

= Agnosticism =

Agnosticism is the view that the truth values of certain claims ? especially metaphysical and religious claims such as whether God , the divine , or the supernatural exist ? are unknown and perhaps unknowable .

According to the philosopher William L. Rowe , " agnosticism is the view that human reason is incapable of providing sufficient rational grounds to justify either the belief that God exists or the belief that God does not exist . " Agnosticism is a doctrine or set of tenets rather than a religion as such .

Thomas Henry Huxley , an English biologist , coined the word " agnostic " in 1869 . Earlier thinkers , however , had written works that promoted agnostic points of view , such as Sanjaya Belatthaputta , a 5th @-@ century BCE Indian philosopher who expressed agnosticism about any afterlife ; and Protagoras , a 5th @-@ century BCE Greek philosopher who expressed agnosticism about " the gods " . The Nasadiya Sukta in the Rigveda is agnostic about the origin of the universe .

= = Defining agnosticism = =

Agnosticism is of the essence of science , whether ancient or modern . It 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 . Consequently Agnosticism puts aside not only the greater part of popular theology , but also the greater part of anti @-@ theology . On the whole , the " bosh " of heterodoxy is more offensive to me than that of orthodoxy , because heterodoxy professes to be guided by reason and science , and orthodoxy does not .

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 ; and that reprobation ought to attach to the profession of disbelief in such inadequately supported propositions .

Agnosticism , in fact , is not a creed , but a method , the essence of which lies in the rigorous application of a single principle ... Positively 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 .

Being a scientist , above all else , Huxley presented agnosticism as a form of demarcation . A hypothesis with no supporting objective , testable evidence is not an objective , scientific claim . As such , there would be no way to test said hypotheses , leaving the results inconclusive . His agnosticism was not compatible with forming a belief as to the truth , or falsehood , of the claim at hand . Karl Popper would also describe himself as an agnostic . According to philosopher William L. Rowe , in this strict sense , agnosticism is the view that human reason is incapable of providing sufficient rational grounds to justify either the belief that God exists or the belief that God does not exist .

Others have redefined this concept , making it compatible with forming a belief , and only incompatible with absolute certainty . George H. Smith , while admitting that the narrow definition of atheist was the common usage definition of that word , and admitting that the broad definition of agnostic was the common usage definition of that word , promoted broadening the definition of atheist and narrowing the definition of agnostic . Smith rejects agnosticism as a third alternative to theism and atheism and promotes terms such as agnostic atheism ( the view of those who do not believe in the existence of any deity , but do not claim to know if a deity does or does not exist ) and agnostic theism ( the view of those who do not claim to know of the existence of any deity , but still believe in such an existence ) .

Most recently , the terms apathetic and pragmatic agnosticism have been coined with regard to the view that there is no proof of either the existence or non @-@ existence of any deity , but since any deity that may exist appears unconcerned for the universe or the welfare of its inhabitants , the question is largely academic and that their existence therefore has little to no impact on personal

human affairs and should be of little theological interest .

### === Etymology ===

Agnostic ( from Ancient Greek  $\alpha$ - ( a- ) , meaning " without " , and  $\gamma\acute{\nu}\omega\sigma\iota\varsigma$  ( gn $\acute{o}$ sis ) , meaning " knowledge " ) was used by Thomas Henry Huxley in a speech at a meeting of the Metaphysical Society in 1869 to describe his philosophy , which rejects all claims of spiritual or mystical knowledge .

Early Christian church leaders used the Greek word gnosis ( knowledge ) to describe " spiritual knowledge " . Agnosticism is not to be confused with religious views opposing the ancient religious movement of Gnosticism in particular ; Huxley used the term in a broader , more abstract sense . Huxley identified agnosticism not as a creed but rather as a method of skeptical , evidence @-@ based inquiry .

In recent years , scientific literature dealing with neuroscience and psychology has used the word to mean " not knowable " . In technical and marketing literature , " agnostic " can also mean independence from some parameters ? for example , " platform agnostic " or " hardware agnostic " .

