

Agnosticism, Inquiry, and Unanswerable Questions

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Abstract

In her paper “Why Suspend Judging?” Jane Friedman has argued that being agnostic about some question entails that one has an inquiring attitude towards that question. Call this the *agnostic-as-inquirer thesis*. I argue that the agnostic-as-inquirer thesis is implausible. Specifically, I maintain that the agnostic-as-inquirer thesis requires that we deny the existence of a kind of agent that plausibly exists; namely, one who is both agnostic about Q because they regard their available evidence as insufficient for answering Q and who decides not to inquire into Q because they believe Q to be unanswerable. I claim that it is not only possible for such an agent to exist, but that such an agent is also epistemically permissible.

Keywords

Agnosticism, suspending judgement, inquiry, unanswerable questions, Jane Friedman.

1 Introduction

In the popular imagination, an agnostic is someone who holds that the existence of a god is unknown or unknowable. However, unlike the term atheist, with which it is often associated, the term agnostic is routinely used in a non-theological way, as when someone describes herself as being agnostic about whether String Theory is true. I will be interested in the term in its broad usage, which includes both theological and non-theological contexts. The broad usage of the term is sometimes referred to as suspending judgement, and (as is fairly common in the philosophical literature) I will be using both

terms interchangeably.¹ In her paper “Why Suspend Judging?” Jane Friedman argues that “suspending judgement about Q entails inquiring into Q . ”² Call this the *agnostic-as-inquirer thesis*. For Friedman, inquiring into some question, Q , does not require engaging in some kind of investigative activity, like asking questions, looking up information online or conducting experiments in a laboratory. Rather, inquiring into Q involves possessing an attitude of openness and sensitivity to information that is relevant to answering Q . In sum, inquiry, for Friedman, is a “frame of mind” rather than an activity.³ In order to keep this aspect of Friedman’s view in sharp focus, I will be framing my discussion of the agnostic-as-inquirer thesis in terms of an agent having an *inquiring attitude* towards Q .

The question I wish to consider is this: does the fact that one is agnostic about Q entail that one has an inquiring attitude towards Q ? I defend a negative answer to this question. My paper will advance two independent arguments. My primary argument, limned in §4, is that there are plausibly cases in which an agent is agnostic about Q at t and fail to have an inquiring attitude towards Q at t . Insofar as this is the case, it follows that the agnostic-as-inquirer thesis is implausible. My secondary argument, limned in §5, is that there are cases in which it is epistemically permissible for an agent to be agnostic about Q at t despite the fact that they lack an inquiring attitude towards Q at t .

Why does this matter? At least two considerations immediately come to mind. First, the agnostic-as-inquirer thesis goes against what many self-described agnostics would say about themselves. For example, there are many individuals who would describe themselves as agnostics about whether a god exists who would flatly deny that they have an inquiring attitude towards the question of whether a god exists. If the agnostic-as-inquirer thesis were correct, then all such individuals would either be conceptually confused or suffer from a gross lack of self-knowledge. Second, the agnostic-as-inquirer thesis

¹ In this respect I follow Friedman (2013a, 2013b), who also uses the terms agnosticism and suspending judgment interchangeably.

² Friedman (2017: 314). Friedman is also committed to the claim that “inquiring into Q entails suspending judgement about Q ” (2017: 308). For criticisms bearing on this further claim, see Archer 2018.

³ Friedman 2017: 307.

forms an essential part of a larger, systematic treatment of agnosticism by Friedman, who maintains that there is an intimate connection between agnosticism and inquiry. Specifically, Friedman claims that we suspend judgement so that we can inquire and that there could be no suspension of judgement outside of a context of inquiry. Should the agnostic-as-inquirer thesis prove to be false, an essential ingredient for the success of Friedman's project would be unavailable. Given that Friedman has done more than almost any other contemporary philosopher to offer a systematic account of the nature and function of agnosticism, and that she is widely regarded as an authority on the matter, it is important for us to have an accurate appraisal of her claims.

2 Stage setting

In order to establish some common ground between Friedman and me, I will be making the following three assumptions. First, following Friedman, I conceive of agnosticism as an “attitude of committed neutrality” and not merely as the absence of belief and disbelief.⁴ For example, a pre-schooler who has never heard of String Theory, and has therefore never considered whether String Theory is true, is correctly described as neither believing nor disbelieving that String Theory is true. However, it does not follow that the pre-schooler is agnostic about whether String Theory is true. Instead, this would be a case in which an agent simply lacks any doxastic attitude about whether String Theory is true.⁵

Second, following Friedman, I will assume that agnosticism is a question-directed attitude. Friedman motivates this idea as follows:

[S]uspension reports are most naturally made with interrogative complements, rather than declarative ones. Ascriptions like, ‘Alice is suspending judgement about whether its going to rain later’ are fine, but ones like, ‘Alice is suspending judgement that it is going to rain later’ are not. (Friedman 2017: 304)

⁴ Friedman 2017: 303. This is a thesis Friedman has argued for at great length (I believe convincingly) in Friedman 2013b.

⁵ See Friedman 2013b: 165ff for a discussion of this point.

