Chapter One: The Agnostic Conundrum

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The last English writer who professed to defend Christianity with weapons drawn from wide and genuine philosophical knowledge was Dean Mansel. The whole substance of his argument was simply and solely the assertion of the first principles of Agnosticism.

Leslie Stephen

The Bampton Lectures had bored the English public ever since their institution in 1780 as a forum for the most traditional sort of Christian apologetics. However, in 1858 the lecturer’s eloquence, wit, and brilliant powers of analysis attracted to St. Mary’s the largest congregation since the days of John Henry Newman. The lecturer was Henry Longueville Mansel (1820–1871), a Tory, a High Church Anglican, at that time Reader in Moral and Metaphysical Philosophy at Magdalen College, and his lectures on The Limits of Religious Thought were a sensation. The Times reported that “Sunday after Sunday, during the whole series, in spite of the natural craving for variety, and some almost tropical weather, there flocked to St. Mary’s a large and continually increasing crowd of hearers, to listen to discourses on the Absolute and the Infinite, which they confessedly could not comprehend.”

Although the topic of the lectures was esoteric and philosophically complex, Mansel’s hearers could grasp just enough of his meaning to know that his ingenious arguments were radically new and that they were considered by orthodox Christian leaders to be powerful ammunition for the war on unbelief. Mansel told his audience that the findings of German biblical criticism, French Positivism, and English geological science were unacceptable if they came into conflict with the Holy Scriptures. In defending the doctrine of biblical infallibility he did not differ from his predecessors who had undertaken the Bampton lecture-ship—it was how he argued his position which struck his listeners as novel and exciting. Mansel seemed to defend the most ancient form of
orthodoxy through the use of the most modern weapons drawn from the theologically suspect philosophy of Immanuel Kant. Since man is a finite being with a conditioned consciousness, Mansel argued, his capacity for knowledge has definite limits. Both God and the transcendental world are beyond these limits and thus are unknowable. Therefore, man is in no position to criticize the Bible because it represents a communication from an inscrutable being (God). Only he who is omniscient can presume to evaluate the Scriptures. The infallibility of the Bible in all matters cannot be questioned.

The Old Saw of Agnosticism

In view of Mansel’s unimpeachable Christian piety, it does not seem possible that the English biologist Thomas Henry Huxley (1825–1895), the man who coined the term **agnostic** to describe his own position, would enthusiastically recommend the Bampton Lectures to his friends. Yet Charles Lyell, the famous geologist, relates in a letter of 1859 the following description of Huxley’s rather high opinion of Mansel’s *Limits of Religious Thought*. “A friend of mine, Huxley, who will soon take rank as one of the first naturalists we have ever produced, begged me to read these sermons as first rate, ‘although, regarding the author as a Churchman, you will probably compare him, as I did, to the drunken fellow in Hogarth’s Contested Election, who is sawing through the signpost of the other party’s public-house, forgetting that he is sitting at the outer end of it. But read them as a piece of clear and unanswerable reasoning.’”

The picture referred to by Huxley is part of a series of paintings by William Hogarth (1697–1764) entitled *An Election: Four Pictures*. These four satirical pictures, based on the Oxfordshire election of 1754, symbolized, for Hogarth, England in the dark years from 1755 to 1757, when the folly of politicians had destroyed her military power and moral strength. The second painting, *Canvassing for Votes*, was completed in 1757. Here, in front of a quaint village inn, are smiling politicians asking for and buying votes. However, behind this tranquil scene lurks an image of brutal violence, for in the distance a throng of men are trying to tear down a building, whose owner defends it by firing upon the unruly mob. Hogarth’s concern with the evils of political corruption and the rising power of the mob are clearly reflected in *Canvassing for Votes*. A third theme is also presented therein—the absurdity of factionalism in politics. Above the seething crowd of men in the background, perched precariously atop a signpost, is a figure sawing down the sign of a public house that supports the party he opposes. The man has probably had a bit too much to drink, because he seems to
be unaware that if he succeeds in his task he too will fall. Hogarth is pointing out that a vicious war between political factions is ultimately self-defeating, for cutting down the opponent would destroy the whole political system, including one's own party.

Huxley took a tiny detail from Hogarth's painting in order to articulate his reaction to Mansel's Bampton Lectures. Originally set within a political context by Hogarth, the metaphor of mistakenly causing one's own downfall in sawing through the enemy's signpost is placed by Huxley within a theological context. The parties vying for power were no longer Whigs and Tories, but believers and unbelievers, Christians and scientific naturalists. In Huxley's hands the motley mob in the distance now becomes orthodox Christian theologians led by Mansel, the fellow up on the signpost. Mansel was "drunk," in Huxley's opinion, because, by attempting to cut down unbelievers using a saw fashioned from Kantian metal, Mansel had unwittingly destroyed the foundations of traditional Christian theology.

But Huxley's reaction to the Bampton Lectures indicates that Mansel not only worked against himself by undermining his own posi-
tion but also supplied unbelievers with arguments that enabled them to construct a new form of scepticism, later labeled by Huxley as agnosticism. Mansel's reasoning was so "clear and unanswerable" that it became the essence of the agnostic viewpoint. As strange as it may seem, agnosticism owed a great debt to an eminent High Church Anglican, and Huxley was perversely fond of pointing out the similarity between Mansel's position and his own. In an article of 1895, Huxley remembers that when he came across *The Limits of Religious Thought*, he said to himself, "'Connu!' and the thrill of pleasure with which I discovered that, in the matter of Agnosticism [not yet so christened], I was as orthodox as a dignitary of the Church, who might any day be made a bishop, may be left to the imagination."5

Huxley's use of the metaphor drawn from Hogarth's painting is actually doubly ironic. From Huxley's point of view it is ironic to come across a Christian theologian who, in holding to the notion of the limits of knowledge, is self-destructive and supplies unbelievers with powerful arguments. However, a second irony is concealed in the adoption by Huxley and the agnostics of Mansel's way of conceiving the limits of knowledge. A philosophical justification of the axioms upon which science must be based could not be undertaken by the agnostics if they restricted knowledge to the same degree as did Mansel. Andrew S. Pringle-Pattison (1856–1931), a Scottish philosopher, once compared the argument of Mansel's Bampton Lectures to "edged tools," saying that their inventor might escape evil but that "the next to handle them will surely cut their fingers."6 Scepticism in general has been found to be a dangerous weapon, for it can often be two-edged. The variety of scepticism embraced by Mansel and Huxley was particularly potent, and they both "cut their fingers" on the blade of the saw they used to bring down their enemies. In the spirit of Hogarth's satiric art, we can visualize a drunken Huxley sitting right in front of an equally inebriated Mansel on that signpost, watching Mansel fall and then sawing off his own section of wood. For whereas Huxley was correct in saying that Mansel undermined orthodox Christianity, it is equally evident that Huxley undercut the certainty of science.