### === Qualifying agnosticism ===

Scottish Enlightenment philosopher David Hume contended that meaningful statements about the universe are always qualified by some degree of doubt . He asserted that the fallibility of human beings means that they cannot obtain absolute certainty except in trivial cases where a statement is true by definition ( e.g. tautologies such as " all bachelors are unmarried " or " all triangles have three corners " ) .

### === Types ===

Strong agnosticism ( also called " hard " , " closed " , " strict " , or " permanent agnosticism " )

The view that the question of the existence or nonexistence of a deity or deities , and the nature of ultimate reality is unknowable by reason of our natural inability to verify any experience with anything but another subjective experience . A strong agnostic would say , " I cannot know whether a deity exists or not , and neither can you . "

Weak agnosticism ( also called " soft " , " open " , " empirical " , or " temporal agnosticism " )

The view that the existence or nonexistence of any deities is currently unknown but is not necessarily unknowable ; therefore , one will withhold judgment until evidence , if any , becomes available . A weak agnostic would say , " I don 't know whether any deities exist or not , but maybe one day , if there is evidence , we can find something out . "

### === History ===

### === Greek philosophy ===

Agnostic thought , in the form of skepticism , emerged as a formal philosophical position in ancient Greece . Its proponents included Protagoras , Pyrrho , Carneades , Sextus Empiricus and , to some degree , Socrates , who was a strong advocate for a skeptical approach to epistemology .

Pyrrho said that we should refrain from making judgment as we can never know the true reality . According to Pyrrho , having opinion was possible , but certainty and knowledge are impossible . Carneades was also a skeptic in relation to all knowledge claims . He proposed a probability theory , however . According to him , certainty could never be attained . Protagoras rejected the conventional accounts of the gods . He said :

Concerning the gods , I have no means of knowing whether they exist or not or of what sort they may be . Many things prevent knowledge including the obscurity of the subject and the brevity of

human life .

= = = Hindu philosophy = = =

Throughout the history of Hinduism there has been a strong tradition of philosophic speculation and skepticism .

The Rig Veda takes an agnostic view on the fundamental question of how the universe and the gods were created . Nasadiya Sukta ( Creation Hymn ) in the tenth chapter of the Rig Veda says :

= = = Hume , Kant , and Kierkegaard = = =

Aristotle , Anselm , Aquinas , and Descartes presented arguments attempting to rationally prove the existence of God . The skeptical empiricism of David Hume , the antinomies of Immanuel Kant , and the existential philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard convinced many later philosophers to abandon these attempts , regarding it impossible to construct any unassailable proof for the existence or non @-@ existence of God .

In his 1844 book , Philosophical Fragments , Kierkegaard writes :

Let us call this unknown something : God . It is nothing more than a name we assign to it . The idea of demonstrating that this unknown something ( God ) exists , could scarcely suggest itself to Reason . For if God does not exist it would of course be impossible to prove it ; and if he does exist it would be folly to attempt it . For at the very outset , in beginning my proof , I would have presupposed it , not as doubtful but as certain ( a presupposition is never doubtful , for the very reason that it is a presupposition ) , since otherwise I would not begin , readily understanding that the whole would be impossible if he did not exist . But if when I speak of proving God 's existence I mean that I propose to prove that the Unknown , which exists , is God , then I express myself unfortunately . For in that case I do not prove anything , least of all an existence , but merely develop the content of a conception .

Hume was Huxley 's favourite philosopher , calling him " the Prince of Agnostics " . Diderot wrote to his mistress , telling of a visit by Hume to the Baron D 'Holbach , and describing how a word for the position that Huxley would later describe as agnosticism didn 't seem to exist , or at least wasn 't common knowledge , at the time .

The first time that M. Hume found himself at the table of the Baron , he was seated beside him . I don 't know for what purpose the English philosopher took it into his head to remark to the Baron that he did not believe in atheists , that he had never seen any . The Baron said to him : " Count how many we are here . " We are eighteen . The Baron added : " It isn 't too bad a showing to be able to point out to you fifteen at once : the three others haven 't made up their minds . "

= = = Thomas Henry Huxley = = =

Agnostic views are as old as philosophical skepticism , but the terms agnostic and agnosticism were created by Huxley to sum up his thoughts on contemporary developments of metaphysics about the " unconditioned " ( William Hamilton ) and the " unknowable " ( Herbert Spencer ) . Though Huxley began to use the term " agnostic " in 1869 , his opinions had taken shape some time before that date . In a letter of September 23 , 1860 , to Charles Kingsley , Huxley discussed his views extensively :

I neither affirm nor deny the immortality of man . I see no reason for believing it , but , on the other hand , I have no means of disproving it . I have no a priori objections to the doctrine . No man who has to deal daily and hourly with nature can trouble himself about a priori difficulties . Give me such evidence as would justify me in believing in anything else , and I will believe that . Why should I not ? It is not half so wonderful as the conservation of force or the indestructibility of matter ...