The observation that suspension reports take interrogative complements is but one of several considerations that lead Friedman to claim that agnosticism is an *interrogative attitude*.⁶ In this regard, agnosticism differs from believing *that P* and disbelieving *that P*, both of which naturally take indicative compliments. I will be proceeding under the assumption that the claim that an attitude is question-directed is a purely positive thesis. To wit, saying that an attitude is question-directed implies that it has interrogative content, but it does not imply that it lacks propositional content. Since Friedman does not explicitly deny that interrogative attitudes display propositional content, I will remain neutral on this question. What Friedman does seem to deny is that interrogative attitudes involve the endorsement or rejection of a certain propositional content. Hence, interrogative attitudes differ from non-interrogative attitudes like belief and disbelief not only because the former possess interrogative content (which the latter lack), but also because they fail to take a stand on the truth or falsity of a proposition.⁷

Third, following Friedman, I will assume that someone has an inquiring attitude towards *Q* just in case *Q* is on his or her “research agenda” (Friedman 2017: 308). Having *Q* on one’s research agenda minimally entails that one has the aim of answering *Q*. Friedman puts the point as follows:

In general we can say that we are in this sort of inquiring frame of mind with respect to *Q* when (and only when) *Q* is on our research agenda. I take it that our research agendas record our epistemic goals by way of the questions we wish to answer....[I]n inquiring into some question we aim to resolve or answer the question—we aim to (e.g.) know the answer to the question” (Friedman 2017: 304. *Italics mine*).

Significantly, having the aim of answering some question is the only explicitly stated necessary condition Friedman offers for being in an inquiry frame of mind. I believe that this makes Friedman’s proposal significantly more plausible than it may initially appear since it does

⁶ For a detailed and sustained argument in defense of the claim that agnosticism is an interrogative attitude, see Friedman 2013a.

⁷ I will like to thank an anonymous referee for this journal for alerting me to the need to make the aforementioned clarification.

not saddle her with a conception of inquiry that involves engaging in the kinds of activities we typically associate with inquiry. I may have the aim of gaining tenure within the next two years at a certain moment in time even if I happen to be watching cute cat videos online at that moment—i.e., doing something that in no way contributes to my gaining tenure within the next two years. In other words, one may count as having the aim of achieving a certain end even if one is not currently engaged in an activity that would facilitate the achievement of that end. Hence, saying that someone has an inquiring attitude towards whether String Theory is true does not entail that they are currently conducting experiments, gathering data, and the like. This is why Friedman often prefers to speak of “an inquiring frame of mind” (2017: 308) or of being in “an inquiring mode” (2017: 308). What she has in mind is a certain mental attitude and not merely a certain set of behaviours.

Friedman’s conception of inquiry is also meant to exclude cases in which an agent is merely engaged in the behaviours typically associated with inquiry, but in which the aim of answering a certain question is lacking. Friedman illustrates the point using a comparison between a detective and a trash collector:

Picking up items at a crime scene doesn’t make it that one is inquiring into who committed the crime. Whether those actions count as part of an inquiry into who committed the crime depends in part upon the state of mind of the relevant subject. When the detective does these things in the relevant sorts of cases they count as part of her inquiry because they are done with the aim of figuring out who committed the crime. The trash collector who has no such aim or goal, is not inquiring into who committed the crime, even if he picks up all of the same items as the detective. (Friedman 2017: 307)

In sum, Friedman holds that having the aim of knowing the answer to a question is a necessary condition for having an inquiring attitude towards that question.

Combining all three of the above assumptions borrowed from Friedman, we may characterize the agnostic-as-inquirer thesis as the claim that *an agent has an attitude of committed neutrality towards Q only if she has the aim of knowing the answer to Q*. It is this claim that my primary argument in this paper will seek to impugn.

3 Unanswerable questions

I began my discussion by observing that, in the popular imagination, an agnostic is someone who holds that the existence of a god is unknown or unknowable. Two different versions of agnosticism may be discerned in the preceding definition. First, there are so-called “weak agnostics” who claim not to know if there is a god, but who remain non-committal on whether it is possible to know if there is a god. Second, there are “strong agnostics” who not only deny that they know that there is a god but also claim that it is impossible to know that there is a god.⁸

Cases like that of the strong agnostic are not limited to the theological sphere. Indeed, it may arise in any context in which inquiry leads someone to believe that a certain question is unanswerable. Sometimes, we may discover that only a certain kind of evidence relevant to *Q* is (in principle) unattainable. For example, Kurt Gödel’s incompleteness theorem, which proves that within any mathematical framework there will be true statements that you cannot prove are true within that framework, is an example in which we know that a certain specific kind of evidence is (in principle) unattainable. However, Gödel’s theorem still leaves it open that other kinds of evidence (i.e., evidence from outside the mathematical framework in question) are attainable. Hence, this is not yet an instance in which we know or believe that we will never acquire sufficient information to answer a certain question.

The kind of cases that interest us at present are ones in which investigation reveals that there could never be sufficient information to answer a question, *tout court*. Consider the following question:

Q1: *Is there a double-ringed galaxy containing exactly 129 thousand million stars located exactly 1.3 billion light years outside of our Hubble sphere?*

⁸ It is noteworthy that Thomas Huxley, who is credited with introducing the term into modern popular discourse, held that the “problem of [a god’s] existence” is “insoluble”(1909: 237). Hence, it is likely that Huxley had strong agnosticism in mind when he first applied the term to himself. See also: Huxley 1889a, 1889b.

According to our currently leading cosmological theories, *Q1* is unanswerable. Firstly, *Q1* is a question about an astronomical object that exists outside of our Hubble sphere. A Hubble sphere is the spherical region surrounding an observer (with a radius of roughly 14.4 billion light years) beyond which objects recede from the observer at a rate greater than the speed of light due to the expansion of the universe. Because the speed of light constitutes the upper limit by which any information can be transmitted, no information leaving an object that exists outside of our Hubble sphere—i.e., an object receding away from us at a rate greater than the speed of light—could, in principle, ever reach us. This means that any object or event occurring outside our Hubble sphere is unobservable. Secondly, the subject matter of *Q1* is so specific that the question could only be answered by observing the region of space that the question is about. By way of comparison, if the question were simply “are there hydrogen atoms beyond our Hubble sphere?”, then given the assumption that the unobservable universe is similar to the observable universe (which I would regard as a perfectly reasonable assumption to make) and the fact that hydrogen is the most common element in the observable universe, it is arguable that we could reasonably give a positive answer to this question despite our inability to ever observe said hydrogen atoms. However, *Q1* is not a general question of this kind. A double-ringed galaxy is the rarest type of galaxy ever observed. Hence, even if we assume that the unobservable universe is similar to the observable universe, we would not be warranted in assuming that there is such a galaxy in a particular unobserved region of space in the way that we would be warranted in assuming that there are hydrogen atoms in a particular unobserved region of space. Moreover, there is a great deal of variation in how many stars a galaxy may contain. Hence, that there is a galaxy with exactly 129 thousand million stars in a particular region of space is too specific a claim to be adjudicated without observation of that region of space. Finally, while being exactly 1.3 billion light years outside of our Hubble sphere is a very specific region of space, it is also an expansive enough region of space that the existence of a double-ringed galaxy with exactly 129 thousand million stars could not be reasonably assumed not to exist sans observational confirmation. Given these facts, we can neither justifiably affirm nor deny that a double-ringed galaxy with exactly

