

Contemporary Atheism

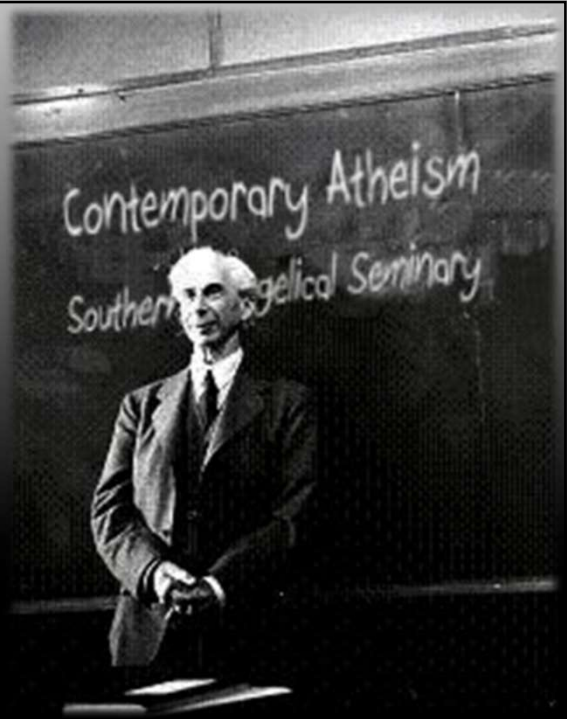
Dr. Richard G. Howe, Ph.D.

Provost

Norman L. Geisler Chair of Christian Apologetics

Professor of Philosophy and Apologetics

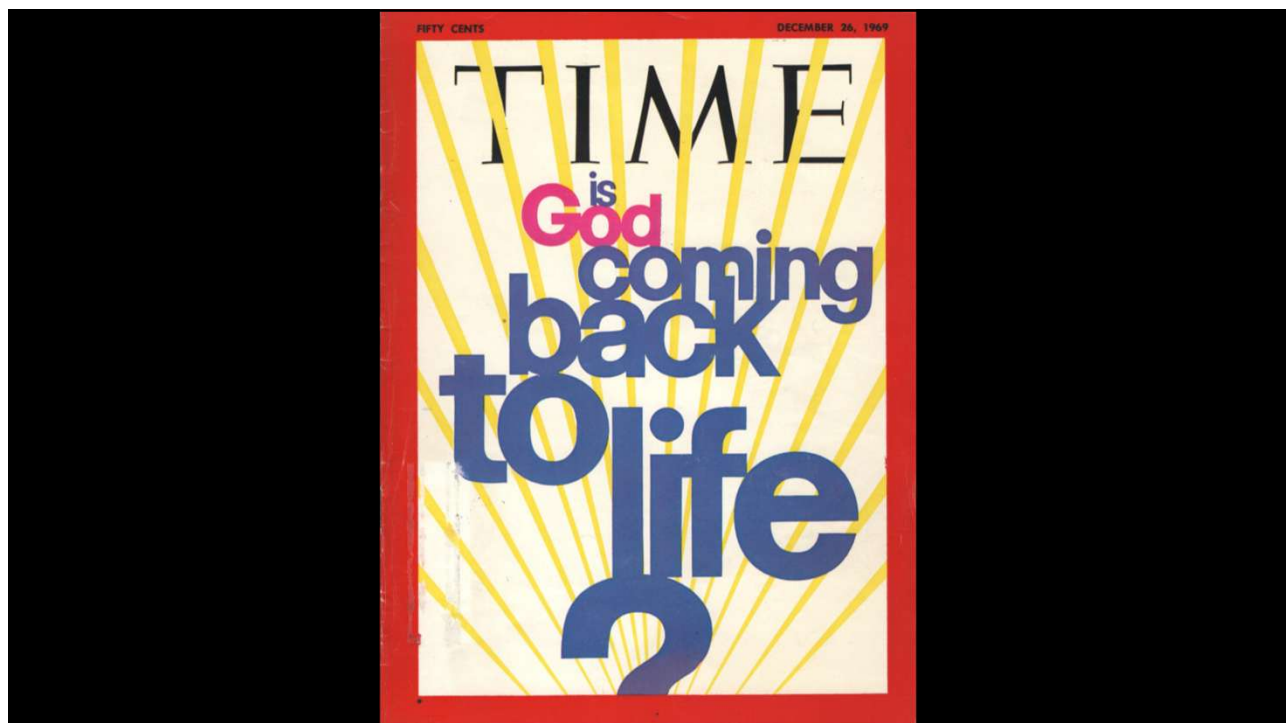
☞ Southern Evangelical Seminary ☞



Christianity

God

Foundation







Religion

Kant (1724-1804), wrote that each person's quest for the "highest good" implies the existence of a moral being as the necessary condition for this idea, who is himself the source of all morality.

Updating Kant, Dartmouth Scholar Ronald Green argues in *Religious Reason* (Oxford, \$12) that though skeptics may think primitive instincts or emotions are the basis for religion, faith actually stems from the sophisticated reasoning process that distinguishes humans from animals. To Green, man must seek an independent, coherent source for his morality. Although Kant ended with a personal God, Green will only go so far as to postulate "some kind of supreme moral causal agency," whether a personal deity or Hinduism's impersonal karma.

The Mental Proof. In this formulation, an all-intelligent Being is offered as the only explanation for the power of reason and for humanity's other nonmaterial qualities of mind and imagination. A contemporary restatement is the 1947 classic *Miracles* by the late English literary critic C.S. Lewis, the century's most read apologist for God. Lewis dismissed the philosophy that mind results from nature: "If any thought is valid, an eternal, self-existent Reason must exist and must be the source of my own imperfect and uncertain rationality."

America's leading orthodox Protestant philosopher of God, Alvin Plantinga of Michigan's Calvin College, develops a related argument from one of the pressing issues in modern epistemology. Though it sounds strange to the man in the street, philosophers ponder how an individual can know that there is any creature besides himself who thinks, feels and reasons, or how he can know that anything ever existed in the past. How, for instance, can we know if another person is in pain? Plantinga answers that such knowledge is acquired through analogy, and in *God and Other Minds* (Cornell, \$13.50) he makes an intricate case that this is the way believers know God. Since it is perfectly plausible to infer that other minds exist, he thinks it is reasonable to believe that God does as well.

The Experiential Proof. Because religious experiences are so widespread, this argument runs, there must be something for rather. Someone inspiring them. Skeptics, of course, reply that experiences are subjective, hence unreliable as evidence, and besides they can be explained apart from God. Harvard's Quine, for example, dismisses beliefs as the product of "tradition, wishful thinking or something in the genes." However, one of Britain's most

distinguished zoologists, Alister Hardy, begs to wonder. A project he founded at Oxford has issued a rigorous scientific study of 3,000 religious experiences, and reports a striking—and intriguing—commonality among them.

The Teleological Proof. Here the infinitely complex structure of the universe is used to argue the necessary existence of an intelligent Designer. In English Archbishop William Paley's famous analogy of 1802, anyone who sees a watch is forced to assume the existence of a watchmaker who made it. The marvels of nature's design, from snowflakes to developing embryos, are comforting buttresses to faith for many people.

Since the Enlightenment, though, philosophers have not been impressed. The great skeptic was David Hume (1711-76),


tends that narrowly antireligious Darwinism ignores the way in which inanimate nature is in harmony with organic evolution. Nor, he asserts, can evolutionary theory possibly explain the rapid emergence of the large brain in the developing human species.

The Ontological Proof. This, the most controversial approach, moves from a mental concept of God to his actual existence. It was originated by Anselm, the 11th century Archbishop of Canterbury who defined God as "a being than which nothing greater can be thought." The Archbishop reasoned that since existence would have to be part of any such perfect and necessary being, this being must actually exist. This is "too good to be true," says one skeptic, and even one of its current defenders admits that it "looks too much like word magic."


The method lay in dispute after Kant supposedly demolished it, until Norman Malcolm, then at Cornell, suddenly claimed in a 1960 article that it was partly defensible. Since then it has been the most debated of proof among philosophers. Three current advocates renovate it by applying a technique known as modal logic. Plantinga, Unitarian Charles Hartshorne, a follower of Alfred North Whitehead's "process" philosophy, now retired from the University of Texas, and Roman Catholic Layman James F. Ross of the University of Pennsylvania.

In *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: \$8.50), Plantinga, who had long opposed ontological theories, explains that his mind was changed through the curious logical process of speculating about "possible worlds" in which things could be different. For example, he says, Raquel Welch has "impressive assets" in our world, but there are possible worlds in which she is "nony and 50 lbs. overweight"; and others in which she is totally nonexistent, adding: "What Anselm means to suggest is that Raquel Welch enjoys very little greatness in those worlds in which she does not exist."


Ross, a leader in modernizing the thought of medieval scholars, favors the revision of Anselm done by John Duns Scotus (1265-1308) but does some renovation himself. In the forthcoming new edition of his *Philosophical Theology* (Hackett: \$17.50), Ross is bold enough to claim that he has an airtight proof that "remains unscathed" after a decade of scrutiny. Ross does this with his "Principle E" (for explicability), which is virtually inapplicable to the uninitiated. Roughly, it means that it is possible for everything, including God's existence, to be




ANSELM OF CANTERBURY



IMMANUEL KANT



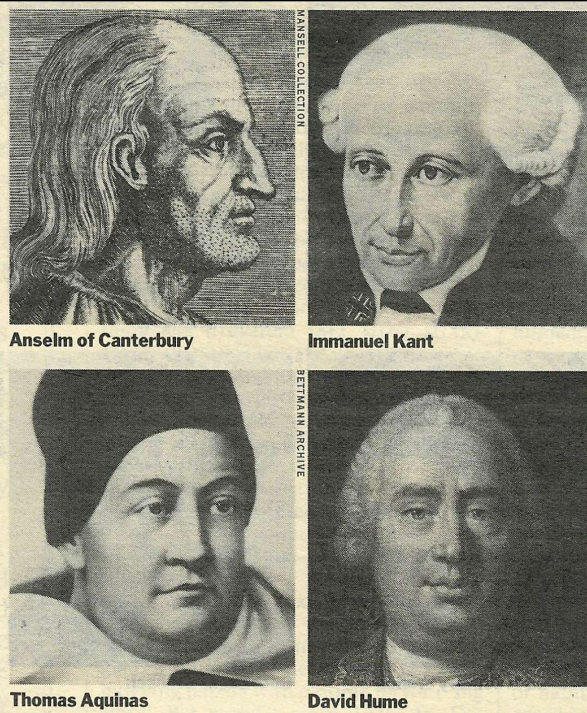
THOMAS AQUINAS



DAVID HUME

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TIME, APRIL 7, 1980



Anselm of Canterbury

Immanuel Kant

Thomas Aquinas

David Hume

explained, but that God's nonexistence does not admit of explanation. Even atheistic philosophers grant that by the latest rules of logic, the updaters of Aquinas are right: if it is even possible that a highest conceivable being exists, then he must exist in actuality. The trouble is, the atheists do not accept that he is even possible.

The Cosmological Proof. The term applies technically to any argument for God through reflection upon the natural world. But most often "cosmological" refers to reasoning generalizations about ultimate origins and why the cosmos exists at all. Evolutionary schools of thought do not entertain such notions because they fall, by definition, outside what can be observed or tracked. If such questions are never asked, of course, they require no answer. Bertrand Russell once remarked in a 1918 debate that the universe is "just there, and that's all." He was convinced that "all the labors of the ages, all the devices, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system."

The classic cosmological inquirer was Thomas Aquinas (1224-74), and the classic modern innovator is Canadian Jesuit Bernard J.F. Lonergan, whose "transcendental Thomism" in *Imphilo* (Philosophical Library, \$10) justifies Aquinas in the modern world through a complex philosophy of human understanding. Chicago's Mortimer Adler has long been interested in Aquinas' thought. Though not formally religious, he nonetheless pondered the God problem for most of his 75 years before writing his readable *How to Think About God*. Aquinas reasoned that each effect must have a cause and that an endless chain must proceed back to a primordial First Cause or Prime Mover. In *How to*, Adler rejects that starting point because a universe with a beginning presupposes the Creator that it seeks to prove. Therefore Adler assumes that the universe had no beginning. He also rejects the idea that a higher cause underlies and explains all phenomena in the universe, on the ground that natural processes provide sufficient explanation.

That leaves the most esoteric of Aquinas' "five ways" of proving God, from "contingency." Things can be divided into two categories: "contingent" ones that could either exist or not exist, and "necessary" ones that cannot not exist. The latter is a category of one, namely God. The reason that anything at all exists, cosmologists argue, is that there must be a "necessary" being.

At one time Adler embraced Aquinas' proof, then for decades he thought it did not work because although everything in the universe is contingent, nothing ceases to exist absolutely (e.g., burning wood only changes form, so no God is needed to explain the existence of contingent things. Last May he suddenly changed his mind again after applying the "possible worlds" approach Adler speculated that the universe is only one of many possible universes, any of which—including this actual universe—can just as easily not exist as exist.

The universe is "radically contingent," the only thing capable of not existing and leaving behind absolutely nothing. An "efficient cause" is needed to explain "the actual existence here and now of a merely possible cosmos," something that preserves it in being and prevents it from being replaced by nothingness. Color that cause God. Philosopher Ross

what nature and history show to be quite likely—that there is a God who made and sustains man and the universe." Basil Mitchell, a philosopher of religion at Oxford, advocates a "many-stranded type of reason" like that employed by historians or scientists to develop the best explanation of evidence. Among his strands: individuals' experience of a mysterious "other" outside nature, the simple faith of believers and "comic awe" in encountering unusually saintly persons.

The procedure is double-edged. Oxford's J.L. Mackie, perhaps the most astute of today's atheistic philosophers, offers nonspiritual explanations for such evidence, and raises the problem, as old as the *Book of Job*, of evil. The existence of evil is no "knock-down disproof of an omnipotent and wholly good God," he says, but it does make God improbable. Plantinga revisits the theist's classic reply to this, the free will argument. Examining whether a semiautonomous, corrupt Boston mayor would have taken smaller bribes in other "possible worlds," he argues that even an all-powerful God cannot create a world in which mayors can choose to take bribes and that also contains no evil. In religious circles, natural theology is not in vogue. Not all Roman Catholics, for example, can wholeheartedly accept the 1961 Vatican Council's decree that "man can know the one true God and Creator with certainty by the natural light of human reason." At the same time, though few people come to believe through the exercise of reason, cathedrals of thought can provide sanctuary for many when faith falters or is attacked by skeptics. Iode Dougherty, dean of philosophy at the Catholic University of America, also sees value in continuing to labor to reason God out in a day when all sorts of bizarre calls flourish. "If religion is not placed on a rational footing then *anything* can be considered religion."

Probably the major failing of such enterprise is that the results, however persuasive, tell us little about the nature and will of God. Blaise Pascal, anticipating modern objections to natural theology, believed that one cannot worship a dry concept, only the living God. Though a genius in science and mathematics, Pascal believed that "the heart has its reasons, which reason cannot know." But if in an age of science, faith in God can be more rationally grounded, as a growing number of philosophers now attest, then the reasoning soul who is so inclined can more surely and assuredly feel comfortable in moving beyond reason.



England's J.L. Mackie



West Germany's Hans Kung



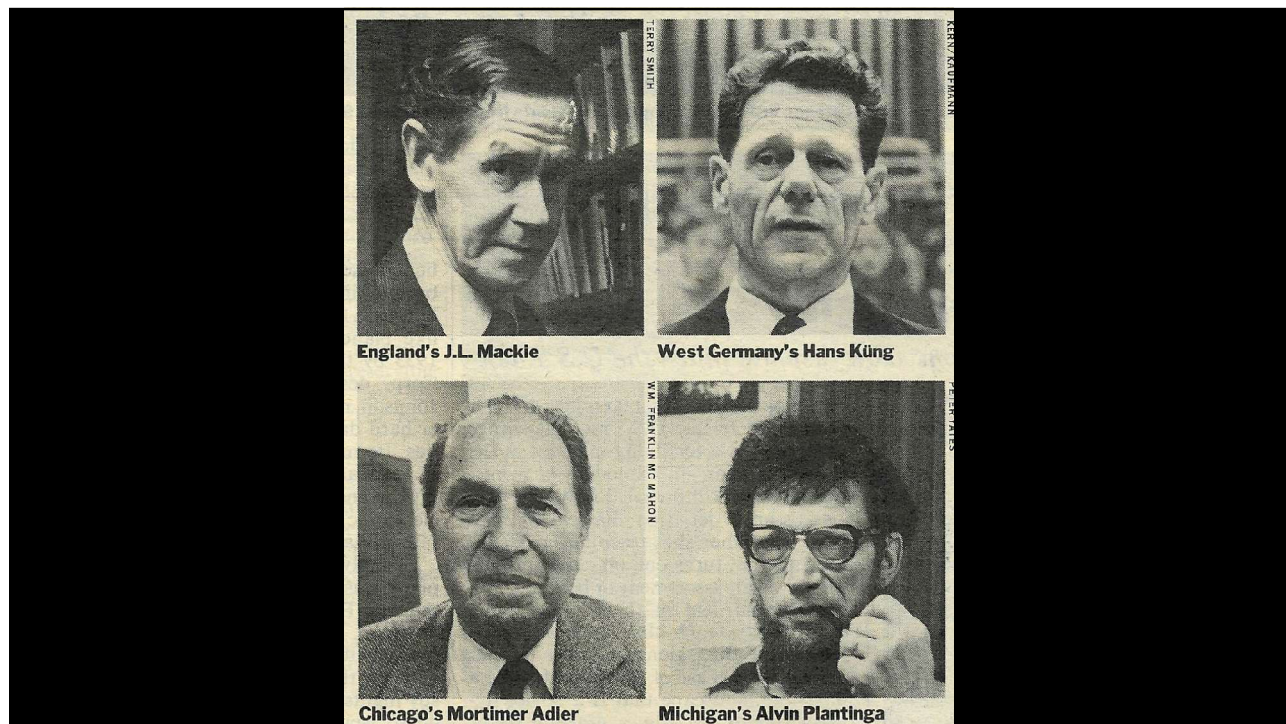
Chicago's Mortimer Adler

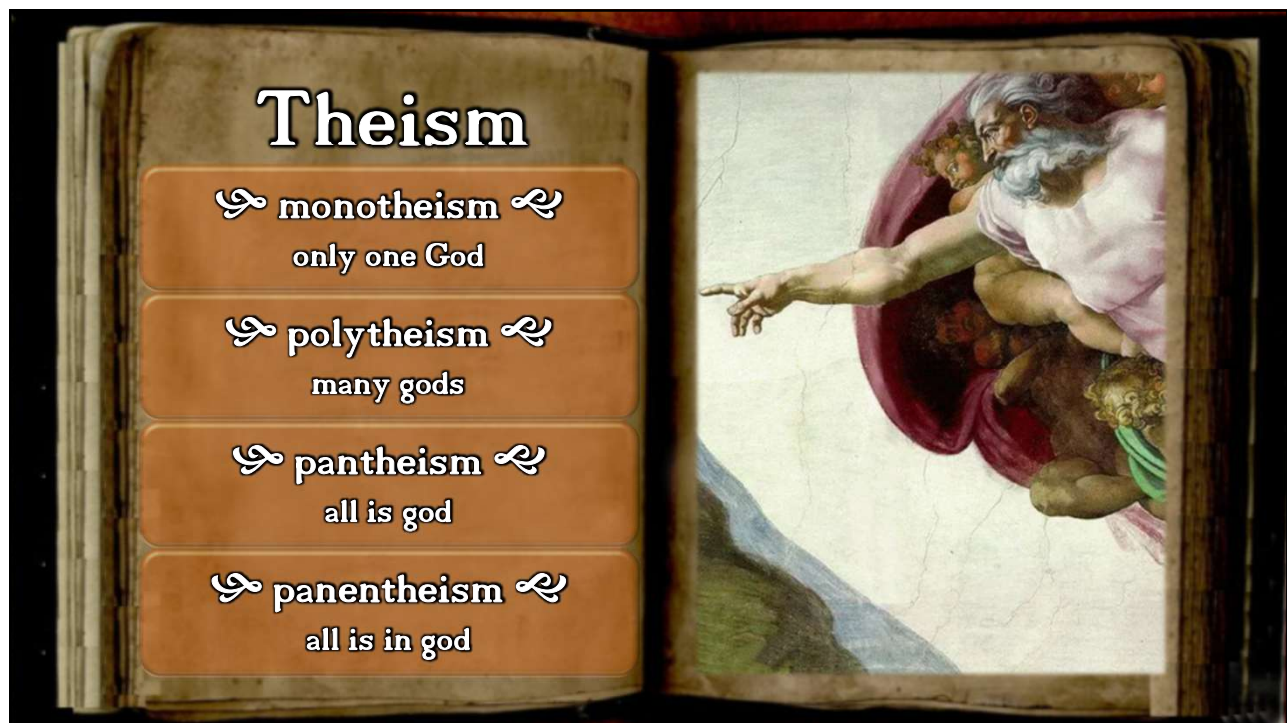
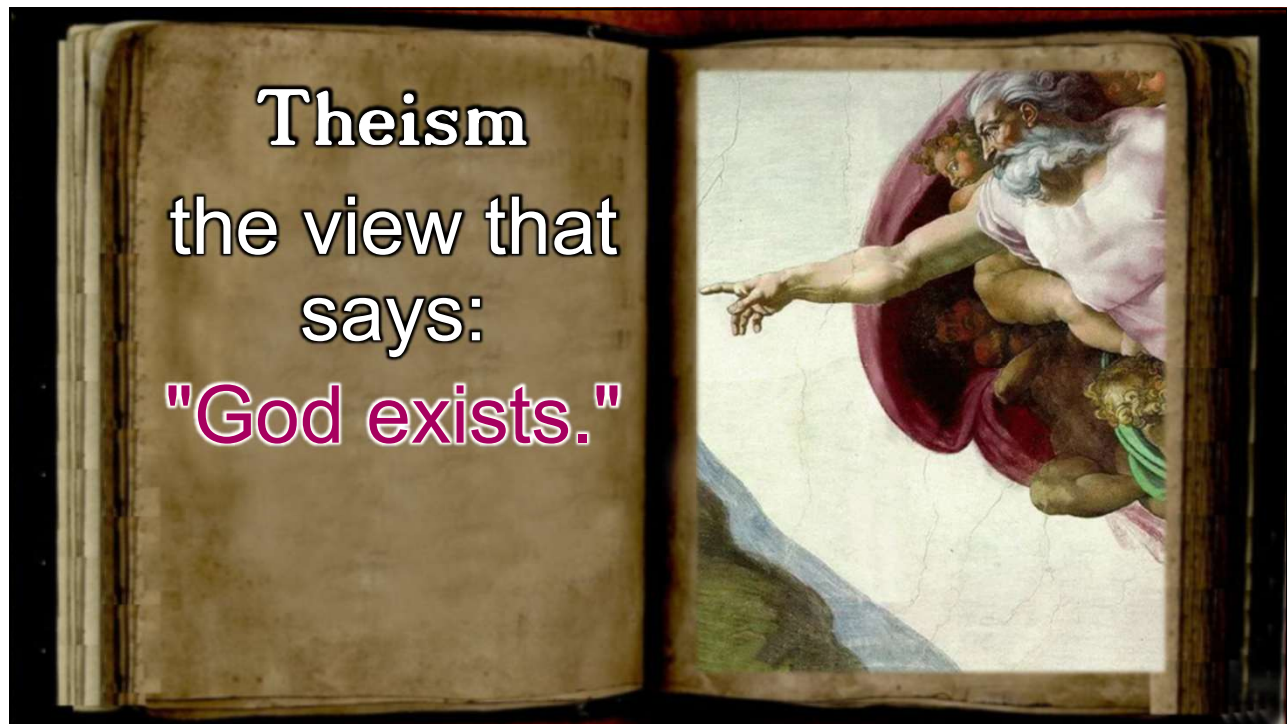


Michigan's Alvin Plantinga

TIME, APRIL 7, 1988

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Agnosticism

- ✓ from the Greek word γνῶσις (*gnosis*) meaning 'knowledge'
- ✓ with the negation α (*a*) meaning 'not' or 'no'
- ✓ the suspension of judgment on the question of God's existence



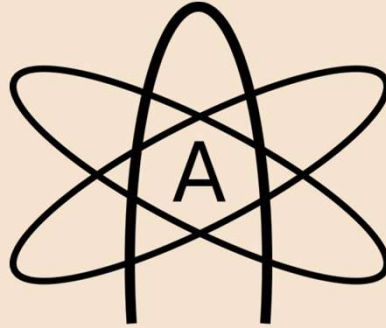
Agnosticism
the view that
says:

"I don't know
whether God
exists."