The double irony arising from Huxley's use of Hogarth's painting and the implications of that irony for Victorian unbelief will be the main theme to be explored in this study of the origins of agnosticism. The importance of Huxley's reaction to *The Limits of Religious Thought* is too often overlooked and has not received full treatment in studies of agnostic thought. A good reason for this lack of attention to the connection between Mansel and Huxley is that a rather loose definition of agnosticism obscures the true origins of this unique form of scepticism.
Huxley the Neologist

In 1882 a letter appeared in *Notes and Queries* asking for the date of the earliest use of the word *agnosticism*. Use of the term had become common and widespread enough by the early 1880s that people were becoming interested in its origin. After several correspondents pointed to publications in which the word appeared in 1876 and 1874, James A. H. Murray, the noted philologist, credited Huxley with coining the term in 1869. When the *Oxford English Dictionary*, edited by Murray, was first published in 1884, invention of the word was again attributed to Huxley.

Thomas Henry Huxley was born into an impoverished, lower-middle-class family. He studied medicine and then entered the Royal Navy medical service in 1846. Just as Darwin had received important scientific training through his experiences on a long sea voyage aboard the *Beagle*, Huxley’s career gathered momentum between 1846 and 1850, while he was doing research as assistant surgeon and naturalist aboard the HMS *Rattlesnake*. Moving into the realm of biological and zoological research, Huxley was appointed lecturer at the Royal School of Mines in 1854, and then later he moved up to professor. Huxley subsequently held professorships at the Royal Institution and the Royal College of Surgeons in addition to the deanship of the Normal School of Science at South Kensington (now known as the Imperial College of Science and Technology). He enjoyed a long and distinguished career as one of Victorian England’s greatest scientists and popularizers of science due to his unwearying efforts in public lecture halls, in the pages of fashionable periodicals, and in important government committees. Huxley was also notorious for his vigorous defense of evolutionary theory, which won him the title “Darwin’s bulldog.”

It was due to the respect accorded Huxley as one of the foremost scientists of the age that he was asked to join the Metaphysical Society, and it is significant that Huxley coined the term *agnosticism* in response to issues raised by the early meetings of this remarkable club. During its existence from 1869 to 1880, the members of the Metaphysical Society met nine times a year in London to hear prepared papers and discuss ultimate philosophical and religious questions. Among the membership were many of the major English thinkers of the time. Orthodox Christians such as Archbishop Manning, R. W. Church, W. E. Gladstone, and Connop Thirlwall were part of the society, as were the liberal-minded A. P. Stanley and F. D. Maurice. Men more left of center, but still within the pale of Christianity, such as W. R. Greg, R. H. Hutton, and James Martineau, were not averse to joining. Besides Huxley, other unbelievers, including J. A. Froude, Frederic Harrison,
and John Morley, found a place within the society. They were joined by W. K. Clifford in 1874 and Leslie Stephen in 1878. As Huxley once remarked, “Every variety of philosophical and theological opinion was represented there, and expressed itself with entire openness” (SCT, 239).

In the company of his illustrious Metaphysical Society colleagues, Huxley began to feel somewhat embarrassed that he had no definite term to describe his philosophical position other than the rather vague freethinker. He rejected atheist, theist, pantheist, materialist, idealist, and Christian because those who were known by these appellations “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." Challenged and attacked by the best minds in Victorian England, most of whom were "-ists of one sort or another," Huxley was forced to invent what he "conceived to be the appropriate title of 'agnostic,'" and, as he wrote, "I took the earliest opportunity of parading it at our Society" (SCT, 238–39).

Scholars have accepted without question Huxley's assertion in this section of his famous essay "Agnosticism" (1889, in SCT) that he coined the term in reaction to the Metaphysical Society meetings. However, there has been some confusion as to the source from which Huxley derived the word. The confusion began when Murray accepted Hutton's account in a letter dated 13 March 1881. Theologian, journalist, and man of letters, Richard Holt Hutton (1826–1897) was editor of the Spectator and a member of the Metaphysical Society. As the self-appointed chronicler of the agnostic movement, Hutton supplied the readers of the Spectator with a steady stream of articles on Huxley, and he is even credited with being the first to publish Huxley's coinages agnostic and agnosticism. Huxley recalled that when he showed off his new label at the Metaphysical Society "the term took; and when the Spectator had stood godfather to it, any suspicion in the minds of respectable people, that a knowledge of its parentage might have awakened was, of course, completely lulled" (SCT, 239). Even Huxley admitted Hutton's key role in popularizing the term, and if not for Hutton, agnosticism might have remained part of the private language of a small circle of Victorian intellectuals. According to Hutton, Huxley had suggested agnostic at a party held at Knowles's home in 1869, before the formation of the Metaphysical Society, and had taken it from St. Paul's mention of the altar to the "Unknown God" in Acts 17:23. Most scholars since then have trusted Murray's confidence in Hutton's letter.

However, in the same section of "Agnosticism" which we have been examining, Huxley presents a very different explanation of the etymological source of the term he coined. Huxley asserts that agnostic "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" (SCT, 239). In an unpublished letter of 10 December 1889, which has not previously been cited by scholars in discussions of this issue, Huxley explicitly denied that agnostic was derived from Acts:

The term "agnostic" was not suggested by the paragraph in the Acts of the Apostles in which Paul speaks of an inscription to the unknown God (agnosto theo). It is obvious that the author of this inscription was a theist—I may say an anxious theist—who desired not to offend any God not known to him by ignoring the existence of such a deity.
The person who erected the altar was therefore in the same position as those philosophers who in modern times have brought about the apotheosis of ignorance under the name of the "Absolute" or its equivalent. "Agnostic" came into my mind as a fit antithesis to gnostic—the gnostics being those ancient heretics who professed to know most about those very things of which I am quite sure I know nothing—Agnostic therefore in the sense of a philosophical system is senseless: its import lies in being a confession of ignorance—a warning set up against philosophical and theological phantasms which was never more needed than at the present time when the ghost of the "Absolute" slain by my masters Hume and Hamilton is making its appearance in broad daylight. [ICST-HP 30:152-53]

Determining whence Huxley derived agnostic is not simply a matter that should concern etymologists, because, as the above quote indicates, we can determine the general thrust of the term from its linguistic origin. First, Huxley clearly tied an epistemological element to agnosticism and intended it to denote a profession of ignorance. Second, he saw agnosticism as the opposite of gnosticism. The Gnostics were a sect existing both within and without Christianity and Judaism in the first three centuries A.D. Claiming to possess superior knowledge derived from secret revelations, the Gnostics were eventually driven out of the Christian Church. In calling himself an a-gnostic Huxley was underlining the orthodox quality of his position. The early Church was a-gnostic in proclaiming gnosticism heretical, and Huxley was siding with the early Christian leaders. If Victorian Christians were unwilling to accept the validity of Huxley's agnosticism, then, Huxley was cleverly implying, perhaps nineteenth-century Christianity was a new gnostic sect dogmatically claiming possession of higher knowledge. Some Christian thinkers admitted that agnosticism was a somewhat justifiable response to the wild extravagances of theology. "For much of the Agnosticism of the age," James Martineau declared, "the Gnosticism of theologians is undeniably responsible." It is only upon perceiving that Hutton's account of the linguistic origin of agnosticism is incorrect that the "orthodox" meaning behind Huxley's new word can be appreciated. However, for a more specific definition of agnosticism we must examine sections in Huxley's work that deal with the essence of the agnostic position.