129 thousand million stars exists exactly 1.3 billion light years beyond our Hubble sphere.

Significantly, our currently leading cosmological theories suggest that our inability to acquire information (and hence, gain knowledge) about objects and events taking place outside our Hubble sphere is not due to a limitation in our current technology (i.e., the sort of limitation that could potentially be overcome by future technological advancements), but is rooted in the fundamental structure and nature of the universe. Furthermore, *QI* differs from the case of Gödel's incompleteness theorem, since in the mathematical case, there is an alternative source of information bearing on the question to which we could appeal. Not so with *QI*. It is impossible to answer the specific empirical question embodied in *QI* via non-empirical means. The upshot is that insofar as it is impossible to answer *QI* via empirical means, it is impossible to answer *QI* full stop.

While unlikely, given their high amount of empirical confirmation, it is possible that our currently leading cosmological theories are mistaken when they predict that *QI* is unanswerable. Fortunately, neither of the two main arguments in my paper will require that *QI* actually be unanswerable. They will only require that it is possible for an agent to *believe* (in the case of my primary argument) or *justifiably believe* (in the case of my secondary argument) that *QI* is unanswerable. With these points in mind, here is a description of the case that will form the focal point of both my primary and secondary arguments:

Agnostic Astronomer:

At time t_1 , a young amateur astronomer, Jocelyn, begins inquiring into *QI*: is there a double-ringed galaxy containing exactly 129 thousand million stars located exactly 1.3 billion light years beyond our Hubble sphere? At the beginning of her investigation, Jocelyn recognizes that she currently lacks sufficient information to answer *QI*. This recognition prompts Jocelyn to adopt an attitude of committed neutrality towards *QI* at t_1 . At t_2 , following a brief period of research into the matter, Jocelyn forms the justified belief that it is impossible to acquire the kind of specific information necessary to answer *QI* given that doing so would require observing a region of space that it is, in principle, impossible to observe. In other words, Jocelyn comes to justifiably

believe that Q_1 is, in principle, unanswerable. Furthermore, this belief prompts Jocelyn to do two things at t_2 : First, it prompts her to resign herself to an attitude of committed neutrality with respect to Q_1 . Given her belief that not only is her currently available information insufficient for answering Q_1 , but also that she will never acquire sufficient information to answer Q_1 , Jocelyn judges that it would be best to maintain an attitude of committed neutrality towards Q_1 and chooses to do so. Second, it prompts her to intentionally give up the aim of answering Q_1 . Given that she now believes it would be pointless to try to answer Q_1 , Jocelyn judges that it would be best to give up her aim of answering Q_1 and chooses to do so.

According to the agnostic-as-inquirer thesis, the agent described in Agnostic Astronomer could not exist. However, as I shall argue below, Agnostic Astronomer describes an agent that plausibly does exist. If this is right, then it puts the defender of the agnostic-as-inquirer thesis in the unattractive position of denying the existence of a kind of agent that plausibly does exist—i.e., an agent who has an attitude of committed neutrality towards a question that they have chosen to refrain from adopting or maintaining an inquiring attitude towards.

It may be claimed that, as described in Agnostic Astronomer, Jocelyn could not justifiably believe that Q_1 is unanswerable. This is because a question is only justifiably believed to be unanswerable if the agent has the justified belief that it is not possible for them to acquire any additional information relevant to answering it. On the present suggestion, it is not enough for an agent to justifiably believe that she will never acquire sufficient information to answer a question for that question to count as unanswerable from her perspective. It must also be true that the agent justifiably believes that she will never acquire any additional information whatsoever bearing on that question. However, it is false that we could ever know that we will never acquire any additional information relevant to answering a certain question. Hence, Jocelyn cannot be said to justifiably believe that Q_1 is unanswerable. Call this the *Additional Information Objection*.

There are at least two problems with the Additional Information Objection. Firstly, it does not comport with what we ordinarily mean when we say a certain question is unanswerable. According

to the Additional Information Objection, a question counts as answerable so long as it is possible to gain *some* information relevant to answering that question. However, it may be true that one may gain some information relevant to answering a question even if we know that, in principle, there will never be sufficient information to answer the question. For example, if Jocelyn were to learn that double-ring galaxies are the rarest type of galaxy, this discovery does seem to constitute information that is relevant to answering Q_1 . However, her learning about the rarity of double-ringed galaxies is entirely consistent with it being impossible, in principle, to ever acquire sufficient information to answer Q_1 . Hence, according to the Additional Information Objection, a question may count as answerable even if, in principle, we could never acquire sufficient information to answer that question. But this is clearly a radical departure from what we would ordinarily mean when we say a question is unanswerable.

