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THE VARIETIES OF AGNOSTICISM

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We provide a framework for understanding agnosticism. The framework accounts for the varieties of agnosticism while vindicating the unity of the phenomenon. This combination of unity and plurality is achieved by taking the varieties of agnosticism to be represented by several agnostic stances, all of which share a common core provided by what we call the minimal agnostic attitude. We illustrate the fruitfulness of the framework by showing how it can be applied to several philosophical debates. In particular, several philosophical positions can be aptly conceived of as instances of agnosticism whilst retaining their differences and distinguishing features.

Keywords: agnosticism, suspended judgement, enquiry, mental attitude, normative commitment, intuitionism, supervaluationism, epistemicism.

I. INTRODUCTION

Agnosticism is a broad church. There are several stances which can be described as agnostic, or so we shall argue. Paying attention to the differences between these stances reveals how varied the agnostic landscape is. At the same time, it is possible to provide a unified account of this landscape, as we shall see.

The term *agnosticism*, in the modern sense, was introduced in the second half of the 19th century by Thomas Huxley,[1] but some of its varieties—prominently, suspended judgement—have been discussed since antiquity. Very recently, research on suspended judgement has witnessed a revival of interest, thanks to the work of Jane Friedman. In a series of papers (Friedman 2013a,b, 2017), she has developed and defended a novel account of suspended judgement, which she identifies with agnosticism. On Friedman's account, agnosticism is a *sui generis* attitude not definable in terms of lack of belief or disbelief.

[1] The term was introduced by Huxley in a speech at a meeting of the Metaphysical Society in 1869 to describe his philosophical position towards spiritual matters.

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Although we agree with some of the main tenets of Friedman's position, in particular on the idea that agnosticism should not be characterized as mere lack of belief and disbelief, our proposal differs from hers in several respects. In particular, we reject Friedman's identification of agnosticism with suspended judgement. On our proposal there is a basic agnostic *attitude* which can be characterized in a rather minimal fashion. This basic attitude can then be used to characterize several, more substantive agnostic *stances* a subject can take towards some proposition. Suspended judgement corresponds only to one (or perhaps two) of the agnostic stances we shall identify. In this respect, we claim that Friedman's proposal lacks the resources to account for the various agnostic stances that we shall discuss.

Although such stances have received much less attention in the literature than suspended judgement, they are extremely interesting from a philosophical point of view in that they are central to debates in various areas of philosophical enquiry. Thus, in this paper, we shall provide the groundwork for a taxonomy of agnostic stances which is fine-grained and flexible enough to account for their differences. This will also help gain a better understanding of the notion of suspended judgement, thus improving on Friedman's work. We proceed gradually. We first introduce the minimal agnostic attitude and contrast it with the gnostic attitude, broadly understood. The agnostic and gnostic attitudes engender certain characteristic normative commitments. We then show that more substantive stances can be obtained by adding further epistemological or metaphysical commitments to the minimal attitude of agnosticism. In order to make our project more tangible, we discuss some of the agnostic stances in connection with actual views defended by philosophers in recent debates, such as the one on vagueness and the one on mathematical realism.

II. IS IT THE CASE THAT *P*? GNOSTICISM VS AGNOSTICISM

In this section, we introduce the *agnostic* attitude and contrast it with the *gnostic* attitude. We provide a minimal characterization of agnosticism, which is shared by the various agnostic stances. That is, taking any of the agnostic stances that we shall discuss implies having the agnostic attitude.

We take both gnostic and agnostic attitudes to be mental attitudes that an agent has towards the propositions that are expressed by complete answers to a question under discussion (Roberts 2012). Given a question under discussion $?$, a complete answer to $?$ is an answer that purports to resolve the issue raised by $?$. For instance, if the question under discussion is *Who went to the cinema?*, answers such as *Alice* and *Bob* count as complete answers to the question, whereas answers such as *Alice or Bob* or *I don't know* do

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not.[2] Mental attitudes are associated with specific sets of normative commitments. Indeed, our focus is on the normative commitments attitudes are associated with, rather than their psychological profile. The idea is that in taking a certain attitude an agent undertakes a series of normative commitments that are characteristic of that attitude. As we shall see in more detail, stances inherit normative commitments from attitudes but are also associated with further commitments, in particular epistemological and metaphysical.

