

CHAPTER I

*Introduction***I.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

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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

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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.

CHAPTER 2

*Criteria for a Satisfactory Account of Agnosticism***2.1 Introduction**

Epistemologists have long recognised that belief and disbelief do not exhaust the possible commitment-involving mental stances we may take towards a given proposition. A third, neutral, commitment-involving mental stance is also possible. This third neutral mental stance has been variously referred to as *suspension of judgement*, *withholding judgement*, or *agnosticism*.¹ (For the sake of simplicity, I will largely restrict myself to the use of the term ‘agnosticism’ in this book.) Furthermore, there is a great deal of disagreement about how agnosticism is best characterised. In this chapter, I discuss seven criteria for a satisfactory descriptive account of agnosticism. I will begin with an examination of the four criteria derived from the work of Jane Friedman that have contributed to the almost universal rejection of non-attitudinal accounts of agnosticism among analytic philosophers. I then offer a defence of the most controversial Friedman-inspired criterion: namely that a satisfactory descriptive account of agnosticism must preserve the possibility of someone being doxastically inconsistent by simultaneously believing and being agnostic towards the same proposition. This will be important since allowing for the possibility of agnosticism-involving doxastic inconsistency will be one of the most distinctive features of the descriptive account of agnosticism offered in this book. I conclude by considering three additional criteria due to Verena Wagner. The goal of this chapter is to introduce and vet these criteria, which I will be applying to the major competing contemporary accounts of agnosticism in Chapter 3.

¹ An example of an author who employs the terms ‘suspension of judgement’ and ‘agnosticism’ to refer to metaphysically distinct phenomenon is Matthew McGrath (2021). In Section 6.4.1, I make the case for continuing the now standard practice of employing the terms ‘suspension of judgement’ and ‘agnosticism’ interchangeably.

2.2 Non-Belief and Friedman's Criteria

Let us take as our point of departure the conception of agnosticism of Roderick Chisholm (1976) and Bergmann (2005), who hold that being agnostic towards **P** is simply not believing **P** and not believing $\neg\mathbf{P}$. Following Friedman (2013a), let us describe an agent who neither believes nor disbelieves **P** as being in a state of *non-belief* towards **P** and let us call the descriptive account of agnosticism that equates being agnostic with non-belief as *Non-Belief*:

Non-Belief: One is agnostic towards **P** at *t* if and only if one is in a state of non-belief with respect to **P** at *t*.

Non-Belief is an example of a non-attitudinal account of agnosticism. According to non-attitudinal accounts, while both believing and disbelieving involve a mental stance towards a proposition (affirming and denying, respectively), agnosticism is merely the absence of an affirming or denying mental stance towards a proposition.

Friedman has argued (I believe, convincingly) that being in a state of non-belief is neither sufficient nor necessary for agnosticism.²

Against the *sufficiency* claim, Friedman observes that cavemen neither believed nor disbelieved that the Large Hadron Collider would find the Higgs boson. Nevertheless, it is false that they were agnostic about whether the Large Hadron Collider would find the Higgs boson, the question being one they simply never considered. The takeaway from Friedman's example is that one cannot be agnostic towards some proposition (or question) if one has never been in cognitive contact with that proposition (or question). Hence, we arrive at the first criterion that a satisfactory descriptive account of agnosticism must satisfy:

Cognitive Contact Criterion

A descriptive account of agnosticism is satisfactory only if it precludes the possibility of someone being agnostic towards a proposition (or a question) if she has not considered the proposition (or question).

Against the claim that being in a state of non-belief is *necessary* for agnosticism, Friedman observes that it seems possible for someone to be irrational by being agnostic about **P** at some time *t* while also believing **P** at *t*.³ If this is right, then a satisfactory descriptive account of agnosticism should leave

² Recent critics of Non-Belief include: Friedman (2013), Atkins (2017), Rosa (2019), Masny (2020), McGrath (2020), and Raleigh (2021).

³ See and cf. Friedman (2017: 305).

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room for agnosticism-involving doxastic inconsistency. This yields a second potential criterion for a satisfactory descriptive account of agnosticism:

Inconsistency Criterion

A descriptive account of agnosticism is satisfactory only if it preserves the possibility of someone being rationally inconsistent by simultaneously believing and being agnostic towards a proposition (or question).

Many theorists reject the Inconsistency Criterion.⁴ I believe this is a mistake. However, a full-throated defence of this criterion is yet to appear in print. I will attempt to fill this lacuna in the literature in Sections 2.3–2.7, where I offer a sustained defence of the Inconsistency Criterion.

