

How to Think like an Atheist

Science, Philosophy, and Religion in Atheist-Produced Educational YouTube Videos

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30664/ar.137472>

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Atheism has had a strong presence on YouTube since its founding in the mid-2000s, which coincided with the rise of the new atheism movement, and lay atheists were quick to use the platform to spread new atheist ideas. Drawing from a sample of sixty-five atheist YouTube channels located and observed through online ethnographic methods, this article views YouTube videos as educational resources for atheists. It investigates different types of educational videos and ways of thinking about science, philosophy, and religion that atheist content creators utilize and promote. The analysis reveals that they consistently frame these domains of knowledge through the truth claims they make and generally construct them within a hierarchical framework, with scientific knowledge at the top and religious knowledge at the bottom. Overall, their educational content reproduces new atheist discourses around these subjects, revealing the continuing influence of new atheism, two decades after its emergence. Furthermore, the popularity of videos that debunk arguments from religious apologists suggests that the intended audience of these videos includes both atheists, who are expected to need to learn to defend their atheism in debate with religious others, and “potential atheists”, religious believers who can be deconverted using rational arguments.

Introduction

Scholars (e.g. Smith and Cimino 2012; Taira 2021) have argued that the internet and social media have played a vital role in the development of twenty-first-century atheism. Atheism has had a strong

presence on YouTube since its founding in the mid-2000s, which coincided with the rise of the new-atheism movement. Put briefly, “new atheism” refers to a type of “evangelical” atheism – characterized by aggressive intellectual and moral critiques of religion, as well as advocacy for secularism and science – that followed the release of a number of anti-religious best-sellers from the authors Sam Harris (2004), Richard Dawkins (2006), Daniel Dennett (2006), and Christopher Hitchens (2007), collectively known as “the four horsemen” (Amarasingam 2010). Besides (often illegal) uploads of documentaries and debates featuring prominent new-atheist figures, atheist YouTube content also includes videos produced by atheist users.

While YouTube videos may be utilized in formal educational settings, most of the learning that takes place through the platform is *informal*. Informal learning (Lange 2018) takes place outside formal educational environments and is open-ended and self-directed, meaning that it does not have a well-defined endpoint (like a course credit or degree) and that informal students shape the curriculum according to their own goals and preferences. Since informal students choose their own subjects and educational resources, they also derive

pleasure from the learning process and, when motivated by entertainment-seeking, they may not even be aware that they are in fact engaging in learning. Previous research into educational YouTube videos has typically focused on the possibilities and limitations of educational YouTube content (Kohler and Dietrich 2021) or the accuracy or quality of medical videos (Şahin and Kaya 2022; Szmuda et al. 2020).

This study views “YouTube atheists”, creators who produce videos for an atheist public as members of that public, as *informal teachers*, who produce educational resources primarily intended for other atheists. Through a combination of online ethnographic methods and critical discourse analysis, it looks at educational videos about science, philosophy, and religion, and investigates the most prevalent ways of thinking about these three domains of knowledge that YouTube atheists utilize and promote. My primary research questions pertain to *a.* the topics they do (and do not) discuss, *b.* constructions of domains of knowledge and authority, and *c.* the educational purposes of the videos.

While the views and discourses on science, philosophy, and religion of atheist authors (historical as well as contemporary) and, to a lesser extent, lay atheists have received a great deal of scholarly attention, this topic has not yet been examined with regard to atheist YouTubers, who exist in a liminal space between the other two. Furthermore, the scope of the data, collected from three and a half years of systematic observation of sixty-five atheist channels, makes it possible to draw conclusions about Anglophone YouTube atheist discourse on science, philosophy, and religion more broadly. It should, however, be noted that while the types of videos discussed in this article do represent a significant part of atheist YouTube content,

they do not represent it in its entirety. Consequently, one might find that the central concepts are constructed differently in videos with different purposes, such as political commentaries.

Next, I discuss previous research on atheism on YouTube, my approach to online ethnography and critical discourse analysis, and my data. In the following three sections, I present and analyse my findings regarding the ways the YouTube atheists approach science, philosophy, and religion. I conclude the article by discussing the strong new atheist influence evident in the discourses around these domains of knowledge, as well as intended audiences in relation to the purposes the videos serve.

Studying atheist discourse on YouTube

Scholars have been interested in atheism on the internet, including YouTube, for well over a decade. Studies of atheism¹ on YouTube can largely be divided into one of two main approaches. The first approach is to look at the opportunities for atheist activism, identity-construction, and community-building offered by the video-sharing platform. Working from the assumption that atheists and other non-believers occupy a marginalized position in many societies, YouTube is said to provide access to a forum where their voices can be heard. Christopher Smith and Richard Cimino (2012, 21) identify YouTube as a significant platform for online secularist activism and identity construction, that allows for a “highly personalized mode of presentation”, which they highlight by contrasting

1 Not all studies referenced in this section have focused on “atheists” specifically, with some preferring terms such as “secularists” (Smith and Cimino 2012) or “nonbelievers” (Clay and Driscoll 2017). However, given that their data have mostly come from atheists, I consider them relevant to this study.

the styles and content produced by prominent atheist YouTubers Amazing Atheist and Thunderf00t. Outside the Western Anglophone context, based on his analysis of four Arabic-speaking atheists and free-thinkers on YouTube, Sebastian Elsässer (2021, 17) argues that YouTube provides a safer way for Arab non-believers to express secularist and anti-religious sentiments and participate in the renegotiation of “social and religious boundaries within Arab societies”. Other studies take an intersectional approach, looking at videos from atheist women (Lundmark 2019) or people of colour (Werner 2012; Clay and Driscoll 2017), focusing on how YouTube allows them to publicly share their experiences of double marginalization (as (non)religious minorities in society and as gender/racial minorities in the atheist movement) and connect with one another.

