

The problem of practical agnosticism in the philosophy of religion

The aim of my project is to analyse the practical dimension of agnosticism in the philosophy of religion. Is there anything which relates to the suspension of judgement in the way action relates to belief? If yes, what is it? Does it come in many varieties? Do the norms underlying the formation of beliefs have any bearing on it, or is it entirely independent of the reasons one may have for believing or disbelieving? The suspension of judgement can be based on different assessments of the available evidence – but what, if any, is the impact of the evidence and its assessment on one's practical situation? I will look for the answers to these questions with reference to agnosticism about God and trace the impact the difficulties surrounding the suspension of judgement exert on the actions and attitudes which constitute practical agnosticism.

The most obvious answer to the riddle of practical agnosticism is based on the assumption that the default practical consequence of suspending judgement about the existence of God is practical atheism, but that under some conditions, an agnostic can also be a practical theist. But if the only options available for an agnostic are practical theism and practical atheism, practical agnosticism as a separate position becomes impossible. Since I would like to explore the possibility that it makes sense to envision practical agnosticism as different from both practical theism and practical atheism, I am more interested in the three remaining options reappearing in the literature. The first one is that the practical situation of an agnostic resembles that of an apophatic theist – someone who believes that God exists but takes his nature to be unknown. According to the second option, practical agnosticism consists of a kind of spiritual inquiry, while according to the third one, a more or less natural practical consequence of agnosticism is religious fictionalism – treating religion as existentially significant fiction. I would like to analyse in detail the intuitions behind these three stances and consider other possible views on the matter.

The philosophical issues relevant for the problem of practical agnosticism in the philosophy of religion include: different concepts of the nature of God and his relation to humanity, the nature of attitudes such as fear, hope, acceptance or assent, acting in the conditions of uncertainty, the nature and value of existential narratives – especially in connection to personal identity and the meaning of life – as well as the temporal dimension of cognition and belief and the dynamic character of spirituality and faith. I want to explore further the relation between different views and concepts connected to these issues, analysing and assessing the varieties of practical agnosticism to which they lead and establishing to what degree they can be considered mutually compatible. Finally, I would like to give an outline of normative and motivating reasons behind each variety of practical agnosticism, figuring out what stands behind different possible choices in the face of the uncertainty about the supernatural.