At the most general level, we take the gnostic attitude to be the attitude an agent has if she believes one of the propositions expressed by complete answers to a question under discussion. For simplicity, we begin by focusing on the case in which the question under discussion is a polar question—that is a question which is typically taken to have two possible complete answers, affirmative and negative.[3] Later in the paper, we will extend our account to the case of complete answers to polar questions other than affirmative and negative ones and the case of *wh*-questions.

Once one restricts attention to polar questions, the gnostic attitude becomes the attitude an agent has if she either believes or disbelieves the proposition under investigation. Believing the proposition is associated with being committed to the truth of the proposition; disbelieving the proposition is associated with being committed to its falsity. Further commitments may be associated with belief or disbelief, but here we only need to consider these basic commitments.

We characterize the agnostic attitude as the attitude that an agent has if she refrains from both believing and disbelieving the proposition under investigation. For present purposes, we only need to assume that refraining has the following features, understood as necessary (but not jointly sufficient) conditions. First, in order to refrain from Φ-ing, an agent must consider Φ-ing. Second, in refraining one is committed to not Φ-ing.[4] It follows that the agnostic, who refrains from both believing and disbelieving, is committed to not being committed to the truth of the proposition as well as its falsity.[5] This might make it seem as though we take the agnostic attitude to be a kind of higher-order attitude, which some philosophers have considered problematic (see e.g. Friedman 2013a,b). However, we only take the commitments associated with agnosticism to be higher order; this does not entail that the attitude itself is higher order.

[2] The notion of a complete answer to a question has been extensively discussed under various guises in the literature on the semantics of questions. See Cross & Roelofsen 2020: Section 2 and references contained therein.

[3] Obviously, an affirmative answer to a polar question can be given in several ways (e.g. *yes* and *yep*). We treat those as equivalent for present purposes, and similarly for the case of negative answers.

[4] On 'refraining', see Smith 1986 and references contained therein.

[5] This is in line with Incurvati & Schlöder (2017), who argue that weakly rejecting p commits one to not being committed to p.

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We have provided a minimal characterization of agnosticism, which we distinguish from the gnostic attitude. In order to further our understanding of the gnostic and agnostic attitudes, it is fruitful to consider how these attitudes can be linguistically expressed in the context of an answer to a polar question (see Smiley 1996; Rumfitt 2000; Incurvati & Schlöder 2017). To illustrate, let's take the proposition that Maria is at home and let's ask a polar question about it: *Is it the case that Maria is at home?* By replying *yes* or *no*, one expresses the gnostic attitude towards the proposition that Maria is at home. By replying *can't say*, by contrast, one expresses the agnostic attitude towards that proposition. It is worth stressing that expressing an attitude does not imply having that attitude, as is familiar from the expressivist literature (Gibbard 1990: 84). Thus, for instance, one may answer *yes* to the question *Is Maria at home?* and express belief even though one in fact disbelieves that Maria is at home. Similarly, one may answer *can't say* and thereby express agnosticism even though one in fact believes that Maria is at home.

III. IS THE PROPOSED CHARACTERIZATION OF AGNOSTICISM TOO MINIMAL?

Our account of how the agnostic attitude may be expressed applies to all the agnostic stances we will discuss: a *can't say*-answer to the question *Is it the case that p?* is appropriate whenever the agent has any of the various agnostic stances. Is this characterization of agnosticism tenable? Let us briefly review some possible worries about our characterization that draw on the recent literature on agnosticism.

Matthew MacGrath criticizes the strategy of characterising agnosticism in terms of refraining on the grounds that in so doing one excludes what he calls *stored agnosticism*. According to McGrath (2021: 12), one may have a stored agnosticism about all kinds of 'don't care' questions—such as 'the publication date of various articles, the middle name of some colleague, who won the Mexico Open, *etc*'—but one is not refraining from judegment on these matters. Is this right? We should distinguish between two types of 'don't care' questions. First, there are questions a subject has never entertained. In that case, the idea would seem to be that a subject has a stored agnosticism about a certain question just in case, if the subject *were* to be asked the question and understand it, she would answer *can't say*. However, this account of agnosticism faces a version of the mind-cluttering problem (Harman 1986). It is cognitively implausible to think that a subject has an attitude of agnosticism towards all 'don't care' questions the subject is in a position to understand. From a purely psychological point of view, this would require that the subject has an infinite storage capacity. Moreover, leaving aside psychological considerations, the normative profile of the agnostic attitude suggests that we should not classify

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these kinds of cases as cases of agnosticism. For these kinds of cases seem to be best described as cases in which the subject is simply not committed to the truth or falsity of the relevant proposition, rather than being committed to not being committed to its truth or falsity, as the agnostic attitude would demand. Simply put, the position of a subject about a proposition which she understands but has never considered, and which does not bear immediate logical relations to propositions she has considered, seems best described in terms of having no view whatsoever, rather than in terms of agnosticism.