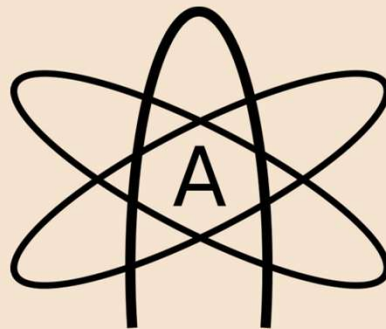
Atheism

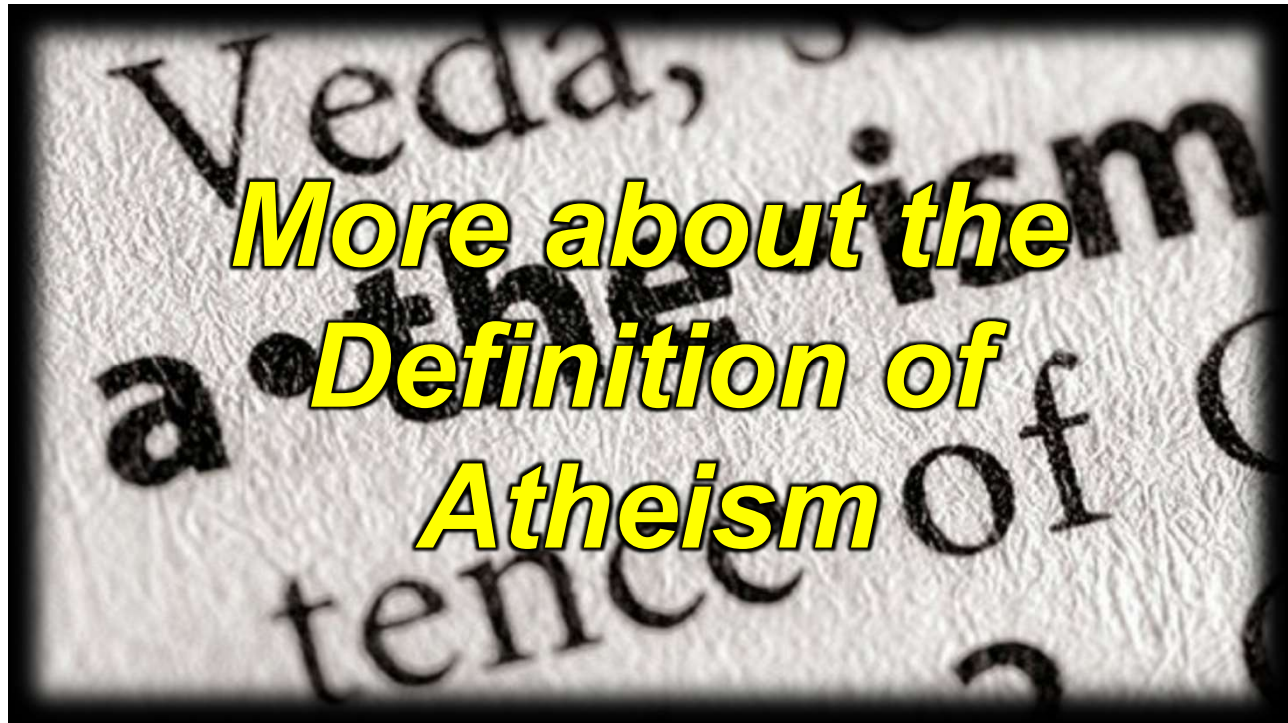
- ✓ from the Greek word θεός (*theos*) meaning 'God'
- ✓ with the negation α (*a*) meaning 'not' or 'no'
- ✓ the worldview that denies the existence of God

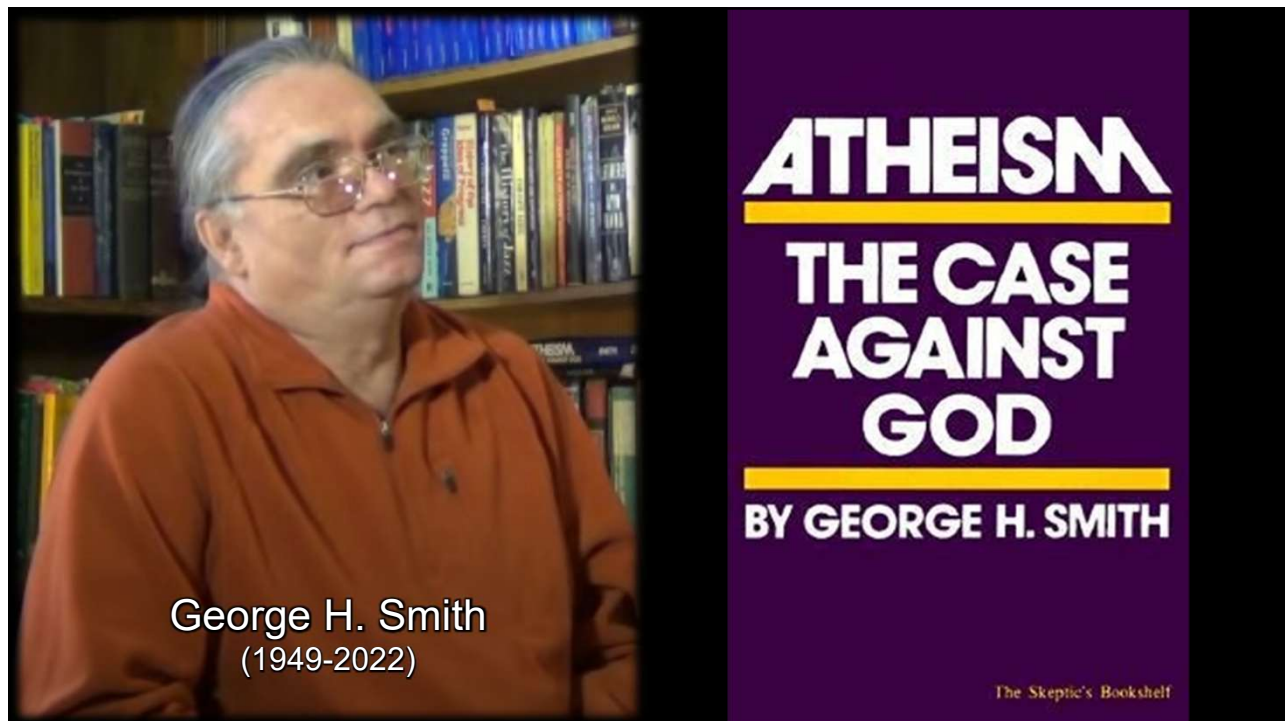
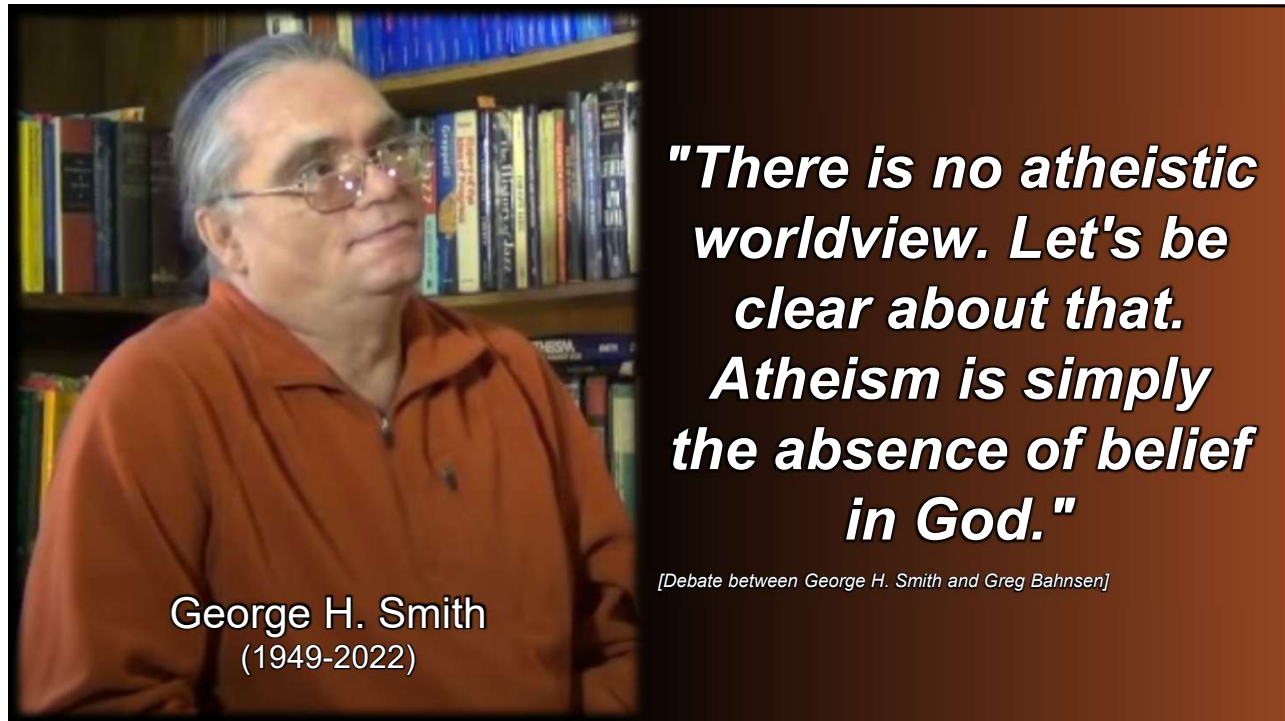



Atheism

the view that
says
"God does
not exist."





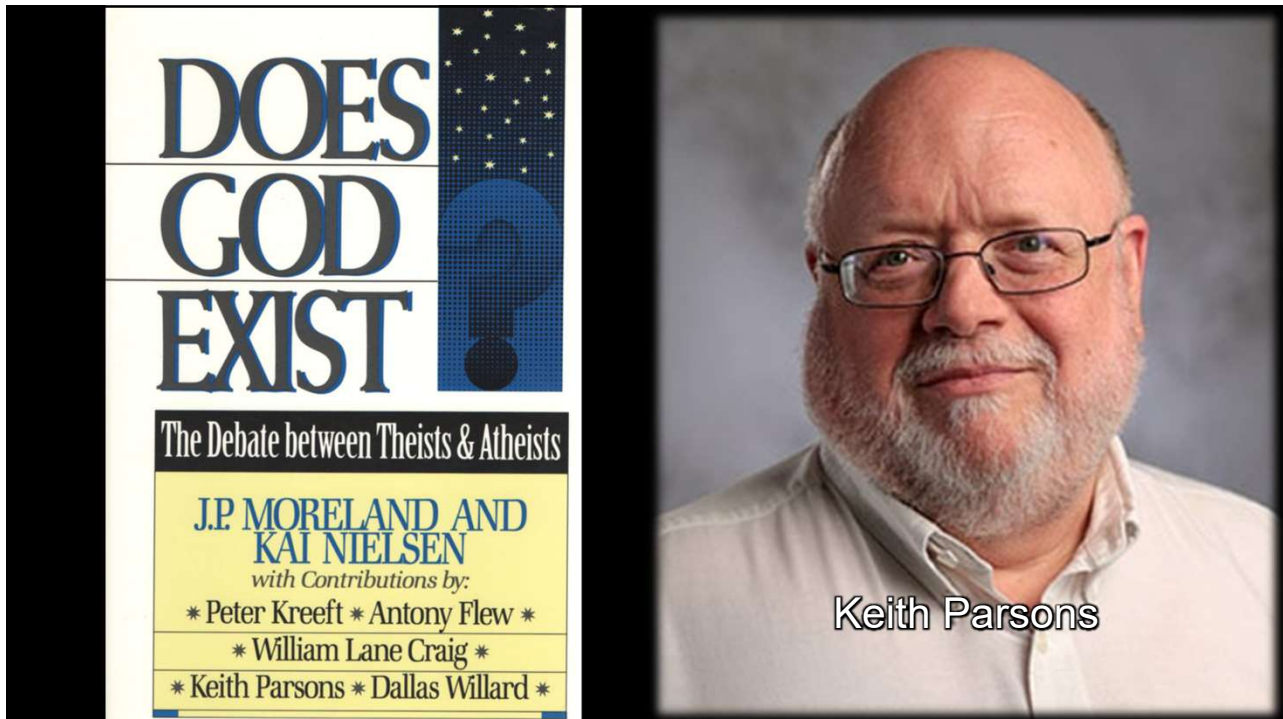




George H. Smith
(1949-2022)

"Atheism, in its basic form, is not a belief: **it is the absence of belief.** An atheist is not primarily a person who believes that a god does not exist; rather, he does not believe in the existence of God."

[George H. Smith, *Atheism: The Case Against God* (Buffalo: Prometheus, 1989), 7]



**DOES
GOD
EXIST**

The Debate between Theists & Atheists

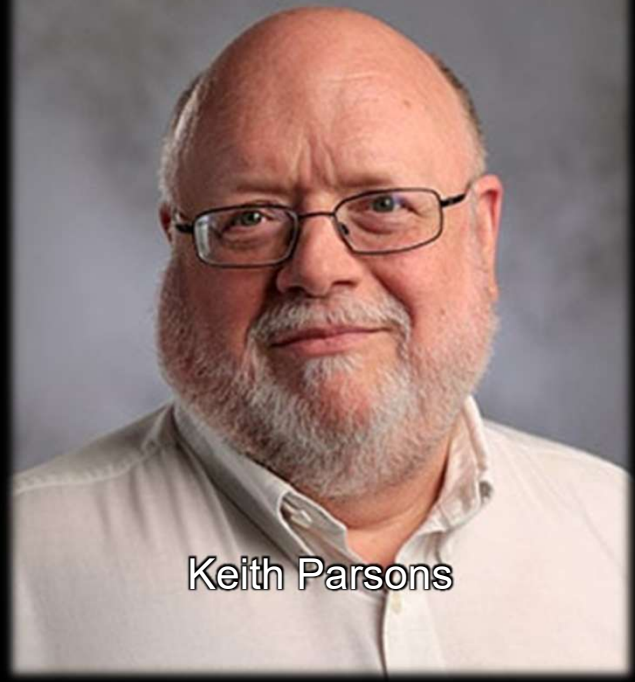
**J.P. MORELAND AND
KAI NIELSEN**
with Contributions by:

- * Peter Kreeft * Antony Flew *
- * William Lane Craig *
- * Keith Parsons * Dallas Willard *

Keith Parsons

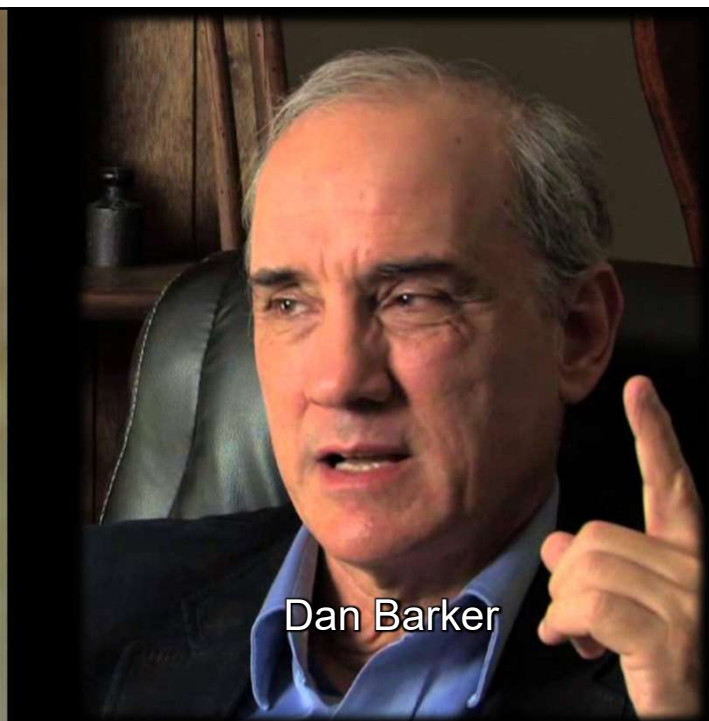
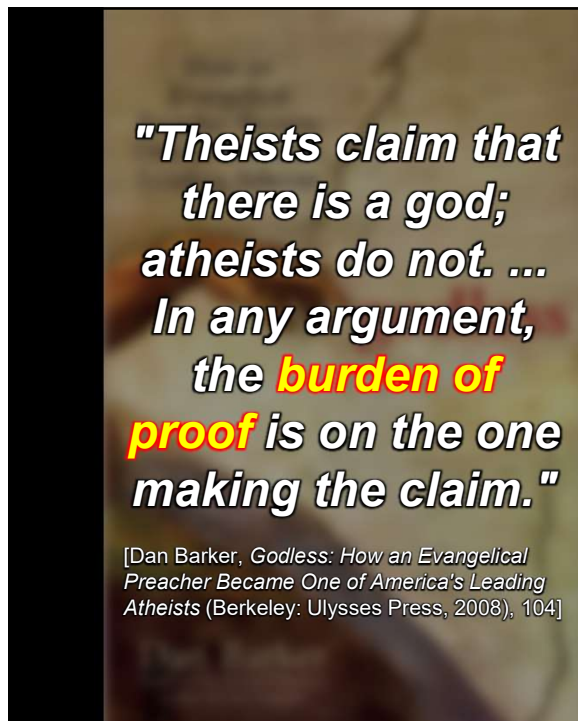
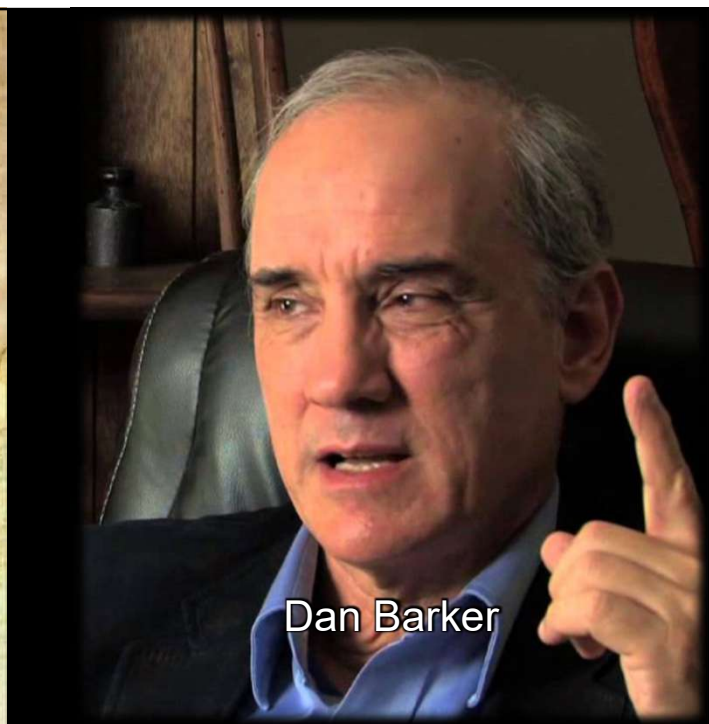
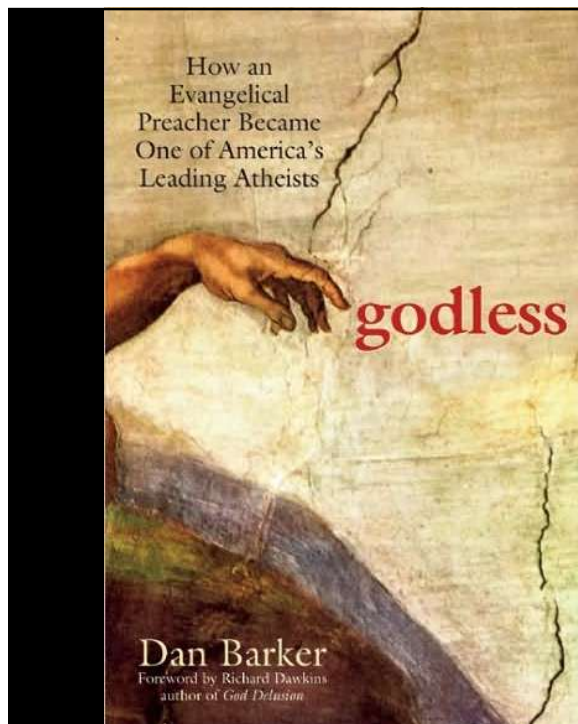
"After all, 'atheism' means simply **the lack of belief in God (and not, as is commonly supposed, the denial of God's existence)."**

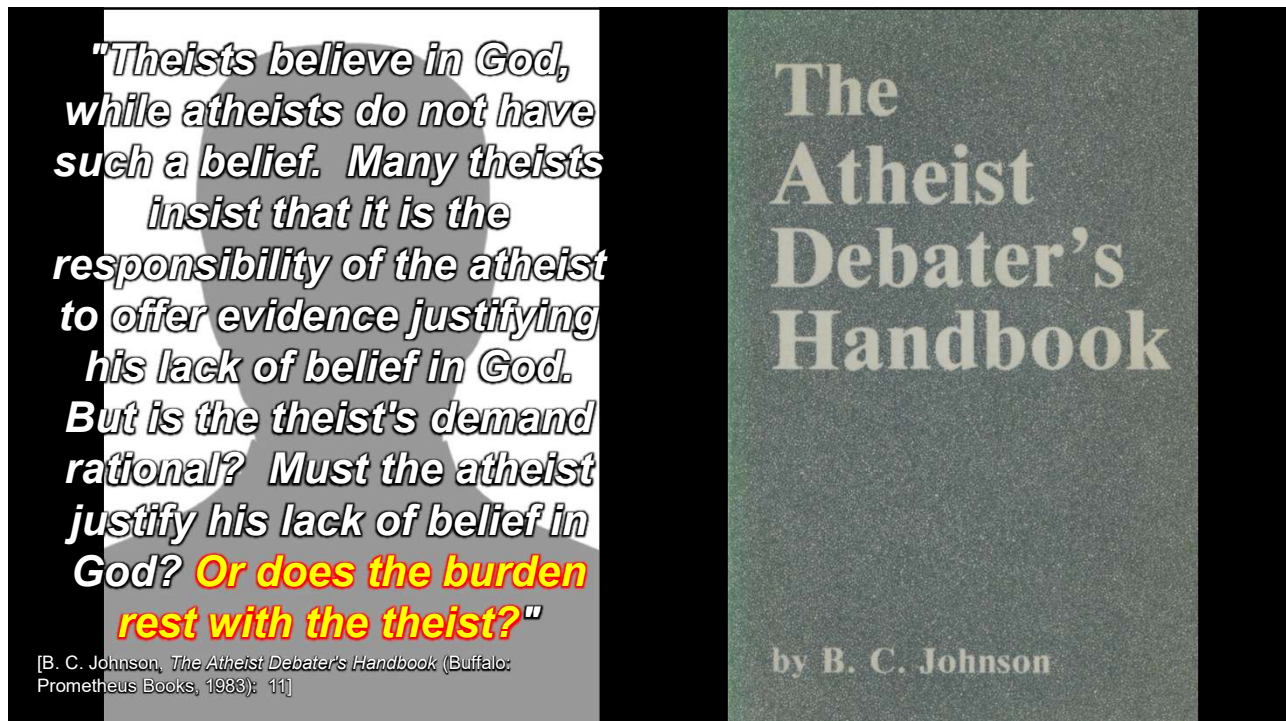
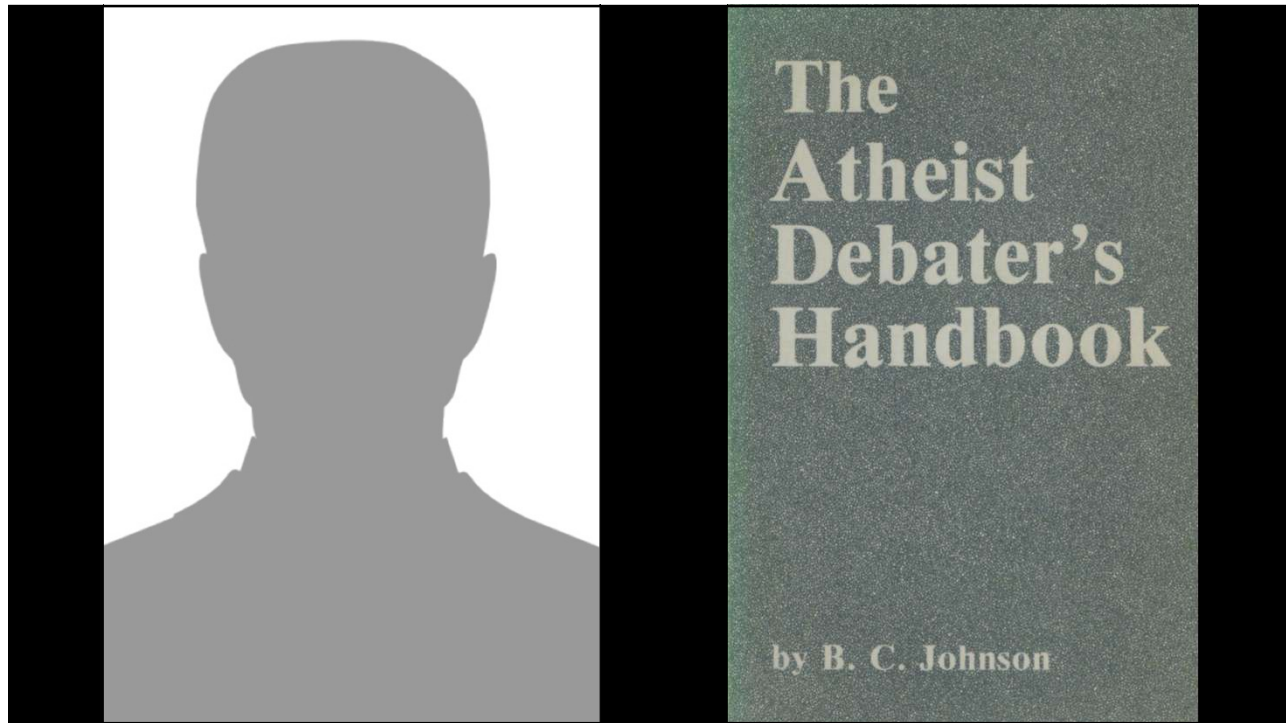
[J. P. Moreland and Kai Nielsen *Does God Exist? The Great Debate* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1990): 179 republished as *Does God Exist? The Debate Between Theists and Atheists* (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1993): 179]

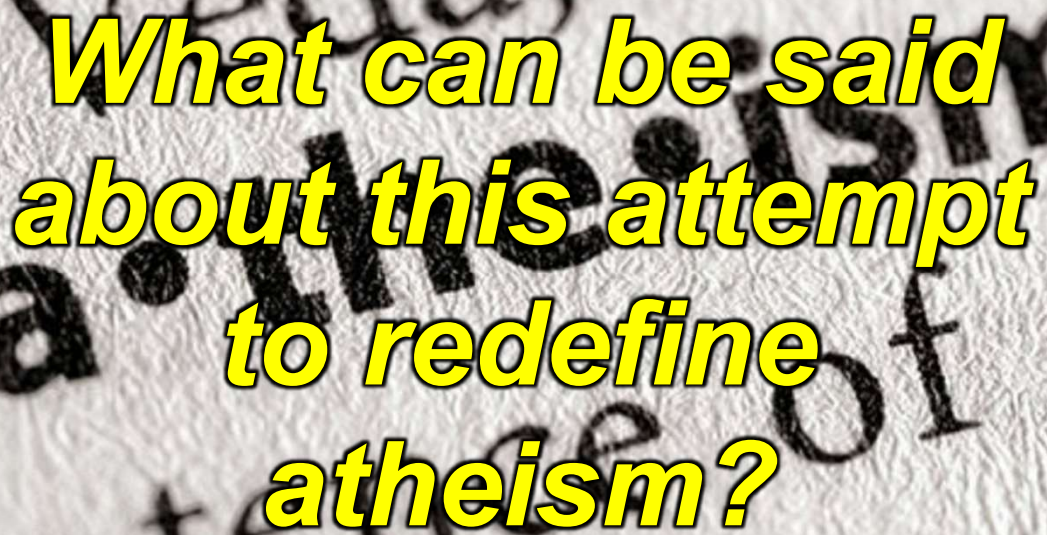


Keith Parsons


What's at stake in the definition of atheism?



