39, and 2 Kings 1:3, 6, 16—and an impiety based on not accepting God after one learns of His existence—such as Romans 1:19-21 (Hartley, 2006); a denotation of etymological distinction, linking *ἄθεος* with the notion that one accused as such is living a 'godless' life, such as we see with the accusation of Socrates and the natural philosophies of the Milesians, whose conclusions were shaped 'without the gods' (Bremmer, 2007); an inimitably ancient position, differentiated from its modern derivative by means of the pre-modern imputations leveled against individuals such as Socrates, Justin Martyr, Democritus, Protagoras, Epicurus, Pyrrho, and Lucretius (Ferguson, 2009); a specific type of heretical belief, once again inextricably linked to the notion that it originates out of a particular way of describing an individual's indictment (Hyman, 2010); and lastly, a term of abuse directed at an individual who is marked as 'different' or 'other,' such as the example of Psalm 14:1, which states: 'the fool hath said in his heart, there is

no God' (Palmer, 2010).

While ἄθεος is determined as a term of censure or imputation, etymologically linked with the alpha privative notion that one who is an ἄθεος is 'without' or 'lacking' a belief in a type of θεός, its modern equivalent is, in three ways, very much a product of modernity. First, it denotes a particular type of dependency, what Buckley (1990) refers to as its 'parasitic nature' (Buckley, 1990, 24). In this way, Atheism is once again inextricably linked to a particular context, but more specifically to that context's particular theological thinking, what Hyman (2009) refers to as an 'inseparable connection' with the Theism against which modern Atheists define themselves (Hyman, 2009, xviii). Which brings us to its second distinction: Atheism as an identity self-avowed and adopted. Where with ἄθεος the term is defined by how individuals are determined as thinking or acting 'Atheistically,' modern Atheism is self-declared or self-confessed: "Atheist' had been vituperative and polemic; now it became a signature and a boast" (Buckley, 1990, 27). Lastly, this self-declared and dependent Atheism stems from a philosophical—and no less theological—origin, an adoption of the rational-naturalism of the ancient world, into a modern context. As Baggini (2003) surmises:

The emergence of atheism at this time fits in with the progressive story of atheism that sees its roots in the birth of Western rationality in Ancient Greece. Just as naturalism and rationalism, atheism's forebears, were the fruits of the progression from myth to reason, so atheism as an avowed doctrine is the fruit of the progression to Enlightenment values (Baggini, 2003, 79).

Yet, this is not as simple as merely relating the Enlightenment's rejection of 'superstition, hierarchy, and rationality' to the philosophies of Democritus or Protagoras, as a change of context equals a change of that which is challenged by this very reason. Rather, modern Atheism seems to derive from a theological conclusion that, when addressing the existence of God as a hypothetical notion, moves the concept of God itself into the realm of the objective. In this same way, mankind 'replaces' God as the subject. This 'subject to object' turn is equally a product of reason and rationalism, both linked with, and dependent from, the re-emergence of the rational-naturalism of the ancient world. As LeDrew (2012) stipulates:

That is, a theism grounded upon a conception of God as a natural entity amenable to scientific investigation would inevitably fail when the evidence failed to demonstrate his role in nature, but rather seemed to demonstrate more and more that the concept of God was not required to explain nature (LeDrew, 2012, 74).

Alongside the definitions presented by those cited above, we also find similar language in those offered by Masterson (1965), Fabro (1968), Herrick (1985), Smith (1991), Pasquini (2000), Gordon (2002), Converse (2003), Reid and Mondin (2003), McGrath (2004), and Ferguson (2009). Likewise, this Atheism is linked to first-order individuals, ranging from the satirical humor of Voltaire, to the more ambiguous and variant philosophies of Lessing, Hume, Hegel, Strauss, Feuerbach, and Marx.