Secondly, even if we were willing to adopt a technical notion of what it means for a question to be unanswerable, according to which a question is answerable if, in principle, it is possible to acquire some information relevant to answering the question, it is still conceivable that Jocelyn may justifiably believe that Q_1 is unanswerable. Specifically, we may amend Agnostic Astronomer to include the stipulation that following an extensive period of research, Jocelyn forms the following pair of justified beliefs: (i) that she has already acquired all the information relevant to answering Q_1 that it is possible, in principle, to acquire, and (ii) that the information that she currently possesses is insufficient for answering Q_1 . On the present stipulation, it is not only true that Jocelyn justifiably believes she will never acquire sufficient information to answer Q_1 , but it is also true that, since she justifiably believes that she already has all the information it is possible to have relevant to answering Q_1 , she also justifiably believes that she will never acquire any additional information relevant to answering Q_1 . Thus amended, Agnostic Astronomer is able to accommodate the conception of an unanswerable question implicated in the Additional Information Objection.

Furthermore, it would be highly implausible to claim that it is simply impossible for Jocelyn to justifiably believe she already has all the information relevant to answering Q_1 . Even if we held that Jocelyn was mistaken, it is widely recognized that it is possible for an

agent to justifiably believe something false. For comparison, even if we are convinced that the earth is not flat, it is entirely conceivable that given all the information available to a certain agent, she may justifiably believe that the earth is flat. Moreover, it seems both arbitrary and unmotivated to draw the line of what justified beliefs it is possible for an agent to have at Jocelyn's belief that she has acquired all the information that it is, in principle, possible to acquire bearing on a question. In light of this, I think it is entirely reasonable for us to stipulate that Jocelyn has the justified belief that she has acquired all the information bearing on Q_1 that it is, in principle, possible to acquire. In light of the immediately preceding considerations, I conclude that the Additional Information Objection fails to undermine the plausibility of Agnostic Astronomer.

One final aspect of our example is worth highlighting before we get to my primary argument. In Agnostic Astronomer, Jocelyn is described as choosing to refrain from having an inquiring attitude towards Q_1 . It may be protested that having an inquiring attitude towards a certain question is not something one chooses or intentionally adopts. For example, it is seldom the case that we decide to be curious about a certain question; we are either curious about Q or we are not. It may therefore be argued that Agnostic Astronomer describes an implausible scenario since it describes a fundamentally non-intentional process—i.e., adopting an inquiring attitude towards Q —as if it were intentional. While I am inclined to agree that in many instances the adoption of an inquiring attitude towards some question is an unintentional process, I also believe it is a process that may be brought under an agent's intentional control should they choose to do so. For comparison, breathing is not ordinarily something we intentionally control. However, we still have the power to bring our breathing under our intentional control should we choose to do so. Likewise, while it may be true that adopting an inquiring attitude towards a certain question is not something we typically do intentionally, it may still be true that we could either intentionally adopt an inquiring attitude towards a question or intentionally refrain from doing so.

This is an important point to stress since it underscores a potential cost of the agnostic-as-inquirer thesis; namely, it requires that we deny that epistemic agents are free to choose to refrain from adopting

or maintaining the aim of answering a question that they have an attitude of committed neutrality toward. Not only does such a restriction on our epistemic agency seem ad hoc, but it is also at odds with what some of us are prepared to say about ourselves. For example, many strong agnostics about the existence of a god see themselves as intentionally refraining from adopting or maintaining an inquiring attitude towards whether there is a god. Often, this decision is motivated by various ideological considerations. For example, a strong agnostic about whether there is a god may view a concern with the god-question as historically having had a net negative effect on human social and moral progress. This belief may make such an individual determined to refrain from adopting an inquiring attitude towards it. Alternatively, we can imagine a politician who is agnostic about whether climate change is real (because she recognizes that her available information is insufficient for answering the question), but who chooses not to inquire about whether climate change is real because she fears that doing so may potentially force her to adopt a politically inconvenient position. Here again, the agent in question is motivated to refrain from adopting an inquiring attitude towards a question that they are agnostic about on ideological grounds. Even if we regard such ideological motivations as misplaced or epistemically inappropriate, it seems like we should wish to make room for the possibility of an agent with said ideological motivations deciding to act on said motivations by intentionally refraining from adopting or maintaining an inquiring attitude towards a question they believe it would be best to avoid inquiring into. Hence, given that the agnostic-as-inquirer thesis constrains the freedom of epistemic agents by implying that it is impossible for an agent who is agnostic about Q to choose to refrain from adopting or maintaining an inquiring attitude towards Q , the plausibility of the agnostic-as-inquirer thesis will partly hinge on whether we think our epistemic agency is restricted in this way.

4 My primary argument

With the example of the Agnostic Astronomer now on the table, here is my argument against the agnostic-as-inquirer thesis:

P1. If it is plausible that Jocelyn does not have the aim of answering Q_1 at t_2 and it is plausible that Jocelyn has an attitude of committed neutrality towards Q_1 at t_2 , then the agnostic-as-inquirer thesis is implausible.

P2. It is plausible that Jocelyn does not have the aim of answering Q_1 at t_2 .

P3. It is plausible that Jocelyn has an attitude of committed neutrality towards Q_1 at t_2 .

C. The agnostic-as-inquirer thesis is implausible.

Let us review each of the above premises in detail.

First, given that the agnostic-as-inquirer thesis precludes the existence of the sort of agent described in Agnostic Astronomer, then to the extent that it is plausible that agents like the one described in Agnostic Astronomer exist, to that very extent the agnostic-as-inquirer thesis is implausible. Recall, according to the agnostic-as-inquirer thesis, an agent is agnostic about Q at some time, t , only if they have an inquiring attitude towards Q at t . However, Agnostic Astronomer describes an agent, Jocelyn, who is agnostic (i.e., has an attitude of committed neutrality) towards Q_1 at t_2 , but who does not have an inquiring attitude towards (i.e., the aim of answering) Q_1 at t_2 . Hence, we arrive at premise P1.

