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The Virtues and Vices of Agnosticism

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Abstract: This essay begins with preliminary observations about the nature of agnosticism. Based on the term's etymology, in this essay an agnostic about some proposition (e.g., God exists) is someone who does not know whether the proposition is true. Being an agnostic about the truth of a proposition is compatible with the proposition appearing to be true or the state of affairs obtains but incompatible with an agnostic knowing its truth or that the state of affairs obtains. (Reference to propositions and states of affairs is intended to be inclusive, rather than a controversial metaphysical distinction.) Based on apparent virtues and vices, reasons are offered about when agnosticism (or the profession of agnosticism) is virtuous or philosophically desirable and when either actual agnosticism or its profession seems to be a vice or undesirable. The essay concludes with challenging Anthony Kenny's case for agnosticism about theism based on the virtue of humility. The central claims about apparent virtues and vices rest on the positive epistemic standing of appearances as defended by many so-called "common sense philosophers" Thomas Reid, Roderick Chisholm, and, more recently, Thomas Nagel's thesis about the justified status of the appearance of values.

Keywords: agnosticism; virtue; vice; theism; humility; Anthony Kenny; Thomas Nagel

1. Introduction

The term "agnosticism" is derived from the Greek term for unknown or unknowable, "agnōstos". The English word "agnostic" was introduced in 1869 by the British biologist Thomas Huxley who professed not to know whether God exists or whether there is life after death. In its ordinary use in English, the term can be employed outside of the topic of theism or philosophy of religion; for example, someone may claim to be agnostic about physicalism or the source of climate change. Usually, the term "agnostic" is used when a person has some capability to inquire into the truth of theism (physicalism or climate change and so on) and has at least made some effort to inquire into its truth, and professes not to know of its truth or falsehood. Without such preconditions, the notion of being agnostic would be too broad; for example, it would be odd to claim that human infants are agnostics even though, to the infants the world itself and the existence or nonexistence of God is unknown or unknowable for them at the time. So, in this essay, let us assume that agnosticism is often a matter of reflection, and that (at the least) it often describes a case of when a person believes they do not know the truth of some matter, commonly not knowing about the existence of God, but it can be used regarding other matters.

It is good for there to be a systematic examination of agnosticism. Many arguments in the history of philosophy and today may be interpreted as appealing to special cases of agnosticism. Aristotelians have sometimes claimed to have no idea what a Platonic form might be; some materialists have claimed to be agnostic about immaterial souls but use Ockham's razor to exclude them in their metaphysics; some idealists have claimed that the very idea of mind-independent matter is muddled, some kind of unknowable phenomena; and of course the ordinary language philosophy under John Austin (which once dominated Oxford University) was driven by his claim to have no knowledge (or understanding) at all of the claims by some of his opponents (like A.J. Ayer and H.H. Price). It has been said that he made looking perplexed and flabbergasted (in the spirit of Thomas Nagel, we might

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refer to his performances as "what it's like to be an agnostic") into an art form (see Rowe 2023 [1] especially chapters 31 and 32).

There are four sections that follow. In Section 1, let us consider some preliminary distinctions about the nature of agnosticism. In Section 2, cases are identified when it seems that agnosticism is virtuous or praise-worthy, while Section 3 identifies cases of when agnosticism or its profession seems inappropriate, even a vice. Section 4 critically engages an argument for agnosticism advanced by Anthony Kenny when it comes to belief in God or its denial. Kenny's argument rests on his concept of the virtue of humility. I suggest that the apparent virtue of humility does not essentially favor agnosticism; either theistic or atheistic convictions may be supported by humility.

2. Some Preliminary Distinctions

Let us consider five matters, beginning with the matter of whether agnosticism is voluntary.

