

CHAPTER I

Introduction

1.1 Overview

In the popular imagination, an agnostic is someone who holds that the existence of a god is unknown or unknowable.¹ However, unlike the term atheist, with which it is often associated, the term agnostic is routinely used in a non-theological way, as when someone, after being asked for their opinion on whether a certain candidate will win the presidential elections or regarding the truth of string theory, announces that they are agnostic on the matter. This book will be interested in the term in its broad usage, one that includes its application to theological and non-theological subject matter.

The most widely discussed contemporary account of agnosticism is that of Jane Friedman, who conceives of it as a *sui generis* mental attitude – that is, one that cannot be reduced to belief or some other mental attitude. Recently, however, *sui generis* views have come under fire by the likes of Michal Masny (2020) and Thomas Raleigh (2021), who hold that agnosticism may be reduced to a higher-order belief and intention (Masny) or a metacognitive belief (Raleigh). Moreover, Raleigh observes that Friedman’s *sui generis* account is currently ‘the only fleshed out version of the view’.² Consequently, theorists who are attracted to a *sui generis* conception have found themselves short on options. The present monograph aims to fill this lacuna by offering a fully developed alternative version of the *sui generis* view that not only avoids the now widely litigated shortcomings of Friedman’s account, but also exposes and improves upon several weaknesses in the competing views of Masny, Raleigh, and others. The central thesis of this book is that agnosticism is best conceived of as the rationally appropriate attitudinal response to some proposition, **P**, in

¹ See and cf. Huxley (1889). ² Raleigh (2021: 2454).

cases in which one's competently considered evidence is insufficient to establish both the truth and falsity of **P**.

1.2 Chapter Descriptions

The Attitude of Agnosticism will have two major tasks. The first task will be to provide a critical survey of the most influential theoretical approaches to agnosticism within contemporary analytic philosophy – including the accounts of Sean Crawford (2004), Friedman (2013a, 2013b, 2013c, 2017a), Whitney Lilly (2019), Errol Lord (2020; 2021), Michal Masny (2020), Matthew McGrath (2021), Thomas Raleigh (2021), and Verena Wagner (2021) – and highlight their relative strengths and weaknesses. The second task will be to articulate and defend a novel version of the sui generis account of agnosticism, employing the aforementioned accounts of agnosticism as foils for my own.

Here is the plan. In Chapter 2, I vet various criteria for a satisfactory account of agnosticism that have been proposed in the literature. This includes criteria like Friedman's requirement that one only be agnostic about a matter one has considered (which I endorse) and Wagner's requirement that one can be agnostic about a matter only if one is undecided with respect to that matter (which I reject). I also offer a sustained defence of what is arguably the most controversial criterion for a satisfactory account of agnosticism: preserving the possibility of a subject being doxastically inconsistent by believing some proposition, **P**, at some time, *t*, and being agnostic towards **P** at *t*.

In Chapter 3, I apply the criteria vetted in Chapter 2 to the accounts of Russell, Crawford, Masny, Raleigh, Wagner, and Friedman. I demonstrate that each account fails to satisfy one or more of the criteria for a satisfactory descriptive account of agnosticism. This will clear the way for my own proposed view.

In Chapter 4, I advance a non-reductive, proposition-directed, sui generis account of agnosticism called the *questioning-attitude account*. The questioning-attitude account is non-reductive because it denies that agnosticism is reducible to other mental states like belief, desire, or intention. It is a proposition-directed account because it holds that the object of agnosticism is a proposition, as opposed to a question or another mental state. It is a sui generis account because it holds that unlike belief, which involves an affirming stance towards a proposition, or disbelief, which involves a denying stance towards a proposition, agnosticism involves a distinct questioning stance towards a proposition. I conclude by

demonstrating that the questioning-attitude account is able to satisfy the various criteria for a satisfactory account of agnosticism set forth in Chapter 2.

In Chapter 5, I mount a sustained argument against Friedman's claim that one is agnostic about whether **P** if and only if one is in an inquiring state of mind about whether **P**. I reject the claim that an inquiring state of mind entails agnosticism on the grounds that it fails to accommodate cases in which an agent inquires with the aim of ratcheting up an instance of (justified) believing to the status of knowledge or an instance of knowledge to the status of complete certainty. I reject the claim that agnosticism entails being in an inquiring state of mind on the grounds that it fails to accommodate cases in which a subject is agnostic towards **P** but is unmotivated to inquire about whether **P** because they believe or know that the question of whether **P** is unanswerable. I conclude that the *raison d'être* of agnosticism is not to facilitate inquiry or an inquiring state of mind, but rather to constitute a rationally appropriate doxastic response to one's competently considered evidence being insufficient to establish both the truth and falsity of a proposition.