Defining the Term Agnosticism

If we turn to scholarly literature on religious thought it is not entirely clear what criteria we should use to decide who is, and who is not, an agnostic. An astonishing number of thinkers besides Huxley have been
referred to explicitly as agnostics or as espousers of agnosticism by theologians, historians, and philosophers. The list includes Heraclitus, Protagoras, Gorgias, Socrates, Carneades, Sextus Empiricus, Maimonides, Occam, Peter D’Ailly, Luther, Henry Cornelius Agrippa of Nettesheim, Faustus Socinus, Montaigne, Peter Charron, Pascal, Daniel Peter Huet, Pierre Bayle, Archbishop William King, Bishop Peter Browne, John Hutchinson, Hume, Kant, Goethe, Schleiermacher, James Mill, Lamennais, Sir William Hamilton, Carlyle, Comte, J. S. Mill, George Jacob Holyoake, Arthur Hugh Clough, George Eliot, Henry Longueville Mansel, John Tyndall, Herbert Spencer, Matthew Arnold, Albrecht Ritschl, George Meredith, Leslie Stephen, Samuel Butler, Algernon Charles Swinburne, Henry Sidgwick, Auguste Saba-tier, William James, William Kingdon Clifford, Francis Herbert Bradley, Mrs. Humphry Ward, Alfred North Whitehead, Bertrand Russell, Martin Buber, Karl Jaspers, and Gabriel Marcel. If thinkers as disparate as Socrates, Luther, Goethe, and Russell can be labeled agnostics, then it can fairly be asked if the term agnostic might not stand in need of radical redefinition.

Huxley’s definition of the term he coined can help us begin to trim down this grossly inflated catalogue of names. Although there were times when Huxley himself, carried away by the heat of controversy and his own polemical skill, used the word agnosticism rather loosely, it is fairly clear what he intended. In those key sections of Huxley’s work where he deals with his conception of agnosticism, two elements will always be found: a discussion of Kant or a thinker profoundly influenced by Kant, and an elaboration of Kant’s notion of the limits of knowledge. For example, in Hume (1878) Huxley presented one of his earliest uses of the term agnosticism in print within the context of a discussion of Hume and Kant. “If, in thus conceiving the object and the limitations of philosophy,” Huxley wrote, “Hume shows himself the spiritual child and continuator of the work of Locke, he appears no less plainly as the parent of Kant and as the protagonist of that more modern way of thinking, which has been called ‘agnosticism,’ from its profession of an incapacity to discover the indispensable conditions of either positive or negative knowledge.” Although the details of Kant’s critical philosophy differ from those of Hume, “they coincide with them in their main result, which is the limitation of all knowledge of reality to the world of phenomena revealed to us by experience.” In the essay “Agnosticism” Huxley recalled how he steadily gravitated toward the conclusions of Hume and Kant, as they were summarized in a quotation from The Critique of Pure Reason which presented reason as an organ whose proper use is to limit knowledge. This section is strategi-
cally placed just prior to Huxley's story of how he coined the term when confronted by his Metaphysical Society colleagues.\textsuperscript{18}

Huxley therefore conceived of agnosticism as a theory that restricted knowledge to the phenomenal realm and that was based on Kant's notion that the human mind is subject to inherent limitations. The essence of the agnostic argument was epistemological.\textsuperscript{19} Although often directed at claims to certain knowledge of God, agnosticism could as easily say that claims to knowledge of self or an external world composed of matter are baseless. Any object that could be termed part of the transcendental or noumenal world was considered to be beyond the limits of human knowledge.

On the basis of defining agnosticism as a species of scepticism built upon Kantian principles, Huxley, Spencer, Tyndall, Stephen, and Clifford are bona fide agnostics. Herbert Spencer (1820-1903), the great "synthetic philosopher," put forward a full-blown program of agnosticism in 1860 and later accepted the term coined by Huxley as an accurate designation for his religious position. Leslie Stephen (1832-1904), known for his work as a philosopher, critic, and biographer (he edited the \textit{Dictionary of National Biography}), was a self-professed agnostic. John Tyndall (1820-1893), professor of natural philosophy at the Royal Institution, and William Kingdon Clifford (1845-1879), professor in applied mathematics at University College, London, did not refer to themselves as agnostics in their published works. But both Tyndall and Clifford, along with Spencer, Stephen, and Huxley, presented the Victorian public with controversial essays and books articulating the agnostic position. They will therefore be the main focus of this study of agnosticism.\textsuperscript{20}

From time to time I will examine the ideas and works of Victorian agnostics who played a less influential role in constructing the agnostic viewpoint. This list includes men such as Charles Darwin, whose spiritual odyssey from orthodox Christianity to agnosticism seems of immense significance in light of his discovery of the theory of natural selection. However, Darwin never published anything of substance on his agnosticism, just bits and pieces concerning his religious thought scattered throughout his writings and a brief section in his bowdlerized \textit{Autobiography}, which appeared in 1887, too late to be considered decisive for the development of Victorian agnosticism. John Morley (1838-1923), editor of the \textit{Fortnightly Review} from 1867 to 1882 before he went on to focus his energies on politics as a devoted Liberal, is another example of one who wrote little on his agnosticism for his contemporaries. Other agnostics who were hostile toward established Christianity in England in their publications, but who played a minor role in the
formulation of agnostic theory, were Francis Galton (1822–1911), founder of eugenics, and Edward Clodd (1840–1930), banker, author, and Huxley’s biographer. I will also discuss the work of lesser-known agnostics, such as Samuel Laing, Frederick James Gould, and Richard Bithell.

Atheism, Agnosticism, Theism

There are three more thinkers who deserve to be classed as authentic agnostics if we adhere to the definition that has been presented. Kant, Hamilton, and Mansel all would qualify. This follows from a definition of agnosticism which stresses its epistemological nature rather than its apparent antireligious bias. What is essential about agnosticism, and what Kant, Hamilton, and Mansel all share with Huxley, Tyndall, Clifford, Stephen, and Spencer, is the belief that there are inherent and constitutive limits of human cognition. In addition, they all would agree that we are ignorant of God’s true nature since he is a transcendent entity and therefore outside the limits of human knowledge.

If we include Kant, Hamilton, and Mansel as agnostics, then we are confronted with the possibility of a species of agnosticism which is Christian, theistic, and religious, a thought that jars the modern sensibility. We are usually accustomed to conceiving of agnosticism as, to move from the particular to the general, hostile toward Christianity, atheistical, and certainly irreligious. Yet even some of the self-professed agnostics do not fit into these categories of unbelief.