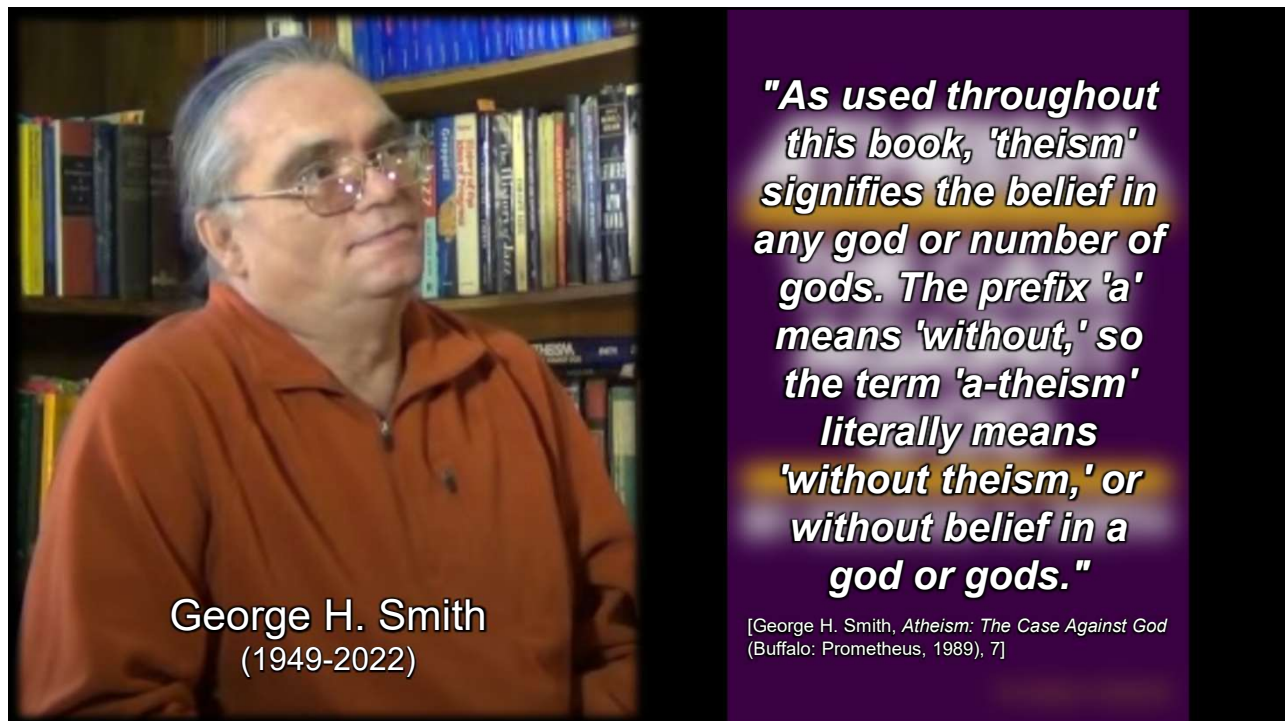
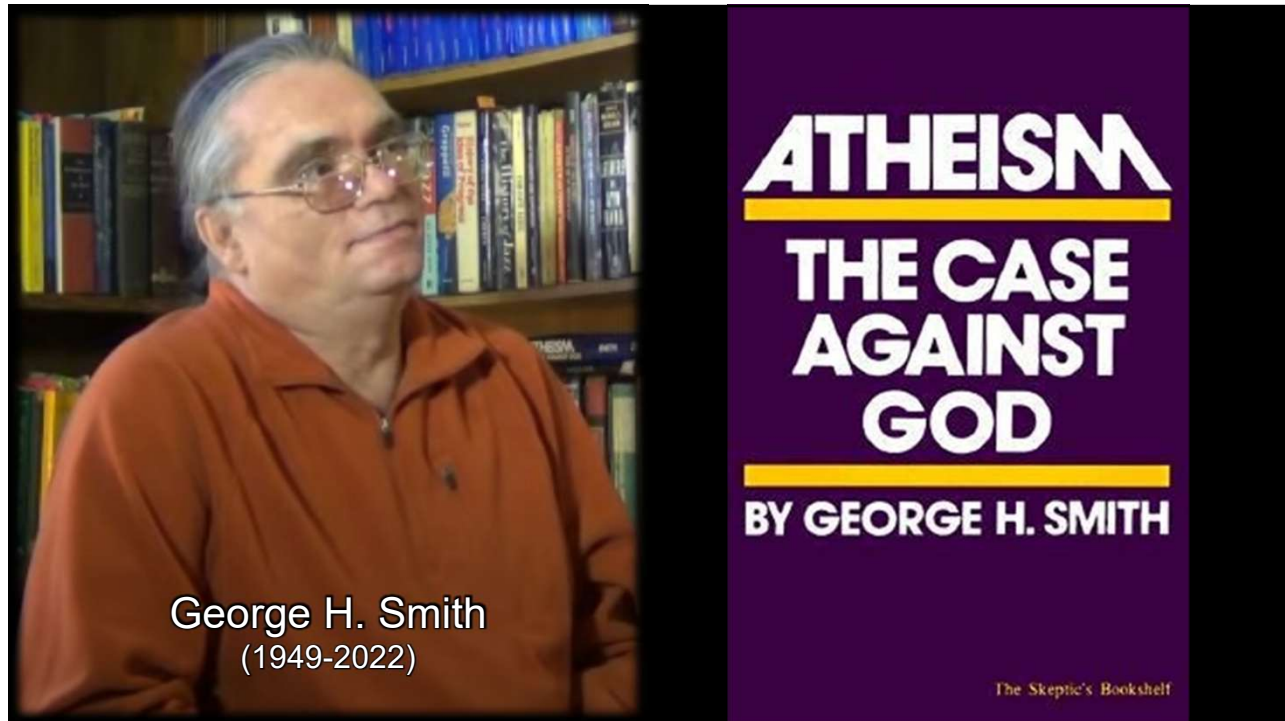




***What can be said
about this attempt
to redefine
atheism?***



***First, some atheists
are using verbal
sight of hand when
they define atheism.***

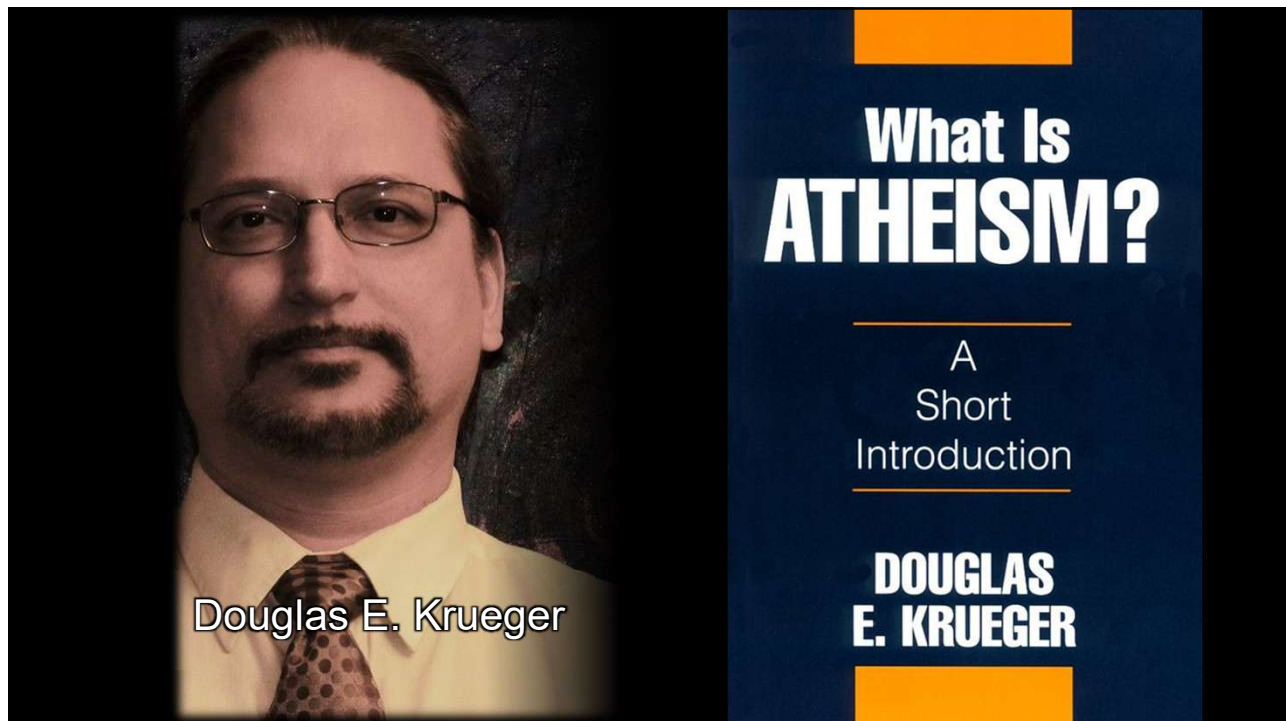


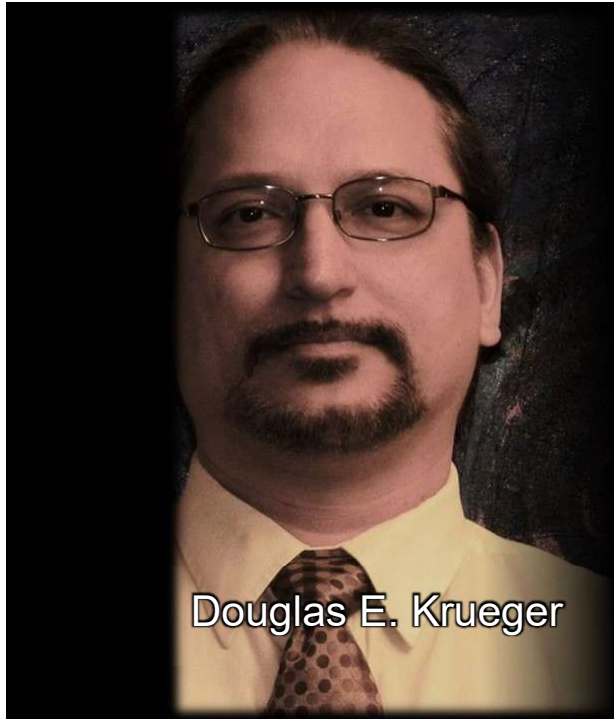
Granted that the suffix "ism" constitutes a belief system, Smith still illicitly has the negation "a" negating "belief" rather than negating "God."

Thus, rather than
"no belief in a God"
 it should be
"a belief in no God."

"As used throughout this book, 'theism' signifies the belief in any god or number of gods. The prefix 'a' means 'without,' so the term 'a-theism' literally means 'without theism,' or without belief in a god or gods."

[George H. Smith, *Atheism: The Case Against God* (Buffalo: Prometheus, 1989), 7]





Douglas E. Krueger

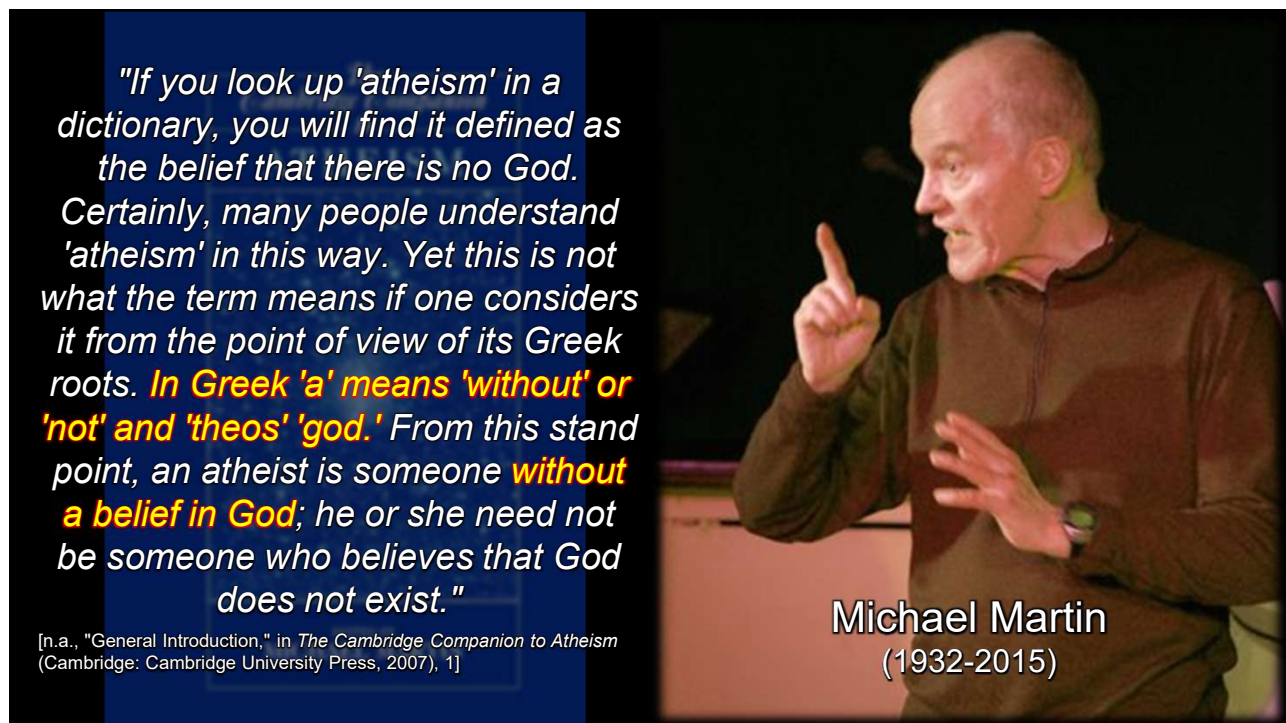
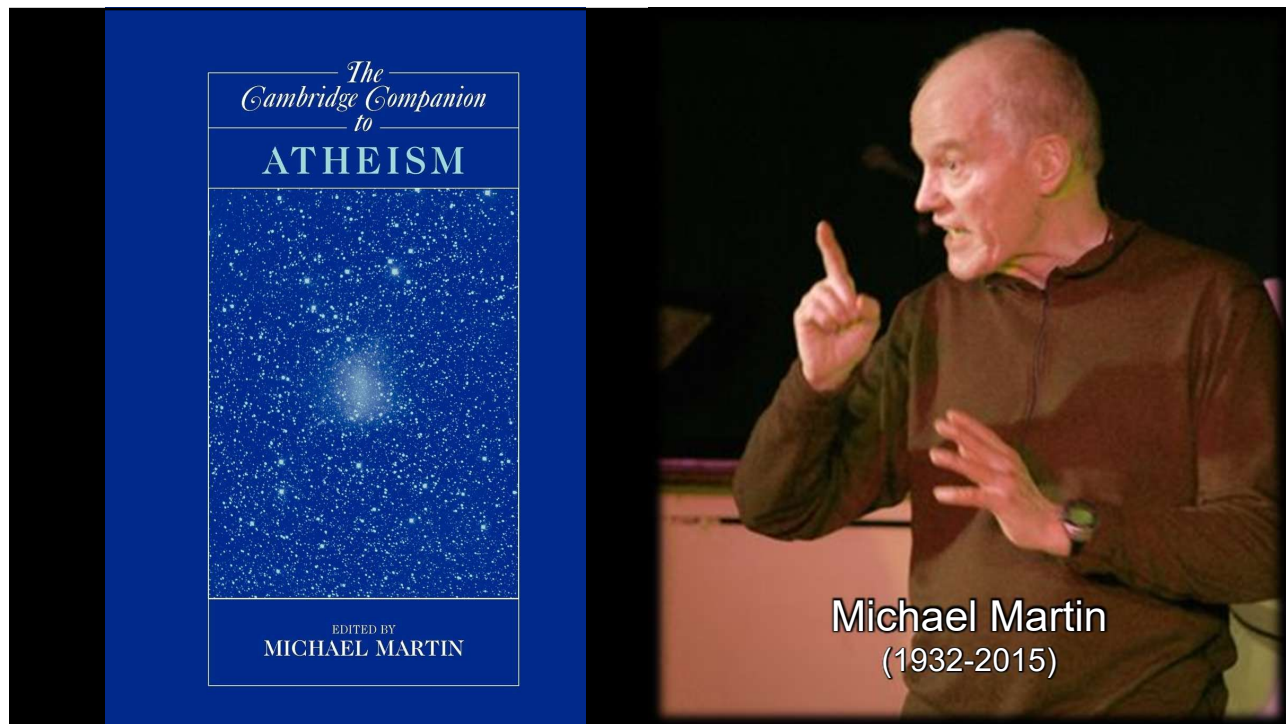
"The term 'atheism' is from the Greek *atheos*. The prefix **'a' means 'without,'** and the Greek *theos* means 'god,' so atheism means simply **'being without god.'** Theism asserts that there is a god, so atheism is the view which **does not assert that there is a god.**"

[Douglas E. Krueger, *What is Atheism? A Short Introduction* (Amherst: Prometheus, 1998), 17]

Notice that Krueger moves from the alpha **negating 'god'** (which would mean **'without god' or 'not-god'**) to the alpha negating the **assertion** (which means the absence of the assertion of god instead of the absence of god).

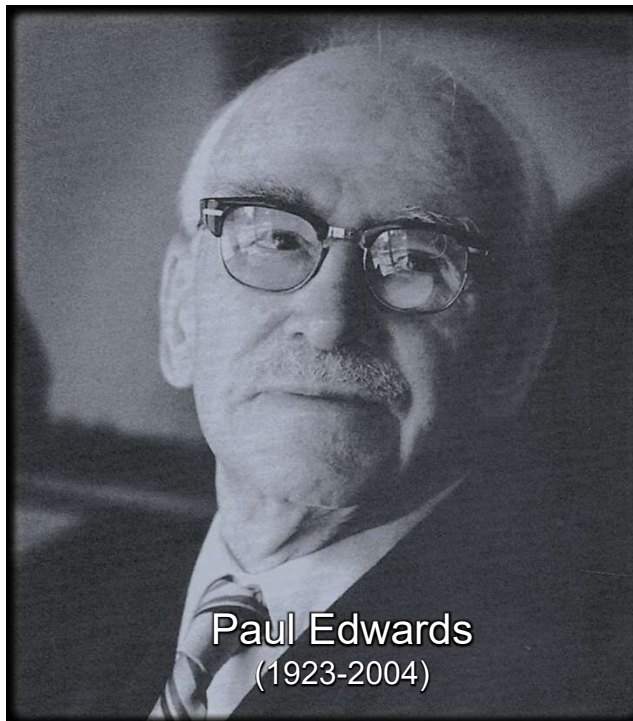
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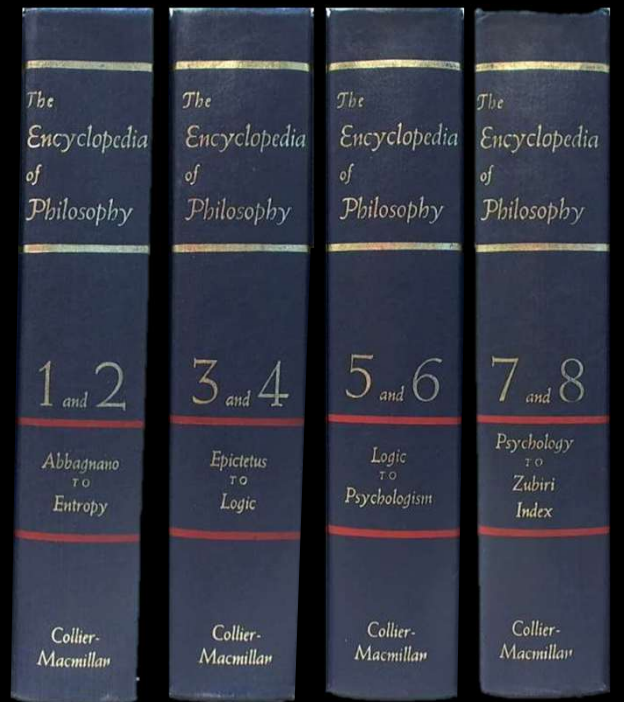


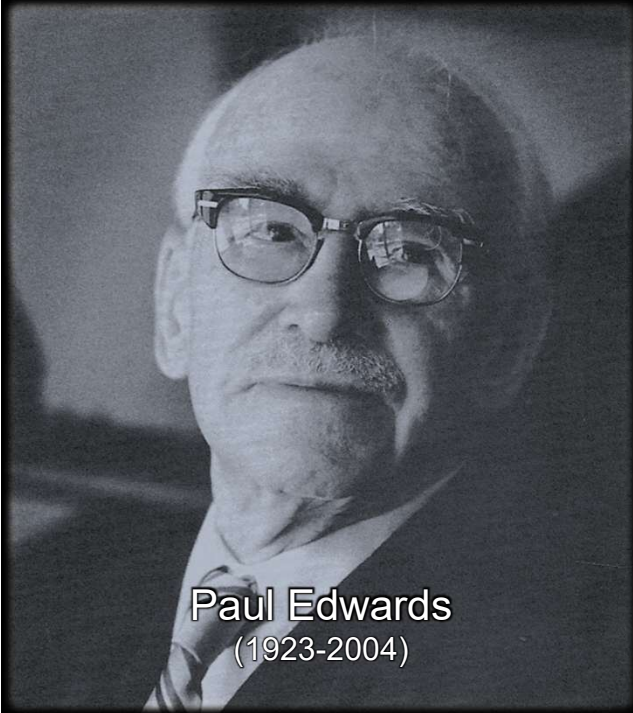


Second, this definition conflicts with the standard academic definition of atheism.



Paul Edwards
(1923-2004)

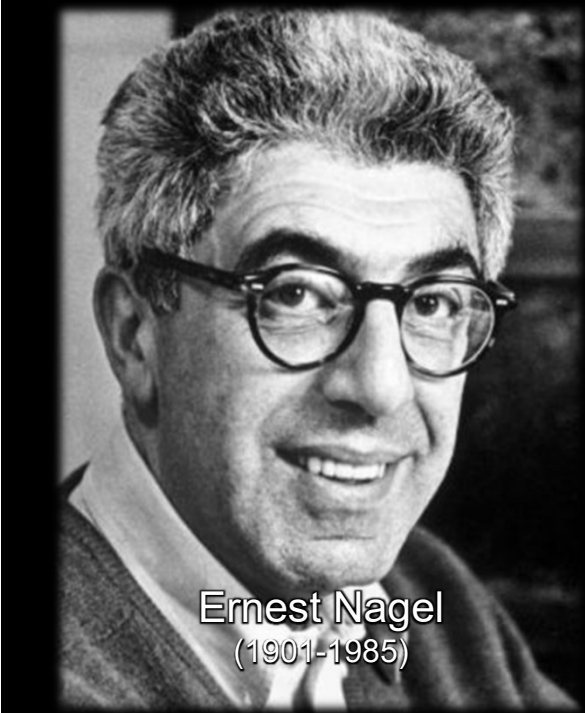




Paul Edwards
(1923-2004)

"According to the most usual definition, an 'atheist' is a person who maintains that there is no God, that is, that the sentence 'God exists' expresses a false proposition."

[Paul Edwards ed. in chief, *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1967): s.v. "Atheism," p. 175.]



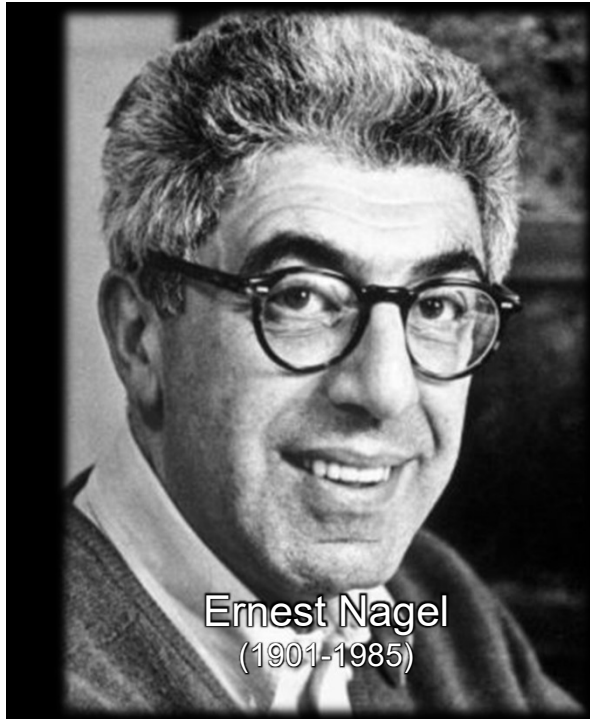
Ernest Nagel
(1901-1985)

**Critiques of
GOD**

**Making the case against
belief in God**

**Edited by
PETER A. ANGELES**

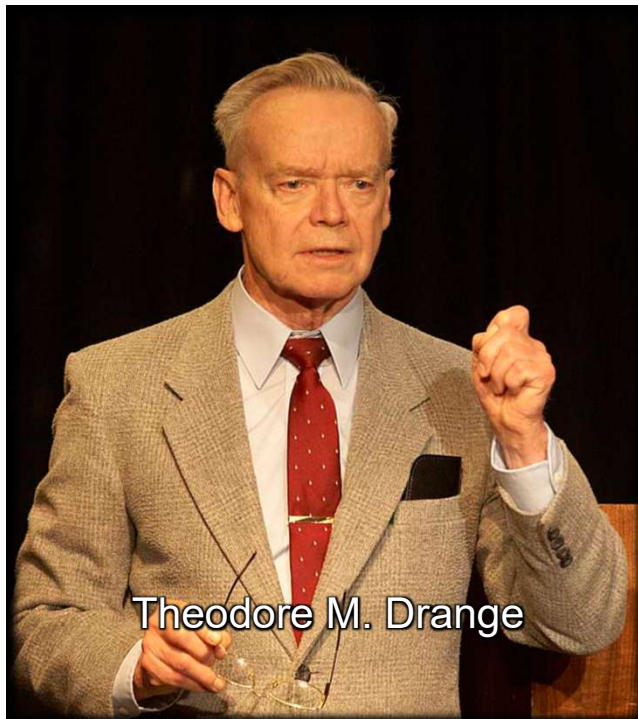
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MICHAEL SCRIVEN



Ernest Nagel
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"[A]theism is not to be identified with sheer unbelief.... A child who has received no religious instruction ... is not an atheist—for he is not denying any theistic claims."

