

## Agnosticism

**Abstract:** *I endorse the following claims in this paper. (1) Agnosticism is suspension of judgment on existence claims concerning gods and God. (2) Historical agnostics accepted (1) but unwisely insisted on further conditions best set aside. (3) Particular case agnosticism is less problematic than general principle-based agnosticism. (4) Agnostics should suspend judgment on—or, on occasion, reject—atomic claims of the form ‘God is F’.*

### 1. Characterisation of Agnosticism

Consider the claim that my youngest daughter is engaged to be married. I am pretty confident that, prior to reading the previous sentence, you had never given any consideration to this claim. Given that you had never given any consideration to this claim, you had no doxastic attitude towards it. You did not believe it; you did not think it true. You did not disbelieve it; you did not think it false. You did not suspend judgment about it; you were not undecided about whether it is true or false. There is no word in English that fits your prior relationship to this claim. I shall say that, with respect to this claim you were *innocent*: your relationship to the claim was one of *doxastic* innocence.

Now that you have considered, for the first time, the claim that my youngest daughter is engaged to be married, I expect you to suspend judgment about it. You have no reason to think that it is true, and you have no reason to think that it is false. Perhaps you might think that my mentioning the claim makes it slightly more likely that the claim is true than that it is false. But, on the other hand, given that I have introduced the claim in order to illustrate a series of distinctions, it is doubtful that you should attach too much weight to that

consideration. Given that you do suspend judgment with respect to this claim, there is an English word that fits your relationship to the claim: you are *agnostic* with respect to this claim. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, an agnostic is a person who is not committed to any particular point of view, and to be agnostic is to be not committed to any particular point of view. In the case at hand, you are not committed to the truth of the claim that my youngest daughter is engaged to be married and you are not committed to the falsity of the claim that my youngest daughter is engaged to be married. Since you have suspended judgment, you are agnostic on the question whether my youngest daughter is engaged to be married.

To progress from your state of agnosticism about whether my youngest daughter is engaged to be married, you need a reason to believe, or a reason to disbelieve, the claim that my youngest daughter is engaged to be married. Of course, any such reason will also be a reason to disbelieve, or a reason to believe, the claim that it is not the case that my youngest daughter is engaged to be married. Given your agnosticism, you are undecided between two claims: that my youngest daughter is engaged to be married, and that it is not the case that my youngest daughter is engaged to be married. Any reason to believe one of these claims is a reason to disbelieve the other.

As it happens, I have no daughters. Consequently, it is not the case that my youngest daughter is engaged to be married. Given that you take my word for this, you now believe the claim that it is not the case that my youngest daughter is engaged to be married, and you now disbelieve the claim that my youngest daughter is engaged to be married. Anyone who moves from agnosticism about whether my youngest daughter is engaged to be married believes

exactly one of two claims—that my youngest daughter is engaged to be married and that it is not the case that my youngest daughter is engaged to be married—and disbelieves the other.

The fourfold distinction that I have just identified—between innocence, agnosticism, belief and disbelief—can be applied to any claim, and to any pair of claims in which one is the negation of the other. For any claim that *p*, an innocent is someone who has never considered whether that *p*, an agnostic is someone who suspends judgment about whether that *p*, a believer is someone who believes that *p*, and a disbeliever is someone who believes that not *p*.

Consider the claim that God exists. Given just our fourfold distinction, it is reasonable to say that: an *innocent* is someone who has never considered whether God exists; an *agnostic* is someone who suspends judgment whether God exists; a *theist* is someone who believes that God exists; and an *atheist* is someone who believes that God does not exist.

Consider the claim that there are gods. Given just our fourfold distinction, it is reasonable to say that: an innocent is someone who has never considered whether there are gods; an agnostic is someone who suspends judgment about whether there are gods; a theist is someone who believes that there are gods; and an atheist is someone who believes that there are no gods.