It is no use to talk to me of analogies and probabilities . I know what I mean when I say I believe in the law of the inverse squares , and I will not rest my life and my hopes upon weaker convictions ...

That my personality is the surest thing I know may be true . But the attempt to conceive what it is

leads me into mere verbal subtleties . I have champed up all that chaff about the ego and the non @-@ ego , noumena and phenomena , and all the rest of it , too often not to know that in attempting even to think of these questions , the human intellect flounders at once out of its depth .

And again , to the same correspondent , May 6 , 1863 :

I have never had the least sympathy with the a priori reasons against orthodoxy , and I have by nature and disposition the greatest possible antipathy to all the atheistic and infidel school . Nevertheless I know that I am , in spite of myself , exactly what the Christian would call , and , so far as I can see , is justified in calling , atheist and infidel . I cannot see one shadow or tittle of evidence that the great unknown underlying the phenomenon of the universe stands to us in the relation of a Father [ who ] loves us and cares for us as Christianity asserts . So with regard to the other great Christian dogmas , immortality of soul and future state of rewards and punishments , what possible objection can I ? who am compelled perforce to believe in the immortality of what we call Matter and Force , and in a very unmistakable present state of rewards and punishments for our deeds ? have to these doctrines ? Give me a scintilla of evidence , and I am ready to jump at them .

Of the origin of the name agnostic to describe this attitude , Huxley gave the following account :

When I reached intellectual maturity and began to ask myself whether I was an atheist , a theist , or a pantheist ; a materialist or an idealist ; Christian or a freethinker ; I found that the more I learned and reflected , the less ready was the answer ; until , at last , I came to the conclusion that I had neither art nor part with any of these denominations , except the last . The one thing in which most of these good people were agreed was the one thing in which I differed from them . They were quite sure they had attained a certain " gnosis " ? had , more or less successfully , solved the problem of existence ; while I was quite sure I had not , and had a pretty strong conviction that the problem was insoluble . And , with Hume and Kant on my side , I could not think myself presumptuous in holding fast by that opinion ...

So I took thought , and 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 . ... To my great satisfaction the term took .

In 1889 , Huxley wrote :

Therefore , although it be , as I believe , demonstrable that we have no real knowledge of the authorship , or of the date of composition of the Gospels , as they have come down to us , and that nothing better than more or less probable guesses can be arrived at on that subject .

= = = William Stewart Ross = = =

William Stewart Ross wrote under the name of Saladin . He championed agnosticism in opposition to the atheism of Charles Bradlaugh as an open @-@ ended spiritual exploration . In Why I am an Agnostic ( c . 1889 ) he claims that agnosticism is " the very reverse of atheism " .

= = = Robert G. Ingersoll = = =

Robert G. Ingersoll , an Illinois lawyer and politician who evolved into a well @-@ known and sought @-@ after orator in 19th @-@ century America , has been referred to as the " Great Agnostic " .

In an 1896 lecture titled Why I Am An Agnostic , Ingersoll related why he was an agnostic :

Is there a supernatural power ? an arbitrary mind ? an enthroned God ? a supreme will that sways the tides and currents of the world ? to which all causes bow ? I do not deny . I do not know ? but I do not believe . I believe that the natural is supreme ? that from the infinite chain no link can be lost or broken ? that there is no supernatural power that can answer prayer ? no power that worship can persuade or change ? no power that cares for man .

I believe that with infinite arms Nature embraces the all ? that there is no interference ? no chance ? that behind every event are the necessary and countless causes , and that beyond every event will be and must be the necessary and countless effects .

