Three Concepts of Agnosticism

In this paper I will argue that debates regarding religious agnosticism have suffered from a failure to distinguish between three possible conceptions of agnosticism. My hope is that paying attention to these distinctions will make future debates about the justification of agnosticism more productive.

In Part One I look at the emergence of the term “agnosticism” in the work of T.H. Huxley. In Part Two I identify and describe three distinct conceptions of agnosticism. In Part Three I examine Richard Dawkins’s argument against agnosticism in *The God Delusion* to illustrate how a failure to recognize these different conceptions can undermine arguments regarding the justification of agnosticism.

Part One: Agnosticism

In 1889 T.H. Huxley took credit for coining the term, “agnosticism,” to describe a position distinguished from both theism and atheism (1889a: 183). There is much to say about this history, but for the sake of time I will only note two points here.

First, Huxley viewed agnosticism as a guiding intellectual principle rather than a position or set of beliefs. “Positively” he wrote, “the principle may be expressed: In matters of the intellect, 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” (1889b: 186-87). Nevertheless, he struggled to maintain the distinction between agnosticism as a principle and agnosticism as a particular position.

Second, Huxley viewed agnosticism as morally, as well as epistemologically normative. In so doing he echoed the view defended by W.K. Clifford as an “ethics of belief.” Clifford appealed to the harmful consequences that result both directly and indirectly from holding beliefs that are not
supported by the evidence to conclude that "it is wrong always, everywhere, and for any one, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence" (295).

In the 20th century this normative attitude towards the justification of belief became widely known as "evidentialism." The "evidentialist imperative" according to Jeff Jordan, is the normative assertion "that one should believe a proposition only if it is supported by adequate evidence" (42). Unfortunately, the normativity expressed could be interpreted epistemically, prudentially, or morally. Though Huxley and Clifford defended a principle that was both epistemically and morally normative, evidentialism today is discussed primarily in terms of epistemic rationality.

Thus, the meaning of the term "agnosticism" has changed from Huxley's original intent. The normative principle has been absorbed into evidentialism and its moral import dampened. What remains is the notion of agnosticism as a stance or cognitive attitude toward a proposition. Exactly what sort of cognitive attitude, however, is less clear.

Part Two: Three Concepts of Agnosticism

We can take many possible stances toward any given proposition, \( p \). For instance, we can desire, fear, doubt, assume, know, believe, or accept that \( p \). The last three of these, or more accurately the attitudes characterized by the failure to take them, are candidates for distinct conceptions of agnosticism.

One way to think about agnosticism is as a lack of knowledge. I will call this "agnosticism as not knowing." According to this view, one is agnostic in regard to \( p \) if, and only if one neither knows that \( p \) nor knows that \( \neg p \). To the extent that Huxley conceived of agnosticism as a position opposed to both atheism and theism, it would have been in this way. He intentionally chose the term "agnostic" to stand in contrast to the term "gnostic," that is, someone who claims to know some sort of spiritual or religious truth (1889a: 183). This also appears to be the concept adopted by Anthony Kenny.
I do not myself know of any argument for the existence of God which I find convincing; in all of them I think I can find flaws. Equally, I do not know of any argument against the existence of God which is totally convincing; in the arguments I know against the existence of God I can equally find flaws. So that my own position on the existence of God is agnostic (1983: 84-85)

Notice that agnosticism as not knowing is perfectly compatible with either the belief that God exists or the belief that God does not exist. One could be religiously agnostic in this sense and still hold either one of these beliefs. The conception hinges on the difference between knowledge and mere belief—i.e., what we imply when we say that we don't just believe something, we know it.

Agnosticism, however, is also frequently characterized as a lack of belief. Unfortunately, as Jonathan Cohen has argued the term 'believe' can be used to express more than one cognitive attitude toward a proposition. Cohen distinguishes 'acceptance' from 'belief,' both of which can be expressed using the term 'believe.'