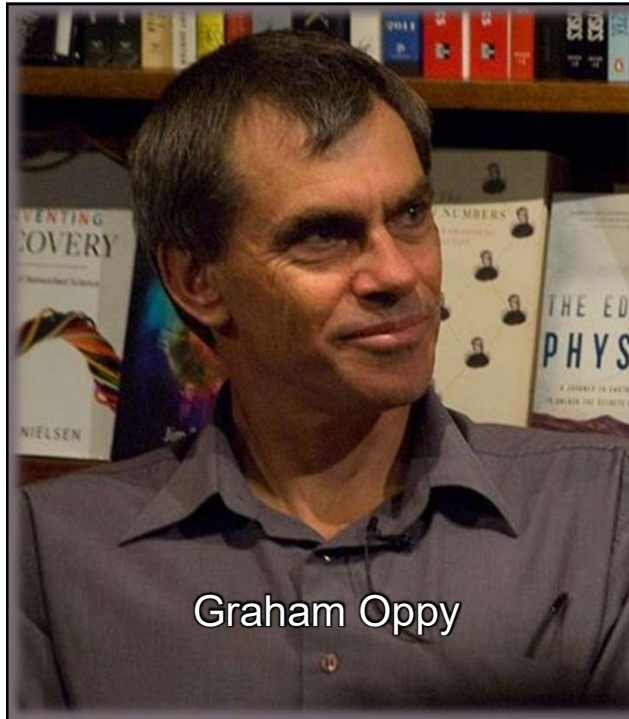
[Ernest Nagel, "Philosophical Concepts of Atheism" in *Critiques of God: Making the Case Against Belief in God*, Peter A. Angeles, ed. pp. 4-5]



Theodore M. Drange

"Is the proposition that God exists true or false? You are a theist if and only if you say that the proposition is true or probably true, you are an atheist if and only if you say that it is false or probably false, and you are an agnostic if and only if you understand what the proposition is, but resist giving either answer, and support your resistance by saying, 'The evidence is insufficient' (or words to that effect)."

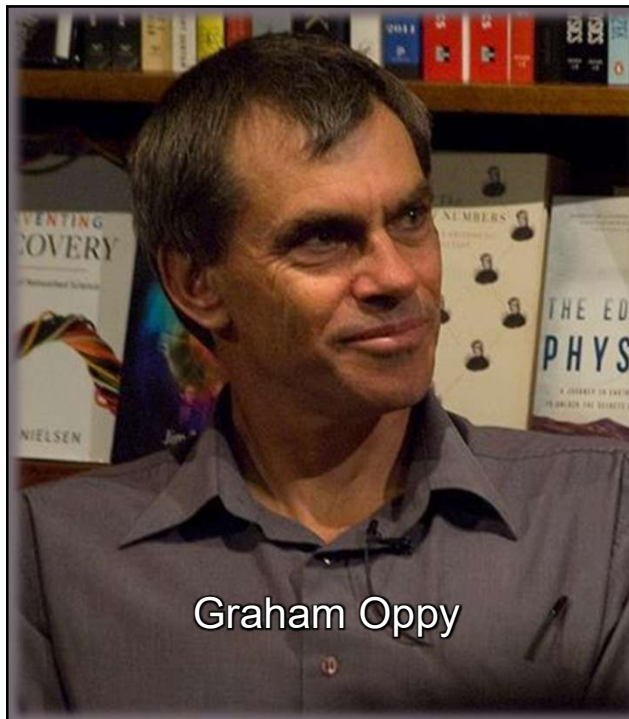
[Theodore M. Drange "Atheism, Agnosticism, Noncognitivism," from https://infidels.org/library/modern/theodore_drange/definition.html, accessed 01/15/19]



Graham Oppy

"Properly, we should define theism as the view that there's at least one god and atheism as the view that there are no gods, and monotheism then as the view that there is exactly one God and we call that one God with a capital 'G'. Atheists then are people who believe that there are no gods and particular in our context, they believe that God doesn't exist.

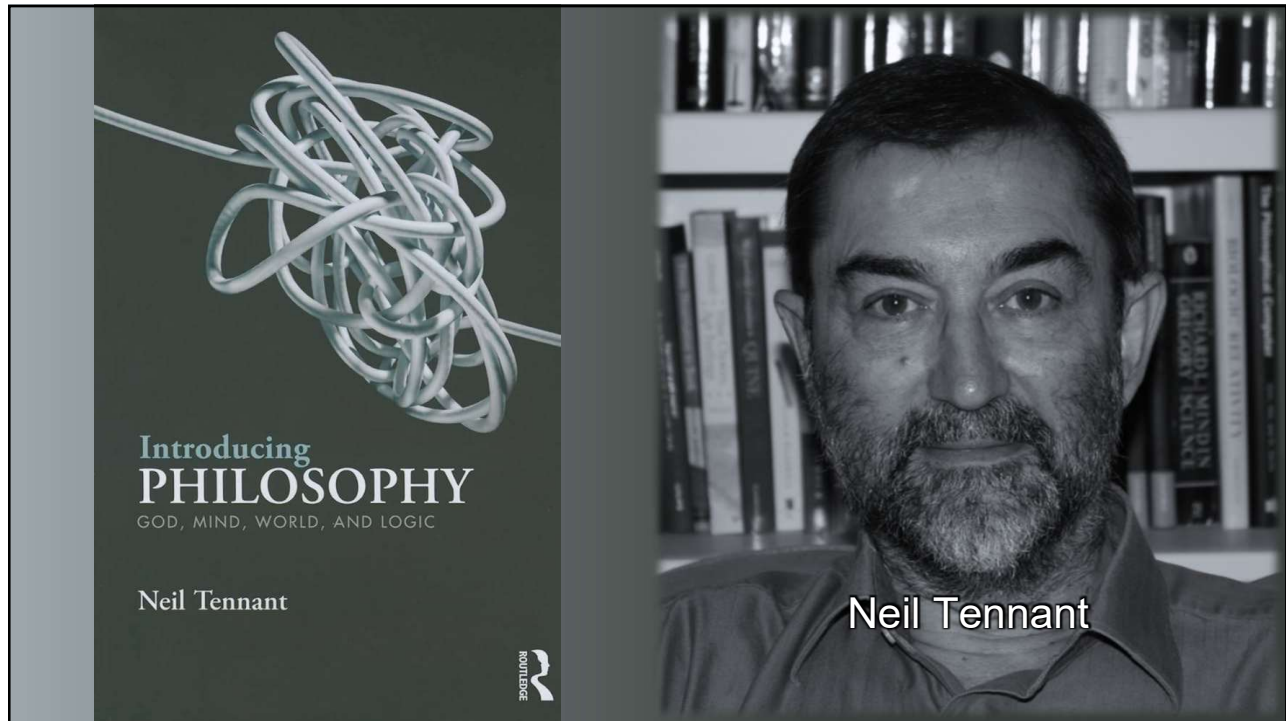
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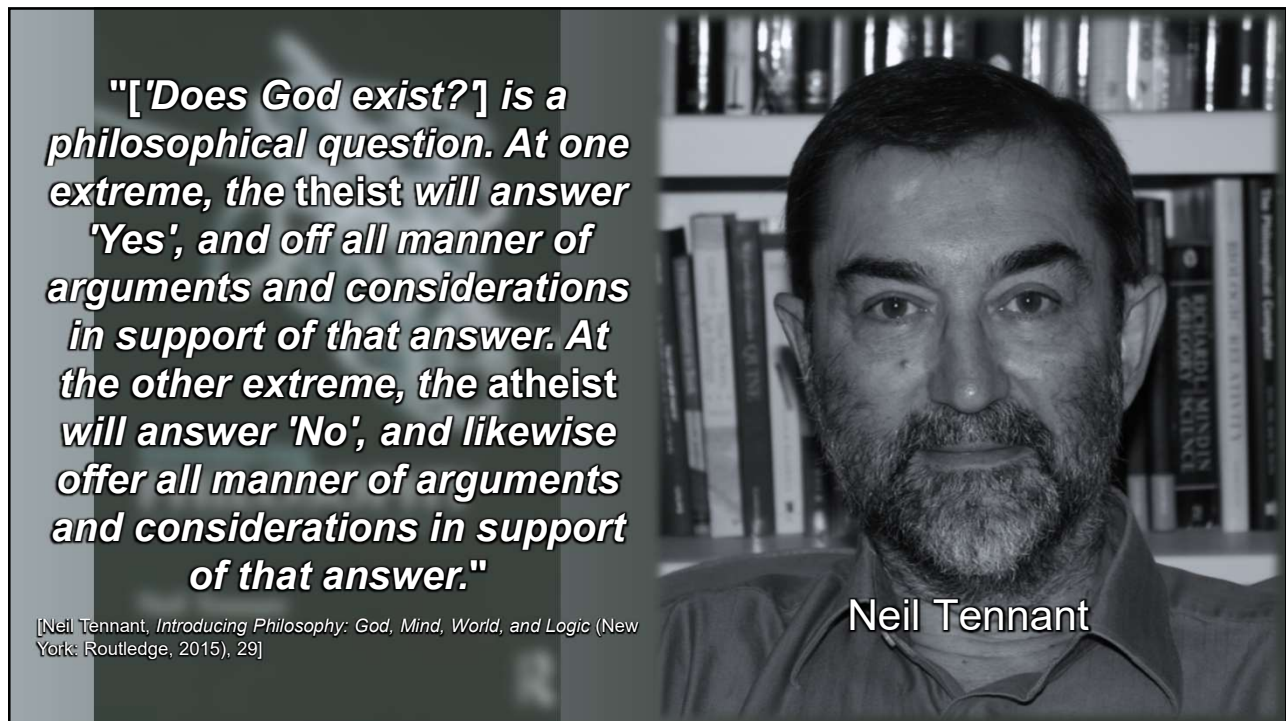
Graham Oppy

"Other people like to say that atheism is just lacking the belief that God exists which lumps together ... the class of agnostics with the class of atheists; if you define it that way, which I don't like."

[Graham Oppy vs. Ben Arbour, "The Ontological Argument" on *Capturing Christianity*; YouTube video <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=udxfuPgq4TY>, @1:05:20, accessed 06/13/22]



Neil Tennant



Neil Tennant

[Neil Tennant, *Introducing Philosophy: God, Mind, World, and Logic* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 29]



Third, this definition entails an absurdity if not an outright contradiction.



The absurdity is that atheism could be true and God still exist. In other words, atheism would be indifferent to the question of God's existence.



Popular Atheism



The "New" Atheism

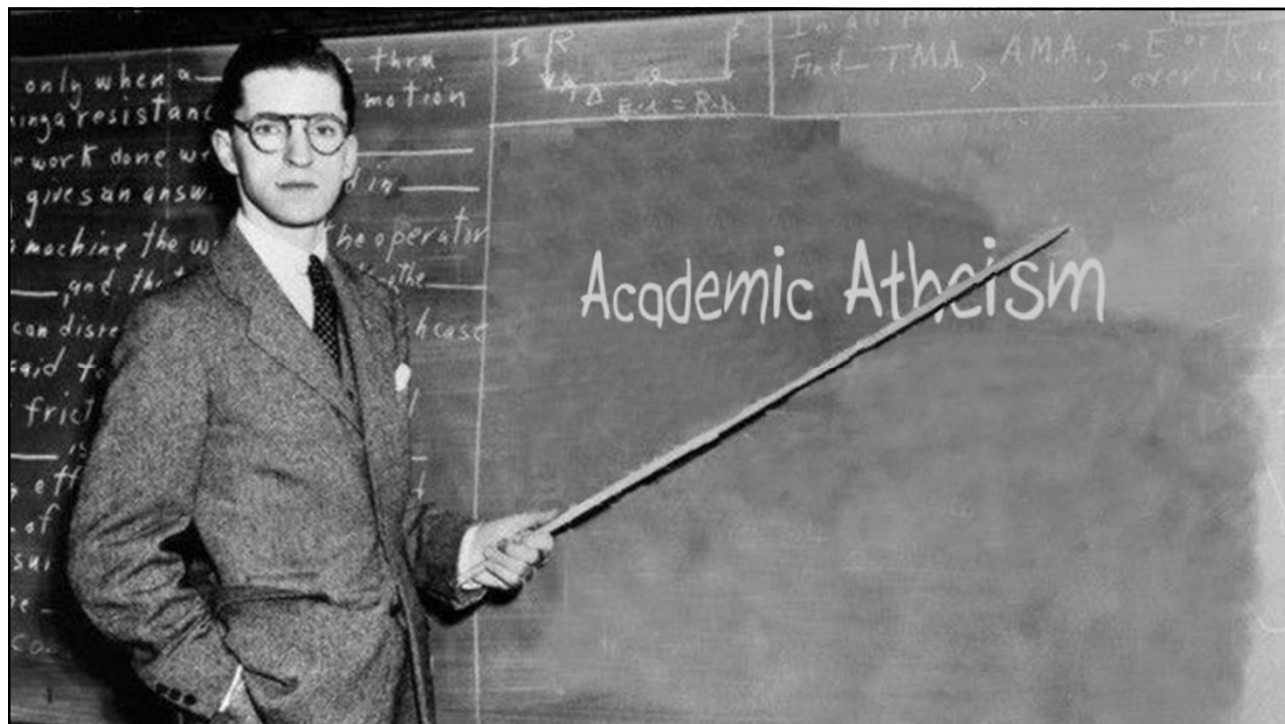


Richard Dawkins

Sam Harris

Daniel Dennett

Christopher Hitchens



What Is Popular Atheism?



The term 'popular' here does not mean that it is well liked or well known.



Rather, in this context, 'popular' is in contrast to 'scholarly.'



It means that the writing is for a more general audience instead of the experts or technicians in the field.



As such, it requires of the reader less background knowledge and is generally free of technical terminology.





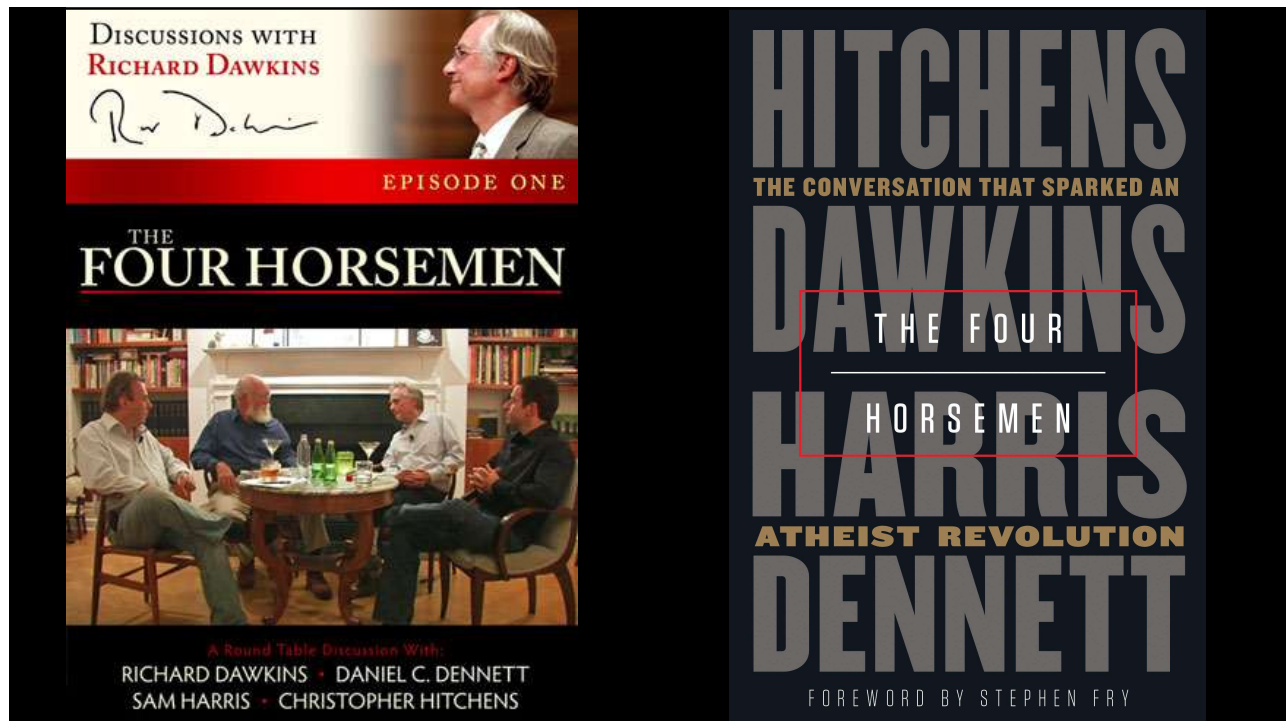
The expression "New Atheism" refers to an atheism characterized by the influences of four main figures:

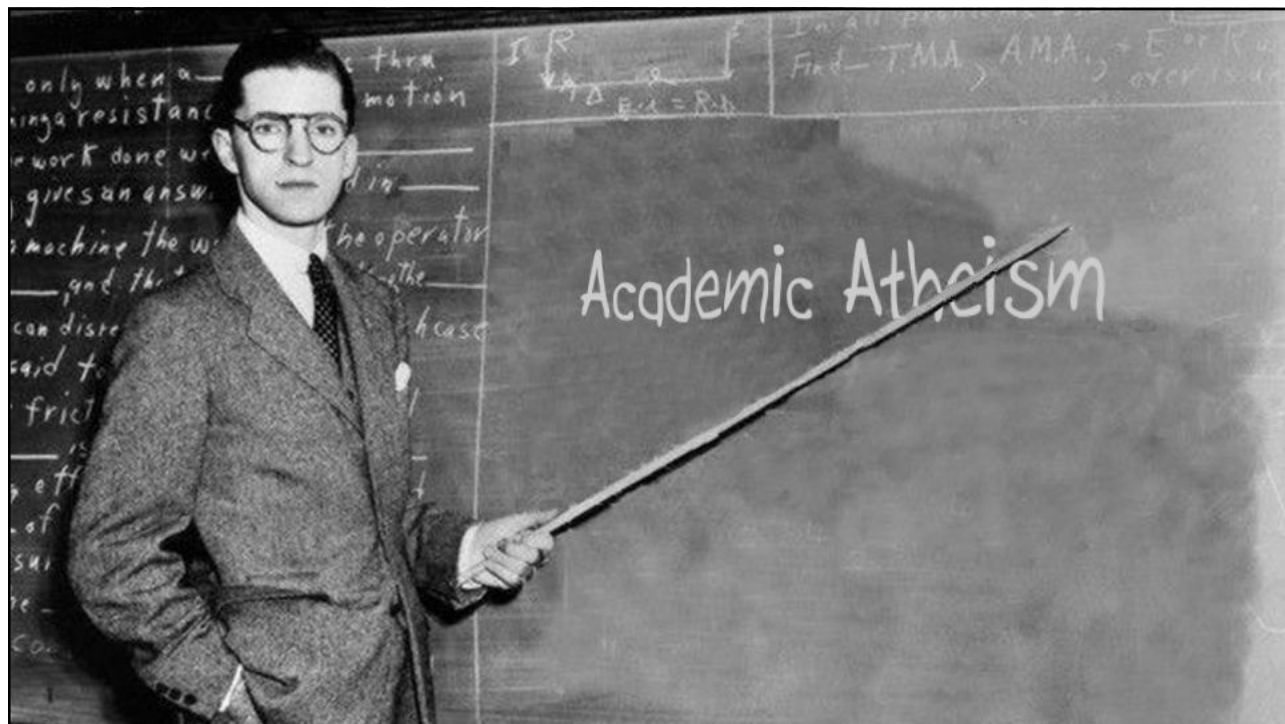
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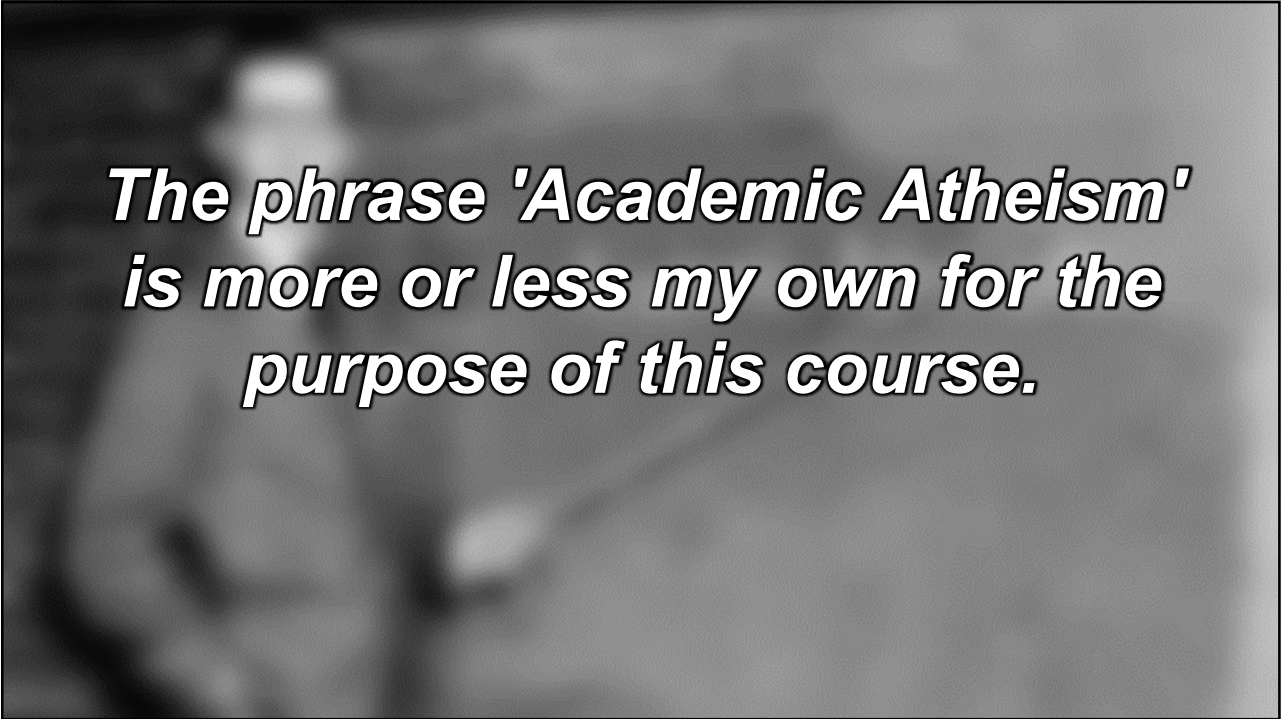
These "apostles" of the New Atheism sometimes refer to themselves as "The Four Horsemen," an obvious reference to the four horsemen of the Book of Revelation.

It is now the name of a CD you can purchase from Richard Dawkins' website as well as the title of a book.

