Three Concepts of Agnosticism

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In the past decade there have been a number of publications in the vein of what has been called, the “new atheism.”\(^1\) They are notable for several reasons, not the least of which is the stridency of their rhetoric. However, they are also notable for their strong criticism not only of fervent religious believers, but of religious moderates and agnostics as well. In particular, in *The God Delusion* Richard Dawkins makes an explicit and concerted argument against agnosticism in relation to the existence of God.\(^2\)

My goal in this paper is to clarify some misunderstandings that I believe have undermined debates regarding the legitimacy of agnosticism. More specifically, I will argue that such debates have been limited by a failure to distinguish between three possible conceptions of agnosticism. My hope is that by paying attention to these distinctions future debates about the legitimacy of agnosticism will be more focused and productive. In the process I will use Dawkins’s argument to illustrate how the failure to distinguish between different conceptions of agnosticism undermines attempts to critique it. However, it is important to note while I will argue that Dawkins’s argument against agnosticism is ultimately unsuccessful, this is not intended as a defense of agnosticism. The failure of Dawkins’s argument merely points in the direction the debate must head.

In Part One I will look at the emergence of the term “agnosticism” in the work of T.H. Huxley and how its usage has changed. I focus on Huxley for two reasons. First, he is credited with originating the term. Understanding what he first meant by it and how responses to him have subtly reshaped the term’s usage will help shed light on the contours of more recent debates. Second, I look at Huxley because Dawkins uses him as a foil in his attack on agnosticism. This strategy is particularly ironic given the significant ways in which they agree on important matters.\(^3\) In Part Two I identify and describe what I take to be three distinct conceptions of agnosticism – agnosticism as not knowing, agnosticism as not believing, and agnosticism as not accepting. In Part Three I will examine Dawkins’s argument against agnosticism to illustrate how a failure to recognize these different conceptions can undermine arguments regarding the legitimacy of agnosticism, and to suggest how addressing this failure might make future debates more productive.

Part One: Agnosticism

In an article written in 1889 the English biologist T.H. Huxley took credit for coining the term, “agnosticism,” some twenty years earlier to describe a position distinguished from both theism and atheism. Noting that while most of his colleagues in the Metaphysical Society were “ists of one sort or another,” he was a “man without a rag of a label to cover himself.” He thus “invented what I conceived to be the appropriate title of ‘agnostic.’” It came into my head as suggestively antithetic to the ‘gnostic’ of Church history, who professed to know so much about the very things of which I was ignorant” (Huxley 1889a: 183).

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\(^1\) See also (Hitchens 2007), (Harris 2004; 2006), (Onfray 2005), and (Stenger 2009)

\(^2\) Unless I specify otherwise, from this point on when I write of “agnosticism” I am referring to religious agnosticism, or agnosticism in relation to God’s existence.

\(^3\) In fact, Huxley was dubbed “Darwin’s Bulldog” for his advocacy of Darwin’s theory of evolution, and now, more than 100 years later, Dawkins has been dubbed “Darwin’s Rottweiler.”
There are two closely related points regarding Huxley’s conception of agnosticism that merit further comment here because they are pertinent to how we now understand, or misunderstand, agnosticism. First, Huxley claimed that agnosticism was not so much a creed or set of beliefs as a guiding intellectual principle. “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” (Huxley 1889b: 186-87).

Though Huxley repeatedly characterized agnosticism as a principle, he struggled to maintain a distance between agnosticism as a principle, agnosticism as a mental act (i.e., the act of suspending belief), and agnosticism as mental state (i.e., a state of belief of some sort). This may have resulted from his invention and defense of the concept as an alternative to both theism and atheism in the context of religious debates that tended to force people into recognizable positions. For Huxley agnosticism was neither the belief that God exists, nor the belief that God does not exist. It was the conviction that we do not have adequate justification for claiming that God does or does not exist, and that the appropriate response to this lack of justification is to suspend judgment on the issue.

