

28 (1963), 429–671, and in William P. Murphy, “Educational Freedom in the Courts,” American Association of University Professors, *Bulletin*, 49 (1963), 309–27. The philosophy of academic freedom is reviewed and evaluated in Russell Kirk, *Academic Freedom; An Essay in Definition* (Chicago, 1955), and in Robert M. MacIver, *Academic Freedom in Our Time* (New York, 1955). Specific academic freedom cases are reported on in almost every issue of the *Bulletin* of the American Association of University Professors.

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[See also **Democracy**; Economic Theory of Natural Liberty; Education; **Freedom**; Law, Due Process in; Loyalty; **Protest Movements**; Religious Toleration.]

AGNOSTICISM

I

AGNOSTICISM is a philosophical and theological concept which has been understood in various ways by different philosophers and theologians. T. H. Huxley coined the term in 1869, and its first home was in the disputes about science and religion, naturalism and supernaturalism, that reached a climax during the nineteenth century. To be an agnostic is to hold that nothing can be known or at least that it is very unlikely that anything will be known or soundly believed concerning whether God or any transcendent reality or state exists.

It is very natural for certain people conditioned in certain ways to believe that there must be some power “behind,” “beyond,” or “underlying” the universe which is responsible for its order and all the incredible features that are observed and studied by the sciences even though these same people will readily grant that we do not know that there is such a power or have good grounds for believing that there is such a power. While the admission of ignorance concerning things divine is usually made by someone outside the circle of faith, it can and indeed has been made by fideistic Jews and Christians as well.

Some writers, e.g., Robert Flint and James Ward, so construed “agnosticism” that (1) it was identified with “philosophical skepticism” and (2) it allowed for there being “theistic agnostics” and “Christian agnostics.” However, the more typical employment of “agnosticism” is such that it would not be correct to count as agnostics either fideistic believers or Jews and Christians who claim that we can only gain knowledge of God through some mystical awareness or “ineffable knowledge.” It surely was this standard but more circumscribed sense of “agnosticism” that William James

had in mind when he made his famous remark in his essay “The Will to Believe” that agnosticism was the worst thing that “ever came out of the philosopher’s workshop.” Without implying or suggesting any support at all for James’s value judgment, we shall construe agnosticism in this rather more typical manner. Given this construal (1) “theistic agnosticism” is a contradiction and thus one cannot be a Jew or a Christian and be an agnostic and (2) also agnosticism is *neutral* vis-à-vis the claim that there can be no philosophical knowledge or even scientific or common-sense knowledge. We shall then take agnosticism to be the more limited claim that we either do not or cannot know that God or any other transcendent reality or state exists and thus we should suspend judgment concerning the assertion that God exists. That is to say, the agnostic neither affirms nor denies it. This, as should be evident from the above characterization, can take further specification and indeed later such specifications will be supplied. But such a construal captures in its characterization both what was essentially at issue in the great agnostic debates in the nineteenth century and the issue as it has come down to us.

II

T. H. Huxley was by training a biologist, but he had strong philosophical interests and as a champion of Darwinism he became a major intellectual figure in the nineteenth century. In his “Science and Christian Tradition” (in *Collected Essays*), Huxley remarks that agnosticism is a method, a stance taken toward putative religious truth-claims, the core of which is to refuse to assent to religious doctrines for which there is no adequate evidence, but to retain an open-mindedness about the possibility of sometime attaining adequate evidence. We ought never to assert that we know a proposition to be true or indeed even to assent to that proposition unless we have adequate evidence to support it.

After his youthful reading of the Scottish metaphysician William Hamilton’s *Philosophy of the Unconditioned* (1829), Huxley repeatedly returned to questions about the limits of our possible knowledge and came, as did Leslie Stephen, to the empiricist conclusion that we cannot know anything about God or any alleged states or realities “beyond phenomena.” Whether there is a God, a world of demons, an immortal soul, whether indeed “the spiritual world” is other than human fantasy or projection, were all taken by Huxley to be *factual questions* open to careful and systematic empirical investigation. In short, however humanly important such questions were, they were also “matters of the intellect” and in such contexts the

central maxim of the method of agnosticism is to “follow your reason as far as it will take you, without regard to any other consideration. And negatively: In matters of the intellect do not pretend that conclusions are certain which are not demonstrated or demonstrable” (Huxley, pp. 245–46). Operating in accordance with such a method does not justify “the denial of the existence of any Supernature; but simply the denial of the validity of the evidence adduced in favour of this, or that, extant form of Supernaturalism” (p. 126). Huxley found that he could no more endorse materialism, idealism, atheism, or pantheism than he could theism; they all claimed too much about essentially contested matters. Huxley felt that people espousing such world views were too ready to claim a solution to the “problem of existence,” while he remained painfully aware that he had not succeeded in coming by such a solution and in addition retained “a pretty strong conviction that the problem was insoluble” (pp. 237–38).

This conviction is at the heart of his agnosticism. Huxley was convinced that Kant and Hamilton had established that reason fails us—and indeed *must* fail us—when we try to establish that the world is finite in space or time or indefinite in space or time, rational or irrational, an ordered whole or simply manifesting certain ordered features but not something properly to be called an ordered whole. Answers to such questions reveal something about our attitudes but can never provide us with propositions we can justifiably claim to be true or even know to be false. Agnosticism is a confession of honesty here. It is “the only position for people who object to say that they know what they are quite aware they do not know” (p. 210).