The second approach is to use atheist content as research data when exploring YouTube interaction. Atheists have a reputation on YouTube for being highly opinionated and confrontational, which makes them suitable for studies of antagonism on YouTube. Such studies have dealt with the character and discourse of interfaith dialogue on YouTube (Theobald 2009; Pihlaja 2018) and instances of “YouTube drama” between atheists and Christians (Pihlaja 2014) or among atheists themselves (Isomaa 2022).

The studies discussed above have analysed either a few select YouTube channels or individual videos with some shared characteristics, and thus have not attempted to paint a broader picture of atheism on YouTube. To be able to do that, this article utilizes data collected within the context of a broader ethnographic study of YouTube atheists.²

2 While Stephen Pihlaja (2014; 2018) also

Online ethnography, sometimes referred to as *virtual* or *digital* ethnography, is, to put it briefly, the adaptation of traditional ethnographic methods for non-physical spaces on the internet. While this may be a challenging task, and the end result may not resemble traditional forms of ethnographic fieldwork, Christine Hine (2015, 2) argues that it is still possible “to retain a commitment to some fundamental principles of ethnography as a distinct mode of knowledge production”. Hine (p. 14) describes the contemporary internet as an embedded, embodied, and everyday phenomenon, as opposed to the outdated notion of “cyber-space” as a separate domain. It makes little sense to talk about *going* online as a distinct experience, because *being* online is part of other ways of living and acting in the world, and most online activities are mundane and unremarkable. For this reason, Hine posits that ethnography is an appropriate way of studying online behaviour and the roles that the internet plays in people’s lives.

Jannis Androutsopoulos (2008) provides a framework for *discourse-centred online ethnography* and offers guidelines for systematic observation and interaction with online actors. Androutsopoulos’s approach emphasizes the context in which discourse takes place and that the task of the ethnographer is to “examine relationships and processes rather than isolated artefacts” (Androutsopoulos 2008, 6–7) through repeated observation over time. Since there is a great deal of fluidity in interaction in online spaces, he advises that online ethnographers should “maintain openness”, in the sense of not defining the parameters of the field of study at the

takes an ethnographic approach, his research concerns interaction between atheists, Christians, and Muslims, not YouTube as a discursive space for atheists.

outset and letting observation data guide one's process. He also recommends mapping the field by identifying key nodes and actors and from there moving towards the periphery of the field. Androutsopoulos (p. 2) argues that observation should be complemented by direct contact with actors in the space, to be able to address questions regarding, for example, "people's motivations for the use of particular linguistic resources online and the meanings they attach to those resources".

While Androutsopoulos's approach was developed for online environments like discussion boards, it can be meaningfully adapted for ethnographic work on YouTube. The methodology outlined below incorporates Androutsopoulos's guidelines for systematic observation, but does not include any direct interaction with atheist content creators. Like Pihlaja (2018, 44), who also bases his approach on Androutsopoulos's, I am not interested in the "lived experience" of these creators, nor what they "privately say they are attempting to do". Content creators are not analogous to participants on discussion boards; they are producing content to be consumed by an audience and their activities do not involve the kind of direct interaction that discussion boards are made for. For this reason, I find it appropriate to take a more text-based approach to YouTube atheism, exploring the field through discursive practices in videos produced by YouTube atheists.

Maintaining openness was central to my approach to locating atheist YouTubers for observation. I began my work in June 2018 by creating a YouTube account and subscribing to a number of YouTube atheists I was familiar with through previous research and/or atheist media. From there, I initiated a form of "digital snowball sampling". While watching their videos, I noted

appearances by and references to other atheist YouTubers and subscribed to their channels as well. Because I had a YouTube account exclusively for consuming atheist content, I could also utilize YouTube's various recommendation features. YouTube offers suggestions for videos that may interest the viewer, based on one's viewing history, on the main page as well as on individual video pages. This introduced me to new channels, many of which were added to my subscriptions.³

For the purposes of this study, I define a "YouTube atheist" as a YouTuber who produces videos *within an atheist public as a member of that public*. In this context, a "public" should not be understood simply as a particular audience, but in Michael Warner's sense of the term. Warner (2002, 67) defines publics as "spaces of discourse, organized by nothing other than discourse itself". Publics are "social imaginaries" which exist only for the circulation of discourse, and only to the extent that they are addressed (p. 114). Other studies (Laughlin 2016; Lundmark 2019; Isomaa 2022) have approached contemporary atheism through the lens of publics, which centres the "reflexive production, distribution, and consumption of texts" (Isomaa 2022, 11). In this light, atheist YouTube channels and videos are connected primarily through their coexistence within a larger discursive space, rather than by direct relationships to one another.