Within this particular discursive category, both ἄθεος and Atheism are defined by these sorts of first-order examples. In this way, the definitions we discover here are lexical. That is, they are 'true' in that they assert a "certain meaning to someone sometime" (Baird, 1971, 10). By comparison, the second category is composed of 'real' definitions, descriptions constructed from second-order positions, or rather, from scholars stipulating terminology in search of an 'essence.' It is here where they begin to veer off into the ambiguous or equivocal, as well as where we find variations or 'types' of Atheisms, originating with a differentiation between positive or negative. As well, this is from where the NSRN's use of 'conscious' or 'unconscious' derives. That is, while initially this differentiation was meant to demarcate a border between degrees of Atheism, it has since come to depict a number of variants, the most prevalent of which divide a line between explicit or implicit Atheisms, or, those who are Atheists either by choice, or by default.

The somewhat ironic root of this obscurity stems from a theological base, once again beginning with Aveling's encyclopedia entry: positive as a dogmatic denial of "any spiritual and extra-mundane First Cause," and negative as based "either upon the lack of physical data for theism," or upon the "limited nature of the intelligence of man" (Aveling, *Catholic Encyclopedia*). From here, this paradigm takes up a number of deviations, such as Maritain's (1949) polemical argument that Atheism-in-general is destructive, either as a shallow or empirical emptiness—negative—or as an

“active struggle against everything that reminds us of God” (Maritain, 1949, 268)—positive. Likewise, Fabro’s (1968) conception equally focuses on this theme of negation, his distinction between positive and negative delineated by chronological differentiation: “we shall directly see the most salient features of those forms of atheism that could be called constructive [positive] atheism, as opposed to the destructive atheism of the materialism of antiquity and of the illuministic currents” (Fabro, 1968, 7). Lastly, and just prior to this discourse’s crystallization into the explicit/implicit derivations we see infecting most contemporary definitions, Robertson’s (1970) limited focus on positive Atheism paves the way for a connection between ‘Atheism’ and its influence on secularization, humanist organizations, and other socio-cultural entities:

By positive atheism we mean a cultural circumstance in which the constructive virtues for the human and socio-cultural condition of an anti-religious stance are upheld. The adjective ‘positive’ is appropriate here also because it highlights the secularization theme. Positive atheism shares many of the concrete concerns of orthodox religious belief systems. Its major manifestations are in humanist movements and organizations and the academic intelligentsia (Robertson, 1970, 238).

In 1976, Flew’s *The Presumption of Atheism* produced a means of commonality between these alternating degrees of positive or negative. In fact, the influence of this text’s contribution is so instrumental in shaping the paradigm from this point on that we might better identify the discursive examples just examined as representing a pre-Flew discourse. It is here where we find the preliminary shift from the theoretical positive/negative into an axial re-conceptualization that argues for the inherent nature of Atheism, and thus promotes a differentiation between explicit/implicit. This is not to say, however, that every definition that follows agrees with, or even promotes, Flew’s contention that all humans are born without the knowledge of God’s existence, and are therefore Atheistic by etymological unconsciousness. Which is problematic. As the predominant means with which Atheism is being defined, these origins seem somewhat overlooked, and while certain examples, such as Martin’s (2007c) theoretical differentiation between the refutation of another’s belief—negative—and the promotion of one’s own—positive—(Martin, 2007c, 89-91), make use of this paradigm in a practical manner, Flew’s ini-

tial polemical argument is still heavily prevalent.

More specifically, it is Flew’s conception of ‘negative’ that seems to pose the largest issue, as well as where this notion of being ‘unconsciously Atheist’ comes in. From this point forward, definitions of negative Atheism adopt many of the facets we see in the lexical definitions of ἄθεος, namely the way it presumes an Atheistic position on individuals who are, like the ἄθεοι described above, merely ‘without’ a belief in a particular θεός. This begins with Stein (1980), who defines this difference as such:

The prefix ‘a-’ can mean ‘not’ (or ‘no’) or ‘without.’ If it means ‘not,’ then we have as an atheist someone who is not a theist (i.e., someone who does not have a belief in a God or gods). If it means ‘without,’ then an atheist is someone without theism, or without a belief in God” (Stein, 1980, 3).

