REAL ATHEISM AND CAMBRIDGE PLATONISM:
MEN OF LATITUDE, POLEMICS, AND
THE GREAT DEAD PHILOSOPHERS

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Ralph Cudworth in 1678 asserts vigorously that "Atheism in this Latter Age of ours, hath been impudently asserted, and most industriously promoted." The open assertion and promotion of atheism in the contemporary meaning of that word begins in the eighteenth century and only gains real force some hundred years later than that. So what does Cudworth mean when he insists so vigorously upon the assertion and promotion of atheism?

One popular response to this problem is to deny that Cudworth or any other seventeenth century writer was employing a concept of atheism commensurable with its contemporary equivalent. After all, in a society where conformity to Christian doctrine and practice was often enforced in a draconian manner, the term “atheism” could be employed in a variety of polemical ways. To draw a more recent analogy: just as it would be unwise to assume that an American in the McCarthy era accused of communism would necessarily be an adherent of the tenets of Marx and Engels, a seventeenth-century thinker accused of atheism may well seem to uphold prima facie conventional religious beliefs.

I wish to draw a distinction between speculative atheism—let us call this SA—which we shall define as the denial of theism, that is to say the rejection of the transcendent personal and benevolent deity of the Christian-Platonic-Aristotelian tradition, and “pragmatic atheism”—let us call this PA. By “pragmatic atheism” or PA I mean the effective or covert denial of true theism. Thus I am claiming that Cudworth is using “atheism” both in the narrower sense of a strict philosophical theory and also as referring to a broader domain of tenets which consciously or unconsciously serve to further the ends of atheism or

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support atheism. However, in this paper I shall argue that “atheism” for Cudworth means the rejection of “theism,” i.e. the denial of the transcendent, personal and benevolent deity of the Christian Platonic-Aristotelian tradition. I do not wish to deny the social and historical complexities associated with the use of the term “atheism” in the seventeenth century. Notwithstanding these considerations, Cudworth is a humanist and his consideration of the role of the antique sources of atheism, especially Lucretius’s *De Rerum Natura*, helps to explain why the men of latitude of the seventeenth century were properly designated the “Cambridge Platonists” in the nineteenth century. Cudworth uses atheism both in the sense of SA and PA, but he is quite aware of the distinction between the two—as I hope to demonstrate. A powerful and persuasive example of the view that atheism has quite a different meaning from contemporary usage is to be found in Frederick Beiser’s excellent monograph *The Sovereignty of Reason*. Beiser presents an account of the importance of reason as part of a liberal Protestant reaction to the Calvinism of Protestant Orthodoxy at Cambridge. Reason is “the voice of conscience, the guide to salvation, the badge of Christian liberty and the sign of grace.” Here is a carefully argued and stimulating account of the thought of the Cambridge Platonists. However, I think he is playing down the genuine significance of atheism in our sense of speculative atheism, SA. This phenomenon explains much of the real and genuinely philosophical interest in Plato evinced by the Cambridge Platonists. I think it is mistake to see atheism as merely representing that which we have designated pragmatic atheism or PA.

Beiser marshals a number of arguments for his position. Firstly he raises the important point of chronology. Hobbes publishes *On Humane Nature* and *De Corpore Politico* in 1640 and in 1642 *De Cive*. Yet the essential position of the Cambridge Platonists had been formulated by 1642, hence it is most unlikely that Hobbes could have been the original bête noir. This seems to me most convincing. The dominant issue in Cambridge amongst the Divines was predestination, and it was not until the 1650s that Hobbes and Descartes are discussed. With the Restoration of the Monarchy the philosophy of Hobbes achieved a novel pertinence in the 1660s. Thus in terms of chronology there is much to recommend Beiser’s initial point.

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