A second type of 'don't care' questions is provided by questions the subject has thought about and for which she has no answer, but she is not interested in investigating any further. In this case, we agree with McGrath (and, as we shall see, disagree with Friedman) that it is correct to attribute to such a subject an attitude of agnosticism. But we also think that it is equally correct to describe her attitude as one in which she refrains from both believing and disbelieving *p*. We will discuss this kind of case in more detail in the next section, when considering Friedman's objections to what we call *ungrounded agnosticism* being a case of agnosticism at all.

Our characterization of agnosticism demands less of the agnostic subject than other extant characterizations. For one thing, it does not require the agnostic to have an enquiring attitude towards the proposition under investigation, as Friedman's (2017) characterization does. For another, *contra* McGrath's (2021) characterization, it does not require the agnostic to have some kind of intermediate state of confidence in the proposition under investigation. One may wonder at this point whether our characterization is indeed too minimal. Clearly, a *can't say*-answer to a polar question is compatible with several stances towards the proposition at hand, as we have remarked. Nonetheless, our characterization, as minimal as it is, does place some demands on the agent. Crucially, in answering *can't say*, the agent makes clear that she understands the question at issue, not only in the sense that she masters the language in which the question is posed, but also in the sense that she has enough conceptual competence to understand what the question is about and what an answer to it would, at least in principle, look like. This aspect of our characterization helps to avoid some of the problematic cases that Friedman takes to put pressure on (something in the ballpark of) the minimal characterization of the agnostic attitude just given. In particular, two cases are worth discussing.

The first one concerns an arachnophobic subject for whom even a fleeting thought about spiders is utterly unbearable. According to Friedman (2013b: 173), although such a subject may refrain from believing that spiders have good eyesight and refrain from believing that they don't, thus remaining in a state of belief–disbelief resistance about spider eyesight, she is not agnostic about whether spiders have good eyesight. Our characterization of the agnostic attitude agrees with Friedman that whatever attitude the subject has towards such a proposition, it is not an instance of agnosticism. This is because the

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peculiar attitude of belief–disbelief resistance about whether spiders have good eyesight that is characteristic of the arachnophobic is different from the attitude of refraining from both believing and disbelieving such a proposition, as we have characterized it. If, in fact, we ask this person whether spiders have good eyesight she wouldn't refrain from believing (disbelieving) that spiders have good eyesight because her psychological condition would preclude her from even being in a position to cognitively entertain the proposition that spiders have good eyesight. She just wouldn't listen and would immediately change the subject. In this respect, it does not seem that the subject is undertaking a commitment to not being committed to the truth (or falsity) of the proposition in question. Thus, the case of the arachnophobic offers no counterexample to our minimal characterization of the agnostic attitude.

Another case discussed by Friedman that *prima facie* creates problem for a minimal characterization of agnosticism concerns a subject who is asked a question she is not in a position to understand. According to Friedman, clearly cavemen hadn't suspended judgement about whether the Large Hadron Collider would find the Higgs boson (Friedman 2013b: 168). Even assuming that the caveman is in a position to understand that the question is indeed a question, we certainly agree with Friedman that this is not a case of agnosticism, and our minimal characterization can deal with cases like this one since refraining presupposes that the subject understands the question at issue. Since this is a case in which the subject has no clue whatsoever concerning how to approach the question, and even less on how to conduct enquiry into it, we take it that probably the most accurate way of expressing her attitude towards the question would be something like *What?!*, which clearly doesn't even qualify as an answer to the question, rather than *can't say*. In other words, what cases like this show is that being in a position to understand the question is a precondition to having any kind of mental attitudes towards the proposition at issue. Furthermore, even if the caveman were in a position to understand the question, our account would not imply that the caveman is agnostic about whether the Large Hadron Collider will find the Higgs boson. For refraining from believing (disbelieving) the proposition in question also requires that the subject is committed to not being committed to the truth (falsity) of the proposition in question, which the caveman clearly isn't.