Such skepticism concerning the truth-claims of religion and metaphysics, including, of course, metaphysical religiosity, should not be taken as a denial that there can be reliable knowledge. Rather Huxley argued, as John Dewey did far more systematically later, that we can and do gain experimental and experiential knowledge of nature, including human nature, and that this, by contrast with so-called “supernatural knowledge,” becomes increasingly more extensive and reliable. And while remaining an agnostic, Huxley saw in science—basically the scientific way of fixing belief—a fundamental and well grounded challenge to the authority of the theory of the “spiritual world.”

Whatever may have been the case in the seventeenth century, there was in Huxley’s time a state of war between science and religion. Huxley took science to be a challenge to claims of biblical infallibility and revelation. The whole supernatural world view built on the authority of the Bible and revelation must come

under scientific scrutiny and when this is done it becomes gradually apparent that the use of the scientific method and appeals to scientific canons of criticism give us a far more reliable method of settling belief than do the scriptures and revelation.

To commit ourselves to the Bible as an infallible authority is to commit ourselves to a world view in which we must believe that devils were cast out of a man and went into a herd of swine, that the deluge was universal, that the world was made in six days, and the like. Yet such claims are plainly and massively contravened by our actual empirical knowledge such that they are quite beyond the boundaries of responsible belief. About such matters, Huxley argues, we ought not to be at all agnostic. Moreover, we cannot take them simply as myths, important for the biblical and Christian understanding of the world, if we are to take seriously biblical infallibility and the authority of revelation. For the Jewish-Christian world view to establish its validity, it must provide us with adequate grounds for believing that there are demons. But there is no good evidence for such alleged realities and to believe in them is the grossest form of superstition (Huxley, p. 215).

Even if we fall back on a severe Christology, we are still in difficulties, for it is evident enough that Jesus believed in demons and if we are to adopt a radical Christology and take Jesus as our infallible guide to the divine, we are going to have to accept such superstitious beliefs. Such beliefs affront not only our intellect—our credibility concerning what it is reasonable to believe—they also affront our moral sense as well (p. 226). Yet once we give up the Gospel claim that there are “demons who can be transferred from a man to a pig,” the other stories of “demonic possession fall under suspicion.” Once we start on this slide, once we challenge the ultimate authority of the Bible, and follow experimental and scientific procedures, the ground for the whole Judeo-Christian world view is undermined.

Huxley obviously thinks its credibility and probability is of a very low order; an order which would make Christian or Jewish belief quite impossible for a reasonable and tolerably well informed man. Those who claim to know that there are such unseen and indeed utterly unseeable realities, are very likely people who have taken “cunning phrases for answers,” where real answers are “not merely actually impossible, but theoretically inconceivable.” Yet as an agnostic one must always—even for such problematical transcendental claims—remain open to conviction where evidence can be brought to establish the truth of such transcendent religious claims.

Leslie Stephen in his neglected *An Agnostic’s*

Apology (1893) remarks that he uses “agnostic” in a sense close to that of T. H. Huxley. To be an agnostic, according to Stephen, is to reject what he calls “Dogmatic Atheism,” i.e., “the doctrine that there is no God, whatever is meant by God. . .”; it is, instead, (1) to affirm “what no one denies,” namely “that there are limits to the sphere of human intelligence” and (2) also to affirm the controversial empiricist thesis “that those limits are such as to exclude at least what Lewes called ‘Metempirical knowledge’” (p. 1). (“Metempirical knowledge” is meant to designate all forms of knowledge of a transcendent, numinal, nonempirical sort.)

Stephen makes apparent the empiricist commitments of his conception of agnosticism in characterizing gnosticism, the view agnosticism is deliberately set against. To be a gnostic is to believe that “we can attain truths not capable of verification and not needing verification by actual experiment or observation” (ibid., pp. 1–2). In gaining such a knowledge gnostics in opposition to both Hume and Kant claim that by the use of our reason we can attain a knowledge that transcends “the narrow limits of experience” (p. 1). But the agnostic, firmly in the empiricist tradition, denies that there can be any knowledge of the world, including anything about its origin and destiny, which transcends experience and comprehends “the sorry scheme of things entire.” Such putative knowledge, Stephen maintains, is illusory and not something “essential to the highest interests of mankind,” providing us, as speculative metaphysicians believe, with the solution to “the dark riddle of the universe” (p. 2).

In a manner that anticipates the challenge to the claims of religion and metaphysics made by the logical empiricists, Stephen says that in addition to the problem of whether they can establish the truth or probable truth of “religious truth-claims” there is the further consideration—actually a logically prior question—of whether such putative claims “have any meaning” (p. 3).

It should be noted that Stephen does not begin “An Agnostic’s Apology” by discussing semantical difficulties in putative religious truth-claims but starts with problems connected with what W. K. Clifford was later to call “the ethics of belief.” We indeed would all want—if we could do it honestly—to accept the claim that “evil is transitory . . . good eternal” and that the “world is really an embodiment of love and wisdom, however dark it may appear to us” (p. 2). But the rub is that many of us cannot believe that and in a question of such inestimable human value, we have “the most sacred obligations to recognize the facts” and make our judgments in accordance with the facts. But the facts do not give us grounds for confidence in the viability of Judeo-Christian beliefs. Rather we are

strongly inclined when we inspect these beliefs to believe they are wish fulfillments. And while it may indeed be true that for the moment dreams may be pleasanter than realities, it is also true that if we are bent on attaining a more permanent measure of happiness, it “must be won by adapting our lives to the realities,” for we know from experience that illusory consolations “are the bitterest of mockeries” (ibid.). The religious platitudes “Pain is not an evil,” “Death is not a separation,” and “Sickness is but a blessing in disguise” have tortured sufferers far more than “the gloomiest speculations of avowed pessimists” (ibid.).

