
UNIT 1 PROBLEM OF ATHEISM AND AGNOSTICISM

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1.0 OBJECTIVES

The main objective of this unit is to discuss the problem of atheism and agnosticism, the two philosophical positions that negate the existence of God. After defining and differentiating both these theories, the unit discusses the different forms of atheism and agnosticism. The unit then goes on to elaborate how the proponents of these two positions argue in favour of non-existence of God and of our inability to have certain knowledge about the existence of God. In the next section, we examine critically the positions of both atheists and agnostics by posting arguments against their views – atheism by showing some of its inherent contradictions regarding the non-existence of God and agnosticism by pointing out the inconsistencies in maintaining the inability of the human mind to have certain knowledge. Having examined the inadmissibility of the positions of both atheism and agnosticism, section five arrives at possible ways of affirming the existence of God. The rest of the sections are meant to help the students to understand better the contents of the unit. All in all, the unit enables the student to take a plunge into the problem of the existence of God from a philosophical perspective. Thus by the end of this Unit the student should be able:

- to have a basic understanding of both atheism and agnosticism;
- to know the different types of atheism and agnosticism;
- to understand the positions of both atheists and agnostics regarding the problem of affirming the existence of God;
- to appreciate the pitfalls of these theories; and
- to arrive at a possible affirmation of the existence of God.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Philosophy of Religion is a philosophical thinking or reflection on religion by applying the philosophical method. It speculates about the origin, nature and function of religion. It also takes up the basic problems relating to the existence, nature and attributes of God. The problem of affirming the existence of God is one of most important issues in philosophy. Since time immemorial, traces of disbelief in the existence of the Supreme Being are noticed among philosophers. Every religion believes that the root reason for human dignity lies in human beings' ability to recognize the existence of one Supreme Being and their ability to commune with God. From the very circumstance of his/her origin human being is already invited to converse with God. For human beings would not exist were they not created by God's love and constantly preserved by it; and they cannot live fully according to truth unless human beings freely acknowledges that love and devotes themselves to their Creator. But still, sadly, many of our contemporaries have never recognized this intimate and vital link with God, or have explicitly rejected it. Thus both atheism and agnosticism must be accounted among the most serious problems that arise in Philosophy of Religion and hence, deserves a closer examination.

1.2 DEFINITIONS OF ATHEISM AND AGNOSTICISM

Atheism is that system of thought which is formally opposed to theism. It is the doctrine or belief that there is no God. An atheist is a person who does not believe that deities exist. The term atheism originated from the Greek 'atheos,' meaning 'without gods,' which was derogatorily applied to anyone thought to not believe in the accepted gods, or to believe in false gods, no gods, or doctrines that stood in conflict with established religions. Since its first coming into use, the term atheism has been very vaguely employed, generally as an epithet of accusation against any system that called in question the popular gods of the day. Thus while Socrates was accused of atheism by the civil authorities in Athens and Diagoras called an atheist by Cicero, Democritus and Epicurus were styled in the same sense impious (without respect for the gods) on account of their new atomistic philosophy. In this sense too, the early Christians were known to the Romans as atheists, because they denied their gods; while, from time to time, various religious and philosophical systems have, for similar reasons, been deemed atheistic. However, today the word 'atheism' designates the negation of theism, the denial of the existence of God.

Agnosticism could be seen as an attitude of the mind towards human's knowledge of God; namely, that God is humanly unknowable. The word 'Agnosticism' comes from the Greek word 'Agnostos' which means 'unknowing' or 'a profession of ignorance.' The word was first used by T.H. Huxley in 1869 to designate anyone who denies human being knowledge of immaterial reality, and especially of the existence and nature of God. An agnostic is not an atheist. An atheist denies the existence of God; an agnostic professes ignorance about His existence.

Thinkers who belong to both atheistic and agnostic traditions hold that though we might not be able to prove the existence of God, we might be able to disprove it. Many philosophers hold that the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient and

good God can be empirically refuted by the existence of evil and suffering. Of course, the existence of a creator God would not be so refutable, and both atheism and agnosticism would have to depend on arguments other than that of the mere existence of evil.

1.3 FORMS OF ATHEISM AND AGNOSTICISM

Atheism takes different forms. The most trenchant form which atheism could take would be the positive and dogmatic denial of the existence of any spiritual and extra-mundane First Cause. This is sometimes known as dogmatic or positive theoretic atheism. It may be doubted whether such a system could ever possibly be seriously maintained. Still we can think of some advanced phases of materialistic philosophy which profess to find in matter its own cause and explanation and positively exclude the existence of any spiritual cause. A second form of atheism is based either upon the lack of physical data for theism or upon the limited nature of the intelligence of human being. This second form may be described as a negative theoretic atheism.