IV. IS YOUR ATTITUDE TOWARDS *P* THE RESULT OF YOUR ENQUIRING INTO WHETHER *P*? THE GROUNDS FOR AGNOSTICISM

In the previous sections, we argued that agnosticism is the attitude expressed by answering *can't say* to a polar question about *p*. This is a minimal

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characterization of agnosticism, so minimal that it might appear to leave out important aspects of agnosticism and thus be subject to counterexamples. We argued that these putative counterexamples disappear on closer inspection. Nonetheless, we do think that some of the features that some philosophers have taken to be distinguishing marks of agnosticism *should* play an important role within the study of agnosticism. In our view, these features are not part of the minimal agnostic attitude, but of *specific* ways of being agnostic—of specific agnostic stances.

Let us elaborate on the distinction between mental attitudes and stances towards propositions. We can conceive of a mental attitude, quite minimally, in terms of a functional relation between a subject and a specific propositional content. As mentioned above, attitudes are associated with sets of commitments. Consider, again, the proposition that John is at home. Julia can have towards that proposition either one among the three mental attitudes of belief (associated with a normative commitment to the truth of that proposition), disbelief (associated with a normative commitment to the falsity of that proposition), or agnosticism (associated with a normative commitment to not being committed to either the truth or the falsity of that proposition). Having a stance towards a proposition involves more than simply having one specific attitude towards it: it also includes what the subject takes the grounds for her attitude to be as well as her epistemological and metaphysical commitments about the status of what the proposition is about. For instance, which stance one holds towards a proposition has to do with whether one takes knowledge of the proposition to be in principle attainable or whether one thinks that there is a fact of the matter concerning the truth-value of the proposition.

More specifically, for the purposes of this paper, a stance can be thought of as a particular pattern of answers to specific focal questions concerning the grounds for one's attitude towards a proposition as well as the metaphysical and epistemological status of the proposition in question. In relation to these focal questions, the subject can express belief, disbelief, or agnosticism by, respectively, replying *yes*, *no*, or *can't say* to those questions. Thus, different subjects may have different stances while having the same kind of mental attitude. This allows us to account for the various kinds of agnosticism while identifying their common core, thus providing a unified model. According to this model, while two subjects may have an agnostic attitude towards the same proposition *p*, they may have different agnostic stances. For instance, they may have different views on the question whether evidence is in principle attainable for or against *p*: one answers *yes*, thus believing that evidence for or against *p* is in principle attainable, the other answers *no*, thus disbelieving that such evidence is in principle attainable, or one can answer *can't say*, thus refraining from both believing and disbelieving that such evidence is in principle attainable. In the following sections, we will develop this model and illustrate the variety

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of agnostic stances that can be obtained from the minimal agnostic attitude as we have characterized it.

We can now see how this distinction allows us to deal with features that philosophers have taken to be distinguishing marks of agnosticism. Friedman (2013a,b, 2017) takes enquiring to be one such distinguishing mark. In particular, she argues that one is agnostic about some matter just in case one is enquiring about that matter. As we shall see, there are agnostic stances that do not fit Friedman's account. In fact, we take it that there is an important distinction between the issue whether or not a subject possesses a certain mental attitude and the issue whether or not the attitude she possesses is epistemically grounded.

In order to appreciate this distinction, let us briefly characterize what we take the notions of enquiry and epistemic ground to be. We take enquiry to be the practice of gathering and assessing evidence in order to answer a question (or set of questions) under discussion and thereby form the appropriate attitude towards the relevant proposition or propositions. In order for a subject to count as enquiring into the question under discussion, it is sufficient that she has carried out a serious attempt to gather evidence relevant to the question under discussion—an attempt that puts, at least, the subject in a position to exclude some possibilities that, if they were actual, would provide a complete answer to the question. For instance, if the question under discussion is: *Is John at the cinema?*, then I would count as enquiring into it in case I have gathered some evidence relevant to John's whereabouts such that it puts me in a position to exclude, e.g. that John is at home, or that John is at the bar with his friends. As a result of this understanding of enquiry, we have that a subject who has enquired or is enquiring into a question under discussion always possesses some epistemic grounds in relation to the question. We work here with a broad understanding of epistemic ground, which includes evidence for a proposition, evidence against it, and evidence that there's no (sufficient) evidence for the proposition. It is clear from this brief characterization that our understanding of enquiry is chiefly epistemic rather than psychological—in this sense one may be enquiring into a question regardless of whether she desires to know the answer to it.

