

Agnosticism or . . . ?

I ADMIT that the title of this pamphlet is illogical. It suggests an alternative where no alternative exists. My excuse for the title is that this and the succeeding pamphlet represent a single essay broken in halves for no other reason than the matter of publication. The purpose of this first half is to prove that a genuine Agnosticism is Atheism masquerading under a lesser socially objectionable name. As presented by the Agnostic himself, no difference between the two terms is discernible. An Atheist is one who does not believe in God. An Agnostic is one who is without belief in God. The difference between not having and being without is too fine for my dull brain.

All important words have a history, and in the present case the history of modern "Agnosticism" throws light on the intention which gave it birth. "Gnostic" is a very old term, and in the early years of Christianity gave considerable trouble to the Church. The Gnostics were those who claimed, by the aid of some "inner light," to know the mysteries of God and the universe. So did the Church, but the gnosis of the Church differed from the gnosis of the Gnostic sects, and when rivals in the mystery business quarrel, the conflict is apt to be very fierce. And it is fiercest of all when neither of the two principals know anything of the matter which divides them. One of the disputants in the quarrel we have in mind has seized hold of this old war-word, Gnostic, with an addition. He does not claim any knowledge (gnosis) of God or gods, he asserts his ignorance, his irremovable ignorance, in the word "A-gnosticism."

He agrees with the Atheist in not having a belief in God, but he disagrees with him as to how that ignorance should be expressed. The Atheist declines to be led astray by the mere change of a word. So, too, would the Christian if Atheism was not there to bear the brunt of his hostility. But the Atheist insists on an identity underlying the verbal difference. The Agnostic accuses the Atheist of "coarseness," of saying more than he ought to say, of being definite where he should be hesitant. To this the Atheist retorts that the Agnostic is thinking "respectably" where he should be helping to rid a perfectly honest and completely applicable word of the ill-odour with which religious bigotry has surrounded it. That is the existing position in a nutshell.

"Agnostic" was brought into vogue by the famous scientist, T. H. Huxley, towards the end of the 'eighties. Examining himself he found that he was without belief in a god. In those days being without belief in a God and spelling it A-T-H-E-I-S-T was a much more serious offence than it is to-day. And it was an offence that was peculiarly English. It was not intellectually wrong, but it was socially undesirable. It was coarse and common; it reeked of quart pots and clay pipes, and had a number of other objectionable connotations with which Christian malignity had surrounded it. So Huxley looked round and found a word that enabled him to spell Atheism in another way. He tacked "a" on to gnosticism, and Agnosticism was born.

In the interests of clarity let us take a number of pertinent definitions from an authoritative modern dictionary, always remembering that dictionaries do not manufacture our vocabulary, they merely record it, and speculate on origins.

Here are the relevant definitions numbered for ease of reference:—

(1) God. Origin unknown. Probably an Aryan word meaning that to which sacrifice is made. One of a class of powerful spirits regarded as controlling a department of nature or of human activity.

(2) Agnostic. One who does not believe in, and who holds that nothing can be known about, God.

(3) Atheist. One who does not believe in the existence of God.

(4) Agnosticism. The negative doctrine held by Agnostics.

(5) Atheism. Disbelief in God.

It will be observed that in the first definition "God" leaves us completely in the air. It has not the slightest significance by itself. It implies nothing. If I define a thing as wood, I can relate it to wood in general, leaving the particularization of the many forms of wood for after consideration. But "God" by itself? We cannot say that "God" by any other name would mean as much, for it has no meaning whatever.

"God," we are told, is probably an Aryan word. But an Aryan language and an Aryan people were both invented about the middle of the last century as a working hypothesis, and are now discarded nearly everywhere—except in Germany.

The rest of the definition does tell us something of importance, but it is of no value whatever to Agnosticism; the definition tells us something concerning gods, but the whole significance of Agnosticism is that it indicates something of which nothing can be known. I disclaim all responsibility for this last seven words, it is the strict Agnostic position. And the information given us in the latter part of the definition is fatal to Agnosticism.

