The Origins of Agnosticism

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Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

Lightman, Bernard.
The Origins of Agnosticism: Victorian Unbelief and the Limits of Knowledge.

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Conclusion

THE TRAGEDY OF AGNOSTICISM

It was absolutely necessary that the soul should be cut away. Religious belief, in the form in which we had known it, had to be abandoned. . . . For two hundred years we had sawed and sawed and sawed at the branch we were sitting on. And in the end, much more suddenly than anyone had foreseen, our efforts were rewarded, and down we came. But unfortunately there had been a little mistake. The thing at the bottom was not a bed of roses after all, it was a cesspool full of barbed wire. . . . So it appears that amputation of the soul isn’t just a simple surgical job, like having your appendix out. The wound has a tendency to go septic.

GEORGE ORWELL (1940)

By the early 1890s agnosticism as a distinct movement had begun to wane. Clifford had been buried over a decade earlier, in 1879. Those that remained, Spencer, Tyndall, Huxley, and Stephen, were tired, old, and found themselves living in a world in which their cause was increasingly irrelevant. The once-energetic Tyndall was plagued by sleeplessness, and in 1889 wrote one of many entries in his journal concerning the misery he endured. “A poor night,” he recorded, “the nights generally are poor now. It is a tragic life!” The X-Club ceased to meet after 1892 because its members were either dead or too sick to attend. Only a year later Tyndall too was gone, due to a bizarre accident when his wife mistakenly administered an overdose of chloral to the ailing old man. Huxley had been frequently ill ever since 1885, and he found that attacking clerics was the most effective cure. He seemed to require controversy in order to convince not only his listeners of the value of scientific naturalism, but also himself. In 1895 Huxley died in the middle of an attack on Balfour.

Spencer and Stephen lingered on into the twentieth century, outliving their friends, their vigor, and even their reputations. A nervous
breakdown in 1882 had made Spencer's task of completing the *Synthetic Philosophy* a struggle against physical and psychological deterioration. But the completion of his magnum opus in 1896 gave him no joy. Beatrice Webb speculated that Spencer "eventually discovered that there was no evidence in the findings of physical science for any such assumption of essential beneficence in the working of natural forces; and that the mental misery of his later life was not altogether unconnected with the loss of the inspiring creed with which he began his *Synthetic Philosophy*."  

Spencer's nervous condition worsened as his philosophical system became subject to increasingly persistent and telling criticism. Sensitive to shifts in the intellectual scene, he could detect the decline of his influence. Indeed, after his death in 1903, his reputation had sunk so low that the Dean of Westminster could doubt that Spencer was sufficiently eminent to merit the national tribute of a memorial in Westminster Abbey.  

Sadder still was Spencer's attempt to find a place for immortality in his agnosticism as he wrestled with imminent death. In 1902 he published an essay on "Ultimate Questions" where he defended the scientific validity of immortality on the basis of the eternal and uncreated nature of space. Morley rushed to Brighton, concerned that this represented a "weakening of Agnostic orthodoxy. It made some of the narrower or the firmer among us quake." Spencer had prepared some diagrams in order to demonstrate the geometric proofs for his position but Morley could only object that space is a subjective impression. Morley recollected that Spencer's eyes flashed as "he exclaimed, 'Then you have turned a Kantian, have you? I saw that things could be carried no further, so with remorse in my heart I quitted him.'"  

The unexpected demise of Stephen's second wife in 1895 plunged him into the depths of a despair that seems to have lasted until his death. His daughter Virginia Woolf described Stephen as one "who, by the failure of some stay, reels staggering blindly about the world, and fills it with his woe." At meals Stephen sat oblivious to his family and "groaned aloud or protested again and again his wish to die." Stephen began to feel isolated. To a friend he wrote in 1898 that "for reasons needless to mention, I am very lonely and often in very low spirits... I am half afraid to say anything about myself—I don't want to appear morbid and yet I have little to say that can be called cheerful." Stephen felt as though the world had passed him by. If no letters arrived for him he would sigh "everyone has forgotten me."  

Like Spencer, Stephen also engaged in activities late in life which might have been thought previously to be at odds with his agnosticism. He was involved in the founding of the London Ethical Society in 1886.
He was president of the Ethical Society and also of the Rationalist Press Association, although Stephen had an aloof attitude and had no great faith in movements of any kind. But Stephen contributed to the *Agnostic Annual* and delivered a number of addresses to ethical societies during the nineties. The addresses were published in *Social Rights and Duties* in 1896. Perhaps Stephen had seen that, like eighteenth-century deism, the agnostics had failed to capture the hearts and minds of the English, and now he became interested in seeing what could be accomplished through organized movements.