From my definition, simply being a YouTuber who identifies as an atheist is

3 When creating the account, I did not consider how the personal information (gender, location, etc.) I provided might affect the recommendation algorithms. This was an oversight that I advise other researchers to consider in similar online ethnographic studies.

not sufficient to be considered a “YouTube atheist”: one’s atheism must be central to one’s presentation as a content creator. When determining whether to include a creator in the study, I took various factors into account. I interpreted channel names that emphasize a creator’s atheism or reference irreligious concepts (e.g. “The Raging Atheist”, “Godless Engineer”, “CosmicSkeptic”) as a claim of membership in an atheist public. Similarly, I looked at how visible their atheism was on their channel overall, for example in the channel description or video titles. I also watched a few videos about topics that seemed frequent on their channel to see if their atheism was central to their self-positioning in relation to the topic. This process admittedly involved a high degree of subjective interpretation and I decided it was better to err on the side of inclusion, since it would be easier to later exclude channels if it turned out that my initial impression was mistaken, which was the case for three channels. Furthermore, channels with fewer than 1,000 subscribers were excluded from the study, and no new channels were added to the study after the end of 2019.⁴

The final sample consisted of sixty-five channels from sixty-three different creators.⁵ Based on the information provided in channel descriptions and videos, as well as geographic indicators such as accents, virtually all creators appear to be native English-speakers, Americans being the largest group, followed by the Brits and,

- 4 The exception was if a YouTuber already included in the study moved their primary video production to a different channel.
- 5 During the time of observation, three of the creators moved their primary video production to a second channel, which I included in the study. Additionally, one of the channels is hosted by two creators, both of which are included in the figure.

to a lesser extent, Canadians. In terms of gender,⁶ men make up about three quarters of the sample, the rest being women as well as two non-binary creators. Of the creators that appear on-screen, all but three are white. The only thing I can say regarding age is that they appear to cover a wide range, from early twenties to late sixties.

As some channels were located via references and appearances in videos on other channels, while others having been suggested by YouTube’s algorithms, the personal and professional connections between creators vary. Some creators frequently interact with and/or address other creators, through direct collaboration and/or response videos, while others hardly mention other atheist YouTubers at all.

The observation process ended in December 2021. Since there are not enough hours in a work week to watch all videos published across sixty-five YouTube channels during the same amount of time, I made sure to watch at least enough videos from each creator to get a general picture of their work. I tried to identify general trends and when a large number of videos about the same topic were published in a short period of time, I prioritized them over other videos. To keep track of such instances, I created playlists for videos with certain themes or topics (e.g. related to the Covid-19 pandemic), many of which were utilized in the analysis below. While my main focus was the creators and their videos, I also looked at comments to get a general idea of their respective audiences. Furthermore, I recorded subscriber counts monthly for each channel.

- 6 In most cases, gender was determined via a creator’s self-identification in their channel description or videos. In other cases, gender was assumed based on presentation.

The present article is based on observations of general trends in educational videos about science, philosophy, and religion, published across all sixty-five channels⁷ during the time of observation. Videos did not have to have explicit educational intent to be classified as such; rather, I considered any video about one of the three aforementioned topics to be “educational” if the balance between informational and editorial content leaned towards the former. To illustrate the difference, consider the following two videos. Friendly Atheist has a long-running series of videos, beginning with “Everything Wrong with Genesis 1 in the Bible”⁸ (2019), where he works his way through the Bible, chapter by chapter, criticizing and “riffing” on the text. While the viewer is presented with the text of the Bible (information), the videos largely centre on his entertaining commentary. For this reason, I do not consider this video educational. In contrast, Rationality Rules’s (2019) video “Creation and Causation (a reply to Dr. Craig)” gives viewers an eleven-minute crash course in causality and logical fallacies in relation to apologist William Lane Craig’s version of the Kalam cosmological argument for the existence of God, but contains very little in terms of Rationality Rules’s subjective opinions about Craig. I consider this video educational.

In the analysis, I employ Norman Fairclough’s (1992) three-dimensional

framework for critical discourse analysis. This approach views instances of discourse simultaneously as text, discursive practice (production, distribution, and consumption of texts), and social practice (ideology and the constitutive and constructive function of discourse). These dimensions form a nested hierarchy, where all text is discursive practice, and all discursive practice is social practice. The textual dimension concerns the videos themselves. As texts, YouTube videos are *multi-modal* (Jancsary, Höllerer and Meyer 2016)), that is, they are composed a variety of modes of language (spoken and written text, graphics, *mise-en-scène*, editing, etc.) Consequently, analysis of YouTube videos should take each mode into account, at least to some extent. At the level of discursive practice, videos are contextualized in relation to other videos by the same creator, as well as other videos dealing with similar topics. In terms of social practice, recurring discourses and discursive practices in educational videos about science, philosophy, and religion, construct these domains of knowledge in particular ways that can be understood in relation to twenty-first-century atheist discourse more broadly.

In the following three sections, I discuss the discursive practices I have identified in educational videos about science, philosophy, and religion. The borders between these three domains of knowledge are, of course, not absolute, and some topics, particularly creationism and arguments for the existence of God, could reasonably be placed under more than one umbrella. In these two cases, I have categorized creationism as a scientific rather than religious topic, since those videos mostly address and debunk creationist claims about the theory of evolution, and arguments for the existence of God as a philosophical topic, since they tend not to be religion-specific.

7 During the time of observation, only thirty-four of the channels published videos which fit these criteria.

8 The “Everything wrong with” title format is popular on YouTube and was popularized by the comedy channel Cinemasins in videos where they examine films chronologically, jokingly pointing out plot holes, inconsistencies, weird scenes, etc.

Science: our best current understanding of the world

Science-related topics have been a staple of YouTube atheism since the beginning, and seventeen out of the sixty-five channels regularly produced educational science videos during the time of observation. Atheist YouTubers like AronRa and Thunderf00t rose to prominence in the late-2000s with long-running series of videos debunking creationism and intelligent design.⁹ The debunking format is still the most common way YouTube atheists talk about evolution-related topics, but there are videos which do not directly address creationist claims. AronRa has, for example, produced several series of videos on evolutionary biology, palaeontology, and taxonomy, many of which are intended as classroom supplements.

While evolution appears to be an “ever-green” topic, most science-related content published during the time of observation address more current issues. A good example is how videos about medical science, which previously had mostly dealt with alternative medicine, in 2020 came to almost exclusively focus on topics related to the Covid-19 pandemic, such as epidemiology and vaccination. Most channels, with few exceptions, stick to only a few scientific topics.