However, the problem of *meaning* cuts to a deeper conceptual level than do such arguments about the ethics of belief. Where Judeo-Christianity does not have a fideistic basis, it is committed to what Stephen calls gnosticism. But does not such a doctrine fail “to recognize the limits of possible knowledge” and in trying to transcend these limits does it not in effect commit the gnostic to pseudo-propositions which are devoid of literal meaning? Logical empiricists later answered this question in the affirmative and while it is not crystal clear that Stephen’s answer is quite that definite, it would appear that this is what he wants to maintain. And if that is what Stephen is maintaining, there can, of course, be no knowledge of the divine.

Stephen raises this key question concerning the intelligibility of such gnostic God-talk, but he does little with it. Instead he focuses on some key questions concerning attempts by theologians to undermine agnosticism. He first points out that an appeal to revelation is no answer to the agnostic’s denial that we have knowledge of transcendent realities or states, for in claiming to rely exclusively on revelation these theologians acknowledge that “natural man can know nothing of the Divine nature.” But this Stephen replies, is not only to grant but in effect to assert the agnostic’s fundamental principle (p. 5). He points out that H. L. Mansel in effect and in substance affirms agnosticism and that Cardinal Newman with his appeal to the testimony of conscience does not provide a reliable argument on which to base a belief in God nor does he undermine the agnostic’s position, for “the voice of conscience has been very differently interpreted.” Some of these interpretations, secular though they be, have all the appearances of being at least as valid as Newman’s, for all that Newman or anyone else has shown. Moreover, on any reasonable reading of a principle of parsimony, they are far simpler than Newman’s interpretation. Thus Newman’s arguments in reality prove, as do Mansel’s, that a man ought to be an agnostic concerning such ultimate questions where reason remains his guide and where he does not make an appeal to the *authority* of the Church. They, of

course, would have us accept the authority of the Church, but how can we reasonably do so when there are so many Churches, so many conflicting authorities, and so many putative revelations? Where reason can only lead us to agnosticism concerning religious matters, we can have no ground for accepting one Church, one religious authority, or one putative revelation rather than another. We simply have no way of knowing which course is the better course. Agnosticism, Stephen concludes, is the only reasonable and viable alternative.

Like Huxley, and like Hume before him, Stephen is skeptical of the *a priori* arguments of metaphysics and natural theology. "There is not a single proof of natural theology," he asserts, "of which the negative has not been maintained as vigorously as the affirmative" (p. 9). In such a context, where there is no substantial agreement, but just endless and irresolvable philosophical controversy, it is the duty of a reasonable man to profess ignorance (p. 9). In trying to escape the bounds of sense—in trying to gain some metempirical knowledge—philosophers continue to contradict flatly the first principles of their predecessors and no vantage point is attained where we can objectively assess these endemic metaphysical conflicts that divide philosophers. To escape utter skepticism, we must be agnostics and argue that such metaphysical and theological controversies lead to "transcending the limits of reason" (p. 10). But the only widely accepted characterization of these limits "comes in substance to an exclusion of ontology" and an adherence to empirically based truth-claims as the only legitimate truth-claims.

It will not help, Stephen argues, to maintain that the Numinous, i.e., the divine, is essentially mysterious and that religious understanding—a seeing through a glass darkly—is a knowledge of something which is irreducibly and inescapably mysterious. In such talk in such contexts, there is linguistic legerdemain: we call our doubts mysteries and what is now being appealed to as "the mystery of faith" is but the theological phrase for agnosticism (p. 22).

Stephen argues that one could believe knowledge of the standard types was quite possible and indeed actual and remain skeptical about metaphysics. It is just such a position that many (perhaps most) contemporary philosophers would take. In taking this position himself, Stephen came to believe that metaphysical claims are "nothing but the bare husks of meaningless words." To gain genuine knowledge, we must firmly put aside such meaningless metaphysical claims and recognize the more limited extent of our knowledge claims. A firm recognition here will enable us to avoid utter skepticism because we come to see that within

the limits of the experiential "we have been able to discover certain reliable truths" and with them "we shall find sufficient guidance for the needs of life" (p. 26). So while we remain religious skeptics and skeptical of the claims of transcendental metaphysics, we are not generally skeptical about man's capacity to attain reliable knowledge. Yet it remains the case that nothing is known or can be known, of the alleged "ultimate reality"—the Infinite and Absolute—of traditional metaphysics and natural theology (p. 26). And thus nothing can be known of God.

III

Before moving on to a consideration of some twentieth-century formulations of agnosticism and to a critical examination of all forms of agnosticism, let us consider briefly a question that the above characterization of Huxley and Stephen certainly should give rise to. Given the correctness of the above criticisms of Judaism and Christianity, do we not have good grounds for rejecting these religions and is not this in effect an espousal of atheism rather than agnosticism?

We should answer differently for Huxley than we do for Stephen. Huxley's arguments, if correct, would give us good grounds for rejecting Christianity and Judaism; but they are not sufficient by themselves for jettisoning a belief in God, though they would require us to suspend judgment about the putative knowledge-claim that God exists and created the world. But it must be remembered that agnosticism is the general claim that we do not know and (more typically) cannot know or have good grounds for believing that there is a God. But to accept this is not to accept the claim that there is no God, unless we accept the premiss that what cannot even in principle be known cannot exist. This was not a premiss to which Huxley and Stephen were committed. Rather they accepted the standard agnostic view that since we cannot know or have good reasons for believing that God exists we should suspend judgment concerning his existence or nonexistence. Moreover, as we shall see, forms of Jewish and Christian fideism when linked with modern biblical scholarship could accept at least most of Huxley's arguments and still defend an acceptance of the Jewish or Christian faith.