When Stephen died in 1904 agnosticism, as a distinct school of thought, was in its final death throes. The less important agnostics were either gone or interested in pursuing commitments other than agnosticism. Laing had died in 1897. Morley was busy with politics and his position as secretary of state for India (1905–10). Liberalism was his religion now. Gould, like Stephen, became attracted to organized free-thought and later viewed agnosticism, as well as Positivism, socialism, and the Ethical Movement, as no longer adequate to meet the challenges of the twentieth century. Even the secularists realized by 1907 that agnosticism was dead and that they no longer had anything to gain by using the term for their own ends. *The Agnostic Annual and Ethical Review* became *The Rationalist Press Association Annual and Ethical Review* in 1908.

Agnosticism did not long survive into the twentieth century as a specific movement in part because of vast upheavals in the intellectual framework of Europe. Symbiotically linked to the Victorian age and to the worship of science which swept all Europe in the latter half of the nineteenth century, agnosticism was eventually doomed to destruction when the forces of change which had created the society in which it flourished also transformed the world once more. The agnostic view of nature became obsolete when the new physics of Rutherford and Einstein revolutionized science in the second and third decades of the twentieth century. Even before the coming of Einstein, the so-called revolt against Positivism of the 1890s and the early years of the twentieth century was already under way. The mechanistic and naturalistic analysis of nature was subjected to attack by eminent thinkers from around the Western world, including the American William James, Henri Bergson and Henri Poincaré of France, the German Edmund Husserl, and James Ward of England. By tying themselves to a particular view of nature so intimately connected to nineteenth-century society, ideas, and politics, the agnostics underestimated the power of science to evolve and grow. And since their god was deduced from their concept of nature it was only “natural” that the agnostic holy trinity became outdated and died a tragic death. With the advent of probabilistic laws
in science, the dogma of uniformity in nature was no longer certain. A crisis of faith in the doctrine of cause was engendered by Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle. It was not as easy to subscribe to the tenet of the existence of an external world now that the theory of relativity undermined traditional assumptions about the role of human beings as passive observers of an unchanging natural order.

Values which the agnostics had read into nature and which betray their Victorianism were also widely discredited. The belief in the rationality of people, the hopes for a world of peace, and the naïve faith in the inevitability of progress, both material and moral, were all guaranteed by a view of nature which was no longer viable. The growth of rabid nationalism, social and economic dislocation, and the devastating impact of a world war spelled the end of the European cult of science.

But it was not just that the evolution of thought and reality passed the agnostics by—their creed was not easily disseminated to an English public. The Christian Commonwealth, in a review of the Agnostic Annual, pointed out in 1901 that agnosticism had “doomed itself to unpopularity” due to its learned but ponderous style of thought. “Agnosticism,” the Christian Commonwealth announced, “as adumbrated in the earlier writings of Mr. Herbert Spencer, promised to fascinate multitudes; but its later developments have been repellent to all but a tiny coterie, although many continue to read merely ethical magazines out of intellectual curiosity.” A philosophy bred from a cross of Kantian epistemology, German transcendentalism, and English empiricism could never be popular unless the simplifying genius of a host of Spencers continued to make it palatable to masses of converts. Stephen’s fears that agnosticism would go the way of eighteenth century deism were well founded.

In addition to the unavoidable complexity of agnosticism there were difficulties with attempts at formulating a consistent theoretical framework. Dockrill argues that one of the reasons why agnosticism declined as a distinct school of thought was that the agnostics were not professional philosophers. “Generally,” Dockrill claims, “agnosticism failed as a strictly philosophical movement.” The professional philosophers were opposed to them and contributed to the swelling body of criticism put forward during the nineties.

One area where the agnostics met with considerable opposition throughout their careers concerned their views on the relationship between science and religion. Critics, especially orthodox Christians, claimed that the agnostics purposely justified science at the expense of religion. We have seen that this approach to agnosticism does not do
justice to the subtlety of their position. They genuinely believed that
they preserved both science and religion in a peaceful harmony through
the agnostic perspective, but the reconciliation was not a viable one
despite the agnostics' best intentions. The upshot of their whole agnos­
ticism was a pervasive scepticism. The validity of scientific first prin­
ciples could not be justified scientifically or intellectually. The agnostics
had limited knowledge to the extent where science could not ground
itself knowingly, but only feelingly or faithfully. The validity of agnos­
tic religion, in the intellectual realm, rested upon these same scientific
axioms, so in the end religion, too, was forced to rely on feelings. Their
agnosticism, at times, became an admission that neither science nor
religion could be affirmed intellectually. To justify holding on to both
they resorted to a position that retained science and religion, but admit­
ted that our knowledge is too limited to allow us to perceive how to
retain the two.