While seemingly innocuous, particularly in his argument about the necessity of ‘knowledge’ as a precursor to denial, when merged with Smith’s (1989) conception, this notion takes up a differentiation between ‘believing not’ and ‘not believing.’ This is, as well, where we begin to see specific language being used in a direct manner, such as Smith’s summary that ‘explicit’ Atheism is “the absence of theistic belief due to a conscious rejection of it,” and ‘implicit’ as “the absence of theistic belief without a conscious rejection of it” (Smith, 1989, 14). It is also here where we begin to first see the notion that children, congenitally ignorant of the existence of God, as defined as natural born Atheists. That is, because he sees an individual who is “unacquainted with theism,” such as those born without an “innate knowledge of the supernatural,” including “the child with the conceptual capacity to grasp the issues involved, but who is still unaware of those issues,” as being ‘unconscious’ of the belief that God exists, he easily defines this sort of individual as implicitly Atheist (Smith, 1989, 14).

With Martin (1990, 2007a, 2007b, 2007c), these same distinctions pick up new terminological expressions, such as ‘narrow’ and ‘broad,’ or ‘strong’ and ‘weak.’ These broaden the meaning of Atheism even further, generalizing a much wider canopy under which a great number of positions might exist. For instance, and in adopting Smith’s conception that an Atheist is “someone without a belief in God, not necessarily someone who believes that God does not exist” (Martin, 1990,

463), Martin defines positive Atheism as a ‘special case’ of negative Atheism, the two differentiated on one end by the belief that “there is no god or gods,” and on the other as that “derived from the Greek root” (Martin, 1990, 464). In this way, he is able to further contend that individuals who are unsure or unwilling to entirely reject or deny the existence of God, but who are otherwise knowledgeable about God’s existence—‘agnostics’—fall under the rubric of a negative absence of belief: “Since agnostics do not believe in God, they are by definition negative atheists” (Martin, 2007a, 2). While this might seem more of a slight to agnostics who wish not to be considered Atheists, it speaks much wider to the incongruity that these sorts of generalizations inspire. For example, this is also where we begin to see the term ‘Atheist’ itself used as a philosophical phrase that denotes any sort of denial, rejection, skepticism, or even ignorance of any sort of ‘religious’ belief, exemplified quite perfectly by Martin’s differentiation between broad and narrow. Simplified, this variation enacts an expansive re-interpretation: while broad positive Atheism consists of a “disbelief in all gods,” narrow positive Atheism consists of “disbelief in a theistic God,” so that, conversely, broad negative Atheism consists of “the absence of belief in any god or Gods,” while narrow negative Atheism consists of “the absence of belief in a theistic God” (Martin, 2007a, 2). As he previously justified: “a negative atheist, if we understand theism in the way it has been understood in modern times, would simply be a person without a belief in a personal god [...] Atheism, so understood, would be compatible with deism, polytheism, and pantheism” (Martin, 1990, 465).

As hinted above, through this broadening scope we begin to see an augmentation of the term far beyond the lexical border established by its ancient and modern geneses, further leading toward an essentialist appropriation of ‘Atheism’ into the arduous discourse on defining religion. This appears in Martin’s own contribution to the *Cambridge Companion to Atheism*—which he also edited—under the heading ‘Atheism and Religion.’ Here, not only do we see a normative position on the definition of ‘non-theistic’ religion, but an association of these religions as Atheist. Basing these conclusions on previous discursive perspectives—Stroup (1968), Pike (1948), and Smart (1967)—his interpretations are noticeably filtered through a positive/negative lens, and as such, his classifications of Jainism as positive Atheism, and Confucianism—or at least Confucius—as negative Atheism,

are built upon the idea that practitioners of the former actively disbelieve that an “all-good, all-knowing, and all-powerful being who created the universe exists” (Martin, 2007b, 223), while the latter, Confucius, “did not hold the view that an all-good, all-knowing, and all-powerful God exists” (Martin, 2007b, 229).