I cannot hope to resolve here whether all beliefs are voluntary. (A classic case of the position that belief is involuntary is in the Appendix of David Hum's *A Treatise Concerning Human Nature* [2]) My own view is nuanced; belief seems to me involuntary when it comes to common sense beliefs about persons and the world, values, and meaning. Perhaps I am wrong, but I do not think I can just choose to believe in global skepticism (that none of my perceptual beliefs, memories, and so on, are reliable) in the absence of powerful arguments. But, in the spirit of Blaise Pascal and William James, I suggest that in some philosophical matters (like the truth of theism or human freedom or a Platonic view of mathematics) the evidence can be non-decisive and yet it is permissible for a philosopher to believe (trust or profess or hope) that some position is true, even if this is not based on discursive reason but more a matter of an appearance [3,4]. Some state of affairs may appear to a subject to be true, even if that subject does not know whether the appearance is veridical and such an appearance may count as prima facie evidence that the state of affairs obtains. Indeed, I shall rely on such an epistemic precept below. Be that as it may, in the present matter, I note that insofar as agnosticism is involuntary, it need not be a reflection of personal responsibility. For example, there are some medical conditions described in terms of agnosticism that seem utterly outside one's control. On the latter, a derivation of the term 'agnostic' is used to designate a medical condition, visual agnosia, when a subject cannot recognize objects, including faces; agnosia can also take place when a subject cannot recognize sounds, including speech. These medical conditions are typically understood to be involuntary, the result of brain damage.

In this paper, I suggest that we assume that a healthy, mature person may be an agnostic, whether this is directly or indirectly voluntary. For example, some agnostics about God may claim that belief in God is not possible for them, while other agnostics may claim that they freely choose to be agnostic. When discussing the virtues and vices of agnosticism, I endeavor to identify cases of when agnosticism is held (or its profession is made) with sufficient voluntariness to merit praise or disapproval.

Let us now consider moderate and extreme agnosticism, selective agnosticism, agnosticism and standards of knowledge, agnosticism and religious practice.

Moderate and Extreme Agnosticism. I suggest that the more reasonable forms of agnosticism are modest in scope and certainty. So, an extreme form of agnosticism about theism would be the claim to know with maximum certainty that no person (including God, if there is a God) in the past, present or future has ever known whether God exists or even could know this. Such a radical claim would seem to require a more powerful argument than almost any argument in the history of thought. None of the great, seemingly indestructible arguments of the past have survived scrutiny—arguments about nominalism versus realism, materialism vs. idealism vs. dualism, Kant's transcendental idealism, Wittgenstein's private language argument, Quine's behaviorism, Rawls's veil of ignorance arguments, Mackie's version of the problem of evil, and so on. (For a devastating exposure of the failures to secure sound, successful arguments in twentieth century analytical

philosophy, see [5]). I suggest that a more defensible form of agnosticism would be for persons to claim that they do not know whether theism is true and, in the tradition of Socrates who (in the early Platonic dialogues) challenged the knowledge claims of his interlocutors, they propose that others do not know whether God exists. So, a modest form of agnosticism would be in the form of a claim and a proposal, rather than to claim to know with absolute certainty that no one (including God, if there is a God) knows whether theism is true. Interestingly, the one who coined the term "agnosticism" seems to have adopted what I am describing as modest agnosticism. Huxley wrote, "I neither affirm nor deny the immortality of man. I see no reason for believing it, but on the other hand. I have no means of disproving it. I have no a priori objection to the doctrine" ([6], p. 17). This claim is different than claiming that the doctrine is known to be false or that to know that no one has ever had good reasons for believing the doctrine.

Selective Agnosticism. Standards in the practice of phil, osophy vary, but the importance of self-consistency seems fairly enduring. This can come into play with agnosticism when a philosopher professes to be agnostic on some topic (normative ethical values, for example) but not agnostic about something remarkably similar (normative epistemic values). J.L. Mackie, A.J. Ayer have been castigated for this from time to time (e.g., Taliaferro 1998) [7–9]. You are not invulnerable to criticism if you use the same reasons and standards for claiming not to know the cause of climate change if those reasons and standards would equally undermine your claim to know that some politician has integrity.

Agnosticism and the standard of knowledge. Knowledge has had multiple analyses over the years beyond the simple formula that a subject knows p if and only if p is true, the subject believes p, and the subject is justified in believing p. The only point to make here is that the conditions for knowledge can be made so constricted—for example, S knows p if and only if p is believed infallibly (incapable of error), indubitably (incapable of doubt), and/or incorrigibly (incapable of change due to counter-evidence)—then few of us would claim to know very much at all (perhaps only the knowledge of when we are in excruciating, relentless pain). The observation here is that if the standard of knowledge is made exorbitant, most persons will be labelled agnostic in many areas of life. Such an outcome makes agnosticism a less interesting topic philosophically.