Writing just after the turn of the century, Benn observed that agnosticism excluded “Christian belief.” Yet it is not at all certain that the theological doctrines attacked by the Victorian agnostics—for example, the dogma of biblical infallibility, the notion of heaven and hell, and the belief in miracles—are necessary to the existence of Christianity. They may have been seen as essential by the Christians of Huxley’s era, but Christianity has been transformed many times throughout history, and tenets considered as orthodox during one period have been jettisoned in other times. Far more common is the stronger charge that agnosticism is really atheistic, which implies that agnosticism is also anti-Christian. Henry Wace, later Dean of Canterbury, sounded a theme in “On Agnosticism” (1888) which was repeated by Huxley’s contemporaries and later by twentieth-century thinkers. Wace charged that the adoption of the term agnostic was only “an attempt to shift the issue,” “a mere evasion,” for the agnostic’s “real name is an older one—he is an Infidel, that is to say, an unbeliever.”

Victorian orthodoxy has received support for its claim that agnosticism was used as a disguise for a genuine atheism from an unexpected
source—two important Marxists, Engels and Lenin. In his introduction (1892) to *Socialism Utopian and Scientific*, Engels referred to agnosticism as "'shamefaced' materialism," linking materialism with a denial of the existence of a supreme being. Lenin later reiterated this point in *Materialism and Empirio-criticism* (1908). Huxley's "agnosticism serves as a fig-leaf for materialism," Lenin joked, while simultaneously lampooning the Englishman's prudish distaste for materialism as something to be embarrassed about, like one's genitals. The Marxists, who saw in the agnostics inconsistent atheists, attacked Huxley and his ilk for not going far enough, while the Victorian Christians rejected the agnostics for going too far from an acceptable orthodox position.

Despite the claims of unsympathetic contemporaries, the agnostics did not always hold to an atheistic position inimical to Christian theism. Tyndall maintained publicly in 1870, in "Scientific Use of the Imagination," that evolutionists "have as little fellowship with the atheist who says there is no God, as with the theist who professes to know the mind of God" (*PS* 2:134). After delivering his "Belfast Address," Tyndall had great difficulty disabusing his critics of the notion that he was an atheist. In an unpublished letter of 7 September 1874, he wrote: "The people that raise this uncandid outcry are not worthy of contradiction. They would roast me, but the time of roasting is happily gone by. You are correct in saying that *I am not an Atheist*. Though I am far from accepting their crude notions of the Power that rules the Universe." Huxley and Stephen also repeatedly denied the accusation of atheism. As agnostics, they believed that humans were incapable of gaining certain knowledge of God, but they agreed that from this epistemological position it followed that positive denial of God's existence was out of the question.

Many who do agree that there is a genuine difference between atheists and agnostics tend to set up a schema that places agnosticism midway between atheism and theism. The agnostic is one who rejects theism but is not quite an atheist, or one who suspends judgment concerning the existence of God. Similarly, agnosticism is portrayed as a neutral position. Besides excluding all theists such as Spencer and Tyndall from consideration as agnostics, this definition tends to be so hazy that it becomes the justification for including almost all doubters, many of whom do not adhere to the typical agnostic theory of knowledge.

But by far the most misguided approach to agnosticism is one that perceives it to be antireligious, for this undoubtedly implies that agnosticism is atheistic and anti-Christian. Preaching to his fellow Christians in 1884, the latitudinarian Reverend A. W. Momerie, Professor of
Logic and Metaphysics at King's College, London, declared that if agnosticism "be true, faith is a mistake; prayer is a mockery; to hope for immortality is as unreasonable as to hope for wings. Nothing worth calling a religion . . . can ever be founded upon an agnostic basis." However, Hutton shrewdly tagged the agnostics "the adorers of Inscrutability," and pointed out that they provided themselves with "an equivalent for religion."

A Sceptical Look at the Sceptical Tradition and Flint's Agnosticism

Just as agnosticism is often confused with atheism, it has also been conflated with other forms of unbelief, whether they be modern empiricism, materialism, positivism, or the development of pre-nineteenth-century scepticism. To Robert Flint (1838-1910) the two words sceptic and agnostic were "about as nearly synonymous as any two words can be expected to be which refer to any comprehensive or complex phenomenon" and hence he concluded that "'sceptic' and 'scepticism', employed in their universally recognized and only philosophical signification would have served Professor Huxley just as well." Flint's Agnosticism, published in 1908 but delivered as a set of lectures during the late eighties, is one of the best major studies of agnosticism to come out of the Victorian period. At first, Flint tended to his flock as minister of the East Church, Aberdeen (1859-1862), and of Kilconquhan, Fife (1862-1864). But in 1864 he was elected to the chair of moral philosophy at St. Andrews University, and in 1876 he moved to the divinity chair of Edinburgh University. Flint was a liberal Christian who believed that Christianity derived its main strength from the ability of human beings to perceive the workings of God in history and in their own lives. It was this type of "religious knowledge" that Flint looked to as a counteracting force to agnosticism not only in his own day but in ages past as well.

Flint's Agnosticism is undeservedly neglected these days, because it is a thoughtful and perceptive book. His familiarity with nineteenth-century German and French thought, as well as his command of the whole tradition of scepticism in European thought, is impressive, and he is especially attentive to the epistemological dimension of agnosticism. However, Flint's desire to defend the Christian perspective is apparent in his whole approach to the history of agnosticism.

Flint divides the history of agnosticism into three periods, the Oriental, the Classical, and the Modern. Since he identifies agnosticism with scepticism, he is able to find proto-Huxleyites among Oriental thinkers, Greek sceptics, and Medieval nominalists. But al-
though Flint discusses how these pre-nineteenth-century sceptics doubted the human ability to obtain certain knowledge in a variety of areas, he fails to demonstrate that, like the genuine agnostics, their delineation of the limits of knowledge was based on their investigation of the inherent structure of the mind. Flint admits that the first period of agnosticism, the Oriental, was "only of a rudimentary character," presenting us with "approximations to agnosticism, not with distinct forms of it" [79]. The question of the limits of human knowledge, Flint concedes, was not specially discussed or distinctly raised. Even the first phase of modern agnosticism, from the beginning of the sixteenth century up to Hume, Flint sees as being "considerably different from the agnosticism of Hume and Kant, and of our contemporaries." Characterized by "imperfect development," since it "did not rest on any searching or comprehensive criticism of the powers of the human intellect," sixteenth- and seventeenth-century European scepticism was "mainly the expression of an exaggerated depreciation of knowledge or of a despair of acquiring knowledge" [100]. At the beginning of the book Flint defined agnosticism as "the theory of the nature and limits of human intelligence which questions either the certainty of all knowledge and the veracity of every mental power, or the certainty of some particular kind of knowledge and the veracity of some particular mental power or powers" on the grounds "that the human mind is inherently and constitutionally incapable of knowing" [21]. Therefore his attempt to include all sceptics prior to Kant as agnostics is inconsistent with his own definition.

