

Is agnosticism liveable?

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In Weak agnosticism defended Graham Oppy set out to 'show that agnosticism can be so formulated that it is no less philosophically respectable than theism and atheism'.¹ Oppy begins by differentiating between strong agnosticism, which obliges rational persons to suspend judgment on the question of God's existence, and weak agnosticism, which allows rational persons to do so. Weak agnosticism is thus the philosophical position that it is possible and rational - but not obligatory - to suspend judgment on the question of God's existence.

The question I discuss in this paper is whether one can consistently practice agnosticism, as opposed to merely suspending judgment regarding the existence of God? Does acceptance of the thesis that 'agnosticism can be so formulated that it is no less philosophically respectable than theism and atheism' entail the possibility of actual consistent practice of agnosticism? I begin by discussing some of the points raised by Oppy: the malevolent deity, forgetting at will, and agnosticism as temperament.

Malevolent deity

What one is to do if one allows the possibility that the world is created, and presumably governed, by a malevolent deity of great or unlimited power, asks Oppy? Such possibility surely has to be among other possibilities, namely various forms of theism and atheism, otherwise, it would not be an agnostic position. Oppy does not reject it on the grounds that such a reality is impossible or even improbable, but on the grounds that it is unhelpful to contemplate.

Being an agnostic, our protagonist accepts that while there is no compelling evidence against the thesis of the world as the product of a malevolent deity neither is there compelling

¹Graham Oppy, Weak agnosticism defended, *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 36: 147-167, 1994.

evidence for it (or the evidence on either side of the argument does not clear a certain evidential threshold or have sufficient evidential weight, etc.) and the same situation obtains for the other possibilities (e.g. theism and atheism). This does not mean they are equally likely, but merely that they are possible.²

The 'malevolent deity world' thesis being one among others, and there being no compelling or overwhelming evidence in favour of such thesis that meets the above-mentioned evidential threshold, our thinker has no more reason to worry about this particular thesis as opposed to any of the others.³

Forgetting at will

Can our thinker however forget at will such a worry, which he may harbour, if he indeed holds an alief of such a world is a live possibility? I argue that he cannot do so at will, as anyone who has tried to forget a vivid but terrible event may confirm: in trying to forget a particular event or idea one necessarily has to mentally identify it and bring it before the mind's eye, distinguishing it from other events, which is precisely what the protagonist wishes to avoid if he wills to forget it.⁴ Forgetting at will is, therefore, an incoherent, self-defeating exercise.

Our agnostic would have no particular reason to single out and worry about the possibility that the world they inhabit is a product of malevolent deity, but that if they unreasonably do so, for whatever reason, willing to forget it is not an option. I therefore disagree with Oppy that 'the only reasonable thing to do in the face of such worries is to forget about them' for it is not possible and what is not possible cannot be reasonable.

²While impossible outcomes have the probability of 0, possible outcomes have a probability between 0 and 1 while excluding 0 (because they would be impossible with a probability of 0) and 1 (because they would be certain and not merely possible with a probability of 1).

³What reasons would our protagonist have for worrying about the other theses? Let us consider just two cases: classical theism and naturalistic atheism. In the case of classical theism our protagonist may worry about the perceived lack of autonomy in a world created by the Almighty, the Supreme Puppet Master - and for someone who places a great value on autonomy that can be a very upsetting thesis indeed. Alternatively, given our protagonist is an agnostic the Almighty might have His reasons to be less than totally happy with our protagonist's agnostic stance and its consequences: if it is possible that he may face the judgment seat of the Almighty our agnostic has reasonable grounds to worry, for doubt in the existence and the jurisdiction of the judge would hardly help when you are standing trial. In the case of naturalistic atheism, he may also have reasonable grounds to worry because in such a world should terrible, overwhelming, and inescapable suffering befall him or others no hope, meaning or solace can be proffered - life forms come into existence, suffer and go out of existence and that's the end of it.

⁴Tamar Szabó Gendler, Alief and Belief, *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 105, No. 10, Epistemic Norms. Part Two (Oct., 2008), pp. 634-663.

Agnosticism as temperament

Is being an agnostic a matter of temperament or a psychological question? Oppy submits that 'It is a psychological question - a matter of temperament - which decides whether one could be a weak agnostic.' Different individuals have different temperaments and perhaps different temperaments may affect one's propensity for acquiring and holding an agnostic belief, that is being able to suspend judgment about God's existence.

A philosophical position such as weak agnosticism however, namely the view that it is reasonable but not obligatory to suspend judgment on the question of God's existence, is a matter of philosophy and not psychology or temperament. One's temperament may influence the strength of conviction or expression of holding such a philosophical view, if one holds it, or even one's predisposition to holding it, it cannot however be the basis or the necessary and sufficient condition for holding it.

I suggest that it is a properly basic belief – as well as rational and ethical thing to do - that one ought to act in accordance with one's beliefs, *ceteris paribus*.