According to Cohen, acceptance is a mental act. '[T]o accept that $p$' he writes, 'is to have or adopt a policy of deeming, positing, or postulating that $p$—that is, of going along with that proposition (either for the long term or for immediate purposes only) as a premise in some or all contexts for one's own and others' proofs, argumentations, inferences, deliberations, etc.' In contrast, believing is a mental state. 'Belief that $p$, on the other hand, is a disposition to feel it true that $p$, whether or not one goes along with the proposition as a premise' (368).

It is worth noting two further points regarding this distinction. First, acceptance and belief are related, but independent. We often accept what we believe and believe what we accept, but we need not. Believing a proposition provides a presumption in favor of accepting it, but it does not require that we accept it. Second, acceptance is voluntary whereas belief is not. Belief is determined by evidence.

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1 The distinction between belief and acceptance and its implications for doxastic voluntarism is made by several other authors as well. See, for instance, "Why is Belief Involuntary?" (Bennett 1990) and "Accepting and Deciding to Believe" (Buckareff 2004). For more on doxastic involuntarism see "Deciding to Believe" (Williams 1973), "Willing Belief and the Norm of Truth" (Funkhouser 2003), "Truth, Reason, and the Regulation of Belief" (Railton 1994), and "How Truth Governs Belief" (Shah 2003).
In this sense it is strictly epistemic. In contrast, acceptance is not dependent solely on evidence. According to Cohen, “the reasons for accepting that \( p \) need not always be epistemic ones: they might be ethical or prudential”(369).²

Utilizing his distinction allows us to identify two further conceptions of agnosticism—agnosticism as not believing and “agnosticism as not accepting.” In regard to the question of God’s existence, agnosticism as not believing would be an involuntary mental state in which a person has no disposition to feel either that God exists or that God does not exist. It would imply that he takes the evidence for and against God’s existence to be counterbalanced.³

Agnosticism as not accepting is something quite different. It is a decision not to accept either the claim that God exists or the claim that God does not exist. The agnostic has decided not to adopt a policy of “deeming, positing, or postulating” either claim. She has decided not to use either as a premise in her “own and others’ proofs, argumentations, inferences, deliberations, etc.” It is quite possible that she believes that God does not exist, but deems for non-epistemic reasons, such as a belief in the benefits of religion, not to use it as premise in her deliberations.⁴

The distinction between these three conceptions of agnosticism is not often recognized in arguments regarding the justification of religious agnosticism. In the philosophical literature most debates regarding agnosticism are debates about whether or not the position can be epistemically

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² For this reason, Cohen argues, people can be held responsible for what they accept, but not directly responsible for what they believe (Cohen 1989: 369-70).
³ This epistemic concept of “counterbalance” is adopted from Chisholm. “A proposition is counterbalanced if there is as much, or as little, to be said in favor of accepting it as there is to be said in favor of accepting its negation” (Chisholm 1977: 10). It should be noted, however, that Chisholm is not using the concept of “acceptance” in quite the same way that Cohen uses it.
⁴ How likely one is to do this might depend a great deal on how one conceives of God. For instance, if one believes that God interacts on a regular basis in our world and punishes humans for not worshipping God, then one would be unlikely to believe, but not accept. On the other hand, if one conceives of God as a being who created the world, but does not continue to interact with it, then believing, but not accepting is more likely. See America’s Four Gods by Froese and Bader for a interesting description of conceptions of God (Froese and Bader 2010).
justified.\textsuperscript{5} This may cause few problems. However, when a moral agenda implicitly or explicitly motivates the debate, failing to make the distinction can have important consequences.

Part Three: Dawkins's 'Poverty of Agnosticism'

Recognizing these three conceptions of agnosticism helps explain how Dawkins's argument against agnosticism falls short of his intent. Dawkins emphasizes that he is not against agnosticism in general, but only against agnosticism in regards to the God Hypothesis, the proposition that 'there exists a superhuman, supernatural intelligence who deliberately designed and created the universe and everything in it, including us' (52, emphasis in the original). He begins his argument by distinguishing between Temporary Agnosticism in Practice (TAP) and Permanent Agnosticism in Principle (PAP) (69-70). TAP is the appropriate response in situations where it would be possible to answer a question if we had adequate evidence, but we don't yet have that evidence. In contrast, PAP is the appropriate response to questions that cannot be answered because the 'very idea of evidence is not applicable' (70).\textsuperscript{6}

Having made this distinction Dawkins structures his argument around two primary claims. The first is that the God Hypothesis is a scientific hypothesis about which evidence is relevant and, thus, taking the position of PAP in relation to it is not appropriate. The second is the claim that there is sufficient evidence against the hypothesis to make the TAP unwarranted.