The latter part of the definition, "One of a class of powerful spirits regarded as controlling a department of nature or of human activity," and "that to which sacrifice is made," does tell us something about gods.

It indicates the *known* way in which the gods have come into existence, and it is what people have in mind when they use "God" with honesty and intelligibility. But that information is, again, fatal to Agnosticism.

"The God according to religion," said the late Lord Balfour, is "a God to whom men can pray, who takes sides, who has preferences." In plain words, a magnified man, not a mere unintelligible abstraction. Gods, says the great anthropologist, Westermarck, are made by man, and man "endows them with rights quite after human fashion, and imposes on himself corresponding duties." Sir James Frazer says, "By a God I understand a supernatural being of a spiritual and personal nature, who controls the world or some part of it. . . It has been not unusual to apply the name God to very different conceptions. . . I cannot but regard them as illegitimate extensions of the term, in short, an abuse of language." Professor F. H. Bradley (author of *Appearance and Reality*) is more directly contemptuous in his language. He says, "Most of those who insist on the personality of God are intellectually dishonest. They desire one conclusion, and to reach it they argue for another. . . The deity they want is, of course . . . a person like themselves. . . What is not this is really nothing."

There is no need to multiply quotations to this end. What I am driving at is this. A proposition to be affirmed or denied, or about the truth of which we suspend judgment, must be intelligible. If I am asked whether my neighbour is guilty of burglary, I may reply, Yes, or No, or say that I cannot decide one way or the other. But then I have a clear conception of what I mean in any one of the three cases. But if I am asked whether "sloberkums" "corifies" "ketcherput," I cannot say I am agnostical on the matter, I can reply only that I do not under-

stand what is the reference of the questions. I may look as wise as the most learned fool that ever existed, but my ignorance remains unaffected.

In other words, I am saying that a proposition to be understood must be intelligible, its meaning must be more or less definite. The answer to whether a "Whoozelum" exists is not, "I do not know, I must wait for evidence one way or the other," the answer, the only intelligible answer, is that I do not know what my questioner is talking about.

Has the Agnostic when he says "I neither affirm nor deny the existence of God," anything in mind? Is his declaration of Agnosticism intelligible to himself? Does it really contain anything more than a desire to guard against being identified with that terrible thing "Atheism"? Candidly I can find nothing more than this. Even if we pass the very ambiguous word "spirit," the Agnostic cannot mean that he is in doubt as to whether there is a number of spirits controlling nature and human activities. That would bring him straight back to fetichism.

By some, Agnosticism is described as a case of suspended judgment. Suspended judgment on what? Does the Agnostic suspend judgment as to whether "God" has ever meant anything other than a magnified man? Many modern religionists deny "God" the possession of a physically animal structure. He has not the shape of man. He has neither arms nor legs, he has neither a physical head nor a physical structure such as a man has. But he is still capable of love, anger, wisdom, etc. Yet these are as much animal and human characteristics as arms and legs. Intelligence, love, desire, are as human as red hair and side-whiskers. What is it about which judgment is suspended? It is no use to keep up a steady chatter, "we do not say that God is or God is not," if one has not the least notion of what God is, and would not know him if he were found. Looking for a black

cat in a black passage on a black night is a very stiff proposition, but at least we do know what "cat" and "black" and "passage" stand for. The Agnostic is looking for a "what-you-may-call-it" in a "thingumajig" and a "whatsisname." If he ever found it he would never recognize his discovery.

The Agnostic warmly declares that he knows nothing about God. That is the foundation of his creed. But if that was all he implied, the statement would hardly be worth making. He obviously means more than this. What he says is, "I know nothing about God." What he implies as the justification of his own credo is "Neither does anyone else." And, as we shall see, when he justifies this, he is justifying precisely the position taken up by the avowed Atheist.