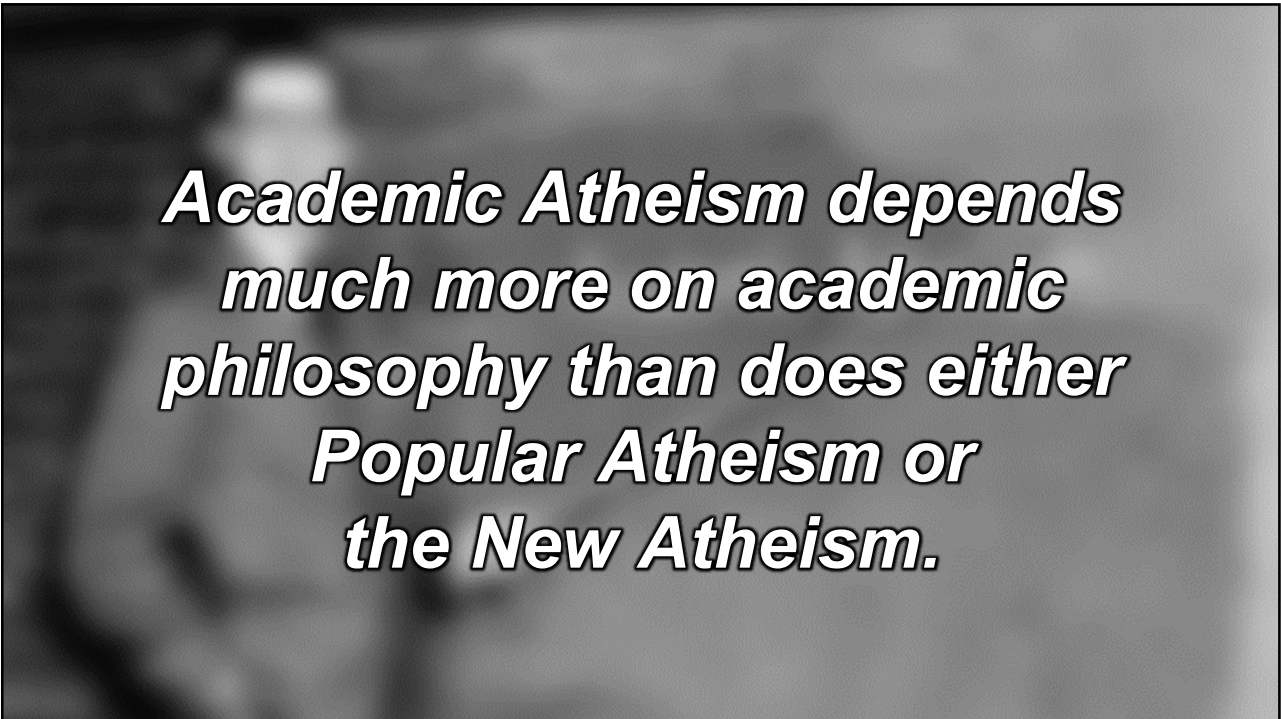




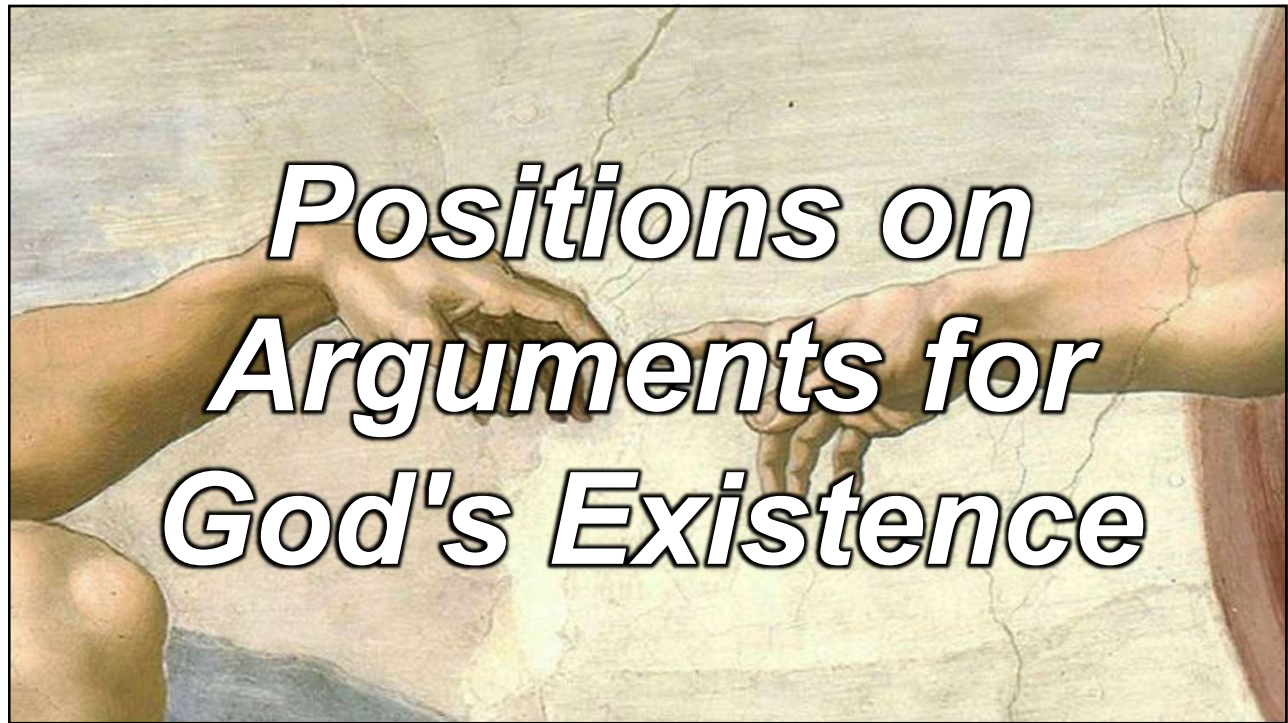
What Is the Academic Atheism?



The phrase 'Academic Atheism' is more or less my own for the purpose of this course.



Academic Atheism depends much more on academic philosophy than does either Popular Atheism or the New Atheism.



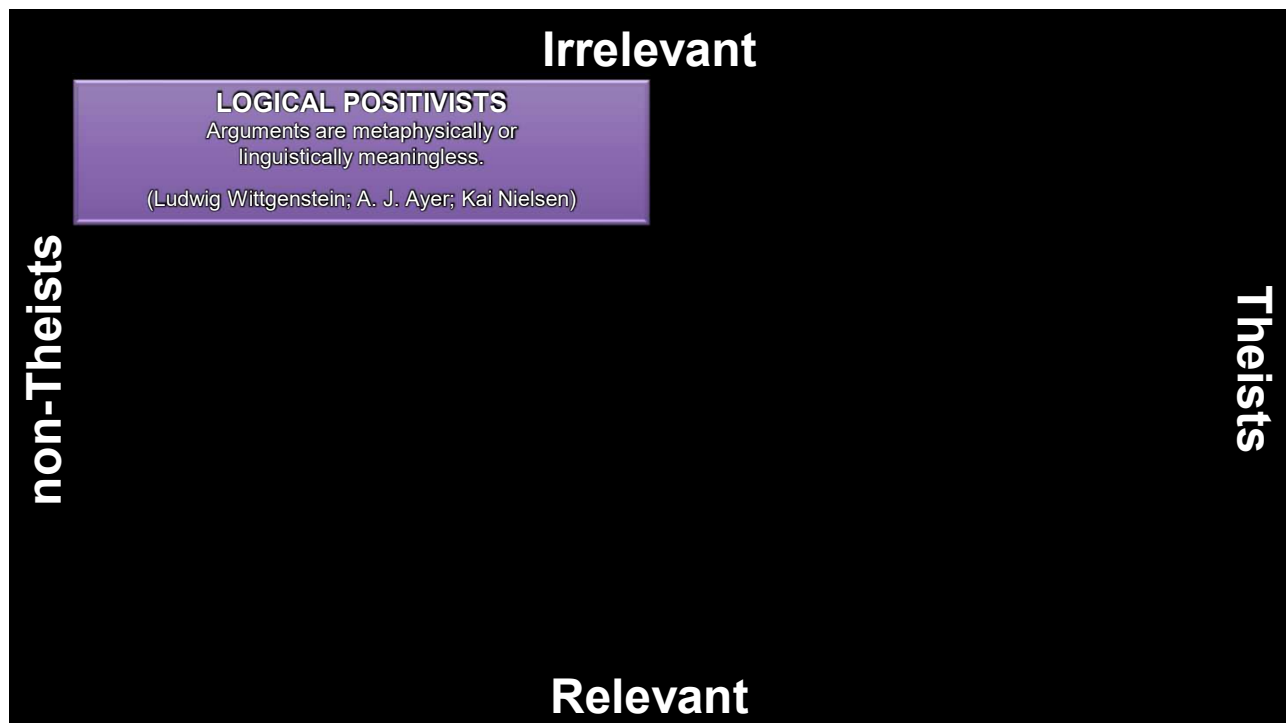
Positions on Arguments for God's Existence

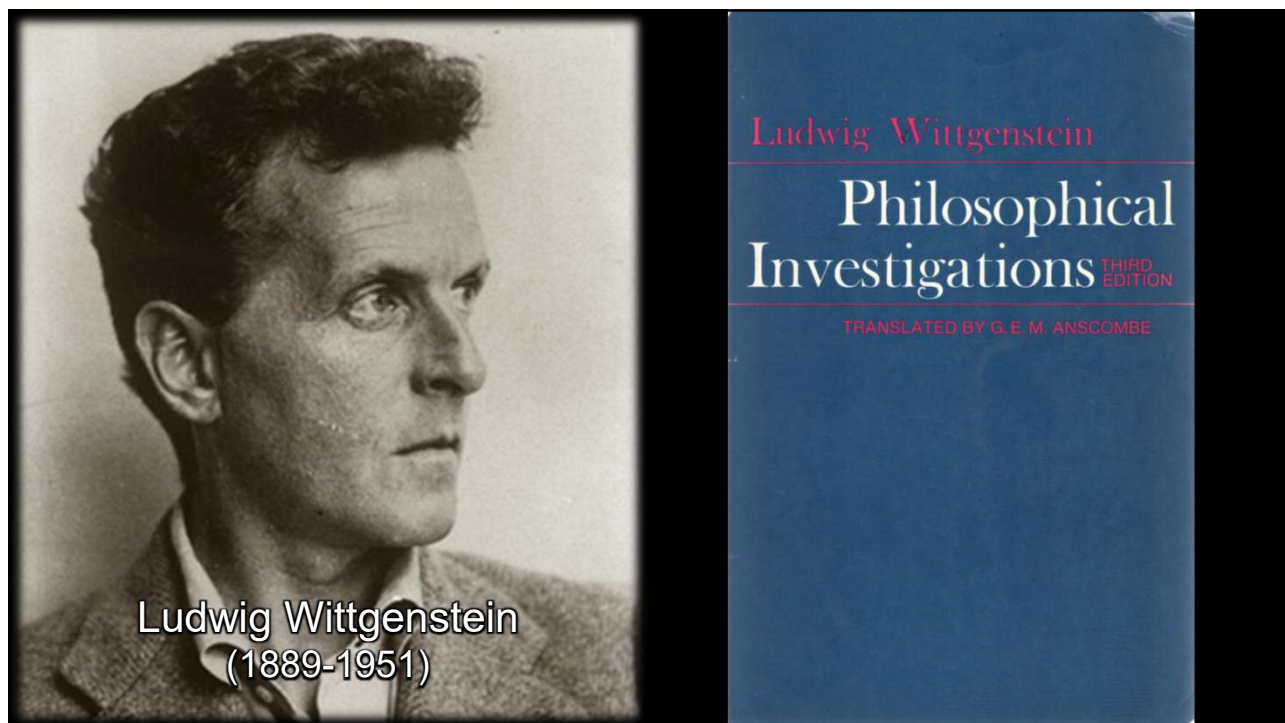
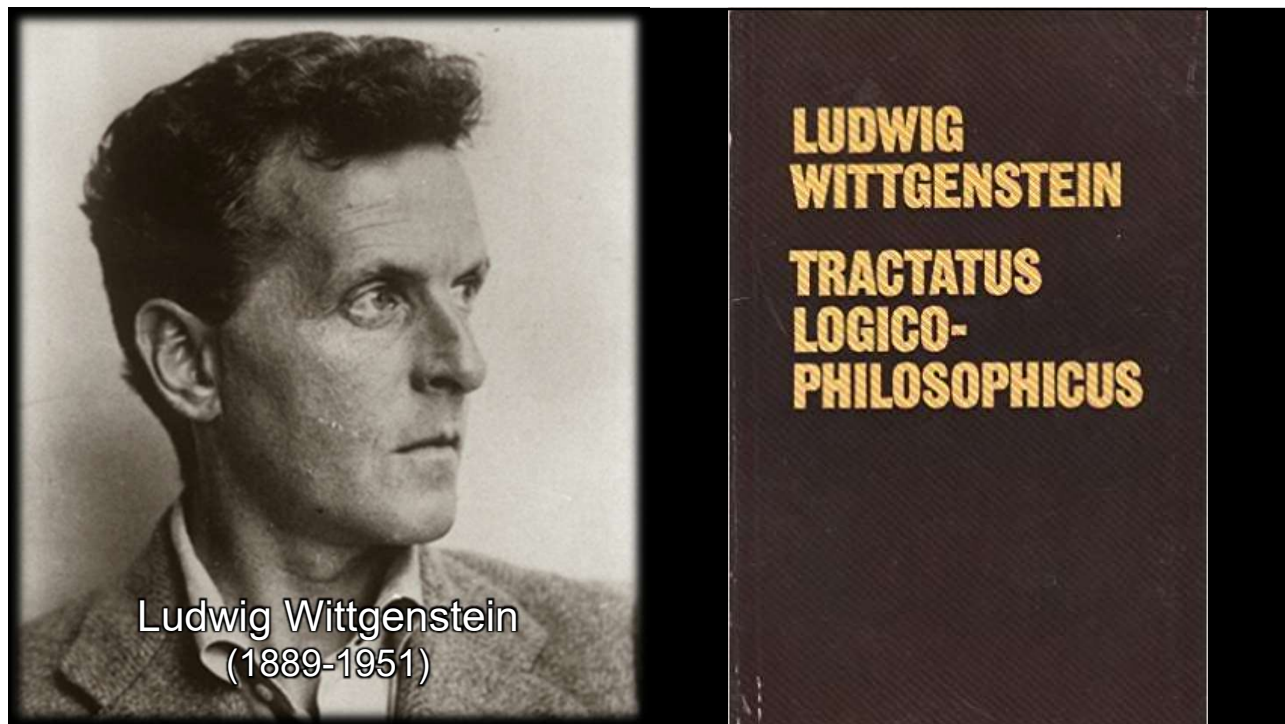
***Perhaps it is not surprising that
there are different views on
whether or how there is any
relevance for the arguments for
the existence of God.***

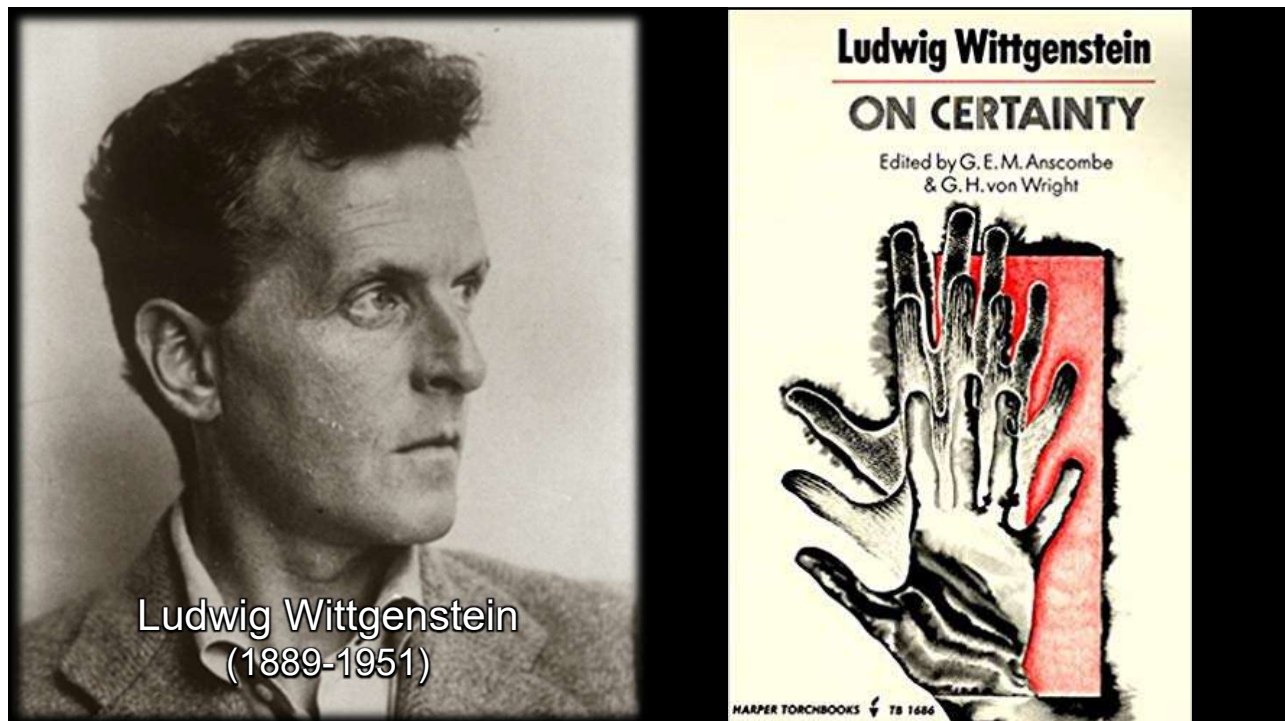
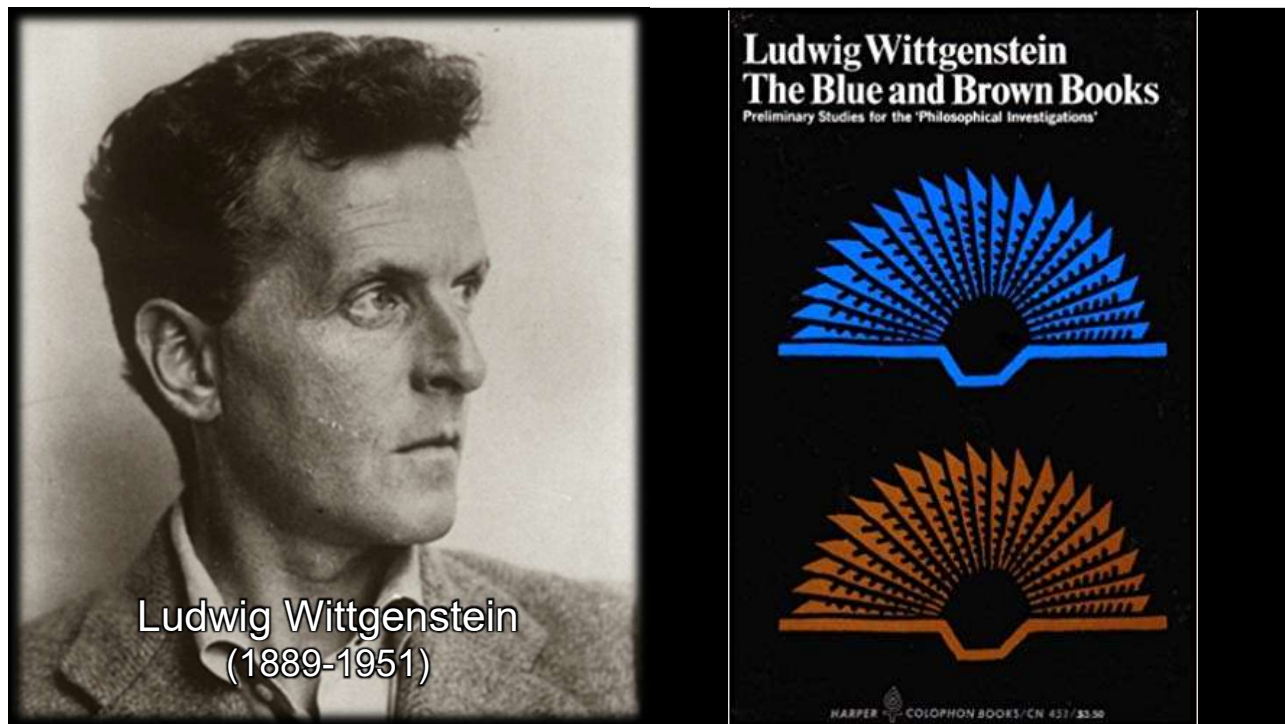
It might be surprising to some, however, that the different views do not fall along the lines of theists and non-theists.

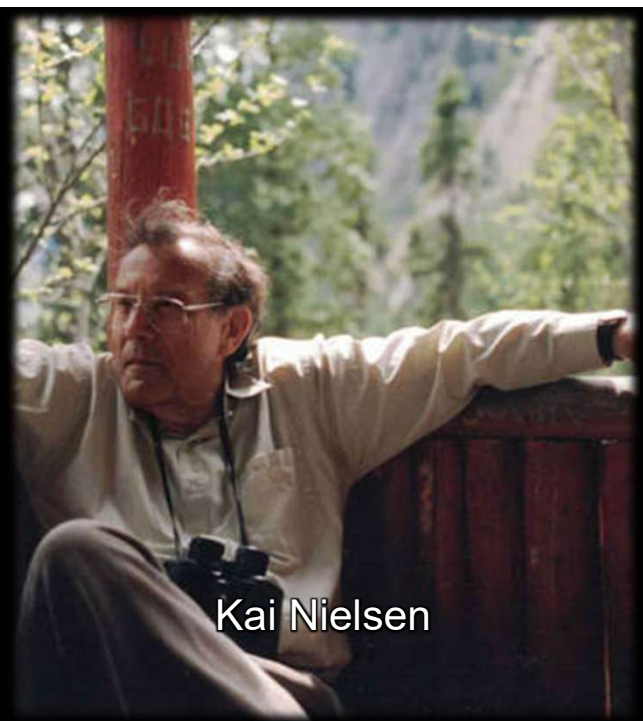
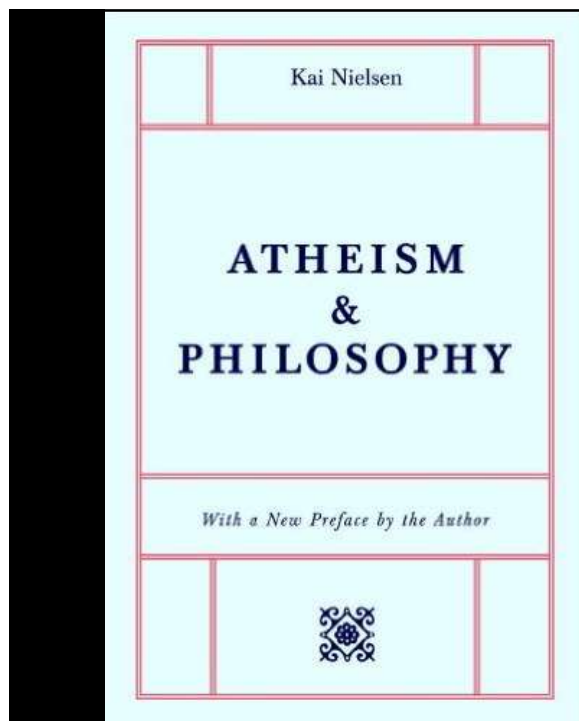
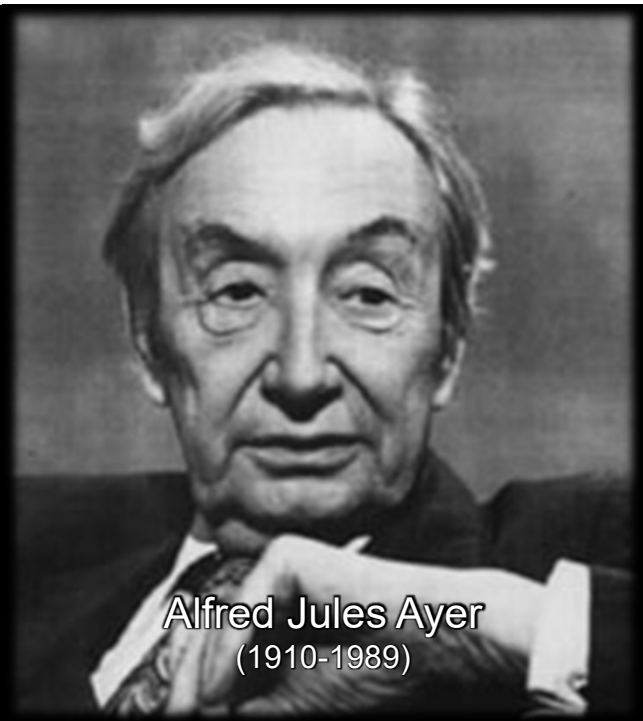
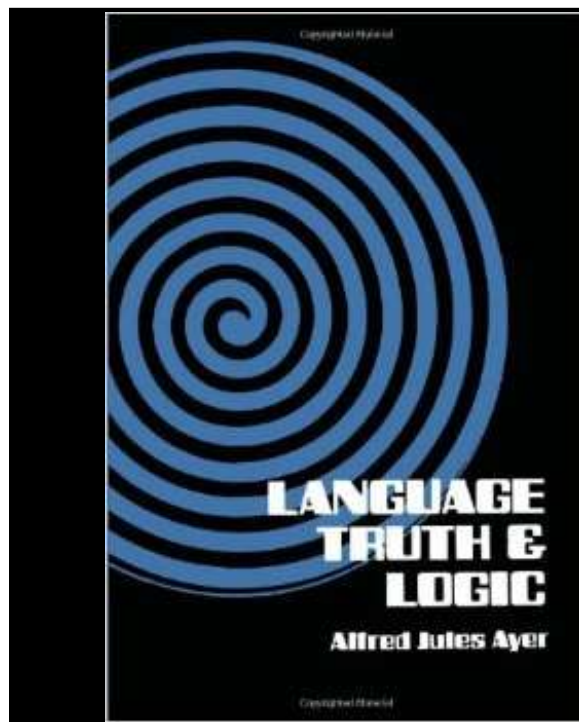
In combining the options of theists and non-theists together with the options of relevant and irrelevant we get these results.