Agnosticism and Religious Practice. Especially if some extreme definition of knowledge is assumed, agnosticism is compatible with much religious belief and practice. The Christian creeds do not begin with something like "We believe with maximal, indubitable certainty in God. . ." Prayer to God may be based on hope, faith, even just gut instinct, intuition or prudence or love of others or even love of God. You may pray, worship, make a confession of sins and repent, petition God to heal the injured, without claiming to know with certitude that God exists (see [10,11]) Indeed, there is a growing literature on non-doxastic faith, according to which religious practitioners are understood as having positive, faithful attitudes and resilient desires rather than overt commitments to the truth of propositions (see [12], pp. 174–176). But some religious emotions seem to require an element of belief or trust that goes beyond the reticence to claim to know the truth of some beliefs. In a Christian context, for example, it is hard to take joy in the proclamation of Jesus's resurrection without some assent that (in some meaningful way) there was a resurrection. Anthony Kenny recounts that, after hearing an Easter sermon in which the resurrection was approached with agnosticism, two Anglicans, including Rowan Williams (future Archbishop of Canterbury) adjusted the traditional Greek Easter greeting "*Christos areste, Alethos areste*!" ("Christ is risen, truly he has arisen") to "*Christos areste, Isos areste*!" ("Christ is risen, perhaps he is risen") ([13], p. 44). Still, Gary Gutting's term "religious agnosticism" seems applicable to such an occasion. Gutting writes:

> Knowledge, if it exists, adds a major dimension to religious commitment. But a fruitful way of life and of understanding, even without knowledge, is a tremendous gift, and religious knowledge claims are hard to support. We should make room for those who embrace a religion as a source of moral guidance and understanding but remain agnostic about the religions knowledge claims. We should,

> for example, allow that a good Christian may doubt the literal truth of the Trinity and the Resurrection. I wager, in fact, that, many professed Christians are not at all sure about the truth of these doctrines -and other believers have similar doubts. They are, quite properly, religious agnostics. ([14], p. 138)

I suggest that Gutting's position is plausible: embracing religious knowledge claims adds a major element to religious practice, but religious practice can be compatible with being agnostic about religious knowledge claims.

3. Some Virtues of Agnosticism

In examining some apparent virtues and vices of agnosticism, I will assume we have some reason to trust our commonsense moral views about some virtues and vices. Such trust need not be based on claims of infallible knowledge, but a matter of what Thomas Nagel recently refers to as "intuitive value judgments" ([15], p. 5). In "Gut Feelings and Moral Knowledge", Nagel argues for the unavoidability of relying on gut feelings, intuitions, and "an immediate sense of what may or may not be done to people" as a starting point in moral inquiry ([15], p. 3). The precept that we should trust appearances to be the what they appear to be (we should trust that what appears to be cruel, truly is cruel) has a long history before Nagel from Aristotle to Thomas Reid, G.E. Moore, and Roderick Chisholm. For a recent defense, see [16]).

Consider agnosticism in light of humility, honesty, and respect:

Humility. I suggest the whole history of philosophy might have been more palatable (accessible and realistic) if it reflected more agnosticism. Imagine, some modified, philosophical claims. I have adjusted them, not as strict agnostic convictions, but as convictions that are advanced with less than dogmatic certainty. Wilfrid Sellars once made this claim: "In the dimension of describing and explaining the world, science is the measure of all things, of what is that it is, and of what is not, that it is not" ([17], p. 173).

Consider this modification of Sellar's original claim: I could be wrong, but what if we tried to make the natural sciences the guide to all things? We might provisionally think that science is the guide to all things, but, of course, we might be wrong.

I suggest the latter would be more humble, and less dogmatic. It suggests that further inquiry is called for. In that sense, I propose that it has an appealing virtue that is not evident in the original claim which contains no hint of doubt.

David Hume once wrote:

> "If we take in our hand any volume; of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance; let us ask, Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number? No. Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence? No. Commit it then to the flames: for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion." (Hume 1748, [18], Sect. 12, pt. 3)

Consider this modification.

If you come across books in metaphysics that go beyond the empiricism I have defended, do not burn them. It might turn out that my empiricism is defective on some grounds (indeed, I worry about my views on causation, the self, induction. . .), and maybe those works on metaphysics are reliable. But I still urge you to read sympathetically my *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*.

I suggest that the modified version appears to be the more humble, and its self-effacing tone more likely to encourage dialogue than the original. Encouraging book-burning (even if its intent was hyperbole) does not appear virtuous. Bertrand Russell ends his *A History of Western Philosophy* pronouncing that we can be certain that the ontological argument is dead. Consider this alteration:

There are very few definitive conclusions in the history of Western philosophy.

