

Avery Archer. *The Attitude of Agnosticism*. Cambridge University Press 2024. 228 pp. \$110.00 USD (Hardcover 9781009214735); \$29.99 USD (Paperback 9781009214728).

In *The Attitude of Agnosticism*, Avery Archer presents a very detailed and comprehensive exploration of the necessary conditions for justifiably withholding judgment on prepositional statements. Archer provides an impressive survey of the relevant theories explaining the agnostic position and contributes substantially to the field with this book. The exploration is analytic, precise, and clear and adds much to the discussion.

In his introduction, Archer—for the sake of full disclosure—informs us that he himself struggled with his growing agnosticism while engaging in pastoral and theological work in his previous career. However, he contends that this book is not primarily about belief in a divinity or deep spiritual questions, but rather about the general experience of belief, disbelief and agnosticism that we face in all spheres of life from the mundane to the profound. His book makes good on this promise and, indeed, many of his examples are extremely banal and one could be forgiven for wondering why they were chosen given how little thought the average person would give them as belief dilemmas. However, Archer uses these examples adeptly to demonstrate distinct aspects of the possible doxastic positions as they are described in various epistemic theories. He presents evidence for and against these theories, and suggests appropriate changes based on these same everyday examples of belief choices.

The book unfolds over 10 chapters, laying out the scope of doxastic theory, exploring and critiquing conventional ideas, modifying both the understanding of belief formation in theories of mind and rational normative theories of belief. He suggests that we must see agnosticism as a justified inquiring attitude, not as a settled position, that this attitude is unique only to belief formation (there is no real-world intentional stance analogous to agnosticism), and that agnosticism is a uniquely permissible because of its necessity for honest, open inquiry and truth pursuit.

While thorough and careful, Archer's work is not without drawbacks here. His examples are mostly mundane and uninteresting; they are not often the sort of situations one considers important doxastic judgments. Most of us do not wonder about the belief requirements concerning bus schedules. One normally only begins to wonder about justifications for belief when considering bigger life changing problems. Archer does present some of these examples, such as the case of a cheating spouse, but most seem inconsequential choices like turning cartwheels in public. Such



examples weary the reader with their banal specificity and over analysis. The question of agnosticism only really appears for us in the meaningful, exigent sense, only comes under purposeful scrutiny, when we consider deeper, interesting questions. While the science of everyday choices may have its merits for inquiry, Archer seems to present so many simplistic choices for discussion, and almost pathologically avoids interesting questions to the point anyone seriously inquiring into their own agnosticism finds themselves perplexed with irrelevancies. The book may add much to analytic discussion, but it adds little to personal understanding of agnostic choice. I do not wish to know whether to be agnostic about bank schedules and soup cans, I can handle such questions just fine. I wonder whether I should withhold judgment on the meaning of life or big political questions. Archer's examples are just so unrelated to my experience of the question as to be pointless in personal inquiry.

The book also seems to miss something essential to belief struggles. Early in *The Attitude of Agnosticism*, we find a discussion of models of the mind that seem to oversimplify belief formation. Archer argues for a "mind as hallway" rather than a "mind as warehouse" model (ch. 2), suggesting people often hold contradictory beliefs in "different rooms" of the mind that are related to specific situations like doors in a hallway, never interacting. This separation of ideas allows for unnoticed contradictions. While this seems an accurate description of unreflective attitude, it also underplays the very reflective condition we are most interested in when being agnostic. Opposing belief states can coexist knowingly and interactively. In fact, this coexistence is often why we proclaim positions we would call agnostic. For example, a person can hold a personal faith commitment while intellectually remaining in a questioning attitude about what is believed. We can be entirely and simultaneously aware that these two positions are held by us, even holding them consistently together for very good reasons.

The very popular New Testament scholar, Bart Ehrmann, does just that when he claims in his various media posts that he is personally an atheist while remaining intellectually an agnostic. His position is that he cannot prove the nonexistence of God and other good thinkers like himself have somewhat persuasive reasons for believing in such existence, he does not find the argument persuasive either way. He is therefore intellectually agnostic about such a divinity. However, he does not personally believe there is a God, the preposition seems unlikely to him. He holds both the atheistic and agnostic positions simultaneously, is quite aware of his opposing thoughts on the matter, and finds the opposition unproblematic. I would state my own position similarly but from

the other side. I hold God's existence to be true, that position appears persuasive to me, while also maintaining an agnostic attitude of scrutiny because of the inconclusiveness of evidence. It is such a question that interested me in Archer's book, but this very question and stance he seems to purposely ignore.

I bring this discussion up because it is what is missing in Archer's approach to agnosticism. This position of doxastic tension goes to the very heart of what agnosticism is and it seems to be lost in Archer's discussion. As in the argument about practical intention (ch. 7), it could be argued against Archer that there is no practical belief state of agnosticism any more than there is a neutral state of intention. We may be fundamentally mistaken in thinking agnosticism is a belief state at all. Theoretical prepositions may really be no different than any other sphere of existence as far the exigent need to form positive or negative stances is concerned. Just as we intend to do or not do X, we also believe or disbelieve P, there really may be no middle ground where we withhold belief. Or, at least, the only real middle ground might be pure ambivalence, just as I may not care which action is chosen in a situation, I may not know what I believe about some subject. Archer has rightly rejected such ambivalence as a candidate for agnosticism, The agnostic state is very intentional and not a simple throwing up of the hands, but that fact does not necessarily lead to the conclusion agnosticism is unique and different than intention. We could as easily suppose that the agnostic stance is something other than belief just as the reflective stance on intentional choices is something other than intentions themselves. We may believe or disbelieve P just as we intend or do not intend to do X, but we may also recognize the lack of convincing reasons for our beliefs just as we recognize the balance of reasons for and against doing a particular action. We may believe even when agnostic just as we choose even when indecisive. Agnosticism really has nothing to do with what we believe anymore than it does what we choose. The judgment being withheld is one of knowledge, not one of faith. It may be as impossible not to form beliefs as it is not to have intentions, and yet, one can remain agnostic because it is possible to recognize a lack of knowledge. It is a-gnosis, not in-credulity that agnosticism is meant to imply. We may be confusing the fact that knowledge changes belief with the idea that lack of knowledge suspends belief. One believes or does not believe just as one chooses to do or not do, but one also reflects which requires an agnostic, inquiring stance.

In summary, Avery Archer has provided us with a very comprehensive discussion of the current debate around agnosticism in the analytic tradition and has added some very worthwhile

insights to that pursuit. However, he has also missed what seems to be some very key aspects of why we effect the agnostic position at all. In his desire to deconstruct the question into simple, manageable vivisection, he has lost the essential question most of us are asking when we wonder at our relation between belief and agnosticism.

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