If I profess hatred of fishing, but consciously choose to spend all my free time fishing you would be entitled to question my profession, my sanity or both. It is therefore a widely held, indeed properly basic belief, that other things being equal one ought to act in accordance with one's beliefs. This brings us to the central question of this paper: is weak agnosticism liveable? How does one act in accordance with one's weak agnosticism?

Oppy proposes that 'There is no good methodological precept which says that a rational person will have a definite opinion about everything; indeed, it seems plausible to suppose that, for any reasonable person, there will be many controversial questions about which he simply suspends judgment.'⁵

I think that is right. Can however a rational agnostic suspend action throughout his life in a way consistent with agnosticism that is not in effect some form or degree of religious belief or atheism? Is it possible to live a properly agnostic life in a world where abstention from action is an action and where refusal to take a position or act on a moral issue is an action with moral significance and consequences?

An objection may be raised at this stage. Given that we do not always live consistently with our beliefs, and sometimes hold contradictory beliefs - at least at different times - why should we expect our agnostic to act in a way consistent with his agnostic belief? The answer is that pace Oppy, a philosophical position such as weak agnosticism is a matter of philosophy, and that one ought to act in accordance with one's philosophical position, *ceteris paribus*. The well-known fact that we do not always do so does not negate that.

⁵p. 162.

Recalling that a rational person, in absence of coercion or other compelling factors, ought to act in accordance with his beliefs, it is rational to expect an agnostic to act in a way consistent with agnosticism, that is to suspend action with regard to the question of God's existence, just as he suspends judgment with regard to the same datum. Someone who claims to be an agnostic but acts as a theist or as an atheist is therefore not an agnostic but a theist or an atheist *de facto*.

A practising agnostic should therefore be able to keep suspended his judgment about existence of God and act or abstain from acting accordingly. This further implies that an agnostic may not act in a way that affirms nor denies theistic belief or in a way that affirms nor denies atheism.

This puts the agnostic in an impossible situation where suspension of judgment leading to suspension of action is action both if theism is true and if atheism is true. Considering that both theism and atheism lay mutually exclusive claims on what our agnostic ought to do suspension of action is impossible and therefore is not an option. To demonstrate this let us consider the example of prayer.

In the Abrahamic traditions prayer is central to the religious doctrine and practice and is a religious obligation. Focusing on the Christian tradition, prayer is commanded, is practiced by God Incarnate, and is an intrinsic activity of the Spirit in the life of the Christian.⁶ The life of prayer is a hallmark of Christian practice, while the principle of *lex orandi, lex credendi* is central to the Christian theology. The act of prayer is also central to Judaism and Islam.

Abrahamic traditions teach that not only one can pray - that prayer is not meaningless or impossible because there is One to whom one can pray - but also that one ought to pray: therefore, total abstention from some sort of prayer is *de facto* atheism.⁷

Atheistic positions differ but can be roughly characterised as follows: at best prayer is a waste of time and at worst it constitutes an ignorant and dangerous irrationality that should be discouraged. In any case an atheist cannot coherently pray (in the classical sense of the word), since someone who prays to a deity is not an atheist. We have now arrived at the crux of the problem.

While our agnostic may suspend judgment about God and prayer, he cannot suspend the corresponding action: he is either praying (acting as a theist) or is not praying (acting as an atheist). The law of the excluded middle excludes the third option. If he is praying he is practicing theism and denying atheism in practice. If he is not praying he is practicing atheism and denying theism in practice. Suspension of action, unlike suspension of judgment, is not

⁶Romans 8:15

⁷There is, of course, a wide variety of types, modes, and content of prayer; what unites them all is that despite their differences they are all considered to be forms of prayer by the respective religious traditions.

an option. Other similar examples may be given, such as participation in religious worship, giving of alms in religious contexts, and so on.

An objection may be made that there are other than religious reasons for praying that do not require belief in God. Perhaps one is 'praying' in the sense of 'sincerely hoping' for some outcome. Perhaps one is 'praying' in the sense of meditating or reflecting on the vastness of the universe or the finitude of human condition. Objections such as these however fall into the trap of modality of 'prayer' – while the word used is the same the meaning and the ontology of those who use it are different. For a Christian (or a Jew, or a Muslim), to 'pray' is to pray to God; if an atheist says 'I pray' he is not referring to what the theists refer to. The point here is not whether atheist's 'prayer' is 'real' or not; the point is that what he calls 'prayer' is different from what is called 'prayer' by a theist: they have different referents and therefore the objection dissolves.

To conclude, if agnosticism is about suspending judgment about the existence of God can an agnostic suspend action in a way that is properly agnostic as proposed above? Can an agnostic suspend action?

The answer as I have argued above has to be no: it is not open to an agnostic to suspend action as required by suspension of judgment on the question of God's existence. Agnosticism is not a liveable option: eventually, we fall on either side of the proverbial fence.