Perhaps the most curious attempt to make the Agnostic position intelligible was essayed by the late Sir Leslie Stephen. In his *Agnostic's Apology*, he solemnly informs us that "The Agnostic is one who asserts—what no one denies—that there are limits to human understanding." Of all the apologies that have been put forward this is surely the poorest and the weakest. Where is the necessity to coin a new word to affirm what nobody has ever denied? One might as reasonably establish a society of "nose-ites" and limit the human membership to those who have nasal organs. There might be a certain convenience in adopting a formula that puts one in agreement with everybody, but it is hardly worth while. After all, a definition must define—that is, it must exclude as well as include. And if the meaning of Agnosticism is as given by Sir Leslie Stephen, in what way does it differentiate the Agnostic from the Atheist, or from anyone else? The Agnostic apparently believes nothing that others do not believe, and says nothing that all others do not say.

Let us, as the professional evangelist would say, get back to God. And I begin with something that everyone actually does believe. The world as we know it (which is the only world we can deal with) is made up of *things*, or as some would prefer to put it, of events. But all events, whatever they are like, or wherever they occur, are single in their existence. We have collective terms such as "tree," "man," "bird," and so forth, but there is not a tree separate from particular trees, or "Man" distinct from particular men.

I stress this consideration because a great deal of the confusion connected with "God" is due to its neglect. There are a multitude of gods in the world, as there are a multitude of trees, and in the earlier stages of civilisation gods are contemptibly common. Many of them have passed away, and many new ones have been created; but there is no such conceivable thing as a "God" that is distinct from particular gods. The gods can be collected, tabulated, and their common characteristics noted, just as one can collect different men, brown, red, yellow, white, tabulate them and indicate what features they have.

Abstract words are very often useful instruments of thought. Without them human thought could not get very far. But when we mistake abstractions for concrete existences, confusion is certain to follow.

Now the gods of the world are as well known and as well understood as the trees of the world. And if we were to take all the gods that have ever existed, and add to them the gods that do exist, the Agnostic would not hesitate to dismiss them one after the other as mere figments of the imagination. In the end he would become a decide on the most elaborate and comprehensive scale. More than that, in terms of his Agnosticism, he would deny the existence of any other god that any people could ever conceive or worship. The gods of existing savages, the gods of

the Mohammedan, the Jew, the Christian, would all go. But if all gods, past and present, *and* future, are rejected as having no better existence than the ghost that haunts the old baronial castle, what has he in mind when he says that he does not deny the existence of God. He *is* denying the existence of any conceivable god, and an inconceivable proposition is just nonsense.

Or if, as is said, the Agnostic suspends judgment as to whether " God " exists or not, what " God " is it he has in mind? As I have written elsewhere, if I say that I don't believe in the existence of the only kind of bird, fish, or tree that is known to me, that I believe they are all creatures of the imagination, but add that I will not say that there does not exist anywhere a fish that has not the structure of a fish and does not live in the water, or that I think there may be in existence a bird that is quite unlike a bird in both structure and habits, or that there may exist somewhere a tree without roots, trunk or branches, etc., I shall quite properly be told that if I run across these things they are certainly not fish, bird, or tree. Can anyone think of a thing existing which is quite unlike any other thing of the same name or nature? The man who is looking for a god or a bird that is entirely unlike the bird and the god he knows would not know them for either god or bird if he ran across either or both.

We have not yet reached the end of the confusion and self-contradictions of the Agnostic. The only helpful definition of " God " that we could find was that God began as one of a company of spirits who exercised control over some part of nature. I accept that definition, not because it suits my own position, but because my position has grown out of the anthropological account of the origin of gods. Every god the world has known began existence as a good or evil spirit, and he was dreaded or loved because he

was supposed to be capable of exerting a good or bad influence on human affairs. These are incontrovertible facts. No competent person seriously disputes them. Many of these gods have come down to us as fairies, goblins, etc., and many of them have died away altogether. The Agnostic has not the least hesitation in brushing aside whole galaxies of known or conceivable gods as figments of the imagination. He says they are the outcome of an unenlightened imagination, and I agree with him. By what rule does he dismiss these dethroned gods, and also all that are still ruling over very diminished territories, but still insists that he cannot deny the existence of something he knows not what, and would be in no better state of mind if he met it?