Having clarified the notions of enquiry and epistemic ground, we can now return to the distinction between the issue of which attitude a subject has and the issue of whether this attitude is epistemically grounded. The close link Friedman defends between agnosticism and enquiry prevents her to give its due to this distinction. This can be appreciated by first considering the perhaps more familiar case of the distinction between a belief and its epistemic grounds. It is one thing to ask whether a subject in fact believes that, e.g. John is a wizard, and another to ask whether John's belief is epistemically grounded—i.e., the result of some enquiry. It would certainly be highly controversial to say that a subject can't have epistemically ungrounded beliefs. For the same reason, we

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think that a distinction ought to be drawn between the agnostic attitude and its epistemic grounds: a subject may be agnostic about *p* without having enquired into whether *p*, and thus without having any grounds for such an attitude towards *p*. Nonetheless, we do think that whether one's agnostic attitude is the result of enquiry is epistemologically important in that it helps to distinguish between two broad kinds of agnostic stances.

Consider again Friedman's counterexamples to the claim that to be agnostic about *p* is to neither believe nor disbelieve that *p*. Most of us, according to Friedman, are not agnostic about whether Donald Trump has more than 100,000 hairs on his head even though we neither believe nor disbelieve that he does. Our characterization of agnosticism delivers the same verdict: in order to be agnostic about whether Donald Trump has more than 100,000 hairs it is not sufficient to neither believe nor disbelieve this; one needs to *refrain* from doing so. However, suppose that you are asked the question *Does Donald Trump have more than 100,000 hairs on his head?* and that you answer *can't say* without enquiring into the matter at all. Perhaps you are just not that interested in finding out about Trump's number of hairs and prefer to dedicate your time to other endeavours. On our account, you are nonetheless expressing agnosticism about whether Trump has more hair than the average human being. And you might well be in the mental state you are expressing: you might indeed be refraining from believing that Trump has more than 100,000 hairs on his head and from disbelieving that he does. Does that mean that our account of agnosticism deliver an incorrect verdict, thereby vindicating Friedman's link between agnosticism and enquiry? No. All it follows is that your attitude is not the result of having enquired into the matter—that our attitude is *ungrounded*, as we put it. Suppose, on the other hand, that, before answering the question, you have carefully enquired into whether *p*, for instance by looking at images of people with average hair quantity and your *can't say*-answer is based on the fact that Trump is more or less in that ballpark. Then your agnosticism about whether Trump has more than 100,000 hairs is *grounded*. As said above, the situation here is no different from the case of belief: the fact that some beliefs are grounded and some are not does not force us to characterize belief in terms of enquiry. The same is true for the agnostic attitude.

Just as it is possible to indicate whether one is agnostic about *p* by suitably answering a polar question about *p*, it is possible to indicate whether one's agnosticism is grounded by answering a polar question about whether one has enquired into whether *p*. In particular, suppose that a speaker has expressed agnosticism about *p*. If she then answers *yes* to the question whether she has enquired into whether *p*, she is expressing *grounded agnosticism* about *p*. If she answers *no*, she is expressing *ungrounded agnosticism* about *p*. In the remainder of the paper we will discuss various grounded agnostic stances.

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V. WILL FURTHER ENQUIRY DELIVER EVIDENCE THAT SETTLES *P* POSITIVELY OR NEGATIVELY?

In the previous section, we distinguished between grounded and ungrounded agnostic stances. The ungrounded agnostic is someone who has done no serious enquiry into the question, even though she perfectly understands the question and knows what an enquiry into the matter would look like (e.g. she knows that a pretty effective way of answering the question *Does Trump have more than 100,000 hairs on his head?* is to cut all of his hairs, collect them, and painstakingly count them one by one). In contrast, the grounded agnostic is someone who has done some enquiry into the matter. How much enquiry is necessary in order to count as a grounded agnostic is a tricky matter—and one we shall not discuss. We assume that the subject has to have gathered at least some evidence that is relevant for answering the question under discussion. Once the subject has reached the stage of grounded agnosticism and has collected a certain amount of evidence which supports an agnostic attitude towards *p*, she may further ask herself: Will further enquiry deliver evidence that settles *p* positively or negatively? Depending on her metaphysical and epistemological background assumptions concerning *p*'s subject matter, the grounded agnostic may answer this question with *yes*, *no*, and *can't say*, which express, respectively, the three different attitudes of belief, disbelief, and agnosticism about the attainability of further evidence for or against *p*.