Second, there is no good reason to think that Jocelyn would be incapable of giving up her aim of answering Q_1 once she comes to believe that it is unanswerable. On the contrary, given what we know about human nature, it is common for individuals to give up on endeavours they believe to be pointless. Moreover, we can easily imagine that having become convinced that Q_1 is unanswerable, Jocelyn may come to see having the aim of answering Q_1 as pointless and that this may prompt her to abandon said aim. To be clear, I do not wish to claim that an agent would necessarily view it as pointless to have the aim of answering a question they believe to be unanswerable. Nor do I deny that it is possible for an agent to continue to have the aim of answering a question after coming to believe that it is unanswerable. We often aspire to achieve aims we believe to be unattainable. I only claim that there are plausibly cases in which the opposite

response obtains—i.e., cases in which an agent’s belief that a certain question is unanswerable is sufficient to motivate her to give up her aim of answering said question. Since, *ex hypothesi*, Agnostic Astronomer is just such a case, we arrive at premise P2.

Third, there is no good reason to think that Jocelyn would be incapable of having an attitude of committed neutrality towards Q_1 at t_2 . She is first moved (at time t_1) to adopt an attitude of committed neutrality towards Q_1 because she believes that her currently available evidence is insufficient to settle the matter. Later (at time t_2) she acquires the belief that she will never gain sufficient information to answer Q_1 . But notice, at time t_2 , Jocelyn’s original motivation for adopting an attitude of committed neutrality remains the same—i.e., it continues to be true that she believes that her available evidence is insufficient to answer Q_1 . Hence, if the belief was enough to move her to adopt the attitude of committed neutrality at t_1 , then it should also be sufficient to move her to continue to do so at t_2 . After all, the only change that has taken place between t_1 and t_2 is that, in addition to believing that her available evidence is insufficient for answering Q_1 , she also believes that she will never acquire sufficient information to answer Q_1 in the future. But I see no reason to assume that this additional belief would, of necessity, cause Jocelyn to give up her attitude of committed neutrality? On the contrary, we would expect that the belief that she will never have sufficient information to answer Q_1 would increase rather than decrease Jocelyn’s overall motivation to maintain an attitude of committed neutrality towards Q_1 . If this is right, then we seem to be on firm ground in accepting P3. Hence, we may safely conclude that the agnostic-as-inquirer thesis is implausible.

4.1 An objection to my primary argument

The defender of the agnostic-as-inquirer thesis may attempt to forestall counterexamples like Agnostic Astronomer by claiming that being agnostic about Q requires a level of interest in Q that is incompatible with not being in an inquiring mode with respect to Q . Friedman puts the point as follows:

I think that the general difficulty is this: the sorts of cases in which it

seems clearest that the subject is not in an inquiring mode with respect to Q are ones in which the subject has absolutely no interest in Q or resolving Q at all. And the problem is that once we start to describe these sorts of circumstances we also start to describe circumstances in which it seems implausible that the subject has any sort of attitude towards Q . We simply don't tend to have attitudes towards contents that we don't care about in the least. (Friedman 2017: 320)

The above passage invokes the idea that an agent must be sufficiently interested in some question, Q , in order to have “any sort of attitude towards Q ”. However, it is important to distinguish between two senses of being interested in a question: the *answer-seeking sense* and the *attention-holding sense*. Being interested in a question in the answer-seeking sense entails being motivated to answer the question, having the question on one's research agenda, or being on the lookout for information that may bring one closer to answering the question. Being interested in a question in the attention-holding sense entails that the question holds one's attention in a manner that is sufficient for one to adopt various attitudes towards it. Significantly, it is possible to be interested in a question in the attention-holding sense without being interested in it in the answer-seeking sense. For example, suppose I am posed the following question:

Q2: *What was the name of Socrates' wife?*

However, falsely believing that Socrates was unmarried, I erroneously assume that the question is infelicitous because it rests on a false presupposition. Insofar as I have the belief that Q_2 is infelicitous, it follows that Q_2 holds my attention in the way required for me to have some sort of attitude toward it. However, insofar as I believe Q_2 to be infelicitous, I may be entirely unmotivated to have the aim of answering Q_2 . Of course, given that I believe Q_2 is infelicitous, I would not be agnostic about Q_2 either. Hence, I do not take the present case to be a counterexample to the agnostic-as-inquirer thesis. What the present case illustrates is that it is possible to be interested in Q in the attention-holding sense without being interested in Q in the answer-seeking sense. This means that if we are concerned with which of the two kinds of interest in a question is necessary for having “any sort of attitude towards Q ”, then the relevant notion of interest in Q should be the attention-holding rather than the answer-

seeking sense. In sum, being interested in Q in the answer-seeking sense is not necessary for having “any sort of attitude towards Q ”.

If we understand the above cited passage as referring to being interest in a question in the attention-holding sense, then we may see Friedman as claiming that in order for an agent to be agnostic about Q , Q must hold that agent’s attention (i.e., be of interest to the agent) in the manner required for that agent to have any sort of attitude towards Q whatsoever. Moreover, it is plausible that if Q holds an agent’s attention in the manner necessary for being agnostic about Q , then Q also holds that agent’s attention in the manner necessary for having an inquiring attitude towards Q . That is to say, being agnostic about Q and having an inquiring attitude towards Q seem to be equally demanding as far as an agent’s level of interest in Q is concerned. On the present view, if Q does not hold an agent’s attention enough for them to have an inquiring attitude towards Q , then Q does not hold that agent’s attention enough for them to be agnostic about Q .