Stephen's key arguments are more epistemologically oriented and are more definitely committed to an empiricist account of meaning and the limits of conceivability. As we shall see in examining the contentions of some contemporary critics of religion, it is more difficult to see what, given the correctness of Stephen's own account, it could *mean* to affirm, deny, or even doubt the existence of God. The very concept of God on such an account becomes problematical. And

this makes what it would be to be an agnostic, an atheist, or a theist problematical.

The cultural context in which we speak of religion is very different in the twentieth century than it was in the nineteenth (cf. MacIntyre, Ricoeur). For most twentieth-century people with even a minimal amount of education, the authority of science has cut much deeper than it did in previous centuries. The cosmological claims in the biblical stories are no longer taken at face value by the overwhelming majority of educated people both religious and non-religious. Theologians working from within the circle of faith have carried out an extensive program of de-mythologizing such biblical claims. Thus it is evident that in one quite obvious respect the nineteenth-century agnostics have clearly been victorious. There is no longer any serious attempt to defend the truth of the cosmological claims in the type of biblical stories that Huxley discusses.

However, what has not received such wide acceptance is the claim that the acceptance of such a de-mythologizing undermines Judaism and Christianity and drives an honest man in the direction of agnosticism or atheism. Many would claim that such de-mythologizing only purifies Judaism and Christianity of extraneous cultural material. The first thing to ask is whether or not a steady recognition of the fact that these biblical stories are false supports agnosticism as strongly as Huxley thinks it does.

Here the new historical perspective on the Bible is a crucial factor. The very concept of the authority of the Bible undergoes a sea change with the new look in historical scholarship. It is and has been widely acknowledged both now and in the nineteenth century that Judaism and Christianity are both integrally linked with certain historical claims. They are not sufficient to establish the truth of either of these religions, but they are necessary. Yet modern historical research—to put it minimally—places many of these historical claims in an equivocal light and makes it quite impossible to accept claims about the literal infallibility of the Bible. Conservative evangelicalists (fundamentalists) try to resist this tide and in reality still battle with Huxley. They reject the basic findings of modern biblical scholarship and in contrast to modernists treat the Bible not as a fallible and myth-laden account of God's self-revelation in history but as a fully inspired and infallible historical record. Conservative evangelicalists agree with modernists that revelation consists in God's self-disclosure to man, but they further believe that the Bible is an infallible testimony of God's self-unveiling. Modernists by contrast believe that we must discover what the crucial historical but yet divine events and realities are like by a painstaking historical investigation of the biblical material. This involves all

the techniques of modern historical research. The various accounts in the Bible must be sifted by methodical inquiry and independently acquired knowledge of the culture and the times must be used whenever possible.

Conservative evangelicalism is still strong as a cultural phenomenon in North America, though it is steadily losing strength. However it is not a serious influence in the major seminaries and modernism has thoroughly won the day in the intellectually respectable centers of Jewish and Christian learning. Huxley's arguments do come into conflict with conservative evangelicalism and his arguments about the plain falsity, utter incoherence, and sometimes questionable morality of the miracle stories and stories of Jesus' actions would have to be met by such conservative evangelicalists. But the modernists would be on Huxley's side here. So, for a large and respectable element of the Jewish and Christian community, Huxley's arguments, which lead him to reject Christianity and accept agnosticism, are accepted but not taken as at all undermining the foundations of Judaism or Christianity.

Huxley's sort of endeavor, like the more systematic endeavors of David Strauss, simply helps Christians rid the world of the historically contingent cultural trappings of the biblical writers. Once this has been cut away, modernists argue, the true import of the biblical message can be seen as something of decisive relevance that transcends the vicissitudes of time.

However, this is not all that should be said vis-à-vis the conflict between science and religion and agnosticism. It is often said that the conflict between science and religion came to a head in the nineteenth century and now has been transcended. Science, it is averred, is now seen to be neutral concerning materialism or any other metaphysical thesis and theology—the enterprise of attempting to provide ever deeper, clearer, and more reasonable statements and explications of the truths of religion—is more sophisticated and less vulnerable to attacks by science or scientifically oriented thinkers. Still it may be the case that there remain some conflicts between science and religion which have not been overcome even with a sophisticated analysis of religion, where that analysis takes the religions of the world and Christianity and Judaism in particular to be making truth-claims.

Let us consider how such difficulties might arise. Most Christians, for example, would want to claim as something central to their religion that Christ rose from the dead and that there is a life after the death of our earthly bodies. These claims seem at least to run athwart our scientific understanding of the world so that it is difficult to know how we could both accept scientific method as the most reliable method of settling

disputes about the facts and accept these central Christian claims. Moreover, given what science teaches us about the world, these things could not happen or have happened. Yet it is also true that the by now widely accepted new historical perspective on the Bible recognizes and indeed stresses mythical and poetical strands in the biblical stories. And surely it is in this non-literal way that the stories about demons, Jonah in the whale's belly, and Noah and his ark are to be taken, but how far is this to be carried with the other biblical claims? Are we to extend it to such central Christian claims as "Christ rose from the Dead," "Man shall survive the death of his earthly body," "God is in Christ"? If we do, it becomes completely unclear as to what it could mean to speak of either the truth or falsity of the Christian religion. If we do not, then it would seem that some central Christian truth-claims do clash with scientific claims and orientations so that there is after all a conflict between science and religion.