If she answers *yes*, thus believing that further enquiry will deliver evidence settling *p*, she expresses the stance which we call *optimistic agnosticism*. What makes this attitude optimistic is the fact that the subject, although refraining from committing to a specific view about *p*, commits to the idea that enquiry will eventually settle *p*. An example of optimistic agnosticism is provided by the *Gödelian optimist* (Tennant 1997: Section 6.3), who holds that every unambiguous proposition of a given mathematical theory is absolutely decidable. Thus, if *p* is a yet to be decided mathematical proposition, the Gödelian optimist will be agnostic about the proposition—there being neither a proof nor a disproof of *p*—but still insist that there is no proposition that lies beyond our ken.

Optimists are sparse in the agnostic church. Instead, many acolytes of the church have an agnostic attitude towards the question whether further enquiry will deliver evidence settling *p*. That is, they answer *can't say* to this question. In doing so, they express what we call *hesitant agnosticism*. Perhaps the most familiar example of hesitant agnosticism is given by the religious agnostic, understood, in a weak sense, as someone whose evidential situation is such that it does not rule out that God exists, it does not rule out that God does not exist, and, moreover, it doesn't rule out in principle that a positive or negative answer to the question whether God exists is epistemically attainable. A second example of hesitant agnosticism is given by the mathematical intuitionist's stance towards a typical undecided statement such as Goldbach's Conjecture.

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The mathematical intuitionist takes the stance of hesitant agnosticism towards the conjecture: having no proof or disproof of it, she refrains from believing it and refrains from disbelieving it. Nonetheless, the intuitionist does not rule out that a proof or disproof of Goldbach's Conjecture may be forthcoming.

By answering *no* to the question whether further enquiry will deliver evidence settling *p*, the grounded agnostic expresses *pessimistic agnosticism*.[6] While optimistic and hesitant agnosticism leave the enquiry into whether *p* open, pessimistic agnosticism effectively closes the enquiry. If a subject has solid evidence that no further evidence for or against *p* can be obtained then it would be irrational for her to continue the enquiry into whether *p*. This is because a precondition for the rationality of enquiring into a question under discussion is that the enquirer does not possess a definite proof that there is no way of advancing enquiry in any epistemically sound direction.

Such a stance of pessimistic agnosticism towards *p* is of course compatible with the possibility of continuing the investigation into whether the evidence for believing that no further *p*-relevant evidence can be attained withstands scrutiny. However, this is a different question which only indirectly may have a bearing on the question whether *p*. Moreover, pessimistic agnosticism amounts to a settled stance which is normatively and epistemically much more resilient than the stance of hesitant agnosticism. While hesitant agnosticism remains an epistemically live option just in case the enquiry is left open, pessimistic agnosticism epistemically survives, and in fact rationally demands, the closing of enquiry. This shows why Friedman's account of suspended judgement does not cover the stance of pessimistic agnosticism since for her one has an attitude of suspended judgement if and only if she is enquiring into the matter. This is not *per se* a criticism of Friedman's account of suspended judgement—after all she may just reply that her account was not intended to cover cases like the pessimistic agnostic. The point is rather that if we think that the stance represented by the pessimistic agnostic is an interesting kind of agnosticism, and we take our project to be that of providing a general account of agnosticism which is able to capture all those cases that we would intuitively take to be examples of agnosticism, then Friedman's way of characterising suspended judgement is not what we are looking for. In addition, equating agnosticism with enquiring in the way Friedman does seems to preclude another interesting distinction that our framework allows us to draw, namely, that between the optimistic agnostic and the hesitant agnostic. Both stances are in fact fully compatible with, and perhaps demand that, the subject leave the enquiry open.

In the next section, we consider some examples of pessimistic agnosticism.

[6] Pessimistic agnosticism is discussed by Le Poidevin (2010: 9–10) under the label *strong agnosticism*.

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VI. IS THERE A FACT OF THE MATTER AS TO WHETHER *P*?

The pessimistic agnostic about a proposition *p* holds that no further evidence can be gathered for or against *p*. This is compatible with different stances as to whether there is a fact of the matter as to whether *p* is the case, i.e., as to whether *p* has a definite truth-value or not.