A third form is positive moral atheism, in which human actions would neither be right nor wrong, good nor evil, with reference to God. Another form of negative practical or moral atheism maintains that human intelligence is incapable of relating to an extra-mundane, spiritual and personal lawgiver. Still a third form of moral atheism speaks of godlessness in conduct, quite irrespective of any theory of philosophy or morals or of religious faith. All these forms of atheism could be clubbed together under two heads: strong atheism and weak atheism.

Similarly, we can speak of different kinds of agnostics. There are those who deny that reason can know God and make any judgment concerning that existence. Bertrand Russell is an example of this kind of agnosticism. A second group of agnostics deny that reason can prove the existence of God but nonetheless profess a belief in God's existence. Immanuel Kant belongs to this form of agnosticism. There is a third group of agnostics who because of their philosophical commitments deny the possibility of knowing God. Some of these philosophical commitments include nominalism, empiricism, Kantianism, Logical Positivism and Existentialism. These philosophical positions have generated agnosticism of various forms and could be called as nominalists, empiricists, existentialists, etc.

Check Your Progress I
Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer
b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit
1) Define both atheism and agnosticism.
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2)	Briefly discuss the different forms of atheism and agnosticism

**1.4 ARGUMENTS FOR ATHEISM AND
 AGNOSTICISM**

When we discuss atheism, we think of the atheological arguments put forth by various philosophers. These arguments are meant to prove the non-existence of God. The argument from evil (sometimes referred to as ‘the problem of evil’) is by far the most famous of such arguments, but it is by no means the only such argument. Indeed, in the 1990s philosophers developed a flurry of atheological arguments.

There are two types of atheological arguments, namely, logical arguments and evidential arguments. Logical arguments attempt to show that the concept of God is self-contradictory or logically inconsistent with some known facts. These arguments attempt to demonstrate a contradiction in the concept of God. If an argument of this type were successful, it would mean that the existence of God is impossible; there is a 0% probability that God exists. Thus, for example, Dan Barker in 1997 introduced the Freewill Arguments for the Non-existence of God. He argues that two of the traditional divine attributes, namely, divine freedom and divine foreknowledge are incompatible with one another.

Evidential Arguments attempt to show that certain known facts that are consistent with theism nevertheless provide evidence against it. These types of arguments start with a known fact, such as the amount of suffering in the world. The arguments then attempt to show that the fact in question supports the hypothesis of atheism over the hypothesis of theism because we have more reason to expect the fact to obtain on the assumption that God does not exist than on the assumption that God does exist. Accordingly, the fact in question is more probable on the assumption that atheism is true than on the assumption that theism is true, and hence provides some evidence for atheism and against theism. By combining such facts, one can begin to construct a cumulative case for atheism.

With regard to agnosticism, taking recourse to different philosophical positions such as nominalism, empiricism, Kantianism, logical positivism and existentialism, the proponents attempted to uphold their view, namely, we cannot have knowledge about the existence of God. Thus, nominalism erases universality from being and holds it to be mere signification of words. It holds that there is nothing in beings that allows the mind to transcend from them to God. Hence we cannot know God with certainty. William of Ockham is the main proponent of nominalism. Empiricism holds that all knowledge comes through experience, and as such, terms such as ‘contingency’ and ‘necessity’ are impossible. Human mind can never reason with certitude as human experiences are particulars in nature. Hence certain knowledge regarding the existence of God is impossible.

David Hume subscribed to such a view. With regard to Kantianism, Immanuel Kant in his Critique of Pure Reason, while tackling the problems of necessity and universality of human knowledge posed by David Hume, maintains that human knowledge requires both sensibility and understanding. The former is possible in both space and time while the latter requires the twelve categories. Since God cannot be subjected to sensibility as He does not come under the purview of space and time, Kant held that we cannot have any direct natural knowledge about God. However, on moral grounds, Kant postulates a belief in God, but such a belief in God has no cognitive content and does not guarantee His actual existence.

The central principle of Logical Positivists is the principle of verifiability, which states that a proposition is true if its language elements are reducible to or verifiable in terms of some direct or indirect sense experiences. Thus those propositions which belong to empirical sciences are factual and they are verifiable while formal propositions, such as those of logic and mathematics, are true if they are consistent with themselves. However, statements about God are neither factual nor formal. Hence they are not verifiable, neither are they true or false. They are merely meaningless and non-sensical statements.