I will not challenge these two claims here, but instead focus on a third claims that Dawkins invokes, a claim regarding the epistemic requirements for agnosticism. Dawkins claims that for agnosticism to be justified the evidence for and against a hypothesis must make its truth or falsity at least roughly equiprobable. He does not defend this claim, but instead just assumes that it is the

\textsuperscript{5} See for instance "Agnosticism" (Dore 1982), "The Reasonableness of Agnosticism" (Brinton 1984), "Necessary Agnosticism" (McLaughlin 1984), "Agnosticism" (Morris 1985), "Atheism or Agnosticism" (McGrath 1987), "Agnosticism and Atheism" (Brinton 1989), and "Is Agnosticism Unreasonable?" (Jacoby 1991).

\textsuperscript{6} As an example Dawkins cites the question of whether you see red as I do. This question belongs in the realm of PAP because it is not clear what evidence could possibly answer it.
definition of agnosticism. This failure to recognize that there are other conceptions of agnosticism leads him to argue against an agnosticism that his agnostic opponents may not hold.

Consider the argument he attributes to those who claim that our inability to prove or disprove with certainty that God does or does not exist justifies agnosticism. I take the following summary to be a fair reconstruction of the argument.

1. We cannot prove conclusively either that God does or that God does not exist.
2. If we cannot prove conclusively either that God does or that God does not exist, then the hypotheses “God exists” and “God does not exist” are roughly equiprobable.
3. One should be agnostic if and only if the hypotheses “God exists” and “God does not exist” are roughly equiprobable.
4. Thus, we should be agnostic in regards to God’s existence.

Dawkins believes this is a bad argument because premise #2 is false. The fact that we cannot prove conclusively that something does not exist, does not make the odds of its existence and non-existence equiprobable.\(^7\) Because it is impossible to prove the non-existence of anything conclusively, accepting premise #2 would lead us to be agnostic about the existence of all sorts of entities that we have no good reason to believe exist—e.g., the tooth fairy, unicorns, or Dawkins’s favorite, the Flying Spaghetti Monster. Huxley’s apparent acceptance of premise #2, Dawkins claims, lead him to mistakenly adopt agnosticism.

Dawkins is correct in his assessment of premise #2, but he is wrong to assume that those who justify agnosticism need to rely on it. Indeed, the accusation that Huxley does so is a misrepresentation of his view. Huxley may very well have agreed with Dawkin’s claim that the lack of absolute proof regarding God’s existence or non-existence does not make the claims equiprobable. However, he did not

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\(^7\) “That you cannot prove God’s existence is accepted and trivial, if only in the sense that we can never absolutely prove the non-existence of anything. What matters is not whether God is disprovable (he isn’t) but whether his existence is probable. That is another matter. Some disprovable things are sensibly judged far less probable than other disprovable things” (77, emphasis in the original).
argue that one should adopt agnosticism only when the evidence for or against a hypothesis made the hypothesis equiprobable, but in any case where the evidence is inconclusive. In other words, he would not have accepted premise #3 in the argument—i.e., Dawkins’s criteria for agnosticism.\(^8\)

The point here is that Dawkins assumes a conception of agnosticism as not believing whereas Huxley seems to have assumed a conception of agnosticism as not knowing. Dawkins’s failure to recognize that he and Huxley do not share the same conception leads him to wrongly chide Huxley for making an error in reasoning, or more generously for “bending over backwards to concede a point.”