I am willing to grant all of the immediately preceding points. However, saying that Q holds an agent’s attention in the manner necessary for having any attitude towards Q falls short of saying that Q holds an agent’s attention in a way that is sufficient for them to have some specific attitude. This is because the attitudes an agent has at a given time is not merely a function of which attitudes they are in a position to have (i.e., given their level of interest in the attention-holding sense). It is also dependent on an agent’s overall motivational state at the time. In sum, when attempting to ascertain what attitudes an agent is likely to have at a given time, we must consider that agent’s motivational makeup at that time.

Consider the following analogy from the case of intention. Suppose that the question of whether I should eat some vegemite is one that has never occurred to me. Given this fact, it would be accurate to say that I do not have the intention to eat vegemite. However, by that very same token, it would also be accurate to say that I do not have the intention not to eat vegemite. The question of whether I should eat vegemite is simply not one that has held my attention in the way required for me to have either intention. But suppose I am offered some vegemite while visiting a friend in Melbourne. Now that the question sufficiently has my attention, I may decide to either eat some or refrain from doing so. Which of the two intentions I

adopt will depend on certain facts about my motivational state at the time. Do I desire to try something novel? Am I especially disgusted by yeast-based foods? Am I afraid of offending my host by turning down their offer to try a local delicacy? But notice, whichever intention I adopt, it would have been true that the question of whether to eat vegemite holds my attention in a manner necessary for me to adopt some sort of attitude towards it, including the attitudes of intending to eat it or intending not to eat it. This follows from the fact that I am free to adopt either intention. It is in this sense that having a question hold one's attention in the manner required for having any sort of attitude towards it falls short of one having some specific attitude towards it. The practical question of whether to eat vegemite may hold my attention in the manner required for me to adopt the attitude of intending to eat it and yet I may choose not to eat any (based on my overall motivational state at the time). Likewise, a theoretical question, like Q_1 , may hold my attention in the manner required for me to adopt the aim of answering it, and yet I may choose to refrain from adopting the aim of answering it (based on my overall motivational state at the time).

Ex hypothesi, this is the kind of situation Jocelyn is in. At time t_2 , Q_1 does hold Jocelyn's attention in the manner required for her to have some sort of attitude towards it. Moreover, we may also assume that Q_1 holds her attention in the manner necessary for her to have an inquiring attitude towards it. However, this does not settle the question of whether Jocelyn has an inquiring attitude towards Q_1 . Whether she does will depend on facts about her overall motivational state at the time. Moreover, the facts about Jocelyn's overall motivational state at the time are these: (i) she believes that her evidence warrants agnosticism towards Q_1 and she is motivated to adopt the doxastic attitude that is warranted by her evidence, and (ii) she believes that since Q_1 is unanswerable, it would be pointless to have the aim of answering Q_1 , and she is motivated to avoid having attitudes she deems to be pointless.⁹ Notice that so characterized, it is false

⁹ It is worth emphasizing that it is not being claimed that Jocelyn must necessarily feel this way, or that any agent in Jocelyn's position would feel this way. Nor does this argument assume that Jocelyn is right to feel this way (though my secondary argument will explore this possibility). All that is being claimed is that it is plausibly possible for Jocelyn to feel this way.

that Jocelyn has absolutely no interest in Q_I . On the contrary, we may suppose that Q_I continues to hold her attention in the manner necessary for her to both suspend Q_I and have an inquiring attitude towards Q_I . However, once we register that which attitudes an agent actually adopts will largely depend on her overall motivational state at the time, it becomes clear how it might be possible for an agent to be agnostic about Q at some time, t , without having an inquiring attitude towards Q at t . If an agent is motivated to have an attitude of agnosticism towards Q (e.g., she believes that doing so is warranted by her available evidence), but is also motivated to give up her aim of answering Q (e.g., because she believes it would be pointless to have such an aim given that Q is unanswerable), then her overall motivational state may be such that she is motivated to be agnostic about Q at t and to refrain from having an inquiring attitude towards Q at t .

To sum up, I agree with Friedman's observation that most of the cases in which an agent lacks an inquiring attitude towards Q , the agent may also be said to have no interest in Q . The questions that interest us constitute only a small subset of all possible questions and the set of questions that are absolutely of no interest to us is primarily (if not entirely) constituted by questions we neither have an inquiring attitude towards nor are agnostic about. However, Q_I is not such a question for Jocelyn. Q_I does hold Jocelyn's attention in the manner necessary for her to adopt attitudes towards it. However, because of her overall motivational state, the attitude she chooses to have towards Q_I is that of refraining from having the aim of answering it. Another way this point may be put is to say that having the aim of answering a question is not the sole manifestation of its holding one's attention. Insofar as deciding to give up the aim of answering a question is possible only if the question holds one's attention in the manner necessary for having any sort of attitude towards it, then deciding to give up the aim of answering a question may itself be a manifestation of the relevant kind of interest in it (i.e., interest in the attention-holding sense). On the present suggestion, deciding to refrain from inquiring into a question is as much a stance towards it as is deciding to inquire into it. Both decisions require that we be interested in the question enough to adopt some sort of attitude towards it.

5 My secondary argument

My primary argument was concerned with the descriptive question of whether it is possible for Jocelyn to have an attitude of committed neutrality towards Q_1 at t_2 despite the fact that she does not have the aim of answering Q_1 at t_2 . My secondary argument will focus on the normative question of whether it is epistemically appropriate for her to do so.¹⁰ As far as I can tell, Friedman never claims that it is epistemically inappropriate for an agent to be agnostic about Q at t and not have an inquiring attitude towards Q at t . Indeed, since the agnostic-as-inquirer thesis regards such cases as impossible, the question of whether it is epistemically appropriate arguably never genuinely arises on Friedman's account. However, Friedman does spend a considerable amount of time defending a normative claim of her own; namely, that "any case in which suspension is appropriate will also be one in which some sort of inquiring stance is just fine" (Friedman 2017: 318). However, if we take "epistemically appropriate" to mean epistemically permissible (as opposed to epistemically obligatory), then we may consistently hold that in every case in which one is agnostic about Q it is epistemically permissible for one to have an inquiring attitude towards Q and that in the case of unanswerable questions, it is epistemically permissible to be agnostic about Q even if one does not have an inquiring attitude towards Q . Hence, once we have dispensed with the descriptive claim embodied in the agnostic-as-inquirer thesis, my normative thesis (i.e., the claim that it is epistemically permissible to be agnostic about Q at t and refrain from having an inquiring attitude towards Q at t) turns out to be consistent with Friedman's normative thesis (i.e., the claim that it is always epistemically permissible to have an inquiring attitude towards Q at t if one is agnostic about Q at t).