Flint's tendency to overemphasize the line of continuity from pre-nineteenth-century scepticism to agnosticism is also questionable if we turn to a brief comparison of the different varieties of unbelief in European thought. Originating in ancient Greek thought, scepticism as a philosophical view was developed by the Academic sceptics into the position that no knowledge is possible and, even further, by the Pyrrhonian sceptics, who claimed that the Academics went too far in even making this statement. The Pyrrhonians believed that a suspension of judgment on all matters concerning knowledge was the only reasonable attitude.34

Both sceptical positions sunk into obscurity after the Hellenic age, until the Pyrrhonian view was revived in the sixteenth century due to the discovery of hitherto neglected manuscripts of Sextus Empiricus's writings. Popkin has shown that the intellectual crisis engendered by the Reformation led to the application of Pyrrhonian arguments to the problems of the day by sixteenth- and seventeenth-century thinkers. If we contrast Pyrrhonism to agnosticism we find that the arguments of the Greek sceptics are far more extreme and that they purposely under-
mine natural science, an aim the agnostics obviously repudiate. The agnostics were doubtful only about certain areas of knowledge, those that had to do with that transcendental realm beyond the limits of knowledge. What differentiates the agnostics from the sceptics dealt with by Popkin in The History of Scepticism is that they draw their arguments from Kant, not Pyrrho.

Among his menagerie of agnostics Flint included Bayle and Hume, allowing them to speak for the Enlightenment sceptics. Flint, then, believed that a genuine agnosticism existed in the eighteenth century and that Huxley and his agnostic colleagues were successors to the Enlightenment philosophers. To be sure, the agnostics looked upon a number of eighteenth-century philosophers as kindred souls, and they published essays and books devoted to rehabilitating their fallen reputations. Huxley's Hume (1878), Stephen's History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century (1876), and Morley's studies of Burke, Voltaire, Rousseau, Diderot, and other Enlightenment figures were aimed at combating the feelings of horror that English intellectuals since the time of the Romantics had experienced when they looked back on the eighteenth century and its climax in 1789. The agnostics saw in the writings of the philosophes a number of themes to be applauded—the refusal to look back to the ancients, a rejection of the Middle Ages as a time of superstition and oppression, and the attempt to create educational schemes that instill tolerance in individuals in order to work toward a “heavenly city” that would have no prejudice, ignorance, or unjust government. Similar as well is the animosity toward the Christianity of the day, the repudiation of revealed religion, the rabid anticlericalism, and the call for a purified Church. Perhaps more striking for our purposes is the parallel between the essentially religious foundations of Enlightenment thought and the significant Christian element in agnosticism. Although tending to reduce religion to ethics and emotion, both forms of unbelief attempted to update religion by presenting a new faith that took into account the vast changes experienced by Europeans.

But there were important differences between the philosophes and their spiritual brothers of the nineteenth century. The philosophes were aristocrats who never talked about atheism in front of the servants, whereas the agnostics were more democratic in their belief that it was their duty (and to their advantage politically) to be outspoken in their public attack on the Christianity of the day. In terms of the actual content of its unbelief, the Enlightenment was far more negative and destructive, and hence less effective, than the agnosticism of the following century. Huxley remarked that his agnosticism differed from “its predecessor in the eighteenth century, in that it builds up, as well
as pulls down." Voltaire's "scoffing doubt" was to be avoided as an evil in the same class as Christian bigotry. The fatal weakness of Enlightenment intellectuals, according to Huxley, was their a priori philosophizing, which was unable to provide a "permanent resting-place for the spirit of scientific inquiry" (SCT, 18). Men such as Voltaire were not truly scientific in their overemphasis on natural religion. The God "proved" by Newtonian science and observed by all thinking men unaided by revelation was merely a rational construction of the intellect and not an empirically verified fact. Huxley and the agnostics were more aware of the limits of reason and, unlike the philosophers, used epistemological arguments to attack the traditional Christian notion of God directly. Whereas eighteenth-century belief was based on a sensationalist theory of knowledge, the agnostics benefited from Kant's more subtle approach to epistemology through the structure of the mind. Even Hume, the Enlightenment thinker most often referred to as an agnostic, did not share the distinctive Kantian feature of agnostic thought. And it was this more sophisticated epistemology, along with other advantages derived from the distinctiveness of nineteenth-century unbelief, that made the agnostic attack on traditional religion far more devastating than the Enlightenment attempt to écrase l'infâme.

The tendency of Flint, writing from a Christian background, to assimilate agnosticism to scepticism is partly a result of his inability to see in agnosticism anything but irreligiousness. Wace's view, that all agnosticism is atheism, is echoed in the philosophical realm by Flint's position that all agnosticism equals scepticism. There is also an advantage to viewing agnosticism as identical to previous forms of scepticism, and Flint was not slow to utilize it. It was possible for him to critique modern agnosticism by attacking ancient scepticism. It was no doubt comforting to Flint and his readers that he could claim that Victorian agnosticism was nothing new and that Christian theologians had overcome this challenge to the faith before.

However, agnosticism was a unique phenomenon of unbelief that was more potent than any previous form of scepticism. This was true not only in terms of numbers of people who were profoundly affected but also from the viewpoint of its level of philosophical sophistication. The widespread popularity of agnostic ideas is tied up with a recognition that the development of agnosticism is grounded in the historical circumstances that molded the Victorian ethos. The superior cogency of agnostic arguments points to the tremendous raw energy the agnostics gained by tapping into Kant's powerful approach to epistemology in *The Critique of Pure Reason*. Although Flint believed that "the agnosticism of the present day flows directly from Hume and Kant" and
that recent agnosticism owed to Kant "the larger part of what has given it plausibility and attractiveness, . . . very much of all that constitutes the superiority of recent agnosticism over earlier agnosticism," he denied that agnosticism should be conceived solely as being of modern growth. Likewise, he rejected the view that Kant was a revolutionary thinker who presented a radically new element in the development of scepticism (55-57, 117, 189).

In fact, Flint was highly critical of Kant, as well as others like Hamilton and Mansel, who adopted the agnostic position in order to defend a religious position. Flint was quite perceptive in recognizing that Mansel's brand of agnosticism destroys the philosophical justification for science while Huxley's scientific agnosticism is fatal to orthodox religion. Yet he saw no possibility of either a self-consistent agnosticism or an agnosticism that does not bear the seeds of its own destruction. A partial or modified agnosticism (i.e., one claiming to restrict its doubts to one type of knowledge) must, according to Flint, carry with it a demand to be put into its completed form, absolute or total agnosticism. For in destroying the credit of one department of knowledge the partial agnostic must hold, in order to be consistent, that the same argument is valid against all other departments of knowledge (193). To Flint this was no less true of religious agnostics like Kant and Mansel, who can only be hurtful to religion despite their sincere intentions. Although Flint was quite right that the agnosticism of Mansel and Huxley was ultimately self-defeating and inconsistent, he did not recognize the validity and inner integrity of Kant's agnosticism, which preserved both science and religion. Flint's insensitivity to the distinctiveness of Kant's position seriously mars what is otherwise an important work.