Given such a dilemma, the agnostic or atheist could then go on to claim that either these key religious utterances do not function propositionally as truth-claims at all or there is indeed such a clash. But if there is such a clash, the scientific claims are clearly the claims to be preferred, for of all the rival ways of fixing belief, the scientific way of fixing belief is clearly the most reliable. Thus if there are good empirical, scientific reasons (as there are) for thinking that people who die are not resurrected, that when our earthly bodies die we die, and that there is no evidence at all, and indeed not even any clear meaning to the claim that there are "resurrection bodies" and a "resurrection world" utterly distinct from the cosmos, we have the strongest of reasons for not accepting the Christian claim that "Christ rose from the Dead." The scientific beliefs in conflict with that belief are ones that it would be foolish to jettison. But it is only by a sacrifice of our scientific way of conceiving of things that we could assent to such a central religious claim. Thus it is fair to say that our scientific understanding drives us in the direction of either atheism or agnosticism.

Some contemporary theologians have responded to such contentions by arguing that there are good conceptual reasons why there could not be, appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, such a conflict. "Christ" is not equivalent to "Jesus" but to "the son of God" and God is not a physical reality. Christianity centers on a belief in a deity who is beyond the world, who is creator of the world. But such a reality is in principle, since it is transcendent to the cosmos, not capable of being investigated scientifically but must

be understood in some other way. God in his proper non-anthropomorphic forms is beyond the reach of evidence. Only crude anthropomorphic forms of Christian belief could be disproved by modern scientific investigations.

To believe that Christ rose from the dead is to be committed to a belief in miracles. But, it has been forcefully argued by Ninian Smart, this does not commit us to something which is anti-scientific or that can be ruled out *a priori* (Smart [1964], Ch. II; [1966], pp. 44-45). A miracle is an event of divine significance which is an exception to at least one law of nature. Scientific laws are not, it is important to remember, falsified by single exceptions but only by a class of experimentally repeatable events. Thus we can believe in the miracle of Christ's resurrection without clashing with anything sanctioned by science. It is a dogma, the critic of agnosticism could continue, to think that everything that can be known can be known by the method of science or by simple observation. A thoroughly scientific mind quite devoid of credulity could remain committed to Judaism or Christianity, believe in God, and accept such crucial miracle stories without abandoning a scientific attitude, i.e., he could accept all the findings of science and accept its authority as the most efficient method for ascertaining what is the case when ascertaining what is the case comes to predicting and retrodicting classes of experimentally repeatable events or processes.

Christians as well as agnostics can and do recognize the obscurity and mysteriousness of religious claims. The Christian should go on to say that a nonmysterious God, a God whose reality is evident, would not be the God of Judeo-Christianity—the God to be accepted on faith with fear and trembling. It is only for a God who moves in mysterious ways, that the characteristic Jewish and Christian attitudes of discipleship, adoration, and faith are appropriate. If the existence of God and what it was to act in accordance with His will were perfectly evident or clearly establishable by hard intellectual work, faith would lose its force and rationale. Faith involves risk, trust, and commitment. Judaism or Christianity is not something one simply must believe in if one will only think the matter through as clearly and honestly as possible.

What is evident is that the agnosticism of a Huxley and a Stephen at least—and a Bertrand Russell as well—rests on a philosophical view not dictated by science. James Ward saw this around the turn of the century and argued in his *Naturalism and Agnosticism* that agnosticism "is an inherently unstable position" unless it is supplemented by some general philosophical view such as materialism or idealism (p. 21). Yet it is

just such overall views that Huxley and Stephen were anxious to avoid and along Humean lines viewed with a thoroughgoing skepticism.

In sum, the claim is that only if such an overall philosophical view is justified is it the case that there may be good grounds for being an agnostic rather than a Christian or a Jew. The overall position necessary for such a justification is either a position of empiricism or materialism and if it is the former it must be a form of empiricism which in Karl Popper's terms is also a scientism. By this we mean the claim that there are no facts which science cannot explore: that what cannot at least in principle be known by the method of science cannot be known. Where alternatively scientism is part of a reductive materialist metaphysics, there is a commitment to what has been called an "existence-monism," namely, the view that there is only one sort of level or order of existence and that is spatiotemporal existence. That is to say, such an existence-monist believes that to exist is to have a place in space-time. In support of this, he may point out that we can always ask about a thing that is supposed to exist *where* it exists. This, it is claimed, indicates how we in reality operate on materialist assumptions. And note that if that question is not apposite, "exists" and its equivalents are *not* being employed in their standard senses, but are being used in a secondary sense as in "Ghosts and gremlins exist merely in one's mind." Besides existence-monism there is the even more pervasive and distinctively empiricist position—a position shared by the logical empiricists, by Bertrand Russell, and by John Dewey—referred to as "methodological-monism": to wit "that all statements of fact are such that they can be investigated scientifically, i.e., that they can in principle be falsified by observation" (Smart [1966], p. 8).

However, critics of agnosticism have responded, as has Ninian Smart, by pointing out that these philosophical positions are vulnerable to a variety of fairly obvious and long-standing criticisms. Perhaps these criticisms can be and have been met, but these positions are highly controversial. If agnosticism is tied to them, do we not have as good grounds for being skeptical of agnosticism as the agnostics have for being skeptical of the claims of religion.