While we might be critical of the overtly theological, or if nothing else, Western-leaning normative quality of these statements, for our interests herein, this language is contributing to a discursive shift, a movement away from the lexical, and thus context-specific, definitions provided above. Likewise, this shift begins to be even more crystalized as later scholars—alongside the flood of academic interest in Atheism, thanks in part to the New Atheism of Harris, Dawkins, Dennett, and Hitchens—attempt to both make sense of this widening scope, as well as uniquely contribute to it with their own interpretations. This, then, explains how Atheism is now categorized by means of ‘pure’ and ‘impure’ (Hiorth, 1995 and 2003); is wholly independent of Theism, and is thus truly inherent (Baggini, 2003); is a singular and inborn trait of all individuals who then convert to Theism out of Atheism, and likewise are ‘born again’ when they convert back (Eller, 2004 and 2010); is a product of absence, more than rejection or denial—“perhaps we should agree that an atheist is not someone who, having tested the appropriate theological argument, concludes that these arguments are spurious and that no such being exists; but rather, that an atheist is someone marked by *the absence of belief*: he or she *simply has no belief in God* [emphases in original]” (Palmer, 2010, 16); is simplified along these same lines for a general readership as ‘overt disbelief’—“(a) positive atheism, an active disbelief in God” [...] “(b) negative atheism, the absence of belief in God” (Walters, 2010, 12); or, and perhaps most troubling, pragmatically defined in an expansive manner in order to, ironically, support the very discourse that created this issue in the first place:

To adopt a zoological metaphor, it might be helpful to think of atheism as a ‘family’, divisible into two ‘genera’ (negative and positive), each made up of various ‘species’ (agnosticism, Promethean antitheism, etc.). This taxonomic approach to atheism permits exploration of a diverse range of stances and worldviews, united by their shared absence of theism (Bullivant, 2014, 15).

While these examples represent a discursive shift

that not only alters our own scholastic perception of 'Atheism,' but the public's as well—equally represented by the Wikipedia.org article that likewise adopts this paradigmatic differentiation—they also represent a problematic progression away from more specific, direct, and contextualized definitions toward the theoretical and inharmonious. To this notion, [Bullivant \(2014\)](#) is quite accurate when he argues that the generalized nature of his definition for the *Oxford Handbook of Atheism* is made in order to move away from the “frustrating morass of contradictions and cross-purposes” ([Bullivant, 2014](#), 13) that, as he further states, demonstrates the nature of the current scholarly study of Atheism. Yet, he is also drastically incorrect in his attempt to try and avoid this issue by accepting and promoting yet another generalization. In fact, and based upon this discursive survey, we might contend here that perhaps this sort of thinking is nothing more than a product of the current scholarly study of Atheism's predominant focus on the social-scientific attempt at making sense of 'Atheism-in-general,' rather than 'Atheism-in-specific.'

It is here where this article will present its own solution, an attempt at moving away from, and disassociating with, the idea that it might be in any way possible to construct and properly use a definitional essence when it comes to ambiguous terms like Atheism or religion.

### Discourse Analysis and the Definition of Religion

Martin's association of 'Atheism' with 'religion,' though precarious in its normativity, suggests a connectivity that, as we shall see, offers with it a relatable solution. That is, like 'religion' Atheism is as equally a precarious term, partly due in part because of the way we have defined it in our attempts to theoretically combine the two lexical meanings between *ἄθεος* and Atheism. Therefore, it would pragmatically follow that we would benefit from treating 'Atheism' as we do 'religion,' particularly in a context such as we find in the academic study of religion. In fact, we might even contend that with their shared precariousness the issues with defining Atheism are like the issues we see in defining religion, only writ small. For this reason, we might even trace a similar genealogy between the two, beginning with theological based 'sui generis' or substantive notions, that then develop into broader categories built upon more functionalist approaches. Likewise, we might even see echoes of methodologi-

cal interpretations that attempt to define the actions pertaining to the term, rather than the beliefs underscoring those who define themselves, or are defined, as such. In this way, both discourses seem to have been built atop similar foundations, and as such they equally suffer from issues of foundational discrepancies, particularly concerning the ability we now have in defining their terminology in a myriad of ways.