Despite his efforts many of his religious opponents, including some prominent church leaders, persisted in equating agnosticism with atheism – both were forms of unbelief. Thus, W.C. Magee, the Bishop of Peterborough, referred to Huxley as “simply an old-fashioned ‘infidel’ who is afraid to own his right name” (Magee 1889: 352). Though it was most often confused with atheism, the mantel of agnosticism was also sometimes adopted by certain versions of theism as well. Huxley’s contemporary, Herbert Spencer, used the term to describe his position that God was best understood as a “shadowy unknown” of which we could have no scientific knowledge (Fitzgerald 1987). In his use of the term a devout Christian could be an agnostic – agnosticism is simply a denial of knowledge, not a suspension of belief.

The second point to note is that Huxley viewed agnosticism as a principle that was morally, as well as epistemologically normative. He makes this clear in the following passage:

This principle may be stated in various ways, but they all amount to this: that it is wrong for a man to say that he is certain of the objective truth of any proposition unless he can produce evidence which logically justifies that certainty. ... That which Agnostics deny and repudiate, as immoral, is the contrary doctrine, that there are propositions which men ought to believe, without logically satisfactory evidence (Huxley 1889b: 937-38, emphasis added).

In stating the principle of agnosticism in this way Huxley is following a position articulated by Locke and more fully articulated by his contemporary, W.K. Clifford as an “ethics of belief.” In a famous article by that name Clifford wrote, “it is wrong always, everywhere, and for any one, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence” (Clifford 1876: 295). In that article Clifford developed a consequentialist moral argument, appealing to the harmful consequences that result both directly and indirectly from holding beliefs that are not supported by the evidence.

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4 A polite, but heated debate took place in The Nineteenth Century over a five month period in 1889. See(Huxley 1889a), (Magee 1889), (Huxley 1889c), (Wace 1889), and (Huxley 1889b).

5 Later, and in a less strident tone, William James argued, in his essay “The Will to Believe” it is not possible to suspend judgment on the question of religion. There are only two options -- either one believes or one does not (James 1956).
“... if I let myself believe anything on insufficient evidence, there may be no great harm done by the mere belief; it may be true after all, or I may never have occasion to exhibit it in outward acts. But I cannot help doing this great wrong towards Man, that I make myself credulous. The danger to society is not merely that it should believe wrong things, though that is great enough; but that it should become credulous, and lose the habit of testing things and inquiring into them; for then it must sink back into savagery” (Clifford 1876: 294).

In the 20th century this normative attitude towards justification of belief became widely known in philosophical circles 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” (Jordan 2006: 42). Unfortunately, the sense of normativity expressed in evidentialism is ambiguous. The phrase “one should” could be taken to mean “it is epistemically rational to.” It could also be interpreted pragmatically, suggesting that it is beneficial or useful to hold only beliefs that are supported by adequate evidence. Finally, it could also be given a moral sense, implying that it is morally wrong to hold beliefs that are not supported by adequate evidence. Jordan refers to the imperative understood in this last sense as “ethical evidentialism” (Jordan 2006: 43). This ambiguity makes it possible to foreground certain meanings and push others to the background. Despite the fact that both Huxley and Clifford clearly intended to articulate a principle that was both epistemically and morally normative, evidentialism is discussed primarily in terms of epistemic rationality.

Thus, while the term “agnosticism” remains in use, its meaning has subtly changed from Huxley’s original intent. The element of it that he intended as a normative principle has been absorbed into evidentialism and its moral import dampened significantly. What remains is the notion of agnosticism as a stance or cognitive attitude toward a proposition. Exactly what sort of cognitive attitude it is, however, is less clear. In what follows I argue that the term can be used to refer to at least three distinct cognitive attitudes and that a failure to recognize this has confounded efforts to challenge or defend the legitimacy of agnosticism.