Some samplings of the grounds for being skeptical about the philosophical underpinnings for agnosticism are these. When I suddenly remember that I left my key in my car, it makes sense to speak of the space-time location of my car but, it is at least plausibly argued, not of the space-time location of my sudden thought. Moreover numbers exist but it hardly makes sense to ask *where* they exist. It is not the case that for all

standard uses of "exist" that to exist is to have a place in space-time. Methodological-monism is also beset with difficulties. There are in science theoretically unobservable entities and "from quite early times, the central concepts of religion, such as God and nirvana already include the notion that what they stand for cannot literally be observed" (Smart [1962], p. 8). Moreover it is not evident that we could falsify statements such as "There are some graylings in Michigan" or "Every human being has some neurotic traits" or "Photons really exist, they are not simply scientific fictions." Yet we do recognize them (or so at least it would seem) as intelligible statements of fact. Such considerations lead Ninian Smart to claim confidently in his *The Teacher and Christian Belief* (London, 1966) that "it remains merely a dogma to claim that all facts are facts about moons and flowers and humans and other denizens of the cosmos. There need be no general embargo upon belief in a transcendent reality, provided such belief is not merely based on uncontrolled speculation" (p. 51). Smart goes on to conclude that "the exclusion of transcendent fact rests on a mere decision" (p. 52). So it would appear, from what has been said above, that agnosticism has no solid rational foundation.

The dialectic of the argument over agnosticism is not nearly at an end and it shall be the burden of the argument here to establish that agnosticism still has much to be said for it. First of all, even granting, for the reasons outlined above, that neither the development of science nor an appeal to scientism or empiricism establishes agnosticism, there are other considerations which give it strong support. David Hume's *Dialogues on Natural Religion* (1779) and Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) make it quite evident that none of the proofs for the existence of God work, i.e., they are not sound or reliable arguments. Furthermore it should be noted that their arguments do not for the most part depend for their force on empiricist assumptions and they most certainly do not depend on the development of science.

The most rigorous contemporary work in the philosophy of religion has not always supported the detailed arguments of Hume and Kant but it has for the most part supported their overall conclusions on this issue. Alvin Plantinga, for example, in his *God and Other Minds* (1967) rejects rather thoroughly the principles and assumptions of both existence-monism and methodological-monism and he subjects the particulars of Hume's and Kant's views to careful criticism, yet in the very course of giving a defense of what he takes to be the rationality of Christian belief, he argues that none of the attempts at a demonstration of the exist-

ence of God have succeeded. He is echoed in this claim by such important contemporary analytical theologians as John Hick and Diogenes Allen. This lack of validated knowledge of the divine or lack of such warranted belief strengthens the hand of the agnostics, though it is also compatible with fideism or a revelationist view such as Barth's, which holds that man on his own can know nothing of God but must rely utterly on God's self-disclosure.

IV

In the twentieth century a distinct element comes to the fore which counts in favor of agnosticism but also gives it a particular twist. This new turn leads to a reformulation of agnosticism. It states agnosticism in such a manner that it becomes evident how it is a relevant response to one of the major elements in contemporary philosophical perplexities over religion.

We have hitherto been talking as if God-talk is used in certain central contexts to make statements of whose truth-value we are in doubt. That is, there is no doubt that they have a truth-value but there is a doubt which truth-value they actually have. Theists think that at least some of the key Jewish or Christian claims are true, atheists think they are false, and traditional agnostics, as H. H. Price puts it in his *Belief* (London, 1969), suspend "judgement on the ground that we do not have sufficient evidence to decide the question and so far as he [the agnostic] can tell there is no likelihood that we ever shall have" (p. 455). But in the twentieth century with certain analytic philosophers the question has come to the fore about whether these key religious utterances have any truth-value at all.

A. J. Ayer defending the modern variety of empiricism called "logical empiricism" argued in his *Language, Truth and Logic* (London, 1935) that such key religious utterances are devoid of cognitive meaning. Such considerations lead Ayer to deny that he or anyone taking such a position could be either a theist, an atheist, or even an agnostic. In a well known passage Ayer comments that it is very important not to confuse his view with agnosticism or atheism, for, as he puts it,

It is a characteristic of an agnostic to hold that the existence of a god is a possibility in which there is no good reason either to believe or disbelieve; and it is characteristic of an atheist to hold that it is at least probable that no god exists. And our view that all utterances about the nature of God are nonsensical, so far from being identical with, or even lending any support to, either of these familiar contentions, is actually incompatible with them. For if the assertion that there is a god is nonsensical, then the atheist's assertion that there is no god is equally nonsensical, since it is only a significant proposition that can be significantly

contradicted. As for the agnostic, although he refrains from saying either that there is or that there is not a god, he does not deny that the question whether a transcendent god exists is a genuine question. He does not deny that the two sentences "There is a transcendent god" and "There is no transcendent god" express propositions one of which is actually true and the other false. All he says is that we have no means of telling which of them is true, and therefore ought not to commit ourselves to either. But we have seen that the sentences in question do not express propositions at all. And this means that agnosticism also is ruled out (p. 219).

Ayer goes on to remark that the theist's putative claims are neither valid nor invalid; they say nothing at all and thus the theist cannot rightly be "accused of saying anything false, or anything for which he has insufficient grounds" (ibid., p. 219). It is only when the Christian, so to speak, turns meta-theologian and claims that in asserting the existence of a Transcendent God he is expressing a genuine proposition "that we are entitled to disagree with him" (ibid.).