In Chapter 6, I advocate for a *bipartite act-attitude account* of doxastic neutrality, according to which the mental act of withholding judgement stands to the attitude of agnosticism as the mental act of judging stands to the attitude of belief. My proposed account stands in contrast with that of Matthew McGrath, who argues that there are at least three distinct ways of being neutral – namely agnosticism, refraining from judgement, and suspension of judgement. I argue that suspension of judgement, as conceived of by McGrath, is not a distinct way of being neutral. This leaves only the mental act of refraining from judgement (or what I call 'withholding judgement') and the mental state of agnosticism as the two genuine ways of being doxastically neutral.

In Chapter 7, I contend that there is no practical attitude that stands to intending to do **X** and intending not to do **X** as agnosticism towards **P** stands to believing **P** and disbelieving **P**. In short, there is no practical analogue to agnosticism. Call this the *non-existence thesis*. I defend the non-existence thesis against potential objections and highlight some of its implications for the norms governing belief and intention.

In Chapter 8, I defend the thesis that there may be pragmatic reasons to be agnostic. Given that agnosticism is one of the possible outcomes of *doxastic deliberation* – that is, deliberation about whether to believe **P** – it follows that pragmatic considerations may determine the outcome of doxastic deliberation. However, while I hold that pragmatic considerations

may be reasons to refrain from belief, I deny that they may be reasons to believe.

According to *uniqueness theorists*, there is only one rationally permissible doxastic attitude available to an agent given a certain body of evidence. *Permissivists* reject this claim. In Chapter 9, I defend a weak version of permissivism, according to which there are cases in which it is rationally permissible to either believe **P** based on some evidence, *e*, or be agnostic about **P**, given *e*. What makes this version of permissivism more modest than standard formulations of the thesis is that it is not committed to there being cases in which it is rationally permissible to either believe **P** or disbelieve **P** based on *e*. I also defend the thesis that agnosticism is the rationally appropriate response to cases of revealed peer disagreement. Call this thesis the *Agnostic Response*. I respond to Michele Palmira's objection to the Agnostic Response, which alleges that it cannot accommodate cases in which one of the parties to the disagreement is already agnostic. Let us refer to cases of revealed peer disagreement in which one of the parties to the disagreement is agnostic as *agnostic disagreement*. Contra Palmira, I argue that in cases of agnostic disagreement, the agnostic party is rationally justified in retaining her attitude of agnosticism.

Chapter 10, the Conclusion, summarises the central theses defended in my monograph and explains how they fit together to provide us with a more complete picture of the nature and normative significance of agnosticism.

1.3 A Unique Perspective

One of the main selling points of any monograph is the unique perspective of its author. As such, a brief description of the personal significance of agnosticism and of how the attitude has featured in my biography seems fitting. My very first career was that of an evangelical Christian minister and church pastor in the twin-island republic of Trinidad and Tobago. Early in my tenure as a pastor, I began to experience doubts about the existence of God which culminated in the adoption of an agnostic position on the question of God's existence. The public revelation of my agnosticism about God's existence resulted in my losing my ministerial position, my excommunication from the church, my estrangement from many of my friends and family, and my being forced to relocate to the United States to begin a new life. Throughout this ordeal, I wrestled over whether the inconclusiveness of my available evidence with regard to the existence of God was sufficient reason to embrace an agnostic position given the significant personal cost attached to doing so. Was such a life-changing

question to be settled by the state of my evidence alone? Did the practical benefits of remaining within my religious community constitute reasons to continue believing? Did the significant emotional, social, and professional cost of agnosticism constitute a reason not to be agnostic? For me, at the time, these questions were not merely theoretical. They were pressing, urgent, and had literally reshaped the course of my life.

Being forced to wrestle with a question in a high-stakes situation can inspire a certain seriousness and focus that is difficult to replicate if said question is merely one of academic curiosity. Take for example the debate over whether non-evidential considerations may be reasons to transition from an attitude of agnosticism to belief. It would be all too easy to have such a question settled by how neatly a particular answer fits with other aspects of whatever theoretical account one happens to favour. However, in my case, a positive answer to this question would seem to have the implication that the significant personal price I paid in the name of intellectual honesty was a needless, and perhaps altogether misguided, sacrifice. This would make such a view unpalatable in ways it would not be otherwise. Moreover, my awareness of this biographical detail should caution me against being too hasty in dismissing the possibility of pragmatic reasons for belief and/or agnosticism.

The preceding anecdote illustrates one of the many ways in which the specific circumstances that have led to my interest in the topic of agnosticism may have shaped (both wittingly and unwittingly) the account of agnosticism defended in this monograph. While I actively defend the thesis that there may be pragmatic reasons to be agnostic, I am careful to distinguish this from the thesis that there may be pragmatic reasons to move from agnosticism to belief, the latter being a view I reject. Such subtleties may initially seem like mere theoretical fastidiousness. But since holding that there may be pragmatic reasons to be agnostic is consistent with the evaluation that I made the right call in leaving my ministerial past behind while the view that there may be pragmatic reasons to believe potentially is not, the practical import of the distinction between the two views is difficult to overstate. In sum, the perspective reflected in this volume is that of someone who is intimately familiar with the potentially far-reaching implications of our conception of agnosticism and of when the attitude is demanded of us.