Personally, I think the theistic ontological argument fails because, as Kant observed, existence is not a property. But someone named Alvin Plantinga might revive the argument, defending the coherence of modal properties like existing necessarily. So, let us keep an

open mind on even some version of the ontological argument. Perhaps these more modified claims would make for less drama. My suggestion is that they would lead to less pomposity and greater honesty, but I make my point as a suggestion. To avoid self-refutation, my suggestion should be read as a mere suggestion, and not as itself a dogmatic claim.

A modest caveat: I am assuming that many of the original claims I have modified above were not known by their authors with infallible, indubitable Certainty.

Honesty. This virtue might be so close to humility that it does not deserve its own entry, but I suggest that when some philosophers advance their claims in strident, non-agnostic ways (e.g., the famous claim by Jeremy Bentham that an opposing view is "nonsense on stilts") there may be just bravado, bluffing, an over-excited suspicion that they have revolutionized all thought, and so on, but there may also be a willful lack of candor. For libel reasons, I will not cite cases of when I think contemporary philosophers have been less than honest, so I will present my point cautiously: if the philosophical community was more open to agnostic claims, there may be less danger of misrepresenting positions as obvious, evident matters of knowledge. I cite a recent case that I believe is exemplary as a philosophical work that is robust and modestly agnostic: *Space* God; Rejudging a Debate between More, Newton, and Einstein by J.D. Lyonhart. The author presents what I believe to be a cogent case for divine space as expounded by the seventeenth century Cambridge Platonist, Henry More. While his case is expertly made, Lyonhart writes in the Conclusion: "I still do not know if divine space is true or not" ([19], p. 205). Is it not a refreshing exception to much of the philosophical literature when authors never even hint that they are less than certain in their arguments and conclusion.

Respect. Agnosticism might play several positive roles in which proper respect is shown to the sacred or divine or, in secular contexts, when it comes to making knowledge claims about groups of people radically different from oneself. On the first point, many religious traditions underscore the radical otherness of God or the sacred. Christian tradition abounds with warnings against presumptuous claims about achieving certain knowledge of God's essence. See, for example, Evelyn Underhill's classic *Mystics of the Church* and praise for reverential agnosticism over against claims of dogmatic certitude. In a secular context, there is now (at least in North America and Europe) a reluctance for philosophers from socially privileged positions (full employment, health and wealth) to claim to know what it is like to be oppressed, starving, diseased, vulnerable, subject to persecution for one's sexual orientation or religion, and so on. I suggest that this is not a matter of an epistemic necessity, but a respectful act of not further suffocating or disabling those who are suffering injustice or hardship. There seems to be something that is either prima facie arrogant or misplaced for me to claim to know what it is to be raped, brutally assaulted, and starving, when I have not been subject to these atrocities. In the next section, however, I take note of when an ostensible, respectful agnosticism ceases to be respectful.

4. Some Vices of Agnosticism

I note here three areas where agnosticism or the profession of agnosticism may not be virtuous.

False Humility. I suggest that there are some matters when professing to be agnostic is implausible. Imagine witnessing first-hand the relentless beating of horses and dogs for what appears to be the purpose of sadistic entertainment. You hear their cries of what appears to be painful suffering; you see the skin lacerations, the bleeding, and the animals trying to escape. In the midst of what certainly seems like pointless carnage you claim to be agnostic about whether there is any morally relevant harm occurring. Would this be proper humility? If the example is not severe enough, imagine, instead of horses and dogs, young, linguistic, human children are being beaten and skinned alive; you even hear them calling you to intervene and stop the violence. I suggest that agnosticism under these conditions (e.g., a person claims not to know whether cruelty is occurring) would be a vice, and not anything like proper humility. The precept that we should trust appearances (such as the appearance of cruelty) in the absence of strong counter-evidence has great

significance. We can imagine some strange counter-evidence (or defeaters). For example, you look more closely and what appears to be real violence and suffering is an animation (not real) and is being made for a film condemning animal cruelty. But I suggest grandiose philosophical, skeptical speculation (maybe I am a brain in a vat hallucinating) would not defeat the evidence of what appears to be very real cruelty.