The central point Ayer is making is that such religious utterances do not assert anything and thus they can be neither doubted, believed, nor even asserted to be false. With such considerations pushed to the front, the key question becomes whether such religious utterances have any informative content at all.

There is something very strange here. Ayer, as we have seen, does not regard his position as atheistical or agnostic, for since such key religious utterances could not even be false, they could not be intelligibly denied and since they make no claim to be intelligibly questioned, they could not be sensibly doubted. But, as Susan Stebbing rightly observed, "the plain man would not find it easy to see the difference between Mr. Ayer's non-atheism and the fool's atheism" (Stebbing, p. 264). But before we say "so much the worse for the plain man," we should remember that to believe that such key religious utterances are unbelievable because nonsensical is even a more basic rejection of religious belief than simply asserting the falsity of the putative truth-claims of Christianity, but allowing for the *possibility* that they might be true.

Because of this altered conceptualization of the situation, Price, Edwards, and Nielsen have characterized both agnosticism and atheism in a broader and more adequate way which takes into account these problems about meaning. A contemporary agnostic who is alert to such questions about meaning would maintain that judgments concerning putatively assertive God-talk should be suspended for either of two reasons, depending on the exact nature of the God-talk in question: (1) the claims, though genuine truth-claims, are without sufficient evidence to warrant either their belief or

categorical rejection, or (2) their meaning is so problematical that it is doubtful whether there is something there which is sufficiently intelligible or coherent to be believed. Where God is conceived somewhat anthropomorphically the first condition obtains and where God is conceived non-anthropomorphically the second condition obtains. The contemporary agnostic believes that "God" in the most typical religious employments is so indeterminate in meaning that he must simply suspend judgment about whether there is anything that it stands for which can intelligibly be believed. His position, as Price points out, is like the traditional agnostic's in being neutral between theism and atheism (p. 454). He believes that neither such positive judgment is justified, but unlike a contemporary atheist, on the one hand, he is not so confident of the unintelligibility or incoherence of religious utterances that he feels that religious belief is irrational and is to be rejected, but, on the other hand, he does not believe one is justified in taking these problematic utterances as being obscurely revelatory of Divine Truth. Neither atheism nor any of the several forms of fideism is acceptable to him.

The contemporary agnostic sensitive to problems about the logical status of religious utterances simply stresses that the reasonable and on the whole justified course of action here is simply to suspend judgment. His doubts are primarily *doubts about the possibility of there being anything to doubt*, but, second-order as they are, they have an effect similar to the effect of classical agnosticism and they lead to a similar attitude toward religion. There is neither the classical atheistic denial that there is anything to the claims of religion nor is there the fideistic avowal that in spite of all their obscurity and *seeming* unintelligibility that there still is something there *worthy* of belief. Instead there is a genuine suspension of judgment.

The thing to ask is whether the doubts leading to a suspension of judgment are actually sufficient to *justify* such a suspension or, everything considered, (1) would a leap of faith be more justified or (2) would the overcoming of doubt in the direction of atheism be more reasonable? Or is it the case that there is no way of making a rational decision here or of reasonably deciding what one ought to do or believe?

It may indeed be true, as many a sophisticated theologian has argued, that religious commitment is perfectly compatible with a high degree of ignorance about God and the nature—whatever that may mean—of "ultimate reality." But, if this is the case and if our ignorance here is as invincible as much contemporary philosophical argumentation would have us believe, *natural theology* seems at least to be thoroughly undermined. In trying to establish whether the

world is contingent or non-contingent, whether there is or can be something "beyond the world" upon which the world in some sense depends, or whether there is or could be an unlimited reality which is still in some sense personal, theological reasonings have been notoriously unsuccessful. About the best that has been done is to establish that it is not entirely evident that these questions are meaningless or utterly unanswerable.

Here a Barthian turn away from natural theology is equally fruitless. To say that man can by his own endeavors know nothing of God but simply must await an unpredictable and rationally inexplicable self-disclosure of God—the core notion of God revealing himself to man—is of no help, for when we look at religions in an honest anthropological light, we will see, when all the world is our stage, that we have multitudes of conflicting alleged revelations with no means at all of deciding, without the aid of natural theology or philosophical analysis, which, if any, of these putative revelations are genuine revelations. It is true enough that if something is actually a divine revelation, it cannot be assessed by man, but must simply be accepted. But the agnostic reminds the revelationist that we have a multitude of conflicting candidate revelations with no means of reasonably deciding which one to accept. In such a context a reasonable man will remain agnostic concerning such matters. To simply accept the authoritative claims of a Church in such a circumstance is to fly in the face of reason.

The most crucial problem raised by the so-called truth-claims of Judaism and Christianity is that of conceivability—to borrow a term that Herbert Spencer used in the nineteenth century and thereby suggesting that there are more lines of continuity between the old agnosticism and the new than this essay has indicated. The *incredibility*—to use Spencer's contrasting term—of these central religious claims is tied, at least in part, to their *inconceivability*. "God" is not supposed to refer to a being among beings; by definition God is no finite object or process in the world. But then how is the referring to be done? What are we really talking about when we speak of God? How do we or can we fix the reference range of "God"? God surely cannot be identified in the same manner we identify the sole realities compatible with existence-monism. There can be no picking God out as we would a discrete entity in space-time. Alternatively there are theologians who will say that when we come to recognize that it is just a brute fact that there is that indefinitely immense collection of finite and contingent masses or conglomerations of things, we use the phrase "the world" to refer to, and when we recognize it could have been the case—eternally the case—that there was

no world at all, we can come quite naturally to feel puzzled about why there is a world at all.