Even if we have agreement that God is a god, it is unclear how we might combine these results. Someone who suspends judgment whether there are gods might nonetheless believe that God does not exist. Someone who thinks that God does not exist might suspend

judgment whether there are gods. And those who deny that God is a god might say both that God exists and that there are no gods.

Perhaps the most natural thought is something like this: someone who believes that God exists or believes that there are gods is a theist; someone who believes that there are no gods and that God does not exist is an atheist; someone who suspends judgment on whether there are gods or on whether God exists, and who is not a theist or an atheist, is an agnostic; and someone who has considered neither whether God exists nor whether there are gods is an innocent. If we go this way, then an agnostic suspends judgment on the claim that God exists or the claim that there are gods, and, if they do not suspend judgment on both claims, either are innocent about or else disbelieve the claim on which they do not suspend judgment.

This proposal generalises. Suppose that we have a wider range of hypotheses: God<sub>1</sub> exists, God<sub>2</sub> exists, ... , God<sub>n</sub> exists, there are gods<sub>1</sub>, there are gods<sub>2</sub>, ... , there are gods<sub>m</sub>. Someone who believes at least one of these hypotheses is a theist. Someone who disbelieves all of these hypotheses is an atheist. Someone who suspends judgment about some of these hypotheses, and who is not a theist or an atheist, is an agnostic. And someone who has never considered any of these hypotheses is an innocent.

Despite its generality, this proposal may still not be entirely satisfactory. The reservations I have arise because *commitments* outrun beliefs. Setting aside complications that arise where beliefs are inconsistent, it is plausible that people are committed to the *consequences* of their beliefs. If, for example, my beliefs *entail* that God exists, even though I have never considered whether God exists, and so do not believe that God exists, there is some room for thinking that I am a theist rather than an innocent.

Here is a new proposal. Someone who is committed to a least one god or God hypothesis—i.e., at least one claim of the form ‘God exists’ or ‘there are gods’—is a theist. Someone who is committed to the negation of all god and God hypotheses—i.e. to all claims of the form ‘God does not exist’ and ‘there are no gods’—is an atheist. Someone who is committed to suspension of judgement about some god or God hypotheses, and who is not a theist or an atheist, is an agnostic. And someone who has never considered any god or God hypotheses and who is not committed to any god or God hypotheses, or to the negations of any god or God hypotheses, or to suspension of judgment about some god or God hypotheses, is an innocent.

This proposal has advantages. One significant strength is that, unlike the previous proposals, it has no list relativity. Atheists need not have considered particular god or God claims in order to be committed to their negations. Agnostics need not have considered particular god or God claims in order to be committed to suspense of judgment about them or to be committed to their negations.

The proposal also raises some questions. Do we really want to say that someone who has never considered whether God exists, and who does not believe that God exists, is a theist merely because their beliefs commit them to the claim that God exists? Do we really want to say that innocence requires not merely absence of consideration of god and God claims, but also absence of commitment to god and God claims, absence of commitment to negations of god and God claims, and absence of suspension of judgment about god and God claims?

Perhaps we can have the advantages without the questions. We can remove the list relativity, while retaining the formulation in terms of beliefs, so long as we insist that: (a) theists believe at least one claim of the form ‘God exists’ or ‘there are gods’; (b) atheists believe that it is not the case that there is a true claim of the form ‘God exists’ and that it is not the case that there is a true claim of the form ‘there are gods’; (c) agnostics suspend judgment on some claims of the form ‘God exists’ or ‘there are gods’, and do not believe any other claims of either of these forms; and (d) innocents have never considered any God or god hypotheses.

There is room for at least one further tweak. Someone who is undecided between monotheism and polytheism is still a theist. So it seems that we should say that a theist is someone who believes either some claim of the form ‘God exists’, or some claim of the form ‘there are gods’, or some claim of the form ‘either God exists or there are gods’. No similar tweak is needed in the case of agnosticism: someone who is an agnostic about a disjunction is an agnostic about at least one of the disjuncts in that disjunction.