Science is often talked about in the abstract, as a set of principles for acquiring knowledge. The value and reliability of science is derived from “the scientific method”, constructed as evidence-driven, non-dogmatic, and ideologically neutral.

9 While AronRa’s content is still centred on evolution and creationism, Thunderf00t has shifted focus to debunking technological innovations, particularly new energy technology, that he considers scientifically dubious.

However, there is some degree of awareness that the scientific ideal, the *unbiased evaluation of evidence*, is not always realized in practice. Most of the time, discussions of processes of knowledge-production are situated in the past, in reference to scientific ideas that turned out to be wrong. These failures of science, or scientists, are sometimes attributed to insufficient data or technological limitations, but in most cases discussed, they are said to be the result of bias.

A good example of the latter is AronRa’s (2018) video about the evolution of mammals from his fifty-part series “The Systematic Classification of Life”. He opens the video by talking about nineteenth-century English palaeontologist Sir Richard Owen, mentor to, and later critic of, Charles Darwin. Despite being “the leading authority on paleontology in his day”, Owen’s commitment to Linnean creationism did not allow him to accept Darwin’s theory of evolution, and “caused him to imagine that God would occasionally create newer and better animals when the old series wore out or died off”. Owen’s explanation for the abundance of extinct, and the lack of extant, species in the fossil record is not framed as an alternative interpretation of the evidence, but a denial of the obvious truth. As AronRa often says, “the truth is what the facts are” and the facts speak for themselves.

The flawed or incorrect science of the past does not undermine the trust in science that YouTube atheists express, and they often defend contemporary mainstream scientific views, for example about climate change, against accusations that since the scientific consensus changes over time, it cannot be trusted at any specific point in time. They argue that the willingness to amend or reject accepted conclusions in response to new data, replacing

bad science with better science, is precisely what makes science reliable. The scientific consensus, often simply referred to as “what science says”, represents *our best current understanding of the world*, the accumulated opinion of experts, and unless you are an expert yourself, and can back up your dissent with more substantial evidence, you should not doubt it.

Given that science is construed as a domain for experts, it is important for YouTube atheists to establish and communicate their own credibility on the topics about which they speak. Many have some degree of formal education, although not necessarily in the fields they discuss: Thunderf00t is a working scientist with a Ph.D. in chemistry, AronRa has an associate’s degree in geology, and Rebecca Watson has a bachelor’s degree in communications. AronRa also derives credibility from extensive self-study (i.e. informal learning) and his videos regularly feature contributions from professional scientists. In Watson’s case, since she mainly discusses topics outside her field of education, her credibility comes from thoroughly researching the topic and her general competence at reading scientific papers. Overall, YouTube atheists also establish credibility by using scientific vocabulary, and commenting on its misuse, particularly the difference between a scientific “theory” and a “hypothesis”.¹⁰

Credibility can also be established visually, although most creators do not utilize this possibility to any great extent. They typically use a traditional video-blog (vlog) format, with videos filmed close up in a domestic location. They do, however, often use on-screen text and images to cite their

10 The most common example of this is as a response to the common creationist claim that evolution is “just a theory”.



Figure 1. Screenshot, cropped. Example of a video filmed in front of a bookcase (Rebecca Watson 2020).

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sources. Furthermore, some creators occasionally record videos in front of a bookcase (see Figure 1), signifying that they are well read and informed.¹¹ By combining the casual presentation of the vlogger with signifiers of expertise, they take on the role of a “ordinary expert” (Tolson 2010, 283). AronRa, who explicitly identifies as a science communicator, is a notable exception. He utilizes a more professional style, filming in front of a green screen in a dedicated studio space, much like videos from mainstream educational channels like PBS Eons (see Figure 2).

YouTube atheists tend not to reflect critically on processes of knowledge-production and distribution in relation to contemporary scientific work. In fact, the socio-political aspects of the institutions where research is carried out, disseminated, and applied, are largely ignored. Rebecca Watson, who regularly discusses studies financed by think-tanks and corporations, as well as ideological bias in fields such as evolutionary psychology, is a rare exception. However, like most of her peers who

11 This applies to most creators, not only those who produce educational videos on science-related topics.



[Get Transcript](#)

Systematic Classification of Life - ep24 Mammalia

AronRa 306,000 subscribers Bli medlem Prenumerera



When Mammals Only Went Out At Night

PBS Eons 2.87 min. Prenumerera 24,876 likes

Figure 2. Screenshots, cropped and composited by author. Comparison of the visual styles of AronRa (2018) and PBS Eons (2021).

made multiple videos about the coronavirus pandemic, she also engages in particular uncritical discourses surrounding the relationship between medical research and government institutions. For example, in her video (Rebecca Watson 2020) addressing accusations that the Center for Disease Control initially deceived the public about the effectiveness of face masks to avoid a shortage of N-95 masks, Rebecca Watson states that:

So if I don't believe that the CDC was purposely lying to us to stop a run on masks, why are they only just now thinking of changing their messaging? Simple, because now we have more data on a complicated subject. This is how science works. This pandemic moved very quickly. Yes, there's

much more our government could have and should have done to prepare, and more that they should still be currently doing, but scientists have been working as quickly as they can from the very beginning to separate fact from fiction, figuring out how this particular virus spreads, and how we can best protect ourselves, and they have been doing it all with seriously incomplete data thanks to our shitty governments.