The Unique Place of Agnosticism in Nineteenth-Century European Unbelief

As Huxley groped throughout the late 1860s for a way to articulate his new position, he was faced with an almost insurmountable difficulty. How could he prevent his standpoint from being confused with Positivism, materialism, or empiricism, movements of thought which were far narrower in their meaning during the nineteenth century? Positivism was chiefly understood to be the philosophy of Comte, materialism was identified with German thinkers such as Büchner, and empiricism was regarded as the school of J. S. Mill, so the agnostics required their own label to signify their disapproval of tenets held by these other types of unbelief. 40
In 1869, the same year that Huxley coined the term agnostic, he lashed out at those who too readily hurled the epithet "Positivist" at innocent agnostics and scientists:

It has been a periodical source of irritation to me to find M. Comte put forward as a representative of scientific thought; and to observe that writers whose philosophy had its legitimate parent in Hume, or in themselves, were labelled "Comtists" or "Positivists" by public writers, even in spite of vehement protests to the contrary. It has cost Mr. Mill hard rubbings to get that label off; and I watch Mr. Spencer, as one regards a good man struggling with adversity, still engaged in eluding its adhesiveness.41

An authentic Positivist in the 1860s was one who followed Comte in holding that the phenomena of human thought and of social life are continuous with the natural world and are thereby subject to the Law of the Three Stages, as well as susceptible to investigation through scientific methods, the relative validity of which were determined by Comte's classification of the sciences.42 In addition to this body of doctrine regarding the nature and place of sociology as a science, the genuine Positivist had to digest an elaborate set of dogmas forming the articles of a Religion of Humanity.

Although the agnostics were attracted by the Positivist's stress on a scientific approach to social problems, the rejection of metaphysics, and the view of science as the ideal form of knowledge, nothing could induce them to swallow Positivism hook, line, and sinker, as had Richard Congreve, Edward Beesley, Frederic Harrison, and other English disciples of Comte. The agnostics were anxious to stress their differences from the English Positivists, and Huxley led the charge. In his essays "On the Physical Basis of Life" (1868, in MR) and "The Scientific Aspects of Positivism" (1869, in Lay Sermons, Addresses, and Reviews) Huxley subjected Comte to a devastating critique. It was Huxley's contention that Comte's positive philosophy contained nothing "of any scientific value" and that the spirit of modern science was founded by Hume and not Comte. Huxley went even further in undermining the Positivist claims to scientific authority in his famous remark that "Comte's philosophy, in practice might be compendiously described as Catholicism minus Christianity."43 In Huxley's eyes, Positivism was more a pseudoreligion than a strictly scientific body of knowledge.

The other agnostics were delighted with Huxley's deflation of Comte's pretensions and with Huxley's attempt to distinguish Positivism from true science. Morley, then editor of the Fortnightly Review,
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which had published Huxley's essays with the attacks on Comte, wrote to Huxley: "I fully understand the vexation with which you have undergone the popular or archiepiscopal confusion about every scientifically minded person being a Comtist; and I hope your protest will do something to clear people's heads."

Tyndall remarked to Huxley in a letter dated 12 January 1869, "I was much amused by the Leaders remarks on your really just criticism of Comte." Probably most gratified of all the agnostics was Spencer, whose violent dislike of Comte stemmed from the fact that Positivism offered a universal and scientifically based system of knowledge which competed with his own synthetic philosophy. Spencer later found himself embroiled in a controversy over the comparative advantages of agnosticism to Positivism with Frederic Harrison in the mid eighties.

An important area of disagreement between agnostics and Positivists which is rarely discussed centers on epistemological issues. Was it true that the agnostics learned their epistemology from Comte when they subscribed to his emphasis on seeking the laws of things or the invariable relations of succession and similarity, rather than attempting to discover the inner causes of phenomena? Although the agnostics agreed with Comte that we can have no knowledge of anything but phenomena, Comte held to this position without investigating the human claim to knowledge. Huxley, like the other agnostics, insisted on the validity of a scientific psychology as the basis of a sound philosophy and took Comte to task for leaving epistemology and psychology off his table of sciences.

But if Huxley did not accept the term Positivism as the correct designation for his position, then, his contemporaries asked themselves, what did he call himself? After having rejected Comte in the late 1860s, Huxley was faced with the problem of avoiding the name tag materialist. Indeed, Huxley's attempt in "On the Physical Basis of Life" to "prove the existence of a general uniformity in the character of the protoplasm, or physical basis, of life, in whatever group of living beings it may be studied" made it that much more difficult to escape the charge of materialism. Huxley complained to Tyndall that his essay had been totally misunderstood. "The paper upon the Physical Basis of Life was intended by me to contain a simple statement of one of the greatest tendencies of modern biological thought, accompanied by a protest from the philosophical side against what is commonly called materialism. The result of my well-meant efforts I find to be, that I am generally credited with having invented 'protoplasm' in the interests of materialism." All this despite Huxley's declaration in the essay that "I, individually, am no materialist, but, on the contrary, believe materialism to involve grave philosophical error."
Tyndall, Stephen, Clifford, and Spencer also had to contend with charges that they were materialists. Just as repugnant for many Victorians as Huxley’s protoplasm was Tyndall’s “Belfast Address” (1874), wherein he boldly discerned in matter “the promise and potency of all terrestrial life.” However, Tyndall repudiated the title “materialist” as did Huxley. “People sometimes revile me for being ‘a materialist,’” Tyndall recorded in his journal in 1872, “as if I as much as they, and in many cases a thousand times more than they, would not rejoice to see what they call the spirit liberated more than it now is from the dominion of matter.” Stephen was equally adamant. “I have been told,” Stephen declared, “as a matter of course, that I am a Materialist. I do not think that I am one in any fair sense of the word, but I willingly leave it to others to label me with such tickets as they please in the museum of monstrosities.” What grated most on the agnostics’ nerves was, as Spencer put it in a letter to Huxley, the way in which “you and I are dealt with after the ordinary fashion popular with the theologians, who practically say—‘You shall be materialists whether you like it or not.”50 Most nineteenth-century critics did not take these denials of materialism seriously.51

During the nineteenth century, however, European materialism was limited almost exclusively to Germany in the form of the scientific materialism of men such as Vogt, Büchner, and Moleschott and the dialectical materialism of Marx and Engels. With philosophical positions held by these men agnosticism had little in common. The German scientific materialists developed their popular hodgepodge of atheism, anticlericalism, and reductionism during the 1840s. In rejecting the old German transcendentalist tradition and Naturphilosophie, the scientific materialists made extensive claims for the power of science to explain all phenomena. Where Büchner unashamedly appropriated the title of materialist as “a title of honour” and made the principle “No force without matter—no matter without force” the basis of his immensely popular Kraft und Stoff (1855), Huxley humbly confessed that he had “never been able to form the slightest conception of those ‘forces’ which the Materialists talk about.” While Büchner and the scientific materialists directed their attacks on the German neo-Kantians, who stressed the limits of knowledge, Huxley believed that materialists transgressed these limits in their claim that everything is composed of matter in forms determined by the working of forces.52 In his essay “Science and Morals” (1886), Huxley referred explicitly to Kraft und Stoff as espousing a “faith materialistic” and stated his reasons for “heartily disbelieving” Büchner’s philosophy (EE, 129).