One recent manner of alleviating this issue for the study of religion is to move away from attempts at defining the term 'religion,' and instead focuses on the discourse used by individuals who refer to themselves as 'religious.' While this, in its way, does indeed present a method more 'anthropological' in that it removes the scholar from the need to define the concepts within his or her research beyond the permission of letting the subjects 'speak for themselves,' it is not without its own issues, such as debates pertaining to what 'doing' a discourse analysis might actually look like. Yet, for the interests of this article, the basic language of this methodology is sufficient enough to move us in a more pragmatic direction. Therefore, the use of it herein should not—necessarily—be seen as an outright promotion, but rather as an interpretation and pragmatic 'borrowing.'

In his initial approach to the discursive study of religion, [von Stuckrad \(2003\)](#) refers to the definitional disparity above as a double-edged issue, on one end offering a particular disciplinary horizon to one's individualized study, while on the other creating what he refers to as a “cornucopia of methodological approaches,” a nod to [Smith's \(1998\)](#) argument that where once we might have struggled to define the term itself, we are now faced with a larger issue, as predicted by [Leuba \(1912\)](#), in doing so “more than fifty ways” ([Smith, 1998](#), 281-282). What this 'multi-definability' equally generates is a contentious discourse not unlike the issues addressed in our discussion of Atheism, a discordancy von Stuckrad resolves by supplanting the formulation of a 'generic definition of religion' with a 'theory of discourse.'

Our object of study is the way religion is organized, discussed, and discursively materialized in cultural and social contexts. 'Religion,' in this approach, is an empty signifier that can be filled with many different meanings, depending on the use of the word in a given society and context. It is this use of 'religion'—including the generic defi-

nitions of academics—that is the responsibility of scholars to explain” (von Stuckrad, 2010, 166).

Determined by a change of typeface, ‘religion’ referring to “contributions to a discourse on religion,” and ‘RELIGION’ referring to the “societal organization of knowledge about religion” (von Stuckrad, 2013, 12), this grammatical alteration shifts our attention from perceiving the term as revealing some sort of transcendent truth, to it serving a practical purpose to those who use it: “Religions are powerful [...] because they serve as instruments in the communicative formation of identity and provide people with a concrete script of action” (von Stuckrad, 2003, 269). Thus, by regarding religion as a system of ‘communication and shared action,’ we turn to an analysis of how those who identify as ‘religious’ go about doing that, our focus now on the “*public* appearance of religious propositions [emphasis in original]” (von Stuckrad, 2003, 268).

While this, in itself, offers us a slight route out of the problematic discourse surveyed above, it fails to fully explain exactly what we might mean by ‘discourse,’ let alone how relating Atheism to religion, and ATHEISM to RELIGION might benefit our intentions. For assistance, then, we turn here to a brief description of discourse analysis beyond the boundaries of the study of religion and/or Atheism.

## Discourse Analysis

The discursive approach to defining particular concepts stands on a fairly established foundation based on analyzing how language is used within particular contexts. In fact, a rather cursory review of this foundation reveals a number of preliminary insights. For instance, we might simply agree with Gee (2005) that it is an “analysis of language in use” (Gee, 2005, 5). Of course, this is admittedly neither a fair nor complete definition. For it also entails an analysis of the way language use impacts the communication of beliefs within interactions between individuals (van Dijk, 1997), as well as demonstrates a particular type of approach (Paltridge, 2006) aimed at specific patterns of language use across differing textual media: from language use in relation to social, political, and cultural formations—“it is language reflecting social order but also language shaping social order” (Jaworski and Coupland, 2006, 3)—to more ‘textual’ based analyses—“its primary purpose [...] is to provide a deeper understanding and appreciation of texts and how they

become meaningful to their users” (Paltridge, 2006, 3).

