

AGNOSTICISM (Greek *αγνοστος* [ágnostos] — unknowable) — a term introduced in philosophy by T. H. Huxley (*Collected Essays*, Lo 1893) to mean the doctrine that reality as it exists apart from phenomena cannot be known. In a general sense, agnosticism may be the epistemological position that nothing can be known (universal agnosticism), or that a certain object or category of objects cannot be known (partial agnosticism). A specific variety of epistemological agnosticism is religious (theological) agnosticism, which emphasizes the limitations or imperfections in the knowledge of God possessed by rational creatures.

Sometimes agnosticism is wrongly identified with scepticism, but scepticism does not accept as completely certain that the truth is completely or partially unknowable, rather in its various forms it prefers to doubt the value of human knowledge.

Universal agnosticism does not actually occur. If it is understood in strict terms, as the doctrine that no valid cognition exists at all, it would lead to contradiction. Partial agnosticism does occur often in period of critique or when one assumes a critical attitude in knowledge. Agnosticism may take different forms, depending on the way it justifies its position.

EXTENSIONAL AGNOSTICISM — states that human knowledge is effectively limited; it is incomplete and can never be complete, since mankind is not capable of exhausting an infinite object of knowledge in a finite time. While it accepts the existence of unknowable things or phenomena, it does not deny that things or phenomena are unknowable by nature, nor does it presuppose any limit to the virtual knowability of things.

PSYCHOLOGICAL AGNOSTICISM — this is the result of acknowledging the relative weakness and limitations of man's cognitive faculties. The highest and ultimate mysteries of the world are too complicated and too extensive for the human mind, and they surpass the measure of its abilities. The unknowability of these mysteries is not so much the result of the structure of things as it is the result of man's limited abilities in the creation of knowledge. Psychological agnosticism occurred most often in ancient philosophy. It stated that the senses do not provide certain knowledge or that the mind by itself cannot come to the truth. Xenophanes and the Sophists took the position that all knowledge is limited, namely that one can only have knowledge in a certain degree (cognitive minimalism). By the end of the Middle Ages, and especially in modern times, there has been a particular emphasis on the shortcomings of man's faculties of knowledge. Most often, however, when one type of cognitive ability is criticized, another type is held in esteem, e.g., D. Hume thought that sense impressions and their images in memory (ideas) are the only source of true knowledge: when one's knowledge of reality goes beyond facts it does not inspire trust; we cannot know anything certain about the world. We cannot know infallibly whether a world exists at all, since the only foundation for such knowledge is the activity of the subject, and this activity is in principle independent of any objective reality. Hume limited true knowledge to strictly formal and purely factual knowledge.

AGNOSTICISM EVOKED BY SCEPTICISM — occurs most often in the area of epistemology. When one sees how the same problems are resolved in contradictory ways and that a system of knowledge has many errors, one does not find it difficult to accept the thesis that human knowledge is limited. Thus it is not strange that the ancient Sceptics proclaimed agnosticism with regard to philosophical truths, while in modern times many scientists professed agnosticism with regard to all knowledge outside of science, and sometimes even with regard to certain kinds of scientific knowledge. This kind of agnosticism appeared, for

example, in the *docta ignorantia* of Nicholas de Cusa, in J. d'Alambert's thesis that it is impossible to construct a full system of knowledge, in E. Littré's positivism and among the philosophers of science K. Pearson and A. Bain. Agnosticism gained strength from scepticism, which held (not without the influence of I. Kant) a position of basic cognitive minimalism. The German natural scientist E. Du Bois-Reymond was the first to hold that the knowledge of the essence of matter and force, the beginning of motion, the rise of consciousness and the freedom of the will lie beyond the limits of science. This ignorance is not merely temporary, but definitive (*ignoramus et ignorabimus*). Later he also added to these eternal questions: the beginning of life, the teleology of nature and emergence of rational thought. At least for the time being, there was no reasonable resolution in sight for these questions. E. Renan, on the other hand, was disenchanted with the humanistic sciences. He thought that we should not try to resolve questions but to take the stance of a mere observer of the past. At the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, agnosticism was in full strength among theoreticians of science. They questioned the necessary character of the laws of science (É. Boutroux) and their objectivity (H. Poincaré and P. Duhem). Conventionalism does not regard scientific facts as real, but only as symbols of reality. Science is incapable of escaping from conventions and symbols, and so it is not capable of grasping reality. In physics, despite its great progress, agnosticism has not expired. For example, W. Heisenberg showed that even if the methods, instruments and concepts of science are perfected, science cannot go beyond certain boundaries.