The distinction also helps us understand Kenny’s response to Dawkins. Kenny agrees with Dawkins that arguments for the existence of God are inconclusive and that there are good reasons to believe that God does not exist. The conclusion he draws from this, however, is that the appropriate response is agnosticism rather than atheism. This is because Kenny, like Huxley, understands agnosticism as not knowing rather than not believing.

To see how the different conceptions of agnosticism play out, it will be helpful to look at the spectrum of possibilities regarding human judgments about the existence of God that Dawkins provides (see figure 1). Dawkins reserves agnosticism for categories 3, 4, and 5 where there is a great deal of uncertainty about the existence of God. This expresses the conception of agnosticism as not believing. However, since both Huxley and Kenny utilize the conception of agnosticism as not knowing, they would allow people falling into categories 2-6 to be agnostics as well.

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\(^8\) Huxley’s argument might have gone something like this.
1. We cannot prove conclusively either that God does or that God does not exist.
2. If we cannot prove something conclusively, then we should not claim to have knowledge of it.
3. Thus, we do not have knowledge of God’s existence.
4. If we do not have knowledge of something, then we should be agnostic in regards to it (Huxley’s principle of agnosticism).
5. Thus, we should be agnostic in regards to God’s existence.
1. Strong theist: 100 per cent probability of God. In the words of C.G. Jung, ‘I do not believe, I know.’
2. Very high probability but short of 100 per cent. 
   De facto theist. ‘I cannot know for certain, but I strongly believe in God and live my life on the assumption that he is there.’
3. Higher than 50 per cent but not very high. Technically agnostic but leaning towards theism. ‘I am uncertain, but I am inclined to believe in God.’
4. Exactly 50 per cent. Completely impartial agnostic. ‘God’s existence and non-existence are exactly equiprobable.’
5. Lower than 50 per cent but not very low. Technically agnostic but leaning towards atheism. ‘I don’t know whether God exists but I’m inclined to be skeptical.’
6. Very low probability, but short of zero. 
   De facto atheist. ‘I cannot know for certain but I think God is very improbable, and I live my life on the assumption that he is not there.’
7. Strong atheist. ‘I know that there is no God, with the same conviction as Jung “knows” there is one.’ (Dawkins 2008: 73)

Figure 1

The spectrum also suggests the possibility of agnosticism as not accepting. In categories 2 and 6 Dawkins makes a connection between our assessment of propositions and the way in which we bring them to bear in our lives. In each case though one does not know for certain that God does (or does not) exist, one believes strongly enough to live one’s life “on the assumption” that God does (or does not) exist. This sounds like what I have been referring to as “acceptance.”

Because Dawkins does not distinguish between belief and acceptance it is not clear how we should interpret the descriptions in categories 2 and 6. There seem to be two possibilities, both of which are problematic. On the one hand, he might argue that the phrase “and I live my life on the assumption” is just a way of further describing what it means to “strongly believe.” It is merely the behavioral manifestation of the degree to which one believes the proposition. However, as I have argued, when we can distinguish between acceptance and belief, the connection between belief and action is not so direct. There may be non-epistemic reasons for acting in a certain way. Thus, the connection Dawkins makes must be defended rather than assumed.

On the other hand, he might argue that the connection between belief and behavior is normative, and that we have an obligation to act on what we believe. If this is the case that Dawkins is making, he is still on shaky ground, blinded perhaps by his allegiance to evidentialism. The evidentialist
imperative tells us that the strength of our belief in a proposition should be proportional to the evidence in support of it. However, even if this is true it does not follow that the same obligation exists between the evidence and our acceptance of a proposition. The question of what justifies our acceptance of a proposition is related to, but not identical to the question of what justifies our belief in a proposition.