Part Two: Three Concepts of Agnosticism

There are many possible stances that we can take in relation to any given proposition, p. For instance, we can hope or desire that p, fear or dread that p, doubt that p, assume that p, know that p, believe that p, or accept that p. The last three of these, or more accurately the attitude characterized by the failure to take them, are candidates for distinct conceptions of agnosticism.

Following Spencer 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 “p. To the extent that Huxley conceived of agnosticism as a position opposed to both atheism and theism, there is good reason to think that he thought of it in this way. By his own admission he 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. This interpretation is also supported by the way in which he described agnosticism as a principle that guides us not to “pretend that conclusions are certain which are not demonstrated or demonstrable”. (Huxley 1889a: 186-87)

This also appears to be the concept adopted by Anthony Kenny in Faith and Reason (Kenny 1983: 85-89).

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” (Kenny 1983: 84-85)

Notice that in Kenny’s use, agnosticism about the existence of God would be perfectly compatible with either the belief that God exists or the belief that God does not exist. That is because knowledge, unlike belief, requires both warrant and a strong commitment to the proposition on the part of the person who claims to have knowledge. He is capturing 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. In this version of agnosticism, there should be many agnostics; in situations of uncertainty agnosticism should be the default position. The burden of proof should be on the person who is claiming to have knowledge. As Kenny writes, “A claim to knowledge needs to be substantiated, ignorance only has to be confessed”(Kenny 2007: 390).

However, agnosticism is more frequently characterized as a lack of belief rather than a lack of knowledge. Unfortunately, this does not fully clarify the concept as the term “believe” can be used to express more than one cognitive attitude toward a proposition. Jonathan Cohen made the case for this when he distinguished between “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” (Cohen 1989: 368). 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”(Cohen 1989: 368).

One element of this distinction is the independence of acceptance and belief. They 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. Perhaps, for instance, a student believes that a paper that is worth 50% of her grade is due in two weeks. A friend tells her that it is due next week, but she strongly recalls hearing the professor say in class that it was due in two weeks. In this case, despite her belief, for prudential reasons she decides not to accept the proposition, “the paper is due in two weeks” as she makes plans for the weekend. Instead, she neither accepts nor rejects the proposition, but starts working on the paper and seeks more information by looking in the syllabus or contacting the professor directly.

Conversely, not believing a proposition does not require that I not accept the proposition. I may, after careful consideration of the evidence, believe that God does not exist. However, I may be convinced by Pascal’s argument and decide to go along with the proposition that God exists. I might

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6 In a 2007 essay, “Knowledge, Belief, and Faith” Kenny addresses this question more fully. He provides the following three criteria for knowledge: “(1) Knowledge can only be of what is true. (2) A belief is only knowledge if it can appeal to some kind of warrant. (3) One who claims knowledge must have a resolute commitment to the proposition claimed to be known. If I claim to know something, then I exclude the possibility of being at some late time rightly converted to a different view” (Kenny 2007: 381).

attend religious services, read religious literature, adhere to some version of religious morality, etc., in hopes that I will come to believe it.

Another important element of the distinction is that acceptance is voluntary whereas belief is not. Belief is determined by evidence. What we believe is a function of the evidence we possess and the standards of reasoning we employ in processing it. In this sense it is strictly epistemic. In contrast, acceptance as a mental act is not solely dependent on evidence, "... the reasons for accepting that \( p \) need not always be epistemic ones: they might be ethical or prudential" (Cohen 1989: 369). For this reason, Cohen argues, people can be held responsible for what they accept, but not directly responsible for what they believe. They may, however, be indirectly responsible for what they believe in the sense that they are responsible for acquainting themselves with the relevant evidence and utilizing the relevant mental disciplines (Cohen 1989: 369-70).