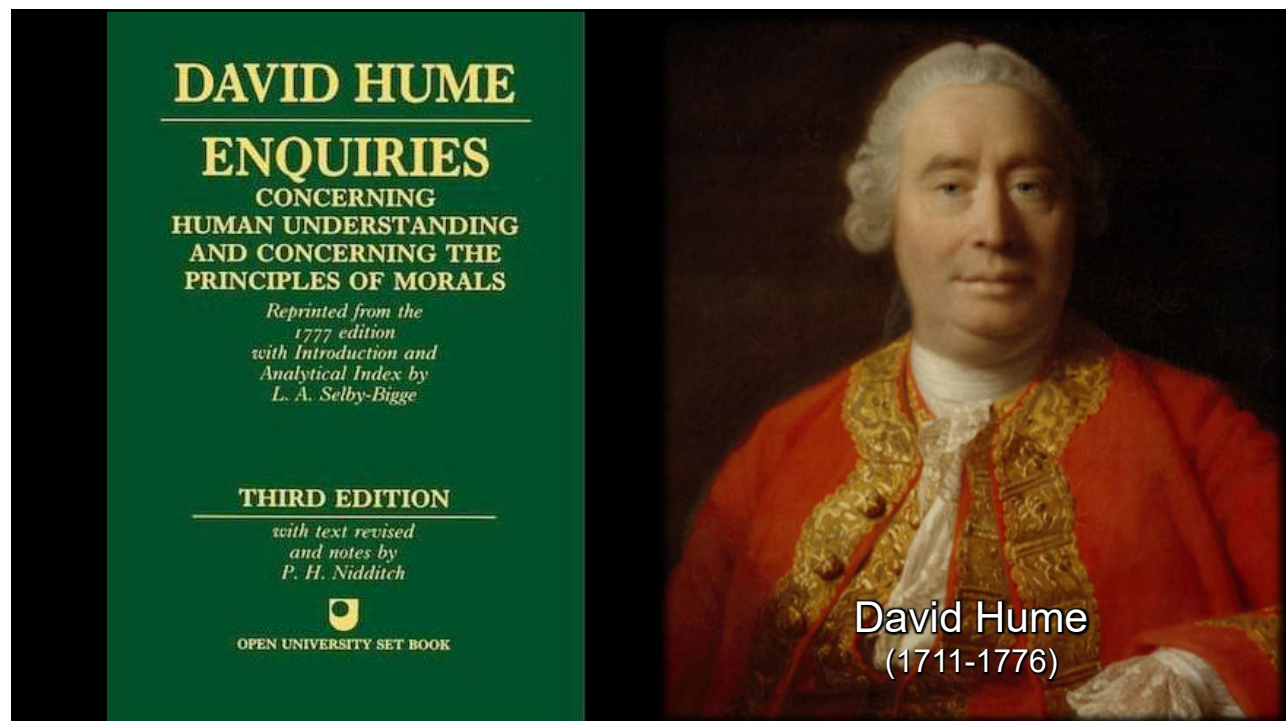
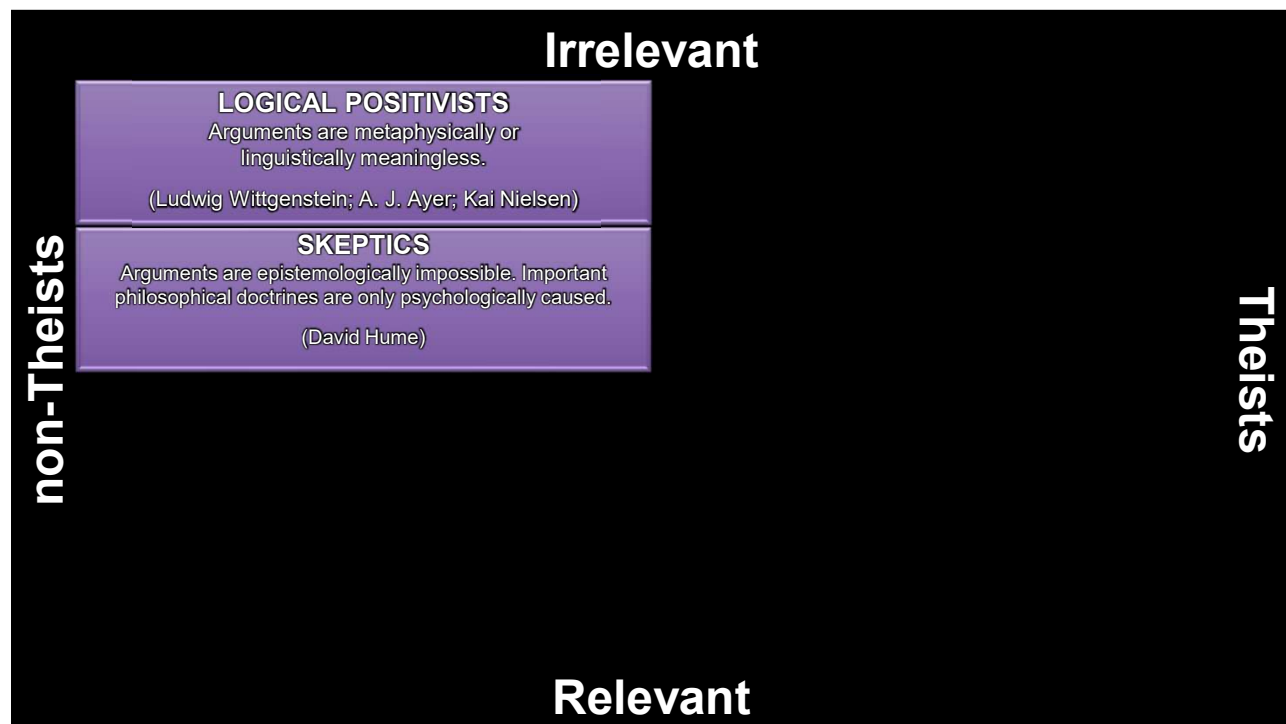
non-Theists / Irrelevant	Theists / Irrelevant
non-Theists / Relevant	Theists / Relevant

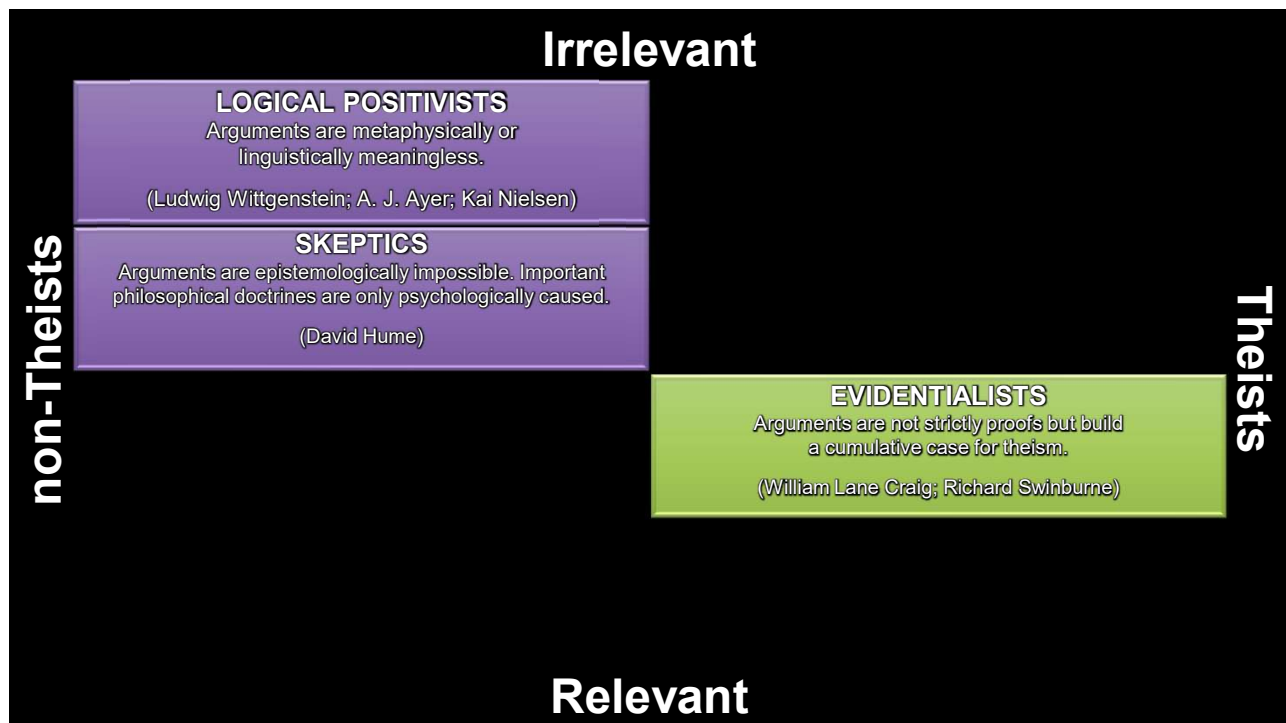
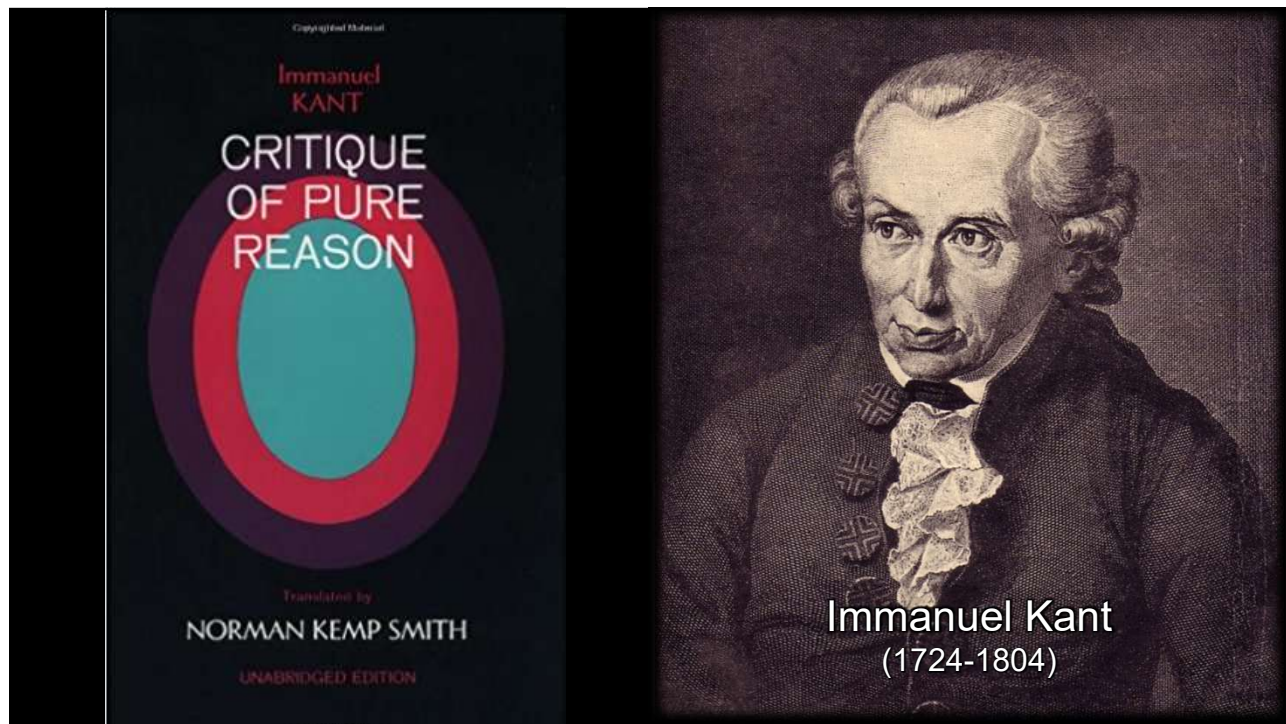


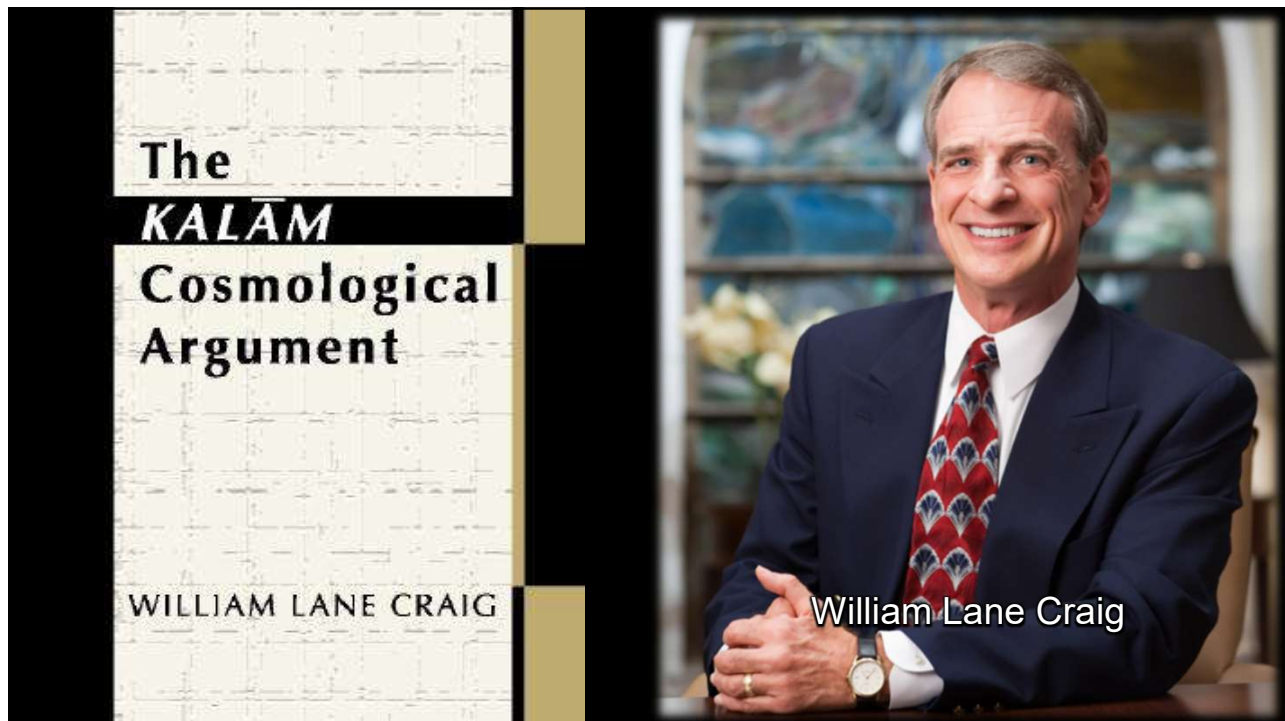
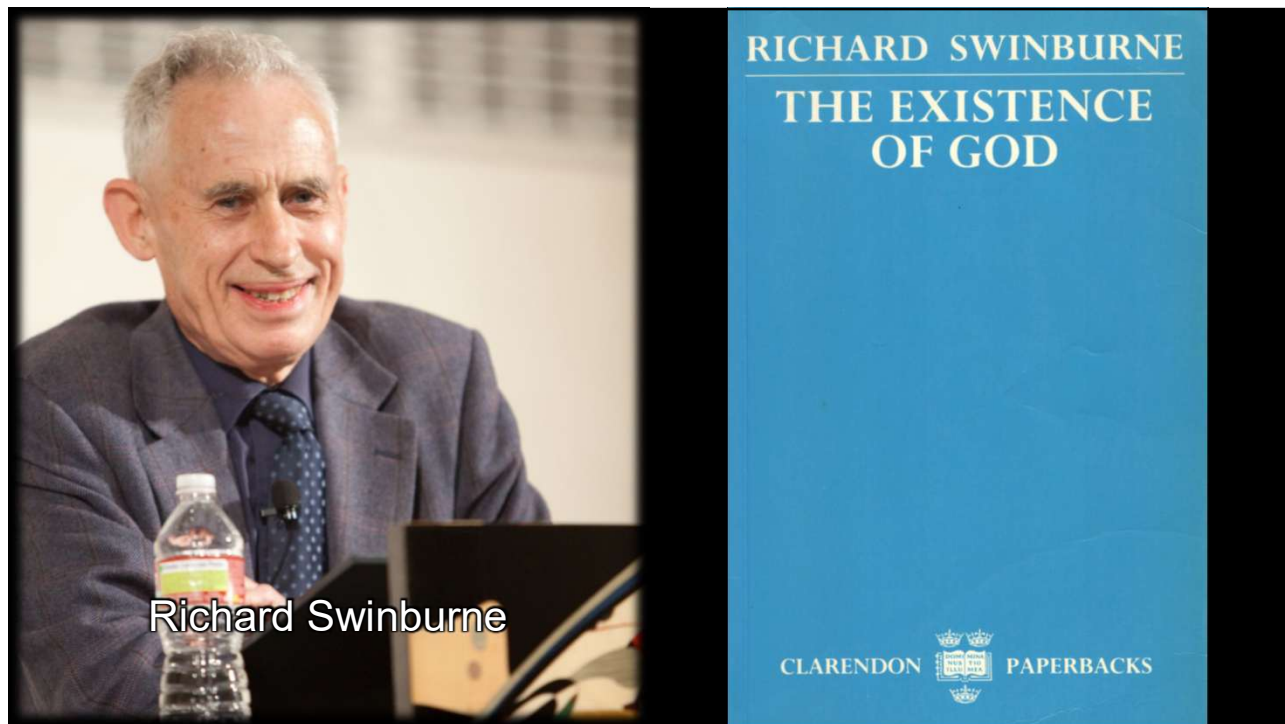


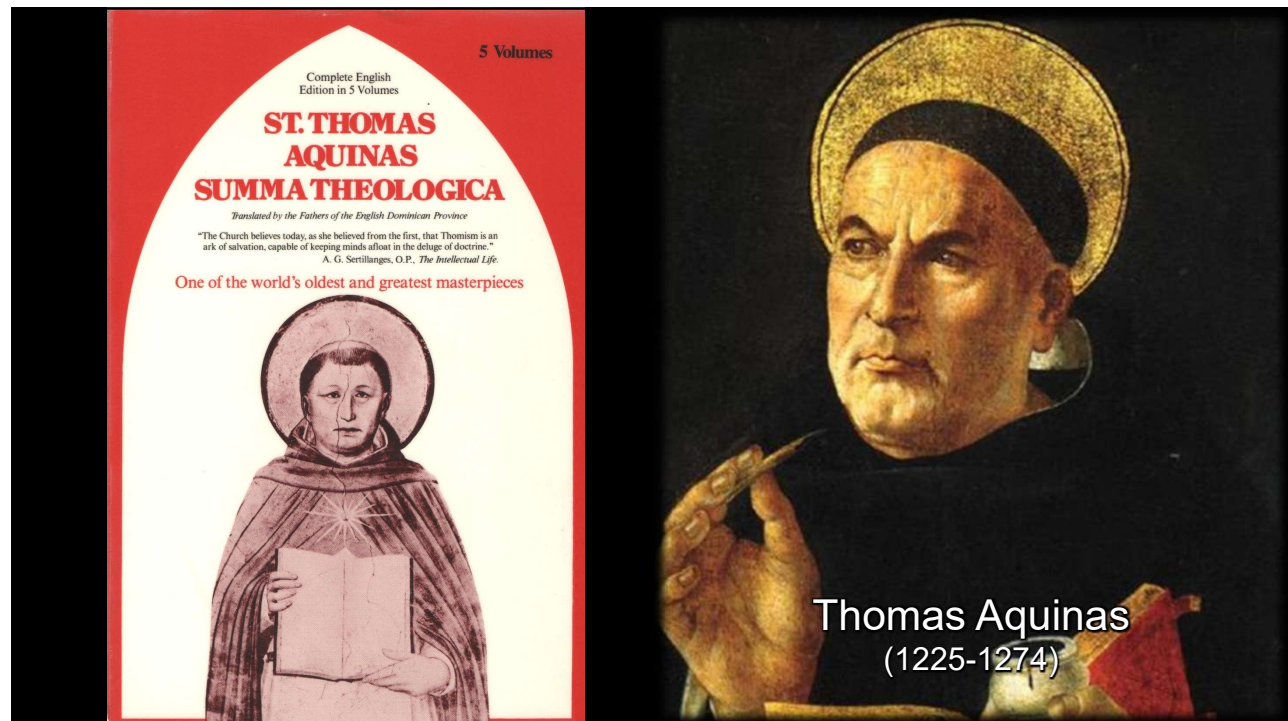
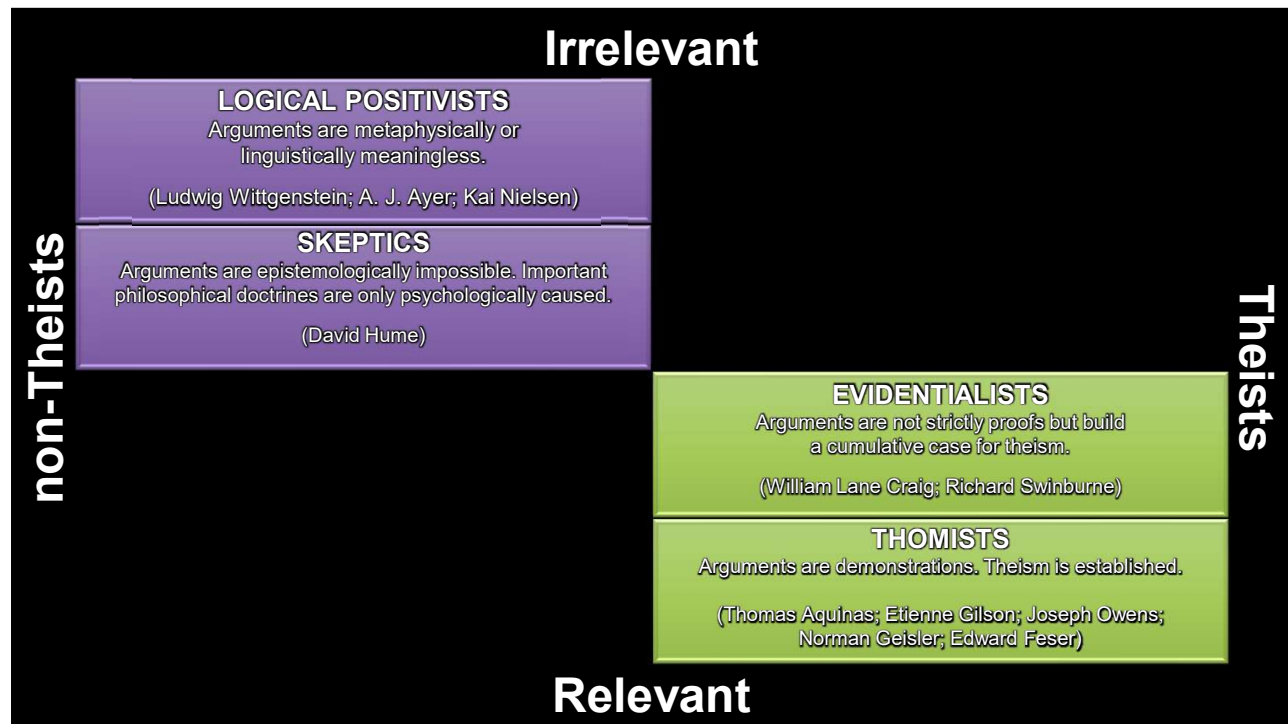






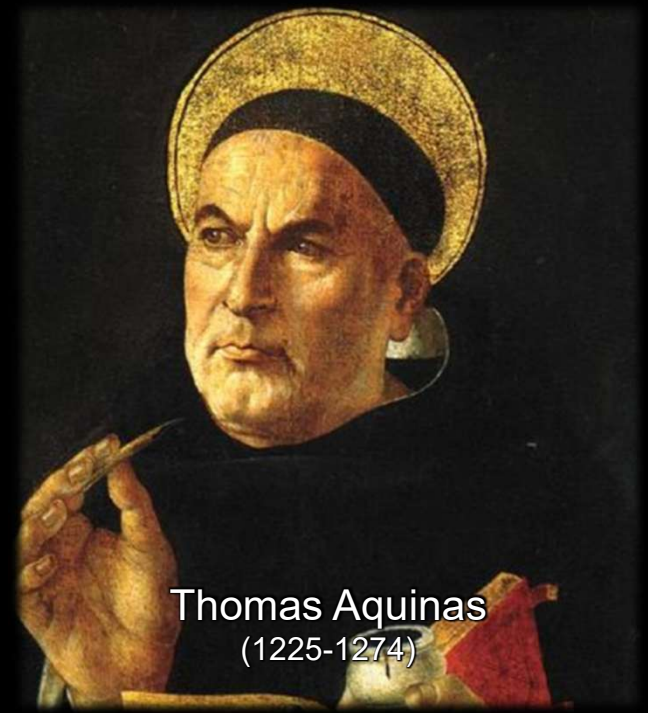






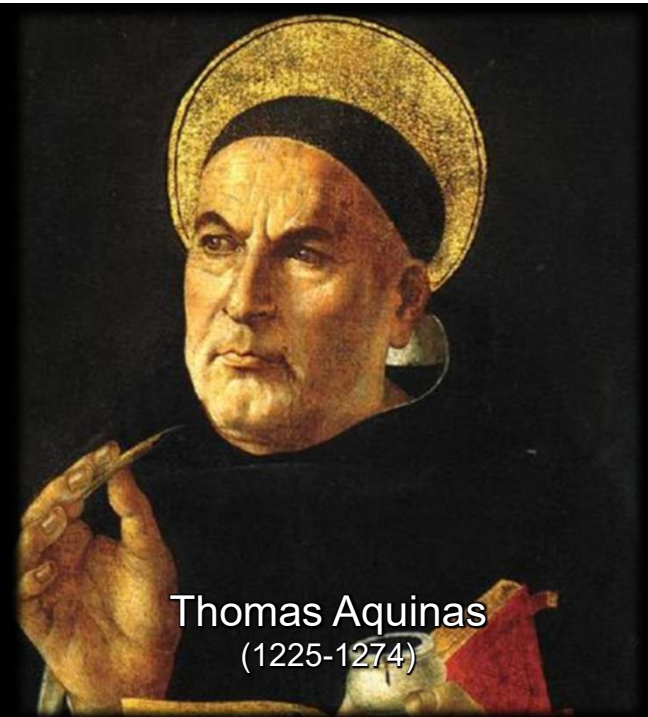
Thomas Aquinas's "Five Ways"