Finally, existentialism holds that the only essence of a human being is that which he/she freely creates for himself/herself through the decisive realization of his/her human possibilities. Human being in his/her existence is a free tendency. He/she makes himself/herself what he/she is. To say that he/she possesses a stable and determined essence is to rob him/her of his/her freedom and to make his/her being a fixed and formalized unfolding of a pre-determined pattern. As a continual flux of existential tendencies, human being cannot grasp himself/herself through any conceptual knowledge. From these, we can conclude that existentialism is essentially agnostic in nature. It refused human beings any rational or conceptual understanding of God. Even when some awareness of a ground of Being is suggested, one can never identify this ground with God.

1.5 ARGUMENTS AGAINST ATHEISM AND AGNOSTICISM

Philosophers, especially those belonging to the theistic tradition, have proposed a number of arguments to disprove the position taken by the atheists. As stated previously, atheism presupposes the non-existence of any gods. There are many different offshoots of an atheistic worldview although roughly we can speak of strong atheism and weak atheism.

Strong atheism is complete denial of the existence of deity in any form, which involves a contradiction. A strong atheist must deny divinity by attributing human being with divine abilities. Common atheistic observation concludes that human person is a finite being and can only obtain knowledge through personal experience and application but for the theists knowledge can also be received through divine revelation. The strong atheist needs to not only have all the knowledge of every person ever but also all of the knowledge in the universe. It can be concluded that a strong atheistic worldview, no matter how eloquently explained, is impractical and illogical. Clinging to a strong atheistic view requires that one must reject scientific and philosophical evidence currently known and yet to be known.

**Problem of Affirming God's
Existence**

Weak atheism, however, covers a much wider range of atheistic beliefs. Typically, weak atheism is attributed to those with any sort of non-theistic worldviews. It denies the existence of God for various reasons. For some since God cannot be found through the uses of the senses, He does not exist. But we know that the air we breathe, the force of gravity, emotions, values, beliefs and thoughts cannot be seen, heard, tasted, smelled or touched. Yet all these exist. Similarly, God who is a spirit cannot be found by way of our senses. This does not mean that he does not exist. Some atheists who hold materialism argue that matter and space just happen to exist and always have existed. But we know that nothing can come from nothingness. Things cannot exist by chance. For the religious, the universe and everything in it was created by God.

Similarly, one can also refute agnosticism proposed by nominalism, empiricism, Kantianism, logical positivism and existentialism. To reject nominalism, we can say that nominalists failed to recognize that while each being is indivisibly singular, the intellect has the power to consider one aspect of the singular while leaving others out of consideration. Thus intellect can attain universal notions, and subsequently, can have knowledge of God. The empiricists are guilty of one-dimensional interpretation of human experience. To limit experience to what is directly perceptible by the five senses is to eliminate large part of human experience, namely, experiences through intellect. God's existence is inferred intellectually rather than through the senses. Kant erred in saying that perception through human sensibility is an absolute condition for knowing anything. The Logical Positivists by proposing the principle of verifiability limits human knowledge like the empiricists. Finally, the existentialists commit a two-fold error. They fail to recognize that a finite being without an essence is a contradiction. For a finite existence is always the existence of something, and this, from this very beginning. Human being without an intrinsic limit or essence would be an act of infinite existence. Secondly, the existentialists fail to recognize that unless human freedom is grounded in intelligence and dependent upon it, humans cannot know the possibilities among which they can choose. Since essence is a potency that can be realized through existence, these possibilities are really surreptitiously re-introduced essences.

**1.6 TOWARDS AFFIRMING THE EXISTENCE OF
GOD**

Believers in the existence of God automatically turn to scriptures to prove the existence of God. However, unbelievers reject all arguments from scriptures saying that God's self testimony is not creditable for proving the case. They argue that one's statements about oneself may be false. While that's true, self-testimony is still permissible in any court of law provided that other witnesses agree. Non-scriptural arguments are therefore needed. These arguments are discussed briefly here although some of them will be studied in detail in the coming units.

The intuitive argument, first presented by Augustine, is that humankind has a direct intuition of the existence of God. This argument relies on two significant facts. First, all humanity, throughout history and in all cultures, is incurably religious. Second, when people try to comprehend the immensity and grandeur of the universe, they realize some great intelligence and power is surely ordering the affairs of the universe.

The ontological argument, first presented by Anselm, asserts that the perfect being (God) must actually exist because man can conceive of him. Anselm declared that God is that than which nothing greater can be conceived. Since humankind cannot conceive of anything that does not exist, and since humankind can conceive of the idea of God, then God himself must exist.

The moral argument is that within all people, there is an innate capacity to know right from wrong. This capacity to discern right from wrong indicates the existence of a moral governor of the universe, a moral creator whose goodness is absolute. That moral governor is God.