Dishonesty. Same case as above, but let us imagine the person comes to truly believes there is preventable cruelty occurring but professes to not really know this. We might feel less ill of this professing agnostic, if the person took action to prevent the apparent cruelty, e.g., the professing agnostic thinks: in case there really is preventable, cruel inflictions of suffering, I will do what I can to relieve it. But such intervention (especially if it was costly to the rescuer) might reveal that the original claim to be agnostic was less than genuine. We can imagine someone undertaking a brave rescue of what she believes to be a stranded innocent person on a distant island, but would such an effort make any sense if the rescuer thought there was no evidence at all (let alone no sufficient evidence) that anyone was in peril?

Failures of Compassion. I claim that it would be disrespectful for me to claim to be agnostic about reported atrocities being committed (imagine an apparently impartial organization such as Doctors Without Borders has produced what appears to be widespread cases of rape, genocide, ethnic cleansing) because, after all, I have not directly witnessed these wrongs and the reports might be false. Maybe I do not know of this violence with maximal certainty, but surely, I can be faulted for what appears to be an affected, perhaps self-serving agnosticism (e.g., I believe that trying to stop the horrors or provide aid might cost me significantly and I value my comfort more than my moral integrity). Let us now turn to Anthony Kenny's case for agnosticism about theism based on the virtue of humility.

5. Kenny on the Primacy of Agnosticism

In what follows, I will be citing Kenny extensively from his 2004 book *The* Unknown God: Agnostic Essays (pp. 106–109) [20]. Kenny writes:

> While praising the characteristic Christian virtue of humility, I have expressed reservation about the other Christian attribute of faith. The recitation of a creed, I claim, is incompatible with the true humility which Christianity so rightly prizes. This may seem surprising, as faith is so often held up as an exercise of humility: the abasement of the human reason before the mysterious power of God. Now of course if God has indeed revealed some truths, it would be insane folly not to accept them. The difficulty is in the knowing first that there is a God; and secondly that he has revealed certain doctrines. For my part I find the arguments for God's existence unconvincing and the historical evidence uncertain on which the credal statements are based. The appropriate response to the uncertainty of argument and evidence is not atheism—that is at least as rash as the theism to which it is opposed—but agnosticism: that is the admission that one does not know whether there is a God who has revealed himself to the World.

We are not yet at the heart of Kenny's claim about the primacy of agnosticism, but I raise two matters in response to this passage just cited of general interest to Christianity and agnosticism.

When is "uncertainty of argument and evidence" about a given matter a decisive reason to be agnostic on that matter? I do not think this is always obvious. In some cases, I suggest that some ethical and prudential principles can guide us in questions of uncertainty. For example, in the case of witnessing what appears to be cruelty to animals, if one does have philosophical uncertainty about the apparent cruelty (perhaps under the influence of Descartes or Wittgenstein) I suggest that one should nonetheless act on the supposition that what appears the case, is truly what is occurring.

Second, some Christian philosophers today claim that knowledge of God (both of God's existence and God's revelation) does not require evidence. Again, this is not the proper occasion for launching a Plantinga-style reformation epistemology argument, but I take note that there are current, interesting philosophical cases for the warrant of religious

beliefs without evidence (Plantinga 2000 [21]). In fairness, it should also be noted that, from time to time it has been argued that there should be a presumption of atheism under conditions of uncertainty. In his famous paper, "The Presumption of Atheism," Antony Flew wrote about the "modest teachability" of atheism (Flew 1972, 29) ([22], p. 29). (Interestingly, Flew later abandoned atheism for theism).

Back to Kenny:

> There is, beyond doubt, a virtue—let us call it rationality—which preserves the just mean between believing too much (credulity) and believing too little (scepticism). From the viewpoint of an agnostic both the theist and the atheist err by credulity: they are both believing something—the one a positive proposition, the other a negative proposition—in the absence of the appropriate justification. On the other hand, from the point of view of theism, the agnostic errs on the side of scepticism: that is, he has no view on a topic on which it is very important to have a view. Internally, there is no way of settling whether it is the agnostic who errs on the side of scepticism, or the theist who is erring on the side of credulity.

But if we look at the matter from the viewpoint of humility it seems that the agnostic is in the safer position. The theist is claiming to possess a good which the agnostic does not claim to possess: he is claiming to be in possession of knowledge; the agnostic lays claim only to ignorance. The believer will say he does not claim knowledge, only true belief; but at least he claims to have laid hold, in whatever way, of information that the agnostic does not possess. It may be said that any claim to possess gifts which others do not have is the same situation, and yet we have admitted that such a claim may be made with truth and without prejudice to humility. But in the case of a gift such as intelligence or athletic skill, those surpassed will agree that they are surpassed; whereas in this case, the theist can only rely on the support of other theists, and the agnostic does not think that the information which the theist claims is genuine information at all. Since Socrates philosophers have realized that a claim not to know is easier to support than a claim to know.