CRITICAL AGNOSTICISM — is the most widely supported position in more recent philosophy. I. Kant is regarded as its author. Kant's agnosticism was the result of a specific critique of knowledge. The senses are the cognitive faculties that make our contact with reality possible, and the reason grasps and explains reality. The operation of thought involves two different functions: the creation of concepts from the material of experience (this ability of the mind was called reason — *Verstand*), and the drawing of conclusions that go beyond this material in the area of absolute being (understanding - *Vernunft*). The understanding is not satisfied with knowledge that does not go beyond phenomena. It wants to know things in themselves (*Ding an sich*). The critique of the understanding shows, however, that things in themselves are unknowable, and the chief concepts that the mind creates, namely the idea of the soul, the universe and of God, have no real foundation; they can be justified in psychological and practical terms. Neo-Kantianism went further. It stated that knowledge cannot be a reflection of objects, but only the shaping of objects by the mind. Experience is not opposed to *a priori* thought since experience includes *a priori* thought; the object is not opposed to the subject, since the object is a product of the subject; the agreement of mental images with things cannot be the criterium of truth, because things are not directly accessible.

W. Hamilton drew upon Kant's theory of knowledge. Hamilton stated that our consciousness is not in contact with things, but only with phenomena. He dismissed metaphysical knowledge (the mind cannot know being, since the mind is built in such a way that it limits that which exists by laws of relativity). Although we can know that something exists, namely that it is unconditioned, we still do not know its nature. H. Spencer presented an original approach to agnosticism. He tried to create a system of knowledge that would explain and include all phenomena and he accepted the existence of reality, but he held that it was unknowable, because of the very nature of things. Initially he held that the boundary between the knowable and the unknowable coincides with the boundary between the object of science and the object of religion. Later he was convinced that the ultimate thesis of science is also a mystery. Spencer's disciples, F. A. Lange and H. Helmholtz, also looked to

Kant. They stated that not only are things in themselves unknowable, but the self is also unknown. Hence we do not know whether things really exist, or whether the opposition between things and phenomena is conditioned by our mode of thought. Helmholtz drew on his work in optics and acoustics and argued that the organs of sight and hearing transform their stimuli in a certain stable manner. He thought that in this way had he provided physiological grounds for Kant's theory. H. Vaihinger also held a type of Kantian agnosticism. Vaihinger borrowed from Lange the concept of fiction and made it the foundation of his philosophy. What he called a fiction was anything that is in the mind and does not correspond to reality, but is necessary for living (e.g., general concepts, philosophical theories, the more abstract concepts of mathematics and natural science). Vaihinger rejected the truth value of theory and accepted only the greater or lesser practical utility of theory. It is meaningless to ask about a thing's cause and essence.

The ancient forms of radical agnosticism no longer occur in our time. It should be noted, however, that to a certain degree human knowledge is limited both on the part of our faculties, and on the part of the objects known. Also, the images that science has created of the world and of man are not lacking in mystery in certain respects. This does not prevent us from accepting the basic thesis that reality can be approached and grasped in knowledge under many aspects: that it is such as it is, that it changes, etc.. Knowledge thereby becomes fuller, broader in scope, more general, more profound and more systematic. Agnosticism has endured primarily in reference to classical metaphysics. It is universally regarded as the *a priori* paradigm of knowledge in logic and mathematics, and in empirical knowledge such as that of the natural and human sciences (whether the human sciences are distinct is a matter of discussion). Cognitive pluralism often enough does not extend to the metaphysical knowledge that would have an analytic and necessary character, while at the same time being realistic and concerning all being. It seems that apart from misunderstandings that result from a wrong understanding of the conceptions of classical metaphysics, a too narrow and monistic conception of rational knowledge is to blame here, but in this area we may also see a readiness for discussion. Although the neo-positivists treat the propositions of classical metaphysics as factually meaningless, they are not considered to be agnostics. They are clearly opposed to the slogan "*ignorabimus*" and they hold that there are no questions (questions that are not falsely presented) that cannot be resolved; there are only questions that cannot be resolved under particular conditions

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AGNOSTICISM IN INDIAN PHILOSOPHY — this term may be applied to several different phenomena.

Epistemological agnosticism, i.e., the rejection of the possibility of any certain knowledge, is the stated position of the school of ajnanika which is closely related to the materialists.

Buddhist metaphysical agnosticism (or soteriological agnosticism), called the silence of the Buddha, is the *de facto* refusal to answer metaphysical or cosmological questions that imply a dichotomy in the answer, e.g., "whether the world is eternal", "whether the world is infinite", "whether a saint (arhat) exists in some way after death", as not questions that are not essential for the soteriological aim of achieving nirvana. In later Buddhism, in the madhyamaka school, this developed into a theory of ontological agnosticism, called the theory that rejects dichotomy (advayavada), which states that reality cannot be known, and that we must take a middle position ("it neither exists nor does it not exist, nor does it exist and not exist at the same time, nor is it so that it neither exists nor not exists), called conditioned emergence (pratīyasamutpada).

The theological agnosticism of certain schools of advaitavedanta is the thesis that the absolute and the relation of the absolute to the world are inexpressible (anirvacanīya).

S. Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, Lo 1954 (*Filozofia indyjska*, I-II, Wwa 1959-1960).

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