The cosmological argument, credited to Thomas Aquinas, is concerned with the laws of nature. The central idea of this argument is that the existing cosmos is an undeniable evidence of a creator. The natural law that supports this idea is that for every effect there must be an adequate cause. Since nothing can come from nothing and since the cosmos is something, then something or someone must have produced the cosmos. The cosmos is the effect.

1.7 LET US SUM UP

This unit discussed the problem of atheism and agnosticism, the two philosophical positions that negate the existence of God. It defined and differentiated both these theories and pointed out the different forms of atheism and agnosticism. The unit then elaborated how the proponents of these two positions argued in favour of non-existence of God and of our inability to have certain knowledge about the existence of God. We, then, examined critically the positions of both atheists and agnostics and pointed out their inherent contradictions and inconsistencies. Having examined the inadmissibility of the positions of atheism and agnosticism, the unit affirms the existence of God. The unit, thus, enables the student to take a plunge into the problem of the existence of God from a philosophical perspective.

Check Your Progress II

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit

1) Discuss the various arguments in favour of atheism and agnosticism.

2) Can we accept atheism and agnosticism as viable theories when we consider the existence of God?

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1.8 KEY WORDS

Agnosticism	: It is the doctrine that one cannot know the existence of anything beyond the phenomena of experience. It is the belief that there can be no proof either that God exists or that God does not exist.
Atheism	: It is disbelief in or denial of the existence of God or gods.
Empiricism	: It is the view that experience, especially of the senses, is the only source of knowledge.
Existentialism	: A philosophy that emphasizes the uniqueness and isolation of the individual experience in a hostile or indifferent universe, regards human existence as unexplainable, and stresses freedom of choice and responsibility for the consequences of one’s acts.
Kantianism	: It comprises diverse philosophies that share Kant’s concern to explore the nature and limits of human knowledge in the hope of raising philosophy to the level of a science.
Logical positivism	: A philosophy asserting the primacy of observation in assessing the truth of statements of fact and holding that metaphysical and subjective arguments not based on observable data are meaningless.
Materialism	: It is the theory that physical matter is the only reality and that everything, including thought, feeling, mind, and will, can be explained in terms of matter and physical phenomena.
Nominalism	: It is the doctrine holding that abstract concepts, general terms, or universals have no independent existence but exist only as names.
Philosophy of Religion	: It is the branch of philosophy that studies key metaphysical and epistemological concepts, principles, and problems of religion. Topics considered include the existence and nature of God, the possibility of knowledge of God, human freedom, immortality, and the problems of moral and natural evil and suffering

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1.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Answers to Check Your Progress I

- 1) Atheism is that system of thought which is formally opposed to theism. It is the doctrine or belief that there is no God. An atheist is a person who does not believe that deities exist. Agnosticism, on the other hand, could be seen as an attitude of the mind towards human's knowledge of God; namely, that God is humanly unknowable. An agnostic is not an atheist. An atheist denies the existence of God; an agnostic professes ignorance about His existence.
- 2) Atheism takes different forms. The most trenchant form which atheism could take would be the positive and dogmatic denial of the existence of any spiritual and extra-mundane First Cause. This is sometimes known as dogmatic or positive theoretic atheism. A second form of atheism is based either upon the lack of physical data for theism or upon the limited nature of the intelligence of man. This second form may be described as a negative theoretic atheism. A third form is positive moral atheism, in which human actions would neither be right nor wrong, good nor evil, with reference to God.

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Answers to Check Your Progress II

- 1) With regard to atheism, there are two types of atheological arguments, namely, logical arguments and evidential arguments. Logical arguments attempt to show that the concept of God is self-contradictory or logically inconsistent with some known fact. Evidential Arguments attempt to show that certain known facts that are consistent with theism nevertheless provide evidence against it. Such arguments start with a known fact, such as the amount of suffering in the world. The arguments then attempt to show that the fact in question supports the hypothesis of atheism over the hypothesis of theism because we have more reason to expect the fact to obtain on the assumption that God does not exist than on the assumption that God does exist. Accordingly, the fact in question is more probable on the assumption that atheism is true than on the assumption that theism is true, and hence provides some evidence for atheism and against theism. By combining such facts, one can begin to construct a cumulative case for atheism.

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- 2) Strong atheism is complete denial of the existence of deity in any form, which involves a contradiction. A strong atheist must deny divinity by attributing human being with divine abilities. Common atheistic observation concludes that human person is a finite being and can only obtain knowledge through personal experience and application but for the theists knowledge can also be received through divine revelation. The strong atheist needs to not only have all the knowledge of every person ever but also all of the knowledge in the universe. It can be concluded that a strong atheistic worldview, no matter how eloquently explained, is impractical and illogical.

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