So our final proposal about agnosticism is this: *Agnostics* suspend judgment on some claims of the form ‘God exists’ and ‘there are gods’, and do not believe any other claims of either of these forms. *Agnosticism* is suspension of judgment on at least one claim of the form ‘God exists’ or ‘there are gods’, and absence of belief in any other claims of either of these forms.

## **2. Some Historical Figures**

My characterisation of agnosticism is minimal: it adverts only to doxastic attitudes taken towards claims of the form ‘God exists’ and ‘there are gods’. However, at least historically, many who have called themselves ‘agnostics’ have wished to make what they took to be

defining affirmations that go beyond this minimal characterisation. At least two questions arise. First, do those who call themselves ‘agnostics’ fit my minimal characterisation? Second, should we join them in imposing further conditions on membership in the class of agnostics?

### 1. *Huxley*

We owe the term ‘agnostic’ to Huxley. He gave many different, and apparently incompatible, accounts of its meaning.

Sometimes, what he takes to be central is issues about *certainty* and *logical justification*:

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. (Huxley (1894, V: ‘Agnosticism and Christianity’)

Sometimes, what he takes to be central is the need for *scientific grounds* for professions of knowledge and belief:

‘[Agnosticism] simply means that a man shall not say he knows or believes that which he has no scientific grounds for professing to know or believe’ (Huxley (1884))

Sometimes, what he takes to be central is considerations about *reason* and *demonstration*:

‘Agnosticism ... is ... a method ... which lies in the rigorous application of a single principle. Positively: ... follow you reason as far as it will take you, without regard to any other consideration. Negatively: ... do not pretend that conclusions are certain which are not demonstrated or demonstrable.’ (Huxley (1894), V: ‘Science and Christian Tradition’)

And sometimes, what he takes to be central is considerations about *knowledge* and *knowability*:

‘They were quite sure they had attained a certain ‘gnosis’ ... while I was quite sure that I had not and had a pretty strong conviction that the problem was insoluble.’ (Huxley (1894), V: ‘Agnosticism’)

At least some of this suggests that Huxley does fit our minimal characterisation. It is clear enough that Huxley supposes that there are no scientific grounds for professing that God exists and no scientific grounds for professing that God does not exist. Taking him at his word, then, he thinks that we should say neither that we believe that God exists nor that we believe that God does not exist. Moreover, I think, it is pretty clear that Huxley supposes that we should be neither certain that God exists nor certain that God does not exist; we should suppose neither that it has been demonstrated that God exists nor that it has been demonstrated that God does not exist; and we should suppose neither that reason tells us that God exists nor that reason tells us that God does not exist. But *these* further claims are all consequences of our minimal characterisation: if I have suspended judgment on the question whether God exists, then—at least given that I am minimally rational—I will be uncertain



whether God exists, and I will suppose that I have no demonstration that applies to God's existence, and I will suppose that reason does not tell me whether God exists.

But there is much here that goes beyond the minimal characterisation. I can be agnostic, in the minimal sense, without accepting: (1) it is wrong to be certain unless you can produce evidence that logically justifies your certainty; or (2) it is wrong to believe unless you have scientific grounds for belief; or (3) it is wrong to be certain if there is no demonstration to be had; or (4) it is impossible that anyone else knows that on which you suspend judgment. I am certain that I had Weetbix for breakfast. I remember doing so. But I cannot produce evidence that logically justifies my certainty that I had Weetbix for breakfast. I have no scientific grounds for my belief that I had Weetbix for breakfast. I cannot demonstrate that I had Weetbix for breakfast. As I see it, we simply should not accept the further conditions that Huxley proposes. If agnosticism is to be tenable, it should not be committed to these kinds of conditions.