This point was made persuasively by philosopher of science Richard Rudner more than 50 years ago when he raised the question of what makes the evidence “adequate” to justify accepting a hypothesis? As Rudner pointed out, this is not a question that can be answered by the evidence (Rudner 1953: 1-6). It is not a strictly empirical question at all. Since no scientific hypothesis is ever completely verified, what counts as adequate justification for acceptance will depend not only on the strength of the evidence for or against the hypothesis, but also on the consequences of making a mistake.9

The point here is that while the evidence for it is certainly relevant, what counts as adequate justification for the acceptance of a proposition is not exhausted by the evidence. There are also non-epistemic factors—i.e., ethical or prudential factors—to consider. But if that is the case, then the strength of our acceptance should not necessarily be proportional to the evidence. There are many cases in which it is appropriate to wait until we have a high degree of certainty before we accept a proposition. These are cases in which the costs of making an error are significant. In other cases, when we have much to gain if the proposition be true and little to lose if it be false, we may be justified in accepting a proposition upon much less evidence.10

9 “For, since no scientific hypothesis is ever completely verified, in accepting a hypothesis the scientist must make the decision that the evidence is sufficiently strong or that the probability is sufficiently high to warrant the acceptance of the hypothesis. Obviously our decision regarding the evidence and respecting how strong is ‘strong enough’, is going to be a function of the importance, in the typical ethical sense, of making a mistake in accepting or rejecting the hypothesis” (Rudner: 2).

10 This is, of course, similar to the argument that James makes regarding epistemic duties in “The Will to Believe” (17-22). This would be an interesting line of thought to pursue. I do not do so here mostly due to the limited scope of this paper. An important question would be whether or not James would accept the distinction between belief and acceptance on which my argument is premised. His doxastic voluntarism and the close connection he makes between belief and action lead me to think that he might not.
Though he does not see the need to invoke them when arguing against agnosticism, Dawkins seems to recognize the relevance of non-epistemic considerations. This is evident in the way he argues not only against the rationality of religious belief, but also against the morality of religious belief. He argues that religious belief is a particularly pernicious category of belief because it is not only irrational, but extremely harmful. Here one can see Clifford’s ethics of belief emerging clearly. Unfortunately, because he assumes a conception of agnosticism as not believing, Dawkins treats the question of the justification of agnosticism strictly as an epistemic question. His argument, even if successful, is limited to those opponents who share his conception of agnosticism.\(^\text{12}\)

Conclusion

My goal in this paper has not been to defend agnosticism per se, but to identify three distinct conceptions of agnosticism and demonstrate how the failure to recognize them confounds debates regarding agnosticism. However, I believe this work suggests possible directions future investigations of agnosticism should take. In closing, I want to suggest some issues to pursue.

First, the three conceptions of agnosticism should be further explored with particular attention paid to the conception of agnosticism as not accepting. This conception has received the least attention in the philosophical literature, but there are some parallels in discussions of what cognitive attitude best describes religious faith.\(^\text{13}\) What does it mean to not accept either the proposition that God exists or the proposition that God does not exist? Can one fail to accept both propositions or does the choice between them represent that type of ‘forced’ option that William James refers to in ‘The Will to Believe’?\(^\text{3}\)?

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\(^{11}\) Interestingly enough, Dawkins never acknowledges Clifford in *The God Delusion*.

\(^{12}\) I think it might be helpful to look at Sam Harris’s argument against religious moderates in *The End of Faith*. Like Dawkins, he offers a moral argument against religious belief, but he extends it to religious moderates in a more intentional way than does Dawkins. It is possible that this could be extended to agnosticism.

\(^{13}\) See for instance (Audi 2008), (Bishop 2002; 2005), (Buckareff 2005), (Hartman 2010),(Kenny 1992; 2007), (Mawson 2004), (Scott 2005), (Swinburne 1981), and (Zamulinski 2003; 2004; 2005; 2008),
Second, how might agnosticism as not accepting be defended or critiqued? If I am correct, arguments that neglect the non-epistemic factors will not be sufficient. My sense is that the most effective arguments will appeal to the consequences of agnosticism as well. It may be possible to extend the ethics of belief argument that Dawkins employs, but this is a question that needs further exploration.

Sources Cited


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14 Sam Harris and Christopher Hitchens, other so-called “new atheists” also make ethics of belief arguments (Harris 2004; Hitchens 2007).