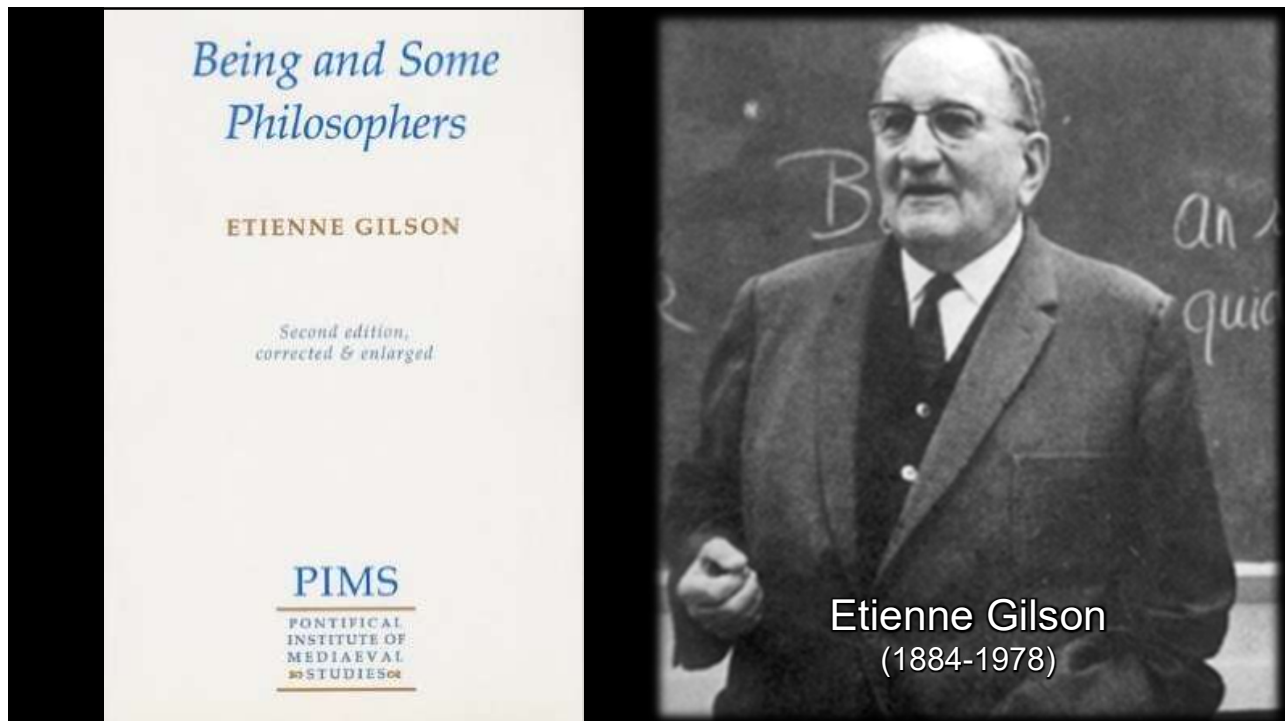
- *Argument from motion*
- *Argument from efficient causality*
- *Argument from necessary being*
- *Argument from degrees of perfection*
- *Argument from final causality*

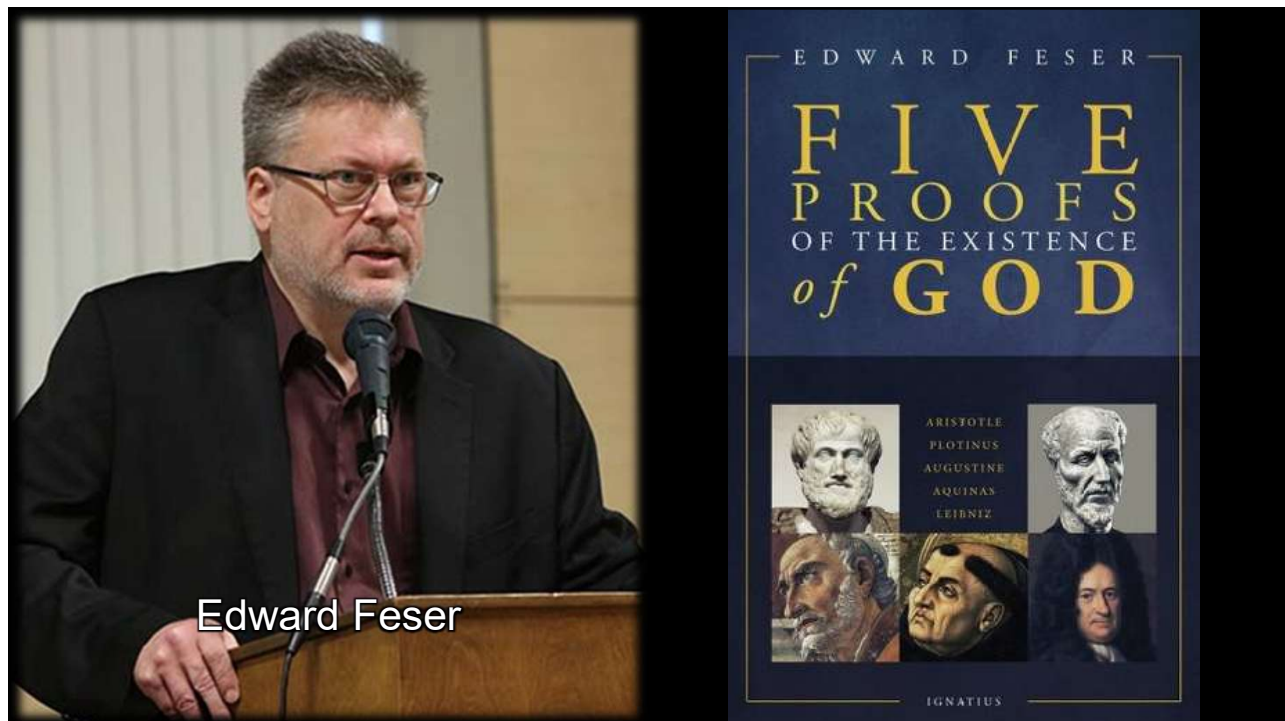
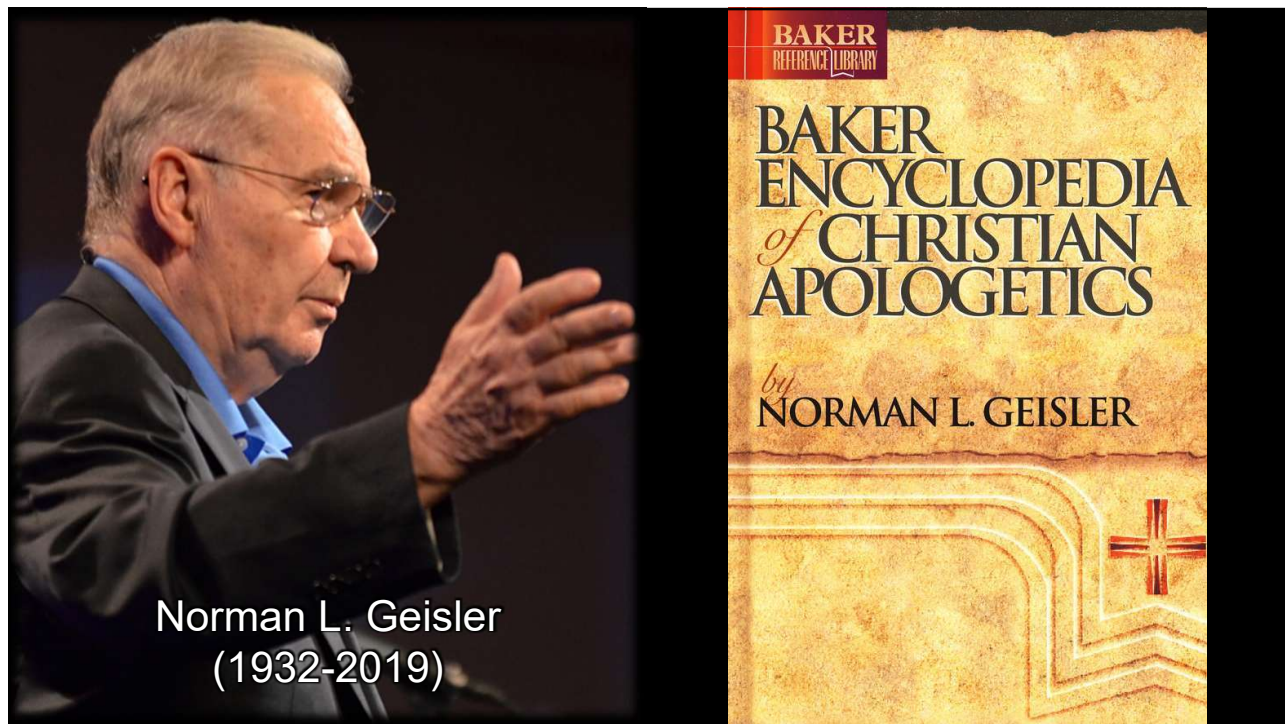


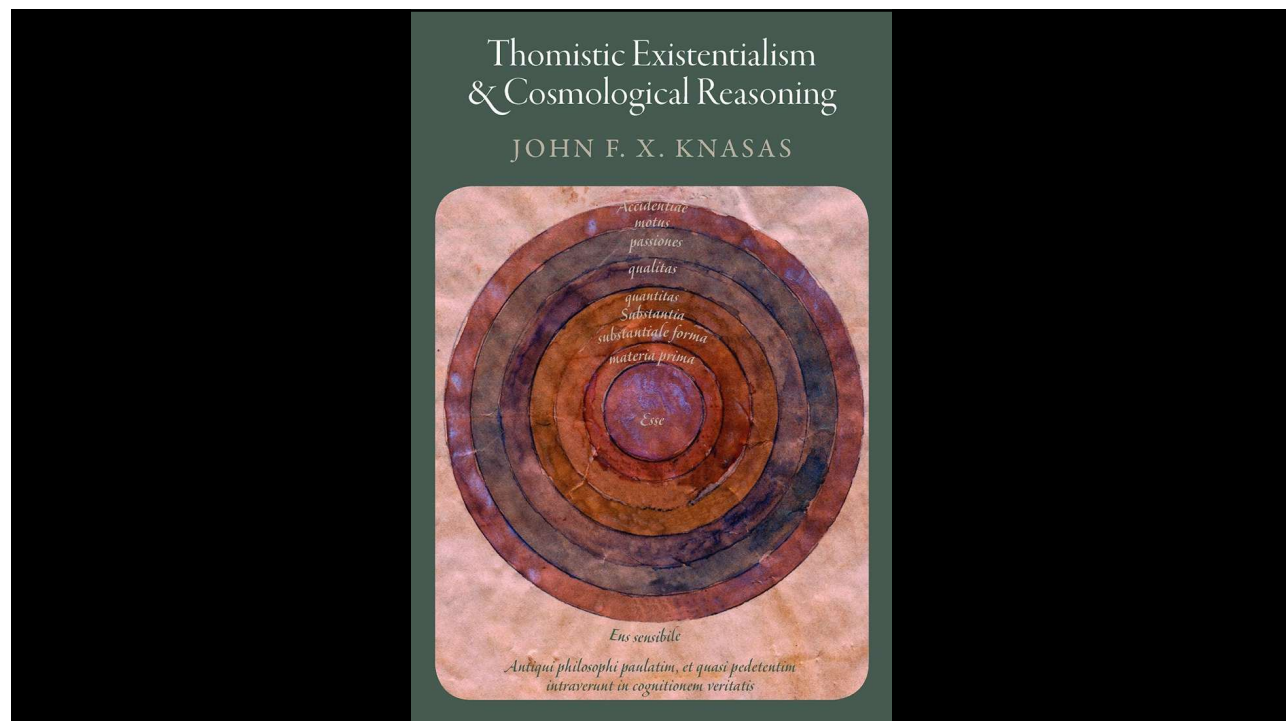
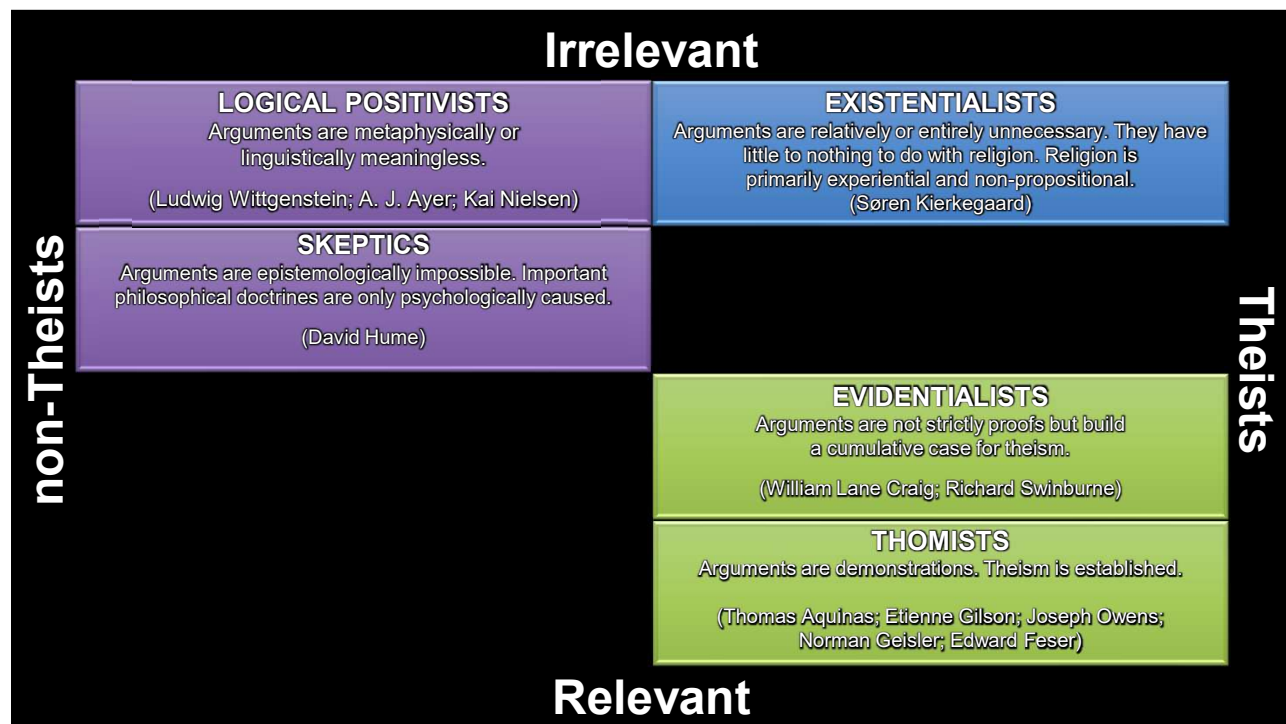
Thomas Aquinas On being and essence

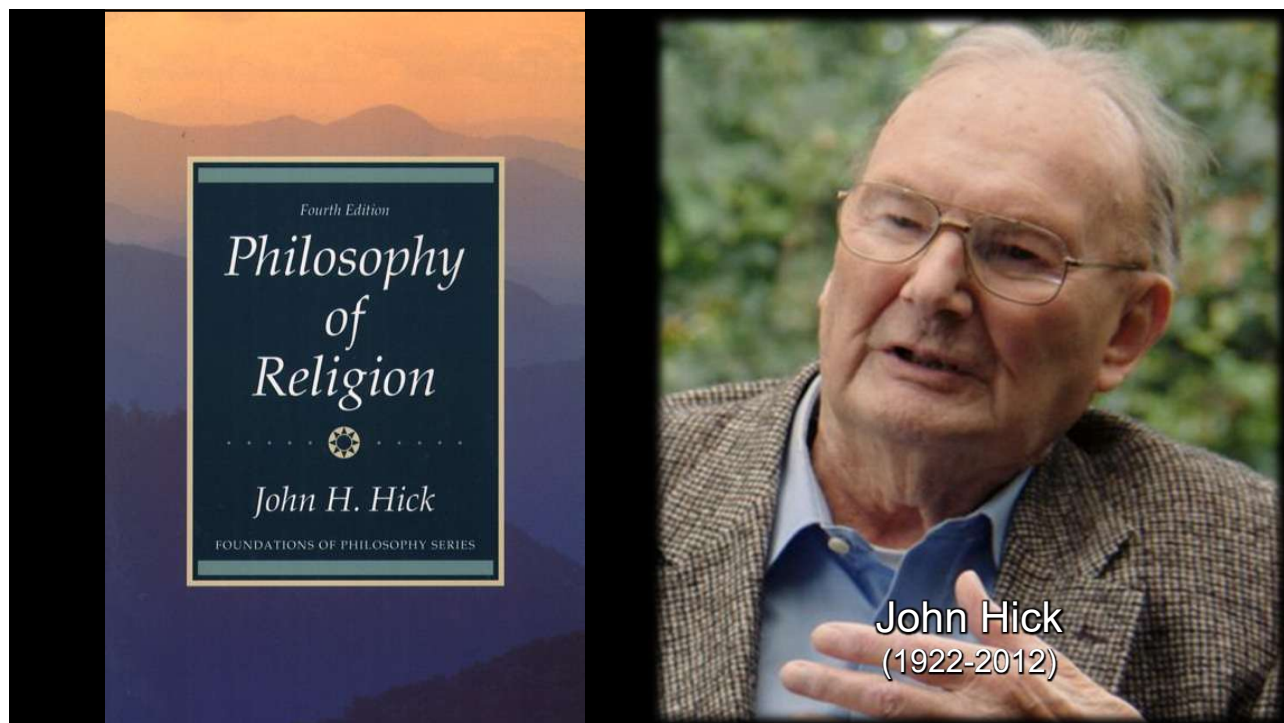
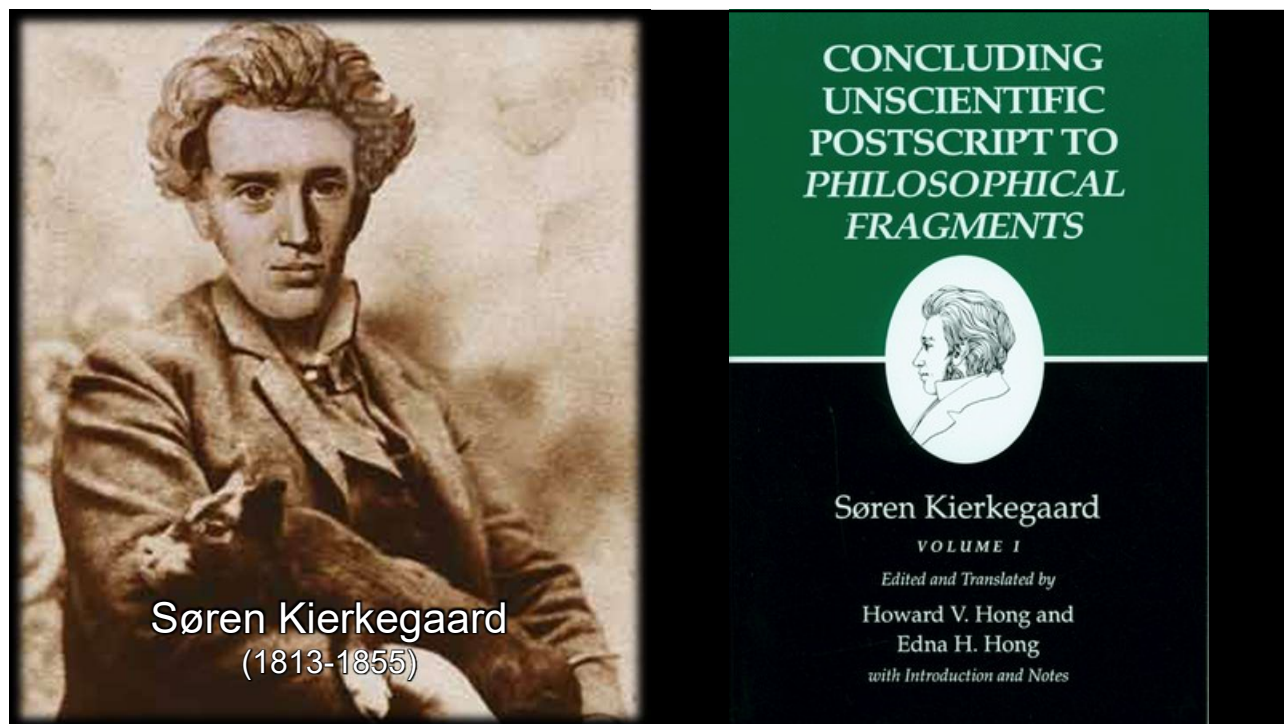
Translated by
Armand Maurer

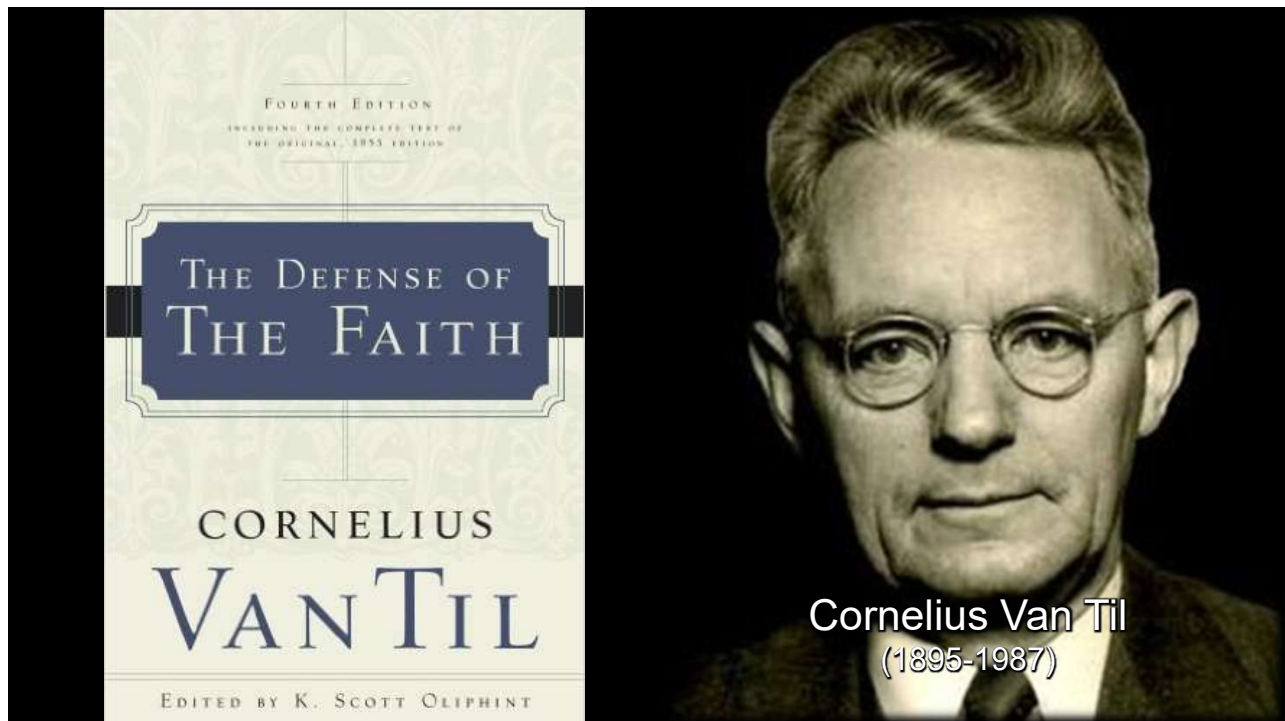


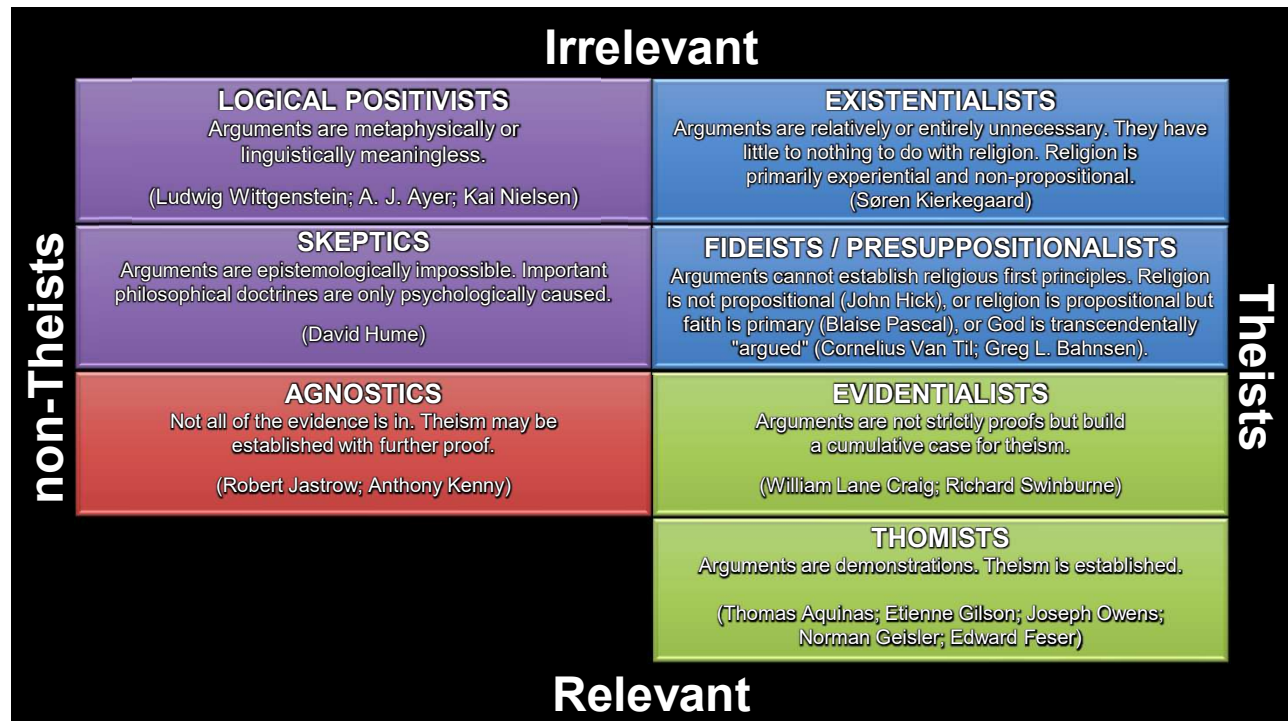
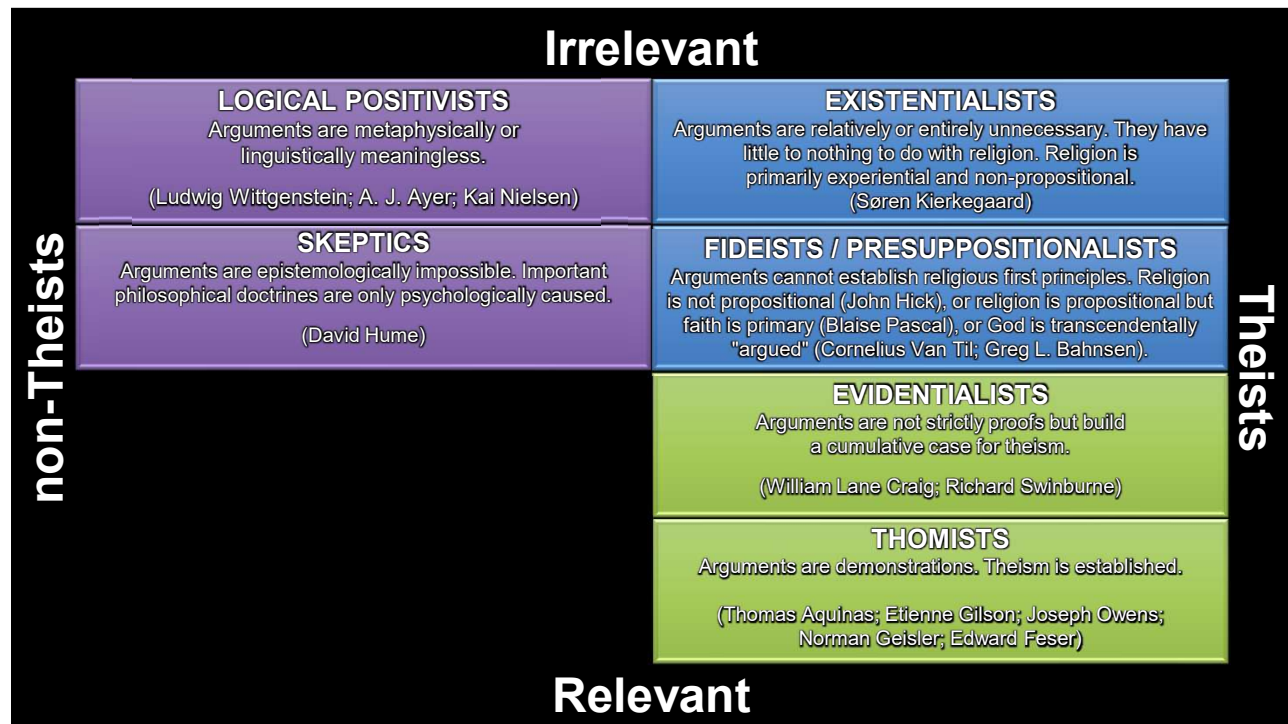