We may therefore distinguish two different stances within pessimistic agnosticism. The first stance insists that despite the impossibility of gathering further evidence about *p* there is nonetheless a fact of the matter as to whether *p*: the indeterminacy of *p* is epistemic. We call this stance *epistemic agnosticism*. The second stance concludes from the fact that it is impossible to gather further evidence about *p* that *p* is genuinely indeterminate. We call this stance *indeterminacy agnosticism*.[7] Friedman's link between agnosticism and enquiry forces her to exclude these stances from the agnostic landscape, since both the epistemic agnostic and the indeterminacy agnostic take enquiry about the relevant question to be closed (albeit drawing different conclusions from this fact). Crucially, our framework vindicates the idea that, on the face of it, both stances are naturally seen as agnostic stances. We will now proceed by discussing these two different stances within pessimistic agnosticism, starting with epistemic agnosticism.

Let us consider again the case of religious agnosticism. In the previous section, we encountered the hesitant religious agnostic: although she is agnostic, she leaves it open whether further evidence may be gathered for or against the existence of God. But this is not the only type of religious agnosticism. Some religious agnostics hold that no further evidence may be collected that would settle whether God exists (Le Poidevin 2010). Some religious agnostic of this kind would nonetheless insist that there is a fact of the matter as to whether God exists—we just can't know it. That is, some pessimistic agnostics argue that a proposition has a determinate truth-value even though no further evidence can be collected to determine what this truth-value is.

This type of agnostic stance has been taken by Timothy Williamson (1994) in the case of vagueness. Consider Alice, who is a borderline case of tallness. Williamson agrees that we should be agnostic about whether Alice is tall. Nonetheless, according to his epistemicism, there is a fact of the matter as to whether Alice is tall. The reason we should be agnostic about whether Alice is tall is not that it is neither true nor false that Alice is tall, but that we cannot know whether Alice is tall. Williamson argues for this conclusion on the basis of *margin-of-error principles*. Roughly, the idea is that if one knows that *p*, then *p* must be true in all nearby situations. Thus, even though, say, one believes that

[7] The distinction between epistemic agnosticism and indeterminacy agnosticism resembles Newton-Smith's (1981) distinction between the *ignorance response* and the *arrogance response* to the underdetermination of theory by data.

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Alice is tall and Alice's height happens to be in the actual extension of *tall*, this belief does not count as knowledge because had linguistic usage been slightly different, the extension of *tall* would not have included Alice but one would have still believed that she is tall.

The epistemicist is a realist in Michael Dummett's (1993) sense of the word. For she insists that *p* has a determinate truth-value despite our incapacity to ascertain what that truth-value is. The cases discussed by Dummett thus provide further examples of epistemic agnosticism. Consider, for instance, the proposition that Julius Caesar had an even number of hairs when he crossed the Rubicon. The available evidence demands that one be agnostic about this proposition and it seems plausible to hold that this agnosticism should be of the pessimistic kind: no further evidence about Caesar's number of hairs on that occasion may be collected. The realist about the past will nonetheless insist that there is a fact of the matter as to whether Caesar had an even number of hairs when he crossed the Rubicon: this proposition is either true or false.

This type of pessimistic agnosticism may be contrasted with the stance which concludes from the impossibility of collecting new evidence about *p* that there is no fact of the matter as to whether *p*. Consider a religious agnostic who concludes that there is no fact of the matter as to whether God exists on the grounds that no evidence may be collected that will settle God's existence one way or the other. According to such a religious agnostic, the proposition that God exists is neither true nor false. The question whether God exists is undecidable and this undecidability is a metaphysical matter rather than simply an epistemic one.

It is not only certain religious agnostics that are willing to conclude that a certain proposition is neither true nor false from the fact that no further evidence may be gathered for or against it. In the philosophy of set theory, for instance, Joel Hamkins (2015) has argued that the Continuum Hypothesis is absolutely undecidable (and not just undecidable on the basis of the ZFC axioms, of which it is independent) on the grounds that any attempt to settle it on the basis of further axioms is bound to be rejected: axioms that settle it negatively will be rejected as violating our experience of worlds in which the Continuum Hypothesis holds, and axioms that settle it positively will be rejected as violating our experience of worlds in which its negation holds. Hamkins appears therefore to be arguing that any attempt to gather further evidence for or against the Continuum Hypothesis (in this case, in the form of new axioms) is bound to fail, and hence that the Continuum Hypothesis is absolutely undecidable. Again, this undecidability for him is not just an epistemic matter: Hamkins concludes that the Continuum Hypothesis is neither true nor false.

For another position of this sort, consider supervaluationism about vagueness (see e.g. Keefe 2000). Suppose that Alice is a borderline case of

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tallness, that is, she is neither definitely tall nor definitely not tall. According to supervaluationists, this is because actual linguistic usage does not determine whether the extension of *tall* includes Alice or not. As a result, it is neither true nor false that Alice is tall and we should be agnostic about whether Alice is tall.