Consider three replies.

First, Kenny's agnostic is making positive claims and, in that sense, may be not a pure agnostic: his agnostic maintains that the information the Christian claims to have is not "genuine information". This is different from claiming not to know whether the information is genuine. I suggest a genuine agnostic (as proposed at the outset of this paper) on the matter at hand would claim not to know whether the Christian "information" is true or not. I must add a minor point that may seem pedantic: describing Christians spirituality as a matter of "information" seems very wide of the mark in taking into account Christian experience (see Evelyn Underhill [23]). Many philosophers of religion today contend that religious experience, at least in the Christian tradition, has an affective, personal dimension (Eleonore Stump 2010; Taliaferro and Evans 2021 [24,25]).

Second, in light of some observations made earlier in this paper, and setting aside Kenny's agnostic making the positive claim to know Christian "information" is false, I question that the general thesis (attributed by Kenny to Socrates) that the claim not to know something is easier to support than a claim to know. I suppose that the term "easier" might be too vague, but off hand I suggest that the claim to trust one's perceptual judgements and self-awareness is more plausible to claim to be justified in believing ('knowing' in the broad sense) than to claim to not to know (or be ignorant whether) you exist as a subject in the world. I suggest, too, the claim not to know any objective moral facts (e.g., it is morally wrong to skin and salt babies) is probably pathological and reflective of deep socio-pathology than to claim that there are some objectively true moral facts. So, there is little reason (I suggest) to accept Kenny's version of the Socratic principle.

Three, Kenny refers to theists claiming to possess some kind of gift. This is peculiar language. What is the epistemology of gift giving and receiving? He offers no guidance on this, but it is easy to suggest that many agnostics claim to have intellectual integrity, humility, purity of beliefs, being wise versus gullible (whether these are considered gifts or not). But perhaps Kenny's point is that the achieving or failing to achieve the reception of

gifts should be a matter of public or broad agreement; something has gone wrong if only theists receive support or recognition by theists. Perhaps Kenny is imagining this: If you and I run a race, with you representing Oxford and me representing St. Olaf, and only the St. Olaf judges and spectators think I won, something has gone wrong.

Fortunately, we need not do a deep dive into how to assess such a race, when in reality the philosophical literature is full of theists praising agnostics, atheists sometimes praising the rigor of theistic arguments, atheists sometimes praising agnostics, non-theistic Hindu and Buddhist philosophers praising theistic Hinduism and the Abrahamic faiths. To reduce the disagreements and agreements among the widespread diversity of religious and secular points of view to a simple race is (in my view) deeply implausible today. See, for example, the four volume Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Philosophy of Religion with contributors and editors representing every religion on the planet (as well as agnostics) [26]. For a single, great counter-example to the thesis that only theists praise theistic arguments, see Michael Ruse's Foreword to *Agents Under Fire:* Materialism and the Rationality of Science by Angus Menuge in which Ruse reports that Menuge's case for theism is so impressive it makes him embarrassed to be an atheist. [27] Maybe Kenny's depiction of theism and its alternatives seemed right in the 1950s when Oxbridge debates were limited to Christians (like Frederick Copleston, C.S. Lewis or Basil Mitchell) versus non-Christians (J.L. Mackie, Antony Flew, A.J. Ayer), but today it seems either odd or hostile. Rather than depict the current intellectual climate like a footrace, a better metaphor would be that the current scene seems more like an ever expanding, epic, global seminar with multiple break-away meetings for special inquiries.

I propose that Kenny has not secured his case for the primacy of agnosticism. The practice of humility, as an apparent virtue, depends upon what appears to be valuable or vicious. In the critical examination of Kenny's case for agnosticism, there is no evident, appearance of value that supports agnosticism over against theistic belief.

6. Summary

In this paper, I have offered some proposals about the nature of agnosticism (its voluntariness, scope, the coherence of religious naturalism). Using a widely accepted epistemic precept (defended by many philosophers from Thomas Reid to Thomas Nagel) that moral appearances should be taken as prima facie reliable, I have identified cases of when agnosticism or its profession involves apparent virtues and vices. In the final section, I contended that Anthony Kenn's case for agnosticism is not successful.

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