Utilizing his distinction allows us to identify two further conceptions of agnosticism, what I will call “agnosticism as not believing” and “agnosticism as not accepting,” respectively. 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 that either that God exists or that God does not exist. If, as Cohen argues, belief is determined by evidence, then this would imply that he takes the evidence for and against God’s existence to be counterbalanced.\(^8\) Certainly his voluntary decisions have some indirect influence over whether he will or won’t be in this state; he could decide to seek out or avoid sources of evidence that might threaten the counterbalance, decide to review his reasoning processes, etc. However, one cannot just decide to believe that God did or did not exist irrespective of the evidence.

Agnosticism understood in terms of acceptance is something quite different. The agnostic in this case has made a decision not to accept either the claim that God exists or the claim that God does not exist. She has decided not to adopt a policy of “deeming, positing, or postulating” that either claim. She has decided not to use either as a premise in her “own and others’ proofs, arguments, inferences, deliberations, etc.” It is quite possible that she might believe that God exists, that is, be disposed to feel that it is true. She may even be disposed to feel this rather strongly, but deem for non-epistemic reasons, such as severe reservations about the benefits of religion, not to use it as premise in her deliberations.\(^9\)

The distinction between these two concepts of agnosticism is not often recognized in arguments about whether religious agnosticism is a defensible position. In the philosophical literature most debates regarding the legitimacy of agnosticism are debates about whether or not the position can be

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\(^8\) 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.

\(^9\) 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 conceived 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).
rationally justified, where “rationally” justified is understood to mean “epistemically” justified. An occasional reference is made to non-epistemic considerations, but these are side issues and given little attention. This causes few problems as long as the debate is strictly over epistemic justification. However, this is not always the case. In some instances, the norm of evidentialism that underlies these discussions disguises a subtle moral agenda behind the arguments against agnosticism. In others, the moral appeal is more overt. As we will see, this is certainly true in the case of Dawkins.

Part Three: Dawkins’s “Poverty of Agnosticism”

Recognizing these three conceptions of agnosticism helps explain why Dawkins disagrees with Huxley on the question of agnosticism despite agreeing with him on so much else. It also helps to show how the argument Dawkins makes against agnosticism falls short of his intent. First, however, it will be helpful to review his argument.

Dawkins emphasizes that he is not against agnosticism in general, but 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” (Dawkins 2008: 52). His distaste for people who are agnostic in regard to this hypothesis is palpable. He even finds a rare point of agreement with certain theists on this issue, writing approvingly of their characterization of agnostics as people who lack the courage of their convictions.

Dawkins begins his argument by distinguishing between two types of agnosticism – Temporary Agnosticism in Practice (TAP) and Permanent Agnosticism in Principle (PAP) (Dawkins 2008: 69-70). TAP occurs in situations where it is theoretically possible to answer a question – i.e., determine whether a hypothesis (i.e., proposition) regarding it is true or not – but we don’t have sufficient evidence yet. In other words, it is agnosticism in regards to questions where evidence is relevant. It is an appropriate response when we do not yet have evidence, but not when we have adequate evidence. As an example he cites the question of what caused the Permian extinction. Agnosticism in regards to this question is appropriate at this time as we do not yet have sufficient evidence to answer it (and in fact, may never), but it is a question which it is possible to answer by seeking more evidence. Agnosticism is appropriate now, but if at some point we gain sufficient evidence to support one of the hypotheses over the alternatives, agnosticism will no longer be appropriate.

In contrast, PAP is the appropriate response to questions that cannot be answered because the “very idea of evidence is not applicable” (Dawkins 2008: 70). 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. Dawkins does not give many other examples, but it is clear that he believes that few, if any, meaningful scientific questions would qualify.

Having made this distinction, Dawkins outlines his argument against agnosticism:

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11 “There is nothing wrong with being agnostic in cases where we lack evidence one way or the other. It is a reasonable position” (Dawkins 2008: 69).