The agnostics were prepared to fight to the death to defend the right of scientists to remain strictly on the material level when analyz-
ing physical phenomena, since materialistic terminology had proven in the past to help people control nature better than obscure spiritualistic terminology. But equally important to the agnostics was the recognition that the scientist erred who tried to convert his materialistic description of nature into an actual ontological doctrine.\textsuperscript{53} Although Huxley and his agnostic colleagues could sympathize with the scientific materialists’ belief in the importance of science and their stress on the eradication of ignorance and superstition and their emphasis on the need to banish supernatural causes from science, the disagreement of the two groups about the significance of Kant’s epistemology led to a radical difference in the whole thrust of their respective views.\textsuperscript{54}

Turning to dialectical materialism, we again find a basic discontinuity between this type of materialism and the agnostic position. I have already discussed Engels and Lenin’s sarcastic references to agnosticism as half-hearted materialism. Engels was critical of the agnostics for postulating the existence of mysterious and ungraspable objects because he believed that science would eventually be able to analyze all things into their chemical elements. Lenin entirely agreed with Engels and traced agnosticism back to Hume and Kant. “Those who hold to the line of Kant or Hume,” Lenin declared, “call us, the materialists, ‘metaphysicians’ because we recognize objective reality which is given us in experience, because we recognize an objective source of our sensations independent of man. We materialists follow Engels in calling the Kantians and Humeans agnostics because they deny objective reality as the source of our sensations.”\textsuperscript{55}

\textit{Forms of Unbelief “Made in England”}

In addition to the confusion of agnosticism with Positivism and materialism, Huxley was confronted by the possibility of being saddled with the label “empiricist.” Unlike the philosophies of Positivism and materialism, which had to be imported from across the channel, empiricism was a distinctly English intellectual tradition. Stephen’s remark that “the critical movement initiated by Locke and culminating with Hume reflects the national character” has been reiterated by many scholars in their discussions of the English people’s practical bent of mind, profound respect for facts, and emphasis on empirical experience.\textsuperscript{56} The empiricist strain in English thought proved to be incredibly resilient, for despite the pervasive influence of early nineteenth-century Romanticism in the form of Coleridge, Carlyle, and the Oxford Movement, the native tradition lived on in philosophical radicalism and political economy, and gave birth to a second generation of Utilitar-
ians, who restored the empiricist school to a position of dominance during mid century. John Stuart Mill's *System of Logic* (1843), according to Leslie Stephen, was "a kind of sacred book for students who claimed to be genuine Liberals." The *Logic* was used as a textbook at Oxford by the 1850s, and Mill's immense prestige continued well into the eighties.\(^{57}\)

For those English thinkers who condemned the growth of agnosticism, Engels offered the dubious consolation that at least "these 'new-fangled notions' are not of foreign origin, are not 'made in Germany,' like so many other articles of daily use, but are undoubtedly Old English, and that their British originators two hundred years ago went a good deal further than their descendants now dare to venture."\(^{58}\) Engels's remark is a good example of the tendency to see in agnosticism the logical culmination of the English empiricist tradition.\(^{59}\) J. S. Mill is usually referred to as an agnostic himself, as is his Utilitarian father, James.

However, Huxley's creation of the new term *agnosticism* was also intended to signify that his position was to be distinguished from empiricism, which in the 1860s meant being a disciple of J. S. Mill and Alexander Bain. Although the agnostics clearly were attracted to many of Mill's beliefs, such as the rejection of intuitionism, the emphasis on experience as the source of truth, and the main tenets of Utilitarianism, they were under no illusions as to the deficiencies of Mill's philosophy. While the agnostics used evolutionary theory to understand and explain almost every feature of the universe, the majority of Mill's work was undertaken either before the appearance of *The Origin of Species* (1859) or during the sixties, when the significance of Darwin's thought was not clear. Stephen voiced an important agnostic theme in his belief that Utilitarianism required "re-statement or reconstruction" in light of developments in evolutionary theory.\(^{60}\) The agnostics recognized that it was hardly reasonable to have expected Mill to undertake this task of reformulating empiricism himself. Yet they could hold Mill responsible for the surprising reticence he displayed when confronting religious issues, especially in the posthumously published *Theism* [1874]. Two years later, Stephen the plainspeaker criticized Mill for "a pathetic desire to find some remnant of truth in the ancient dogmas [which] breathes throughout its pages, and is allowed to exercise a distorting influence upon its conclusions."\(^{61}\) Furthermore, Mill never held to the essential agnostic position that God is unknowable owing to the inherent limitations of the human mind. Mill, unlike Huxley, did not need a new label to describe his position. He already possessed a creed that he had discovered in his youth. He recalls in his
Autobiography (1873) that after reading Bentham he had "a creed, a doctrine, a philosophy; in one among the best senses of the word, a religion." 

Besides empiricism there were other English varieties of unbelief in the nineteenth century. During the late forties and fifties a small group of independent thinkers, including A. H. Clough (1819–1861), Francis W. Newman (1805–1897), Tennyson (1809–1892), and J. A. Froude (1818–1894), questioned the validity of traditional Christianity in their poems, novels, and spiritual autobiographies. These writers were not concerned with advancing epistemological arguments for the unknowability of God; it was institutional religion that repelled them. Their faith in the authority of the Church had been shaken by the findings of German biblical criticism, moral objections to Christian doctrine, and the Oxford Movement's denunciation of the stagnation of Anglicanism, which drove them beyond the pale of orthodox Christianity rather than Romeward. The unbelievers of the forties and fifties rebuilt their faith on a reverence for the human spirit. In a review of F. W. Newman's The Soul (1849), Clough approved of Newman's rejection of a faith based on historical facts and doctrinal articles because "the abiding revelation is written, not on hard tablets of stone, legal, historic, or dogmatic, but on the fleshly tablets of the human heart and conscience."

The original agnostics were not atheists, nor were they materialists or Positivists. Their stress on Kantian epistemology distinguishes them from any previous form of British unbeliever, including the empiricists or the unbelievers of the forties and fifties. However, the agnostics do belong to a distant group of English intellectuals who were hostile toward the Victorian Church. Agnosticism was an important component of the nineteenth-century movement known as "scientific naturalism."

