

Moments in Atheism: A Rough Guide to -isms

This list is not meant to be prescriptive, nor is it philosophically precise. It is intended only as a guide to what most people might mean when they use these terms.

- *Theism*. Belief in the existence of a supernatural being (God or gods), not bound by the laws of nature. Sometimes used in a more restrictive sense to denote belief in a God who is active in the world, in contrast with deism or pantheism.
- *Atheism*. Belief that supernatural beings do not exist. Sometimes divided into positive atheism (“belief that God does not exist”) and negative atheism (“absence of belief that God does exist”). [Feuerbach, Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, O’Hair.]
- *Agnosticism*. Belief that one cannot (or merely does not) know whether God exists. [Hume, Huxley, Russell.]
- *Naturalism*. Belief that the natural world can be fully understood in terms of material objects and mechanistic laws. Sometimes distinguished from materialism by allowing for the possibility of a supernatural world, but one which is strictly independent of the natural one; sometimes not.
- *Materialism*. (Also *physicalism* or *mechanism*.) Belief in only the natural world, operating according to physical laws. [Democritus, Epicurus, Lucretius, Hobbes, de la Mettrie, Diderot, d’Holbach.]
- *Idealism*. Belief that the primary reality is outside the natural world, or that only mental entities are real. Opposed to materialism. [Plato, Leibniz, Kant, Schopenhauer.]
- *Deism*. Belief that God exists and created the world but does not interfere with the world, which operates strictly according to natural laws. Deists are thus simultaneously theists and naturalists (as distinguished from materialists). [Newton, Voltaire, Paine, Rousseau.]
- *Pantheism*. Belief that God and nature are identical. [Stoics, Bruno, Spinoza.]
- *Humanism*. Belief that humans are the source of value and meaning.
- *Empiricism*. Belief that experience is the source of knowledge. Opposite of rationalism. [F. Bacon, Locke, Hume.]
- *Rationalism*. Belief that knowledge is attained through pure reason or innate ideas. Opposite of empiricism. [Plato, Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz.]
- *Fideism*. Belief that faith (not reason) is the grounding for religion.
- *Skepticism*. Belief that certainty in knowledge is unattainable. (In an extreme form, belief that any knowledge is unattainable.) [Sextus Empiricus, Hume.]