Here, the CDC is discursively transformed from a government institution to a scientific body representing the scientific consensus. This construction is central to the very premise of the video: the conduct that the accusers frame as *government misconduct* is justified as *proper scientific conduct*. This separation between the CDC and the government is further reinforced by attributing the lack of data that lead to flawed CDC recommendations to governments not doing what they should.¹²

Philosophy: the application of reason in the search for truth

Philosophy, despite being the least popular subject for educational videos, with only seven channels producing such content, still has a notable presence among atheists on YouTube. YouTube atheists interested in philosophy discuss a variety of topics,

12 It should be noted that the ways in which content creators were able to talk about the coronavirus pandemic are affected by several factors. For example, it might be seen as irresponsible to criticize official recommendations during a global medical crisis. Furthermore, YouTube instituted a number of policies to combat medical misinformation during the pandemic, which meant creators had to be careful when discussing this topic.

the most popular ones being philosophy of religion, epistemology, and ethics. Videos discussing and debunking arguments for the existence of God make up a majority of philosophy videos, typically addressing the arguments of particular apologists by identifying questionable premises and fallacious reasoning. Videos about logic and epistemology generally cover topics such as induction and deduction, certainty, and logical syllogisms and fallacies. Regarding ethics, the videos deal with everything from meta-ethical frameworks to particular ethical questions, such as abortion and human rights. Overall, there is a notable lack of videos covering other philosophical topics, such as aesthetics and the philosophy of language.

The focus on broad, “evergreen” topics that have been debated by philosophers since Antiquity has consequences for the treatment of philosophy as an academic discipline. Philosophical questions are typically not framed in relation to how different philosophers have approached them, and references to particular thinkers are rare, unless they are addressing a philosopher directly. There is virtually no engagement with contemporary philosophical literature. While past and present thinkers may offer interesting and useful points of view on an issue, and a YouTuber’s familiarity with them, through formal education or self-study, lends credibility to their videos, ultimately, philosophy is about *how to think*, not *what others have thought*.

This view is perhaps best illustrated in the work of Matt Dillahunty, who produces videos about epistemology, apologetics, debating (including reviews of his own debates), and the Bible. His channel has an explicit educational purpose: he wants to help people become “better thinkers” and “[teach] people how to better recognize and respond to arguments” (Matt

Dillahunty Patreon¹³ page, n.d.). This more practical focus is often explicitly stated in the videos, for example in the introduction to his video about logical syllogisms (Matt Dillahunty 2019b):

Some people are probably going to be expecting this to be like an introduction to Logic 101, or “Here’s the basics of syllogisms.” I’m gonna be telling you details about syllogisms, but I don’t want to get bogged down in it ... because the purpose here today is to talk about the usefulness of syllogisms and how, for most of you, most of the time, it’s going to be impractical.

While syllogisms may be impractical for everyday use, they are central to how YouTube atheists are *doing* philosophy. Philosophical arguments are typically presented and analysed in syllogistic form, albeit using natural language rather than formal logical notation. Their philosophical analysis tends to revolve around identifying logical fallacies. Rationality Rules’s aforementioned video response to William Lane Craig (Rationality Rules 2019) is a good example of this. After playing a clip of Craig arguing that the only alternative to the first premise of his argument – “If the universe began to exist, then the universe has a cause for its beginning” – is that the universe somehow came into existence for no reason, Rationality Rules states:

First off, notice that this is a black and white fallacy. Craig would have you believe that either the universe has a cause or it just popped into existence

13 Patreon is a service for continuous crowdfunding for various types of creative content.

for no reason whatsoever, but there is at least one more option. And this brings me to my second point. We could reject not only the cause claim of the premise, but also the existence claim. That is, we could claim that the universe never began to exist (it's always existed) in precisely the same way that Craig claims that his God never began to exist, but we can do so without his additional assumptions. Again, to be clear, I'm not accusing Craig of chicanery here, but rather, making a point.

As he speaks, Rationality Rules also uses a graphic he has created for the “black and white” fallacy, and displays Craig’s argument on-screen, highlighting the two claims of the first premise as he addresses them (see Figure 3). The latter is common practice among YouTube atheists, but his set of graphics for logical fallacies¹⁴ is unique to Rationality Rules.

There are many possible reasons for their extensive use of syllogisms. Pedagogically, it is a clear and accessible way of presenting an argument. It is also the form in which most arguments they address are originally presented. Furthermore, it allows for an objective, systematic way of analysing arguments: evaluating the truth of each premise and the chain of logic that leads to the conclusion. By demonstrating that an argument is invalid or unsound, they show that, by logical necessity, it must be rejected.

The syllogistic approach constructs philosophy as *the proper application of reason in the search for truth*. While most YouTube atheists explicitly reject the possibility of

14 He also uses the graphics in *Debunked*, a card game he created where players debunk arguments for the existence of God using logical fallacies.

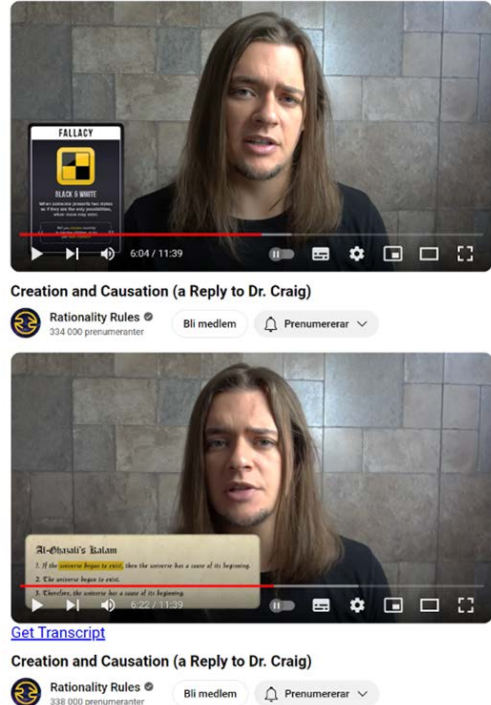


Figure 3. Screenshots, cropped and composited by author. Rationality Rules’s (2019) use of on-screen graphics and text.

absolute certainty about anything, philosophical conclusions, if arrived at through principles derived from the most fundamental laws of logic, are treated as objective truths with the highest possible degree of certainty.