One could object that indeterminacy agnosticism is not an instance of agnosticism at all, since it involves a commitment to the relevant proposition being neither true nor false. To address this objection, it is crucial to observe that, on our approach, whether one is agnostic or not depends on the question under discussion. If the question under discussion is understood as a polar question, a commitment to the relevant proposition being neither true nor false does not amount to settling the question in one of the available ways, so indeterminacy agnosticism is rightly counted as an instance of agnosticism. However, one could allow the relevant proposition being neither true nor false to count as a way of settling the question. In this case, the question under discussion is no longer understood as a polar question—we are countenancing a third complete answer to the question. On this reading of the question under discussion, agnosticism requires refraining from giving any of the available complete answers to it. In this context, therefore, agnosticism becomes the attitude of refraining from believing that p is true, refraining from believing that p is false, and refraining from believing that p is neither true nor false. Under the proposed reading, Hamkins and the supervaluationists do not refrain from giving one of the available complete answers—they give a third answer. And although they do refrain from believing that the relevant propositions are true and refrain from believing that they are false, they do believe that they are neither true nor false. Thus, our account can concede that there is a sense in which indeterminacy agnosticism is not agnosticism, namely, when expressing a commitment to the proposition being neither true nor false, which was previously not considered an admissible complete answer to the polar question under discussion, is now itself admitted as a complete answer to the question under discussion (which is therefore no longer understood as a polar question).

This brings to light the flexibility of our account, which has the resources to be naturally extended to cover cases in which one is dealing with questions that admit more than two complete answers. Indeed, our account can be similarly extended to apply when the question under discussion is a *wh*-question. In this case, again, the agnostic is someone who refrains from giving any of the complete answers to the question under discussion. For instance, if the question under discussion is *Who went to the cinema?*, the agnostic is someone who refrains from giving any complete answer which is pertinent to this question. In terms of mental attitude, the agnostic refrains from committing to all propositions expressed by the various complete answers to the question under discussion.

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VII. CONCLUSION

We have provided a framework for understanding agnosticism. The framework accounts for the varieties of agnosticism while vindicating the unity of the phenomenon. This combination of unity and plurality is achieved by taking the varieties of agnosticism to be represented by several agnostic stances, all of which share a common core provided by the minimal agnostic attitude. We have illustrated how the framework can be fruitfully applied to some philosophical debates. In particular, several philosophical positions can be aptly conceived of as agnostic whilst appreciating the important differences between them.

There are several directions for future research. We mention three that we consider particularly important. The first one concerns gnosticism. We believe that our framework can be fruitfully applied to distinguish several stances within the gnostic camp, in a similar vein to what we did in the case of agnosticism. For instance, we can distinguish between two broad gnostic stances: the grounded gnostic, whose belief (or disbelief) is the result of enquiry into the relevant proposition; and the ungrounded gnostic, whose belief (or disbelief) is not the result of such an enquiry. An interesting example of an ungrounded gnostic is the fideist, who believes that God exists—she answers *yes* to the question *Is it the case that God exists?* but not as a result of any enquiry into whether God exists. Indeed, the fideist thinks that no enquiry into the existence of God will ever deliver evidence to settle the matter. Our framework also allows us to capture this aspect of the fideist's position—the fideist answers *no* to the question *Will further enquiry deliver evidence that settles the question of God's existence positively or negatively?*.

The second direction for future research concerns the possibility of partial agnosticism. In the paper, we have focused on complete answers to questions under discussion, but of course non-complete answers may be considered too. For instance, when asked *Who went to the cinema?*, Alice may answer *Bob and Carla did, but I don't know who else went.* We submit that such cases can be naturally understood as cases of partial agnosticism and another advantage of our framework is that it appears to be extendable to cover such cases.

The third direction concerns disagreement. Disagreement may of course occur between the believer and the disbeliever. But it might seem controversial whether disagreement may also occur between the agnostic and the (dis)believer (on this issue see, for instance, Gibbard 2003: ch. 4). Our framework promises to shed light on this question too. In particular, it can be used to vindicate the existence of disagreement between the agnostic and the (dis)believer in terms of a clash of their commitments. In addition, the framework would seem to have the resources to distinguish between several types of disagreement in terms of the different commitments associated with the

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various agnostic stances. We hope to explore these avenues of research in future work.[8]

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