While the Inconsistency Criterion remains controversial, most theorists agree that the Cognitive Contact Criterion is a legitimate requirement for a satisfactory descriptive account of agnosticism. A defender of the non-attitudinal accounts who also wishes to satisfy this criterion may modify Non-Belief so that it includes a consideration-condition. This yields what we may call *Non-Belief + Consideration*:

Non-Belief + Consideration: One is agnostic towards **P** at *t* if and only if one has considered **P** by *t* and is in a state of non-belief with respect to **P** at *t*.⁵

Contra Non-Belief + Consideration, Friedman argues that having considered **P** is neither sufficient nor necessary for being agnostic towards **P**. Against the *sufficiency* claim, we can imagine someone with late-stage Alzheimer's who previously considered **P** but who is no longer cognitively equipped to grasp **P**. Such an agent may be in a position of non-belief with respect to **P** at *t*, and may have also considered **P** by *t*, but is nevertheless not agnostic towards **P** at *t*. The lesson of examples like this, according to Friedman, is having previously performed the cognitive act of considering **P**, where **P** is the object of one's non-belief, does not guarantee that one is agnostic post-consideration. Against the *necessity* claim, we can imagine someone who arrives at agnosticism towards **P** via some non-standard means, like hypnosis. This leads her to conclude that a descriptive account of agnosticism should leave room for agnosticism that is not preceded by considering **P**. The upshot is that the Non-Belief + Consideration should be rejected.

The rejection of the consideration condition entails the rejection of any kind of deliberation condition – to wit, a satisfactory descriptive account of

⁴ These include Wagner (2021).

⁵ This is the sort of picture we get from Hájek (1998) and Wedgwood (2002). See and cf. Zinke (2021: 4).

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agnosticism must leave room for the possibility of agnosticism that is not preceded by deliberation. This is important since, *inter alia*, we want to preserve the intelligibility of the kind of radical scepticism about the past proposed by Russell and Full (1921):

There is no logical impossibility in the hypothesis that the world sprang into being five minutes ago, exactly as it then was, with a population that 'remembered' a wholly unreal past.⁶

Given that it is possible that we all sprang into existence five minutes ago with all of our memories and mental states remaining qualitatively as they are (at least from an introspective point of view), it follows that our having all of our current doxastic attitudes must be consistent with this possibility. Since our current doxastic attitudes include not only believing and disbelieving but also agnosticism, it follows that it should be conceptually possible for us to have the agnostic states we currently enjoy without engaging in prior deliberation. Otherwise, we could refute radical scepticism about the past by merely observing that we have doxastic attitudes. However, it is a sad fact that radical scepticism about the past is not so easily refuted. The preceding observations yield our third Friedman-inspired criterion for a satisfactory descriptive account of agnosticism, which we may call the *Spontaneity Criterion*:

Spontaneity Criterion

A descriptive account of agnosticism is satisfactory only if it preserves the possibility of someone being agnostic towards a proposition (or question) they have not previously considered or deliberated about.

There may initially appear to be some tension between the Cognitive Contact and Spontaneity criteria. After all, does not being in cognitive contact with a proposition involve considering (in some minimal but important sense) that proposition? I believe we may mollify the apparent tension between Cognitive Contact and Spontaneity by disambiguating between two things we may mean when we say that someone has considered whether **P**. We may use the expression 'consider whether **P**' to simply mean that someone has entertained a question in the manner necessary for grasping what is being asked. Call this sense 'weakly considering'. We may also use the expression 'consider whether **P**' to mean that an agent is entertaining a question with the aim or intention of figuring out the answer to it. Call this sense 'strongly considering'.

⁶ Russell and Full (1921: 159–160).

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I believe it is possible to weakly consider some question, **Q**, without strongly considering **Q**. Take for example, the following, question:

(1) Have the Dallas Cowboys won more than four Super Bowls?

Since I have zero interest in American football, I have no desire to find out the answer to (1). Nor do I have the aim or intention to figure out the answer to (1). Hence, while I have entertained (1) in the manner necessary for grasping what is being asked, my lack of desire to know the answer to (1) means that I have not considered (1) with the aim or intention of answering it. In short, while I have weakly considered (1), I have not strongly considered (1). Moreover, weakly considering (1) is not a sufficient condition for deliberating about or inquiring into (1). I have neither inquired into nor deliberated about whether the Dallas Cowboys won more than four Super Bowls. Hence, if we understand the kind of consideration implicated by the Cognitive Contact Criterion as ‘weakly considering’, then the criterion does not require inquiry or deliberation.

While deliberation about whether **P** is not a prerequisite for being agnostic towards **P**, it remains true that deliberation about whether **P** often terminates in being agnostic towards **P**. This point is echoed by Friedman in the following passage:

Suspending judgment then can be thought of as one way of terminating a deliberative process and (other things equal) moving into a more settled state, viz., a state of suspended judgment or agnosticism. Suspending then is (other things equal) a way of (at least temporarily) terminating a deliberative process that is sufficient for getting into a state of agnosticism. Either this way of terminating a deliberative process is a matter of forming or coming to have an attitude towards the proposition under consideration or it is not.⁷

The just-cited passage hints that not every case in which an agent’s deliberation about whether **P** fails to culminate in either believing or disbelieving **P** qualifies as a case of being agnostic about **P**. An agent may stop deliberating about whether **P** prematurely due to disinterest, distraction, or death. Cases in which we stop deliberating about whether **P** prematurely due to disinterest, distraction, or death differ from ones in which our deliberation culminates in agnosticism towards **P**. This observation yields the following Friedman-inspired criterion for a satisfactory account of agnosticism:

⁷ Friedman (2013b: 179).