My aim in the present section is not to impugn Friedman's normative thesis (with which I am inclined to agree) but rather to defend my own independent normative claim. I take as my point of departure the intuition that it is always epistemically permissible to be agnostic about Q if one knows or justifiably believes that one's available

¹⁰ This will require a shift away from talk about what Jocelyn believes and towards talk about what Jocelyn justifiably believes.

evidence is insufficient for answering Q . Hence, I am committed to the following epistemic norm:

The Suspension Permissibility Norm:

If at some time, t , one knows or justifiably believes that one's available evidence is insufficient for answering Q , then it is epistemically permissible to suspend Q at t .

Strictly speaking, the defender of the agnostic-as-inquirer thesis may consistently endorse the Suspension Permissibility Norm. However, they would also be committed to denying that there is ever a case in which an agent knows or justifiably believes that their available evidence is insufficient to answer Q and in which they lack the aim of answering Q . Moreover, as I noted in the previous section, if we are to make room for the freedom of epistemic agents to decide not to inquire into questions they deem unworthy of inquiry (as might be the case in at least some instances in which an agent believed a question to be unanswerable), then our account of agnosticism cannot preclude the possibility of an agnostic agent deciding to refrain from inquiring into what they are agnostic about. Taking this idea one step further, I hold that it is always our epistemic prerogative to refrain from having an inquiring attitude towards a question we know or justifiably believe to be unanswerable. There is no need for us to first give up our attitude of committed neutrality towards the question. Hence, I am also committed to the following epistemic norm:

The Optional Inquiry Norm:

If at some time, t , one knows or justifiably believes that Q is unanswerable, then it is epistemically permissible for one to refrain from taking an inquiring attitude towards Q at t .

It is worth emphasizing that the Optional Inquiry Norm is consistent with the claim that it is epistemically permissible to adopt an inquiring attitude towards a question one deems to be unanswerable. Indeed, I wish to leave room for the epistemic permissibility of an agent being curious about Q even if they regard Q as unanswerable. I only claim that in the case of questions that are known or justifiably believed to be unanswerable, such curiosity (or any other inquiring

attitude) is not epistemically required.

With the above two principles now on the table, here is the argument in favour of my normative thesis:

- (1) If at some time, t , one knows or justifiably believes that one's available evidence is insufficient for answering Q , then it is epistemically permissible to suspend Q at t . (Suspension Permissibility Norm)
- (2) If at some time, t , one knows or justifiably believes that Q is unanswerable, then it is epistemically permissible for one to refrain from taking an inquiring attitude towards Q at t . (Optional Inquiry Norm)
- (3) At t_2 , Jocelyn justifiably believes that her available evidence is insufficient for answering Ql and justifiably believes that Ql is unanswerable. (Agnostic Astronomer)
- (4) It is epistemically permissible for Jocelyn to be agnostic about Ql at t_2 . (from 1 and 3)
- (5) It is epistemically permissible for Jocelyn not to take an inquiring attitude towards Ql at t_2 . (from 2 and 3)
- (6) It is epistemically permissible for Jocelyn to be agnostic about Ql at t_2 and for her to refrain from taking an inquiring attitude towards Ql at t_2 . (from 4 and 5)

Generalizing from the case of Jocelyn, I conclude that there are cases in which it is epistemically permissible for an agent to be agnostic about Q at t and for that agent to refrain from having an inquiring attitude towards Q at t . Embracing this conclusion allows us to preserve two desiderata that the agnostic-as-inquirer thesis calls into jeopardy: (i) the truthfulness of the self-reports of the strong agnostic who insists that she does not have the aim of answering the question she is strongly agnostic about, and (ii) the epistemic permissibility of her choice to refrain from having the aim of answering the question she is strongly agnostic about.

5.1 An objection to my secondary argument

It may be objected that even if one justifiably believes that a certain question is unanswerable, being an epistemically virtuous agent requires that one remain open to the possibility that one may be mistaken. On the present suggestion, even if Jocelyn justifiably believes that she will never gain sufficient evidence to answer *Q₁*, she should still be open to the possibility that she may be proven wrong by receiving evidence that decisively answers *Q₁*. Failing to remain open in this way would be a recipe for dogmatism since it would mean that once one has formed the opinion that a question is unanswerable, one would close oneself off to having one's mind changed, even in cases in which one happens to be mistaken. Moreover, if we assume that being open to the possibility of receiving additional information bearing on a certain question is sufficient for having an inquiring attitude towards that question, then being an epistemically virtuous agent may require Jocelyn to have an inquiring attitude towards *Q₁* even if she justifiably believes it to be unanswerable. Call the preceding line of criticism of my normative thesis the *Epistemic Humility Objection*.