The focus on finding the truth is also visible in the ways they approach moral philosophy. Religious moral systems are rejected as unsound, since they are derived from theological beliefs that rest on epistemologically shaky ground. Instead, they advocate secular, utilitarian systems, based on reason rather than faith. Many advocate some form of moral objectivism, sometimes referencing the “science of morality” from Sam Harris’s book *The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values* (2012). Put briefly, his argument is that while the basis of a moral system is always subjective to some degree,

once we have agreed on a foundation – in his case well-being – objective moral truths can be derived using reason to analyse facts about the world.

Their overall approach to philosophy seems to be heavily inspired by Harris's work. Their tendency to treat philosophical questions as separate from their history is particularly notable in *The Moral Landscape*, which has been criticized for Harris's explicit reluctance to engage with historical and recent developments in moral philosophy (Pigliucci 2013). Furthermore, like Harris, they occasionally utilize scientific findings in their philosophical arguments, for example by claiming that libertarian notions of free will are incompatible with a neuroscientific understanding of human action.

Religions: sets of truth claims about the world

It should not come as a surprise that YouTube atheists like to talk about religion, and seventeen of the channels produced educational videos on the subject during the time of observation. In addition to the religion-related topics discussed in the previous two sections (such as creationism and apologetics), educational videos about religion tend to address specific religious beliefs and claims, texts, and, to a lesser extent, groups. YouTube atheists overwhelmingly focus on Christianity, with Islam being a distant second.

Videos about religious claims or beliefs may address historical claims, such as the resurrection or historicity of Jesus, or beliefs of a more metaphysical nature, such as religious conceptions of God or the soul. They may be direct responses to apologists or discussions of the topic on a more general level. Religious beliefs and claims are taken at face value, as *factual propositions about the world* that adherents must accept

as true, and are generally evaluated in terms of scientific plausibility: is it a proper falsifiable hypothesis and is there supporting evidence? Consequently, they rarely attempt to directly disprove religious claims, but instead aim to show that accepting them as true is unwarranted. While they occasionally recognize that not all religious adherents view their beliefs in such a way, they typically maintain that any other position would be inconsistent.¹⁵

The legitimacy of scientific critiques of religious beliefs is reinforced by addressing apologists who defend their beliefs as factual propositions. For example, in *Godless Engineer's* (2019) response to Christian apologist Lee Strobel's argument for the historicity of Jesus's resurrection, he states:

Okay, so [Strobel] says there are nine independent sources in and out of the Bible. He's not actually going to name these sources, but, of course, the ones in the Bible we know are not independent, so that's rubbish. So, however many he has outside the Bible, I've looked at all of the sources and none of them actually say that Jesus was risen or that there were post-resurrection appearances of him or anything like that. There's nothing that solidifies this "resurrection" of Jesus in history. Now, there are historians that talk about the beliefs of Christians, but that doesn't actually mean that the shit happened. That just means that these Christians believed these things. That's it.

15 Evelina Lundmark and Stephen LeDrew (2019) found a similar attitude among atheist Reddit users, who generally view religious people as either "fundies" or "cherry-pickers", affording more respect to the former group than the latter.

Here, Godless Engineer not only argues that the sources are either unreliable or do not actually support the claim; by pointing out that Strobel does not name the sources, he also questions Strobel's scholarly credibility. In essence, he positions himself as a critical historian, more credible than the apologist he is responding to.

Approaching religious beliefs as factual propositions, which Robin Le Poidevin (1996) calls *theological realism*, is characteristic of new-atheist discourse about religion (Haught 2008; Falcioni 2010; Kaden and Schmidt-Lux 2016), for example in Sam Harris's (2004, 63) claim that all beliefs are "attempts to represent states of the world" or the chapter titled "The God Hypothesis" from Richard Dawkins's *The God Delusion* (2006).

Most videos about religious texts come in the form of "bible studies", focusing on a specific passage or topic. These videos tend to follow a particular structure, beginning with reading selected passages from a particular book, followed by a discussion of popular religious interpretations and whether they are supported by the text itself. A good example of a Bible study is Matt Dillahunty's (2019a) video about the story of Jephthah from the Book of Judges, who made a vow to God and ended up having to sacrifice his daughter. His approach is intertextual, discussing the story in relation to Jephthah's biography, the story of Abraham and Isaac, and different theological interpretations. He contrasts one traditional Jewish interpretation of the story, as an object lesson to "be careful about the vows you make to God", with those of apologists who "have basically twisted themselves in pretzels to try to offer some sort of softening of this text". He also discusses what it implies about the Old Testament God's attitude towards human sacrifice, as well as how Jephthah's daughter

is denied agency and moral consideration. Like most Bible-study videos, it makes the argument that Christians often ignore what the text *actually says* to avoid having to admit that the Bible does not always conform to their views of God (as opposed to human sacrifice) and contains morally problematic passages (the treatment of women).