What about the suggestion that you should think that it is impossible that anyone knows that on which you suspend judgment? Clearly, that condition cannot hold in general. Before I ask, I may perfectly reasonably suspend judgment on the claim whether you had Weetbix for breakfast. But, even given my reasonable agnosticism, it would be absurd for me to think that it is impossible that *you* know whether you had Weetbix for breakfast. Might similar considerations apply to the question of the existence of God? Suppose that I do reasonably suspend judgment on the claim that God exists. Must I suppose that it cannot be that there is someone who knows that God does not exist? Must I suppose that it cannot be that there is someone who knows that God does exist? Even if I think that I have made a reasonably good fist of canvassing the considerations that bear on the existence of God, how confident should

I be that there are no considerations that I have overlooked that would justify belief one way or the other? If God does not exist, why should I expect to be the first to know? If God does exist, why should I expect to be the first to know?

Even if you are persuaded that one can reasonably be agnostic both about God's existence and the possibility of knowledge concerning God's existence, you might wonder whether one might also reasonably be agnostic about God's existence but committed to the claim that there cannot be knowledge concerning God's existence. It is not obvious that this is a tenable position. Suppose that God exists. Surely, then, God knows that God exists. Surely, too, God is able to let other parties know that God exists. But then, if you are undecided whether God exists, why are you not also undecided whether God has, in fact, let some people other than you know that God exists? Even if you are very sure that no contemporary Christians, or Muslims, or Jews know that God exists, what considerations persuade you that there is no one in history who has known whether God exists? Did Huxley have evidence that logically justified the claim that no one has ever known whether God exists? Did Huxley have scientific evidence for this claim? Did reason alone take Huxley to this claim?

## *2. Ingersoll*

Perhaps the leading exponent of 'agnosticism' in the United States was Robert Ingersoll. Like Huxley, he gives different, not evidently consistent, accounts of his agnostic commitments.

Sometimes, what he says commits him to the identification of agnosticism with atheism:

‘The Agnostic is an Atheist. The Atheist is an Agnostic. The Agnostic says “I do not know but I do not believe there is any God”. The Atheist says the same.’ (Ingersoll (1902), VIII ‘My Belief’)

Other times, what he says seems to be almost empty of content:

‘We can be as honest as we are ignorant. If we are, when asked what is beyond the horizon of the known, we must say that we do not know.’ (Ingersoll (1902), IV: ‘Why I am an Agnostic’)

Clearly, any identification of atheism and agnosticism runs against the minimal characterisation of atheism and agnosticism given above. Of course, Ingersoll is right that neither atheists nor agnostics believe that God exists. But, unlike atheists, agnostics also do not believe that God does not exist. Furthermore, it seems clear enough that neither theists nor agnostics believe that God does not exist. If agreement in failing to believe that God exists suffices for identification of atheists and agnostics, then surely failing to believe that God does not exist suffices for identification of theists and agnostics. But no one should be happy with the identification of theists and atheists. So, I think, the most reasonable course of action is to reject Ingersoll’s identification of atheists and agnostics on the ground that only the former believe that God does not exist.

Everyone agrees that, for any proposition that  $p$ , if we do not know that  $p$ , then we do not know that  $p$ : what lies outside that which we know is that which we do not know. Moreover, everyone agrees that, for any proposition that  $p$ , if we do not believe that  $p$ , then we do not believe that  $p$ : what lies outside that which we believe is that which we do not believe.

Whether we are atheists, theists, agnostics, or innocents, we are bound to accept these obvious truths. So it is hard to see how they can have any implications for our honesty or our rationality.