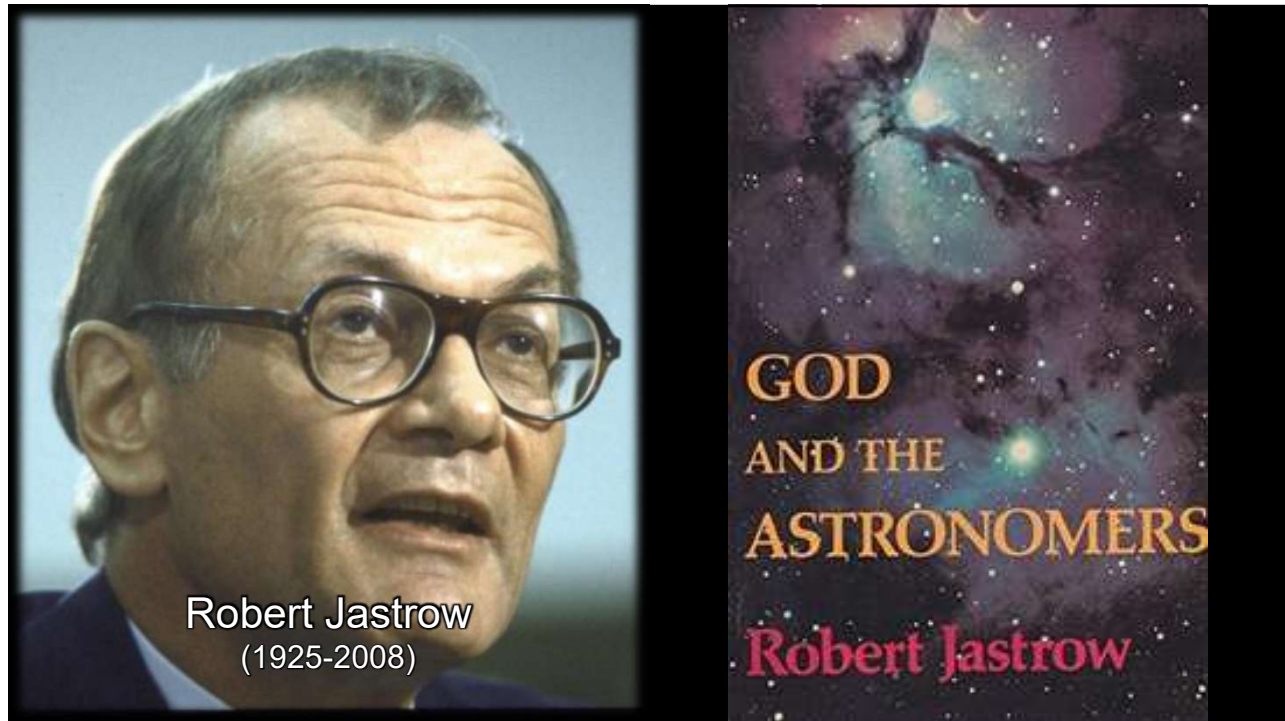




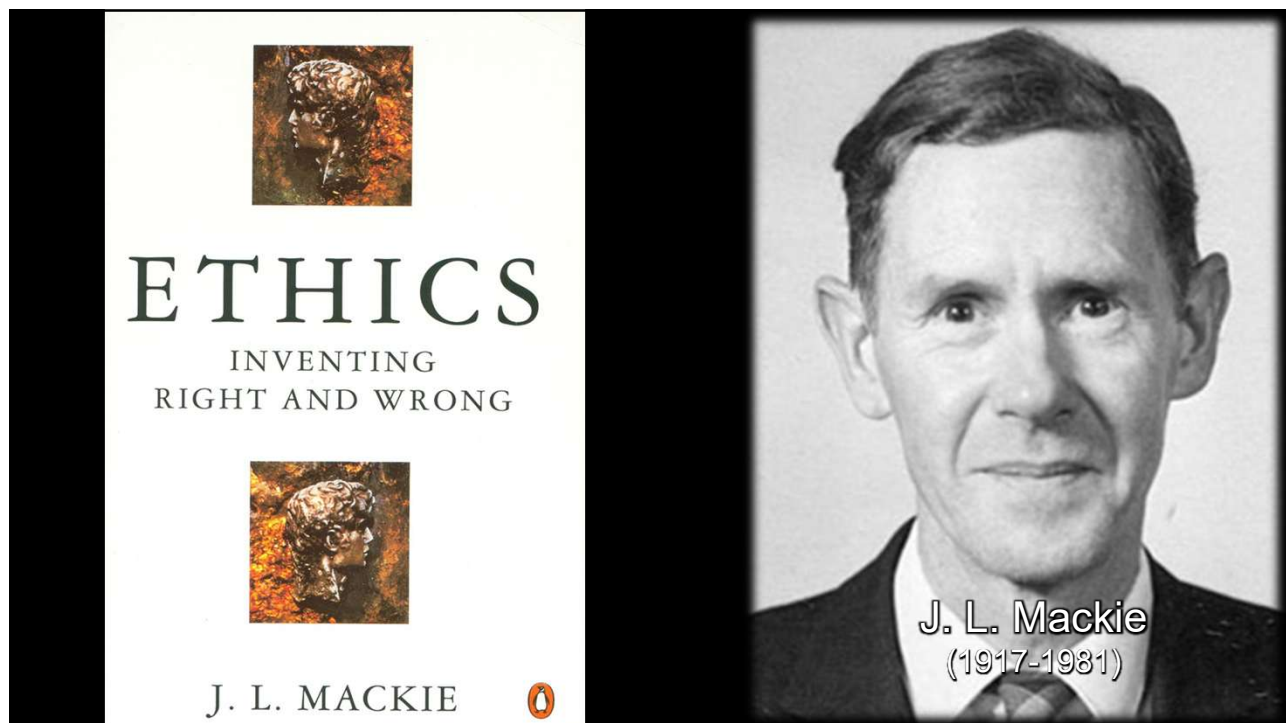
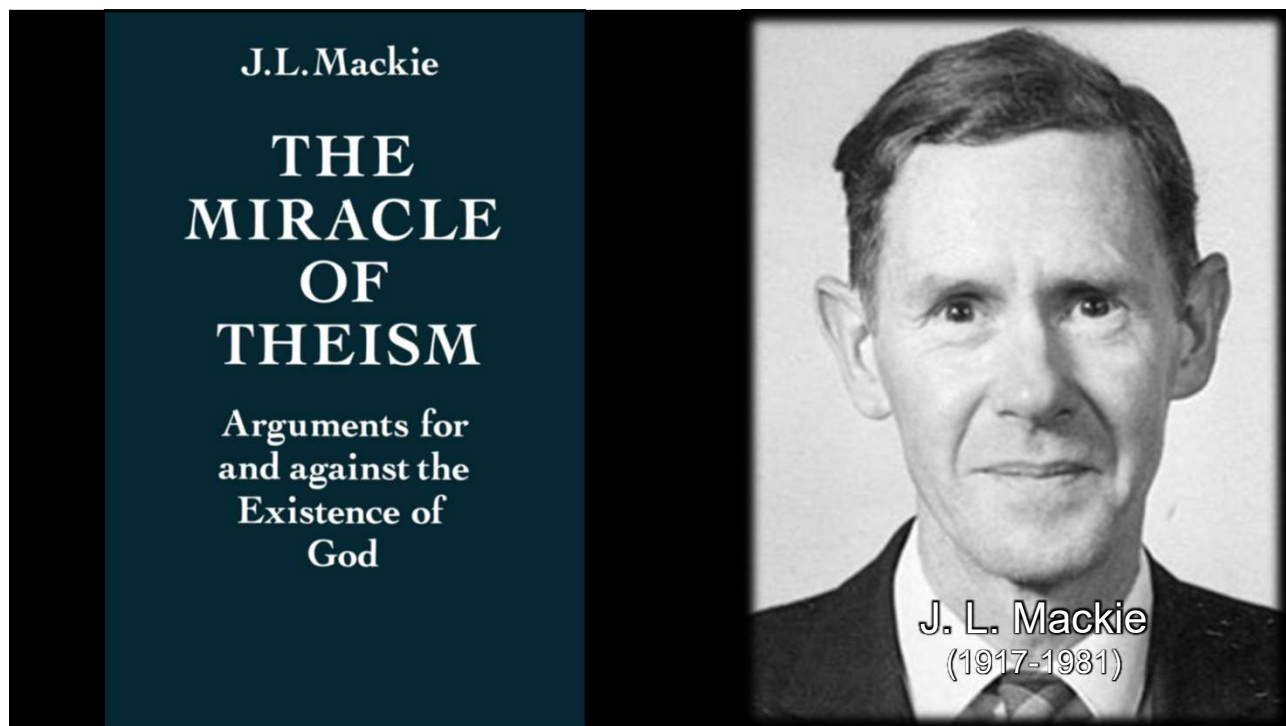


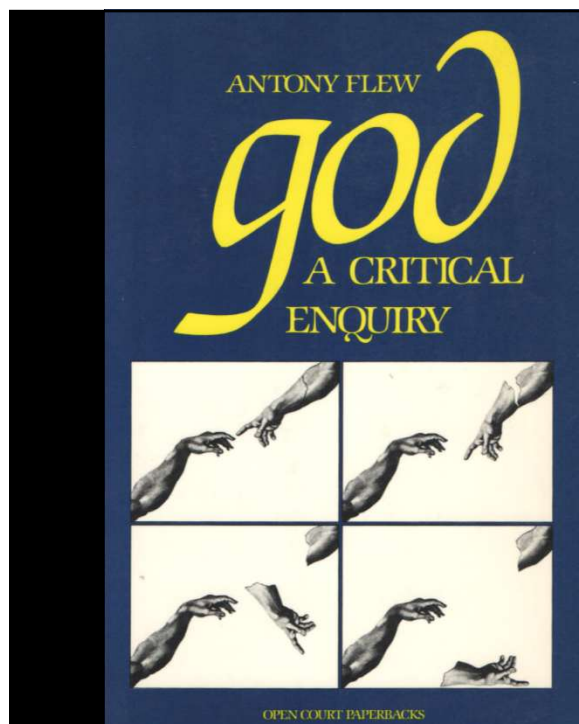




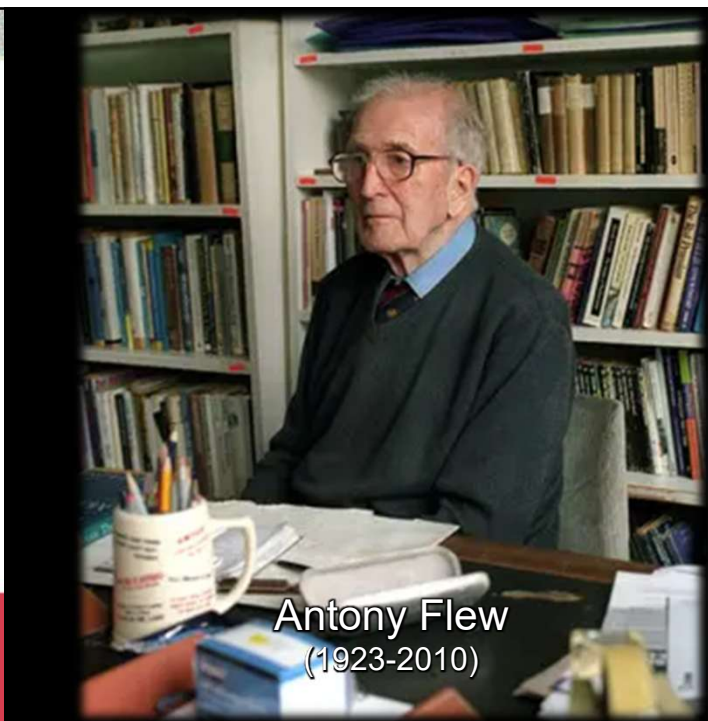
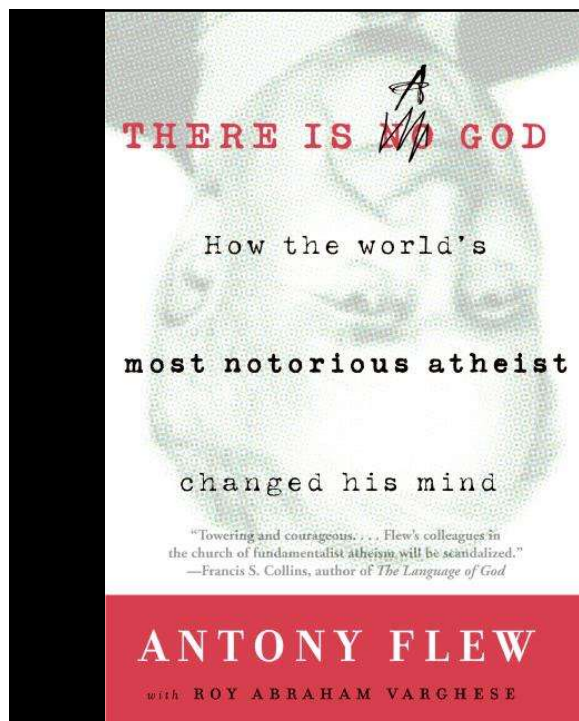


non-Theists	Irrelevant	
	LOGICAL POSITIVISTS Arguments are metaphysically or linguistically meaningless. (Ludwig Wittgenstein; A. J. Ayer; Kai Nielsen)	EXISTENTIALISTS Arguments are relatively or entirely unnecessary. They have little to nothing to do with religion. Religion is primarily experiential and non-propositional. (Søren Kierkegaard)
	SKEPTICS Arguments are epistemologically impossible. Important philosophical doctrines are only psychologically caused. (David Hume)	FIDEISTS / PRESUPPOSITIONALISTS Arguments cannot establish religious first principles. Religion is not propositional (John Hick), or religion is propositional but faith is primary (Blaise Pascal), or God is transcendently "argued" (Cornelius Van Til; Greg L. Bahnsen).
	AGNOSTICS Not all of the evidence is in. Theism may be established with further proof. (Robert Jastrow; Anthony Kenny)	EVIDENTIALISTS Arguments are not strictly proofs but build a cumulative case for theism. (William Lane Craig; Richard Swinburne)
	ATHEISTS Arguments surface important philosophical issues. The evidence proves atheism. (J. L. Mackie; early Antony Flew; Michael Scriven, Theodore Drange; Michael Martin)	THOMISTS Arguments are demonstrations. Theism is established. (Thomas Aquinas; Etienne Gilson; Joseph Owens; Norman Geisler; Edward Feser)
Relevant		
Theists		

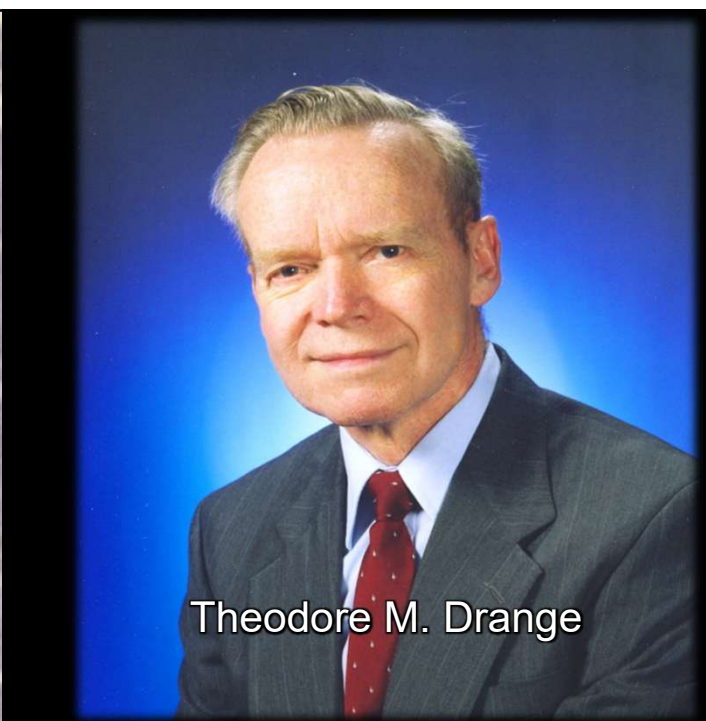
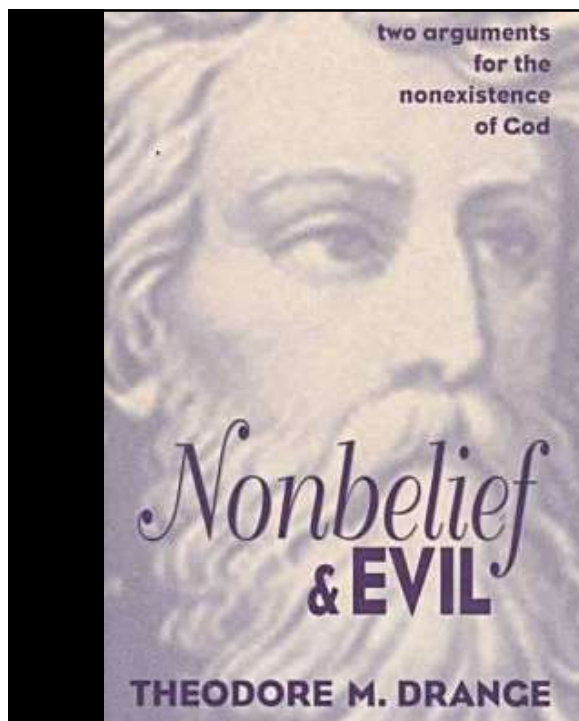
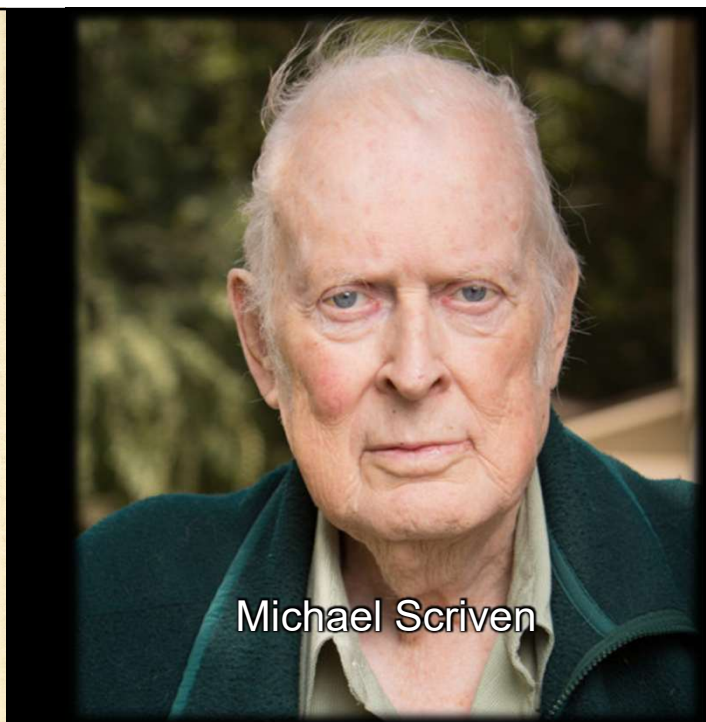
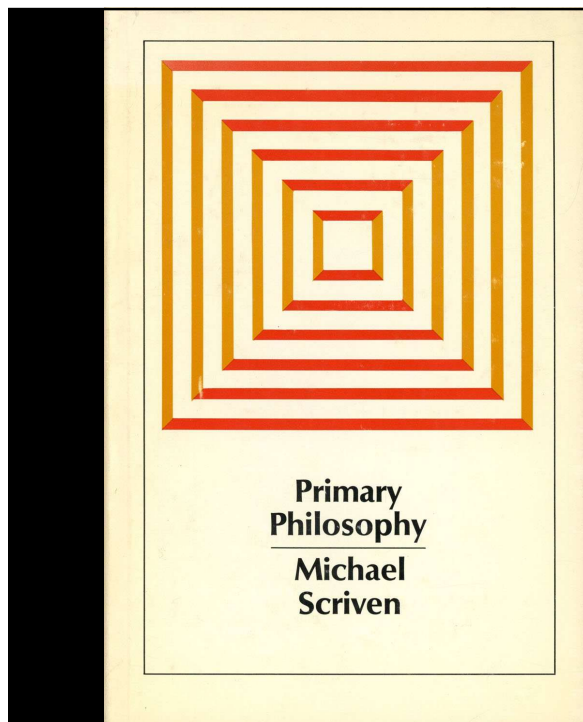


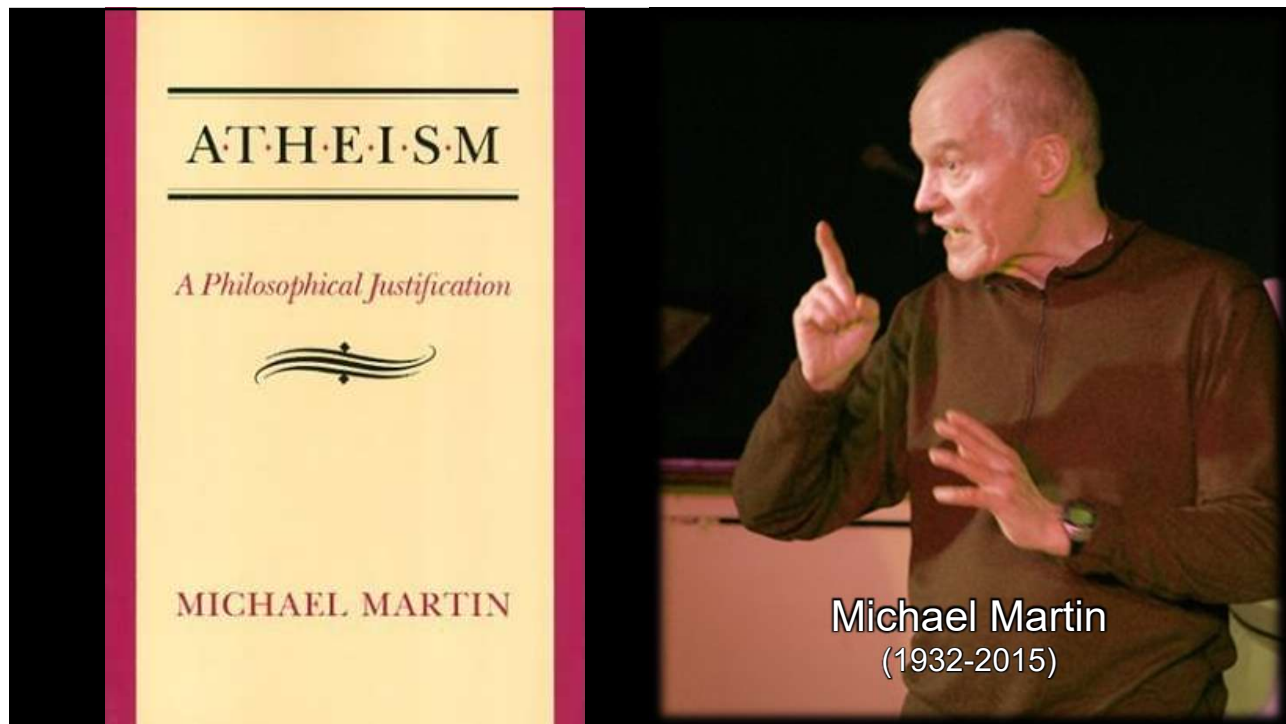


Antony Flew
(1923-2010)



Antony Flew
(1923-2010)





Michael Martin
(1932-2015)