Because of this somewhat methodological polyfocality, the notion of ‘discourse,’ as van Dijk further suggests, is somewhat ‘fuzzy’ (van Dijk, 1997, 1). Schiffrin, Tannen, and Hamilton (2001) refer to this as the ‘curse of discourse,’ alluding to the fact that because discourse-as-language-use might represent a myriad of multi-disciplinary approaches, then “the directions in which its meanings may fan out are limitless” (Schiffrin, Tannen, and Hamilton, 2001, 1). For his own intentions, van Dijk demarcates three main dimensions—“(a) *language use*, (b) the *communication of beliefs* (cognition), and (c) *interaction* in social situations” [emphases in original] (van Dijk, 1997, 2)—which then give way to three disciplinary approaches with which to differentiate an ‘order of discourse’ between ‘abstract’—language and communication—and ‘concrete’—singular or particular conversations. This formula performs a clarification of sorts, cataloguing disciplinary notions about how discourse is examined—such as linguistically, psychologically, and social scientifically—in the process of perceiving how language use influences the beliefs and interactions of those speaking.

Relatedly, in their compilation of Jaworski and Coupland’s (1999) ten definitions, and in order to address the ‘broad conglomeration’ of their ‘curse of discourse,’ Schiffrin, Tannen, and Hamilton stipulate their own three-part interpretation: “(1) anything beyond the sentence, (2) language use, and (3) a broader range of social practice that includes nonlinguistic and non-specific instances of language” (Schiffrin, Tannen, and Hamilton, 2001, 1). Similarly, and by combining elements of comparable analysis, Fairclough (2003) clarifies the integral presence of dialecticism in the social study of language, particularly through a correlative meaning of ‘language’ that broadly encompasses a wide range of textual and dialogical elements: “written and printed texts such as shopping lists and newspaper articles are ‘texts,’ but so also are transcripts of (spoken) conversations and interviews, as well as television programmes and web-pages” (Fairclough, 2003, 4). This broadening the concept of ‘text’ to incorporate any ‘actual instance of language in use,’ re-conceptualizes the notion of ‘discourse’ by incorporating a sense of authorial intention—integral to the notion of identity construction—into his own definition.

Then, and building atop Fairclough’s three-level

method of discursive interpretation—"the production of the text, the text itself, and the reception of the text" (Fairclough, 2003, 10)—Gee's (2005) own conception takes up the emphasis of balance: "discourse analysis [...] seeks to balance talk about the mind, talk about social interaction and activities, and talk about society and institutions" (Gee, 2005, 6). Somewhat mimetic of the typeface change we see in von Stuckrad's conception of religion above, Gee differentiates between 'Discourse,' and 'discourse,' the latter designating how language is used 'on site' to "enact activities and identities," and the former to denote when this sort of discursive 'language-in-use' is "melded integrally with non-language 'stuff' to enact specific identities and activities" (Gee, 2005, 7). Thus, at least for Gee, the focus of Discourse Analysis is a two-pointed affair: "(a) illuminating and gaining evidence for our theory of the domain, a theory that helps to explain how and why language works the way it does when it is put into action; and (b) contributing, in terms of understanding and intervention, to important issues and problems in some 'applied' area (e.g. education) that interests and motivates the researcher" (Gee, 2005, 8).

With a more direct focus on identity construction, Paltridge (2006) takes up this identifying notion of 'language-in-use' in order to decipher the relationship between language and identity, both in an individual 'display' of one's identity, as well as in how that identity is intended to be seen. In this way, his emphasis is on the particular ways in which, through the use of both 'written' and 'spoken' discourse, language plays a part in 'performing' and 'creating' certain social identities. Anchored to the concepts of communication and interaction, Paltridge's more social-oriented use of discourse is attached to the development of patterns across 'texts,' denoting a process by which we might decipher influential aspects of identity construction within relational interactions between participants. As he himself states: "discourse analysis considers the relationship between language and the contexts in which it is used and is concerned with the description and analysis of both spoken and written interactions" (Paltridge, 2006, 3).

