Agnosticism

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Founder: Thomas Henry Huxley
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BACKGROUND

Agnosticism, upon a brief examination of the word itself, is simply a combination of the Greek prefix \( \text{a} \), which denotes a negation, with the Greek word \( \text{gnosis} \), which is the English equivalent of the term knowledge. Therefore, in English, this would simply mean “one without knowledge.” The term was coined by Thomas Henry Huxley in the Spring of 1869; and first appeared in print in the May 29, 1869 issue of The Theological Statute at Oxford.\(^1\) The first time the term was used with meaning attached was in the January 29, 1870 issue of The Spectator.\(^2\) Huxley was known as “Darwin’s Bulldog” because of his ardent defense of Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution. Despite a materialistic position; he was an advocate for the Bible being read in schools, for its moral teachings and use of the English language. However, he did not believe the Bible's teachings concerning God.\(^3\)

Roughly speaking, there are generally two forms of agnosticism that have emerged over the last few centuries.\(^4\) These two primary forms are: an intellectual form of agnosticism and a theological form of agnosticism. Both of these two versions can even be subdivided into what is called a hard agnosticism and soft agnosticism.

DEVELOPMENT OF INTELLECTUAL AGNOSTICISM

First, the hard-intellectual form of agnosticism claims that one either cannot know reality, or objective truths about reality, or is not justified in claiming to know anything true, or objective, about reality. Sometimes it is stated that one cannot know the ‘external world’ as it truly is (or even if an external world actually exists). The hard-theological form of agnosticism claims that one cannot know any truths in regard to God, much less if one even exists. In other words, the theological agnostic would claim that human limitations (usually epistemological limitations)\(^5\) simply do not allow for one to possess the ability to know anything concerning God.\(^6\) The soft forms of both intellectual and theological agnosticism will be addressed later.

Hard Form of Intellectual Agnosticism

The intellectual form of agnosticism blossomed from the radically skeptical views put forth by two “Enlightenment Era” philosophers, David Hume and Immanuel Kant. Without going into great detail of the arguments themselves, it is the case that Hume argued vehemently against what many individuals would have taken to be basic or axiomatic truths concerning human knowledge. For instance, Hume argued that one was completely unjustified in claiming to even know true cause and effect relations.\(^7\) He argued that reason has not much (if anything at all) to do with moral judgments;\(^8\) that the very notion of one’s own self-identity was difficult, if not perhaps impossible, to justify;\(^9\) natural theology (arguments for God’s existence) are unreliable;\(^10\) and that it is absurd to talk of the nature and essence of things.\(^11\) It is quite obvious that these topics, which are foundational for so many other areas of life, would logically extend to important topics upon which Hume would then also cast serious doubt or skepticism. However, many found Hume’s arguments concerning the above to be somewhat persuasive and troubling. And, of course, if one were to find such arguments to be compelling, then one may easily begin to ascertain as to why one’s ability to know anything, with any sort of confidence, would begin to be called into question - and even fall apart. And this is exactly what happened with Immanuel Kant after reading the writings of David Hume.\(^12\) Kant, who had...
been a convinced Rationalist, was seriously impacted by Hume’s skeptical views. But Kant’s attempt at answering such skepticism, in order to rescue the human ability to know, does not solve the problem but rather compounds it.

Kant, desperate to save science and other avenues of knowing that he considered valuable, wanted to bring harmony between Hume’s allegedly strong arguments, and his own views on Rationalism. This is in contrast with what Hume had argued; primarily that what one “knows” of the “real” world, if even possible, is through sense experience alone.

Suffice it to say, the end product that resulted from Kant’s synthesis, specifically in regard to what and how humans know, was that human beings are capable of knowing things (trees, people, dogs, houses, water, etc.) as they appear to us via our perceptions of them (what Kant called the Phenomenal world), but humans cannot know things as they are in and of themselves (what Kant called the Noumenal world). Notice this radical distinction: What humans know in their minds does not necessarily reflect, match, or correspond to that which exists outside of the mind. Hence, the logical ramification is simply that humans may possibly know the content of their own mind, but not necessarily what is actually external to the mind - or what most would simply call the external, objective world, or Reality. In other words, Kant’s view created a radical disjunction between what is in an individual’s mind, and what actually exists “out there” in the apparent real world. To be clear, it was the radically skeptical arguments put forth by David Hume against most “common sense” beliefs, which resulted in the arguments put forth by Kant that drove many intellectuals to simply embrace agnosticism - we just cannot know, for sure, anything about reality.

