

Atheism is that system of thought which is formally opposed to theism. Since its first coming into use the term *atheism* has been very vaguely employed, generally as an epithet of accusation against any system that called in question the popular gods of the day. Thus while [Socrates](#) was accused of atheism (Plato, Apol., 26, c.) and Diagoras called an atheist by Cicero (Nat. Deor., I, 23), Democritus and [Epicurus](#) were styled in the same sense impious (without respect for the gods) on account of their trend of their new [atomistic philosophy](#). In this sense too, the early [Christians](#) were known to the [pagans](#) as atheists, because they denied the [heathen](#) gods; while, from time to time, various religious and philosophical systems have, for similar reasons, been deemed atheistic.

Though atheism, historically considered, has meant no more in the past than a critical or sceptical denial of the [theology](#) of those who have employed the term as one of reproach, and has consequently no one strict philosophical meaning; and though there is no one consistent system in the exposition of which it has a definite place; yet, if we consider it in its broad meaning as merely the opposite of theism, we will be able to frame such divisions as will make possible a grouping of definite systems under this head. And in so doing so we shall at once be adopting both the historical and the [philosophical](#) view. For the common basis of all systems of theism as well as the cardinal tenet of all popular religion at the present day is indubitably a [belief](#) in the existence of a personal [God](#), and to deny this tenet is to invite the popular reproach of atheism. The need of some such definition as this was felt by Mr. Gladstone when he wrote (Contemporary Review, June 1876):

The most trenchant form which atheism could take would be the positive and dogmatic denial of the existence of any spiritual and extra-mundane First Cause. This is sometimes known as dogmatic, or positive theoretic, atheism; though it may be [doubted](#) whether such a system has ever been, or could ever possibly be seriously maintained. Certainly [Bacon](#) and Dr. Arnold voice the common judgment of thinking men when they express a

### [doubt](#)

as to the existence of an atheist belonging to such a

### [school](#)

. Still, there are certain advanced phases of materialistic philosophy that, perhaps, should rightly be included under this head.

### [Materialism](#)

, which professes to find in matter its own cause and explanation, may go farther, and positively exclude the existence of any spiritual cause. That such a dogmatic assertion is both unreasonable and illogical needs no demonstration, for it is an inference not warranted by the facts nor justified by the

### [laws](#)

of thought. But the fact that certain

### [individuals](#)

have left the sphere of exact scientific observation for speculation, and have thus dogmatized negatively, calls for their inclusion in this specific type.

### [Materialism](#)

is the one dogmatic explanation of the

### [universe](#)

which could in any sense justify an atheistic position. But even materialism, however its advocated might dogmatize, could do no more than provide an inadequate theoretic basis for a negative form of atheism.

### [Pantheism](#)

, which must not be confused with materialism, in some of its forms can be placed also in this division, as categorically denying the existence of a spiritual First Cause above or outside the world.

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