12 As a scientist rather than philosopher Dawkins writes of agnosticism in relation to hypotheses and questions, not propositions. However, because hypotheses can be stated as propositions I see little difference. To remain as close to his argument as possible I will follow him in using the term “hypothesis.”
And some scientists and other intellectuals are convinced – too eagerly in my view – that the question of God’s existence belongs in the forever inaccessible PAP category. From this, as we shall see, they often make the illogical deduction that the hypothesis of God’s existence, and the hypothesis of his non-existence, have exactly equal probability of being right. The view that I shall defend is very different: agnosticism about the existence of God belongs firmly in the temporary or TAP category. Either he exists or he doesn’t. It is a scientific question; one day we may know the answer, and meanwhile we can say something pretty strong about the probability” (Dawkins 2008: 70).

There are two primary claims being made here, each of which Dawkins supports with an argument. The first is a claim about how to categorize the God Hypothesis. It is a scientific hypothesis about which evidence is relevant. For this reason taking the position of PAP in relation to it is not appropriate. The second is a claim about the evidence that we have in regard to the God Hypothesis. There is sufficient evidence against the hypothesis such that TAP is unwarranted. Dawkins defends this claim both by critiquing arguments for the existence of God and by offering a series of related arguments against the existence of God.13

There is also a third implicit, but very important claim about the definition of agnosticism, or more specifically about the epistemic requirements for holding a position of agnosticism. It is the claim that for agnosticism to be legitimate the evidence for and against a hypothesis must make the hypothesis equiprobable, or at least roughly equiprobable. This claim plays a key role in defending both the claim that the God Hypothesis does not belong in the realm of PAP and the claim that there is sufficient evidence against the existence of God to make TAP in regard to the hypothesis unwarranted. Dawkins does not defend this claim, nor does he acknowledge that there is any need to defend it. He just assumes that it is part of the definition of agnosticism. This failure to recognize that there are different ways of understanding agnosticism leads him to mount an argument against a type of agnosticism that his 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 makes agnosticism legitimate. I take the following summary to be a fair reconstruction of the argument as Dawkins represents it.

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 that God exists and that God does not exist are equiprobable.
3. One should be agnostic if and only if the hypothesis that God exists and the hypothesis that God does not exist are equiprobable.
4. Thus, we should be agnostic in regards to God’s existence.

Dawkins believes this is a bad argument as it would lead us to be agnostic about the existence of all sorts of entities that we have no good reason to believe exist. This is because it is impossible to prove the non-existence of anything conclusive – i.e., with 100% certainty. Thus, if we accept the argument, it would lead to the conclusion that we should be agnostic about the existence of all sorts of imaginary entities, such as the tooth fairy, unicorns, or Dawkins’s favorite, the Flying Spaghetti Monster. Surely, an argument that would lead to such a conclusion is faulty. The problem, he believes is that the premise #2

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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. Huxley’s failure to acknowledge this, Dawkins argues, leads him to the faulty conclusion of agnosticism.

Huxley, in his concentration upon absolute impossibility of proving or disproving God, seems to have been ignoring the shading of probability. The fact that we can neither prove nor disprove the existence of something does not put existence and non-existence on an even footing. I don’t think Huxley would disagree, and I suspect that when he appeared to do so he was bending over backwards to concede a point, in the interests of securing another one (Dawkins 2008: 72).

Dawkins may very well be correct in his assessment of premise #2, but he is wrong to assume that those who justify agnosticism on the claim that God’s existence or non-existence cannot be proven conclusively need to rely on it. Indeed, I believe this to be a misrepresentation of Huxley’s view to claim that he does so. Huxley may very well have agreed with Dawkins’s claim that the lack of absolute proof regarding God’s existence or non-existence does not make the claims equiprobable. However, there is no indication that he would have thought that “shadings of probability” were irrelevant to the conclusion of agnosticism. He did not 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 not conclusive. He would not have accepted premise #3 in the argument – i.e., Dawkins’s criteria for agnosticism. 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 conclusively something, 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).15
5. Thus, we should be agnostic in regards to God’s existence.