This radical view would eventually ‘trickle down’ to the layman, which is usually revealed in various statements or popular slogans such as, “What can we really know about reality?”; “What’s real is what is real to you?”; or “Our perception is what is ‘real’” etc. Of course, then, the problem is simply that if the above is actually true, then one is left as an agnostic regarding the “knowability” of the objective, external, “real world.” That is to say, one cannot claim to possess knowledge about reality (a-agnostic i.e. one without knowledge). To put it simply, one “just cannot really know.”

There is much more that could be said regarding the others that helped to contribute to both forms of the problem of agnosticism (such as Descartes) but the problem is simply that if all of the above is actually true, then one is left as an agnostic regarding the “knowability” of the objective, external, “real world.” That is to say, one cannot claim to possess knowledge about reality (a-agnostic e.g. one without knowledge).

The hard agnostic, because of the above position/arguments, believes that he provides good reason as to just why no one can know anything concerning the external, or “real,” world. Or, it is possible that the same individual could simply claim that one is simply not justified, based upon the same position/argument above, in claiming to know anything about the external world. However, both of these claims would come from the lips of the hard [intellectual] agnostic. Thus, this brand of agnosticism is dubbed hard - it is due to the fact that it is obviously a very strong stance against the human ability to know.

**DIFFICULTIES WITHIN INTELLECTUAL AGNOSTICISM**

If one cannot know anything about the external world, or reality, then how can one know that? Because, obviously, it is itself, a claim about reality. Moreover, it is not a small claim, but if, true, would be the most fundamental truth that one could know concerning reality or the external world. Yet, the hard agnostic just claimed that nothing could really be known about reality - but again, this is simply to refute one’s self in the very process. The claim is self-defeating. It contradicts itself. It cannot meet its own requirements. For instance, the only way that one may make such a claim is if, and only if, one can know something about reality. How does one know that one cannot know anything of the external world (reality), if in fact, no one can know anything about the external world? He must know something about the external world, or reality, in order to know that his claims represent the way the way things actually are. But that is just to say that this is the truth about reality - and he knows it. Or, another angle by which to see that it is self-defeating would be by simply reframing the claim to reveal its obvious implication: “We cannot know truths concerning an external world or reality.” However, notice how this is itself a truth claim about the external world and reality. If it is true,
then it is false, because one may now know a truth concerning the external world or reality. But the hard agnostic had claimed that one cannot know truths concerning the external world or reality. On the other hand, if one can know truths of the external world, then there may very well be other truths that can be known concerning the external world, as well. It would be special pleading\textsuperscript{20} to argue otherwise (not to mention one would have to know those “new” truths they are arguing concerning the external world). Lastly, notice that the hard agnostic must already assume that the individual with whom he is conversing, actually exists, and that he is not merely talking with himself, but another person that exists ‘out there’ in reality.

The hard agnostic may try another strategy, as stated above, and simply claim that, because of our human limitations, one is “not justified in making any truth claims about reality or an external world.” But again, though worded differently, it also falls victim to the same charge of self-contradiction - it is just another truth claim about reality, or the way thing are; claiming that no one can make such claims. But again, if no one can make “justified truth claims” about reality or the external world, then how can the hard agnostic make that very claim itself? It is, itself, simply a truth claim about reality saying that one is not justified in making such claims. But if it is not justified, or true, then why ought anyone take it seriously? Yet, if it is justified or true, then one can obviously make justified, or true, claims concerning reality or the external world; which also renders it false. Therefore, no matter the angle which the hard-intellectual form of agnosticism may try and take, the logical result is that hard intellectual agnosticism is self-defeating. It cannot withstand its own claims. In other words, it simply contradicts itself, and is therefore necessarily false.

**Soft Form of Intellectual Agnosticism**

This soft form is the same in principle (a claim to “not know”) yet is different in degree. That is to say, the soft form of intellectual agnosticism does not claim that one cannot know any truth about reality or an external world, merely that he does not currently know - but is actually open to knowing the truth if it can be found. This soft form is something akin to a humble admission of ignorance i.e. one is open to arguments, debates, and so on, in order to “get to the truth” as it were. Of course, if one is truly claiming as much, then there is more than a bit of virtue within this form. This type of individual should be, in theory, open to conversation and dialogue without simply “shutting down” any possibility thereof at the onset. Simply stated, it is no threat.