A potential problem with the Epistemic Humility Objection is that it appears to trade on an ambiguity in what it means to be open to the possibility of receiving additional information bearing on a certain question. Specifically, we may distinguish between what I shall call *humility-inspired openness* and *goal-inspired openness*. The notion of epistemic humility currently at play is one rooted in a recognition of our own fallibility. Given our knowledge of our own fallibility, we should generally be open to the possibility that a given belief of ours is false, and this includes the belief that a certain question is unanswerable. This is what I call humility-inspired openness. I maintain that humility-inspired openness should be displayed in relation to most (if not all) of our empirical beliefs. For example, suppose that I believe that all life on earth has a common ancestor. It follows that for me, the following question is settled:

Q3: *Does all life on earth have a common ancestor?*

However, insofar as I am displaying the virtue of epistemic humility, I should still be open to the possibility that I may encounter decisive evidence against a universal common ancestor. For example, if I were

to come across a *New York Times* article with the headline: “Discovery of New Marine Organism Disproves Theory of a Universal Common Ancestor”, it would be inappropriate for me to simply disregard the article on the grounds that I already believed in a universal common ancestor and the article purports to supply evidence incompatible with what I believe. On the contrary, one would expect me to be quite keen to survey the evidence against a universal common ancestor so that I may update my beliefs if necessary.

On the present suggestion, even if a question is settled for me in the sense that I believe a particular answer to it, insofar as I display the virtue of epistemic humility, there is a sense in which I should be open to the possibility of acquiring evidence that is incompatible with what I believe. Being open in the sense at hand does not entail the expectation that one would acquire evidence that is incompatible with what one believes. On the contrary, if I already believe a certain answer to a question, then I should not expect to acquire decisive evidence that is incompatible with what I believe. Being open in the sense at hand entails that if I were presented with the opportunity to acquire such evidence (e.g., as when I encounter the *New York Times* article purporting to provide decisive evidence incompatible with what I believe) I would be disposed to examine rather than ignore or disregard such evidence.

I take the above point to be no less true of an agent who believes that a certain question is unanswerable. Given that Jocelyn believes *Ql* to be unanswerable, she believes she will never receive sufficient information to answer *Ql*. However, insofar as Jocelyn displays the virtue of epistemic humility, she should also be open to receiving evidence that is incompatible with her belief that *Ql* is unanswerable (i.e., evidence that decisively answers *Ql*). For example, if she were to encounter a *New York Times* article claiming that, contrary the leading cosmological theories, it has newly been established that we can acquire information about galaxies existing billions of light years outside our Hubble Sphere, we would expect Jocelyn to be keen to read said article, and may be disappointed in her (from an epistemic point of view) if she was not so keen. There is therefore a sense in which I am willing to grant that an agent should always be open to receiving information bearing on a certain question.

The salient question is whether humility-inspired openness is

sufficient for having an inquiring attitude towards Q ? My response is that it had better not be. Why? Because if humility-inspired openness were sufficient for having an inquiring attitude towards Q , then it would follow that every agent who believed some particular answer to Q with the requisite amount of epistemic humility would also have an inquiring attitude towards Q . It would follow that it is epistemically appropriate (even required) to have an inquiring attitude towards Q even in cases in which Q is settled for one. However, this is something Friedman flatly denies. Hence, the kind of openness to evidence that is a sufficient condition for having an inquiring attitude cannot, by Friedman's lights, be humility-inspired openness.

A second kind of openness to receiving new evidence bearing on a question is that which arises from the desire or intention to answer that question. This is what I call goal-inspired openness. Goal-inspired openness to receiving evidence bearing on Q is sufficient for having the aim of answering Q . As such, it represents a kind of openness to receiving evidence that is sufficient for having an inquiring attitude. It is also the kind of openness that is normatively incompatible with Q being settled for an agent. If one already believes some particular answer to Q (in which case, Q is settled for one), then one should not have the goal or aim of answering Q . The question that now confronts us is whether Jocelyn is epistemically required to display goal-inspired openness with respect to Q_1 ? Saying that she is would imply that an agent is epistemically required to have the goal of answering a question they know or justifiably believe to be unanswerable. This strikes me as a rather bizarre epistemic requirement. Perhaps it may be epistemically permissible to have the goal of answering a question one knows or justifiably believes to be unanswerable. But to hold that one is epistemically obligated to do so seems like a step too far. If this is right, then Jocelyn is not required to display goal-inspired openness towards Q_1 . At best, she is required to display humility-inspired openness towards Q_1 . However, since displaying humility-inspired openness is not sufficient for having an inquiring attitude, saying that Jocelyn is epistemically required to display humility-inspired openness towards Q_1 is consistent with my claim that it is epistemically permissible for her to refrain from adopting or maintaining an inquiring attitude towards Q_1 .

6 Conclusion

The takeaway from the preceding discussion is that we can only make room for cases like that of the Agnostic Astronomer if we reject the agnostic-as-inquirer thesis. It may still be true that in some (or even most) cases, we adopt an attitude of agnosticism as a precursor to inquiry. However, agnosticism is also sometimes an attitude we adopt in *response* to our beliefs about the current and future state of our evidence. This point becomes clearest in the case of questions we justifiably believe to be unanswerable. In such cases, it is still possible and epistemically permissible to adopt an attitude of committed neutrality towards the question at hand. However, given that one justifiably believes a question to be unanswerable, it also seems epistemically appropriate to decide to refrain from having an inquiring attitude towards that question. Of course, saying that it is epistemically appropriate to refrain from having an inquiring attitude towards a question one justifiably believes to be unanswerable is consistent with its also being epistemically appropriate to continue to have an inquiring attitude towards a question one justifiably believes to be unanswerable. Hence, none of the arguments limned in this paper impugn what I take to be Friedman's normative claim. Even so, the fact that it is epistemically appropriate to refrain from having an inquiring attitude towards a question one is agnostic about is sufficient to show that facilitating inquiry is not the sole purpose of suspending judgement. This means that we should be open to a more expansive answer to the question "why suspend judging?" than that emphasized in Friedman's paper. An instance of agnosticism may be in perfectly good order even if it is not accompanied by an inquiring attitude.

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