All my life I have been asking Agnostics to give me some justification for their "suspension of judgment." What is there on which we are to suspend! The Agnostic does pass judgment on the spirits he is told about, and in whom other people believe. Is there any better evidence, or any different evidence, for the probable existence of a spirit called God, than there is for another spirit who, instead of being called God, is called Mumbo-Jumbo? There is sincerity of belief with both these gods, and the evidence for the existence of each is of exactly the same character and quality. Why the differentiation? If I may paraphrase a line in Wilde's *Lady Windermere's Fan*, whenever religion is concerned to be intelligible it is found out.

Still further. Less than two centuries ago the belief that men and women might hold intercourse with the devil was very generally held. Witchcraft was then a criminal offence, and many thousands of men, women, and children were tortured and killed for intercourse with devils, in whose existence there is the same religious and Christian warranty as there is for the existence of God. This belief in intercourse

with devils was killed, for intelligent men and women, by the knowledge of the conditions that gave this belief being and authority. Yet one never heard an Agnostic say that he suspended judgment concerning that deposed god, Satan. Quite definitely he says with the Atheist that so soon as the origin and history of the belief in human intercourse with the spirit, Satan (God) was known and understood it was at once definitely rejected. He does not say I am agnostic on the subject of demoniacal possession. He says, I deny that any such being as Satan exists; he owes his existence to the imaginings of the uninstructed mind. The belief is condemned by its history.

And this is exactly what has happened to the gods. They have been found out. I do not mean that they have been found out in the sense in which we find out that someone is bad whom we have considered good, or as a liar one whom we thought truthful. The gods have been found out, as people discovered ghosts and fairies and demons to be mere "figments of the imagination." For the past three hundred years this idea concerning the gods has been gaining ground, and, with and since the publication of the epoch-making *Primitive Culture*, by E. B. Tylor, the gods have been tracked down and their origin exposed with a devastating accuracy. Such primitive peoples as exist have been carefully studied and the process of god-making has been fully exposed. The whole weight of modern scientific theory is thrown upon the side of the conviction that all gods, ancient and modern, savage and civilized, good and bad, have had their origin in the uninstructed mind of man reading his own feelings into nature, personifying them, and then trembling before the creation of his own imagination. There are, of course, divergences of opinion as to the order of the different stages of this development, just as there are differences

of opinion as to the precise nature and order of that organic evolution which traces the development of living matter from the simplest to the highest form. From all sides, from that of the study of culture in general, from the essential nature of such ceremonies as the Christian eating of the god, the incarnate god walking the earth as a man, the general conception of natural happenings as due to supernatural or superhuman beings, the whole of modern religion can be traced.

Now it is possible, although it would be supremely ridiculous at this time of day, for the Agnostic to repudiate the demonstrable findings of the anthropologists. But I have never met an Agnostic who takes up this position. With a lack of logic that runs the Christian Scientist very close for a front place in the race for the absurdity medal, what we find is an acceptance of the scientific account of the origin of the belief in gods, followed by an assertion that one must suspend judgment on the whole question as to whether gods exist. But if one really does accept the account of modern science concerning the *origin* of the belief in God, what is there left on which to express doubt? If all the facts of experience, subjective and objective, upon which primitive humanity built the belief in "spirits" are otherwise explained, the first interpretation is quite plainly ruled out of court. We cannot, at least we ought not, to accept a conclusion that follows from premises that are demonstrably false. If the mental hesitancy and illogicality displayed by the Agnostic in relation to the idea of God was manifested with regard to the ordinary affairs of life, existence would be impossible.

I began this pamphlet with some definitions. I may well end with some more. A correspondent once asked me what reply I would give to a ques-

tioner who at the end of one of my lectures put the following question:—

Do you believe that the universe was created or set going by a personal power?

I replied in substance to this question, which was obviously considered clear and simple, that the question needed clarifying because in any important controversy a question should have a definite meaning. Words should have a reference to something that one understands. Take, for example, the three cardinal terms in this fifteen-word sentence.