Religions are generally constructed as cognitively coercive. On the one hand, religious beliefs are described as the result of "indoctrination" or even "brainwashing". On the other hand, religions are said to limit the intellectual freedom of adherents by imposing "required beliefs" and disallowing doubt. While some consider all religions to be "cults", others reserve the term for particular groups and movements which exercise a high degree of control over their followers. Owen Morgan,¹⁶ a former Jehovah's Witness, is known for his cult-evaluation videos, where he uses anti-cult counsellor Steven Hassan's BITE model,¹⁷ which looks at aspects of behaviour, information, thought, and emotion control to determine if groups such as Jehovah's Witnesses, the Roman Catholic Church, or the Church of Scientology, are cults. He has also used the cult evaluation format in videos about political groups

16 During the time of observation, Morgan's channel name was "Telltale", but in 2022, he changed it to "Owen Morgan (Telltale)". To avoid confusion, the channel is referred to as "Owen Morgan" in the article text.

17 While the BITE model was developed in a non-academic setting, it has been used in Hassan's academic work (Hassan and Shah 2019; Hassan 2020). However, Julie Ingersoll (2022) argues that while it may be useful in a therapeutic setting, it is inadequate as a sociological-historical tool for assessing which groups are "cults" that exercise "undue influence" over their members.

like Black Lives Matter and the Republican party. While his videos, and similar videos from others, rarely contain explicit calls to action, they often include an activist component, typically to raise awareness about dangerous religious groups.

The construction of religions as cognitively coercive has consequences for how religious individuals are constructed. While YouTube atheists may accuse some religious apologists and leaders of being actively dishonest, religious laymen are, by contrast, consistently constructed as passive victims of learned irrationality, said to be “misinformed” or “imperfect thinkers” and in need of an education in critical thinking. Interestingly, this view, which is also found among the new atheists (LeDrew 2016; Lundmark and LeDrew 2019), is the opposite of what Evelina Lundmark and Stephen LeDrew (2019, 125) found in their study of atheism on Reddit: that atheist redditors grant religious individuals a high degree of agency, as people who choose to “look to religion to validate their own values”. They argue that this disparity between new atheists and atheist redditors implies a fundamental difference in their understanding of human nature, humans as predisposed to indoctrination and irrationality and humans as inherently rational, respectively. I return to the question as to why YouTube atheists, unlike atheist redditors, tend to promote the new-atheist perspective in the next section.

The question of authority with regard to religion is somewhat more complex than with regard to science and philosophy. On the one hand, formal expertise is rarely considered necessary to talk about religious topics, particularly in relation to scripture, and they rarely cite academic literature on religion. On the other hand, their theological realism places religious claims in the expert domain of science, and they

may rely on the work of experts, such as the BITE model, for credibility.

Overall, the YouTube atheists’ approach to religion is overwhelmingly Christianity-centred; not only do they primarily discuss topics related to Christianity, but their discussions of “religion” in general are heavily influenced by Christian, particularly Protestant, theology. Personal religious belief is taken to be the core of all religious traditions and Martin Luther’s *sola fide* doctrine (salvation through faith alone) is treated as a religious universal. Religious texts, regardless of tradition, are treated as the presumed words of gods, the ultimate authorities of what religious people ought to believe, that can be read and understood by anyone, without the need to consult additional works or authorities (cf. Luther’s *sola scriptura* doctrine). This is another trait they share with the new atheists, who tend to take “the local theism”, which is Protestantism in both the US and the UK, as the “essence of religion itself” (Eller 2010, 15).

Discussion

Any attempt to summarize such a large amount of data will inevitably involve some degree of generalization; not every statement in the previous three sections will apply to all atheist YouTubers. That being said, on an ideological level, their approaches to science, philosophy, and religion share two fundamental characteristics.

A truth-centred approach to science, philosophy, and religion. Atheist YouTubers consistently construct these domains of knowledge in relation to “truth”. While unable to provide us with truths in the absolute sense, the methods of science represent the best ways of investigating the facts of reality, and the scientific consensus, always progressing, is the best approximation of the truth we have. The aim of philosophy is,

using reason, to discover more fundamental truths. Religions claim to possess both kinds of truths, but rely on flawed methods, such as revelation and tradition.

A *hierarchy of knowledge*. For these atheists, science is epistemologically privileged, meaning that philosophical propositions must be consistent with scientific ones, and religious propositions must be consistent with both science and philosophy. While science relies on epistemology to justify its methods, and philosophical truths, when derived from first principles, are more absolute than scientific truths, on issues where science and philosophy intersect – for example regarding cosmological and philosophical notions of causality – the former is more authoritative than the latter. Furthermore, scientists, in so far as they represent the scientific consensus, can and should be cited as authorities, whereas philosophers and theologians are not considered experts in the same way, if at all.

This hierarchy mirrors nineteenth-century French philosopher Auguste Comte's three-stage model of societal progress: from the *theological* stage, characterized by religious explanations of phenomena, via the *metaphysical* stage, where religion is replaced by philosophical speculation, to the *positive* stage, where humans rely on empirical investigation (LeDrew 2016, 20). While I have not come across any references to Comte over the course of this study, scholars (e.g. Stahl 2010, 98; LeDrew 2016, 21) have identified Comte's view of religion as an outdated way of knowledge-production that will ultimately be superseded by science, which he called *positivism*, as a core feature of new atheist ideology, which the YouTube atheists overwhelmingly accept.¹⁸