**THEOLOGICAL AGNOSTICISM AND IT’S SHARED DIFFICULTY**

The hard form of theological agnosticism logically, and readily, follows from the hard form of intellectual agnosticism. If all of the arguments that were given by David Hume and Kant go through, then God, as “part” of reality, just cannot be known based upon our limitations and finite abilities.\textsuperscript{21} Moreover, Hume argued that no classical arguments for the existence of God could actually be proven and were dubious, and even Kant agreed for the most part concerning the classical arguments for God’s existence and even added that one could just as easily “prove” contradictory positions with such arguments. To put it simply, hard theological agnosticism claims that one is unable to know any truths about God; much less if God even exists at all. If one has become readily familiar with the great difficulties of hard intellectual agnosticism observed above, then one is in the position to note that the very same difficulties are actually present within its hard-theological form, as well.

One may just as easily substitute the term “reality” or “external world” with the term “God” in order to see that the self-defeating nature of theological agnosticism is assuredly as unavoidable as its intellectual counterpart. The hard-theological agnostic, as it turns out, is claiming that “one cannot know any truth about God.” But again, as has been argued above, how could one claim make such a claim - as it, itself, is a truth about God? It is a truth claim about God which claims that truth claims about God cannot be made. Again, this is self-defeating. How could one know that no truths concerning God could be made, unless one knew enough about God to know that all other statements about Him were false? Simply reconsider the above position, concerning reality, and substitute the term “God” within the place of reality. The self-defeating nature of such similar statements is exposed.

The hard-theological agnostic may try to employ the same angle, or second strategy, used by the intellectual agnostic to in order to avoid such a difficulty mentioned previously above.
Namely, because of our human limitations, “one is not justified in making any truth claims about God.” Yet, this strategy is merely another claim that assumes that is, itself justified and true, and falls victim to being as self-defeating as that which the hard-intellectual agnostic employed when using the same second option or strategy. Again, simply re-read the above position claiming that one “is not justified in making any truth claims about reality or an external world” and substitute the term “reality or an external world” with the term “God” and the self-defeating nature of such a similar statement is exposed.

**CHRISTIAN RESPONSE**

Agnosticism and Christianity stand at obvious odds with one another. If agnosticism is true then Christianity is false, for Christian faith boldly declares that God has revealed Himself, made Himself known, and is indeed knowable (Romans 1:18-20). In addition, Jesus Christ, as God incarnate, came to reveal the heart of God on a much more intimate level than even many might have imagined (John 14:7, 17:3, etc.). Moreover, the entire witness of Christian Scripture attests to the revealed truths of God from the very inception of creation and humanity (Genesis 1) until the very end of the age (Revelation 22). That is to say, Christian faith declares that there never has been, nor will there ever be, a time in which God was/is not known and active among His creation. Furthermore, as just mentioned, Christianity not only declares that God has revealed Himself to His creation, but that He is adamantly involved, and active, in regard to it (Genesis 2, Exodus 14, John 1, etc.). The fact that God has most assuredly revealed Himself to man, and involves Himself with them, should provide great comfort to the believer.

**Notes**

2 Ibid.
4 Though there were possibly similar views on agnosticism even in ancient times.
5 Epistemology is a subdivision of philosophy that studies how one knows, or how one comes to know.
6 It should be noted that there are various forms of “agnosticism” even within conservative theological Christian circles, such as a view held by Thomas Aquinas, but this will not be discussed here, as the term is not truly being employed in the same way, or same sense, but is actually used somewhat analogously.
9 Hume, 1993, 135. (For instance, he claims that one does not have any experience at all of what is called one’s “self.”)
12 Ibid, 352-53
13 Generally speaking, Rationalism is the philosophical view truth is primarily gained through the mind based upon a priori truths that are independent of sense experience.
14 Specifically, the recent advances provided by Isaac Newton.
15 Lawhead, The Voyage of Discovery, 352.
16 The philosophical view that truth is primarily gained through sense experience is called Empiricism.
18 George Berkeley had a very original, odd, and wildly counter intuitive, counter argument here. But we’ve no space within this essay for such a discussion.
19 That is, it violates what philosophers call “The Law of Noncontradiction” which is a fundamental and basic law of logic. If some proposition truly violates this fundamental law, then it is assuredly false. The law simply states that A cannot be not A at the same time, in the same way, and in the same sense. In fact, in order to deny the Law of Noncontradiction, one must immediately employ the Law of Noncontradiction. One cannot deny it without literally employing it in the very process (e.g. an individual that says he does not believe in the Law of Noncontradiction does not mean, at the same time, that he does believe in the Law of Noncontradiction without violently contradicting himself). Otherwise, his statement is meaningless.
20 Special Pleading is an informal logical fallacy.
21 Of course, God being a “part” of reality is being used in a very loose sense, here. God is not merely a thing among other things that has existence. His very essence is existence.
22 Kant would famously dubbed these allegedly contradictory positions as antinomies.
23 Lawhead, The Voyage of Discovery, 363-64.

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