### 3. *Smith*

There are some more recent authors who have cleaved to something like the positions taken by Huxley and Ingersoll. Consider, for example, the following claim from George Smith:

‘Agnostic atheism is the view of those who do not believe in the existence of any deity but who do not claim to know if a deity does or does not exist. Agnostic theism is the view of those who do not claim to know of the existence of any deity but still believe in such an existence.’ (*Atheism: The Case against God* (1979))

Smith insists that agnosticism is not a third kind of orientation to the claims that God exist and God does not exist to be set alongside atheism and theism. Rather, according to Smith, agnosticism is a mode of orientation to those two claims that both atheists and theists can adopt. On Smith’s approach, agnosticism with respect to a proposition that *p* is consistent both with believing that *p* and with believing that not *p*. What agnosticism adds is a profession of ignorance: not knowing whether it is the case that *p*. (Strictly, Smith has ‘agnostic atheists’ not claiming to know *whether* a deity exists and ‘agnostic theists’ not claiming to know *that* a deity exists. But there is no justification for introducing that kind of asymmetry into the contrast between atheists and theists. Either Smith should say that both ‘agnostic atheists’ and ‘agnostic theists’ do not claim to know whether a deity exists, or he should say that ‘agnostic atheists’ do not claim to know that a deity does not exist.)

Can someone coherently claim to believe that *p* while denying that they know that *p*? There is at least *prima facie* reason for thinking that the answer to this question is negative. Suppose that we accept that knowledge is properly understood to be justified true belief: S knows that *p* if and only (a) it is true that *p*; (b) S believes that *p*; and (c) S is justified in believing that *p*. Suppose that someone believes that *p*. It would be paradoxical for them to insist that, although they believe that *p*, it is not true that *p*. So, if this person is to deny that they know that *p*, then they must be committed to denying that they are justified in believing that *p*. But it would seem to be paradoxical for them to insist that, although they believe that *p*, they are not justified in believing that *p*: how can I reasonably go on believing that *p* if I deny that I am justified in believing that *p*. If this line of reasoning is sound, then it seems that disavowal of knowledge that *p* requires disavowal of belief that *p*. However, if that is right, then it seems that ‘agnostic theism’ and ‘agnostic atheism’ are not rationally tenable positions.

Perhaps it might be replied that there is more to knowledge than justified true belief. In particular, it might be said that knowledge requires certainty. And, of course, I can be uncertain in my beliefs. Indeed, it seems the merest commonsense to allow that theists need not be certain of their theism and that atheists need not be certain of their atheism. Can we save ‘agnostic theism’ and ‘agnostic atheism’ by following this line of thought?

I do not think so. To date, we have been thinking about belief as an all-or-nothing matter. On the all-or-nothing conception, there are just four relevant states: belief, disbelief, suspension, and ignorance. While it is very common to think about belief in this way, it is also very common to think about belief in a graduated fashion: each belief has a strength associated with it. At least roughly, we can represent the strengths of beliefs as probabilities. Given a

proposition that  $p$ , certainty that  $p$  is credence 1 that  $p$ , certainty that not  $p$  is credence 0 that  $p$ ; suspension of belief that  $p$  is credence 0.5 that  $p$ , and so on. (There are many subtleties in the more careful development of this line of thought; those subtleties can be ignored for the purposes of the present discussion.)

If we adopt the proposal that knowledge requires certainty, then, from Smith's standpoint, atheism is credence 0 that God exists, theism is credence 1 that God exists, 'agnostic atheism' is credence in the interval  $(0, 0.5)$  that God exists, and 'agnostic theism' is credence in the interval  $(0.5, 1)$  that God exists.

There are various difficulties with this proposal. One obvious problem is what to call credence 0.5: 'agnostic agnosticism'? Another obvious problem is that this proposal does not align with the way that credences map onto named positions in other cases. Someone who assigns credence  $1-\epsilon$ , where  $\epsilon$  is very small, to a proposition  $p$ , is very confident that  $p$  is true. If someone assigns credence  $1-\epsilon$  to naturalism, then we say that they are a very confident naturalist, and hence, in particular, a naturalist. Surely we speak the same way in the case in which we are presently interested: someone who assigns credence  $1-\epsilon$  to atheism is a very confident atheist, and hence an atheist.