Is there a God ? I do not know . Is man immortal ? I do not know . One thing I do know , and that is

, that neither hope , nor fear , belief , nor denial , can change the fact . It is as it is , and it will be as it must be .

In the conclusion of the speech he simply sums up the agnostic position as :

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 .

= = = Bertrand Russell = = =

Bertrand Russell 's pamphlet , Why I Am Not a Christian , based on a speech delivered in 1927 and later included in a book of the same title , is considered a classic statement of agnosticism . He calls upon his readers to " stand on their own two feet and look fair and square at the world with a fearless attitude and a free intelligence " .

In 1939 , Russell gave a lecture on The existence and nature of God , in which he characterized himself as an atheist . He said :

The existence and nature of God is a subject of which I can discuss only half . If one arrives at a negative conclusion concerning the first part of the question , the second part of the question does not arise ; and my position , as you may have gathered , is a negative one on this matter .

However , later in the same lecture , discussing modern non @-@ anthropomorphic concepts of God , Russell states :

That sort of God is , I think , not one that can actually be disproved , as I think the omnipotent and benevolent creator can .

In Russell 's 1947 pamphlet , Am I An Atheist or an Agnostic ? ( subtitled A Plea For Tolerance in the Face of New Dogmas ) , he ruminates on the problem of what to call himself :

As a philosopher , if I were speaking to a purely philosophic audience I should say that I ought to describe myself as an Agnostic , because I do not think that there is a conclusive argument by which one can prove that there is not a God . On the other hand , if I am to convey the right impression to the ordinary man in the street I think I ought to say that I am an Atheist , because when I say that I cannot prove that there is not a God , I ought to add equally that I cannot prove that there are not the Homeric gods .

In his 1953 essay , What Is An Agnostic ? Russell states :

An agnostic thinks it impossible to know the truth in matters such as God and the future life with which Christianity and other religions are concerned . Or , if not impossible , at least impossible at the present time .

Are Agnostics Atheists ?

No . An atheist , like a Christian , holds that we can know whether or not there is a God . The Christian holds that we can know there is a God ; the atheist , that we can know there is not . The Agnostic suspends judgment , saying that there are not sufficient grounds either for affirmation or for denial .

Later in the essay , Russell adds :

I think that if I heard a voice from the sky predicting all that was going to happen to me during the next twenty @-@ four hours , including events that would have seemed highly improbable , and if all these events then produced to happen , I might perhaps be convinced at least of the existence of some superhuman intelligence .

= = = Leslie Weatherhead = = =

In 1965 Christian theologian Leslie Weatherhead published The Christian Agnostic , in which he argues :

... many professing agnostics are nearer belief in the true God than are many conventional church @-@ goers who believe in a body that does not exist whom they miscall God .

Although radical and unpalatable to conventional theologians , Weatherhead 's agnosticism falls far short of Huxley 's , and short even of weak agnosticism :

Of course , the human soul will always have the power to reject God , for choice is essential to its

nature , but I cannot believe that anyone will finally do this .

= = = Charles Darwin = = =

Raised in a religious environment , Charles Darwin studied to be an Anglican clergyman . While eventually doubting parts of his faith , Darwin continued to help in church affairs , even while avoiding church attendance . Darwin stated that it would be " absurd to doubt that a man might be an ardent theist and an evolutionist " . Although reticent about his religious views , in 1879 he wrote that " I have never been an atheist in the sense of denying the existence of a God . ? I think that generally ... an agnostic would be the most correct description of my state of mind . "

= = Demographics = =

Demographic research services normally do not differentiate between various types of non @-@ religious respondents , so agnostics are often classified in the same category as atheists or other non @-@ religious people .

A 2010 survey published in Encyclopædia Britannica found that the non @-@ religious people or the agnostics made up about 9 @. @ 6 % of the world 's population . A November ? December 2006 poll published in the Financial Times gives rates for the United States and five European countries . The rates of agnosticism in the United States were at 14 % , while the rates of agnosticism in the European countries surveyed were considerably higher : Italy ( 20 % ) , Spain ( 30 % ) , Great Britain ( 35 % ) , Germany ( 25 % ) , and France ( 32 % ) .