Scientific naturalism was the English equivalent of the cult of science in vogue throughout Europe during the second half of the nineteenth century. During the ongoing debate on man's place in nature in Victorian England (a public discussion that encompassed all realms of thought) the scientific naturalists put forward new interpretations of man, nature, and society derived from the theories, methods, and categories of empirical science. This cluster of ideas and attitudes was naturalistic in the sense it would permit no recourse to causes not present in empirically observed nature, and it was scientific because nature was interpreted according to three major mid-century scientific theories, the atomic theory of matter, the conservation of energy, and evolution. The ringleaders of scientific naturalism were Huxley, Tyndall, Spencer, Clifford, Galton, Harrison, Morley, G. H. Lewes, Edward Tylor, John
Lubbock, E. Ray Lankester, Henry Maudsley, Stephen, Grant Allen, and Clodd. Even though scientific naturalism is a broader movement of thought than is agnosticism, examining the connection between the two will contribute valuable insights into the birth of Huxley's brain-child. All general points regarding the ethos of scientific naturalism largely hold for the agnostics. Moreover, agnosticism shared a common social context with scientific naturalism. Conclusions drawn from a study of the social significance of scientific naturalism apply with equal force to agnosticism. The ideology of scientific naturalists became the apologetic tool of the Victorian middle class in its attempts to generate a new Weltanschauung, one appropriate in a competitive, urban, and industrial world, as a replacement for old philosophies and theologies suitable to a pastoral, agrarian, and aristocratic world.

The efforts of scientific naturalists were resisted by the Church and the propertied classes, whose alliance was strengthened during the first half of the nineteenth century, when religious infidelity and politically dangerous ideas were seen as complementary. Christianity had assumed the role of defender of the social order in many European nations, wherein fortifying the coalition between throne and altar was the response to the threat of revolution in the wake of 1789. Stephen declared that Christianity had worked "itself so thoroughly into alliance with the conservative forces of society that it is no longer possible to separate the two interests. Its influence is rigorously dependent upon the strong conviction of the governing classes that the old creed is bound up with the old order" (AA, 364). The clash between social classes, therefore, had a political dimension, and scientific naturalists were by and large supporters of the radical wing of the Liberal party, at least to begin with, as "young Turks."

But despite the animosity of middle-class scientific naturalists toward the Church, we must not forget the factors of continuity which linked the two warring factions. As the nineteenth century wore on, the Victorian middle class increasingly began to feel that it was entering into a political partnership with the upper class and that it had a stake in the continued health of the social order. In the intellectual realm there existed subtle parallels with the old system under attack, not the least of which flourished in the area of religious thought.

In his History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century (1876) Leslie Stephen made the following comment about the general tendency of ideas to persist in the ebb and flow of intellectual history:

The most unflinching sceptic really carries with him far more than he knows of the old methods of conception. He inherits the ancient
framework of theology, and, unable to find a place in it for his new doctrine, cuts away a large fragment to make room for the favourite dogma. To his contemporaries this sacrilegious act appears to be the most important; it is the mark by which they recognize his peculiar character; to observers at a distance it may appear that his conservatism is really more remarkable than his destructiveness. They wonder more that he should have retained so much than rejected so much. He follows the old method or retains the old conception, though he sees its futility for attaining the old ends. The discord is the result of an incomplete transformation of thought. He gives up hell, but he admits that hell is the only sanction for morality. [1:9]

Stephen's critique of "incomplete" scepticism, although aimed at the deists of the eighteenth century and perhaps even the Broad Churchmen of his own day whom he so despised, is applicable to his fellow agnostics. It also suggests a view of agnosticism which preserves both change and continuity in the development of Victorian thought. Stephen's contemporaries were impressed most by the agnostic attack on the Anglican Church. But Stephen also reminds us that what struck contemporaries as important differences between unbelievers and the orthodox should not blind us to the larger continuity between the old and new, and hence to the religious quality of agnosticism. Living in an age of unprecedented change and transition, the Victorian agnostics produced a form of thought which reflected the times. The Victorians were caught between two worlds, the medieval era and the slowly emerging modern age. It is no coincidence that the Victorian period was also the agnostic epoch *par excellence* . Only then did agnosticism crystallize into a widespread movement of thought which gloried in the sacredness of uncertainty.

The Missing Link

When Huxley extolled the virtues of Mansel's Bampton Lectures he was disclosing two facets of the ideological significance of agnosticism. First, he indicated that Mansel's arguments would be valuable aids in the attempt of scientific naturalists to discredit the authority of the Church. The notion of the limits of knowledge was a useful tool for revealing the gnostic pretensions of Christian thinkers and thereby questioning their ability to lead England into the brave new world of the future. Second, he revealed that those who transferred ideas from the lectures into scientific agnosticism shared some of the interests of the lecturer. Mansel desired to defend the Bible and constitutional authority as a bulwark against democracy and reform, while the agnostics
were motivated by the more moderate concern of preserving social order within a bourgeois society.\textsuperscript{68}

Although an understanding of the social context allows us to understand why the work of an orthodox Christian such as Mansel was attractive to the agnostics, it still leaves open the question of how Huxley and his colleagues altered the message of \textit{The Limits of Religious Thought} to suit their own ends, and it fails to explain the consequences that arose for their articulation of the agnostic viewpoint. To deal with these issues we must probe as deeply as possible at the level of intellectual content.\textsuperscript{69} This means discussing agnosticism in the context of the importation of German modes of thought into England after 1850 and their synthesis with English empiricism. German thought is usually seen as infiltrating England in a significant way during the seventies and eighties, once the fortunes of scientific naturalism had begun to wane, with the development of neo-Hegelianism. However, German ideas made their way into England decades earlier, and one of the mediums of transmission was the agnostics themselves. Although the ability to read German was rare in England during the third quarter of the nineteenth century, Huxley, Tyndall, Stephen, and Clifford were among the few who possessed the skill.

Mansel is the "missing link" in the history of the theory of agnostic descent.\textsuperscript{70} It is through a study of his thought that we can perceive the connection between the species known as the Kantian tradition and the agnostic species. Historians have tended to deal with the decline in traditional religious faith and the corresponding rise of agnosticism by emphasizing the destructive effects of science and evolutionary theory, the impact of biblical criticism, and the role of the ethical revolt from orthodox Christianity.\textsuperscript{71} However, viewing the birth of agnosticism from a perspective informed by these factors tends to assume that agnostics are inherently antireligious due to their scientific spirit and antagonistic to Christianity on account of their rabid loathing for the Bible. I have purposely de-emphasized the role of such factors so that we may view the origins of agnosticism through the development of their essential notion of the limits of knowledge. Huxley, Stephen, Spencer, Clifford, and Tyndall developed their agnosticism during the time when controversy raged over the issue of God's knowability, and their religious thought was shaped by those theologians who defended a modified Kantian position.

It was a notorious fact during the mid nineteenth century that German and English modes of thought could hold no commerce. But Mansel thought he could find a way to make oil and water mix, and it was partially through his work in this area that the agnostics learned how to synthesize German and English intellectual currents.