18 Rebecca Catto and colleagues (2023) found similar attitudes around science and

As educational resources for atheists, the videos serve two primary purposes. Firstly, they communicate information and ideas in an accessible format. Each video can be viewed as a crash course on a particular topic, be it evolutionary biology, medicine, epistemology, philosophy of religion, or the Bible.¹⁹ As argued by Smith and Cimino (2012, 23), YouTube affords atheist creators a great deal of freedom in choosing their styles of presentation and video topics. While it is undeniable that their choices of topics reflect the personal interests of creators, they also reflect their understanding of the atheist public they address. According to Warner (2002, 114), while the act of addressing a public requires a preconceived notion of its scope and character, it also constructs it in particular ways. By producing educational videos on particular topics, YouTube atheists are, on the one hand, showing that they think the topic might be of interest to atheists, and, on the other, implicitly asserting that it should be. This ideological dimension extends beyond the topics atheists should care about and the facts they should know. Educational videos also, implicitly as well as explicitly, teach particular ways of approaching and evaluating different types of knowledge claims (scientific, philosophical, religious), and in doing so construct a normative atheistic approach to knowledge.

religion – the incompatibility of science and religious belief, and an idolization of science – among non-religious people of various identities in Canada and the UK, so this does not seem to be particular to atheists.

19 Whether the information presented in the videos is accurate or the videos are conducive for learning and retaining knowledge is outside the scope of this study. For such discussions, see the studies of educational YouTube videos cited in the introduction.

Secondly, and perhaps most importantly, they prepare atheists to defend their non-belief in (casual or formal) debates with religious believers. While some explicitly identify this as one of their main goals (e.g. Matt Dillahunt), this aspect is present throughout the videos. Educational videos often come in the form of response videos, where claims and arguments from religious apologists are broken down into shorter points and refuted one by one. By alternating between clips of apologists and themselves responding to them, the audience is presented with a simulated debate, which can be entertaining as well as informative. This format provides viewers (and other atheist creators) with ready-made counter-arguments to the most common arguments for, for example, the existence of God or creationism. There is an expectation that one's atheism will be challenged, by everyone from friends and family members to religious strangers on the internet. This is consistent with Jack David Eller's (2010, 4) claim that atheism in majority-theistic societies, where religion and God-belief have both popular and institutional support and non-belief may be stigmatized, "must necessarily be oppositional, critical, defensive, and argumentative".

Although a plurality of the creators are located in the United States, where studies have found significant anti-atheist bias and that non-religious individuals may experience discrimination (Hammer et al. 2012; Swan and Heesacker 2012), one could object that this is not the case for British atheist YouTubers who engage in counter-apologetics since, according to Linda Woodhead (2016, 259), religious non-affiliation has become "the new norm" in the United Kingdom. However, the atheist public is transnational, and, from the perspective of YouTube economics, it makes sense for most Anglophone content

creators to want to appeal to an American audience. Furthermore, I would argue that this also suggests that debating and debunking are understood to be central to what it means to be a (public) atheist, and producing counter-apologetics videos is an easy way to establish oneself as an atheist YouTuber.

While it can be assumed that for most YouTube atheists, their primary intended audience is other atheists²⁰ – after all, it is difficult to build a following (and crowd-fund) of people who disagree with you – this is not necessarily the case for their educational content. Given that YouTube is a public platform, videos produced within an atheist public can still, at least partially, be intended for other audiences, particularly if the creator views the sharing of the information as a public good (e.g. debunking Covid-19 conspiracy theories).

Videos debunking religious claims reassure an atheist audience that their lack of belief is justified, but they can also provoke doubt in a religious audience. Since "changing minds about the existence of God" is a central goal of contemporary atheist movements (LeDrew 2016, 214), educational atheist content should also be viewed through this lens.²¹ This helps explain why YouTube atheists, like the new atheists, construct religious believers as honest victims rather than dishonest agents. While the r/atheism subreddit is a "niche community" (Lundmark and LeDrew 2019, 118) where there are no theists to deconvert, atheist creators on YouTube are more similar to new atheist authors, who write

20 Based on the comment sections, I would say that atheists also appear to be their *de facto* primary audience.

21 It is not uncommon for commenters to thank creators for putting them on the path away from religion.

books distributed by mainstream publishing houses for a general audience, which Warner (2002, 65) would call “the public”. For the project of creating atheists to be a worthwhile endeavour, one must assume that religious beliefs are sincere convictions, amenable to rational argument, or at least that this is true of the religious people one attempts to reach. In this light, the religious audience these videos are partially intended for is better understood as an audience of *potential atheists*.

Two decades have passed since Sam Harris published the first book of the new-atheist canon, and it is safe to say that new atheism is no longer “new”. Atheism no longer enjoys the mainstream media attention and public interest it did in the mid to late 2000s, and the three remaining horsemen²² no longer publish books or participate in public debates about religion and atheism. However, as this article shows, new atheist discourses around science, philosophy, and religion are still the dominant ones among YouTubers who address an atheist public. This is not particularly surprising. Much has been written about the debates and conflicts among atheists that followed the rise of the new-atheism movement (e.g. Kettell 2013; LeDrew 2016), but these disagreements were almost exclusively political, pertaining to goals, approaches to activism, and the treatment of women and minorities within the movement. While sociologists, philosophers, theologians, and scholars of religion (e.g. Haught 2008; Dickson 2010; Falcioni 2010; Stahl 2010) have offered academic critiques of the new atheists’ views of religion and science, these do not appear to have had much of an influence on contemporary atheist discourse.

22 Christopher Hitchens passed away from oesophageal cancer in 2011.

On a final note, I would like to emphasize that while educational videos about science, philosophy, and religion produced by YouTube atheists are popular and exhibit a high degree of discursive consistency, as noted in the introduction, they do not represent all of YouTube atheism. During the time of observation, videos about social and political issues have been just as prominent as the videos discussed in this article. Their political content appears more discursively diverse and, notably, a majority of the political commentary does not align ideologically with the new atheists. This will be examined in a future article. ■

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