While there are difficulties involved in putting together our all-or-nothing talk about beliefs with our graduated talk about beliefs, it is not plausible that consideration of graduated talk about beliefs tells against the view that theists, atheists, agnostics and innocents belong to non-overlapping classes (hard questions about borderline cases aside).

### **3. Routes to Agnosticism**

There are at least two different routes to agnosticism about gods.

One route goes by way of a more broad-ranging agnosticism about a great many other things. If you suspend judgment in *all* matters, then, in particular, you suspend judgment on whether there are gods. If you suspend judgment in all *theoretical* matters, then, in particular, you suspend judgment on whether there are gods. If you suspend judgment on all *controversial* matters, then, in particular, you suspend judgment on whether there are gods. If you suspend judgment on all *religious* matters, then, in particular, you suspend judgment on whether there are gods. If you suspend judgment about all *philosophically controversial* matters, then, in particular, you suspend judgment on whether there are gods. If you suspend judgment about all theoretical questions that have not been *settled by science*, then, in particular, you suspend judgment on whether there are gods. And so on. For some, agnosticism about gods is a manifestation of a broader epistemological orientation.

A second route goes by way of consideration of the particular case. Some people are agnostics about gods because, as they see it, they have no more reason to believe that there are gods than to believe that there are no gods, even though they have no general disposition towards suspension of judgment in other classes of cases. Agnostics about gods need not be agnostics about free will, or substance dualism, or golden mountains, or fairies, or the current state of liberal democracies. Perhaps they are agnostic about some of these things; perhaps not. What matters is that, when it comes to their agnosticism about gods, these agnostics take their agnosticism to turn on the relative weightings of the considerations that speak for and against gods.

As we have seen, Huxley's agnosticism was avowedly general: believe only what you have scientific grounds to believe, etc. This agnosticism is not as strong as ancient—or Pyrrhonian—scepticism; Huxley does not say: believe only what is obvious, or evident, or indisputable. Nonetheless, there is a strongly empiricist tenor to Huxley's views: while he was convinced of biological evolution by Darwin, he remained agnostic on the question whether natural selection is the means by which it plays out. Although Huxley was an effective advocate for scientific education, his empiricist conception of scientific grounds is narrow: broader conceptions favour the view that inference to the best explanation justified belief in Darwinian natural selection over Huxley's agnosticism about it.

One key question for advocates of broad-ranging agnosticism concerns the consequences of their principles for apparently clear cases. Consider fairies. It seems to me that the right approach to the question of the existence of fairies is outright disbelief: there are no fairies. But, if you are drawn sufficiently towards empiricism, it is hard to see how you could justify anything other than agnosticism about fairies. No matter how many attempts to make observations of fairies fail, you need something like inference to the best explanation to get you to the belief that there are no fairies. If you have an aversion in principle to inference to the best explanation—or the like—then you will end up being agnostic about a great many things that, by my lights, you should not be agnostic about.

Advocates of particular case agnosticism do not face these same difficulties. One might accept, on the basis of inference to the best explanation (or the like), that there are no fairies, while nonetheless being undecided whether there are gods. As many have noted, there are numerous differences between best cases for fairies and best cases for gods. It is much easier to understand how a thoughtful, reflective, educated person might be undecided about gods



than it is to understand how a thoughtful, reflective, educated person might be undecided about fairies.

#### **4. Agnosticism and Divine Attributes**

What should an agnostic about the existence of God say about atomic claims that attribute properties to God, e.g., ‘God is omnipotent’, ‘God is ultimate creator of all else’, etc.

Theists may say that these claims are straightforwardly true; they will do so if they think that God has the relevant properties. Theists may say that these claims are straightforwardly false; they will do so if they think that God lacks the relevant property. Theists may say that they are undecided; they will do so if they have not made up their minds whether God has the relevant properties. Theists may say that we should be hesitant to suppose that any properties that we are capable of grasping are literally true of God; they may say that it is, at best, only analogically true that God has these properties.