Created. In relation to the question this has two meanings. It may carry the theological implication that the world was made out of nothing. That may be set on one side as pure nonsense. It might be recited as an act of faith, but it could not be believed apart from a first-rate miracle. The second meaning of the term might be that indicated when we speak of the creation of a painting, a piece of music, or the design of a building. But this does not lift us out of the realm of human effort, and so cannot have any bearing on the question of Agnosticism. As used, the word is either nonsensical or misleading.

Universe. There is a double sense here, that may very easily mislead. The world, or the universe, whichever term we prefer, does not refer to one thing, but to a vast number of individual things. There is not indicated in the word "world" an existence that is separate from particular things. "World" is a short summing up of the total of individual things. But a whole has never an existence separate from the parts. The world, as I have already said, is a world made up of particulars. They form the material of and for our thinking. But there does not exist these things *plus* another existence, the world. To think otherwise is to get back to the fallacies of the mediæval schoolmen.

Personal Power. Power means, briefly, the ability or capacity to do something, never any more than this, even though it be spelt with a capital P. *Personal* means something pertaining to a person, to a human being, although if anyone chooses to extend it to animals, I should raise no objection. But no "personal power" is known or is conceivable that can absolutely originate power. All that happens in nature is the transformation of "power," or emergence of power following from a rearrangement of existing forces. (There is a suggestion of question-begging here, but it would require a lengthy discussion to put it otherwise, and the reader will, I think, follow my meaning.) If we are to retain a sane meaning to the words we use, the creation of the universe by personal power is simply unthinkable. We are mistaking words for things, which lands us back into the early stages of savage thought.

As to how I would reply to one who put the question given at the end of a lecture I might probably answer as follows:—

"I will put this question into plain English before replying to it. I have been asked whether I believe that every *thing* has been created by some manlike power—this is what I understand by personal power, because if it means that everything has arisen out of preceding conditions, the question has no connection whatever with 'God.' If the first meaning is intended, then I must know *what* it means. Until then I cannot say I do not know, because even to say that one does not know one must know what it is of which he pleads ignorance. If a question is asked in Greek, how can I say whether I agree with it or not unless I have some understanding of Greek? I do not know and cannot conceive any personal power except that manifested by man. So will you please go home, write out the question you have in mind, giving it an intelligible meaning, so making it a topic for

probable fruitful discussion, and I will see what can be done. At present all the good that has been done by your question depends upon whether I have made it plain that philosophy does not consist in posing unanswerable questions clothed in non-understandable language, but in properly framing an enquiry resting on a known basis, and to work from that known basis to further understanding. And in doing this it may help to bear in mind the fact that profound truth is nearly always simple. It is only complicated error that looks intellectually impressive—until it meets with exposure.”

I will conclude with one more attempt to clear up a confusion, and by asking a question. The confusion is a very common one with modern religious apologists, and it appears to have fooled a great many who are not religious. Jumbling together a purely artificial question that belongs to a philosophy that has not yet freed itself from the influence of religious associations, we are told that neither the Atheist nor the Agnostic can solve the problem of the “mystery of the universe.” But the mystery of the universe has nothing whatever to do with the validity of the belief in “God” or gods. It is a heritage from the days when neither science nor philosophy had completely freed itself from theology. Besides, science knows nothing of “mysteries”; it considers only problems. And a problem must be stated in intelligible terms; it must have reference to knowable facts, and we can only think of what is unknown so far as it falls into the framework of the possible knowable. To use a horse-breeding term, “The problem of the universe was born of bad metaphysics out of a weakened theology.” The progeny of that line has been simply awful.

The final question I put to the Agnostic is this:—
The Agnostic says he does not deny the existence of

“ God ” (this does not include the gods of all theologies past and present), but denies that if “ God ” exists, he cannot be like the gods of any of the religions, otherwise he would not call himself an Agnostic. So my question is: “ As ‘ God ’ standing by itself has no reference to anything known, or to anything that is conceivably known, how would the Agnostic recognize God as God if he ever discovered him—or it? In other words, how does anyone recognize something as being what it is, if it is totally unlike anything he has ever seen, or anything he can even think about? ”

By the time the Agnostic has carefully reconsidered his question, I fancy he will have small use for such a word as Agnosticism.

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