Is there anything that would account for the existence of all finite reality and not itself be a reality that needed to be similarly explained? In speaking of God we are speaking of such a reality, if indeed there is such a reality. We are concerned with a reality not simply—as the world might be—infinite in space and time, but a reality such that it would not make sense to ask *why* it exists. Such a reality could not be a physical reality.

In sum, we have, if we reflect at all, a developing sense of the contingency of the world. The word “God” in part means, in Jewish and Christian discourses, whatever it is that is non-contingent upon which all these contingent realities continuously depend. God is the completeness that would fill in the essential incompleteness of the world. We have feelings of dependency, creatureliness, finitude and in having those feelings, it is argued, we have some sense of that which is without limit. “God” refers to such alleged ultimate realities and to something richer as well. But surely this, the critic of agnosticism will reply, sufficiently fixes the reference range of “God,” such that it would be a mistake to assert that “God” is a term supposedly used to refer to a referent but nothing coherently specifiable counts as a possible referent for “God,” where “God” has a non-anthropomorphic employment.

Surely such a referent is not something which can be clearly conceived, but, as we have seen, a non-mysterious God would not be the God of Judeo-Christianity. But has language gone on a holiday? We certainly, given our religious conditioning, have a *feeling* that we understand what we are saying here. But do we? Perhaps, as Axel Hägerström thought, “contingent thing,” “finite thing,” and “finite reality” are pleonastic. For anything at all that exists, we seem to be able to ask, without being linguistically or conceptually deviant, why it exists. “The world” or “the cosmos” does not stand for an entity or a *class* of things, but is an umbrella term for all those things and their structural relations that religious people call “finite things” and many others just call “things.” What are we talking about when we say there is something infinite and utterly different from these “finite realities” and that this “utterly other reality” is neither physical nor temporal nor purely conceptual nor simply imaginary, but, while being unique and radically distinct from all these things, continuously sustains all these “finite things” and is a mysterious something upon which they are utterly dependent? Surely this is very odd talk and “sustains” and “dependent” have no unproblematical use in this context.

These difficulties and a host of difficulties like them

make it doubtful whether the discourse used to spell out the reference range of “God” is sufficiently intelligible to make such God-talk coherent. An agnostic of the contemporary sort is a man who suspends judgment, oscillating between rejecting God-talk as an irrational form of discourse containing at crucial junctures incoherent or rationally unjustifiable putative truth-claims and accepting this discourse as something which, obscure as it is, makes a sufficiently intelligible and humanly important reference to be worthy of belief.

One reading of the situation is that the network of fundamental concepts constitutive of nonanthropomorphic God-talk in Judeo-Christianity is so problematical that the most reasonable thing to do is to opt for atheism, particularly when we realize that we do not need these religions or any religion to make sense of our lives or to buttress morality. But agnosticism, particularly of the contemporary kind specified here, need not be an evasion and perhaps is the most reasonable alternative for the individual who wishes, concerning an appraisal of competing world views and ways of life, to operate on a principle of maximum caution.

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[See also **Gnosticism**; **God**; **Positivism**; **Skepticism**.]

ALCHEMY

THE ALCHEMY of the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries represents a fusion of many seemingly disparate themes derived from ancient and medieval Near and Far Eastern sources. A simple definition is difficult if not impossible. The alchemists always maintained

a special interest in the changes of matter and surely most of them accepted the concept of transmutation, but there were other significant strains evident in alchemical thought as well. Important among these was the early and persistent belief that the study of alchemy had a special role in medicine through the preparation of remedies and the search for the prolongation of life. In addition to this was the belief that alchemy was the fundamental science for the investigation of nature. And yet, if the alchemists spoke repeatedly of experience and observation as the true keys to nature, they also maintained a fervent belief in a universe unified through the relationship of the macrocosm and the microcosm—a relationship that of necessity tied this science to astrology. The alchemists were convinced further that their search for the truths of nature might be conceived in terms of a religious quest which would result in a greater knowledge of the Creator. It is not surprising then to find a late sixteenth-century author defining medicine as "the searching out of the secretes of nature," a goal that was to be accomplished by resort to "mathematicall and supernaturall precepts, the exercise whereof is Mechanicall, and to be accomplished with labor." Having thus defined medicine, he went on to state that the real name of this art was simply chemistry or alchemy (Bostocke, 1585).

In short, while few would deny that there were elements of modern science in alchemy, it is also true that this was a study permeated with a mysticism foreign to the post-Newtonian world.

ALCHEMY IN ANTIQUITY

The difficulty in dating alchemical texts has resulted in a long-standing controversy over its origins. Yet, if the priority of Near Eastern, Indian, and Chinese alchemists remains in dispute, there is general agreement among scholars that the student in search of the roots of alchemy must be concerned not only with early concepts of nature, but also with the practical craft traditions of antiquity. The oldest surviving works of metal craftsmen combine an emphasis on the change in the appearance of metals with the acceptance of a vitalistic view of nature—a view that included the belief that metals live and grow within the earth in a fashion analogous to the growth of a human fetus. It was to become fundamental to alchemical thought that the operator might hasten the natural process of metallic growth in his laboratory and thus bring about perfection in a period of time far less than that required by nature.

Several texts point to the existence of a practical proto-alchemical literature in the ancient Near East. The recent study of two Babylonian tablets (Oppenheim, 1966) dating from the thirteenth century B.C.