We have highlighted the genuine religious elements that do re­
main in the agnostics' thought through an examination of their debt to
Mansel. Scientific naturalism and orthodox Christianity in the nine­
teenth century were like mirror opposites. An image in a mirror is al­
ways inverted and may at first glance be mistaken for a complete oppo­
site, but the more basic similarity is revealed on closer examination.
Scientific naturalism and orthodox Christianity shared a number of as­
sumptions. An identical epistemological structure presented as many
difficulties in reconciling science and religion for Mansel as it did for
Huxley. There is a deep vein of scepticism in Mansel's thought, but at
the same time he was dogmatic in his use of Kantian thought to defend
the status quo and the infallibility of the biblical text as interpreted by
the Anglican Church. The agnostics found it fruitful to borrow from
Mansel, as they had a similar aim. Mansel's dogmatism is echoed in
the agnostic attempt to dogmatically proclaim the infallibility of the
text of nature as interpreted by the Church Scientific in order to protect
conservative liberalism from the attacks of socialists and liberal demo­
crats.21

Despite the end of agnosticism as a school of thought, the philo­
sophical inconsistencies of Victorian agnosticism, and the reaction
against Positivism during the late nineteenth and early twentieth cen­
turies, the power of agnostic assumptions has continued up until the
present day. Agnosticism proved to be extremely malleable. It could be
adapted to the needs of varying intellectual movements. But what was
retained by twentieth-century thinkers usually represented the shadow
side of agnosticism. The optimistic, questioning, forward-looking, reli­
gious element in agnosticism was lost when the Western world entered
what Baumer has called "The Age of Longing." The death of the agnostic god of science transformed the robust faith of agnosticism into a frustrated and despairing doubt longing for faith.

The twentieth century has spawned other varieties of agnosticism which also display a tragic quality. There are the complacent unbelievers who seize upon agnosticism in order to justify a self-serving, lazy attitude toward religious and metaphysical issues. Maurice's fears that Mansel's Bampton Lectures would eventually lead to the stifling of religious questions proved to be valid. There are also the aggressive unbelievers who cloak their atheism in a modified agnosticism and put forward a new gnosticism.

But all agnosticism need not be tragic. Although the Huxleian variety of agnosticism is no more successful in attaining intellectual and moral integrity than the orthodoxy it attacked, including Mansel's version of agnosticism put forward as a defense of Christianity, this study has pointed to a third type of agnosticism represented by Kant which succeeds in justifying both science and religion intellectually and faithfully. Kant could demonstrate that the universal and necessary principles that ground science with certainty can be legitimized from the transcendental idealist position. The validity of Kant's approach depended on treating nature as appearance and limiting knowledge to the realm of appearances. But this same idea constituted the point of departure for Kant's ethical and religious thought. If knowledge is restricted to objects of possible experience, then people are not merely subject to the laws of nature, they are compelled by moral law to think of themselves as free beings, responsible for their actions and the values (gods) they choose to worship. A true defense of science must, paradoxically, also be a defense of religion. An authentic agnostic view of the limits of knowledge is a necessary component of a sound theism.

Kant's notion of two points of view could not be consistently adopted by Huxley and his colleagues. The agnostic stress on causal determinism endangered the notion of freedom upon which Kant had built his justification of religion and moral "proof" of God. Kant's work shows us the possibility and importance of developing a perspective that allows us to appropriate knowledge (of nature) in order to show that the house we dwell in is that of faith (Kant's practical reason).

Our historical study of agnosticism has, if nothing else, revealed the tremendous flexibility in the agnostic principle. Perhaps we can mold agnosticism in such a way that it is no longer destructive, pessimistic, or tragic. The potential exists for a reinterpretation of our understanding of agnosticism which would allow for the return of reli-
igious and spiritual elements. Agnosticism of the Kantian variety curtails dogmatism, defeats scepticism, and can contribute something of value to all systems of belief. The challenge of the future is to see if a healthy agnosticism, which actively questions everything, including itself, can be rescued from the remains of tragic agnosticism.