My point here is that Dawkins assumes a conception of agnosticism as not believing whereas Huxley is advocating a conception of agnosticism as not knowing. His 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.”

A similar point underlies Anthony 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. He disagrees, however, about the appropriate position to take in light of this. The

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14 “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” (Dawkins 2008: 77, emphasis in the original).

15 Dawkins quotes illuminating passages in which Huxley explains the origins of the term agnosticism and what it entails. In these passages Huxley explains that he coined the term ‘agnostic’ as a response to those who are sure that “they had attained a certain ‘gnosis’ or knowledge about the “problem of existence.” Not only did he not claim to have such knowledge, but siding with Hume and Kant, he suggested that such knowledge was not possible (Dawkins 2008: 71-72).
conclusion he draws from this is that the appropriate response is agnosticism rather than atheism. This is because Kenny, like Huxley, defines agnosticism as not knowing rather than not believing.

The spectrum of possibilities regarding human judgments about the existence of God that Dawkins develops provides further evidence that he understands agnosticism only as the agnosticism of not believing.

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)

If my assessment that both Huxley and Kenny utilize the conception of agnosticism as not knowing, then they would allow people falling into categories 2-6 to be agnostics as well. Dawkins, however, 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. Though he seems to allow an agnostic to have beliefs slightly shaded towards believing or not believing, he does so somewhat grudgingly. Given his use of a criterion of equiprobability in the argument considered earlier, it is reasonable to assume that this is mostly a nod to the imprecision with which we are able to estimate probabilities. In other words, he appears to be doing exactly what he accused Huxley of doing, of “bending over backwards to concede a point.”

What about the conception of agnosticism as non-acceptance? Is it relevant here? I think it is, though not in understanding the disagreement between Huxley and Dawkins. The relevance can be seen in the connection Dawkins makes between our assessment of propositions and the way in which we bring them to bear in our lives. This connection shows up in his description of categories 2 and 6, the de facto theist and de facto atheist positions respectively. (We can assume the connection holds for granted in categories 1 and 7 as well.) 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. In contrast, if one is an agnostic by Dawkins’s account one does not make that assumption.

It might be tempting to think that Dawkins is basing the spectrum on some hybrid notion of agnosticism that incorporates elements of both agnosticism as non-believing and agnosticism as not accepting. This, however, would be a mistake. It seems more likely that he adds the phrase “and I live my life on the assumption” as 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. The stance of agnosticism is purely an epistemic stance. We do not know if Dawkins makes a distinction between
belief and acceptance, but the spectrum suggests that if he does, it would seem that he does so in a way that makes acceptance dependent on belief.

The nature of that dependence, however, is not altogether clear from the wording he provides in the spectrum. However, we can make some conjectures. It cannot be logical or causal dependence. If that were the case it would be impossible for someone to accept a proposition that she did not believe or to believe a proposition that she did not accept. But that simply is not true. As I argued earlier, it is possible for one to believe a proposition that she does not accept and to accept a proposition that one does not believe. It seems more likely that what Dawkins presumes is some sort of normative dependence, the notion that what we accept should be governed by what we believe. Moreover, the gradient of his spectrum implies that our level of acceptance should be proportional to the strength of our evidence.

If this is the case that Dawkins is making, he is still on shaky ground, misled perhaps by an unspoken, but nevertheless unquestioning 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 (I will not debate the point here) it is a mistake to assume that the same obligation exists in relationship to 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 will depend not only on the strength of the evidence for or against the hypothesis, but also on the consequences of making a mistake.16

An illustration or two might help here. Take the question of whether a drug should be approved for treatment of disease. One of the hypotheses researchers would need to test is whether the drug is safe. How certain do we need to be? Of course, we have adopted standards of statistical validity and reliability that must be reached in order to have the research accepted by the scientific and medical communities. However, these standards merely endorse at an institutional or policy level a consensus about the appropriate balance between making potentially beneficial drugs available to the public and protecting the public from risk. The question of whether or not a trial meets those standards is an empirical one, but the question of what the standards should be is not.

