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Agnosticism about God's Existence

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One of the main debates in the philosophy of religion is between theists, who believe that God exists, and atheists, who believe there is no God.^[1]

However, not everyone interested in God's existence is a theist or an atheist. The term "agnosticism", coined by Thomas Henry Huxley in the 1860s, describes the view of some of the people who do not fit into these two camps.

1. What is agnosticism?

One is agnostic about something when one suspends judgment on it, i.e., is neutral or undecided about the issue in question after considering it: e.g., most people, when they begin wondering whether the number of leaves on a nearby tree is odd or even, become agnostic on the matter.^[2]

Within the contemporary philosophy of religion, the word "agnosticism" usually refers to the position of those who suspend judgment on the existence of God.

2. What agnosticism is not

To avoid common misconceptions about agnosticism, one should note that:

- agnosticism is not necessarily incompatible with religious faith. According to some, agnostics can have *non-doxastic faith*, e. faith without theistic belief, with some other positive attitude (e.g., hope) at its core.^[3] Another positive option for an agnostic is to embrace *fictionalism* and treat religion like a fictional narrative that guides one's actions.^[4] However, agnosticism does not entail any specific positive or negative attitude towards religion;

- agnostics may or may not actively seek or hope to acquire evidence about the existence of God. Agnosticism entails neither being a 'seeker' nor spiritual indifference;^[5]
- agnosticism is not the same thing as *apophaticism*, which states that God is essentially unknowable: on most accounts, apophaticists are a subgroup of theists;
- agnosticism is not the same thing as *religious non-cognitivism* – the position that the question of whether God exists (like all statements which involve the term "God" or other religious terms) does not make sense (e.g., because it does not refer to anything empirically observable) and thus cannot have a meaningful answer. Both agnostics and non-cognitivists are neither theists nor atheists, but agnostics believe that the question of whether God exists does have an answer, even though they suspend judgment on what it is.

3. Why agnosticism?

The main argument for agnosticism can be described as *the evidential argument*. One of its premises is the view (called *evidentialism*) that one should *believe* something if evidence supports it, *disbelieve* it if evidence supports its negation, and *suspend judgment* on the matter if evidence is neutral. The other premise states that evidence about whether God exists is neutral between theism and atheism, prompting the agnostic conclusion.

Why consider the evidence about God's existence to be neutral? Some argue that there is an equal amount of evidence for theism and atheism (which includes the view that there is no evidence for any of the two). Others prefer to say that the evidence is ambiguous: it is not clear how much evidence there is on each side or how to measure it – e.g., it is hard to say how the existence of evil, which supports atheism, measures against the ontological arguments for God's existence.^[6]

4. Why not agnosticism?

Every argument for theism or atheism, considered in itself, is also an argument against agnosticism, but there have also been attempts to directly challenge the evidential argument.

One answer to the evidential argument for agnosticism is that suspending judgment on the existence of God is psychologically or practically impossible (or identical to atheism in psychological or practical terms). The reason for this would be that whether we are theists or not determines our actions and attitudes (e.g. our expectations about the afterlife) in such a way that one cannot have neutral position on God's existence – just like one cannot be neutral about performing an action: one can only perform it or not perform it.^[7]

Another common answer to the evidential argument is noting that the evidence for a lot of things is ambiguous, but it is generally considered unreasonable to suspend judgment on all of them. Especially in areas such as ethics or politics, where a lot is at stake, we routinely have strong beliefs even though evidence allows for different readings, and it seems counterintuitive to say that these beliefs are not rationally justified. If we are justified in having such beliefs despite neutral or ambiguous evidence, the burden of explaining why this is not the case with theistic or atheistic belief is on the agnostic.^[8]

5. Weak and strong agnosticism

Two types of agnosticism, *strong and weak*, have been distinguished. The views on the nature of the difference between them vary.

One proposed criterion of the distinction is whether agnosticism is considered to be universally rationally required: *weak* agnostics believe that, for some people at some times (which includes themselves at the current moment), rationality *allows* suspending judgment on God's existence; *strong* agnostics state that everyone is always *obliged* to do that if they are to remain rational.

On this account, weak agnosticism is preferable if *some* people at *some* times may have neutral or ambiguous evidence, and strong agnosticism is the right option if evidence available *always* and *to everyone* is neutral or ambiguous. As a consequence, weak agnostics believe it is *possible* to have evidentially justified theistic or atheistic belief, while strong agnostics take it to be an *impossibility*.^[9]

6. The future of agnosticism

Agnosticism has often been perceived as an “empty” position – nothing more than an inability or unwillingness to take a stance. In spite of that, philosophers are increasingly interested in its positive aspect: the possibility and nature of

perspectives resulting from suspending judgment on God's existence.

While some philosophers explore the consequences of combining permanent agnosticism with some form of religious commitment or its absence, others analyze the nature of agnosticism as a stage on the way to a more robust (theistic or atheistic) position. In any case, agnosticism seems to be the key to the epistemic and spiritual borderland which extends between theistic and atheistic realms.

Notes

[1] On an alternative definition of atheism, everyone who does not believe that God exists is a *negative* atheist, while a *positive* atheist is someone who believes that God does not exist. That would make agnostics a subset of negative atheists. See e.g. Martin 2007: 1-3 and Draper 2017.

[2] For a detailed analysis of the suspension of judgment and its relation to indecision, see Friedman 2013: 166-167.

[3] The nature of non-doxastic faith and its relation to agnosticism are a matter of debate, but the openness to the possibility of God's existence, which can be the grounds for hope or similar positive attitudes, is often considered to make such faith possible for an agnostic.

[4] While it may be possible for an atheist to be a fictionalist, it has long been argued that fictionalism is an especially fitting attitude for an agnostic. A recent proposal to combine agnosticism with fictionalism can be found in Le Poidevin 2020.

[5] For an example of the position connecting agnosticism to spiritual inquiry, see Draper 2002.

[6] For a definition of agnosticism in terms of equal amount of evidence on both sides, see e.g. Martin 2007: 3. For the definition in terms of the difficulties with evidential assessment, see e.g. Le Poidevin 2010: 54-57, and Oppy 2018: 50-63.

[7] This answer, the classic version of which has been presented by William James in his classic “The Will to Believe” (James 1896/1979), lies at the heart of the contention between evidentialists and pragmatists, and its significance for agnosticism is hard to overstate.

[8] E.g., Van Inwagen 1996.

[9] For more details, see Oppy 1994: 147-148 and 2018: 18-19. See also Kenny 1983: 87-88 and Le Poidevin 2010: 9-10.

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For further reading

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