Atheists should, I think, say that all of these atomic claims are false. Given that there is no God, it is not true that God is omnipotent. If God is omnipotent, then something is omnipotent. But, according to atheists, nothing is omnipotent. So, in particular, according to atheists, God is not omnipotent. Some atheists may say that it is true by definition—trivially true—that God is omnipotent. But that seems wrong to me. If it is true by definition that God is omnipotent, then it is true that God is omnipotent. But if it is true that God is omnipotent, then it is true that something is omnipotent. But, according to atheists, nothing is omnipotent.

For any particular atomic claim that attributes properties to God—e.g. ‘God is omnipotent’—agnostics may reject it, or they may be undecided between accepting it and rejecting it.

Clearly enough, an agnostic cannot accept a claim of this form: if, for example, they accept that God is omnipotent, then they accept that God exists. But agnostics suspend judgment on the question whether God exists. Since agnostics recognise that, were they atheists, they would reject every atomic claim that attributes a property to God, they will suspend judgment on every atomic claim that attributes a property to God for which they do not suppose that, even if God does exist, God does not possess that property. If, for example, an agnostic is persuaded by Geach that, even if God exists, God is not omnipotent, then that agnostic will maintain that it is not the case that God is omnipotent. (Such agnostics should not say that God is not omnipotent. The propositional negation is fine; the predicate negation is not.) If, on the other hand, an agnostic either accepts that, or is undecided whether, if God exists, God is omnipotent, then that agnostic will be undecided whether God is omnipotent.

Some may think that there are further options here. For example, according to logical positivists—e.g. Ayer (1936)—the term ‘God’ and the atomic sentence ‘God is omnipotent’ are both meaningless. On this view, questions about belief, disbelief, and suspension of judgment do not arise, since there is nothing to believe, disbelieve, or suspend judgment about. But might not there be an agnostic who is undecided between the standpoint of the logical positivists and standpoints according to which the term ‘God’ and the atomic sentence ‘God is omnipotent’ are meaningful? Not everyone will suppose so. In particular, those who follow Quine (1960), in supposing that every atomic sentence of the form ‘N is F’ is false if ‘N’ is empty, will suppose that what the logical positivists offer is merely one kind of atheism. This point notwithstanding, it does seem that there might be some agnostics who are undecided between a greater range of options that I initially put on the table.

Meinongians may have a different kind of beef with the preceding discussion. If we suppose that there is a distinction between being and existence, then we might suppose that ‘God is omnipotent’ can be true even if God does not exist: all that is required is that God is a non-existent being that possesses the property of omnipotence. According to Meinongian agnostics, what I said above about ‘God is omnipotent’ is mistaken. By their lights, atomic sentences of the form ‘N is F’ can be true, even if ‘N exists’ is false, so long as ‘F’ is not a member of the class of non-characterising predicates (e.g. ‘exists’). While it seems unlikely that there are many agnostics who remain undecided about both logical positivism and Meinongianism, perhaps we should not be too quick to insist that there are no agnostics who fall into this category.

## 5. Concluding Remarks

Although I have not made anything of this in the preceding discussion, the use of the term ‘agnostic’ has always been contentious. While Huxley invented the term, his contemporaries—including Spencer—used it to mean something quite different from what Huxley himself had intended. (For discussion, see Lightman (1987) (2002) and Harvey (2013).) The account of agnosticism that I have defended is *stipulative*: it is a suggestion about what it is most useful for us to mean, *now*, when we use this term in discussion in philosophy of religion to taxonomise positions. However we use the term, we cannot hope to accommodate all of its diverse historical and contemporary uses. (Compare Oppy (2018).) Moreover, we should not lose sight of the multiplicity of uses of the term when interpreting what others say when they use it: in order to read Huxley, Spencer and Ingersoll with understanding, we need to know what they took the term to mean.

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