Perhaps one more example from outside the realm of science or medicine will help to make this clear. In the U.S. and most other Western democracies we think that depriving a person of his or her liberty is a very significant harm. Thus, in our legal institutions we have implemented numerous procedures and evidential standards to guard against making this mistake. In criminal cases we start with a presumption of innocence and then ask the jury to return a finding of guilty only if the evidence proves the case “beyond a reasonable doubt.” This requires a very high level of certainty. We realize

16 “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 1953: 2).
that while using these standards minimizes the risk that we will imprison an innocent person, it also increases the risk that we will allow a guilty one to go unpunished. As a result, in some cases, even though we believe – that is, we are disposed to feel – that the accused committed the crime we accept the proposition that he is innocent – that is, we adopt it for the purposes of deciding whether or not to deprive him of his liberty.

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 other factors – call them ethical or pragmatic as opposed to evidential 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. In other cases, when we have much to gain and little to lose, we may be justified in accepting a proposition upon very little evidence.

To his credit Dawkins seems to indirectly acknowledge this. In *The God Delusion* he offers not only arguments 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. One type of harm is direct – e.g., the violence encouraged or condoned by religious belief. Here he cites a litany of atrocities he attributes to religion, from the Inquisition, to the Holocaust, to the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. However, he is also concerned more generally with the indirect harm caused by religious faith. By encouraging people to hold beliefs based on insufficient evidence religion undermines science and rationality, and in so doing deny humanity of the benefits they provide. Because it is harmful to hold religious beliefs, it is wrong to do so.

If this sounds vaguely familiar, it should. It is Clifford’s ethics of belief emerging clearly from behind the screen of evidentialism. Dawkins would almost certainly agree with Clifford that anything less than a complete commitment to science and rationality threatens to sink us “back into savagery.” Surprisingly, however, Dawkins does not seem to recognize this heritage and does not mention Clifford. Could an argument of this sort be developed against agnosticism as not accepting? Perhaps, but Dawkins does not provide one in his critique. Because he assumes a conception of agnosticism as not believing, he treats the question of the legitimacy of agnosticism strictly as an epistemic question. His argument, even if successful, is limited to those opponents who share his conception of agnosticism.17

Conclusion

My goal in this paper has not been to defend agnosticism per se or to defend one particular conception of agnosticism relative to the others. It has been more modest -- to identify three distinct conceptions of agnosticism and demonstrate how the failure to recognize that these different concepts exist or to take the differences into consideration confounds debates regarding agnosticism. Critiques that fail to recognize the distinctions, such as the one provided by Dawkins, run the risk of missing their target. However, I do believe this work suggests possible directions future investigations of agnosticism should take. In closing, I want to identify some possible questions to address.

17 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.
First, the three conceptions of agnosticism should be further developed and assessed with particular attention paid to the conception of agnosticism as not accepting. This conception has received the least attention in the philosophical literature, but I believe there are many parallels to be found in discussions of what cognitive attitude best describes religious faith.\(^{18}\) How does agnosticism as not accepting relate to concepts of faith? 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 James refers to in “The Will to Believe” (James 1956)?

Second, if the conception of agnosticism as acceptance is a viable conception, how might the legitimacy of holding such a position be defended or critiqued? If I am correct, arguments aimed at the defending or critiquing agnosticism as not knowing or agnosticism as not believing will not be successful as they address the epistemic justification and neglect the non-epistemic factors that are relevant to the acceptance of propositions. My sense is that the most effective arguments will appeal to the consequences of agnosticism. It may be possible to extend the ethics of belief argument that Dawkins and other new atheists implicitly employ to agnosticism, but this is a question that needs further exploration.

Sources Cited


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\(^{18}\) 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),