Lastly, Jaworski and Coupland (2006) seem to develop their notion of discourse on top on Paltridge's more social-centered conception, their perception of language-use as "relative to social, political, and cultural formations" (Jaworski and Coupland, 2006, 3), as thematically correlative to Paltridge's argument

that Discourse Analysis considers "how people manage interactions with each other, how people communicate within particular groups and societies, as well as how they communicate with other groups, and with other cultures" (Paltridge, 2006, 1). Dependent upon actions of communication, Jaworski and Coupland see discourse not just as 'language-in-use,' but as language that is reflecting and shaping social order. In this way, language becomes something that affects, and is affected by, how individuals interact with that social order. This sense of social interaction, they argue, is why there appears such a multi-disciplinary interest in studying 'discourse,' not just linguistically, but also textually, historically, politically, philosophically, and social-scientifically: "despite important differences of emphasis, discourse is an inescapably important concept for understanding society and human responses to it, as well as for understanding language itself" (Jaworski and Coupland, 2006, 3). This equally explains how using discourse analysis in the study of religion might alleviate much of the disparity in how that term is defined in the process of external examination.

### Discourse Analysis and the Definition of Atheism

With this review, we gain a bit more insight into von Stuckrad's use of discourse. For his intentions, the language used by individuals who identify as religious plays an important part in how they identify themselves as *being* 'religious.' This is also where our previous mention of the 'anthropological service' offered by such an approach finds meaning. Additionally, this equally clarifies what he means by 'religion' acting as an empty signifier, a term 'filled' with meaning by those who use it, so that when an individual discusses their own individual use of 'religion,' we might perceive that as contributing to the larger societal organization of knowledge about religion: RELIGION.

For our own intentions herein, 'Atheism' might be equally seen as an empty signifier, so that rather than busying ourselves with definitions, and thus contributing to a discourse mired in ambiguity, our attentions can be turned toward how individuals who identify as 'Atheists' go about filling that signifier with what they perceive the word to mean for their own usage. Thus, in our analysis of the language they use to do this we not only gain a better understanding about how they construct their identities pertaining to conceptual terms, but this equally alleviates the need to

partake in the cyclical and double-edged issue concerning the construction of definitions mentioned in the introduction. In this way, when we study Atheists and their Atheism we are no longer required to define what we mean when we talk about what they mean, removing ourselves as theoretical intermediaries and allowing them to speak for themselves.

As well, this gives us a secondary outlet, not just in clarifying what our subjects mean when they use the language that they do, but in clarifying our own. For example, a keen reader may have noticed that this very article was incorporating a particular type of Discourse Analysis, the discursive field at the focus of our examination being the internal progression from lexical to essential definitions of Atheism. By employing this same sort of methodology to make sense of how scholars have come to define the term in such a general manner, we have equally traced the discursive language underscoring this very progress. In this way, just like how we might be able to better inspect the way Atheists define themselves by filling the empty signifier 'Atheism' with meaning, we can clarify how our own discourse has shifted along a particular tract. In fact, just as we might come away from a lexical interpretation of Atheists defining their Atheism in real places in real time, this same sort of methodological process has mapped out for us the manner with which we have ourselves filled this same signifier with our own meaning, and thus betrayed the objectivity required of our position as observers.

To conclude, then, we might resolve that employing a discursive analysis to the study of Atheism is effective on two levels: first, on the level of the subjects under our investigation, it alleviates the need to define the term prior to our examinations, granting us the methodological epoche or agnosticism necessary to carry out an objective inquiry; and second, it deconstructs our own internal discourse so as to further remove any subjective influence, not only in broadening what we might engage with as data, but in how we perceive our subject's construction of identity with terminology we did not in some way 'give' to them. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, this removes the temptation to construct our own terminology, infecting our subjects with language created for our own benefit, and thus further removes us from the discourse that promotes even more precarious notions such as 'ir-religion,' 'un-belief,' or 'non-religion.'

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## Endnote

[1] Throughout this article I have chosen to capitalize the 'a' in Atheism for two reasons: first, in order to distinguish it as a modern signifier discursively described in reflection of its classic predecessor; and second, as that derivation denotes a specific identity (as we shall see below), my capitalization is made for the same reasons we might capitalize the 'c' in 'Christian' or the 'a' in 'American.' That is, as an identity, 'Atheism' is capitalized because it is a title.