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A “New Agnosticism” — Coming Soon?

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Monday, August 2, 2010

No one seems quite sure what to do with agnostics. In a sense, they are the odd cousins at the theological family reunion. The atheists and the theists know where they stand, but the agnostics? Who knows?

Writing recently at Slate.com, Ron Rosenbaum suggests that perhaps the time has come for a “new agnosticism” to match wits with the “New Atheists,” such as Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens. It’s time for a “revivified agnosticism,” Rosenbaum argues. As he says, their T-shirts will read simply, “I just don’t know.”

Rosenbaum makes an interesting case for his proposed revival of agnosticism. As he cites, the word itself was coined by Thomas Henry Huxley, Charles Darwin’s aggressive sidekick. Huxley was known as “Darwin’s bulldog” for a good reason, for he was totally committed to evolutionary theory and he was nothing less than pugnacious in argument.

Huxley defined agnosticism in terms of his principle that no one should claim objective knowledge “unless he can produce evidence which logically justifies that certainty.” In Huxley’s view, this principle of thought rules out any form of theism. At the same time, it supposedly renders atheism unnecessary. In the view of Huxley, atheism actually conceded too much to theism, for it seemed to allow that some adequate evidence for or against the existence of God might be brought forward.

Rosenbaum takes this argument a step forward. Atheists, he insists, actually “display a credulous and childlike faith, [and] worship a certainty as yet unsupported by evidence — the certainty that they can or will be able to explain how and why the universe came into existence.”

Thus, Rosenbaum wants “a distinct identity for agnosticism, to hold it apart from the certitudes of both theism and atheism.” This is not a small project.

“Let’s get one thing straight,” he insists: “Agnosticism is not some kind of weak-tea atheism. Agnosticism is not atheism *or* theism. It is radical skepticism, doubt in the possibility of certainty, opposition to the unwarranted certainties that atheism and theism offer.”

At this point Rosenbaum’s argument gets really interesting. He accuses the New Atheists of intolerance and their own form of heresy hunting, and ridicules them for their untenable faith that all the big questions can be answered with satisfaction by science. The New Atheists, he laments, “seemed to have stopped thinking since their early grade-school science fair triumphs.”

But Rosenbaum has no tolerance for theism, either. In fact, he basically accepts the atheistic rejection of any belief in a personal God. “Let me make clear that I accept most of the New Atheist’s criticism of religious bad behavior over the centuries, and of theology itself,” he asserts. “I just don’t accept turning science into a new religion until it can show it has



all the answers, which it hasn't, and probably never will."

Well, if Rosenbaum generally accepts the atheist argument, where can his own argument go? It goes to the one "big question" that seems to vex him most — "Why is there something rather than nothing?"

Now, that is one of the perennial questions of philosophy and theology, but it is an arbitrary and somewhat eccentric question to establish at the center of his argument. The more central question is, of course, the existence or non-existence of God. But Rosenbaum's point here seems to be that he lacks any confidence that science can supply an adequate or certain answer to the question of existence itself.

On these big questions, Rosenbaum proposes uncertainty. "Agnosticism doesn't fear uncertainty," he insists. "It doesn't cling like a child in the dark to the dogmas of orthodox religion or atheism. Agnosticism respects and celebrates uncertainty and has been doing so since before quantum physics revealed the uncertainty that lies at the very groundwork of being."

Rosenbaum clarifies that agnostics do not lack certainty on *all* questions of knowledge. They accept that some truths can be known, verified, and defended. But not the question of God's existence or the primary existence of anything at all.

But, in a fascinating twist, Rosenbaum suggests, contrary to Huxley, that the existence of God is not, in principle, unknowable. "I can conceive of logically possible states of affairs in which a God is knowable, and I can conceive of cases in which it is certain that no God exists."

Well, what might these "logically possible states of affairs" be? At this point in Rosenbaum's essay, I feel cheated. How can he simply assert that he can conceive of some intellectual conditions for theism or atheism without naming them?

In the end, Rosenbaum's argument for a "new agnosticism" seems more rooted in attitude than in logic. He accuses both the New Atheists and classical theists of intolerance and a lack of intellectual humility.

But, check out this rather striking sentence: "Agnosticism is not for the simple-minded and is not as congenial as atheism and theism are." Ah, so by implication, theism and atheism might be for the simple-minded, but it takes a higher intellect to be agnostic. How humble.

He continues: "The courage to admit we don't know and may never know what we don't know is more difficult than saying, sure, we know."

This is one of the central problems with agnosticism as a worldview. In claiming to take a humble approach, it actually ends up in a posture that is rather lacking in humility. The agnostic argues that we, as human creatures, are capable of deciding the intellectual terms when it comes to the big questions such as, first and foremost, the existence and possible knowledge of God.

A first principle of the Christian faith is the fact that special revelation is necessary in order to have any adequate certainty on these questions. Prior to this, the Christian worldview affirms that God has implanted the knowledge of himself in nature. In both forms of revelation, God sets the terms for his own knowability.

The intellectual state of affairs that makes theism possible is the knowledge given by God himself in revelation. Atheism rejects the possibility or actuality of such revelation. Fair enough; at least we know where we stand. Agnosticism requires what divine revelation does not offer — certainty on our own arbitrary terms.

The second major problem with agnosticism is more practical. It just doesn't work as a middle position or alternative to theism and atheism. Why? Because the question of God's existence or non-existence is simply too important and fundamental to human life. Every human being acts either upon the assumption that God exists, or that He does not exist. In the main, agnostics side with the atheists on this question, and operate on the assumption that God does not exist.

On this score, the atheists have it over the agnostics in terms of argument. There is little real difference in the two positions in terms of everyday life. Thus, agnostics are counted among the non-believers. But, to Ron Rosenbaum's

consternation, they actually seem less intellectually confident than the atheists. Given what is at stake, living on the basis of a mere assumption that we cannot know if God exists seems a bit flimsy.

Ron Rosenbaum's argument is worthy of consideration even as it shows where a "new agnosticism" might lead. But, I'm guessing that "I just don't know" isn't going to end up as a best-selling T-shirt.

I am always glad to hear from readers. Write me at mail@albertmohler.com. Follow regular updates on Twitter at www.twitter.com/AlbertMohler.

Ron Rosenbaum, "[An Agnostic Manifesto: At Least We Know What We Don't Know.](#)" *Slate.com*, Monday, June 28, 2010.

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