A study conducted by the Pew Research Center found that about 16 % of the world 's people , the third largest group after Christianity and Islam , have no religious affiliation . According to a 2012 report by the Pew Research Center , agnostics made up 3 @. @ 3 % of the US adult population . In the U.S. Religious Landscape Survey , conducted by the Pew Research Center , 55 % of agnostic respondents expressed " a belief in God or a universal spirit " , whereas 41 % stated that they thought that they felt a tension " being non @-@ religious in a society where most people are religious " .

According to the 2011 Australian Bureau of Statistics , 22 % of Australians have " no religion " , a category that includes agnostics . Between 64 % and 65 % of Japanese and up to 81 % of Vietnamese are atheists , agnostics , or do not believe in a god . An official European Union survey reported that 3 % of the EU population is unsure about their belief in a god or spirit .

= = Criticism = =

Agnosticism is criticized from a variety of standpoints . Some religious thinkers see agnosticism as limiting the mind 's capacity to know reality to materialism . Some atheists criticize the use of the term agnosticism as functionally indistinguishable from atheism ; this results in frequent criticisms of those who adopt the term as avoiding the atheist label .

= = = Theistic = = =

Theistic critics claim that agnosticism is impossible in practice , since a person can live only either as if God did not exist ( etsi deus non @-@ daretur ) , or as if God did exist ( etsi deus daretur ) .

Religious scholars such as Laurence B. Brown criticize the misuse of the word agnosticism , claiming that it has become one of the most misapplied terms in metaphysics . Brown raises the question , " You claim that nothing can be known with certainty ... how , then , can you be so sure ? "

= = = Christian = = =

According to Pope Benedict XVI , strong agnosticism in particular contradicts itself in affirming the

power of reason to know scientific truth . He blames the exclusion of reasoning from religion and ethics for dangerous pathologies such as crimes against humanity and ecological disasters . " Agnosticism " , said Ratzinger , " is always the fruit of a refusal of that knowledge which is in fact offered to man ... The knowledge of God has always existed " . He asserted that agnosticism is a choice of comfort , pride , dominion , and utility over truth , and is opposed by the following attitudes : the keenest self @-@ criticism , humble listening to the whole of existence , the persistent patience and self @-@ correction of the scientific method , a readiness to be purified by the truth .

The Catholic Church sees merit in examining what it calls " partial agnosticism " , specifically those systems that " do not aim at constructing a complete philosophy of the unknowable , but at excluding special kinds of truth , notably religious , from the domain of knowledge " . However , the Church is historically opposed to a full denial of the capacity of human reason to know God . The Council of the Vatican declares , " God , the beginning and end of all , can , by the natural light of human reason , be known with certainty from the works of creation " .

Blaise Pascal argued that even if there were truly no evidence for God , agnostics should consider what is now known as Pascal 's Wager : the infinite expected value of acknowledging God is always greater than the finite expected value of not acknowledging his existence , and thus it is a safer " bet " to choose God .

Peter Kreeft and Ronald Tacelli cited 20 arguments for God 's existence , asserting that any demand for evidence testable in a laboratory is in effect asking God , the supreme being , to become man 's servant .

= = = Atheistic = = =

According to Richard Dawkins , a distinction between agnosticism and atheism is unwieldy and depends on how close to zero a person is willing to rate the probability of existence for any given god @-@ like entity . About himself , Dawkins continues , " I am agnostic only to the extent that I am agnostic about fairies at the bottom of the garden . " Dawkins also identifies two categories of agnostics ; " Temporary Agnostics in Practice " ( TAPs ) , and " Permanent Agnostics in Principle " ( PAPs ) . Dawkins considers temporary agnosticism an entirely reasonable position , but views permanent agnosticism as " fence @-@ sitting , intellectual cowardice " .

= = Related concepts = =

Ignosticism is the view that a coherent definition of a deity must be put forward before the question of the existence of a deity can be meaningfully discussed . If the chosen definition is not coherent , the ignostic holds the noncognitivist view that the existence of a deity is meaningless or empirically untestable .

A.J. Ayer , Theodore Drange , and other philosophers see both atheism and agnosticism as incompatible with ignosticism on the grounds that atheism and agnosticism accept " a deity exists " as a meaningful proposition that can be argued for or against .